



HAL
open science

The Irish in Britain: Injustices of Recognition?

Grainne O’Keeffe-Vigneron

► **To cite this version:**

Grainne O’Keeffe-Vigneron. The Irish in Britain: Injustices of Recognition?. Sources : Revue d’études anglophones, 2003, Automne, pp.33-43. hal-00612720

HAL Id: hal-00612720

<https://hal.science/hal-00612720>

Submitted on 1 Aug 2011

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L’archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d’enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

The Irish in Britain: Injustices of Recognition?

Gráinne O'KEEFFE
University of Le Havre

La population irlandaise de Grande-Bretagne a été considérée de deux manières différentes : d'abord, sa différence culturelle fut ignorée au sein de la société britannique. Elle fut victime d'un « mythe d'homogénéisation », forgé par la population blanche de Grande-Bretagne en raison d'une langue et d'une couleur de peau communes. D'un autre côté, elle subit la discrimination et le racisme de cette même société et eut du mal à faire valoir ses droits dans les domaines de l'emploi et du logement par exemple. Cet article retrace comment les débats concernant les minorités ethniques révèlent une relative invisibilité de la population irlandaise et montre les conséquences induites sur cette dernière. De surcroît, les problèmes propres à l'Irlande du Nord contribuèrent à un renforcement des stéréotypes négatifs et rendirent l'expression d'une identité irlandaise très problématique. Les Irlandais souffrent de plus de certaines maladies psychiatriques que d'autres minorités ethniques connaissent à un moindre degré en Grande-Bretagne. Cet article suggère qu'une des causes de ce phénomène est le malaise entourant l'identité irlandaise et sa perception négative dans la société britannique. À quoi s'ajoute que les Irlandais ont été inclus pour la première fois dans la catégorie « minorité ethnique » lors du recensement organisé en Angleterre, au Pays de Galles et en Écosse en 2001. Nous verrons que les chiffres sont beaucoup moins importants que prévu.

This article deals with the injustices of recognition of the Irish community in Britain and its consequences. The post-1945 Irish population in Britain has been caught between two representations. On the one hand, their migrant experience and cultural difference have been denied because they are a 'white,' 'British Isles' population group.¹ On the other hand, anti-Irish stereotypes persist in British society and have been fuelled by anti-IRA fears over the last thirty years, making integration and the assertion of an Irish identity in Britain difficult tasks.

Firstly, this article proposes to examine the reasons and the consequences of the invisibility of the Irish in Britain. This invisibility has meant that discrimination and racism targeting the Irish community have gone relatively unnoticed. A report published by the Commission for Racial Equality in 1997² has shown, through large-scale interviews, that the Irish suffer from discrimination and stereotyping in Britain, and some examples of this will be discussed. It will be seen that having an Irish identity can pose problems in British society. Secondly, some areas of disadvantage as cited in a report published in August 2002 by the Irish Ministry of Foreign Affairs³ will be examined. This report dedicated a separate chapter to the Irish in Britain as it concluded that Irish integration in Britain is perceptibly less successful than in other countries and that there is a disequilibrium in the allocation of public services and resources in Britain for the Irish community. Finally, the area of mental health of the Irish in Britain will be analysed. The Irish in Britain, and more especially England,⁴ suffer high rates of psychiatric illness as compared to other ethnic minorities and I will argue that this is one of the consequences of the years of invisibility of the Irish community and the negativity associated with an Irish identity in Britain. The British Department of Health, in a report entitled, *“Inside, Outside,”*⁵ deals with mental health issues of ethnic minorities and it includes the Irish. This is significant because it shows recognition on a national level of the specific problems of the Irish as they have not always been included in debates on ethnic minorities in the past.

The Invisibility of the Irish: Reasons and Consequences

When the Irish government withdrew from the Commonwealth and declared a Republic in 1949,⁶ Irish citizens were still to be treated with the same rights as British citizens under the *Ireland Act, 1949.*⁷ This gave them a special status in Britain even though the country was no longer a member of the Commonwealth and meant that the Irish could continue to supply labour on the British market.

