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A Community in Crisis?: Birmingham Irish and the 1974 IRA Pub Bombings

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Figure 1. Damage to the Mulberry Bush pub [1]

Contents:

List of Abbreviations:

BM - Birmingham Mail

BP - Birmingham Post

GAA - Gaelic Athletic Association

LoB - Library of Birmingham

(P)IRA - (Provisional) Irish Republican Army

PTA - Prevention of Terrorism Act, 1974

Introduction

On the morning of 22nd November 1974, the city of Birmingham woke up to scenes of horror plastered across its newspapers and television screens. The night before, two bombs had exploded in busy city centre pubs. Over the coming hours and days the magnitude of the tragedy became apparent: in killing 21 and injuring 162 others, this was the most lethal terrorist attack on British soil until the 7/7 London Underground bombings. Although never officially claimed, it is universally assumed that the attacks formed part of a wider IRA campaign in the 1970s, whereby bombings in England aimed to draw attention to political turbulence in Northern Ireland. Here, an anti-Catholic Unionist Party was in power and British troops had been present since 1968. Indeed, there had been 32 other bombings in Britain since August 1973 alone, but the scale of murder and explicit targeting of civilians meant that these shook the city and nation like no other.[2] In their aftermath six local Irishmen - 'the Birmingham Six' - were wrongly convicted and imprisoned, beginning a judicial saga that would last until 1991. Further, the resultant Prevention of Terrorism Act gave police greatly increased arrest and detention powers. Considering the scale of tragedy and its impact both on Birmingham and wider British legislation, surprisingly little has been written with the attacks as a central focus. Furthermore, where they have been academically addressed, the arrest and treatment of the Birmingham Six has largely come to overshadow the bombings themselves.[3] However, there is another group that were adversely affected by November 1974, and whose experiences this dissertation will explore: the ordinary Irish people of Birmingham.

Mass immigration from Ireland in the years after the potato famine gave many English cities an increasing Irish community, with Birmingham having the fourth highest born Irish population by the 1880s.[4] Such trends only intensified in the twentieth century, as continuing economic difficulties in Ireland coincided with a boom in job opportunities in Birmingham. Indeed, by the 1960s, 1 in 6 children born in the city had at least one Irish parent, and it was the second only to London as the English destination of choice for Irish immigrants.[5] Despite such figures the historiography is insufficient: not only are the Irish marginal in mainstream work on diaspora, where they are studied, the Birmingham community is frequently overlooked. For instance, in

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[2] 'Months and Months of Devastation', *BP,* 23 Nov. 1974

[3] see C. Mullins *Error of Judgement: The Truth About the Birmingham Bombings,* (London, 1986); S. Deane, *The Birmingham Six: An Appalling Vista* (Dublin, 1990)

[4] J. Moran, *Irish Birmingham,* (Liverpool, 2010) 2

[5] Ibid., 3; E. Delaney, *The Irish in Post-war Britain,* (London, 2007) 97

'Wherever Green is Worn', Coogan glosses over the city, claiming there is a 'dull tide of grey rather than green'.[6] Such dismissal is unjustified, and clearly contradicted by crowds of up to 70,000 shamrock-wearing revellers at Birmingham's annual St Patrick's day parade and a network of Irish events and organisations throughout the city.[7]

Such a historiographical gap has not gone unacknowledged in recent years. Birmingham based historian Carl Chinn and librarian Joe McKenna have gathered an extensive collection of archival material, allowing for exploration in new areas. Although the main body of work regarding the Birmingham Irish still concerns the 1900s, two key studies examine the twentieth century: Chinn's 'Birmingham Irish: Making Our Mark' and Moran's 'Irish Birmingham'.[8] Chinn includes a variety of rich testimony gathered from members of the Irish community, but in allowing it to stand alone, an opportunity for analysis and argument is missed. Moran takes a cultural approach, and his book revolves around key moments of spectacle in Birmingham Irish history. However, it seems to have the opposite problem to Chinn's work: as Herson has noted, 'the mass of Irish people in Birmingham are perennially a stage army in the background'.[9] In relying on local newspapers and secondary sources for evidence of people's feelings, Moran makes no real attempt to examine the lives of ordinary 'Brummies'. There are also a handful of relevant theses from Birmingham University students. Ziesler's time frame, 1830-1970, means that the bombings are only dealt with in an appendix, but her work concerning Irish organisations leading up to the 1970s is valuable.[10] Kileen also meticulously examines a variety of aspects of Irish life, having conducted over 100 interviews and many hours of participant observation.[11] Interestingly, the conclusions reached by these two theses are divergent: while Ziesler claims that 'far from disintegrating in the wake of the 1974 bombings, the Irish community in Birmingham appears to have grown stronger', Kileen sees the attacks as a disaster for the Irish, commenting that 'the ramifications are still being felt today'.[12]

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[6] T. Coogan, *Wherever Green is Worn: The Story of the Irish Diaspora* (London, 2000) 254

[7] attendance figues taken from Moran, *Irish,* 3

[8] C. Chinn, *Birmingham Irish: Making Our Mark,* (Birmingham, 2003); Moran, *Irish*
for work concerning the nineteenth century see R. Swift and S. Gilley (eds)*The Irish in Victorian Britain: The Local Dimension,* (Dublin, 1995); P. Davis, *The Irish in Birmingham in the 1860s,* (unpublished thesis, 2003)

[9] J. Herson, 'Irish Birmingham: A History', *Irish Studies Review,* 18 (2010) p463

[10] K. Ziesler, 'The Irish in Birmingham 1830-1970' (unpublished doctoral thesis, 1989)

[11] N. Killeen, 'Culture, Identity and Integration: The Case of the Irish in Birmingham' (unpublished doctoral thesis, 2002)

[12] Ziesler, 'Irish', 344; Kileen, 'Culture', 123

There is clearly room for much more work, especially in light of the available archival evidence. This dissertation, therefore, aims to add to both a body of scholarship concerning the Irish diaspora in Birmingham, and to an understanding of the 1974 bombings specifically. A focus on the impact of the bombings on ordinary Irish 'Brummies' means that oral history interviews form the first key part of my primary sources. I have carried out 8 interviews with first and second generation Irish immigrants who were living in Birmingham in the years surrounding 1974. These include 3 women and 5 men, aged, at the time, between 12 and 45. The majority of respondents are first generation immigrants and are from working class backgrounds. Nonetheless, they have a range of occupations and roles in the community, including a teacher and a priest. In the case of the three second generation immigrants specifically, they are now middle class with professional jobs. There are many well trodden potential pitfalls of oral history, including broad questions about the problematic nature of memory, subjectivity, and interviewer bias.[13] Furthermore, my respondents were consciously and artificially thinking about their Irish identity, and perhaps somewhat 'performing' it for the interviewer.[14] However, the benefits of such an approach outweigh drawbacks, especially when those drawbacks are acknowledged and balanced by other sources. In allowing the recreation of a multiplicity of viewpoints, oral history is vital to the success of a project which aims to highlight the complexities of experiences of those who have hitherto been largely silent in the historical record.

