

Diasporic subjects: migrant identities and twentieth-century Ireland

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Life history and the Irish migrant experience in post-war England: myth, memory and emotional adaptation, Barry Hazley, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2020, xv + 272 pp., £85.00 (hardcover), ISBN 9781526128003; £25.00 (paperback, 2022), ISBN 9781526163752

Homeward bound: return migration from Ireland and India at the end of the British empire, Niamh Dillon, New York, New York University Press, 2023, x + 245 pp., \$30.00 (hardcover), 9781479817313

Illuminating the nuances, resonances, and ambivalences of diasporic memory, Barry Hazley and Niamh Dillon alike have produced important monographs elucidating migrant subjectivities among two contrasting socio-political cohorts. Both Hazley and Dillon offer detailed analyses of diasporic identities and ideas during and after political upheaval across Britain and Ireland. While Hazley assesses Irish migrants' experiences and memories of work, politics, and civil society in post-war England, Dillon's synthetic investigation compares the post-partition trajectories of southern Irish Protestants and settlers in British India. Although these books discuss distinct communities, they share a fine-grained sensitivity towards migrant subjectivities and their evolution.

Drawing upon textual analysis and the critical insights of popular memory theory, Hazley primarily dissects how Irish migrants in post-war England navigated their host society and its political world in respect of their nationality, class, religion, and gender. Hazley's interviewees migrated to England between 1945 and the 1960s, when between 50,000 and 60,000 people entered the British labour market from Ireland each year (105). Eschewing a purely reconstructive oral history methodology, Hazley engages his oral testimonies to unpack how migrants negotiated their new surroundings, and how they retrospectively composed a viable narrative of the self. Focusing upon a core sample of ten interviews from twenty-six recorded, Hazley especially underscores his subjects' ambivalences in relation to their lives in England. Reading the transcripts dialogically, Hazley homes in on the narrative complexities and contradictions which appear when interview partners render their experiences.

Colligating original oral histories and cultural representations of Irish experience in post-war England, Hazley examines how migrant memory generates and reimagines versions of the self. Positioning his oral histories as 'sites of memory' produced in response to their cultural and political surroundings, Hazley explores with acuity the 'discursive' and 'public' dimensions of memory (18, 21). Assessing narratives of exit and arrival, urban space, gendered work, religious identities, and contentious politics, Hazley's thematic chapters draw upon Graham Dawson's and Penny Summerfield's pioneering conception of subjective composure.¹ Tapping the critical taxonomy of 'popular memory' which Dawson developed at Birmingham University's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the dawn of the 1980s,² Hazley trains a penetrating eye upon how migrant subjectivities adopt and challenge motifs familiar to the popular and cultural imagination.

Repudiating the assimilationist paradigm associated most notably with Donald Harman Akenson, Michael P. Hornsby-Smith, and Angela Dale³ – who posited that within a generation, the Irish in Britain became largely submerged in their new surroundings – Hazley is chiefly concerned with how members of the Irish diaspora imposed themselves upon the host society, and how they remembered these processes decades later. But as well as rejecting the assimilationist precept, Hazley is similarly chary of those who would lament from a different

standpoint the 'invisibility' of the Irish in Britain. From the 1980s, the 'invisibility' theme was increasingly invoked among radical diaspora activists who implored municipal government to recognise a cohesive 'Irish ethnic community' meriting specific socioeconomic attention and uplift (10). Upholding the aspirations of the republican movement, these militants – including second-generation Irish emigrants – formed organisations such as the Irish in Britain Representation Group (IBRG), linking what they considered British 'imperialism' in Ireland and the subaltern position of Irish migrants in Britain (13).

Instead, Hazley argues, the Irish in post-war England neither straightforwardly assimilated, nor did they uniformly subdue a singular identity, national or otherwise. They were neither, he avers, 'the dominated or the colonised'; nor were they 'merely effects of a static political relationship; they *made themselves* through active negotiation of the discourses of identity they encountered in both sending and receiving societies' (15-16). Exploring these processual dynamics, *Life history and the Irish migrant experience* traces how diasporic subjects have constructed, modified, and retrospectively curated a sense of self.