When immigrants from Commonwealth countries began arriving in great numbers in response to the post-war reconstruction boom, the British government introduced legislation to control this influx. The Irish were not included in the 1962 *Commonwealth Immigration Bill* on the ground that it was impossible to police the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic, a view that was broadly accepted in the debate on the bill. It was also widely accepted that Irish workers were needed in Britain, especially to meet the demand for unskilled labour and were preferable to Commonwealth immigrants as it was thought they would integrate much more easily, sharing the same skin colour and language.⁸ This did not prevent many MPs expressing their views that the southern Irish were, “a social liability, a source of contamination and a drain on the public purse.”⁹

What is important here is that even though there was animosity against the Irish both by sections of the British population and MPs, the Irish were not to be treated ‘*any differently than British citizens*’ and could travel to and from Britain without hindrance. This is very significant because the exclusion of the Irish from controls on entry directly contributed to their subsequent invisibility. They were constructed as the ‘same’ as the British and they were excluded from the restrictive immigration legislation which came to determine which groups were defined as ‘ethnic’.

IRA activity on the British mainland is another reason for the lack of visibility of the Irish in Britain. Following the Birmingham pub bombings in 1974, the *Prevention of Terrorism (Temporary Provisions) Act* was introduced.¹⁰ This gave extensive powers of port control and detention to the British authorities and evidence suggests that it mainly targeted the Irish community. Prof. Paddy Hillyard, who has carried out extensive research on the Irish community and the PTA, suggested that the Act constructed the Irish as a “*suspect people*.”¹¹ Irish people were afraid of asserting their identity for fear of reprisals, and this made them “*keep their heads down*.” When Irish people got together, they were frequently seen as members of the ‘IRA’.¹² This constrained group activity of all kinds, including social and cultural events.

IRA activity has also contributed to the stereotyping of the Irish in Britain. It has been suggested in the CRE report that the Irish have been reluctant to protest at racist treatment when experienced partly as result of fear of being identified, but also shame arising from a partial acceptance of guilt by association. According to this report, attacks and intimidation were not reported to the police, because the latter were perceived as sharing negative stereotypes of the Irish. The main features of hostility were its “*virulence, lack of connection with any understanding of the political background and blanket application to all Irish people, triggered solely by hearing Irish accents*.”¹³

As a respondent to the survey pointed out in the aftermath of the Birmingham bombings, “*When there was a bombing here. I always kept quiet on buses and trains. I was careful—I knew they would recognise my accent*.” And another, “*You couldn’t join anything because I know the Irish here were under surveillance. And it is as well not to be getting nationalistic*.” Irish people played down their identity, “*Often it would be better not to have my accent*,”¹⁴ remarked another interviewee. The political situation in Northern Ireland has made Irish community life in Britain particularly fragile.

Discrimination and Disadvantage

Prof. Mary Hickman has argued that the Irish have been victims of the myth of a British homogenous white society, that all people who were “*white smoothly assimilated into the ‘British way of life’ and that all the problems resided with*

those who possessed a different skin colour. Different skin colour was taken to represent different culture."¹⁵ This ignored the problems that the Irish could encounter in Britain as they were perceived to be the same.

However, the 1976 *Race Relations Act* defines discrimination on racial grounds as being on grounds of "colour, race, nationality or ethnic and national origins."¹⁶ The definition of a racial group to include ethnic or national origins obviously includes the Irish. This period represented a turnaround in official discourse in Britain, with 'new racism' being defined in terms of differences of culture. Nevertheless, this did not prevent anti-Irish racism. Irish accents are considered an inferior form of English and mimicry is considered 'a legitimate form of amusement'.¹⁷

Media representation of the Irish has done nothing to help the situation. The Irish are often represented as drunks and fraudsters in various newspapers and on several television programmes. An example of how the situation has not changed is in an article in *The Guardian* of the 5th March 2003.¹⁸ Retail entrepreneur, Phillip Green, head of the BHS-to-Top Shop empire, said of *The Guardian's* financial editor, Paul Murphy, when he carried out an investigation into Mr. Green's accounts, that the Irish were illiterate! Paul Murphy is not Irish, he was born in Oldham and was brought up in Portsmouth. The trigger, of course, for Mr. Green, was the name 'Murphy' and the meaning around the word 'Irish' in British mindsets. This is an example of the continued racism against the Irish in Britain and stereotyping by name.

