

Depicting the Irish

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Joe and Hugh

Simianizing the Irish Celt - Lewis Curtis

- Evolution in the portrayal of the Irish from the 16th-19th century. The image changed from a relatively positive idea of the “wild Irishman” towards the construction of very negative stereotypes that brutalized and simianized the Irish, particularly between 1840 and 1890.
- This process of simianization began with various caricature artists in the late 18th century who began applying “prognathous” features to various nationalities, such as French, English, Scottish and Irish. The more established connection to Ireland had its origins in an Irish insurrection in 1798. From then to the 1860s, portrayals of the Irish deviated towards monstrous or ape-like representations.
- This process of caricature simianization was heavily linked with political events in Ireland, such as the Fenian Rising in 1867 and the Fenian movement more broadly, and later the Irish land war. The debate concerning Home Rule was also affected, and the animalisation of Irishmen served to reinforce their inability to govern themselves.
- Curtis focuses largely on printed media and its involvement in popularising these portrayals. Numerous publications whether periodicals or Victorian weeklies such as *Punch*, *Tomahawk*, *Fun* and *Judy* published caricatures of the Irish as animals and beasts. Often female Irish figures such Hibernia and Erin were portrayed as being saved from the Fenian “Beast by a handsome Prince or St. George” (p. 37). The media often played upon these mythical motifs.
- There were links to craniology and physiognomy. Caricaturists applied “Pieter Camper’s facial angle” to many of their drawings. As such Anglo-Saxon faces had a higher facial angle between 70-80 degrees whereas Irish facial angles were often between 50-60 degrees which drew comparisons between the Irish and apes. Although by the turn of the century these kinds of portrayals began to die out.

“For many comic artists of Tenniel’s generation, the advent of the revolutionary republican movement known as Fenianism, whose members were sworn to end British rule in Ireland by physical force, seemed to reveal the beast that lurked within Irish character.” (p. 37)

English Attitudes to the Irish in England, 1780-1900 - Sheridan Gilley

- Gilley attests to the fact that the 'Paddy' stereotype was as much an English creation as it was an Irish one. She explains that the national image of Ireland, created by the Irish had been used by the English to create an image of the 'Paddy'.
- She goes on to explain that the stereotypes of the Irish were not always negative, contesting Curtis' viewpoint, which seems to suggest the English always looked down upon the Irish portraying them as animalistic and degenerated.
- She also debates Curtis' assertion that the creation of comics that depicted the Irish as monkeys and ape-like was not down to racial belief, but rather political. She contests the use of the rebels of 1798, the Fenian Troubles and those who advocated for home rule, which in Curtis' mind seem to have been portrayed as ape-like because of anti-celtic and Irish racial sentiment.
- *"How better to show political loathing than to draw one's victim as an ape?"*
- She backs up her claim these comics were political by providing examples in which the Irish were not simianised. She presents media portraying English loyalists who were portrayed in the 'Saxon' image that Curtis speaks about.
- She also states the Irish stereotypes were centered in truth however "misinterpreted". The Irish were on the whole poorer individuals who had fled Ireland and the Famine so had little to live off of. They worked awful jobs and lived in poor conditions, therefore the image of the Irish was for many centered in truth but exaggerated.

"It would be truer to say that Englishmen had drawn from their long experience of the Irish a national stereotype which had both its good points and its bad: as good and bad points were defined by the Irish themselves. So the English invoked the good points or the bad according to their temperament, moment or mood. Thus an Irish riot or rebellion typified Celtic lawlessness, though Irish military valour always came in for English praise; the remittances which poured into Ireland from overseas were in English eyes the hallmark of Celtic family loyalty, as the railways were monuments to Irish industry, although a single drunken Irishman proved all Irishmen drunkards, as the idleness of unemployed Irishmen in a slum establishes Irish indolence."

