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# *“Emigrants in the traditional sense”? – Irishness in England, contemporary migration, and collective memory of the 1950s*

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## **“Emigrants in the traditional sense”? – Irishness in England, contemporary migration, and collective memory of the 1950s.**

The title of this paper is taken from remarks made by Irish Minister for Finance Michael Noonan, at a press conference in January 2012. In response to a question from the BBC’s Mark Simpson, Noonan attempted to contextualise the latest figures on emigration:

There’s always young people coming and going from Ireland, some of them are emigrants in the traditional sense, others simply, it’s a small island and they want to get off the island, a lot of the people that go to Australia, it’s not being driven by unemployment at all, it’s driven by a desire to see another part of the world. I have five adult children, three of them living and working abroad, I don’t think any of the three would be described as an emigrant, it’s a free choice of lifestyle and what they wanted to do with their lives. There’s a lot of families like that. Now there are other people being driven abroad alright. Now what has happened is that the collapse of the building industry has created a lot of forced emigration. ... What we have to make sure is, that people have the best possible education right up to third level so when they go, they’re employed as young professionals in their country of destination rather than the traditional image of Irish people from the 1950s. (namawinelake, 2012)

Noonan’s remarks on emigration caused something of a furore both within Ireland, and among recent Irish emigrants, and reignited the debate about the level of agency available to contemporary emigrants in ‘choosing’ to leave. In part, this reaction may have been due to the perception that Noonan was fitting into a long tradition of Irish politicians seeking to distance themselves from responsibility for emigration by framing it as a positive individual choice (Glynn, Kelly, & MacÉinrí, 2013).

My intention in this paper is not to re-examine the false dichotomy of whether contemporary emigration is a matter of choice or compulsion. Rather, I wish to explore an intriguing aspect of the quote: the use of “the traditional image of Irish people from the 1950s” as a comparison point for contemporary migrants. In so doing, I will argue that there is a transnational collective memory of 1950s emigration from Ireland that has become increasingly well-established, and that the rhetorical invocation of this memory can shed light on important discourses of education, class and agency in relation to current Irish emigration.

### **Migration, collective memory and the 1950s**

It was perhaps inevitable that the current wave of emigration from Ireland, beginning with the 2008 financial crisis, would invite comparisons with previous generations of emigration. (Characteristics of the current wave of Irish emigration are discussed elsewhere in this special issue by Glynn). Media coverage of recent emigration has tended to represent it either as a return of the ‘scourge of emigration’, or in essentially benign terms as a positive choice for modern migrants, in contrast to their historical predecessors (Glynn et al., 2013). If, to paraphrase Joe Lee (1989), emigration has left a prominent imprint on the archaeology of the modern Irish mind, it is the legacy of this imprint that has coloured much of the reaction to recent emigration; either in terms of continuity or contrast.

My focus in this article is on the collective memory of the experience of one specific cohort of Irish emigrants; those who arrived in English cities in the wave of post-war emigration that lasted roughly from 1945 to 1962 (Delaney, 2007). As an umbrella term, this cohort are known as ‘the 50s

generation' or perhaps more evocatively as 'the mail-boat generation' (Murray, 2012). While histories of Ireland in the twentieth century have demonstrated that it is impossible to talk about the 1950s without talking about emigration e.g. (Ferriter, 2004; Keogh, O'Shea, & Quinlan, 2004; Lee, 1989), the psychological impact of this emigration has been such that the corollary is also true: it is largely impossible to talk about Irish emigration without talking about the 1950s. In particular, despite this cohort regularly being represented as 'the forgotten Irish', or 'an unconsidered people' (Dunne, 2003), a transnational memory of their experiences has gradually taken hold in both Ireland and England, to the extent to which they act as a postmemory that mediates discourses on current Irish emigration.

