How far, if at all, can British responses to Irish immigrants in Victorian Britain be called racist?

Taken from Donald M. MacRaild, *Irish migrants in modern Britain, 1750-1922*, Macmillan, 0-33367-762-5, pp 156-62, and Simon Potter's review of *The Eternal Paddy: Irish Identity and the British Press, 1798 1882* by Michael de Nie, http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/paper/potter.html

Anti-Irish behaviour

Although anti-Irish behaviour was a part of British life from the Middle Ages, the mid-Victorian years - between the Famine and the emergence of the Home Rule movement - witnessed by far the most intense examples.

The timing of Irish migration does much to explain the nature and extent of anti-Irishness in Victorian society. Without Irish settlers, the great conurbations of industrial Britain would still have been miserable and unhealthy places to live and work, but with the significant numbers of Irish the same cities took on an even greater social relevance. The incoming group provided a ready-made scapegoat for the disease, overcrowding, immorality, drunkenness and crime of the urban world. Thus images of the Irish as drooling, half-crazed Fenian monkeys or wild Frankenstein's monsters dominate our perceptions of the way the Victorians perceived Ireland - see below, page 4, for how the Irish were presented in the press and other writings and in cartoon.

Possible explanations

Religion, perceived Irish criminality, workplace tension and organised sectarianism each contributed to the anti-Irish tenor of Victorian life, but so too did cultural and political differences between these nations. Discord imparted a sense of national identity. The fact that Irish migration reached previously unimaginable proportions in the turbulent period of industrialisation, and developments such as Catholic emancipation, Fenianism, Irish agrarian violence and the struggle for political independence each added colour to what was an already vivid palette of animosities.

The question of race

Although anti-Irish behaviour had many roots, the most contentious explanation, the one which has most divided historians, is the question of race. The savagery of writing about the Irish has led historians to wonder whether or not the Victorian view of the Irish was racist.

For racist argument: a cultural approach by L.P. Curtis Jr

The debate was stimulated by L. P. Curtis's study of the Irish stereotype, *Apes and Angels: the Irishman in Victorian Caricature* (1971). Its central thesis was that Victorian anti-Irishness was fundamentally racist.

According to Curtis, an American, images of the Irish in political cartoons underwent a gradual but unmistakable change between the 1840s and the turn of the century. Depicted at first as harmless, whiskey-drinking peasants, Irishmen increasingly were represented - especially after the rise of the Fenian movement in the 1860 - as apelike monsters menacing law, order, and middle- class values.

Showing that cartoons in London, Dublin, and New York newspapers tapped into a preexisting 'cultural aquifer' of assumptions about race and civilization, Curtis explores the connections among Victorian images of the Irish, the lore of physiognomy, the debate over evolution, and the art of caricature. The escalating demonization of Paddy, the stereotypical Irish rebel, in such comic weeklies as *Punch*, *Judy*, and *Fun* parallelled the increasingly militant nature of Irish nationalism after the famine of the late 1840s.

TWO FORCES.

This classic confrontation between the forces of good and evil shows Britannia protecting a distraught Hibernia from a stone- throwing Irish anarchist with repellent features.
Trodding on the Land League and holding the sword of justice, Britannia serves notice that she will prosecute Irish criminal conspirators to the full extent of the law. (*Punch*, 29 October 1881.)

‘These harsh caricatures also played into the belief among many educated Victorians that the Irish were a separate race whose inferiority could be seen clearly in their facial features. In addition, the mid-century emergence of Darwin’s theories prompted cartoonists to assign to more violent Irish nationalists the role of the half-ape/half-man.

Against racist argument: a political approach by Sheridan Gilley

Curtis’s main critic is the English academic, Sheridan Gilley. In ‘English attitudes to the Irish in England, 1780-1900', Gillley questioned Curtis’s arguments about racism on the basis that ‘few ideas are more subtly influential than a nation’s understanding of its ‘national character’. Gilley then argued that ‘the English perception of the Irish was loaded with positive as well as negative assumptions’, and that the ‘English invoked the good points or the bad according to their temperament’.

