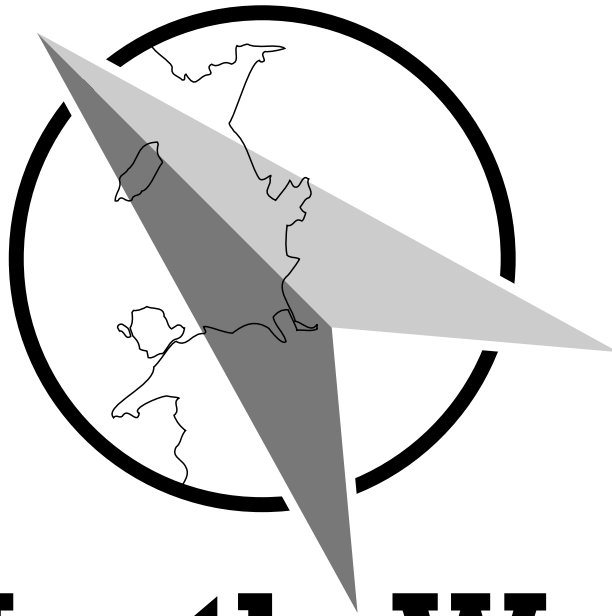


ISSN 1476-1580



North West Geography

Volume 1, Number 2, 2001

Research report on Irish Nationalist Processions in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Manchester

Mervyn Busteed

School of Geography, University of Manchester

Email: mervyn.busteed@man.ac.uk

Acknowledgement

This is a report on an ongoing research project into aspects of remembering and identity amongst Irish migrants in Manchester in the last decades of the nineteenth and the first years of the twentieth century. In 2000 Manchester Geographical Society kindly awarded me a grant which was used to begin reading into the subject and start gathering empirical data.

Introduction

As demonstrated in earlier work, much of it supported by MGS, by the second half of the nineteenth century, there was a considerable Irish born population resident in Manchester and there was also a growing element of Irish descent (Busteed & Hodgson 1993). As with the rest of England and Wales, the total Irish born population in the city reached a peak in 1861, 52,000 or 15.4% of the city's total; both figures then declined steadily thereafter until the arrival of the 'second wave' in the 1940s and 1950s. There were some Irish in every part of the city, but there was a marked tendency for them to concentrate in the poorer parts of the urban fabric, and within these areas to segregate themselves from their fellow workers (Busteed 1997). Of course, such segregation could never be complete, but certain districts became notable for their high level of Irish residents.

Within these districts a strong sense of Irish identity was preserved (Busteed 1998, 2000a,b). It is hardly surprising therefore that as Irish political life adjusted to the aftermath of the famine of 1845-52, these developments were reflected in Manchester. But one event in Manchester itself was to have a profound effect on Irish nationalism - or perhaps it would be more accurate to say that the impact flowed from how that event was subsequently remembered, interpreted and presented.

Memory and Identity

Every national group constructs a selective, self-justifying grand narrative in which some events and individuals are given special prominence whilst others are conveniently ignored. The intention is to emphasise historical continuity and therefore by implication the legitimacy of a cause. The resulting construct is then presented in the high culture of

the state by various means, including rituals, ceremonies and public monuments. One version of the past thereby becomes widely diffused and accepted as "the truth". Minority or subaltern groups, which do not share this hegemonic outlook, are either ignored or written out of the narrative or they are demonised and scapegoated.

However, such groups do have their own techniques of resistance. These can vary widely in scale and nature (Pile 1997), but those which fall short of armed rebellion have to be carefully calculated since the hegemonic group commands the main means of public expression. In this way such groups can present an alternative version of events, constructing their own narrative and group memory and asserting their identity against the power of the hegemonic group. This is the broad framework within which I am studying the processions by which the Manchester Martyrs were remembered in Manchester.

The Events

The Irish Republican Brotherhood, or Fenian movement, was founded in Dublin on St. Patrick's Day 1858, by James Stephens. It was a secret, revolutionary, oath-bound movement dedicated to the violent overthrow of British rule and the establishment of an independent Irish republic. However, though Stephens was a born organiser and political intriguer, like the Fenian movement overall, he was militarily inept. By February 1867 his frequent postponement of planned insurrections had led to his replacement as head of the organisation by Thomas J. Kelly. In late July and early August 1867 at a secret convention in Manchester, Kelly was confirmed as chief executive. He remained in the city with a colleague, Timothy Deasy, but on 11 September they were arrested. Whilst being taken from court to Bellevue Gaol on 18 September the police

van was attacked as it passed under a railway arch on Hyde Road, the two were rescued and escaped, but police sergeant Brett was shot dead.

