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Leaving the North: migration and memory, Northern Ireland 1921–2011 [book review]

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Book review for *Irish Studies Review*

Leaving the North: Migration and Memory, Northern Ireland 1921-2011, by Johanne Devlin Trew, Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 2013, 348 pp., £75 (hardback), ISBN 9781846319402

Johanne Devlin Trew's recent book on migration from Northern Ireland is that increasingly rare thing in Irish diaspora studies: research that addresses a genuinely glaring gap in the literature. As she points out, there has been a relative silence with regard to migration and diaspora in relation to Northern Ireland on the part of both policy-makers and academics. The neglect of the 'Northern diaspora' on the political stage since the outbreak of the Troubles may be considered understandable, and Trew goes into some details as to the likely political motivations involved. The academic neglect of the topic is rather harder to fathom. Trew attributes this to compartmentalisation in social scientific research on the North, and a 'partitionist' approach in the study of 20th century Irish migration (p.6). She argues that the complications arising from dealing with data from two national jurisdictions has led to a concentration in the literature on migration from the Republic, with the consequence that authorities in the North could label emigration as 'a Southern problem', and that pre-1922 Irish migration is now wrongly seen through a partitionist lens.

Much of this rings true – one might add that there is a temptation in researching Irish identity abroad to gloss over any putative diasporic 'Northern Irishness', in favour of a simple Irish/British binary. If migrants (and their descendants) from the north self-identify as Irish, then they can be safely included within the category 'Irish abroad', if they self-identify as British, they can equally safely be discounted as irrelevant to research on Irish diasporic identity. While research on the Irish in Britain has done much to deconstruct this binary, it has mostly done so through research on the second-generation's identification with both Irishness and Britishness. Trew's multi-faceted analysis challenges easy assumptions of Irish diasporic identity, by concentrating on the specific ways that migrants continue to identify with Northern Ireland, and Northern Irishness from abroad.

One of the potential reasons for the overlooking of migration from Northern Ireland in academic studies has been the sheer difficulty of obtaining accurate statistics, given the invisibility of 'internal migration' from Northern Ireland to the rest of the United Kingdom, as well as the conflation of the Northern Irish with either the Irish or British populations in the census statistics of other countries. Trew devotes a chapter to tackling this conundrum, while acknowledging the regular patchiness and inconsistency of her sources. Nonetheless, Trew's impressively comprehensive compilation of the available statistics seem as definitive an account of population movements to and from Northern Ireland (and more broadly, Ulster) as it is possible to get, and are likely to prove an essential reference point in future publications on the topic.

The effect of these figures is also to disrupt some basic assumptions about the demographics of Irish migration more generally. For instance, the general view of the 1970s as a lull between the two major waves of post-war Irish emigration needs to be seen in the context of massive out-migration from the North; to the Republic, Britain, and further afield. Trew returns to this 1970s generation a number of times in the book, following not only their own experiences post-migration, but also speculating on the gap they left behind in Northern Irish society. Again, one can draw a contrast with

emigration from the Republic here – whereas emigration from the South has often been regarded as something of a ‘safety valve’, Trew argues forcefully that in the case of the North, it was anything but. Drawing both on past analysis and the perspectives of her interviewees, she argues that an ‘over-representation of the young, liberal and higher educated Protestants and Catholics in the outflow who would be more likely to support change at home’ (p.126) has been a contributory factor in the entrenchment of sectarianism and the slow progress of the Peace Process.

One of the most effective aspects of the book is Trew’s exploration of how the Troubles continued to shape the experiences of this generation overseas. Through deft use of interview extracts, she illuminates the difficulty these migrants experienced in articulating the complexity of their identifications to an overseas audience that have a black-and-white understanding of the conflict. This is particularly the case in Chapter 5, which focuses on the experience of being Northern Irish in Britain. Trew situates this within the wider experience of being Irish in Britain during the ‘suspect community’(Hillyard, 1993)period. While much of this will be familiar ground to many readers with knowledge of the relevant literature, Trew is adept at pointing out hitherto overlooked facets of this experience where there may have been a specifically Northern Irish layer. For instance Trew builds on Bronwen Walter’s (2008)work on the recognisability of Irish accents in Britain by highlighting the extent to which media coverage of the Troubles made ‘Ulster accents’ in particular identifiable and negatively associated with the conflict, with knock-on effects for migrants from Northern Ireland (p.142). Perhaps more strikingly, she also sensitively presents the pain in the narratives of migrants who had lost friends and relatives in the Troubles, only to find themselves positioned as perpetrators rather than victims in Britain (pp.152-156). This is one of the most powerful passages in the book and in itself offers ample support for Trew’s call for more investigation of the ‘curious middle space’ (p.156) occupied by Northern Irish migrants between Ireland and Britain, and the Irish and the British.

Trew’s other empirical chapters address migration to Canada and return migration. The chief interest within the Canada chapter is the level of historical detail, particularly in situating migration from Northern Ireland in the wider context of British migration to Canada. The chapter then moves to an extended critique of Canadian immigration regimes, to which at times the specific Northern Irish experience seems only tangentially relevant. There is, however, some interesting material here on the involvement of Canadians, and Irish-Canadians in the peace process, including some critical comments from Trew’s participants.

While the subtitle of this book is ‘Migration and Memory’, the memory component is kept in focus rather less than the migration component. In the opening chapter, Trew includes a thoughtful consideration of how Marianne Hirsch’s (1997) concept of postmemory (and related concepts) might be applied to the diaspora of a post-conflict Northern Ireland. However, she only occasionally returns to this strand of thinking in her analysis of her participants’ narratives, rather reserving them for the conclusion of each chapter as a means of summing up. While letting her participants’ narratives more or less speak for themselves, she counterbalances this by applying memory theory more explicitly to her own family stories of multiple migrations between Northern Ireland, Canada and elsewhere. In particular the experiences of her grandmother Roseena, and how these experiences persisted in family narratives and memories are interwoven throughout the book, before being brought to a bittersweet conclusion in the postscript. This is deftly done, and one might

wish that Trew had brought this theoretical insight more explicitly to bear on the extracts from her participants' narratives.

Trew closes the book with a wish that in an era of renewed migration from Northern Ireland, that the narratives of previous generations of migrants may be learned from, "not only to acknowledge their departure but in the hope that we might welcome the opportunities that migration and diaspora may present" (p.104). Coincidentally, as I write this, there is a promotion drive for a 'homecoming' conference to be held in Belfast to encourage "expats to reconnect, re-engage, re-invest and rebuild Belfast"ⁱ. While this is specifically centred on Belfast, it may be seen as evidence of stirrings of a diasporic consciousness in Northern Ireland as a whole. As such, *Leaving the North* could hardly be more timely. While it is quickly attaining the status of a core text in Irish migration studies, it is to be hoped that it reaches the wider audience it deserves.

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ⁱ <http://aisling-events.com/event/one-city-conference/>