Interviews compiled by others, including Chinn, Holohan and Harland, play an important role in helping to balance issues of reliability and representativeness in vastly increasing my amount of testimony.[15] It is, of course, important to bear in mind that other researchers' agendas differ from my own, and hence these sources are used as additional supplement rather than as the basis of this paper. Documentary sources further help to counter problems posed by the nature of oral history, and provide broader perspectives. Archival material at the Library of Birmingham includes a myriad of leaflets, pamphlets and newspaper clippings related to the Irish in the city. Indeed, newspaper articles form a second key section of primary source material. Both tabloids (the Sun and the Daily Mail) and broadsheets (The Times, The Guardian, The Observer) have been explored, and this sample represents a range of political leanings. Two important local papers, the Birmingham Post and Birmingham Evening Mail, have also been drawn upon

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[13] guidance was found at http://www.ohs.org.uk/advice/ and R.Perks and A. Thompson (eds.), *The Oral History Reader,* (London, 1998)

[14] noted in Kileen, 'Culture', 7

[15] Chinn, *Birmingham Irish;* A. Holohan, *Working Lives: The Irish in Britain,* (Middlesex, 1995); L. Harland, *Birmingham Voices,* (Birmingham, 1999)

heavily. And thirdly, there are a handful of detailed sociological reports concerning the Birmingham Irish: namely those of Rex and Moore in 1964, and O'Donovan in the 1980s.[16]

An issue which cuts across all of my research is that of defining the Irish community. Being born in Ireland is not a prerequisite to identifying as Irish: in the 2001 census, while 31,467 Birmingham residents claimed to belong to the Irish ethnic group, only 22,828 of these were born in Ireland.[17] The inclusion of second generation immigrants in my work acknowledges this. Furthermore, just as the Irish population is not homogenous, neither is that of Irish immigrants. There is evidence that different class groups frequented different Irish bars and clubs, with factory workers going to the Shamrock while nurses, teachers, and professionals preferred the Mayfair.[18] There were also divisions within the community on the basis of Irish origin. As Des Gleeson, who moved to Birmingham from Dublin, commented, 'the country boys hated the boys from Dublin', and Rex and Moore's study of Sparkbrook found that country born 'culchies' often used different pubs and churches to those from cities.[19] While acknowledging these differences, it is also important not to overstate them by the time frame in question, with many respondents confirming that their social circle contained people from 'all over the place'.[20]

The most important issue is the potential invisibility of Irish protestants in my work, a problem across studies of the Irish diaspora in general. It is too simplistic to assume that 'Irishness' and Catholicism are synonymous - although many interviewees appear to. However, it has long been recognised that protestants are less visible in social organisations - many of which were closely linked to the church - and more likely to have integrated into mainstream society.[21] Therefore their experiences are less likely to be captured in the sources I will be using and I was unable to locate any to participate in my interviews. Furthermore, individuals identify to varying degrees with their heritage. Jackson, in the mid 1960s, found that 'for some [immigrants] the escape from Ireland is almost complete...for others quite the opposite is the

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[16] J. Rex and R. Moore, *Race, Community and Conflict: A Study of Sparkbrook,* (Oxford, 1969); I. O'Donovan, *Ethnicity and Migration: A Study of the Irish in Britain,* (Birmingham, 1984)*;* I. O'Donovan, *Report for the Race Relations Committee on travellers and the Irish community in Britain,* (Birmingham, 1987)

[17] Birmingham City Council, *Cultural Background: 2001 Population Census,* tables 2.11 and 3.1

[18] Ziesler, 'Irish', 293

[19] Interview with Des Gleeson 18/03/2016; Rex and Moore, *Race,* 86

[20] Interview with Kitty Gardner, 23/03/2016

[21] B. Walker, 'The Lost Tribes of Ireland: Diversity, Identity and Loss among the Irish Diaspora', *Irish Studies Review,* 15 (2007) 274

case'.[22] The very nature of my research and recruitment for oral interviews - often through Irish organisations - will attract those who strongly identify with their roots. Indeed, all but one of my interviewees was heavily involved in Irish social and cultural life in Birmingham, and two of the three second generation immigrants defined their ethnicity/nationality as purely Irish. This is probably not a ratio representative of the Birmingham Irish in general, especially those who are second generation. Kileen's research demonstrates that social class is also strongly implicated in identification with the Irish diasporic community, with many professionals being much more integrated[23]. Throughout, I will remain acutely aware of these issues and acknowledge that 'every trend I identity carries a silent chorus of skeptical and dissenting voices'.[24]

The first chapter will examine the impact of the bombings on public discourse surrounding the Irish, through exploring the ways in which this community was constructed in the media and via legislation. It will become clear that the Irish assumed an ambiguous position. While often being highlighted as victims of anti Irish backlash, they were also implicitly constructed as a 'suspect' community. The two subsequent chapters deal with the impact of the bombings on the everyday experiences of the Birmingham Irish, through oral testimony and other contemporary studies. In chapter two both the nature and extent of anti-Irish hostility will be explored. This focus on anti Irish prejudice will reiterate claims of those such as Ghaill and Hickman that shared whiteness does not protect the Irish from racial discrimination, and help to redress the lack of attention they have received in studies of race and ethnicity.[25] The final chapter will look at the impact of November 1974, and subsequent experiences of hostility, upon Birmingham Irish identity and self expression. Examination of Irish cultural, social and political life clearly reveals a strong and vibrant community that continued.

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[22] J. Jackson, *Report on the Skibereen Social Survey,* (Dublin, 1967) 39-40

[23] Kileen, 'Culture', 160

[24] Ibid., 7

[25] M. Ghaill, 'The Irish in Britain: the invisibility of ethnicity and anti Irish racism', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies,* 26 (2000); M. Hickman and B. Walters, 'Deconstructing Whiteness: Irish Women in Britain', *Feminist Review,* 50 (1995)

Chapter 1 - The Irish in Public Discourse: A 'Suspect Community' [26]

> 'We in the Irish community are doing everything in our power to show we do not support violence of this kind. I would appeal to the people...not to take it out on the Irish of the city' [27]

> 'We must remember that the overwhelming majority of Irish people in Britain condemn and detest these wicked attacks as much as anyone else' [28]

In the hours and days after the bombs exploded, key figures in the Irish community promptly condemned the attacks and explicitly distanced the majority of Irish in Birmingham from the IRA. Such pleas for calm and tolerance were soon echoed by Prime Minister Harold Wilson, Home Secretary Roy Jenkins, and widely published in newspapers. However, as has been noted in a recent study, closer examination demonstrates that the Irish actually came to occupy a more ambiguous position in public discourse.[29] In the aftermath of 1974, they were constructed both as victims and potential threats, and the boundaries between the two were often thin. However, such negative constructions must also be set in a wider picture: many were not new, with the bloody history between England and Ireland long being a basis for constructing 'othered' stereotypes of the Irish.