The analytical emphasis upon the subject's search for composure enables Hazley to map recurring dilemmas of politics and identity facing Irish migrants in England, especially after the outbreak of conflict in Northern Ireland in 1969. On the one hand, a constellation of Irish centres, clubs, and county associations 'served as a context for the performance of a semi-official code of Irish respectability', disavowing the republican campaign. In retrospect, Hazley astutely notes, these diaspora networks have become nodal points for community history and reminiscence projects, celebrating the Irish contribution to rebuilding post-war Britain (23). This 'respectable' associational culture had at least an institutional affinity with the Catholic Church, which also tended to promote an ideal type of industrious, politically placid migrant (118).

Conversely, especially from the 1980s, in larger cities such as Birmingham, Manchester, and London, Irish militants dismissed the acquiescent, 'official' Irish community initiatives, and instead honed a more confrontational orientation towards the British state. Fulminating against anti-Irish racism in Britain, organisations such as the IBRG endorsed the republican campaign against British rule in Ireland. Moreover, they directly connected Britain's 'imperialist' war in Ireland and the discrimination and marginalisation which afflicted Irish workers in Britain (203).

Attending in detail to the composure braided through his interviews, Hazley's study yields a mosaic reading of the diaspora in post-war England. Sidestepping assimilationist and nationalist accounts, *Life history* unpacks how Irish emigrants formulated syncretic identities, by turns participating, withdrawing, and adapting to traverse their surroundings and to pursue a malleable, independent selfhood. Accentuating the generative content of his subjects' testimonies, Hazley's chapters delineate how interviewees exerted themselves upon the host society's mores and political assumptions. The book's thematic organisation is apt for evaluating these variants of composure across the cohort. Hazley's chapter on 'religious selfhoods', for example, is especially lapidary, uncovering how interviewees simultaneously depicted Catholic clerical control both as an inhibiting influence, and as an Other against which a 'more autonomous, assertive and self-aware version of self was constructed' (183). The book's second chapter, examining migrant femininities, evinces similar dialectic sophistication, probing how Irish women in England oscillated between 'competing constructions of femininity' to defy significant social barriers and fashion a form of independence (77). Throughout, Hazley amplifies 'multiple voices which echo through migrants' stories' (101).

Addressing how migrants navigated the difficult, dangerous backdrop of the Northern Ireland conflict, Hazley's final chapter is a particular *tour de force* fusing oral micro-history, textual analysis, and politically-inflected social history. Focusing upon how three migrants modified

and sometimes muted their political pronouncements, the chapter masterfully delineates how unassuming migrants adapted to circumvent social ostracism when the IRA bomb in Manchester in 1996 sharply renewed the perception in Britain of the Irish as a 'suspect community', in Paddy Hillyard's resonant phrase.⁴ In Hazley's skilful analysis, the conflict and the criminalisation of the Irish community in Britain – codified most notably in the Prevention of Terrorism Act – presented migrants with an invidious dichotomy: condemn the republican campaign and plead their community's essential 'innocence', or face enduring public suspicion and rancour (200-201, 205-206).

Throughout *Life history*, Hazley makes a compelling case for the hermeneutic potential of fusing micro-historical inquiry and popular memory theory. Orienting oral retrospectives in their discursive, diachronic, and cultural contexts, *Life history* destabilises simplistic characterisations of the Irish diaspora in Britain. Revealing migrant subjectivities' contingent complexity, Hazley charts how interviewees refashion and reframe their memories to position themselves vis-à-vis an evolving social and political conjuncture.

Niamh Dillon's *Homeward bound* represents a similarly perspicacious analysis of how migrants handle political upheaval and subsequently reflect differently upon their trajectories. Drawing upon twenty-two life history interviews, Dillon compares southern Irish Protestants whose families left Ireland after partition, and British 're-emigrants' from independent India. *Homeward bound* therefore forms a study of memory among cohorts who returned to the British metropole in substantial numbers during the twentieth century. Many erstwhile unionists left Ireland after partition: in the twenty-six counties which comprised the Irish Free State from 1922, the number of non-Catholics dropped from approximately 313,000 to 208,000 between 1911 and 1926. A generation later, after Indian independence, the majority of the British population left the subcontinent, plummeting from the peak in 1921 of 157,000, including some 60,000 troops and 22,000 working in government service (90).