Employment

The 2001 Census returns on the socio-economic position of the Irish are not available at the time of writing, so my analysis here is based on 1991 Census returns. Irish labour for men has been situated largely in construction and labouring: 25.2% and women in the personal services: 34.6%.¹⁹ However, the percentages under the 'professional category' more than doubled for men in the thirty-year period from 1971 to 1991, increasing from 5.1% to 11.6%, for women there was a slight decrease from 22.4% in 1971 to 21.4% in 1991.²⁰ Women were present in larger numbers under the professional category in the past because of the large amount of trained nurses amongst Irish women.

The *Race Relations Act* 1976 makes it unlawful to discriminate on racial grounds in employment and in the provision of goods and services. However, the CRE has had a number of complaints brought by Irish people of discrimination in employment. A number of cases could be cited. An Irish job applicant, after answering a question about his nationality, was asked: "Do you have a problem with drink?" (*O'Driscoll v Post Office, 1990*).²¹ Faced with derogatory comments about his Irish origins nearly every day, a factory worker was dismissed when he continued to complain (*McAuley v Auto Alloys Foundry, 1994*).²²

Claiming Benefits

The Irish are entitled to benefits, so legally there are no grounds for different treatment. Concerning local authority housing, when an individual approaches the personnel, they have to prove that they are not intentionally homeless. Homelessness is described as someone having no accommodation in England, Scotland and Wales. Irish agencies reported cases where 'leaving Ireland' itself was taken as a definition of people making themselves intentionally homeless.²³ One respondent for the CRE report was asked *why she did not return to Ireland?* This attitude has prevented a lot of Irish people accessing their rights. They are not seen as being entitled to the same benefits as the national population and are not perceived as being sufficiently different to justify the claim that their needs are particular.

Mental Health

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Irish-born people in Britain were between two-and-a-half and three-and-a-half times more likely to be hospitalised for some kind of psychiatric disorder than the English-born.²⁴ They have one of the highest rates of admission to mental hospital of any migrant or ethnic group. Nevertheless, the persistent pattern of excessive admissions for Irish people has failed to lead to much interest in Irish health within ethnicity debates in the past. However, this pattern seems to be changing with the Department of Health Report which includes the Irish as a separate category. This report constitutes a significant new departure in central government discourse on ethnic minorities, defined not only in terms of colour but also of culture.

The Department of Health carried out a consultation with members of the Irish community in London in February 2003.²⁵ The general feeling of the people there was that their particular needs were not being taken seriously by the majority of health professionals. For Irish women in Britain, depression was the largest single cause of admission, with rates between one-and-a-half and two-and-a-half times that of English-born women.²⁶ There are also significantly high rates of suicide among Irish-born people of both sexes, with particularly high rates among young women. High rates have persisted for decades and have increased over the years.²⁷ Latest figures, from national statistics on suicide, suggest that suicide among Irish emigrants is 53% above the national level.²⁸ This figure is significantly higher than that for all other black and minority ethnic groups. Among young people (20-29 years) 75% excess was found for males and nearly three-fold excess for young women.²⁹

The Irish have also higher rates of alcoholism and, therefore, some of the mental problems experienced are due to excess alcohol consumption.

There is evidence that particular populations of Irish people may have alcohol problems linked to mental health and wider disadvantages of isolation, poverty, living alone, particular employment histories, homelessness, marginalisation and poor general health.³⁰

Some of the Irish present at the meeting stated that misdiagnosis by GPs of mental disorders of Irish patients was a concern due to a stereotype of Irish people which equates cultural identity with alcohol problems. This can lead to Irish people not getting help for their condition in time. They are afraid of such stereotypes and of experiencing hostility. Some have a lack of confidence, lack of knowledge of what is available and need support with accessing adequate services. The Department of Health proposes to reduce and eventually eliminate ethnic inequalities in the health service by enhancing the cultural relevance of the workforce and by investing in community development of minority ethnic groups aimed at achieving greater community participation and ownership around mental health.³¹