The collective memory of the homeland and of the migratory experience is regularly classed as an integral part of what makes a diaspora; e.g. Cohen (2008). However the nature of such memories is generally conceptualised as unidirectional, being seen as the preserve of a migrant group in a new nation, who have a collective narrative or origin myth about the pre-migration homeland, the migratory journey, and the tribulations of life in the new land. While such a typology can certainly be applied to the story of 1950s Irish emigration to cities in England, my focus here is on how narratives that draw on this collective memory contextualise contemporary migration. The proximity of Ireland and England, with the history of multiple migration flows and ongoing familial and cultural links between the two, leads to migratory memories being multiply located. Examples include second generation Irish people's memories of childhood holidays in Ireland (Walter, 2013), or the memories of those who left for English cities, by people who remained in Ireland (Gray, 2002, 2004b). Memories of 1950s emigration can therefore be considered a 'transcultural memory', i.e. "not just memories of migrants, but memories that transcend national boundaries" (Glynn & Kleist, 2012, p. 12), which although mediated by experience, is broadly a shared one. This collective memory has been fostered in both Ireland and England over the past decade; initially as a reaction to the perceived 'forgetting' of this cohort of emigrants, but more recently as a usable past against which contemporary migration, and more specifically contemporary *migrants* can be assessed.

The migration and subsequent experience of this wave of Irish migrants in English cities, has been increasingly well documented, both in overviews such as Delaney's (2007) history of the Irish in post-war Britain, and also in research that looks more closely at the specificities of this experience, e.g. (Cowley, 2001; Goek, 2013; Ryan, 2007). This experience has also been highlighted in works aimed at a non-academic audience such as Catherine Dunne's (2003) *An Unconsidered People*, and the documentary, "I only came over for a couple of years"(Kelly, 2005), both of which curated the memories of Irish migrants of that era.

In terms of the formation of a collective memory from the experiences of the Irish in post-war England, 'the 1950s' exists as a discursive resource, as distinct from the 1950s as a historical period. It is a resource by which speakers situate their own narratives in larger narratives of place, nation and belonging, rather than "a 'real' time of uninterpreted occurrences in a 'real' world" (Taylor & Wetherell, 1999, p. 41). Therefore, while real historical events may be referred to, the focus of the analysis is on what invoking such events achieves within the interaction in question. As such, what the experiences of 1950s Irish emigrants *means*, is something that is continually reconstructed, contested, and used for rhetorical purposes.

In Halbwachs' (1992) terms, collective memory is the result of a process of constructing a shared memory, and is bound to a certain social or material framework. It can be argued that the required framework came about through the (albeit uneven) rise in diasporic consciousness in Ireland, both at a state and popular level, throughout the 1990s and 2000s (Boyle, Kitchin, & Ancien, 2013; Gray, 2012; Mac Éinrí & Lambkin, 2002). This process also created the sense that the perceived 'forgetting' of the experiences of the 1950s generation needed to be redressed. For instance, an episode of *Prime Time Investigates* entitled 'The Lost Generation' (Rouse & O'Connor, 2003), prompted a debate in the Dáil on Ireland's responsibilities to elderly emigrants in Britain (Rabbitte, 2004).

The 2000s also marked a memorialisation process of this generation within the Irish community in England, perhaps prompted by the realisation of their increasing mortality, as well as the closures nationwide of many of the iconic music halls and Irish clubs and centres with which they were associated. Heritage Lottery Funding facilitated this process in a number of instances e.g. publications marking the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the London Irish Centre (Harrison, 2004), and the history of St. Patrick's Day parades in Birmingham (Limbrick, 2007). This memorialisation is ongoing: a plaque in Camden Town Hall commemorates 'The Forgotten Irish of this City', while the possibility of erecting a monument to Irish emigrants at Euston station is currently being explored by the London Irish Centre<sup>1</sup>. The recent 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the London Irish Centre also presented another opportunity to memorialise the experiences of the generation for whom it was originally founded.

