Introduction

Irish migration in the nineteenth century is one of the most significant movements of population in modern European history, in terms of the total number of people involved and the proportion migrating. Between 1801 and 1921 (the period of Union with Britain), approximately 8 million people left Ireland. Ireland’s contribution to the outflow of approximately 44 million people from Europe between 1821 and 1914 was the largest of any other country, relative to the size of the island’s population. In the twentieth century, outward migration continued; but it was marked by two periods of very heavy out-migration, the 1950s and the second half of the 1980s, and by two periods of net inward migration, the 1970s and the second half of the 1990s. These patterns reached a point in Ireland such that, for all but the eldest son and sometimes daughter, emigration was a life event as ‘normal’ as leaving school or getting married. Altogether in the period 1949–89 800,000 people left Ireland. There are two consequences following this sustained emigration over the past two centuries. One is that at any one time a significant proportion of people alive who were born in Ireland were living abroad. The second is that there are many millions of people across the globe who are of Irish descent and who can claim an Irish heritage and identity should they so wish.

In terms of numbers received the two most important destinations for Irish migrants have been Britain and the United States of America. In the nineteenth century, almost 80 per cent of the huge outflow crossed the Atlantic. After 1920, however, there was an almost complete reorientation of these patterns, so that, overall, 80 per cent settled in Britain during the rest of the twentieth century. Australia is also an important destination, because while at most 5 per cent of Irish migrants in the nineteenth century went to Australia, they formed 25 per cent of the settler population in that country; since the 1950s there has continued to be a small but notable on-going movement to Australia. These settlements, and other significant destinations such as Canada, South Africa and New Zealand and increasingly the rest of the European Union, form the basis of any discussion about an Irish diaspora. My aim here is to indicate the complexity of the issues in understanding these movements and settlements and their contemporary relevance.

Migration and diaspora are closely interlinked. The contemporary currency of the term diaspora begs the question: do all migrations produce diasporas? For some diaspora theorists, the answer would be in the negative, because only a forced migration creates the requisite conditions. Many historians of ethnic groups would argue that unless an immigrant group’s position was correlated with social disadvantage, then an assimilatory trajectory ensures that ‘the homeland’ remains of only residual interest. There are reasons to question both these conclusions. On the one hand, all exit streams are heterogeneous in social composition, resulting in diverse motives and decisions to migrate within the same time span. This entails heterogeneous diasporas from the moment of inception. On the other hand, the assimilation paradigm ignores the extent to which being ethnic and being diasporan can be mutually constitutive on settlement elsewhere. In this chapter, I consider Irish migration and diaspora from 1800 onwards. I commence by summarising the main theoretical approaches to analysis of diasporas prior to discussing how certain themes as applied to the study of the Irish diaspora might illuminate the internal dynamic and tensions between migration and immigration, ‘being diasporan’ and ‘being ethnic’. A final section deals with Irish diaspora identities and contemporary multiculturalisms.

Defining diaspora

There are broadly two approaches to defining diaspora: a traditional paradigm which sees diaspora as produced by some form of coercion that leads to the uprooting and resettlement outside the boundaries of the homeland of large numbers of people; and a post-modern reading of diaspora by anthropologists and cultural critics, which sees it as expressing modes of ‘hybrid’ consciousness and identity. In the traditional
account, derived from the Jewish diaspora, six features are significant: dispersal, collective memory, alienation, respect and longing for the homeland, a belief in its restoration, and self-definition in terms of this homeland. Since the late 1960s, broader definitions of diaspora have emerged in this tradition, and diaspora has come to be used for a wide range of dispersions of populations: expatriates, expellees, political refugees, alien residents, immigrants and ethnic and racial minorities.