Every newspaper examined, as well as many key individuals, clearly exonerate the majority of the Irish community from involvement. Both the local and national press regularly quoted figures such as Jenkins, and published letters which equally expressed that there was 'no true voice of Ireland in the blasts'.[30] There are several articles which specifically highlight the deaths of Irish brothers Eugene and Desmond Reilly - perhaps a conscious effort to demonstrate that the attacks do not represent 'the Irish' verses 'the British'.[31] Furthermore, many pieces which detail prejudice and violence inflicted upon members of the Birmingham Irish community construct them as innocent victims. For instance, the Observer published 'Feeling Irish and Isolated'

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[26] term first used to describe the effects of the PTA by P. Hillyard, *Suspect Community: People's Experience of the Prevention of Terrorism Acts in Britain,* (London, 1993)

[27] John O'Keefe quoted in Chinn, *Birmingham Irish,* 162

[28] Roy Jenkins quoted in '"Don't Take Law Into Own Hands" - Jenkins', *BP,* 22 Nov. 1974

[29] H., Nickel, L. Thomas, M. Hickman and S. Silvestri, 'Report of a research project: A comparative study of the representations of 'suspect' communities in multi-ethnic Britain and of their impact on Muslim and Irish communities 1974-2007' (London Metropolitan University, 2001) 3

[30] 'No True Voice of Ireland in the Blasts', *The Guardian,* 26 Nov. 1974

[31] 'Tragedy of Two Brothers', *The Sun,* 25 Nov. 1974; 'The Grief of Mrs Reilly', *The Sun,* 4 Dec. 1974; 'Two Irish Brothers Died Together', *BP,* 26 Nov. 1974; 'The Irish Weep for their Dead', *BM,* 4 Dec. 1974

which explores the plight of the Irish amidst increasing hostility and a Guardian article by Maeve Binchy similarly aims to elicit sympathy and understanding for the community.[32] Additionally, both the Birmingham Post and Birmingham Mail make an effort to highlight Irish generosity in the aftermath. They detail specific Irish donations to the fund set up for the bomb victims, stating they signify that 'they are as outraged as anyone else about the bombings'.[33] However, there are limits to such sentiments. During discussions surrounding anti terrorist legislation, Lord Kilbracken issued a message to ordinary Irish people in Britain: 'You have done nothing wrong. Hold your heads high, be proud of your Irish heritage. God save Ireland.'[34] The fact that he 'sat down amidst absolute silence' suggests that, although distancing the majority of the Irish from the IRA was common and accepted rhetoric, direct praise of or pride in Ireland or 'Irishness' was an uncomfortable step too far.

Indeed, alongside explicit exonerations of ordinary Irishmen and women are more troubling representations of the Irish in public discourse. In a minority of occasions, mostly in published letters from the public, there are overt expressions of racism, and a direct conflation of terrorism with Irish ethnicity. To take but one example, a letter to the Birmingham Mail makes no distinction between the IRA and the rest of the Irish population, all referred to as 'these people' who 'return our hospitality in a 'revolting way', and implores the government to 'remove them all'.[35] However, it is mostly by more subtle means that ideas of the Irish as potentially dangerous are created and reinforced. Firstly, a continual need to prefix the word 'Irish' with disclaimers such as 'innocent' or 'law abiding' 'implicitly constructs the community as a potential threat' with the 'inbuilt assumption that many are guilty'.[36] It is interesting that even in articles discussing the deaths of Eugene and Desmond Reilly, their mother feels the need to distance them from the conflict, mentioning that they were born in Birmingham and 'didn't want to know about the fighting and killing in Northern Ireland'.[37] Secondly, the feelings of those who are hostile to the Irish community, or who violently lash out, are repeatedly validated as 'understandable'.[38] One Observer article goes as far as saying that a lack of 'lynchings' after previous IRA bombings shows 'almost unbelievable restraint', as though abusive behaviour is both normal and

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[32] 'Feeling Irish and Isolated', *The Observer,* 1 Dec. 1974; 'Through Irish Eyes', *The Guardian,* 8 Dec. 1975

[33] 'Outraged Irish Pour Cash Into Bomb Fund', *BP,* 5 Dec. 1974; '£1000 Given to Fund by Irish', *BM,* 28 Nov. 1974

[34] 'Hailsham Calls for Death Penalty Discussion', *The Guardian,* 29 Nov. 1974

[35] 'The Angry City', *BP,* 25 Nov. 1974

[36] Nickels, Thomas, Hickman, Silvestri, 'Representations of 'suspect' communities', 17

[37] 'Tragedy of Two Brothers'

[38] 'Dangers of a Backlash' *BP,* 23 Nov. 1974; 'Confronting the Terrorists', *The Observer,* 1 Dec. 1974

inevitable.[39]   Thirdly, placed alongside pleas for calm, are several references to the Irish community as IRA sympathizers and potential harborers of terrorists. The Guardian stated that Irish terrorism is clearly condoned by 'a number large enough to make it possible', and the Times that among Birmingham's Irish population are 'ostensibly raw and cheerful men...nurturing an inclination for violence'. Such a description clearly implies that those who seem normal, or even friendly, may have an underlying 'Irish' propensity for brutality.[40] There are even some indications that non political Irish gatherings ought not to be trusted. A suggestion in the Birmingham Mail of 'checking any money from tote tickets, raffle tickets, bingo halls or fundraising schemes' is not funding the IRA extends suspicion to all realms of Irish life.[41]

The Prevention of Terrorism Act, passed a week after the bombings, further helped to construct the Irish as a 'suspect community'.[42] Self admittedly 'draconian' legislation, the PTA outlawed the IRA and any symbols of support, along with granting the authorities increased powers of arrest, detention and deportation.[43] It was accompanied by several confirmations that it was 'not directed against the great majority of law abiding Irish people', and some even suggested that such decisive action would come as a 'welcome relief to the peaceful Irish community' in 'placating English anger'.[44] Nonetheless, in seemingly conflating Irish ethnicity with potential involvement in the IRA, along with the arrest of the Birmingham Six it blurred the lines between innocent and guilty members of the Birmingham Irish population. Indeed, all of the six men arrested for the bombings were well established in the city, having lived there for between 11 and 27 years. This notion that the Irish enemy came very much from within was explicitly drawn out by The Guardian, which confirmed the bombers were 'first or second generation Irish who have lived in England for years...who are sufficiently established in the community...entirely indistinguishable from English people' - and surely, by extension, indistinguishable from the harmless Irish population.[45]