Dillon's comparative framework is felicitous to scrutinising how displaced 're-emigrants' negotiated their attenuated relationships with the British empire. *Homeward bound* is premised upon the argument that for those who left Ireland and India, the contentious aftermath of independence 'crystalised' subjects' 'diasporic consciousness' through the following decades (8). How, Dillon asks, did these migrant minorities – who 'thought, felt, looked, and determined they were British, during the imperial period and beyond' (10) – conceptualise home and place after the waning of the empire?

The six Irish interviewees in Dillon's cohort ranged in age between their mid-seventies and their nineties, and all had professional or middle-class backgrounds. Their parental occupations spanned military or civil service to the crown, and the business and education sectors. Family backgrounds also encompassed the Church of Ireland hierarchy and the landed classes. Throughout, these families 'shared [a] political outlook and allegiance' (12-13, 87). Several had migrated between Britain and Ireland more than once (197-201). Analysing how these diasporic subjects absorbed a jarring loss of status after partition, *Homeward bound* traces how 're-emigrants' from Ireland and India managed a less privileged social standing.

Dillon combines her Irish interviews with a substantial trawl of case files from the Irish Grants Committee (IGC), which was first established – as the Irish Distress Committee – in 1922, assisting financially approximately 20,000 Irish refugees fleeing Ireland. Reviewing a sample of 350 of the 4,032 claims submitted to the IGC, Dillon scrutinises how those leaving Ireland, bereft of a 'clearly defined role' in a transformed polity, subsequently related to their former homes, and to the empire more broadly (123-125). Dillon's mixed ecology of source material helpfully maps the affective dimension of Protestant subjectivities in 'independent' Ireland. The controversy surrounding the southern Protestants is as old as the southern state itself: were the

unionists to be regarded, as the militant republican Constance Markievicz advocated in the Second Dáil in 1922, as England's 'malignant' garrison, as 'cruel capitalists... grinding on the people of the nation'?⁵ Or were they to be granted the esteem which the poet and senator William Butler Yeats demanded for the Protestant minority, as 'one of the great stocks of Europe', and 'no petty people'?⁶

Sharing Hazley's judicious attention to subjective composure as an analytical tool, Dillon delineates how political transformation in Ireland did not necessarily prevent her subjects from continually asserting their Britishness. Interviewees who had left Ireland could conceptually locate it as 'home' while identifying with an overarching British imperial community. In these perspectives, Ireland maintained a curious yet enduring place in the colonial imaginary long after partition – and even after the Republic left the Commonwealth in 1949 (22-23). *Homeward bound's* longitudinal perspective elicits these evolving subjectivities towards place and politics. For instance, among her older Irish Protestant interviewees, Dillon noted that in later life in exile, those who had been raised with a profound sense of loyalty to Britain reconnected with a modified sense of their 'Irishness' (193). There were echoes here of a previous generation in the early twentieth century, when Elizabeth Bowen and Cecil Day-Lewis, inter alia, found their Irish identities awakened on arrival in the alien terrain of British boarding schools (65).

Dillon's comparisons maximise the methodology's insights, contrasting the general to highlight the particular. As a proportion of their demographic cohort, far fewer left Ireland than India, where the government facilitated return to Britain, relocating service personnel and assisting their transit. By contrast, in independent Ireland, experiences of violence, intimidation, and ostracization more often propelled the minority to leave the country (91). Comparing emigrants' motivations for leaving India and Ireland, their changing social standing, and their post-independence politics, Dillon draws out the curious blend of disillusionment and nostalgia which percolates her interviewees' reflections.