In its post-modern version, the hallmark of diasporic experience is a process of unsettling, recombination and hybridisation. One consequence is that a diasporic space is created that transgresses the boundaries of ethnicity and nationalism. In his study of The Black Atlantic, Paul Gilroy observes that diaspora provides a ‘third space’, or alternate public sphere, which allows for both identification outside, and permanent living inside, the national time-space. This ‘post-modern’ version of diaspora emphasises that what distinguishes a diasporic community is its sense of being a ‘people’ with historical roots and destinies outside the time-space of the ‘host’ nation. Avtar Brah argues that diaspora space marks the intersectionality of the transmigration of people, capital and culture, and therefore diasporic identities are at once local and global. All those who inhabit diaspora space – whether ‘indigenous’ or ‘immigrants’ – are subject to transformation. The concept of diaspora space thus takes account of the entanglements of genealogies of ‘dispersal’ with those of ‘staying put’, so that the ‘natived subject’ is rendered as much a diasporian as the diasporic subject is nativised. All parties to an encounter are deeply marked by it, albeit differently depending upon the specific configurations of power mobilised by the encounter, and the differential impact of asymmetries of power on different social groups.

In recent years, perhaps as a result of the exponential increase in the use of the term diaspora, attempts have been made to produce typologies of diaspora. For example, Robin Cohen distinguishes five different categories of diaspora: victim, labour, imperial, cultural and trade. Cohen’s categorisation of the Irish diaspora is as one of the classic ‘victim’ diasporas, based on the trauma of the Great Famine of the 1840s, the size of migration between 1845 and 1852, and the extent to which recent post-revisionist scholarship has demonstrated that the British government had a hidden agenda of population control, designed to facilitate the modernisation of agriculture and land reform. In Cohen’s view, all of these aspects closely connect Irish patterns to those that propelled the Jewish, African and Armenian diasporas. This is a convincing account of the development of the Irish diaspora in the middle of the nineteenth century, a period in which the primary destination of Irish peasant migration was the United States of America. However, given the volume and longevity of Irish migration, the typology of diasporas Cohen advances could just as well provide the means of differentiating discrete phases of the Irish migrant stream during the past 200 years, or of differentiating the displacement and placement of distinctive social groups among those emigrating from Ireland at any one time.

In a recent overview of the diaspora literature, Pnina Werbner critiques typologies of diaspora that list approaches according to whether their stress is on the empirical realities of ethno-transnational connections or on questions of diasporic consciousness and subjectivity. She argues that these divisions serve to separate analytically what needs to be read as mutually constitutive: in her view, diasporic culture is always both materially inscribed and organisationally embodied. Werbner instead points to a growing consensus that diasporas are characterised by social heterogeneity, that they are historical formations in process and that they encompass a dual orientation: to fight for citizenship and equal rights in the place of settlement, alongside continuing efforts to foster transnational relations. She critiques the post-modern versions of diaspora for marginalising the continued imbrication of diasporas in nation-alist rhetoric and for underplaying the continued significance of attachments to a place of origin and/or collective historical trauma for the late modern organisation of diasporas. In Werbner’s view, diasporas are both ethnic-parochial and cosmopolitan. The challenge is ‘to disclose how the tension between these two tendencies is played out in actual situations’.

How can these different ways of defining diaspora enhance discussion of the Irish diaspora? And how can analysis of the Irish diaspora contribute to this general discussion? On the one hand, it might be shown how the Irish, upon migration, have a set of features deemed to distinguish diasporic formations in one typology or another. On the other hand, it is possible to establish whether the post-modern concept of diaspora offers fruitful possibilities for analysing the experiences of a global dispersion of people who identify as Irish. Both these approaches would yield valuable material on the Irish diaspora, especially if they encouraged comparative research rather than the more usual single-country focus. Alternatively, we could explore the possibility of constructing an explanatory framework which allows us to expand on
Werbner’s observation about diasporas as historical formations in process, changing over time and responding to the different political and social contexts in which their members find themselves. This seems the most fluid approach as it allows for multivariation across space and time, and is the method I adopt in what follows.