He claimed that the Irish character, as perceived by both English and Irish, combined what the novelist Maria Edgeworth called ‘that mixture of quickness, simplicity, cunning, carelessness, dissipation, disinterestedness, shrewdness and blunder’. Gilley concludes that anti-Irishness in this period was more ‘national’ than ‘racial’. Indeed, the Victorians caricatured what they perceived as the fundamental failings of Irish character - for example, drunkenness and violence - just as much as (if not more than) their alleged racial inferiority. At the same time, even when social reformers and cartoonists suggested genuine attempts to improve Ireland such as industrialisation and land reform, they could not help but refer to the old habits of this Celtic people. Although Gilley points out the ambiguities of Anglo-Saxonist perspectives on ‘race’ and ‘national character’, he does not doubt the supremacist overtones of many British writers.

More recent disputants

Subsequent positions on the subject of racism and anti-Irishness were taken by Roy Foster, ‘a so-called revisionist’, and Mary J. Hickman, with radical views. The former aligns with Gilley, the latter with Curtis..

Supporting Gilley: Roy Foster

In ‘Paddy and Mr Punch’, Foster, like Gilley, focuses on the ambiguity of anti-Irish stereotyping. He portrays this dimension of Anglo-Irish relations as loaded with contradictions over the Irish character (and, thus, stereotype), and points out that the caricatures in magazines like *Punch* - key evidence in Curtis’s thesis - were just as likely to denigrate the English working class, while *Punch*’s Irish equivalents lampooned the English in similar fashion.

Moreover, while Irish agitators might be portrayed with ape-like feature, Hibernia is drawn as pure and lovely, with classical limbs, and a pure line from forehead to chin which accords with the most civilised category of the relationship of jaw and mouth to the upper part of the skull, the generally accepted nineteenth-century criterion for measuring the development from primitivism to civilisation.

Foster thus concludes that racial prejudice is too simple a generalisation to apply to the anti-Irish hostility of the British. He cites the fact that intermarriage between Irish and British partners was viewed as a process of conversion, rather than as miscegenation, to play down the allegedly racialist dimension.

Indeed, Foster considers that ‘class and religion were more central preoccupations in constructing an alien identity for the Irish than Curtis will admit’, adding that the general feeling in Britain ‘may relate more to resentment of the Irish attack on property [in Ireland] and the Union, and also resentment against Irish resentment of the Union. How could they know

A Prospero-like Gladstone saves Hibernia from the fiendish clutches of Caliban in "*The Irish 'Tempest.*" Here, Tenniel draws on Shakespeare's play to allegorize the "Irish Question," casting Caliban as the epitome of such evils as Fenianism and ultramontanism. *(Punch,* 1870)

what was good for them? Certainly the attitude was colonial; the Irish were weaker brethren'.

Supporting Curtis: Mary J. Hickman

Hickman stress this final point, but takes the issue a step further. She claims that the Irish were the victims of what she calls 'colonial racism'. And indeed, anti-Irish attitudes undoubtedly were moulded by the long-lived colonial relationship between the two powers, one stronger and aggressive, the other weaker and resistant. This colonial relationship came to a head in the nineteenth century when challenges to the Act of Union (1801) separated Irish from Irish, Protestant from Catholic, English from Irish on the grounds of politics, religion, and, Hickman believes, 'race'.

Hickman is particularly critical of Gilley's argument that, in the case of the Irish, there is no 'objective criterion of 'race'. To suggest that racism can be expressed only towards a person or group with a different skin colour is, Hickman asserts, an 'unjustifiably narrow definition of racism'.

Is there a right of wrong answer?

According to Donald MacRaild, there is perhaps no single 'right' or 'wrong' answer to this vexed question, though it is important to note that white-on-white attacks can be racist. At the same time, we need to acknowledge that Victorian definitions of racism were different from ours: they used the term 'race' much more casually, in a way which lacked the consistency and degree of determinism evinced by later exponents of race theory and eugenics. What we need to remember is that perceptions were an important part of the myth of Irish character and behaviour, and that the Victorians were quick to preference these perceptions over the reality of daily lives, in which the Irish were generally victims rather than perpetrators of crime and discord.

