"Oh This Division of Allegiance!" Being Both Irish and British?

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Abstract: *This is a critical essay on Liam Harte's anthology* The Literature of the Irish in Britain: Autobiography and Memoir, 1725-2001. *The historian Elizabeth Malcolm questions the selection of Harte's "life-stories" and points ou the richness of the assembled material.*

Keywords: *Liam Harte; the Irish in Britain; autobiography; memoir.*

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The title page of this anthology informs us that it begins in 1725 and ends in 2001, while the table of contents indicates that it contains sixty-three short extracts from the autobiographies and memories of Irish immigrants living in Britain. But, in fact, none of this information is quite true. The book begins before 1725 and ends before 2001; I would suggest that it actually contains sixty-four extracts, not sixty-three; and, while some of the authors are Irish immigrants to Britain, others are not. However, I'm not necessarily criticizing Liam Harte for these inaccuracies; indeed, it seems to me that they reflect the complexity and variety of his collection, and the problem of setting precise parameters to it.

Harte is concerned with "life stories" and, in his introduction, he includes a section on his own and his family's experience of migration from Ireland to Britain, commencing with a line from the short-story writer Frank O'Connor: "A scholar's work is as much a self-portrait as a writer's". I'd suggest that the book contains sixty-four extracts, because Harte, as well as being its editor, is also a contributor. He acknowledges that compiling the anthology "has never been an entirely intellectual exercise for me" (xxxvi). Harte grew up in east Mayo, "an emigrant nursery for centuries" he tells us, and both his paternal grandfather and his father immigrated to England before him, although both eventually returned to Ireland. Harte is eloquent about the impact of immigration upon his father and how migration stories were a feature of his own childhood.

> England etched itself upon his consciousness with the intensity of a newsreel. Life in Ireland afterwards seemed smudged by a penumbra of anticlimax. Even now, my father is seldom more animated than when drawing from his well of migrant memories, the water from which seeped into my own childhood imagination, leaching it with exotic place-names – Mytholmroyd, Skipton, Hebden Bridge – and outlandish tales of hiring fairs and doss-houses (xxxvii).

During the 1990s Harte, while studying at university in England, visited these "exotic" west and north Yorkshire towns. As someone working at a northern English university myself during the 1990s, who also visited such places, I'm sure Harte discovered that their names were the only "exotic" thing about them, but of course we would have seen them through very different eyes from his father, arriving from rural Mayo during the impoverished post-war years, or from his own younger Mayo self. Now based in Manchester, Harte goes on to inform us that since his student days he has become a "serial border-crosser", his constant comings and goings charted by the ticket stubs he uses as bookmarks (xxxvii-xxxviii). I smiled with recognition on reading this sentence, having the same habit myself and, in fact, marking my place in Harte's book with a boarding pass from my last flight to Dublin. Such "moments of imaginative connection", as Harte argues, remind us that we are all part of a "wider narrative of migration" and that our personal stories are often not quite so specific to ourselves as we may like to imagine (xxxviii).

Given that Harte has included in his anthology his family story of Irish migration to Britain and acknowledged the subjective nature of his selection, I feel prompted to follow his example and draw upon my own experience of migration and research on migration in reviewing his book. If his collection "bears vestigial traces of self-portraiture" (p. xxxviii), so probably will this review, for I too am a "serial border-crosser", having not only migrated from Ireland to Britain once and from Britain to Australia once, but from Australia to Ireland twice – and now being engaged in contemplating a third such upheaval. I've spent much of my adult life migrating; while behind me lie four generations of Irish emigrant forebears. However, unlike Harte, I am an historian by profession, not a literary scholar, and this means I come to the topic of migration, and thus to his book, from a rather different perspective.

Before considering what is in this anthology, I'm going to do something that is probably a little unfair, but which most reviewers and critics tend to do, I'm going to complain about what is not in it. Firstly, I must ask: where is the late eighteenth century; in fact, where is the whole eighteenth century? The eighteenth century is represented by just two extracts: both by women, one dating to about 1700 and the other to the early 1740s. On the other hand, there are twenty-five extracts for the nineteenth century and thirty-six for the twentieth. Harte doesn't explain the scanty coverage of the years 1700-99: could he find no other appropriate materials? That's hard to credit. Many Irish-born men were prominent in the literature, philosophy and politics of England during the century: familiar names like Swift, Steele, Molesworth, Goldsmith, Sheridan, Berkeley