This chapter suggests further analysis of the Irish diaspora as a historical formation in process might usefully revolve around two organising themes: first, the importance of ‘the Irish’ in constructing ethnic, racial, religious, gender and class hierarchies in societies of settlement and, second, the multitrajectories of Irish immigrants in different nation-state contexts and their positionings within the diaspora. The first theme subjects assimilation arguments to interrogation while the second involves unpacking the engagement of a heterogeneous diaspora with various nineteenth-century industrialising and nation-building contexts and with globalisation and various multiculturalisms in the twentieth century. Engaging with both these themes entails examining the impact of the presence of particular diasporic groups on formative moments or processes in the development or re-formulation of nation states and in the transition from one economic mode to another. It also focuses on the framing that those processes give to the subsequent trajectories of immigrant groups and their descendants. I am separating these themes for analytical purposes, but it should be clear that they are closely connected. In studying the Irish diaspora these processes can be perceived through the lens of the ‘invention’ of one important element in the populations that contributed to the history and formation of the United States of America, Britain and Australia. The story is different in each case.

**Diaspora, race, ethnicity and the nation-state**

How can we conceptualise the constitution, trajectories and survival of ethnic identities of Irish migrants within specific nation-state contexts and place these analyses in a diasporic context? What has been the role of contestations over Irish identities in the historical formation of the ‘nation’ in each of these major places of settlement for Irish emigrants? What have been the roles of different groups of Irish migrants in constructing or contesting the dominant lines of social cleavage in each of these societies? This entails analysing the intersectionality of Irish immigration with: class and the particular ethno-racial regime which developed in Britain; race and ethnic hierarchies in the United States; and with constructions of ethno-national identity and the marginalisation of indigenous peoples in Australia. Is it possible that diasporic identities were constituted in ways that challenged rather than reinscribed hegemonic power relations?

Contemporary research about the Irish diaspora uses the concept of assimilation as the standard framework within which to understand the trajectory of Irish experiences since the mid-nineteenth century. The focus is rather more often on how the Irish were assimilated than on whether the evidence about the Irish informs us about the adequacy or inadequacy of the assimilation paradigm. The accepted orthodoxy is that the disadvantages and discrimination Irish people experienced in Britain hindered the process of assimilation there to some degree, but that this can be contrasted with Irish ‘success’ in all the other major destinations, especially the United States of America. Underpinning this assumption is the idea that (except for the peculiarities of the British context) the Irish benefited from being a white, English-speaking people as part of the outflows from Europe in the nineteenth century. This perspective fails to recognise the differently constituted elements within the Irish diaspora and homogenises the largest constituent element of that body: Irish working-class Catholics, who on settlement in nineteenth-century Britain and America were identified as ‘the Irish’.

To illustrate the complexity of these questions, I will examine an aspect of the first of my two themes: the importance of the category of ‘the Irish’ in constructing ethnic, racial, religious and class hierarchies in societies of settlement (the historical research on the gendered aspects of these processes is still too scanty to afford much confidence in including it in this analysis). In particular I want to focus on the significance of populations constructed as ‘Irish’ for the (re)establishment of the central social cleavage and mode of nation building in both the United States of America and Britain. The processes of ethnic and racial formation involved are linked to the evolution of hegemony, unpacking the way in which societies are organised and ruled.

**United States of America**

Nineteenth-century migration from Ireland to the United States of America is seen as fulfilling the criteria of a classic ‘diaspora’. Irish immigrants arrived during a century in which the United States of America became a post-slavery society, at a time when the racial differentiations
Migration and diaspora

Anglo-American blood, it was vouchsafed, guaranteed the United States a fundamental unity that could never be fully fractured. Knobel charts the transition from this antebellum stereotype which treated the Irish ‘almost as an alien “race”’ to their re-racialisation, patchily commenced during the civil war and continuing through the 1860s, as part of a white Anglo-Celtic racial majority. Knobel connects this process of re-racialisation with the concomitant efforts of civil war science to assert the adaptability of all white blood to ‘true’ Americanism, the corollary being the inadaptability of all black blood. In effect, whatever their legal status, blacks still lacked the nature that qualified them to be ‘true’ Americans. The Irish stereotype did not disappear and, according to Knobel, was still capable of generating inter-ethnic hostility but this was now ethno-cultural in character rather than racial. It should be added, however, that the drawing of boundaries along lines of ethnicity forms a terrain in which processes of racialisation can still be generated.

