

Immigrant self-fashioning: the autobiographies of the Irish in Britain, 1856–1934

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It has been recognised for some time now that historians of the Irish in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Britain have a sizeable body of autobiographical literature to draw upon. For the most part, however, scholars have tended to use autobiographical testimony as a documentary supplement to empirical analysis, with very little attention being paid to it as a literary discourse. There are few critical works that serve as navigational charts to Irish autobiography in general, let alone Irish immigrant self-writing, and those that do exist tend to concentrate on literary as opposed to plebeian self-writing.¹ Why this should be so is an open question. It may have something to do with the seemingly self-evident, artless nature of the genre, or the fact that autobiography is, in the words of John Sturrock, 'a kind of writing that, more than any other, is intended to work on our sympathies', and as such deters or even resists theorisation.² But whatever the reasons, it is perhaps time that we began to subject the autobiographical narratives of the Irish in Britain to more sustained literary analysis by inquiring into their textual and contextual workings. Such an inquiry brings forth several complex questions. Is there a discernable typology of Irish immigrant autobiography? What functions did self-writing serve for the immigrant subject? What were the motive forces behind this literature? How did immigrant subjects imagine and represent themselves? How did they construct and negotiate their identity both as individuals and as members of a particular cultural group?

In this essay I want to suggest answers to some of these questions based on my reading and research for a critical anthology of autobiographical writings by Irish immigrants in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Britain.³ I will confine myself to

¹ See T. Brown, 'Literary Autobiography in Twentieth-Century Ireland' in A. Martin (ed.), *The Genius of Irish Prose* (Dublin, 1984), S. Deane, 'Autobiography and Memoirs, 1890–1988' in *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing* (Derry, 1991), iii, pp. 380–3 and G. O'Brien's entry on autobiography in W.J. McCormack (ed.), *The Blackwell Companion to Modern Irish Culture* (Oxford, 1999), pp. 45–7. For Irish immigrant autobiography, see B. Canavan, 'Story-tellers and writers: Irish identity in emigrant labourers' autobiographies, 1870–1970' in P. O'Sullivan (ed.), *The Irish World Wide: The Creative Migrant* (Leicester, 1994), pp. 154–69.

² J. Sturrock, 'Theory Versus Autobiography' in R. Folkenflik (ed.), *The Culture of Autobiography: Constructions of Self-Representation* (Stanford, 1993), p. 21. ³ Liam Harte, *Writing Home: An Anthology of Autobiography by the Irish in Britain* (Dublin, forthcoming).

self-narratives produced by first and second-generation nineteenth-century immigrants which appeared in print between the 1850s and the 1930s. Most of the texts to which I will refer belong to the category of plebeian rather than literary autobiography, and many were the authors' only published work. I want to state at the outset that I offer here no comprehensive, overarching theory of autobiography in general or of Irish self-writing in particular. Indeed I am both wary and sceptical about the possibility of arriving at any such grand theory, given the intensity of theoretical debate about the nature of autobiographical discourse. My own approach is based on a view of autobiography as a cultural practice and a narrative artifice as much as a form of personal expression. Rather than seeing a self-narrative as a more or less straightforward reflection of an autonomous pre-existing self, I concur with those critics who conceptualise autobiography as a constitutive act, whereby the subject's identity is configured by the act of autobiographical narration.⁴ In this perspective, identity is seen as dynamic and evolutionary, 'a "production" which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation'.⁵ This leads to a narrative concept of the self as a rhetorical, fictive construct which is historically and culturally contingent. As Keya Ganguly argues: 'It is important to underscore the ways in which identities are fabrications – that is, both invented and constructed – because doing so is a necessary step in accounting for the centrality of representation in the constitution of the real'.⁶ Moreover, Michael Mascuch's formulation of autobiography as 'a performance, a public display of identity, even when composed secretly for an audience of one'⁷ usefully alerts us to the performative dimension of self-writing. Such insights seem to me to have much validity, and can be of qualified use to us in our analysis of the narrative self-representations of Irish immigrant autobiographers in nineteenth-century Britain. Let us begin, however, with the question of typology.