However, perhaps more research should be carried out as to why Irish people suffer from such high rates of illness. Frantz Fanon, author of *Black Skin, White Masks*,³² argues that colonialism must not be understood simply as an economic or a political process but also as a psychological and an ideological one. The question of an Irish identity becomes crucial in understanding the psychological conditions of the Irish migrant in Britain. Living in the country of the 'coloniser' and the negative imaging around the former 'colonised' have contributed to the difficult time the Irish have had asserting their identity, the unrest in Northern Ireland adding to the difficulties in promoting it as positive. The negative perception of Irishness throughout the years in Britain has created a lot of pressure on the Irish and their need to assert their identity and their difference has been largely ignored in mainstream British society.

Some further explanations given for the high incidence of mental illness among the Irish community are: stress, adaptation problems relating to authority or officialdom, the absence of familiar social contacts, isolation.³³ Isolation can occur in the workplace, in the home or in everyday social relations.

*

To conclude, many Irish people have been subject to some form of racism or discrimination at some point in their lives in Britain. The exclusion of the Irish from immigration controls has contributed to their invisibility and to the myth that racism concerned only those minorities visibly different from the mainstream population. It has been shown that the Irish do experience discrimination in British society, whether it be verbal or in the media, or in accessing their rights to housing or in the health service.

For the first time, in the 2001 Census, the Irish have been included under the 'Ethnic Minority' section. This after much campaigning by Irish groups and more especially the Federation of Irish Societies. Their inclusion with other ethnic minorities, it is hoped, will contribute to a more thorough monitoring of Irish needs in Great Britain. However, unlike in North America or Australia, this section was a singular rather than a 'mixed' or a 'multiple choice' category. In England and Wales the named 'White' categories were 'British' and 'Irish,' without provision for a 'Mixed' category, whilst in Scotland the specific choices were 'Scottish,' 'Other British' and 'Irish.' This category may have been too restrictive for many second and third generation Irish as it can be seen from Table 1 and Graph 1 that the number of those who identified themselves as Irish is small.

The CRE report estimated the Irish ethnic population at about 4.6% of the total population of Great Britain and the final results have proved to be a lot less at 1.21% of the population. These Census returns raise many questions concerning how second and third-generation Irish view their roots. A malaise may still persist in assuming an Irish identity. Perhaps the years of invisibility and lack of a positive image of Irishness have taken their toll. Or maybe there is confusion around the term 'ethnic' and perhaps it evokes a negative connotation in people's mindsets. More research needs to be carried out to assess why the figures are less than what was previously expected and what effect they will have on future monitoring of the Irish ethnic group.