The city authorities reacted in somewhat panic stricken fashion. Following extensive forays and numerous arrests in Irish districts, 33 men were eventually brought to trial, five were sentenced to death and three - William Philip Allen, Michael Larkin and Michael O'Brien - were publicly hanged at the New Bailey prison, Salford, on 23 November. They were buried in quicklime and when the prison was closed the following year, their remains were transferred to Strangeways prison.

Irish nationalist opinion both in Ireland and the Diaspora was outraged by the executions, the three were rapidly elevated to the pantheon of Irish nationalist heroes and the cult of "The Manchester Martyrs" was born. It had a variety of manifestations. There was a stream of popular ballads and a proliferation of stone monuments, the first of which was erected in Dublin's Glasnevin cemetery in 1868. Successive generations of Irish nationalist politicians of every outlook found it impossible to complete a speech without the obligatory invocation of the martyrs. But one of the most popular and long-lived means of commemoration was by procession.

Procession and Memory

Processions are a virtually universal means by which groups proclaim their identity (Dunn and Morgan 2000). They have been widely used by hegemonic groups to proclaim and demonstrate their power, wealth and legitimacy and to impress, overawe and perhaps even intimidate spectators (Davis 1986). However, processions can also be used by subaltern groups to express dissenting views. In both forms the size, route, and composition of the procession along with the dress, behaviour and accoutrements of participants can convey messages. Moreover, whilst one of the prime purposes of a procession is to convey an impression of unchanging group power and unanimity, the meaning of such commemorations can alter with time and they are quite often contested events, meaning very different and sometimes conflicting things to various groups of participants.

Newspapers as Sources for Remembering the Martyrs in Manchester

There are problems in the study of historic mass events such as demonstration and processions, because, as Harrison (1988) has remarked, those taking part have rarely left records. In this study of Irish processions commem-

orating the Martyrs in Manchester between 1867 and 1920 there appear to be only two passing comments from participants.

Contemporary newspapers have proved a particularly rich source, though they are not without problems, three of which are illustrated here. The *Manchester Guardian* went through a sea change in attitudes to the Irish during the period under study. From its foundation in 1821 it was very consciously the mouthpiece of enlightened liberal opinion in the city. As such it adopted a notably patronising attitude towards Roman Catholicism, regarding it as an arcane peasant superstition which would fade before the inevitable progress of enlightened thought. Consequently, for a long period coverage of Irish affairs varied in tone from supercilious amusement to outraged indignation. However, under the editorship of C.P.Scott, which lasted from 1872 until 1929, the tone changed. The paper became a pillar of the Liberal Party and in particular of W. E. Gladstone and his Irish policies of land reform, Anglican disestablishment and, from 1886 onwards, home rule. Consequently, a distinct shift of emphasis emerges in coverage of Irish nationalist politics. The first martyrs' commemoration processions in 1867 had been treated at some length, but with barely controlled impatience. Gradually however, the treatment altered. By the early twentieth century, and especially during the period 1910-14 when Asquith's liberal governments depended on Irish nationalist party support for their Commons majority, the language used was much more sympathetic. Sergeant Brett was referred to as having been "killed" rather than "murdered" and in its report of the commemoration of 1909 the paper referred to the three dead Fenians as "...the unfortunate men." (*Manchester Guardian* 22 November 1909).

No such sympathy characterised coverage by the *"Manchester Courier"*. From its launch in 1825 until its demise in 1915 it was pro-Tory, church and crown in politics, consistently anti-Catholic and usually anti-Irish. Its indignation at the Fenian rescue and killing of Sergeant Brett knew no bounds and barely softened with the passage of time. Forty-six years after the incident it was referring to the "murder" of sergeant Brett in its report of the 1911 commemoration. Its descriptions of the processions were at times remarkably full, possibly because it wished to stoke the indignation of its readers at manifestations of Irish nationalism in the heart of a great English city. However, if carefully utilised, the information gleaned from them on the composition of the processions, the dress and behaviour of the participants and the nature of the speeches can be highly illuminating.

The “*Weekly (later Catholic) Herald*” which began publication in 1881 as “a Catholic organ for the metropolis” soon widened its remit to report on Great Britain as a whole and developed provincial editions, including one for Manchester. Clearly its prime purpose was the dissemination of Catholic news and views, and by extension it was well disposed in its treatment of things Irish. This means its coverage of the martyrs’ commemoration in both Manchester and elsewhere was more consistent and generally fuller than other publications, though here it is a sympathetic bias that must be guarded against.