It is possible to divide immigrant autobiographies of the period under review into four broad narrative categories: moral, testimonial, political and self-improving. Caveats gather quickly around this statement. Not only are the borders between these categories fluid rather than fixed, they also cut across two other important classificatory modes, namely, gender and generation. Furthermore, not all autobiographies fall neatly into a single category; some, indeed, such as Patrick MacGill's *Children of the Dead End* (1914), contain elements of all four narrative types. That said, such a typology provides us with a serviceable if rudimentary map to what is largely uncharted literary territory, and affords us a discursive entry point to the subject. Thus, we can assign to the first category autobiographies by early nineteenth-century Irish immigrants whose primary concern was for the moral

4 See, for example, M. Mascuch, *Origins of the Individualist Self: Autobiography and Self-Identity in England, 1591–1791* (Cambridge, 1997). 5 S. Hall, 'Cultural Identity and Diaspora' in J. Rutherford (ed.), *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference* (London, 1990), p. 222. 6 K. Ganguly, 'Migrant Identities: Personal Memory and the Construction of Selfhood', *Cultural Studies*, 6: 1, 1992, p. 30. 7 Mascuch, *Origins*, p. 9.

development of both author and reader. The second category contains works which are mainly preoccupied with documenting a way of life, while the third encompasses what is undoubtedly the most well-known type of immigrant self-writing, Fenian autobiography, as well as the memoirs of Irish parliamentarians. Although there are much fewer texts in the fourth category, two stand out as particularly fine examples of the self-betterment narrative, *My Struggle for Life* (1916) by Joseph Keating and *The Story of a Toiler's Life* (1921) by James Mullin. But it is with the moralists that I wish to begin, since their texts are among the earliest I have found from the nineteenth century.

The earliest nineteenth-century Irish immigrant autobiographers were artisans whose works were published in Victorian working-class journals or craft periodicals. In the mid-1850s two such workers published their abbreviated memoirs anonymously in the *Commonwealth*, a weekly Glasgow newspaper devoted to the moral and intellectual improvement of the working classes. The author of 'Life of a Cotton Spinner', published in 1856, was born in Glasgow of Irish parents in 1799, his family having left C. Antrim the previous year 'to avoid the troubles of that unhappy period'.⁸ His memoir is in many respects a classic migrant worker's tale which chronicles his continual movement between Glasgow and Belfast in search of regular employment. The central theme of the work is the author's relentless struggle with adverse fortune that, despite financial prudence and frugal living, thwarted his lifelong ambition to achieve a college education. Migrancy and adversity are also the defining themes of the 'Life of an Irish Tailor', published in the *Commonwealth* in April 1857.⁹ The author, who identifies himself only by the initials 'J. E.', was born in Co. Antrim in 1816. Orphaned when very young, he was apprenticed at the age of twelve to a country tailor with whom he spent seven years. Following an unsatisfactory period of employment in Belfast, he moved to Liverpool, where the discriminatory work practices of the Tailors' Club hampered his progress. When 'a dullness in trade' led to redundancy, he embarked upon a ten-week tramp around the industrial centres of northern England in search of work. Unable to find any, he returned to Ireland and eventually found employment as a 'caretaker and watchman in a large establishment' in an unnamed town.