For Simon Potter, the controversy clearly reflected opposed political preferences and, in particular, divergent views about contemporary Irish nationalism and Anglo-Irish relations. However, it also derived from different ideas about historical explanation and the relative importance of the general and the specific. Thus while Curtis, Gilley and Foster all used the periodical press as a source, they did so in distinct ways, in order to support quite different conclusions.

What is needed, Potter maintains, is

- a more considered investigation of the balance between stereotyping and more informed treatment of Irish affairs in the British press in contextualised studies* and
- to move on from the unhelpful binary oppositions of previous historiographical controversy.

'To appreciate how the press influenced British policy-making on Irish issues, which seems to be the ultimate aim of the exercise, we need to see the politically-focused approaches of Gilley ... and the more culturally-oriented methods of Curtis ... as offering complementary rather than conflicting accounts.'

* Other issues also need to be explored if we wish to understand the balance between stereotyping and more informed treatment of Irish affairs in the British press. Questions of authorship and of the nature of different modes of journalistic writing are particularly important. We might find, for example, that editorials ... provide us with particularly pungent, but also somewhat misleading, examples of prejudice. Nineteenth-century editorial writers were frequently non-specialists, who had access to limited background information, and who were often working to tight deadlines: they may have relied on stereotypes to a much greater extent than did those journalists whose job it was to provide detailed reports on Irish affairs. Provincial papers, lacking specialised editorial staff or Irish correspondents, may have been particularly prone to prejudice. Studies of individual newspapers, examining the variations between different types of news and comment, and relating these differences to issues of authorship and journalistic approach, would help us to understand the circumstances in which writers relied on prejudice, and the factors that encouraged a more informed position. It would be interesting to know for example whether W. H. Russell's reports of 1843 on O'Connell's repeal agitation provided a more complex picture than the editorial comment otherwise published by his newspaper, *The Times*.

Note on anti-Irish behaviour in Victorian Britain

Taken from Donald M. MacRaild, *Irish migrants in modern Britain, 1750-1922*, Macmillan, 0-33367-762-5, pp 156-60

Contemporary writing

National press

Historians have tended to focus on

- the classic, stereotyped, texts of writers such as Carlyle or Engels or J. A. Froude, the Anglo-Saxonist historian who attacked the Irish as being 'more like tribes of squalid apes than human beings';
- the often savage or lampooning caricatures that were the stock-in-trade of *Punch* and other such publications.

Thus images of the Irish as drooling, half-crazed Fenian monkeys or wild Frankenstein's monsters dominate our perceptions of the way the Victorians perceived Ireland.

Local press

Yet there were in fact more mundane though equally pervasive influences at work. The harshest tones of anti-Irishness often sounded in local and provincial newspapers rather than in illustrated national journals, yet few historians have undertaken detailed study of the role of the provincial journalist in moulding the Irish stereotype.

In all, few contemporary works, apart from Cornewall Lewis's magisterial essay of Irish life in the industrial north of Britain (1836), came close to an even-handed treatment of the Irish, though even here the appendices are loaded with the antipathies of a procession of petty provincial office-holders and employers whose outpourings Lewis tried vainly to temper.

Starting point, 1830s

J.P. Kay

One of the starting points in the construction of the Irish migrant's negative identity is the work of the Manchester doctor and reformer J. P Kay, who in a now infamous essay of 1833 denounced the Irish in his city as an insidious social problem. Kay believed the Irish were a threat to both the living standards and the morality of the native working class.

In arguing that 'The Irish have taught the labouring classes of this country a pernicious lesson', Kay captured the essential features of what was becoming a pervasive contempt for the arrival of Irish workers:

> Debased alike by ignorance and pauperism, they have discovered, with the savage, what is the minimum of the means of life, upon which existence may be prolonged. The paucity of the amount of means and comforts necessary for the mere support of life, is not known by a more civilised population, and this secret has been taught the labourers of this country by the Irish. As competition and the restrictions and burdens of trade diminished the profit of capital, and consequently reduced the price of labour, the contagious example of ignorance and a barbarous disregard of forethought and economy, exhibited by the Irish, spread. The colonisation of savage tribes has ever been attended with effect on civilization as fatal as those which have marked the progress of the sand flood over the fertile plains of Egypt.