and Burke immediately come to mind. Perhaps none produced the sort of memoir Harte is interested in. But one I'm sure who did is Richard Lovell Edgeworth, helped by his more famous daughter Maria, both of whom spent long periods living in England. Having recently read Jenny Uglow's book, *The Lunar Men*, I'm very conscious that Edgeworth's contribution to England's Industrial Revolution has been largely overlooked. As regards the nineteenth century, I noted the absence of the memoirs of Lady Morgan and Lady Blessington; and I wondered about the lack of any Fenian memoirs, especially accounts of life in English prisons. There is no O'Donovan Rossa or Michael Davitt or, for that matter, Oscar Wilde. I can only suppose that Harte may have been excluding such well-known figures in favour of lesser-known ones.

In turning to look at the extracts actually in the book, one is immediately struck by their richness and diversity. Many of the authors may be little known, but their writings are frequently colourful and compelling. They refute the judgment, often passed by historians on the Irish in Britain, that this was an impoverished, downtrodden community, racked by poor health and despair; a community partly illiterate and largely inarticulate. There is certainly poverty and prejudice aplenty in this collection, but much more besides, including a great deal of hope and humour.

I want to begin with an overview, before exploring aspects of the book. A substantial majority of the extracts are from memoirs written by male Catholic immigrants during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Most are written in English by immigrants living in England, and most were published in London. But among the minority of extracts are fourteen by women and eleven by the second generation: that is by the British-born children of Irish immigrants. So not all the contributors are themselves immigrants. Nine authors lived or were born in Scotland and Wales, rather than England, and within England, most authors lived or were born in London and the north, especially Lancashire and Yorkshire. However, there are also a number who were itinerant, including a pickpocket, a beggar, a tramp and several rural labourers. Such people raise the issue of class. About 30 per cent of extracts are written by Protestants, most from middle-class, Anglo-Irish backgrounds. Members of the peerage and landed gentry do not appear in the book, but otherwise the authors represent a wide socio-economic spectrum, ranging from parliamentarians to petty thieves. Although all the extracts appear in the anthology in English, three were originally written in Irish and have been translated. This summary I hope offers a taste of the diversity of the extracts, but there are some persistent themes running through them that lend coherence to the collection and are worth closer investigation.

As an historian with an interest in women's history, I noticed immediately that only fourteen of the extracts are from works written by women – that's less than a quarter of the collection. However, as Harte acknowledges in his introduction, economic and social constraints often made it difficult for women to write, let alone publish, memoirs. Thus the anthology makes "no claim to comprehensiveness" (p. xvii). Despite these limitations, Harte has nevertheless managed to assemble a surprisingly mixed group of women contributors. They include fairly familiar figures, like the writers Laetitia Pilkington, Annie M.P. Smithson and Elizabeth Bowen and the crusading feminist reformer Frances

Power Cobbe. But most are either little known or totally unknown: like Ellen O'Neill, a convicted pickpocket; Maureen Hamish, a domestic servant; Alice Foley, a mill worker; Mauyen Keane, a nurse; and Nesca A. Robb, a teacher with an Oxford doctoral degree. As with the men, most emigrated from Ireland, but three were born in England and so represent the second generation of the Irish in Britain.

Also like the men, only a handful of these women describe events that had happened to them relatively recently. Most are recalling experiences and feelings from the long distant past, sometimes fifty or sixty years before the time of writing. In the case of Elizabeth Bowen, for instance, we have a woman explaining, shortly before her death in 1973 aged seventy-four, how she perceived England when she first arrived in 1906 as a child of seven (pp. 126-9). So, typically, the extracts involve a middle-aged or elderly person trying to remember and reconstruct their youth. Thus, in fundamental ways, the collection is not so much composed of firsthand accounts, as of exercises in memory. And, for this reason, Harte is quite correct in his introduction to caution his readers against treating these extracts as straightforward examples of social history (p. xxvi).

Many certainly yield fascinating insights into the details of past lives, but we must not be misled by the seductive voices we encounter. When Walter Hampson, for instance, tells us his harrowing tales of working illegally as a child chimney sweep for his brutal father during the early 1870s, forced to climb up inside the many tall chimneys of Lancashire big houses and lunatic asylums – burnt, blistered and often nearly suffocated – as moving as his account is, we must bear in mind that we are not in fact listening to the voice of an eight-year-old sweep. Instead, we are hearing that of a professional propagandist and committed socialist, writing sixty years later during the Great Depression of the early 1930s (pp. 107-10). Some of the writers included are clearly very conscious that their accounts are substantially exercises in imagination: efforts to re-connect with a distant and only half-remembered past. Musician Bob Geldof, for instance, describes his youthful 1960s' self as the "ghost of a boy". Writing about him is "as if I held hands with someone else, someone who lived a long time ago and had no connection" to the famous man Geldof had become twenty years later (p. 266).