Alongside this process of memorialisation, it is notable how those who did not live through this period evoke it in relation to their own experiences, often as a means of contrast. Irish migrants in England comparing themselves to previous generations are not, of course, a new phenomenon. It has been well documented that a core element of the identity work of many 1980s Irish migrants in England was to differentiate themselves from 1950s migrants and the second generation, along class, education and modernity lines (Gray, 2004b; Mac an Ghaill & Haywood, 2003). However, the passage of time and demographic changes have altered the ways in which such differentiation occurs. For contemporary migrants, encounters with surviving 1950s migrants within 'diaspora space' in England appears to provoke reflection on the contrast between the present and the past, rather than any form of identity threat. Such reflections can regularly be seen in the Irish Times' online *Generation Emigration* feature, as in the following extract:

Echoes of the past are visible, though, for those Irish who want to look. Living in West Hampstead, on the edge of Kilburn, Eamonn FitzGerald is now wine-development manager for the online retailer Naked Wines. "A walk down Kilburn High Street is quite upsetting," he says. "At any point in the day where you see the pubs open early, you'll see old people standing outside, lonely, with cans or pints in their hands. It is a real stark reminder about the community that did come before us. (Hennessy, 2011)

The effect of this is to set up a contrast between current migrants with the relevant social capital to negotiate London with the 'lost' figures of the past haunting the same streets: as such, previous generations of migrants almost constitute a *memento mori* for recent migrants. More positive encounters are, of course, also possible, as in the following case, where harpist Jean Kelly describes performing music for Irish pensioners in London:

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<sup>1</sup> Personal communication with Gary Dunne, Artistic Director of the London Irish Centre

We were moved by the tales of hardship endured by the audience members – a generation of Irish emigrants who arrived in London in the 1950s and 60s. The comparison to our own trouble-free, racism-free experience of moving to London was shocking to me, and I came away feeling that I owed a huge debt to this group of people who contributed so much to change the attitude towards Irish people in Britain, and who allowed my transition from Cork to London to be so smooth (Kelly, 2014).

While Kelly positions the 1950s generation more as heroic pioneers than distressing reminders of a bygone era, a similar discourse of contrast between the generations is evident. In migrating to England, more recent Irish migrants are self-consciously following previous generations with whom they both identify and distance themselves from: a generation that is a reference point through which they can understand and construct their own experiences. The collective narratives of assumed cohort-wide experiences evident in the extracts above are also explored by Ryan elsewhere in this special issue. It is worth noting that the assumed *Generation Emigration* readership is transnational; such references to the experiences of the 1950s generation will be read, and are assumed to be understandable, both in Ireland itself, and across the diaspora; contributing to the construction of a transcultural memory.

It can be argued that the legacy of 1950s emigration matches Marianne Hirsch's concept of 'post-memory', something she describes as "characterising the experience of those who grew up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated" (Hirsch, 1997, p. 22). In the Irish context, the concept has generally been employed either in relation to the Famine e.g. (Corporaal & King, 2014), or the Troubles (Trew, 2013). While it may be stretching a point to argue that the mass emigration of the 1950s had an equally traumatic effect on the collective Irish psyche, it is still an embedded memory that is invoked. Arguably exacerbating the traumatic effect is the collective memory not just of the hardships experienced by 1950s migrants in Britain, but also the hardships inflicted by life in 1950s Ireland, and the subsequent legacy of resentment and betrayal at the necessity of leaving (Leavey et al., 2004).

Central to this post-memory is the discourse that the 1950s generation of migrants encountered levels of racialised prejudice that subsequent generations did not. This prejudice is exemplified in the collective memory of 'No Blacks, No Dogs, No Irish', or 'No Irish Need Apply' signs in the windows of rental accommodation. These signs can be used as a form of visual shorthand for the collective experience of this generation, or as Ryan has suggested, "a metaphor for all the other unspoken and difficult experiences that are hard to put into words" (Ryan, 2003, p. 75).