The barbarity of this Irish horde was, for Kay, measured by many examples of their rude habits and unsavoury behaviour. Excess drinking was considered to be a particularly acute problem as was the failure of the Irish to respect self-help or fear poverty. 'For the provision of old age and infirmity', Kay reckoned, the Irish 'too frequently trust either to charity, to the support of their children, or to the protection of the poor laws'.

Thomas Carlyle

Such complaints grew in currency during the 1830s, but few were as supremacist as Thomas Carlyle's now infamous attack of 1839:

> The wild Milesian features, looking false ingenuity, restlessness, unreason, misery, and mockery, salute you on all highways and byways. The English coachman, as he whirls past, lashes the Milesian with his whip, curses him with his tongue; the Milesian is holding out his hat to beg. He is the sorest evil this country has to strive

with. In his rags and laughing savagery, he is there to undertake all work that can be done by mere strength of hand and back - for wages that will purchase him potatoes. He needs only salt for his condiment, he lodges to his mind in any pig-hutch or dog-hutch, roosts in out-houses, and wears a suit of tatters, the getting on and off which is said to be a difficult operation, transacted only in festivals and the high tides of the calendar. The Saxon man, if he cannot work on these terms, finds no work. The uncivilised Irishman, not by his strength, but by the opposite of strength, drives the Saxon native out, takes possession in his room.'

Impact of Famine migration

Such negative impressions were intensified by the mass influx of Famine victims, as is shown by the *Morning Chronicle* surveys of 1849, conducted by, among others, Henry Mayhew, and A. B. Reach.

Reach, the Mayhew of the north, surveyed the great industrial regions of Lancashire and Yorkshire, doing what Mayhew had achieved in rather more sensitive and skilful fashion in the capital. Reach was obsessed with the Irish, choosing to comment on their inferior ways at almost every turn. Indeed, his impression of the 'Irish in Manchester' is one of the most vivid pieces of anti-Irish prose ever written:

> The last place we visited is, I am told, the 'worst cellar in all Manchester'. The outer room was like that of the others which I had seen, but, following a woman who held a light, we proceeded into the inner cellars. They were literally vaults, three of them opening from one to the other. The air was thick with damp and stench. The vaults were mere subterranean holes, utterly without light. The flicker of the candles showed their grimy walls, reeking with foetid damp, which trickled in greasy drops down to the floor. Beds were huddled in every corner; ... In one of these there was a man lying dressed, and beside him slept a well-grown calf. Sitting upon another bed was an old man, maudlin drunk, with the saliva running over his chin, making vain efforts to rid himself of his trowsers, and roaring for help. In the next cellar boys were snoring together in one bed, and beside them was a man sleeping in an old battered cap for a nightcap. 'Is he undressed?' I said. The police officer for an answer, twitched down the clothes, and revealed a stark man black with filth. The smell in this room was dreadful, and the air was at once hot and wet.''

For Reach, the English poor were different, maintaining a certain dignity in adversity. Such characteristics were, he felt, absent among the Irish: 'The contrast between this poor [English] family and their lazy Irish neighbours was very striking and very painful'. In an effort to strengthen the case against the Irish, many of Reach's pen portraits were highly personalised. The following is one of the most loathsome of them all: 'A woman with skin so foul that she might have passed for a negress, was squatted on the ground; and a litter, I cannot call then a group, of children burrowed about her. The woman could barely talk English; yet she must have been more than a dozen years in the country'.

Views such as these were both influential and commonplace. They underpinned what self-confident Victorians already felt about the backward and boisterous sister isle, but also added to the anxieties which created the 'Condition of England' question. It is quite likely, too, that condemnation from such quarters added a perceived legitimacy to the antagonisms of the street or workplace.