Yet, if some writers feel detached from their past selves, others remain deeply attached to painful past memories. Geldof went to school in Dublin, but a number of the contributors attended English schools. For such children, bullying seems to have been a common experience; and this bullying usually arose out of the fact that they were perceived as Irish and, therefore, not as "us". Tom Barclay, born in a Leicester slum to Irish parents who had fled the Great Famine of the late 1840s, was "hounded and ill-used by Sassenach kids…battered, threatened, elbowed and pressed back to the door of our kennel" – "kennel", "pigsty", "hut" and "crib" are the words Barclay uses as an adult to describe the two small rooms in which his large family was forced to live (75). Multicultural Liverpool, on the other hand, offered some protection to Pat O'Mara, born there in 1904, but a self-proclaimed "Irish slummy". O'Mara belonged to a gang

and, during his school days, "our gang" was composed not only of the children of Irish Catholic parents, but also of Italian, Spanish, German, Filipino and "gypsy" parents (154-5).

Clearly there was safety in numbers. Such safety, however, was not usually available to Anglo-Irish children, who attended English schools singly and often as boarders. The poet W.B. Yeats describes being abused at his London day school during the late 1870s for being Irish. This led to "many fights", but because he was "delicate and had no muscles", he "never, for years, got the better in any one of them" (81). Louis MacNeice was another poet from an Anglo-Irish background sent to school in England; in his case this was as a boarder towards the end of the First World War. Confronted on 12 July by his headmaster, who enquires, "Isn't it all mumbo-jumbo", MacNeice agrees – and, influenced by his father, he does genuinely believe that Orange celebrations of the 1690 battle of the Boyne on the Twelfth are nonsense. But, talking later to an Ulster-born teacher, MacNeice says he suddenly felt "guilty and cheap" because he realized that he had "betrayed" his fellow Irish by siding with the English whose approval he craved. "Oh this division of allegiance", is his adult lament (183).

As must be obvious already, I'm interested in the experiences of children, and this anthology provides a wealth of information on how bullying at school forced many of the young, whether of Irish birth or descent, to prematurely ponder who they were. Some, like the Irish-born but Anglo-Irish MacNeice, seem never to have fully resolved their identity issues, but nor did many of the less privileged second-generation immigrants either. Although he attended a Catholic school in Liverpool, O'Mara says that most of the lay teachers had trained in England and thus lessons reflected pride in empire and a belief that the "British always won wars". But some Irish priests at the school took a rather different view, especially when it came to religious history. O'Mara says that he emerged from his "English-Irish schooling" with an "intense love for the British Empire and an equally intense hatred for England as opposed to Ireland" – and his views had apparently not changed much by the time he was writing twenty years later (154). Harte characterizes O'Mara's nationality as hybrid, but one might equally argue that it was schizophrenic.

But at least O'Mara appears to have managed to keep his multiple and conflicting identities in some sort of equilibrium. Others were not so fortunate. Elizabeth Hamilton was born in 1906 into a Protestant military family in Wicklow, but converted to Catholicism in her early twenties while a student in London. She sums up her feelings succinctly when she writes: "to belong to two countries is to belong that much less to each". In Ireland she feels an "outsider" as a "citizen of Britain", but in England she is "conscious" and "proud" of her "Irish origins" and feels distanced from the English by their "patronizing tone" towards her (177). Hamilton's sense of being an outsider in both countries was doubtless partly a function of her Anglo-Irish background, but the Catholic second generation born in England could have a similar experience. John Healy was born in London in 1943 to Irish parents, but from a young age he spent periods of

time living with his grandmother and attending school in Ireland. However, as well as never mastering the Irish language, then a compulsory subject, he finds himself abused by Irish boys as an "English cur", an "English black and tan swine", and told to "Go back to England". Yet in England he is called "Paddy" by English boys mimicking an Irish accent, abused as an "Irish cunt" and, on one occasion, kicked in the "bollocks" (261-2).