Interestingly, this visual shorthand of collective trauma has also been invoked in Ireland as part of 'historical duty' pro-immigrant discourses, which suggest that given the hardships of previous Irish emigrants, the Irish people should be sympathetic towards the hardships suffered by contemporary immigrants to Ireland (Conway, 2006; Garner, 2004). For instance, a campaign leaflet calling for a 'No' vote at the 2004 Citizenship referendum featured a 'No Irish, No Blacks, No Dogs' poster framed with the slogan "Remember This? Vote No" (Kinsella, 2010). While the fact that the referendum passed in a landslide indicates the limited impact of this moral rhetoric, efforts to appeal to this collective memory within Ireland reflect its place in the wider discourse around migration.

In order to further examine the place of the collective memory of the 1950s in discourses of migration and Irish identity in England, I now present a more in-depth discursive analysis of

interactions with Irish people in England. These are intended as illustrative, rather than comprehensive: the initial research project from which they were derived being intended to explore discourses of authenticity, rather than specifically collective memory. Having said that, the two are closely linked: as I've previously argued (Scully, 2010), there is a strong discourse of authenticity through collective experience and memory, where to be able to situate oneself in the historical narrative of the Irish in England is to position oneself as authentically Irish; a discourse that is also drawn upon by more recent migrants.

### **Collective memory of the 1950s and Irish identity in England**

The following extracts are derived from interviews and discussion groups carried out during my PhD research on discourses of authenticity and national identity among the Irish in England. There were three main sites for the research – London, Birmingham and Milton Keynes, with both those of Irish birth and descent taking part. The research was carried out throughout 2008, ergo, just before the start of the current wave of emigration from Ireland. As such, these extracts represent the prevailing collective memory of the 1950s among the Irish in England, before the arrival of recent migrants.

My analytical focus here is on the 'post-memory' of the 1950s among subsequent generations of Irish people in England, both new arrivals, and those of Irish descent. While the interviews I carried out with 1950s migrants themselves did touch on the hardships and prejudice they encountered, they also incorporated the more enjoyable social aspects of life within their narratives (Scully, 2010). However, for later migrants, the hardships associated with this cohort became a point of reference against which to compare their own experience, as well as an explanatory narrative for current issues surrounding the Irish in England. The following extract from a discussion in Milton Keynes illustrates how such narratives are co-constructed. Marion is a second generation Irish woman whose parents had migrated in the 1930s, whereas the other speakers had migrated in the late 1960s/early 1970s. Gerry, a 1950s migrant, was also present, but did not contribute at this point of the conversation. The extract begins with Kathleen discussing a talk she had attended organised by the Federation of Irish Societies<sup>2</sup> on the link between alcohol and mental health problems among Irish migrants.

#### **Extract 1:**

**Kathleen:** What they think caused a lot of it was, is the digs that these men lived in, and they used to pay for their room and they had to pay for a meal, but the meal that they got was sub-standard; it was lots of crap that they were given to eat. They weren't allowed to sit in anybody's living room [**Marion:** couldn't cook] or dining room; they couldn't cook for themselves; they just had a bed, so, so [**Marion:** in the damp, cold] so they went down the pub, got drunk, came home, went to bed, went to work

**Marion:** Slept in their clothes [**Áine:** yeah] but socially they met people [**Áine:** yeah]

**Andrew:** That happened here.

**Kathleen:** And that was, that was the, she; they reckoned that that's

**Marion:** That was the start of it

**Kathleen:** A lot of the reason for the Irish being disadvantaged and, and being the way that they are

**Marion:** And thought of as drunkards, it's because they actually went to the pub; they might not have all got drunk, but because that was a meeting place and they were warm ; my dad told us that. You'd be out working in all weathers, your clothes would be wet, there was nowhere in your

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<sup>2</sup> Now renamed 'Irish in Britain'.

room to dry them and you'd go home and you'd go to the pub, because it was warm, and your clothes dried out on you while you were in the pub.