The third artisan autobiography of this period is 'Fifty Years' Experience of an Irish Shoemaker in London' by John O'Neil,¹⁰ published serially between May 1869 and February 1870 in the weekly occupational journal, *St Crispin: A Magazine for the Leather Trade*. O'Neil was born in Waterford in 1777 and died in Drury Lane, London in 1858. In addition to being a shoemaker of some note, he is described as

8 'Life of a Cotton Spinner', *The Commonwealth*, 27 December 1856, p. 3. 9 'Life of an Irish Tailor', *The Commonwealth*, 18 April 1857, p. 3. 10 The text contains no consistent spelling of the author's surname. 'John O'Neil' appears as the heading on each of the weekly instalments, yet the name appears variously as 'O'Neil', 'O'Neile', 'Neil' and 'Neill' in the narrative proper. This inconsistency may be a product of editorial carelessness, as the autobiography was serialised over a decade after the author's death.

'a Laureate of the Temperance Movement' who 'was always in the shade and on the brink of poverty'.¹¹ He was also remembered as the author of eight plays and several volumes of prose and verse, including a number of temperance poems. O'Neil's autobiography, which is a more sustained and more detailed narrative than the two *Commonwealth* memoirs, chronicles the vicissitudes of his professional and domestic life in London from his arrival in 1808 to the late 1840s.¹² The work is woven around two main narrative strands: his trials and triumphs as a shoemaker and his doomed attempts at writing, which was for him 'the chief consolation of life in every extremity'.¹³ The autobiography provides a useful insight into the London shoemaking trade in the early part of the nineteenth century, as well as illuminating the material and normative forces operating within the metropolitan working-class community. As the father of a large impoverished family – his first wife bore him at least eleven children – O'Neil was prone to many physical and psychological privations. Starvation and pauperism were seldom far from his mind, and he was frequently out of work. As he succinctly puts it in chapter eleven, following another sacking: 'I had, as it was the common saying among the craft of that day, "three outs for the one in" – out of cash, out of credit, out of work, and in debt'.¹⁴

The shared desire of all three of these authors was to document a way of life and promote certain moral convictions, motives which place them firmly in the tradition of nineteenth-century British working-class autobiography. As David Vincent has observed, this tradition was founded upon 'the secularization of a long-established tradition of spiritual autobiography', much of which was written by Puritans and Quakers, in which pious experience was preserved in first-person discourse.¹⁵ The influence of the spiritual tradition on working-class narratives, he claims, 'is to be found not in the structure but rather in the tone and general purpose of the works. The meaning of the past is now conceived in secular terms, but in spite of this fundamental change the autobiographers, on the whole, retained a desire to write respectable and above all morally improving pieces of work'.¹⁶ This is certainly true of these three immigrant autobiographers, whose texts contain a blend of secular and spiritual influences. The secular element is evident in the titles of their works, which suggest that the authors' occupation and the social status they derived from it acted as the master narrative that shaped the way they saw their

11 Details of O'Neil's life are given in 'Biographies of Noted Shoemakers' in the edition of *St Crispin* of 20 February 1869, p. 100. **12** One of the most conspicuous features of O'Neil's autobiography is the almost total absence of any reference to his earlier life in Waterford or Liverpool, where he first settled on coming to England. The emphasis throughout is on his London experiences, as if what went before was of no consequence. **13** J. O'Neil, 'Fifty Years' Experience as an Irish Shoemaker in London', *St Crispin*, 2: 48, 27 November 1869, p. 263. **14** *Ibid.*, *St Crispin*, 2: 39, 25 September 1869, p. 147. **15** D. Vincent, *Bread, Knowledge and Freedom: A Study of Nineteenth-Century Working Class Autobiography* (London, 1981), p. 36. For a more recent analysis of this tradition, see Mascuch, *Origins*. **16** *Ibid.*, p. 17.

lives. This aspect aligns them with many nineteenth-century working-class autobiographers who defined themselves in terms of their occupational or political identity, thereby signalling their belief in the pre-eminence of the relationship between self and society over that between self and God.¹⁷