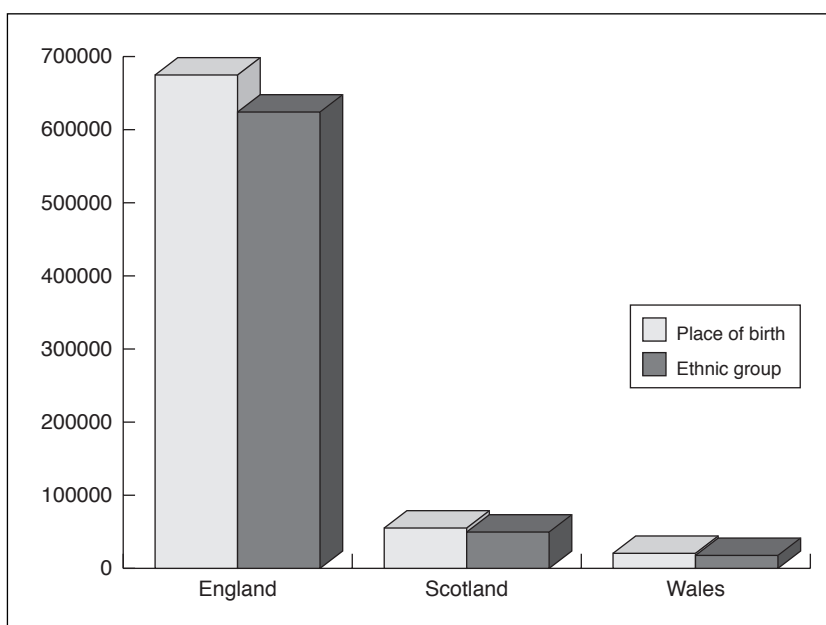
Table 1

Irish-Born Population (Great Britain)						
	All people	N. Ireland	Percentage	Republic of Ireland	Percentage	Total
England	49,138,831	215,124	0.44	459,662	0.94	674,786
Scotland	5,062,011	33,409	0.66	21,766	0.43	55,175
Wales	2,903,085	7,851	0.27	12,718	0.44	20,569
Total	57,103,927	256,384	0.45	494,146	0.87	750,530

Ethnic group						
	All people	White Irish People	Percentage			
England	49,138,831	624,115	1.27			
Scotland	5,062,011	49,670	0.98			
Wales	2,903,085	17,708	0.61			
Total	57,103,927	691,493	1.21			

Source: Census 2001 (England, Wales and Scotland)

Graph 1



References

- Balarajan, R. and S. Harding. "Patterns of Mortality in Second Generation Irish Living in England and Wales: Longitudinal Study." *British Medical Journal*, (1 June 1996): 1389-1392.
- Delaney, Enda. *Demography, State and Society: Irish migration to Britain, 1921-1971*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000.
- Department of Health. *'Inside, Outside': Improving Mental Health Services for Black and Minority Ethnic Communities in England*. London: Department of Health, 2003.
- Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. USA: Grove Press, 1991.
- Federation of Irish Societies, *The Health of the Irish in Britain: The Report of a Community Conference*. London: FIS, 1998.
- Finch, Julia. "Threat of Consumer Boycott Leads to BHs Owner issuing Apology to Irish," *The Guardian*, March 5th, 2003.
- Greenslade, Liam et al. *Generations of an Invisible Minority: the health and well-being of the Irish in Britain*. Liverpool: The Institute of Irish Studies, 1991.

- Greenslade, Liam. "White skin, white masks: Psychological Distress among the Irish in Britain," in *The Irish World Wide: history, heritage and identity: volume 2, The Irish in the New Communities*, edited by Patrick O'Sullivan. Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1992.
- Hickman, Mary and Bronwen Walter. "Deconstructing Whiteness." *Feminist Review* (No. 50, summer 1995): 5-19.
- . *Discrimination and the Irish Community in Britain*. London: CRE, 1997.
- Hickman, Mary. "'Binary Opposites' or 'Unique Neighbours'? The Irish in Multi-Ethnic Britain." *Political Quarterly* (71.1, 2000): 50-58.
- . "Reconstructing Deconstructing 'race': British Political Discourses About The Irish in Britain." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* (Vol. 21, No. 2, March 1998): 288-307.
- . "The Irish Experience of Racism and Discrimination in Britain." *British Association for Irish Studies Newsletter*, (No. 9, summer 1996): 3-6.
- . "The Irish in Britain: Racism, Incorporation and Identity." *Irish Studies Review* (No. 10, spring 1995): 16-19.
- . *The Irish Community in Britain: myth or reality?* London: Irish Studies Centre, 1996.
- Hillyard, Paddy. *'Suspect Community': People's Experience of the Prevention of Terrorism Acts in Britain*. London: Pluto Press, 1993.
- Inglis, Joan. "The Irish in Britain: A Question of Identity." *Irish Studies in Britain* (No. 3, spring/summer, 1982): 11-14.
- Jackson, John A. *The Irish in Britain*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963.
- Lee, J. J. *Ireland 1912-1985: Politics and Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.
- Llyod, Cathie. *The Irish Community in Britain: Discrimination, Disadvantage and Racism*. London: University of North London Press, 1995.
- Mac Laughlin, Jim (ed). *Location and Dislocation in Contemporary Irish Society: Emigration and Irish identities*. Cork: Cork University Press, 1997.
- Raftery, James, David Jones and Michael Rosato. "The Mortality of First and Second Generation Irish Immigrants in the U.K." *Social Science and Medicine* (Vol. 31, No. 5, 1990): 577-584.
- Sproston, Kerry, James Nazroo (eds). *Ethnic Minority Psychiatric Illness Rates in the Community (EMPIRIC)*. London: TSO, 2002.
- Task Force on Policy regarding Emigrants. *Ireland and the Irish Abroad: Report of the Task Force on Policy regarding Emigrants to the Minister for Foreign Affairs Mr. Brian Cowen*. Dublin: Department of Foreign Affairs, August 2002.
- The Commission for Racial Equality, *The Irish in Britain*. London: CRE, 1997.