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[39] 'Confronting the Terrorists'

[40] 'Those Who Harbor Terrorists', *The Guardian,* 23 Nov. 1974; 'Police Urge Public to Help Search for the Bombers', *The Times,* 24 Nov. 1974

[41] 'Hang Terrorists - the mood of the Midlands', *BM,* 25 Nov. 1974

[42] Hillyard, *Suspect Community*

[43] 'Terror: How Long is an Emergency?', *The Guardian,* 21 Mar. 1979

[44] 'Feeling Irish and Isolated'

[45] 'Sinister Precedent Feared', *Guardian,* 23 Nov. 1974

Attempts to exonerate the majority of the Irish community from IRA involvement ultimately become problematic when placed alongside references to them as harbourers of terrorists or potential threats. The extent to which these opposing constructions were not fixed, and the boundaries between them permeable, is clear. For instance, many arguments against the introduction of harsh anti IRA legislation were that, in alienating the Irish community, they will become 'even more willing to harbour and otherwise assist bombers'.[46] One Observer article even notes that there is a 'danger' they will become 'increasingly Irish' - something that is clearly conflated with support for the IRA and its tactics.[47] The Irish are shown to be balancing in an ambiguous and precarious position: for now, perhaps, the majority are innocent, but the inherent subversive and suspect nature of the community means that there is a threat of this changing.

However, it is important to note that anti Irish feeling was also apparent in public discourse before the attacks. Anti Irish prejudice in the nineteenth century has been widely acknowledged and a growing body of scholarship has highlighted the same negative constructions a century later. Liz Curtis for instance, traces an almost unbroken line in prejudice from initial conquests of Ireland in the twelfth century: 'anti-Irish prejudices constitute one of the largest secular trends in English cultural history'.[48] Indeed, several sources testify to a considerable amount of anti Irish feeling in Britain in the decade before 1974: in a 1967 Gallup Poll only 16% felt the presence of Irish migrants was beneficial to Britain, while 22% claimed it was harmful.[49] Moreover, many specific negative stereotypes, which present the Irish as troublesome, violent or illogical, were deep rooted. Just as after the attacks the political demands of Irish republicans are consistently ignored in public discourse, the cartoons in figures 2 and 3 paint a picture of Irish backwardness and irrationality, in opposition to the civilized British. The stereotype of the Irish drunken troublemaker was also incredibly persistent: Russell stated in 1963 that it is 'as strong in England as it was in the mid nineteenth century...a view which i found shared by everybody with whom i came in contact'.[50] Indeed, there is evidence of such feelings in Birmingham. Rex and Moore noted that English residents of Sparkbrook saw 'a steady, disastrous and

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[46] 'Confronting the Terrorists'

[47] 'Feeling Irish and Isolated'

[48] L. Curtis *'Nothing but the same old story: Historic Roots of Anti-Irish Racism'* (London, 1985); see also W.R. Jones, 'England Against the Celtic Fringe: a study in cultural stereotypes', *Journal of World History,* 13 (1971); Ghaill, 'Irish in Britain'

[49] survey described in C. Holmes, *John Bulls Island: Immigration and British Society, 1871-1971* (Houndmills, 1988) 233

[50] M. Russell, 'The Irish Delinquent in England', *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review,* 53 (1964) 140
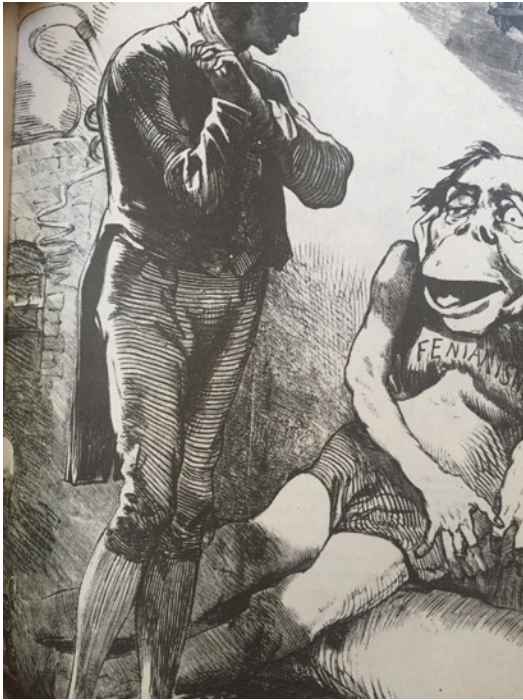
Figure 2. 'The Irish Frankenstein' by Matt Morgan (1869) in Curtis, *Same Old Story,* 59
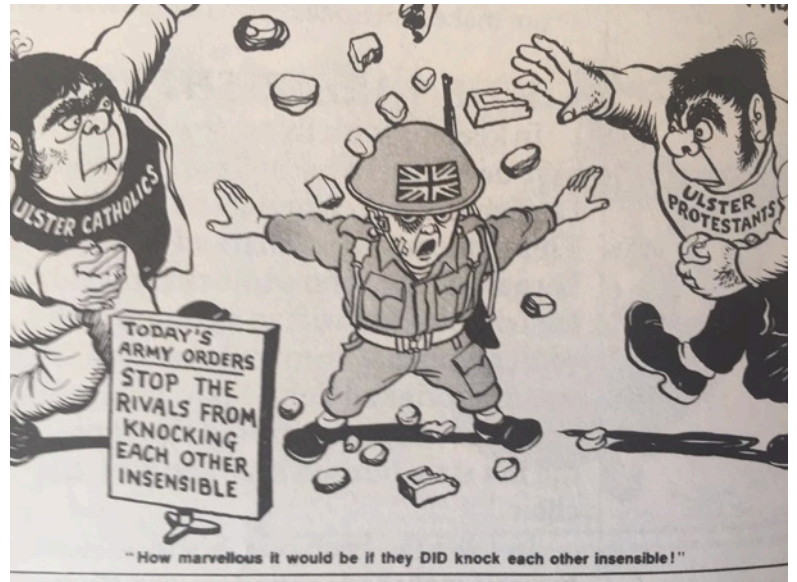

Figure 3. from the *Daily Express,* 12 Aug. 1970

demoralizing process of degeneration', for which they often blamed the Irish who 'got boozed up to the eyeballs, became fighting mad, and punched and kicked one another in the street'.[51] Similarly, although beginning to contest and mock the outdated stereotype by the 1970s, the Birmingham Mail still admitted that 'wherever the Irish wander they seem dogged by the myth of violence and drunkenness'.[52] The bombings clearly increased the intensity and prevalence of such negative characterizations: before 1974, for many, their impact was subtle. My respondents felt that they had experienced little to no prejudice in the decade prior to 1974, even after previous IRA attacks, with many making remarks similar to Kitty Gardner's that 'everyone was friendly...I liked the English people, they were alright to work with and everything'.[53] For instance, although aware of the prevalence of anti-Irish jokes, my respondents saw them as 'a bit of mickey taking' which they 'wouldn't mean badly'. The extent to which this changed after the pub bombings will be explored in the next chapter. Nonetheless, anti Irish constructions in public discourse post 1974 should be set in a much more long term picture of prejudice: the bombings caused an eruption of deeply ingrained stereotypes and prejudices, rather than the abrupt development of new ones.