**Kathleen:** 'Er, you know, and they reckon that was the cause of a lot of the ill health with the Irish and that's how we were perceived by other, by [**Áine:** by the English people] the natives if you know what I mean, yes, yes, and I never, never gave that a thought until she was talking about it and because she worked with a lot of these people and she came across it on a daily basis, but I would never have, you know, because I didn't have to do anything like that when I came. You didn't have to do anything like that [**Áine:** No, no]

**Marion:** No, it was different

**Kathleen:** You; maybe Gerry's generation did

**Áine:** Again, I didn't really have to come over [**Kathleen:** yeah] like you I didn't have to come over

[**Kathleen:** no]

With the Federation of Irish Societies report providing the framework, the experience of 1950s migrants is co-constructed in such a way as to provide an explanation for the poor health of many elderly Irish people, as well as countering the 'native' perception of the Irish as drunkards. Despite most of the participants in the discussion being female, the 'typical' Irish 1950s migrant is here represented as male; perhaps reflecting a general tendency to imagine migration as a male phenomenon, statistics notwithstanding (Gray, 2000). The condition of the 1950s Irish male migrant is presented in an almost pathological way, and in so doing, a contrast is drawn to later migrants, who did not have to negotiate such hardships. Notably, both Kathleen and Áine speak in terms of 'not having *had* to come over', positioning themselves as possessing greater agency due to having migrated through choice. This association of 'hardship' and lack of agency runs through discourses of Irish emigration, and is especially prevalent in explanatory discourses of recent migration, as I shall return to later.

That the 1950s experience acts as a collective memory for the Irish in modern-day England is illustrated by the fact that it is not just used to distinguish one cohort of Irish migrants from another, but also to distinguish the Irish more generally from other migrant groups. Both forms of distancing and association are present in the following extract, where Sharon, who moved to London in the 1980s, discusses the trope of the 'Polish as the new Irish' (also noted by Ryan (2013)), which was widespread at the time of the interview:

#### **Extract 2:**

**Sharon:** I used to get a bit hot under the collar about all of that in so far as Polish builders and Romanian builders coming in, they'd say 'oh they were just like the Irish way back', they weren't just like the Irish, they hadn't been forced out - we were forced out - we had nothing . I grew up, when I grew up, in Ireland, there was loads of people without fathers they're all working in England and stuff, now I know that you say economically it might be the same, but it wasn't because they weren't getting cut wages they weren't, I mean, they may choose to look for cheaper wages but way back then, they didn't choose they were just given shit wages and stuff and there was very little going back home ... a lot of men that generation, they just got lost there, lost their families and they're the lonely ones, I mean we were okay coz we were educated, and you had friends back home that went to college so you kind of hung on to friends ... but there was definitely those older ones that lived in hostels and stuff that just were lost, I mean totally lost they just never never got to go back, never made money, drink took 'em you know, I mean it was just horrendous so that's always very sad, I just I always get hot under the collar and it was just like, it wasn't like that, it was so much harder for some of them it was just horrendous

Sharon here combines a personal memory of 'missing fathers' during her childhood in Ireland, with the collective memory of the hardships suffered by, again, *male* migrants of this generation and their

subsequent destitution. This combination produces a transnational memory: Sharon contextualises the hardships suffered by the 1950s emigrants by also emphasising the gap they left behind in an Ireland that had forced them out. These migrants are represented as becoming lost to Ireland, but also lost within London; their lack of agency is contrasted to Sharon's own generation whose education is constructed as having inoculated them from similar hardships. However, it is noticeable that Sharon uses the words 'we' and 'they' when referring to this generation interchangeably; their experience is part of the collective memory of the wider 'we' of the Irish in England, alongside a memory of the hardships of 1950s Ireland. This is particularly the case when comparing the Irish to other groups, and it is this collective memory that Sharon draws on when resisting a reading of contemporary Polish migration as similar to Irish migration in the past.