A number of authors in the United States have studied the ways in which race was central to the formation of an American working class. This has included the analysis of the Irish in the United States of America as the first immigrant group to provide unskilled free white manual labour. David Roediger’s proposition in the early 1990s, that ‘Working class formation and the systematic development of a sense of whiteness went hand in hand for the US white working class’, was a catalyst for this debate. Roediger also emphasises the role of the Democratic Party, that ‘alliance of slaveholders, financiers, and white labourers’, and its bid to build a northern power base as a critical factor in the ‘whitening’ of the Irish. Kevin Kenny challenges historians who argue that the Irish ‘opted for’ or ‘chose’ whiteness in order to deliberately distance themselves from African-Americans and advance themselves socially. He thinks this argument overestimates the degree of conscious agency involved rather than seeking the explanation in part in the structure that determined individual actions. Kenny argues that the American Irish did not create the social and racial hierarchy of the society into which they immigrated and they cannot be expected to have overturned this hierarchy in the course of earning their livelihoods. Furthermore, he cites many Irish immigrants who acted to promote racial justice and social reform. Although Kenny’s caution as to the specific relationship of agency and structure in this context is worth heeding, there is a danger of seeming to posit a static view of the relationship that does not appear to embrace the notion of an historical formation in process.

Richard Williams examines how the Irish immigrants in antebellum America were moved from being a lower race (Irish and Catholic as opposed to English and Protestant) into the lower slot of the upper race (Irish and white as opposed to African and black). As unskilled workers, Irish immigrants in the nineteenth century occupied the lowest slot within the free labour system, a position understood in terms of their ethnicity. Williams suggests that through a parallel process to the creation of race ‘a segment of Irish society became identified as the Irish in the United States’. The creation of an Irish ethnic identity (a group of individuals with a specific social value, as reflected in stereotypes) in the United States, he argues, was similar to the process by which a sector of the African population became black.

Dale Knobel describes how an Irish stereotype gestated in America in the late antebellum period. Not solely derived from anti-Catholicism or borrowed from notions of the ‘wild Irish’ held in England, the Irish stereotype of this period was shaped strongly by prevailing popularised understandings of character, ethnicity and nationality. The late antebellum stereotype drew boundaries, as Knobel writes,

not just between native-born and foreign, Protestant and Catholic, well-educated and ill, but between Celt and Saxon (or, more to the point, Anglo-American), setting the Irish outside the pale of ‘true’ Americanism much more thoroughly and finally than the other principal white ethnic minorities in the United States.

Thus, the antebellum Irish stereotype represented the character and condition of one rapidly accumulating element of the immigrant population as borne in the blood and resistant to improvement. In contrast,
Kenny considers that one source of Irish-American racism was that Irish immigrants were themselves ‘racialised’ as inferior in social practice and popular stereotype and faced abundant discrimination. This may have made their claims to ‘whiteness’ all the more assertive. Irish immigrants were, however, eligible for citizenship after a five-year waiting period, and when they became citizens male Irishmen could vote. The point is, argues Kenny, that there are degrees of racial discrimination, and that racism cannot be understood at the level of cultural stereotype alone; the perspectives of labour, politics and citizenship laws must also be added to the picture. Kenny’s proposition is not entirely convincing, however. Are we examining degrees of racial discrimination or different processes of racialisation that had their own specificity? In particular, what has to be accounted for is the consolidation of two hierarchies, with one fundamentally underpinning the existence of the other. The category of race helped to manage the phenomenon of ex-slaves, as definitions of blackness (one drop of blood) created a seemingly unassailable positioning for whites in the race hierarchy. However, differentiations within whiteness were manifold and were generated from the varied ethnicities of immigrant populations.

The change in the positioning of the Irish after the civil war is usually related to the coming of later immigrant groups not to the changes wrought by emancipation and processes of re-racialisation. The ethnified hierarchy of the white population installed by the post-bellum period had its own determinations. What it afforded was a mode of classifying and regulating an expanding immigrant labour force. At the same time it opened a route to Americanisation, although this was a far from straightforward process. The arrival of new immigrant groupings in the second half of the nineteenth century was therefore the terrain upon which the re-racialisation of the Irish as ethnic (now with a positive connotation) was confirmed. After all, Roediger’s argument is that ethnicity was not an option in the antebellum period (because of nativist campaigns), so the Irish had to position themselves within the dominant racial group. This was hotly contested until the postbellum period, as traced above. Subsequently, the Irish played a critical role in the process of ‘becoming American’ for other immigrant groups, to the point that incorporation amounted almost to an Irish version of being American (especially true in northern cities).