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[51] Rex and Moore, *Race,* 62

[52] Ibid.

[53] Kitty Gardner

Chapter 2 - Anti Irish Backlash

Both oral history and contemporary press reports make clear that there was an anti Irish backlash stimulated directly by the bombings. Within hours, acts of explicit retaliation ranged from the anti Irish chants of youths in the city centre, to those much more violent: petrol bomb attacks damaged the Irish centre, a prominent Irish pub in Erdington, and a Catholic Church and school in Small Heath.[54] Some anti Irish incidents make especially shocking reading. For instance, three men with Irish accents were hospitalized after being attacked in a local pub, and the house of one local Irishman was set on fire, almost killing his young children.[55] Such acts of extreme violence were clearly in the minority, but many experienced ongoing lower level prejudice: a story told by Billy Power of the local shopkeeper refusing to serve his Irish mother is one familiar to many.[56] The PTA could also adversely affect the community. In leading to the arrest of 5,802 people between November 1974 and 26 March 1984, of whom 94.3% were innocent, it has long being controversial for supposedly 'harassing' Irish people in Britain. [57] Billy Power, (who, along with his father, shares a name with one of the Birmingham Six) speaks of his house being searched and his father arrested for 2 days. He notes the negative consequences, saying 'it marked you out you know...the neighbours were at bit suspicious after that'.[58]

Such events have, understandably, led to a widely expressed academic opinion that the 1974 bombings were an unmitigated disaster for the Irish in Birmingham, in prompting an outburst of extensive and long lasting anti Irish prejudice.[59] Contemporary popular opinion is similar, with the Irish Post in 2004 calling the aftermath 'the worst backlash the Irish community in Birmingham has ever experienced'.[60] Such conclusions do not, however, adequately address the nuances and complexities in experiences of anti Irish discrimination after the bombings.

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[54] 'Backlash Hampering Police - Warning', *BP,* 25 Nov. 1974; 'Belfast Type Horror', *BM,* 22 Nov. 1974; 'Bombs Shatter Crowded Pubs', *Guardian,* 22 Nov. 1974

[55] 'Backlash Hampering Police'; 'Family in Fire Bomb Terror', *Birmingham Mail,* 26 Nov. 1974

[56] Interview with Billy Power, 04/02/2016

[57] Curtis, *Same Old Story,* 93

[58] Billy Power

[59] Moran, *Irish Birmingham,* 197; Chinn, *Birmingham Irish,* 162*;* Kileen, 'Culture', 123-4

[60] 'The Irish in Birmingham - 40 years on from the Birmingham pub bombings', *Irish Post,* 21 Nov. 1974

Closer examination of oral testimony reveals that the extent to which individual Irish men and women felt outcast or persecuted depended on a number of personal and social factors.

Just as Kileen claimed that 'everyone who was old enough to remember confirmed the devastating effect that the bombings in Birmingham had on the Irish community', all of my respondents spoke of adverse consequences.[61] Paul King, aged 14 at the time, claimed 'it brought real division and a wave of revulsion...a real hatred for the Irish in Birmingham' and Des Gleeson made similar comments: 'it was really bad...you wouldn't go out the door...they just hated us and friends would turn into enemies overnight'. [62] However, close examination shows that the picture of prejudice is more complex than first appears. Although all were highly aware of anti Irish feelings in the city, only a minority had experienced problems first hand - including neither of those quoted above. Many followed up tales of prejudice with comments such as 'I never saw it personally' or 'the English were OK to me, though'.[63] Other testimonies also attest to the fact that, for many, it is second hand stories from friends, family, or the press, rather than personal experience, that is recalled. Frank Griffin, despite claiming after the bombings he 'felt ashamed to be Irish', does not link this to personal experience, saying 'I was not made to feel this way by my neighbours..or by my workmates.[64] Similarly, Owen Dolan comments that although 'some people faced abuse and rejection I think it was a minority that this happened to' and Breeda Harrison that 'despite the disasters attributed to the Irish I've never experienced prejudice'.[65]

Clearly, there are variations in experiences of anti Irish prejudice among the community in Birmingham. As would perhaps be expected, it was those who were visibly Irish and in regular contact with members of the non Irish community who faced the most difficulty. Newspaper reports suggest especial issues in factories. At Longbridge car plant, fights between English and Irish workers eventually led to 1,500 employees marching out and chanting anti IRA slogans, with an interviewed worker stating that 'anyone with an Irish accent would be well advised to keep his mouth shut'.[66] Sometimes such trouble had disturbing undertones. One Irish man

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[61] Kileen, *Culture,* 124

[62] Interview with Paul King, 04/02/2016; Des Gleeson

[63] Paul King; Kitty Gardner

[64] Frank Griffin, http://lives.bgfl.org/carlchinn/display_item.cfm?mr=&res=y&rt=&media=&area=&phys=&hum=&k1=griffin&k2=&k3=&k4=&k5=&k6=&k7=&k8=&id=776&rtn=sr, [accessed 01/04/16]