Like Pat O'Mara, others seem to have developed ways to rationalize their two identities. Thus we find Joseph Keating, born in 1871 in a south Wales coal-mining village, the son of Irish immigrants, announcing that he "neither would nor could think of any other place on earth as home" but his Welsh birthplace, yet, at the same time, claiming that: "I am Irish in every way…I regard Ireland as my country; and not only mine, but God's; and its people as a race chosen by the Almighty". Keating reconciles these apparently conflicting statements by arguing that the "feeling of nationality had nothing to do with the land of birth, but was inherited in the blood": thus he could be Irish by "blood", yet still love the land of Wales (87). However, someone born in England would likely have found it much harder to achieve such a compromise.

Some of the immigrants were obviously deeply unhappy and bitter at having to leave Ireland. This seems to have been especially true of those who left during the 1950s. The writer John B. Keane gives readers the precise date of his own departure (6 January 1952) and evokes the "early Christian martyrs" when describing the scenes at Dun Laoghaire harbour and in "steerage" on the boat to Holyhead: "Underneath it all was the heartbreaking, frightful anguish of separation". The boat sailed at eight o'clock at night and Keane spent much of that day on a pub crawl round Dublin city centre with a friend; indeed, all the young male passengers on the boat are drunk on departure, "not violently so", according to Keane, "but tragically so" (243). However, Keane's sad picture of "men and women being torn away from home" is in stark contrast to how Bob Geldof perceived his departure about fifteen years later. He is desperate to be "off" out of Ireland, and "Off meant England", which had given him his "first sense of real liberty" when he had spent several summers there as a schoolboy working in a Lincolnshire canning factory. So, once he finishes school he is "off" again to England, but this time permanently and clearly without any regrets (267).

In reading and trying to grasp the complexities of the many extracts in this book, I quickly became aware that, as an historian, I had to employ two different chronologies: one is a list of dates when the writings were published and the other a list of dates when the extracts are actually set – and, as mentioned, sometimes these dates could be more than half a century apart. I would commend Harte for carefully providing all the necessary dates. Yet, surprisingly, he does mix these different chronologies in one important respect: he arranges his extracts in an order dictated by the date at which the events described occurred – which is fair enough – but the dates in his title refer to the other chronology, that of publication. This is why I was initially puzzled that a book, which said on its cover that it started in 1725, had as its first extract an account of an incident that occurred in about 1700. I think Harte should have been consistent: having

organised his extracts according to the experiences described, he should have employed the same dating system in his title, which then would have become, 1700-1982.

Harte's short introduction to each extract is informative in contextualizing the life and memoir of the author, while his annotations help in explaining local terms and references. However, based on some of my own interests and research, I registered a few omissions. For instance, in the book's first extract, Mary Davys provides a vivid account of an episode that occurred in an English inn in about 1700, when she and some friends were on route from Dublin via Holyhead probably to York. A local farmer offers one of the serving maids a shilling if she will let him see "the wild *Irish*" since he had never met Irish people before. Davys decides to "humour" him after he enters the room "with Eyes staring" and "half afraid to come near Monsters". She mimics his thick, local accent in her account and, in talking to him, confirms his belief that Irish people are born with tails, informing him that her own tail was cut off when she was a child. The farmer wants to see the mark left by this procedure, but Davys informs "*poor Hodge*", as she calls him, that this would not be "very decent" (2-3). Obviously she is mocking English ignorance and credulity, their "Wonder and Folly" as she calls it, but I think there are further aspects to this story that Harte overlooks.

In his introduction to the extract, he informs us that Davys encounters "an Englishman named Hodge". But "Hodge" is not in fact the farmer's surname; "hodge" is an English colloquial term for a "rustic", someone whom today the Irish might call a "culchie" – the word implies bucolic stupidity. But I also suspect there may be a sexual subtext to Davys' story. Hodge compares the Irish to his cow because he believes that, in addition to tails, they are also born covered with hair. The word "hodge" originally suggested not just dim wittedness, but possibly an unhealthy sexual interest in animals (Partridge 568). One can't be certain, but Davys, by having Hodge compare his cow to the Irish and then request to see her posterior, may be hinting at bestiality among the English – a crime more usually ascribed to the Irish. Yet, "poor Hodge" is actually not as dim and deluded as he sounds. The belief that the Irish mated with animals and thus shared physical characteristics with them is a very old one, widely held since at least the twelfth century, when it was given much credence in Gerald of Wales's very influential account of his visits to Ireland during the 1180s. Gerald, a highly-educated Welsh monk serving King Henry II, spins tales of an Ireland where men are half oxen and oxen half men, where women have sexual intercourse with goats and lions, and where Irish kings mate with horses (Gerald of Wales 73-6, 110). And, indeed, as late as the 1640s, English soldiers fighting in the Irish wars claimed to have seen long tails on Irish corpses (Thomas 42-3). Thus Hodge's fantasies about the "wild" Irish were far from being restricted just to the benighted denizens of early eighteenth-century rural England.