Like Hazley's book, *Homeward bound* reverberates with subjective ambivalences about macropolitical change and its diasporic effects. Dillon's monograph is especially attuned to the wistful reflections of interviewees who juxtapose their family backgrounds in Ireland and India, and their subsequent lives in Britain. For Dillon, these plaintive reminiscences highlight bigger uncertainties pertaining to the relationship between Britain and independent Ireland, and highlighting the 'anomalous' place of the Irish in post-war Britain. After considerable parliamentary controversy, citizens of the Republic of Ireland were included in the terms of the Commonwealth Immigrants Act (1962), which provided to control Commonwealth immigration to the United Kingdom. Besides constituting cheap labour, Dillon contends, the Irish working class were never 'fully accepted as part of the community of British subjects. They were white, but not white enough' (151-153). For Dillon, the social peripherality of the Irish working-class had a corollary, too, for southern Irish Protestants with more privileged backgrounds. Having suffered material losses after partition, many faced life back in the 'metropole' both financially and socially straitened. Dillon's generous quotations provide her interviewees with the space to unfurl both their instinctive affinity with 'returning' to Britain, and their laments for a lost place and status.

Explicating subjects' conflicting ideas of home and belonging, Dillon grounds her analysis in the germane theoretical apparatus of Homi Bhabha, who conceptualised hybridity and the liminal spaces of 'cultural translation' in diasporic identities (185).⁷ Bhabha's schema is especially apt for Dillon's sophisticated appreciation of intergenerational perspectives. Probing how interviewees imagined the challenges which faced their parents during and after their departure, Dillon draws out the layered complexity of testimonies which simultaneously asserted their Britishness while mourning their displacement back 'home'; who yearned for an

Irish idyll while recalling the traumatic upheaval which had attended their exit. In sum, *Homeward bound* charts how emigrants from India and Ireland reframed their 'imperial' experiences after historical ruptures forced their families to confront disparities between life in Britain as a grand ideal, and as a set of more mundane realities.

Throughout their innovative works, Barry Hazley and Niamh Dillon make a compelling case for conceptualising their diasporic cohorts in terms of hybridity and reflexivity. Dillon's interviewees were dislocated from southern Ireland after partition, while Hazley's subjects navigated life in Britain during the 'troubles' in Northern Ireland. Both books illustrate how objective political transformations challenged a subjective sense of self, purpose, and position in new environs. Dillon explains how southern Irish Protestants' expectations of 'the metropole' jarred with a loss of land, business, or social capital. Hazley's nuanced analysis also evokes the discomfiture and dilemmas which the Irish in Britain confronted during the Northern Ireland conflict.

More broadly, both Hazley and Dillon open stimulating lines of research concerning diasporic subjectivities and the imperial imaginary. Reading their oral testimonies as multi-layered retrospectives, both authors underline the contingency and evolution of diasporic identities. By taking memory seriously as substantive historical material, Hazley and Dillon elucidate how shifting political, social, and discursive contexts affect the subject striving for composure. Both books distil competing conceptions of 'home' as physical and imagined spaces, invested with cultural, historical, and political significance. Theoretically sophisticated and textually rich, both volumes should inspire further propitious inquiries into these cohorts' complex experiences and the (dis)composure pervading their contested memory.

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¹ Graham Dawson, *Soldier heroes: British adventure, empire and the imagining of masculinities* (London: Routledge, 1994); Penny Summerfield, *Reconstructing women's wartime lives: discourse and subjectivity in oral histories of the Second World War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998).

² CCCS Popular Memory Group, *What do we mean by popular memory?* (Birmingham: Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, Stencilled Occasional Paper, no. 67, January 1982).

³ Donald Harman Akenson, *The Irish diaspora: a primer* (Belfast: Institute of Irish Studies, 1993); Michael P. Hornsby Smith & Angela Dale, 'The assimilation of Irish immigrants in England', *British Journal of Sociology*, 39 (1988), pp. 519-544.

⁴ Paddy Hillyard, *Suspect community: people's experience of the Prevention of Terrorism Acts in Britain* (London: Pluto Press, 1993).

⁵ Dáil Éireann, 3 January 1922.

⁶ Seanad, 11 June 1925.

⁷ Jonathan Rutherford, 'The third space: interview with Homi Bhabha', in Jonathan Rutherford (ed.), *Identity: community, culture, difference* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 2007), pp. 207-221.