Therefore the 1950s generation are positioned in diaspora space in relation to the Irish in Ireland, subsequent generations of Irish migrants, the 'host' community of English people, and other migrant/ethnic groups in English cities. Their perceived experience is sufficiently emblematic that evoking it in conversation is a means of situating oneself within the Irish community in England. This can also be seen in the usages to which this collective memory is put by those of Irish descent. The following extract arises from a conversation with three second-generation Irish women who worked with an Irish community group in Birmingham, where they had been discussing the particular challenges posed in obtaining funding and recognition from the local authorities:

### Extract 3:

**Eileen:** I don't know about your parents, but my parents; I mean my dad, the few times he was out of work, he would never, never have gone on the dole; you know, 'we're poor but we're proud' and, you know, 'of course we don't need any help'. Actually, you know, it would be quite nice, but and I think that, that, that was why you got such a strong community in Birmingham, because it was almost like a social security network within the community.

**Marc:** So there was a kind of self-sufficient kind of

**Eileen:** Yes, absolutely, because, and I suppose, if I'm being honest, I have a little bit of that in as much as I don't like admitting that I can't do something. So they, they're all the same, that by admitting that they needed help, or admitting that they needed something, they'd see that as a sign of weakness, don't you think?

**Becky:** Hmm.

**Eileen:** I'm just thinking of *[name]* there as well, fight to the death

**Becky:** Absolutely, I'd, I'd totally agree with that. 'Erm, it's, what, which is the whole difference with the Asian community [**Eileen:** yes], 'cos they are first at the queue, 'er the front of the queue for whatever they're entitled to [**Eileen:** absolutely], and whether it's detrimental to themselves or their families, the Irish community aren't that great at

**Eileen:** I mean, women were always encouraged to put everybody first before themselves, and although that's watered down with the generations, it's still there. Then you've got a lot of women who die of cancer; I'm thinking of *[name]'s* sister who had had breast cancer for goodness knows how long, and didn't go to the doctors until two weeks before she died, and that is just indicative.

**Becky:** Yeah, that's true of a lot of the males that came over [**Eileen:** yes] to work, to send money back home [**Eileen:** that's right] the likes of *[name]* came over in the '50's, worked within the Irish community on sites and pubs, and that kind of thing, lived in a squalor in the back of Sparkbrook, [**Eileen:** sent money home], never had a penny benefit in the entire time; didn't even have a National Insurance number; anything, he had; he'd been limping around for years with his foot and only just before he had to have his leg amputated was he brought into hosp-, but it had just gone so far up his leg; but he just left and left and left it. I don't even think he was registered at a doctor's was he

**Eileen:** The other thing with that was that I, I heard that they didn't think they were here permanently, because they always thought they were going home [**Becky:** going back] you see,

so they didn't need to register, but they'd send all their money back, but then it got harder and harder and then actually when they did try and go back, either the families didn't want them, because they were then perceived as being almost English, and so they were stuck on this bridge, because the Ireland left behind had long gone, you know, everybody they knew had grown up and gone and they, they're sort of left here with no money, no family, no homes.

Again, the dominant theme running through this co-constructed narrative of 1950s emigration is that of hardship; the pathological figure of the 'typical' male Irish migrant is again present, although this time alongside the experience of female migrants. In a similar manner to Sharon's narrative, the 'typical' Irish migrant of this era is portrayed as now belonging in neither England, nor Ireland; being 'stuck on a bridge' between the two countries. This experience is constructed as having a damaging legacy in terms of the poor health of the individuals involved, but also collectively with regard to the Irish community in Birmingham. In portraying attitudes of self-sufficiency as characteristic of the 1950s generation, Becky and Eileen stress the detrimental effects not accessing welfare have had. However this also serves the purpose of differentiating the Irish community from the local Asian community, who Becky somewhat disparagingly characterises as 'at the front of the queue for everything'. In the contested wider discursive sphere of immigrants' rights to claim benefits, this has the effect of positioning the Irish community as both contributing more and taking less from the city of Birmingham than other communities. The collective memory of the 1950s Irish community in Birmingham is thus a complex one: while acknowledging the detrimental legacy of the 'typical' lifestyle of the time, there is also a level of pride in the self-sufficiency of the community. Tales of individual hardship arguably contribute to a narrative of collective survival, forging what it means to be 'authentically' Birmingham-Irish.