- Walter, Bronwen *et al.* *A Study of the Existing Sources of Information and Analysis about Irish Emigrants and Irish Communities Abroad*. Dublin: Task Force Research Study, Minister for Foreign Affairs, 2002.
- . “Challenging the Black/White Binary: The Need for an Irish Category in the 2001 Census.” *Patterns of Prejudice* (Vol. 32, No. 2, 1998): 73-86.

Notes

1. Bronwen Walter *et al.*, *A Study of the Existing Sources of Information and Analysis about Irish Emigrants and Irish Communities Abroad* (Dublin: Department of Foreign Affairs, 2002) 38.
2. Mary J. Hickman and Bronwen Walter, *Discrimination and the Irish Community in Britain* (London: Commission for Racial Equality, 1997).
3. Task Force on Policy Regarding Emigrants, *Ireland and the Irish Abroad: Report of the Task Force on Policy Regarding Emigrants to the Minister for Foreign Affairs Mr. Brian Cowen*, (Dublin: Department of Foreign Affairs, 2001).
4. This is not surprising as the largest Irish-born population in Britain is found in England. According to the 2001 Census returns, 674,786 live in England, 55,175 in Scotland and 20,569 in Wales.
5. Department of Health, *'Inside, Outside': Improving Mental Health Services for Black and Minority Ethnic Communities in England* (London: Department of Health, 2003).
6. Joseph Lee, *Ireland 1912-1985: Politics and Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989) 300.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Mary J. Hickman, “Reconstructing Deconstructing ‘Race’: British Political Discourses about the Irish in Britain,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 1, no. 2 (1998): 288-307.
9. Hansard 1961-62, vol. 649, cols. 753-762.
10. *Op. cit.*, Hickman and Walter, *Discrimination and the Irish Community in Britain*, 125.
11. Paddy Hillyard, *Suspect Community: People's Experience of the Prevention of Terrorism Acts in Britain* (London: Pluto Press, 1993).
12. *Op. cit.*, Hickman and Walter, *Discrimination and the Irish Community in Britain*, 127.
13. *Ibid.*, 207.
14. *Ibid.*, 211.
15. Mary Hickman, “‘Binary Opposites’ or ‘Unique Neighbours’? The Irish in Multi-ethnic Britain,” *Political Quarterly* 71:1 (2000): 50-58.
16. Race Relations Act 1976, Chapter 74, (Part 1, (ii)): 2.
17. *Op. cit.*, Hickman and Walter, *Discrimination and the Irish Community in Britain*, 193.
18. Julia Finch, “Threat of Consumer Boycott Leads to BHs Owner issuing Apology to Irish,” *The Guardian*, March 5th, 2003.
19. Census, Great Britain 1991.

20. Census, Great Britain 1971-1991.
21. The Commission for Racial Equality, *The Irish in Britain*, (London: CRE, 1997) 4.
22. *Ibid.*
23. *Op. cit.*, Hickman and Walter, *Discrimination and the Irish Community in Britain*, 112.
24. Liam Greenslade, "Colonialism, Health and Identity Among Irish Immigrants in Britain," in *Location and Dislocation in Contemporary Irish Society: Emigration and Irish Identities* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1997) 46.
25. I was present at this meeting thanks to Sue King of the Federation of Irish Societies, London.
26. *Op. cit.*, Greenslade, 47.
27. *Op. cit.*, 'Inside, Outside', Department of Health Report, 39.
28. *Ibid.*
29. *Ibid.*
30. *Ibid.*, 40.
31. *Ibid.*, 36.
32. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (England: Pluto Press, 1986).
33. *Op. cit.*, 'Inside, Outside', Department of Health Report, 37.