In the case of these immigrant autobiographers, however, occupational self-definition is not a reliable indicator of a wholly secular, let alone a political, worldview. None of them shows any signs of political radicalism, though O'Neil refers to, but did not take part in, trade union activism. Nor did they see themselves as part of an evolving working-class movement; O'Neil, for example, makes no reference to the rise of the Chartists, despite the fact that a contemporary of his, the radical tailor Francis Place, was one of the authors of the 1838 People's Charter. On the contrary, all three tend to see the meaning of their lives in moral rather than political terms, their narratives being closer in tone and purpose to Puritan self-writing rather than to the memoirs of political radicals. In each of these three texts the testimonial impulse is underpinned, if not actually overridden, by a moral seriousness and a desire to encourage good behaviour in others, so that the reader is offered an improving tale for imitation rather than an expression of unique individuality or a testament of political activism.

The eponymous cotton spinner's main autobiographical objective – to affirm the efficacy of religious faith in the face of doubt and despair – is expressed through a central epiphanic experience in which he recalls how he was spiritually rescued from the depths of depression by a profound intuition of God's goodness as revealed in the natural world. Any lingering doubts about the author's Christian probity are dispelled by an editorial coda, which recommends the autobiography to working-class readers as a moral exemplum: 'This narrative of a good man's struggles with adversity, is worthy of the special attention of working men. We have seen numerous first-class testimonials in his favour, and believe that, up till the present time, he has maintained an unsullied reputation'. 'J. E.', the Irish tailor, was exercised by the evils of alcohol, tobacco and gambling. Having succumbed to the temptations of all three at various times in his life, he concludes his narrative on a morally improving note by extolling the benefits of temperance. His sentiments are echoed by John O'Neil, whose desire to promote the virtues of sobriety and industry among the working classes is clearly stated in the closing chapter of his autobiography, where he expresses the hope that 'by giving my experience from the first time I entered the Metropolis, in the triple character of shoemaker, author and Teetotalter' his memoir will 'serve as a landmark to steer the future adventurer on this mighty ocean of good and evil, that by perseverance, industry, and sobriety, he may ride securely, avoiding many of the rocks and quicksands that threaten him on every side'.¹⁸

But if these three autobiographers' preoccupation with moral instruction aligns

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 18. ¹⁸ O'Neil, 'Fifty Years' Experience as an Irish Shoemaker in London', *St Crispin*, 3: 60, 19 February 1870, p. 87

them with the British tradition of self-writing, they can also be read in another discursive context, namely, the racial construction of the Irish in Victorian Britain. As several historians have pointed out, Victorian racist discourse constructed Irish immigrants as an alien, inferior and potentially traitorous people who were not entitled to a place within 'respectable' British society, thereby relegating them to the discrete world of the ethnic ghetto.¹⁹ This discourse stressed a number of characteristics which rendered the immigrant Irish as degenerate 'others': backwardness, irrationality, rootlessness, gregariousness, dirtiness and, of course, drunkenness. By promoting two of the most cherished ideals of Victorian Britain – temperance and self-improvement – these three autobiographers can be seen to be implicitly challenging negative stereotypes of the immigrant Irish, and in the process revealing their interpellation as moral, self-improving subjects by bourgeois Victorian society.

The subversion of cultural stereotypes of the immigrant Irish is also a feature of *At Scotland Yard* by John Sweeney, a classic testimonial autobiography of the late Victorian period. Sweeney was born into a small farming family in Co. Kerry in 1857. His autobiography reveals little about his early life in Ireland, except that his family suffered eviction when he was two years old and emigrated to London in 1875. In that year Sweeney joined the London Metropolitan Police and was posted to Hammersmith. In 1884 he joined the Criminal Investigation Department at Scotland Yard, where he was assigned to the Special Branch division, formed in 1881 as a 'Fenian Office' to deal with militant Irish republicans. In his role as sergeant Sweeney was directly involved in countering the violent threat posed by Fenian and Clan na Gael activists in London, as well as curbing the frequently disruptive public clashes between Irish nationalists and unionists over Home Rule. He eventually rose to the rank of detective-inspector before leaving the force in 1902, aged forty-five.