It is arguable that the hardships of the 1950s generation have now become the accepted collective memory of this time. However, the dominance of the narrative of 'hardship' within this collective memory may lead to a collective forgetting of some other aspects of the 1950s experience, including the more positive, celebratory facets. The following extract represents a dialogue between these two alternatives in memorialising the 1950s generation. It was prompted by a conversation about Irish centres in London, where I have posed a question about what they'd like to see in a contemporary Irish centre. Sheila had moved from Dublin to London as a child in the late 1950s, while Máire, who is slightly younger, had led a more transnational life, having lived in a number of cities in Northern Ireland, England, and the Republic, before settling in London around 10 years before the interview took place.

#### **Extract 4:**

**Sheila:** I'd put in the generation that are all gone

**Máire:** Yeah; I'd put; there'd be some kind of memorial to their experience, which was awful.

**Sheila:** Well I don't know about that so

**Máire:** Well not awful completely, but y'know

**Sheila:** I don't mean it in that way

**Máire:** People that came over, built the roads [**Sheila:** yeah, yeah] and all that, you know.

**Sheila:** Yeah, because I, but I, I don't mean as a memorial, but I'd like to reinvent them (*laughs*) but, you know, I'd like; I'd still like to have; I'd still like to have that; to go in and sort of sit in somewhere and have like loads of different Irish people; you know when we 'erm, when we've been to that party at the Hilton that time and they [**Máire:** mm] have the sing-song, [**Máire:** mm] the Irish sing-song?

**Máire:** Mm.

**Sheila:** Yeah? [**Máire:** yes], do you know what I'm talking about, yes?

**Máire:** And the old guys.

**Sheila:** All the old; right, that

**Máire:** God, just looking at their faces said it all, you know, they'd lived a rough old life

**Sheila:** That's what I'd like because that, what, what you've heard there, that's what I was brought up with, what you got in there, that's what I was brought up with

Máire's misunderstanding of Sheila's original wish to preserve "the generation that are all gone" is illuminating insofar as it illustrates the different ways in which this generation are positioned within discourses of Irishness. As discussed, the accounts of the 1950s generation themselves, who while not glossing over the hardships in their experiences, also stressed the enjoyable sociable aspects, are distinct from 'post-memory' accounts, which seem to be mostly through a traumatic lens. It's notable, therefore, that when the post-war generation is brought up, Sheila speaks in terms of resurrecting the sociable aspect she associates with childhood memories, whereas Máire orientates towards a memorial towards their 'awful' experience. Even when Sheila clarifies by stressing conviviality, Máire still focusses on the 'rough old life' she saw in the faces of the 'old guys' she'd encountered. This may therefore indicate a difference of emphasis in the collective memory of 1950s migration between those of Irish descent in England, and more recent migrants. While both position the 1950s experience as integral to Irishness in England, there is perhaps more of a sense of continuity in the accounts of the descendants of this generation and a desire to draw out the positive legacies of the experience. On the other hand, for recent migrants, the collective memory of the 1950s is primarily a traumatic one: one worthy of memorialisation, but that is more indicative of contrast than continuity with contemporary experience.