[65] both quoted in Chinn, *Birmingham Irish,* 118 and 116-7

[66] 'Walk-Outs Hit Car Factories after Clashes between Workers', *Irish Times,* 23 Nov. 1974

recalled turning up at work to find nooses hanging from the beams with the names of Irish workers on them, commenting that 'they had to bus the Irish out of Longbridge to stop them being lynched'.[67] Similar stories, albeit less threatening, were told second hand by my respondents. Marian Cosnett recalled her father, who worked in a car factory, 'suffering' from verbal abuse and Paul King made similar claims about his uncle: 'he didn't speak to anyone for a week, he didn't want anybody to hear his Irish accent. And some chaps he worked next to didn't speak to him...he wasn't included in the tea round and things like that'. [68] Experiences of prejudice seem to have varied upon occupation, with those who had more middle class or 'respectable' jobs being less likely targets. Indeed, members of the Irish business group interviewed by Kileen were the least likely to have encountered difficulties, with one stating that they had 'a real problem with this idea that the english are anti irish...I have been here for 30 years and I have never come across it'.[69] Similarly Marian Cosnett, who was working for the council, noted 'I don't remember anyone taking against me...and they were aware of my Irish roots'. Fr. McGillycuddy, a Catholic priest, also experienced very little backlash.[70] His work in the accident hospital on the night of the bombings meant that, despite his accent, he could fairly easily be distanced from an Irish threat. He recalls a victim telling his suspicious mother not to treat him with hostility, saying 'he's been helping me. He's not like them'. It is also plausible that for many, being a second generation immigrant without an accent served as protection from discrimination. One respondent expressed a recognition of this in saying 'it was difficult especially for the generation prior to me'.[71] However in some cases, especially when in a clear minority, second generation Irish were also targeted. Billy Power, one of only 6 second generation Irish at his secondary school in 1974, recalls being sent home due to safety concerns, and experiencing both verbal and physical abuse on the way. He comments that the months following the attacks were 'very difficult' at school, and have left him with 'unhappy memories of that time'.[72] Such experiences directly contrast to those of Paul King, who estimated his school was '80% Irish Catholic', and that this left him largely 'shielded from [prejudice]...we were all in the same boat'.[73]

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[67] quoted in Kileen, 'Culture', 123-4

[68] Interview with Marian Cosnett, 20/03/2016; Paul King

[69] quoted in Kileen, *Culture,* 149

[70] Marian Cosnett; Interview with Fr. Dennis McGillycuddy, 12/03/2016

[71] Marian Cosnett

[72] Billy Power

[73] Paul King

It is evident that escalating violence of the IRA, and in particular the 1974 bombings, directly affected the way in which Irish people in Birmingham were treated and thought of by their fellow citizens. However, the notion that the Irish community of Birmingham ubiquitously experienced a sudden wave of persecution does not hold up. As demonstrated in chapter 1, anti Irish feelings in the wake of 1974 were not entirely novel. Moreover, the experience of direct incidences of prejudice appear have varied upon a number of factors, with many experiencing no discrimination at all. Those who could most clearly be separated from the 'threat' of an Irish enemy within generally encountered less severe or common hostility. Conversely, those who fitted the profile of common IRA bombers - first generation, working class men - experienced more difficulties. Interestingly, extreme 'Irishness' could serve to both mark an individual out for abuse, such as on the factory floor or schoolyard, or to protect, in the case of those too heavily involved with fellow Irish to have sustained contact with the wider community. Furthermore, just as my respondents echoed a desire for the Irish of the city not to all be 'tarnished with the same brush', it is incorrect and unfair to see other 'Brummies' as all responding in a hostile manner. Many who experienced prejudice do also - often indadvertedly - acknowledge those who stood up to it. While Jim Gilraine claimed 'people I'd worked with for 20 years walked past me like a piece of rubbish' he also described his workmates showing solidarity when he was refused service at the markets, in saying 'if you won't serve him you won't serve any of us'.[74]

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[74] quoted in G. Limbrick, *'A Great Day: Celebrating St. Patrick's Day in Birmingham',* (Birmingham, 2007) 44

Chapter 3 - Irish Self Identity

Hand in hand with the perception that the bombings sparked a wave of prejudice, is the idea that this had a 'drastic and adverse effect on the self confidence and self expression of the Birmingham Irish'.[75] Chinn claims in the years after 1974 'a cloud of shame and guilt' hung over the community causing 'almost a total withdrawal...in a social and political sense'.[76] Moran reaches similar conclusions: 'Ireland and Irishness endured censure in Birmingham'.[77] Such statements have some truth to them. The cancellation of the St. Patrick's Day parade in particular was cited by numerous respondents as being a real blow to Birmingham Irish pride. However, through examining personal testimony and contemporary studies, this chapter will demonstrate that to make the whole story one of withdrawal and shame does a real disservice to the resilience of the Birmingham Irish.

It is first important to paint a picture of Irish self expression and identity in the years before 1974, and a variety of sources testify to a cohesive and vibrant community. In studying Sparkbrook in 1964, where the Irish made up 12.4% of the population, Rex and Moore noted thriving informal communities, commenting that 'an Irishman can, if he likes, live almost completely in the colony'.[78] My interviewees confirmed such notions. First generation immigrants recalled that their social circle was almost 'entirely Irish', and acknowledged that 'we lived in an Irish cultural bubble'.[79] Second generation respondents also noted the importance of an Irish identity in their youth: 'we had nothing else. We were brought up going to mass, listening to Irish music, playing gaelic sports...that was the whole community'.[80] Many highlight the important role of more formal Irish organisations in developing and maintaining Irish networks, as well as retaining and practicing 'Irishness'. Although 'Irish' and 'Catholic' are not synonymous, one cannot ignore the role of the Church in the life of Irish immigrants, with many respondents highlighting Catholicism as a key part of their Irish identity. Rex and Moore indeed found that 57% of their Irish sample attended mass weekly, compared to 5.3% of the English sample, concluding that it was 'one of the most significant social organisations for the Irish and

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[75] Chinn, *Birmingham Irish,* 163

[76] Ibid. 164

[77] Moran, *Irish Birmingham,* 213

[78] Rex and Moore, *Race,* 149

[79] Interview with Bridget King, 10/03/2016 ; Frank Murphy quoted in Chinn, *Birmingham Irish,* 163

[80] Billy Power

the main one for women'.[81] By the mid 1950s, every Parish in Birmingham had one Irish priest and the English Martyrs Church in Sparkbrook was described as having the largest Irish congregation outside London.[82] Marian Cosnett elaborated on the social function of the churches: 'you went to church and then you went to social events, or you went to the pub...I think that was a very Irish thing'.[83] Purely social organziations and networks also developed in this era, the most significant of which were the Irish Centre in Digbeth and County Organisations. It is remarkably apparent in testimony collected by Carl Chinn that the functions and dances these bodies organized were, for many first generation immigrants especially, part of a weekly routine.[84] Kitty Gardner and Bridget King similarly commented that they went 'most weeks' and explained the crucial role such dances played in 'meeting people from home' - indeed, both met their future spouses at these events.[85] Irish dancing schools and the GAA also became increasingly established and successful: the Warwickshire board of the GAA had over 50 teams by 1960, with the junior hurlers winning 3 all Ireland finals between 1968 and 1973.[86] Engagement in such organisations was not limited to first generation immigrants. All of my second generation respondents recalled being implored to 'do something Irish' as a child, sometimes even if they had other wishes: 'I always wanted to go ice skating but Mom said "no, you're going irish dancing"'.[87] However, formal organisations did not attract all of the Birmingham Irish: in Rex and Moore's sample of 89, 59 belonged to none.[88] For the second generation especially it can be assumed that the extent of involvement of my respondents was not entirely typical. Nonetheless, they form a huge part of many personal testimonies, and Des Gleeson demonstrates that even those not formally involved could cultivate and express a positive Irish identity in other ways. For him, 'Irishness' was retained in Birmingham via family, friends, and a more passive appreciation of Irish culture in a love for Irish music.[89]