Kenny’s work usefully sets the discussion in a diasporan context. He cites the dynamics of Irish society in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with its religious sectarianism and segregation, as providing an important background and argues that the Irish immigrants arriving in nineteenth-century America came equipped with a notion of group solidarity and a familiarity with militant force that translated easily into racism and violence. The battles they fought over identity in the United States were similar to the ones they and their ancestors had fought in Ireland and thus many of them ‘turned to racial politics and even violence in America as though it was the natural state of affairs’. In fact, as Kenny himself points out, significant numbers did not turn to racial politics and violence. In addition, most of the research about the Irish and whiteness is based on histories of Irish male immigrants; given the distinctiveness of the Irish immigrant stream in the post-Famine period as made up more evenly of single men and women than any other European immigration to the United States we need more thorough investigation about the gendered patterns of these interactions. What all of this suggests is that a more complex mapping of origins, differentiations and contexts is required in order for us to be able to ascertain the heterogeneous positionings of Irish America in general and within the group constructed as ‘the Irish’, that is Irish working-class Catholic immigrants.

A general argument about incoming European immigrants in the United States is that they were subject to the parallel processes of assimilation and nationalisation, going through various stages en route to becoming American. The literature on whiteness has been a necessary corrective to most of the previous theories about the Irish in the United States, which assessed assimilation mostly in terms of such a staged movement from a position of militant Irish nationalism, through ethnic nationalism and dual nationality towards becoming American. It is perhaps more fruitful to consider these as the dual processes of becoming American and participation in a diaspora (both of which inevitably change over time). Without a diaspora, for example, it is arguable that outrage at the imprisonment of Young Irelanders or the Fenians would not have had political effect. The stagist approach (with its notion of an assimilatory trajectory) may however obscure the extent to which, simultaneously, from the moment of arrival, an individual or group experiences both processes — that is, they are becoming something else in a diasporic and a specific nation-state context. These processes are not necessarily experienced as either contradictory or antagonistic although they can be. My point on simultaneity is that being diasporan informs being ethnic, just as being positioned as ethnic informs being diasporan.
Many might argue that it is the longevity of Irish nationalism amongst Irish Americans that has to be explained rather than its disappearance. I will return to this point in the final section.

**Britain**

American scholarship on migration and whiteness has been conducted with reference to the intersection of racialisation processes and the construction of particular ethnicities. In Britain, however, with rare exceptions, discussions of whiteness operate as an extension of class analysis rather than the deconstruction of a racialised category. For example, Alistair Bonnett cites the presence of Irish immigrants in the metropolitan centre in nineteenth-century Britain as indicative that whiteness may not be solely about the racial ordering of the working class, but simultaneously restores and privileges the class axis by arguing that middle-class alienation was founded on fears of the ‘urban poor’ far more than ‘immigrants’ at that time. This failure to deal with submerged ethnicities within ‘whiteness’ is a feature of histories of Britain.

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, accelerating industrialisation, rapid urbanisation, colonial expansion, increasing immigration and the development of a more complex state apparatus were the context for nationalisation and civilisation strategies within Britain. A code of breeding was cemented that enabled the alliance of the new hybrid élite (aristocracy and industrial capital) and different national élites (English, Welsh, Scots and the Anglo-Irish Protestant ascendency). Positioned as members of a superior island race, this code enabled the English/British to classify and hierarchise all human beings.