### **Recent migration and 'echoes of the past'**

To argue that the experience of 1950s migrants in England is one that is passing into collective memory is to argue for a sense of continuity within Irish diasporic consciousness. While identifying with a particular generation of Irish migrants in England may involve differentiation from other generations of Irish migrants, it nonetheless involves recognising that 1950s migration is a pivotal aspect of the overall Irish diasporic experience. As outlined earlier, this represents a shift from findings from research conducted among the 'economic emigrant aristocracy' of middle-class Irish migrants in the 1980s and 1990s. An obvious explanation for this is that due to the increasing mortality of elderly migrants, encounters between contemporary migrants and their 1950s predecessors are less likely than in the 1980s, a dynamic also noted by Ryan elsewhere in this special issue. When such encounters do occur, they come under the guise of helping the elderly. As such, contemporary migrants share 'diaspora space' (Brah, 1996) less with 1950s migrants themselves, as with the memory of the experiences of 1950s migrants. The present day is a time where the narratives of 1950s migration are passing from the lived experience of individuals to a collective post-memory. Therefore, while instances of contestation of Irish authenticity in the present day may still occur between generations at an interpersonal level, the narrative of the experience of 1950s migrants has become canonical, and as such is available as a 'usable past' on both sides of the Irish Sea.

Hickman (2014) has argued that the stereotype of the down-on-his-luck Irish labourer in Britain exists alongside the stereotype of the rich ignorant Irish-American, and the mobile entrepreneurial adventurer as the three major archetypes of the Irish diaspora within the popular imagination in Ireland. As noted earlier, a regular rhetorical strategy of Irish government ministers across party lines has been to position current emigrants as 'entrepreneurial adventurers' through contrast with the 'down-on-his-luck labourer' of previous generations. Such a strategy does not allow for much nuance in the experiences of the Irish diaspora, arguably doing the 1950s generation of migrants a disservice by portraying them, in Akenson's (1993) terms as "mere passive bits of flotsam on some alleged historical tide". It may also be noted that the Noonan quote, with which I began this article, distinguishes between 'forced migrants from the building industry and 'young professionals' whose emigration is characterised as a 'free choice of lifestyle'. Contemporary working-class migrants are therefore implicitly positioned alongside 1950s migrants, and in contrast to middle-class migrants.

While the overwhelming majority of coverage of contemporary migration has focussed on young middle class migrants, the proposition that this cohort are better equipped to succeed post-emigration than their predecessors generally passes unchallenged. As such, they can be positioned as having made an individual rational economic choice to emigrate, and as likely to return with extra skills with which to benefit the Irish economy. The power of such narratives is derived from the implied contrast with previous generations who are portrayed as having neither agency nor education. While this may rest on relatively crude stereotypes of those who emigrated in the 1950s, such stereotypes are situated within an increasingly well-established collective memory, which has become an integral part of both diasporic consciousness in Ireland, and ethnic/community consciousness among the Irish in England.

The shadow of this collective memory may also influence public understanding of current emigration. Seeing contemporary migration to England as relatively untraumatic compared to the 1950s may cause those who are currently experiencing difficulties to be overlooked, as has been highlighted by some recent reports (Crosscare Migrant Project, 2012; Moore, Waters, Tilki, & Clarke, 2012). Similarly, the portrayal of the 1950s as a time of unprecedented hardship in Ireland where people were forced to leave has the effect of mitigating responsibility for current migration. The implied comparison to the 1950s in relation to the level of choice available to Ireland's youth as to whether or not to emigrate also has the effect of constraining the ways in which current emigration can be discussed by ignoring the structuralist aspects of migration for the voluntarist aspects. As Billig argues, memories that are collectively determined are also ideologically determined, and "the collective processes which enable memorization to occur will also themselves be part of wider ideological patterns" (1990, p. 60). Gray (2012) among others has argued that the ideological patterns shaping the 'neo-institutionalisation of state-diaspora relations', view the development of such relations 'as a means of achieving neoliberal economic development and global competitiveness' (p.245). If the diaspora is primarily viewed as an economic resource, then diasporic memories may equally be deployed as a rhetorical resource to position contemporary migrants as entrepreneurial agents, rather than 'emigrants in the traditional sense'. One might therefore conclude that while 'unforgetting' and memorialising the experience of the post-war generation may be laudable, a critical perspective on how this memorialisation is part of wider ideological patterns regarding how contemporary migrants are portrayed, is advisable.

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