Some Preliminary Findings

The project is at an early stage, but some tentative findings can be offered. First, though reports on the very earliest processions describe them as “spontaneous”, careful reading of these same accounts points strongly to detailed planning and organisation. The printing of advance publicity describing the time and place of assembly for the processions, the route to be taken and even prescribing desirable dress and behaviour for participants, indicates a high degree of preparation, and suggests the Fenian movement was as responsible for these early demonstrations as it was for the original ambush.

Second, by the early 1890s commemoration of the Manchester Martyrs had become an established feature of the Irish year in Manchester, as indeed it was elsewhere in the Diaspora. By then there was an established routine. In mid morning of the Sunday closest to 23 November a procession took place consisting of representatives of all Irish organisations in the area and led by a band, usually playing the “*Dead March*”. This procession walked to a Catholic Church, almost always St. Patrick’s in Livesey Street, where mass was celebrated for the three executed men. The procession then reformed and walked either to the parochial hall in nearby Reather Street, or to an Irish club on Rochdale Road. There a public meeting was held, addressed by either a leading local councillor of Irish background or an Irish Nationalist MP. He invariably paid tribute to the martyrs as role models for contemporary Irish people and went on to invite support for Irish self determination and the stance of the Nationalist party on contemporary issues.

Third, Fenians may have dominated the early proceedings, but in the years which followed there was a long drawn out contest for ownership of the event. Elements in this contest included militant republicans, the Irish Nationalist party and the Catholic Church, the last two usually as allies. Personalities involved in the contest at various times included Fenians, James Stephens, Maud Gonne, actress and militant republican, members of Sinn Fein, successive Catholic bishops of Salford, Alderman Sir Daniel McCabe, first Catholic Lord Mayor of Manchester and Manchester Alderman Daniel Boyle, Nationalist MP for North Mayo from October 1910 until 1918. By 1914 moderate Nationalists had such firm control of the event that it incorporated support for Britain’s war effort, but by 1920 it was totally in the hands of Sinn Fein.

Conclusion

The research is ongoing, and subsequent work will hope to elaborate and modify early results. However, certain points are already clear. The lack of material from participants means that the work is relying almost entirely on analysis of commentaries by outside observers unconnected with the events and organisations concerned, sometimes lacking in understanding and in some cases actively hostile. Nevertheless, by carefully cross checking several reports on the same happenings, hopefully one can arrive at a reasonably rounded picture of what was taking place. Furthermore, the bias displayed by some newspapers can itself be illuminating, since they are presumably reflecting the attitudes of their readers and thereby articulating a viewpoint which ran through certain sections of English society.

Finally, though such commemorative events, with their emphasis on large numbers marching together for a common purpose, can give the impression of solidarity and unanimity, in reality every aspect is open to change and dispute. Moreover, such contests are not merely between subaltern groups and established authorities, but also quite often within such groups themselves. It is intended that subsequent publications will explore these dimensions of contested commemoration of the martyrs in Manchester.

References

- Busteed M A** 1997 The Irish in nineteenth century Manchester *Irish Studies Review* 18 8-13
- Busteed M A** 1998 Songs in a strange land - ambiguities of identity amongst Irish migrants in mid-Victorian Manchester *Political Geography* 17 627-55
- Busteed M A** 2000a 'I shall never return to Hibernia's bowers': Irish migrant identities in early Victorian Manchester *The North West Geographer* 2 15-30
- Busteed M A** 2000b Little islands of Erin: Irish settlement and identity in nineteenth century Manchester in **MacRaild D** ed *The great famine and beyond: Irish migrants in Britain in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries* Irish Academic Press, Dublin
- Busteed M A and Hodgson R I** 1993 Angel Meadow: a study of the geography of Irish settlement in mid-nineteenth century Manchester *The Manchester Geographer* 14 3-26
- Davis S G** 1986 *Parades and power: street theatre in nineteenth-century Philadelphia* Temple University Press, Philadelphia
- Dunn S and Morgan V** 2000 Series editors' preface in **Fraser T G** ed *The Irish parading tradition: following the drum* Macmillan, London
- Harrison M** 1988 *Crowds and history: mass phenomena in English towns, 1790-1835* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge
- Manchester Guardian* 22 November 1909
- Pile S** 1997 Introduction: opposition, political identities and spaces of resistance in **Pile S and Keith M** eds *Geographies of resistance* Routledge, London