At different times in the nineteenth century, therefore, the English working class were designated by the ruling class as ‘a different breed’ or an uncivilised ‘race’, but in other circumstances, as a constituent part of the English (British) ‘race’. As Robert Miles comments:

> The result was a racialized nationalism or a nationalist racism, a mercurial ideological bloc that was manipulated by the ruling class (or rather by different fractions of it) to legitimate the exploitation of inferior ‘races’ in the colonies, to explain economic and political struggles with other European nation states, and to signify (for example) Irish and Jewish migrants as an undesirable ‘racial’ presence within Britain. 18

Ideas of race and hierarchy were, therefore, a constant feature of much of the public discourse in the domestic arena as well as in various parts of the empire. Immigrants with political demands came to be identified with an invasive and highly contagious virus, which must be isolated if the body politic was to survive. It is important to note that this distinction between immigrants and the indigenous population powerfully combined elements of class and ‘racial’ signification, because as an ideology it had to be the basis of a nation-state underpinned both by class and ethno-national differentiations. The two arenas of differentiation intermesh; calls to the national interest mask class relations and debates about the primacy of socio-economic divisions mask important ethno-racial or ethno-national hierarchies.

In Britain, Irish immigrants filled certain niches in the labour market. The Irish Catholics amongst them were, however, stigmatised, both because of the historical relationship between Britain and Ireland and because they represented a threatening ‘other’ in class-divided British cities. The boundaries of the nation which were socially constructed to bind together different classes of Protestants in Britain did not accommodate Catholics easily, even after Catholic Emancipation in 1829. Thus, although they were formally citizens of the state in the nineteenth century, Irish Catholics were not imagined as part of the nation in the same way. Dichotomies of race and nationality were constantly conflated in commentaries about the Irish. The national characteristics which separated and raised the British above the people they colonised – their economic pre-eminence, Protestantism and ‘way of life’ – always depended on the proof of difference. In the scientific register of the code of breeding which developed in Victorian England, the Irish were made unconsciously to represent a missing evolutionary link between the ‘bestiality’ of black slaves and that of the English worker. Further, the Irish living in British cities were cited as evidence of the ‘missing link’ between the gorilla and the Negro.

In the nineteenth century anti-Catholicism was ingrained amongst all social groupings in Britain and was significantly intertwined with anti-Irish hostility. In cultural terms anti-Catholicism remained the sentiment which most clearly defined the nation and the decades that followed emancipation were a period of resurgent anti-Catholicism. Further, the popular discourse of the Protestant nation intersected with anti-Irish sentiment and helped define where the danger to the nation lay. These fears were made manifest in the shape of Irish immigrants,
who were perceived as threatening the union of church and state, which was the embodiment of ‘the English people’. In Britain, an ethno-religious hierarchy paralleled and intersected with a class hierarchy, and both were underpinned by processes of racialisation in the course of producing national subjects. The resuscitation of anti-Catholicism after emancipation is not dissimilar, in some respects, to the expanding significance of modes of racial thinking in Britain after slavery was abolished.

The discourses generated about the Irish both at national and local levels in the 1830s and 1840s differentiated them as immigrants from the rest of the working class, and resulting discriminatory practices effectively segregated them. This can be seen by examining how Catholic schools came to be state funded. The context of the establishment of state-funded Catholic education in 1847 was the Famine immigration from Ireland. The government pushed the funding of Catholic schools through parliament against considerable opposition. Their articulated motivation was the harm that would accrue to the Protestant nation if the children of Irish Roman Catholics were to be ‘as at present, ignorant, sensual and revolutionary infidels’. They were also responding to objections that were voiced about the presence of the children of Irish Catholic immigrants in the same schools as other working-class children. The objections centred on a fear of ‘contamination’ from the children of Irish Catholic immigrants who were problematised as a social and political threat.

A peculiar process of segregation and involution therefore took place. The children of Irish Catholic immigrants were set aside in their own church schools. Catholicism was equated with culture and became the main way of ‘being Irish’ in the public domain. Catholicism became increasingly respectable and remained an anglicised institution, so that beginning as an agent of segregation, the church eventually became one of incorporation. The school was therefore a site where the identities of people with Irish-born parents were contested. The aim of the government and the intention of the Catholic church was that Catholicism would be the cement to bind Irish Catholic migrants to their subordinated place in the nation. One consequence was the masking of Irishness both within official discourse and for the children of working-class Irish Catholic immigrants. Catholic schools held up a mirror to their pupils in which their Catholicity was reflected rather than their Irishness.

