



## Life history and the Irish immigrant experience in Post-War England

by Barry Hazley, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2020, 272 pp., £80 (hbk), ISBN 978-1-5261-2800-3

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## BOOK REVIEWS

**Life history and the Irish immigrant experience in Post-War England**, by Barry Hazley, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2020, 272 pp., £80 (hbk), ISBN 978-1-5261-2800-3

It is always welcome to find a new book featuring oral histories with the Irish in Britain, a community that has experienced continued but differing waves of new migrants into its cohort in the post-Second World War period. Capturing such experiences, as Hazley has in this book, is essential and contributes not only to the history of the Irish in Britain but also to British history in explicitly acknowledging the role immigrants have played in that country in modern times. Such insights are particularly relevant to highlight and explore in post-Brexit Britain where ahistorical, nationalist narratives have abounded which erase the valued contribution immigrants from the Empire and beyond have made to such valued institutions as the National Health Service, to give just one example that is explored in the Conclusion. In the Acknowledgements, Hazley describes the interviews as ‘source material of incomparable richness’ (p. xiii) and this is a fitting description of the value of oral history to modern social histories regardless of theme or focus.

The theoretical focus of the book and the literary references peppered throughout the chapters places it within the more interdisciplinary field of Irish studies, whilst demonstrating the recent trend in Irish historiography that is not shy of utilising theories to come to historical conclusions. Popular Memory Theory is applied by Hazley to the lived experience of the Irish in Britain, examining issues of identity, religious expression and affiliation, employment, and community. The emphasis on theory is also in tune with the historiography developed in the field of women and gender history, and Hazley’s reflection on masculinities in the construction industry is a very welcome addition to the literature. Analysing contemporary images of manly virility as proven by feats of physical prowess on the building sites of England, this work records the lived experience of often harsh conditions. The growth of ethnically Irish construction companies is important to chart given their contemporary economic power within that sector and their role in rebuilding Britain after the war has not been sufficiently recorded or analysed in prior literature. The physical nature of this work was important in creating ‘distinctive conceptualisations of work-based masculinity’ (p. 114) which is different for Irish male immigrants than females. Women did physically demanding work also, but it did not serve to enhance their own or others’ conceptions of their femininity in the same way that construction work did for men.

Although women are part of the interview cohort and the author draws upon some specific secondary sources that relate to the female experience, the book is missing some of the recent historiography on Irish women’s migration narratives that would have helped to contextualise the research and highlight what is new in comparison to other recent studies. The focus on memory in this book chimes well with the work of cultural historian Sarah O’Brien, whose focus on women’s retelling of their life narratives has featured many of the threads present in this book too. The diaspora element of the book would have been enhanced by a reflection on the edited collection by D.A.J. MacPherson and Mary Hickman (*Women and Irish Diaspora Identities: Theories, Concepts and New Perspectives*) and by engagement with MacPherson’s individual scholarship on Irish women’s political and cultural identities. Given the similar themes explored in this book and the above-named sources, they are strange omissions. Notwithstanding these comments, the book offers much to scholars of the histories of the

Irish in Britain which has thankfully seen a reappraisal and enlivening in recent decades, having formerly been neglected in historiography that focused on the more numerous migrants to North America in the post-Famine period.

This book will be of interest to all scholars of oral history methodologies, memory studies and the Irish in Britain, and given the depth of theoretical work, is more appropriate for the academic, rather than the general reader. Hazley has analysed the interview material and integrated it thematically whilst preserving the words of his respondents through lengthy quotes throughout the book. He notes the pauses, tonal shifts, hesitancy and exuberance of his interviewees, analysis that is missing in other books that have attempted to capture oral histories of this cohort. As such, it extends earlier work in this vein and guides the reader to a deeper analysis of meaning in the words of the respondents. This appears to be sensitively done, and while we do not know what the interviewees themselves would make of such linguistic analysis, it is a helpful guide to the reader and makes real the interview process, as well as providing testimony that others can use and analyse in comparative studies. Furthermore, the Appendix, which details the biographical profile of the sample interviews and the wider cohort, makes this an ideal book for interested students, particularly those at undergraduate level.

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**Cultural history of school uniform**, by Kate Stephenson, Exeter, University of Exeter Press, 2021, xi+220 pp., £75 (hbk), ISBN 9781905816538

The attire of schoolchildren has received little attention from scholars of education, perhaps seen as ephemeral or as the domain of historians of dress. Kate Stephenson's excellent monograph spans the histories of schooling and fashion, providing an impressive and extensive analysis of the evolution of school uniform in England across 500 years.

Stephenson argues that school clothing is a reinforcement of the ideal appearance and behaviours of certain children in certain contexts, reflecting social and educational trends and wider social and cultural anxieties. These crystallised particularly around class and gender, and to a lesser extent, religion and national identity.

The book moves chronologically through the different types of educational institutions which emerged from the 1550s until the present day. Stephenson begins with the earliest examples of school uniform in the sixteenth century; this book debunks the myth that uniforms began with Etonian mourning dress in 1820. Chapter One focuses on charity schools for working-class children from 1552 to 1900, and highlights the reinforcement of a social hierarchy through the outdated and modest attire of working-class pupils, reinforcing their destiny in service. The identities of charity school benefactors as charitable and as socially superior were inculcated through the spectacle of pupils at funerals and by viewing pupils at work or lunch.