The Unbearable Lightness of Being Irish - Patrick Brantlinger

- Brantlinger contends that ultimately, the racial stereotyping of the Irish by the English rested on the centuries of oppression and exploitation which helped to cultivate a view of English superiority and Irish inferiority. Although this inferiority was largely formulated along economic, political, military and religious lines rather than an institutionalised English belief in biological superiority over the Irish.
- English understanding of the Irish as having a rebellious 'character' or in some cases the idea that the Irish had little 'character' at all which was used to explain this rebelliousness. Consequently the act of rebellion reduced the Irish to a savage, and in some cases even as far as cannibalistic, state. Frequent Irish defeat contributed to this idea of inferiority.
- Brantlinger does however show how the Irish or Celtic revival of the late 19th century challenged many of these perceptions. Individuals such as Matthew Arnold, Yeats and James Joyce began focusing on the Celtic cultural tradition, particularly its literary output.
- Comparisons were often made between the Celt and the Teutonic Anglo-Saxon, with the Celt viewed as more feminine and anarchical. But Brantlinger shows how some writers and intellectuals saw value in the Celtic tradition and how it could "render the Saxon a bit less intestinal and somewhat more poetical" (p. 148).
- Despite the continued promulgation of Irish weakness and "lightweightness" that was reinforced by the Famine (1845-1850), there remained a belief amongst some that Irish/Celtic culture should be preserved and the language protected. Although many of those who advocated for this protection, such as Matthew Arnold, continued to claim that the Irish were unfit for Home Rule and that they were both spiritually and physically 'weaker'.

"As in many other nationalist revival movements, the intellectuals who participated in the Irish one from the 1840s to 1922 accepted the racial categories imposed on them by the colonizers, the English, while revaluing them in positive terms." (p. 152)

Emaciated, Exhausted, and Excited: The Bodies and Minds of the Irish in Late Nineteenth-Century Lancashire Asylums - Catherine Cox, Hilary Marland and Sarah York

- The piece speaks on the huge proportion of Irish migrants who moved to England, and in particular Lancashire, who found themselves in asylums.
- The increase in migration is explained by the Great Famine in which many attempted to escape by coming to England. (290,000 Irish in England prior to famine in 1841 and in 1855 this number had risen to 1.5 million)(pg.503)
- The views of the Irish were dictated largely by economic conditions, during times of full employment they were seen as hard working and willing to do the jobs nobody else would, however views shifted during downturns. They were seen as scabs and willing to work for less pay further fuelling anti-Irish sentiment.
- “Fanned by negative press reporting, the Irish presence was linked to a wider well-documented range of social evils that threatened the equilibrium of Liverpool and Lancashire.”(pg.504) The Irish were also widely considered to be the most difficult to deal with in the asylums. Many doctors and superintendents found that they were commonly the most abrasive and challenging patients.
- Poverty and poor living conditions seemed to be the main driver of the Irish to asylums. The lack of familial support was a key driver of many to asylums as many Irish migrants were alone and therefore had nobody to turn to in times of unemployment. It was much easier to spiral and fall into workhouses and asylums as a result.

“While poverty, living in overcrowded dwellings, the stress and strains of migration and working conditions in large towns forced the Irish into precarious lives, it was argued increasingly in the late nineteenth century that Irish patients also had a particular propensity to low living, immorality, vice and inherited conditions” - page 517

Social Darwinism, anthropology and English perspectives of the Irish, 1867-1900 - Paul B. Rich

- Rich engages with some of the historiographical debate provoked by Curtis and Gilley. In the process he focuses more explicitly on the growth of anthropology in the 19th century and how the English then applied their understanding of anthropology to Ireland.
- There was a debate over whether people should encourage the creation of mixed races as opposed to “Teutomaniac’s” who favoured defending ‘pure’ races. This was a debate that spilled over into Ireland but this experienced difficulties as the racism towards Irish people was complicated by shared characteristics, such as skin colour, language and to a certain extent culture.
- Rich also mentions how this was made more complex by the definition of ‘race’ also incorporating ‘culture’. In the case of Ireland this made it increasingly difficult to claim fundamental differences between the Saxon and the Celt compared to the other peoples within the British empire.
- The division between the Celt and the Saxon was lessened by members of the “Victorian intelligentsia” whose faith in the Union consequently encouraged the “the quest for a common culture.” (p. 780). A rejection of Home Rule by Victorians was not necessarily a rejection based purely on a belief in the racial inferiority of the Irish but also incorporated a belief in Anglo-Irish unity.
- Ultimately, at the end of the nineteenth century, anthropologists stopped trying to find fundamental racial differences between the Saxon and the Celt and turned instead to the other peoples of the empire. As a result there was a desire to investigate the social anthropology of Irish communities. The acceptance of Darwin’s theory of evolution helped to kill off polygenist approaches that tended to claim clear racial difference between Celt and Saxon.

“The construction of English national identity in the course of the nineteenth century owed much to the rise of Irish political and cultural nationalism.” (p. 777).

Questions for further discussion

With reference to previous weeks, was the English racialised depiction and treatment of the Irish fundamentally different to the treatment of other peoples?

Regarding the historiographical debate over whether the racialised portrayals of the Irish were motivated by 19th century trends in anthropology or political events in Ireland, what factor seems most important in the ‘simianization of the Irish’?