The most important effect of these strategies was that many Irish people maintained a low profile (outside Irish areas) about being Irish and about Irish national issues. The partial success of the incorporatist strategy of the church, therefore, lay in its being the agency of a low public profile for the Irish in Britain, frequently misrecognised as a process of assimilation. The private sphere of the family and sometimes local communities provided other sources of identifications and were also the sites where the Irish elements of children’s identities were more likely to be expressed. It is in these locations that processes of denationalisation and incorporation have been variously resisted, transgressed, sidelined, accommodated or embraced. The process of incorporation is never total, however, and is typically characterised by instability and incompleteness.

Issues about the integration and segregation of an ethnic minority were, therefore, of crucial significance in shaping the development of the British education system in the nineteenth century. Within the Enlightenment, education was the means by which ‘man’ was perfectible and thus schooling was to confer access to civilisation. Education was, therefore, central to the construction of modernity. The racialised discourse which ensured that Irish Catholic children were not educated with other working-class children established an ethnically segregated, religiously distinctive, state education system with far-reaching consequences for both the Irish Catholic children educated within Catholic schools and those educated in the rest of the sector.

Perhaps one of the important differences between the United States and Britain in the nineteenth century was that the social construction of whiteness as a unifying concept across class and ethnic demarcations for European immigrant groups was critical for the formation not only of the working class in America, but for the basis of the whole society. The nation was produced in tandem with this process of assimilation. In Britain, on the other hand, it was the social construction of a national ideology of Britishness/Englishness and the colonial enterprise which was crucial for underpinning class alliances and for shaping the particular ethno-racial regime that developed. Studying the Irish in the United States and Britain illuminates both nation-building contexts, facilitates comparison across the diaspora, elucidates differences in ethno-racial regimes in each country and is suggestive of the ways in which a diasporic context remained significant for Irish migrants and their descendants.
Diasporan identities and contemporary multiculturalisms

It is important to examine the relationship between the ‘invention’ of ‘the Irish’ in the nineteenth century and the persistence of Irish identities in the contemporary period. One response to the persistence of ethnic identifications has been the suggestion that people of Irish descent are just availing themselves of an ethnic option in an era in which such identifications have acquired some leverage. Further, it might be suggested that the Irish are ‘tailing’ on the struggles of other ethnic communities to gain recognition in the public sphere. I think these arguments can be simplistic. Groupings constituted as Irish have responded to the transition to official discourses of multiculturalism by a resurgence of Irish identifications, activities and organisations, but in complex and varied ways (for example, in the United States in the 1960s/1970s after Civil Rights, in the 1980s in Australia and in the 1990s in Britain).

There is now a general assumption that the term ‘symbolic’ best describes the relationship to ethnicity of white ethnic groups in the United States. Mary Waters argues that with the achievement of middle-class suburban status, ethnicity becomes a lifestyle option, a costless form of community. But when ethnicity is correlated with class disadvantages, a more complex phenomenon emerges. Waters argues that this is primarily a function of the racial/colour divide in today’s United States and, therefore, applies to African-Americans and racialised groups (e.g. Asian and Latino groups) amongst the post-1965 migrants to the United States. In fact, ethnicity does not necessarily remain solely symbolic for Irish Americans. Waters may miss this because she did not include any analysis of diasporic consciousness in her study and because she treats Irish Americans as a homogenous formation, in the process eliding internal differentiations based, for example, on social class and generation.

As Khachig Tölöyan comments, lines separating ethnic groups and diasporas are not clear cut. They shift in response to a complex dynamic. Sometimes it is possible to describe individuals and communities as behaving as ethnics in one sphere of life, as diasporan in others and frequently as shifting from one to another. The distinguishing diasporan feature, he argues, tends to be the existence of a multi-tiered community, consisting of degrees of activism. Some evidence for this can be found in the Irish diaspora. The same community, therefore can contain, for example, ethnicised Irish Americans and committed diasporans; or, to borrow a distinction made by Paul Arthur, could include those with an awareness of diaspora and those with a consciousness of diaspora. The continuing salience of social class for Irish Americans has been brought out in research in the past thirty years and this has been followed in the 1990s by biographies of working-class Irish Americans. These biographies portray working-class Irish Americans sympathetically but depict polarised relations with and towards local working-class African-American communities. Suburban ethnic whiteness is not, therefore, the full story of the Irish in contemporary America. However, Irish America has largely conformed to the reinforcement of the race divide and new immigrants, particularly if in working-class jobs, very quickly learn where they stand in relation to the central race cleavage: ‘A hostile posture toward resident blacks must be struck at the Americanizing door before it will open . . . Only when the lesson of racial estrangement is learned is assimilation complete.’