Oral testimonies demonstrate a variety of responses to the IRA bombings and subsequent Irish backlash. At one end of the spectrum, the attacks could prompt feelings of embarrassment and

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[81] Rex and Moore, *Race,* 146

[82] Ibid 154 ; 'Britain's New Generation of Irish', *BM,* 19 Sept, 1973

[83] Marian Cosnett

[84] Chinn, *Birmingham Irish,* 139-44

[85] Kitty Gardner; Bridget King

[86] Chinn, *Birmingham Irish,* 149*;* Ziesler, 'Irish', 242

[87]Paul King; Marian Cosnett

[88] Rex and Moore, *Race,* 96

[89]Des Gleeson

shame over Irish identity: 'you just felt so embarrassed that this was done in your name'.[90] Furthermore, it is clear that fear of discrimination made some, at least publicly, play down their Irish roots. Marian Cosnett recalled that 'in those days you were less inclined to say [you were Irish]'.[91] A proportion even went to greater extremes, such as John Johnson, who after being beaten up at school 'for many years' lost his accent.[92] Such a sense of disgrace and needing to hide 'Irishness' can be seen to be exemplified in the cancellation of the 1975 St. Patrick's Day Parade, and its astonishing 22 year absence. The memories of those that had previously participated are captured in testimony collected by Limbrick, and many, such as Mike Nangle, speak of 'immense pride' and 'feelings of togetherness' stimulated by the event.[93] In fact, it appears the parade had a crucial symbolism even for those who did not attend, such as Jim Gilraine: 'it wasn't right to stop the parades..it did kill Irish culture here for a long time'.[94] Ultimately, the feelings of many are summed up by Paul King, who commented the absence of the parade demonstrated the 'shame' of a community who 'didn't feel safe enough, or even proud enough, to walk around the streets of Birmingham.'[95]

Although the loss of the parade was keenly felt by many, its centrality to Irish life should not be overplayed. Interestingly, none of my respondents were aware of the length of time for which it was absent, variously stating between 2 and 9 years. Of course, inaccuracies in memory are expected, but the significantly shorter lengths of time recalled also hint that the parade was not as fundamental to individual Irish identity as is sometimes implied. A study by O'Donovan a decade later clearly demonstrates that, in fact, a strong sense of 'Irishness' remained, even concluding that the Irish in Birmingham identified more strongly with their heritage than those in Ireland.[96] Indeed, the dominant narrative of my respondents was one of continued Irish pride in the face of difficulty. Many made it clear that they had no reason to be ashamed - 'you can't sit down and think, well, I feel responsible for what those people did' - and saw that it should have no impact on their engagement with the Irish community - 'you can't let what happened rule how you feel or how you live your life'.[97] Ultimately, all made it clear that much carried on as before.

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[90] Bridget King

[91] Marian Cosnett

[92] quoted in Limbrick, *Great Day,* 66

[93] Ibid.*,* 33

[94] Ibid., 43

[95] Paul King

[96] O'Donovan, *Ethnicity and Migration,* 8

[97] Interview with John Fitzgerald, 13/02/2016

None felt that they had stepped back from Birmingham Irish life and it is evident that many Irish organisations continued. The 'Irish in Britain Directory', published in 1979, provides a comprehensive guide of Irish organisations, which it claims 'are thriving'. There appears to be no notable lack of these in Birmingham as compared with other key cities.[98] Billy Power, who both played Gaelic Football and managed a club with his father, said that the sport was thriving in Birmingham, and similarly Marian Cosnett, who taught and performed Irish dance, commented that it continued to grow and flourish in the late 1970s and early 1980s. A regional council of the Irish dancing commission was even set up in the Midlands in these years.[99] Irish social life also continued, with Bridget King, who was heavily involved with the County Waterford Association, stating that although their scheduled dance on the night of the bombings was cancelled, after this events resumed as before.[100] The comments of John Fitzgerald, who organized numerous Irish music festivals throughout the '70s and '80s, make clear that the second generation had equally not shied away. He describes these events as 'full of the second generation...a hell of a crowd'.[101]

Clearly, the bombings and anti Irish hostility had not eroded Birmingham Irish identity, and can actually be seen to have further stimulated and heightened it: O'Donovan's research explicitly links the development of Irish identities in second generation immigrants to experiences of prejudice within the host society.[102] Similarly, Kileen argues that prejudice and ostracization can create or reinforce communities 'by default'.[103] Indeed, some interviewees also express ideas of an increasingly important Irish identity in the wake of 1974. For some, this was due to feelings of bitterness or division - Paul King stated that he felt 'more proud to be Irish because you see them being persecuted for something they haven't had anything to do with'.[104] Others comment on the heightened importance of the Irish community for safety and acceptance, with Billy Power explaining that 'people were keeping ourselves to ourselves, we cocooned ourselves in the Irish Community' and Marian Cosnett noting 'there was safety in numbers'.[105]

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[98] LoB, Local Studies Collection, Irish Studies Box 1, 'Irish in Britain Directory'

[99] Marian Cosnett

[100] Bridget King

[101] John Fitzgerald

[102] O'Donovan, *Ethnicity and Migration,* 280

[103] Kileen, 'Culture', 128

[104] Paul King

[105] Billy Power; Marian Cosnett

This phenomenon is not entirely positive, with a lack of integration perhaps helping to 'fuel the marginalization of Irish people'.[106] Indeed, the fact that such networks were attended exclusively by the Irish has led some to conclude that, although Irish organisations survived, they shrank from the public eye.[107] Firstly, such comments ignore the fact that even prior to 1974, Irish networks were rarely accessed by those outside the community. More importantly though, they overlook evidence of an increasingly assertive Birmingham Irish voice in the years after the bombings. The conviction of many that the Birmingham Six were innocent led to the birth of a nationwide campaign to free the men. Birmingham Irish figures, such as Fr. Joe Taafe, played a central role in this movement, which acutely focussed attention on issues surrounding the Irish and the law. Ita O'Donovan's 1987 report for the Race Relations Committee is also indicative of a community beginning to insist upon more recognition and assistance. Her conclusions that insufficient special provisions were made for the Irish, with ignorance of Irish history and culture, awareness of negative stereotypes among children and a relative lack of funding, helped to stimulate changes.[108] 1980s developments like the introduction of Gaelic into some school curriculums, and an explicit focus on the contributions of the Irish to the city in 1989 centenary celebrations, point to a community growing increasingly vocal (and successful) in its demands for recognition and equality.[109]