There were a couple of other instances in which I thought Harte could have enriched his extracts with further explanation or annotation. For instance, James Dawson Burn, a self-styled "Beggar Boy", was only about ten, illiterate and penniless, when he fled his life as a rural labourer in Ulster, stowed away on a boat to Scotland and began

a long trek across Britain, in search of his mother and stepfather who were living in Northumberland. Sometimes meeting with kindness from strangers and sometimes with cruelty, in desperation he ends up searching Dumfries for a close friend of his stepfather's, only to be told "that he had left his country by authority!" (28) Harte doesn't gloss this remark, but I take it to be a reference to transportation. The year is 1816 and Burn's stepfather is an Irish ex-soldier, an alcoholic, who works as a pedlar and, at times, a beggar. It is probable that his Dumfries friend came from a similar background. Transportation of convicts to the Australian penal colonies surged towards the end of the Napoleonic wars, which had impeded shipping. At the same time, the post-war depression that swiftly followed the French defeat left many ex-soldiers unemployed and impoverished, forced to survive not only by begging but sometimes also by petty theft (Shaw 92, 99, 147). Young Burn had clearly chosen a particularly bad year in which to seek a better life for himself in Britain.

Another remark that I thought worth annotation occurred in Kevin FitzGerald's satirical account of how he was nearly expelled in 1921 from his English agricultural college for suggesting that students protest against the "appalling" food they were expected to eat by throwing it at the steward responsible for catering. As a result of this proposal, he is hauled up before the principal, a former British army colonel, who begins by saying: "FitzGerald…you are Irish, I think". FitzGerald tells us he "had not yet grasped that this is the typically British beginning to particular forms of insult", that usually continue along the lines of: "You are dirty; dishonest…a Catholic, militant Protestant, [or] red revolutionary". And, indeed, the colonel opts for the latter insult: having ascertained that FitzGerald is Irish, he accuses him of being a "dangerous Bolshevik" (186). As the British were fighting Republicans in Ireland at the time, as well as Bolsheviks in Russia, the colonel obviously regards the wealthy, English-born, nineteen-year-old FitzGerald, who had attended one of England's most "exclusive" Catholic schools, as a serious menace to the peace of the college.

Ordered to appear before the board of governors for further questioning, FitzGerald says that he stood, hands behind his back, "in the attitude of that boy in blue velvet who was being asked when he last saw his father" (187). Harte doesn't explain to us what FitzGerald is referring to here, but I think the remark is revealing. FitzGerald is comparing his plight to that of a boy in a very popular Victorian painting by W.F. Yeames, "And when did you last see your father?" (1878), held in the Walker Gallery, Liverpool. The picture shows parliamentarians interrogating the young son of a leading royalist during the English Civil War. Although FitzGerald, whose book wasn't published until 1986, appears to treat his college "inquisition" in a jocular fashion, nevertheless, his oblique reference to the wars of the 1640s immediately throws a dark shadow over the proceedings. In the first half of 1921 the Irish were fighting the English, just as they had been in the 1640s when many Irish supported the royalist cause. Like the little boy in the painting, FitzGerald has been detained by English authorities, with little hope of escape. In event, however, he isn't expelled from his college because one of the governors, a "stout

lady", briskly intervenes, chiding her colleagues for making themselves "ridiculous", and so brings an abrupt end to FitzGerald's farcical interrogation.

I confess that in highlighting references Harte hasn't glossed, I'm metaphorically "nit picking" – poor Tom Barclay has to do this literally as a slum child (77) – yet the richness of the materials he has assembled invites the reader, and perhaps especially the historian, to dig deeper for more revelations or, better still, to go in search of the books from which the extracts have been so skilfully chosen. I have copies of some of the books Harte draws upon, but I must admit that a number were unfamiliar to me. The success of any anthology, I believe, must be measured by its capacity to inspire readers to want to read more. On that criterion, this book is clearly an outstanding achievement.

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