Irish identities in England have had a very low profile. There has been a widespread assumption by academia, politicians and the public at large that twentieth-century Irish immigrants unproblematically assimilate into the ‘white’ population within a fairly short space of time and that their children are simply ‘English’. The complexity of the experiences and positionings of Irish people in Britain are, therefore, not fully acknowledged in debates about a multicultural or multiethnic Britain. These complexities are charted by Breda Gray in research which reveals the positioning of Irish women in England as cultural ‘outsiders’ and racial ‘insiders’. The women’s accounts demonstrated the impossibility of meeting the criteria for cultural belonging in England and the unrealisability of a racial belonging based on looking ‘white’ when the Irish are culturally racialised. There was a sharp debate in the 1980s and 1990s within Irish communities in Britain over whether to seek ‘ethnic minority’ status in governmental and public terms. Despite the subordinated positioning it involved, about 60 per cent of Irish when surveyed agreed with the designation. Those who opposed it were either anxious about any raised profile for the Irish or were middle-class professional Irish immigrants who regarded notions of Irish stereotyping and discrimination as part of an outdated victim mentality. They took an ostensibly politically correct position that ‘race/racialisation did not apply to the Irish and in the process they firmly staked their claim to a racialised, de-ethnicised upper-middle-class elite positioning.
Conclusion

Economic rationalism may have taken the Irish to Britain, the United States of America and to various British dominions where they could maximise any advantages that accrued to them by knowing the English language and familiarity with British-derived institutions and procedures. However, in all these contexts Irish migrants encountered a political and cultural establishment that was British or British in origin and a common feature of all these diasporic contexts was that Irish ethnic identities were forged against anti-Irish stereotypes and as part of ongoing interaction with the ‘homeland’. In the United States of America and in Australia, Irish Catholic migrants had opportunities (to varying degrees) to climb beyond subordinate positionings and were often keen to prove their loyalty to their new state of residence in the face of systematic questioners. In nineteenth-century Britain, Irish migrants neither necessarily had opportunities for advancement (though some did) nor necessarily wanted to prove their loyalty (although for some this was a concern). Proving loyalty to the state was, however, an overt objective of the Catholic church, the hierarchy of which was not taken over by the Irish. These arguments have largely been made about the groups who left Ireland and became part of Irish Catholic working-class communities in the expanding cities of the United States of America and Britain. This was the major, but by no means the only, migration from Ireland between 1800 and 1970.

My intention here has been to explore some of the ways in which we can understand the Irish diaspora as a historical formation in process. Even when restricting consideration to the groups who left Ireland and became part of Irish Catholic working-class communities elsewhere, it is a demonstrably heterogeneous formation. Much more research is required about the role of this part of the diaspora and others (for example, the role of Irish Protestants in eighteenth-century America in the creation of the republic) in order to fully assess the importance of ‘the Irish’ in constructing ethnic, racial, religious, gender and class hierarchies in societies of settlement and the multitrajectories of Irish immigrants in different nation-state contexts and their consequent positionings and identities. In addition, the complexities of the diasporic networks over these two centuries are only beginning to be traced. If this research agenda can be harnessed to the urgent task for interdisciplinary study of how Irish migration and diaspora shaped social, cultural, economic and political formation in Ireland itself, we might be well on the way to mapping the full significance of Irish migration and diaspora.

Notes


26. Ibid.


28. Töloyan, ‘Rethinking diaspora(s)?


33. Hickman and Walter, *Discrimination and the Irish Community*.

**Further reading**

- Donald H. Akenson, *The Irish Diaspora* (Belfast: Institute of Irish Studies, The Queen’s University, 1993)
- Timothy J. Meagher, *Inventing Irish America* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001)