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[106] Holohan, *Birmingham Voices,* 7

[107] A. Moran, 'Hail ambiguous St Patrick: sounds of Ireland on parade in Birmingham', *Irish Studies Review,* 20 (2012) 160

[108] O'Donovan, *Report for the Race Relations Committee*

[109] LoB, Local Studies Collection, Irish Studies Box 2, 'Programme for 1989 Birmingham Irish Centenary Celebrations', A8 941.5

Conclusions

For the victims, their families, and the Irish community in Birmingham, the lethal bombings of 21st November 1974 sparked a deeply distressing time. Despite many expressions of Irish innocence by newspapers and officials, what was explicitly stated was often implicitly undermined by more negative and troubling constructions. Such 'slippages in public discourse' meant that measured discussions, which placed emphasis on the majority of the Irish as being innocent, were not always reflected in reality.[110] Backlash experienced by the Birmingham Irish indeed shows that the engagement of individuals with such a discourse was often negative in the weeks and months after the attacks.

While readily acknowledging this, two important points have been highlighted. Firstly it has been demonstrated that anti Irish prejudice must be set within a wider context. In the years prior to 1974, a variety of sources testify to the presence of anti Irish feelings in Britain. Even if these were more subtle, and did not regularly have an adverse impact on the daily lives of ordinary people, they could easily be triggered into eruption when provoked by events such as those of November 1974. Neither negative feelings nor specific constructions of the Irish as irrationally violent were new, or, as has sometimes been assumed, a break with 'a period of easy self confidence'.[111]

Secondly, while many readily acknowledge the complexity of the Birmingham Irish community, this has seldom been translated to an awareness of a diversity of post-bombing experiences. More critical examination of oral testimony and existing sources reveals this diversity, and future study focussed on the experiences of Protestants could be enlightening. It has become evident that what retains real power over the Irish in the city is the collective memory of persecution. The strength of this communal memory, and sometimes its conflict with personal experience, is demonstrated through some contradictions in testimony: while Queenie Monoghan initially claims 'they all hated us, our friends didn't like us', she later clearly states that 'our Brummie neighbours were great people, always there to help'.[112] While historians such as Jensen and Delaney have started to note the role of communal memory in commonly told narratives of 'No Irish Need Apply' signs in the 1950s, recognising the ease with which 'individuals interweave a well known communal memory into a personal life story', no similar

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[110] Nickels, Thomas, Hickman and Silvestri, 'Representations of Suspect Communities', 24

[111] Moran, *Irish Birmingham,* 184

[112] quoted in Chinn, *Birmingham Irish,* 138

Figure 4. St Patrick's Day Parade 2014[113]

acknowledgements have been made regarding the aftermath of the bombings.[114] To recognise this is not to diminish the very real and difficult prejudice that many experienced, but simply to highlight that it was often encountered in a different way to that which has been assumed.

However, alongside difficulty, fear and shame, this dissertation shows that resistance and resilience are also dominant themes in the Birmingham Irish story. Negative repercussions of the attacks did not always result in reneged Irish identity or a weakened community. It is clear that many of my respondents, and those captured in other sources, were especially involved with Irish life: those on the peripheries of the community may have found it easier to give up Irish ties in the wake of the bombings. Nonetheless, it has been demonstrated that there is a significant core of the Birmingham Irish for whom much carried on as normal, and who are overlooked in descriptions of an ashamed and crumbling community.

Rather than fading, the Birmingham Irish have increased in strength, vibrancy and assertiveness in the decades since 1974. After its revival in 1996 the St Patrick's Day Parade has consistently attracted huge crowds of first, second, and even third generation Irish. In 2001, a specifically Birmingham Irish newspaper, 'The Harp', was established, and funding has been poured into rejuvenating an 'Irish Quarter' in the city centre. Such developments reflect a broader renaissance of Irish identity from the 1990s. As the peace process was well underway

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[113] 'St Patrick's Day Parade', *BM,* 21/12/2014

[114] R. Jensen, '"No Irish Need Apply": A myth of victimization', *Journal of Social History,* 36 (2002); Delaney, *Irish,* 123

and the commercialized 'Celtic Tiger' spreading worldwide, second and third generation immigrants could now be taunted for not being Irish enough - 'plastic paddies'.[115]

Issues are, nonetheless, ongoing. Irish males continue to be disproportionately represented in unskilled labour, Irish immigrants have been shown to die younger in Britain, and as demonstrated by Curtis, anti Irish prejudice continues.[116] However, attention is increasingly being drawn to such problems. More Irish provisions in local libraries, extra funding to Irish social and welfare developments and the inclusion of an 'Irish' ethnicity option on the 2001 census, are but some positive consequences of heightened awareness. Hopefully such steps can continue, and this dissertation adds to a growing body of literature which highlights the need for a specific focus on the Irish as a minority group, and more broadly, the inadequacy of an exclusively black and white conception of race relations.

Furthermore, exploring the experiences of minority communities in the wake of radical members carrying out lethal terrorist attacks, has especial pertinence considering recent events in Paris and Brussels. On a basic level, the Irish community as the embodiment of a minority group recovering from experiences of prejudice and stigmatization, can serve as an 'important sign of hope' for twenty-first century Muslims.[117] Additionally, although historians should be wary of drawing direct lessons from the past, current political debate surrounding terrorist threats 'is greatly impoverished without historical memory'.[118] There is much more room for systematic study in this area.

Ultimately all of my respondents expressed positive feelings towards Birmingham. John Fitzgerald encapsulated sentiments shared by many:

> 'My home is here now definitely...all my life has been Birmingham and it's Irish community, and I couldn't ask for better. I am proud to be Irish, and I am proud to be Irish in Birmingham'.[119]

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[115] Moran, *Irish,* 220-221; Kileen, 'Culture', 260

[116] Ghaill, 143; Curtis, *Same Old Story*

[117] Nickels, Thomas, Hickman and Silvestri, 'Representations of Suspect Communities', 5

[118] G.McGladdery, The Provisional IRA in England: The Bombing Campaign 1973-1997, (London, 2006) 1

[119] John Fitzgerald

Many happy memories of being Irish in the city have not been tarnished, and demonstrate that a recognition of difficulties experienced after the bombings must go hand in hand with a recognition of the pervasiveness of Irish resilience and pride.

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