
Depicting the Irish

Week 11

Medicine, Empire & The Body

Patrick Brantlinger, *Taming Cannibals: Race and the Victorians* (Ithaca, 2011), 'Ch. 6: The Unbearable Lightness of Being Irish,' pp.136-156.

- Patrick Brantlinger explores the complex Identity of the Irish during the Victorian era, focusing on how they were perceived and represented in British society through literature. Stereotypes were often framed within racial narratives condemning the Irish as 'primitive' or 'uncivilised'.
- Brantlinger bases much of his analysis around authors such as Charles Kingsley and Matthew Arnold, understanding the stereotypes that came to class the Irish as grotesque or animalistic. Humour and hyperbole are used to marginalise and dehumanise the Irish.
- Rebelliousness is a repeated character flaw of the Irish which can be traced back further than 1844 to depictions of 'the wild Irish' by Edmund Spenser, often linked to savagery and sometimes cannibalism. This is similar to the descriptions of revolutionaries in France at the time.
- Due to a reliance on a basic diet, often consisting of potatoes, the Irish were considered to be less 'hefty' in contrast to the English. This in turn reciprocated in writers such as Friedrich Engels commenting that a lack of nourishment resulted in a less civilised people.
- The positive traits of the Irish were sometimes embellished by Aryanism, the idea being that the Celts shared in the world's earliest civilisations This feeds into critiques from reformers and intellectuals who challenged the racialised depictions, finding unease with the racial hierarchy.

Quote: **"By the Victorian era these had led to a widespread view in England of the Irish or Celtic "race" as brutes, savages, degenerates, white apes, noxious weeds, overpopulating rabbits, drunken beggars, and so on." (P.136)**

Catherine Cox, Hilary Marland and Sarah York, 'Emaciated, Exhausted and Excited: The Bodies and Minds of the Irish in Nineteenth-Century Lancashire Asylums,' *Journal of Social History* 46 (2012), 500-524

- The chapter by Cox, Marland, and York examines the experiences of Irish individuals in nineteenth-century Lancashire asylums, focusing on their physical and mental states.
- Bodies and minds of the Irish were often perceived through a lens of emaciation and exhaustion, reflecting broader societal attitudes towards poverty and mental health. They explore how these individuals were treated within the asylum system, highlighting the intersection of ethnicity, class, and mental illness.
- Analysis of asylum records revealing the perceptions of Irish bodies and minds as 'Othered'. Cultural or racial traits are often noticed as a reason for Irish mental health crises. The Irish could be **labelled** as excitable, emotionally unstable or inherently predisposed to insanity.
- The impact of migration and economic hardship on the mental well-being of the Irish is explored, revealing how their experiences were shaped by both personal trauma and systemic neglect. Through a detailed analysis of asylum records and personal narratives, the authors illustrate the complex realities faced by this marginalized group,
- Irish women were often institutionalised for behaviours seen as socially deviant e.g hysteria or postnatal mental health issues, while Irish men were more commonly admitted for violence and alcohol-related issues.

Quote: 'In 1851 Dr. William Duncan, Liverpool's Medical Officer of Health (the first to be appointed to such a post in England), described Liverpool as "a City of the Plague," the result of "hordes of sickly and half starved Irish" flooding into the city and spreading fever.' (p.503)

Paul B. Rich, 'Social Darwinism, Anthropology, and English Perspectives of the Irish, 1867-1900,' *History of European Ideas* 19 (1994), 777-785.

- Paul B. Rich explores the intersection of Social Darwinism and anthropological thought in shaping English attitudes towards the Irish during the late 19th century. The chapter argues that Social Darwinism, which applied evolutionary concepts to social and cultural contexts, was used to justify imperialist and colonial attitudes, portraying the Irish as a 'lesser' race in need of civilising.
- Rich highlights the role of anthropologists and social theorists in reinforcing stereotypes that depicted the Irish as primitive and backward, which served to rationalise British dominance.
- The article connects racial perspectives to the Irish nationalist movement. By portraying the Irish as incapable of self-governance it supported the English opposition to Irish political autonomy.
- Depictions of the Irish in literature and journalism demonstrate them as violent, lazy and intellectually inferior, contrasting representations of the English as being civilised and rational.
- Similar to Cox and Marland, Rich notes changing attitudes towards the end of the 19th century. There was a growing critique of Social Darwinism, challenging racialised perceptions.

Quote: “Darwinism played a considerable part in unlocking the static racial typology of the middle years of the century and introducing a more evolutionary perspective” (P.784)

Seminar Questions

What is the significance and why was it important for the English to depict the Irish in this manner during this period of time?