Sweeney's autobiography consists of an extensive chronicle of his varied professional experiences during twenty-seven years of police service. As befits a retired detective-sergeant, he is primarily concerned with factual accuracy and verisimilitude: 'I am confident that I have in no way romanced, and that nowhere have I been guilty of any misrepresentation of fact that should do harm or injustice to anyone'.²⁰ He represents himself throughout as a public guardian of the peace and an enforcer of law and order, roles in which he took a manifest degree of pride and satisfaction: 'I "shadowed" suspects; I guarded public men; I watched by royal residences; I helped to keep the public peace; I tracked the perpetrators of outrages. I was one of the cogs in the machine, the workings of which are felt in continents other than ours and across other seas'.²¹ The mixture of individuation and self-

¹⁹ For a cogent analysis of this phenomenon, see J. MacLaughlin, "'Pestilence on their backs, famine in their stomachs": the Racial Construction of Irishness and the Irish in Victorian Britain' in C. Graham and R. Kirkland (eds), *Ireland and Cultural Theory* (Basingstoke, 1999), pp. 50–76. ²⁰ J. Sweeney, *At Scotland Yard* (London, 1904), p. vi.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

effacement that characterises this statement is typical of the autobiography as a whole. Although Sweeney uses the subjective 'I' throughout, there is little overt self-revelation or personal introspection in his narrative. Despite having a wife and family, he makes no attempt to connect his public, professional life with his private, emotional life. Nor does he discuss his social activities, apart from passing references to his interests in athletics and rowing. It is as if the private sphere did not exist for him, or that he did not attach any significance to it, or that his private self was inseparable from his professional role. Even more than the cotton spinner, tailor and shoemaker discussed above, this London-Irish policeman defines his subjectivity exclusively in relation to his work.

It is not only his inner life that Sweeney keeps hidden from view; he is also conspicuously reticent about his experience of being an Irishman in the Metropolitan Police during this most turbulent period in Anglo-Irish relations. One of his few explicit allusions to his Irishness occurs in chapter four, where he proudly recalls being selected for the special police protection unit which accompanied Queen Victoria to Ireland during her extended visit in April 1900. He writes of this, one of his 'most honourable calls of duty': 'Being alike an Irishman and an English police officer, I shared the responsibility of the important duties involved in the protection of Queen Victoria, in the capital of my own country, and I felt, as it were, a sort of double responsibility'.²² In general, however, Sweeney adopts an unreflective attitude towards his ethnicity, which does not appear to have been an issue for him in his professional career. Only once does he allude to an occasion on which his Irishness was the subject of prejudicial comment by a fellow officer. It occurred while he was assigned to the protection of Lord Salisbury at Hatfield House in Hertfordshire, and arose out of what Sweeney calls 'the excessive ignorance of a certain local constable'.²³

Sweeney's benevolent view of those who would offend him on racial grounds is largely attributable to his underlying regard for the British people and nation with which he strongly identified. He saw himself as a loyal imperial subject whose deferential respect for monarchy and the institutions of the state was accompanied by a corresponding disdain for those who sought to undermine them, not least 'the seditious Irish, particularly the Irish-Americans'. Chapter two of his autobiography contains a detailed account of the series of 'dynamite outrages' that shook London between March 1883 and January 1885, masterminded by republican activists. Sweeney's Irish background meant that he was a natural choice for the task of shadowing suspected Clan na Gael agents and attending their meetings: 'Being an Irishman born and bred, I knew quite as much of the Irish language as did the people whom I had to watch, and so was specially selected for this work'.²⁴ This work evidently caused him no ambivalence; indeed it is clear from his account of his undercover activities that he had nothing but contempt for extra-parliamentary Irish agitation, whether it emanated from the militant spirit of Fenianism or the

social grievances of the Land League. To him, both groups were made up of 'seditious revolutionaries', and while he evinces some respect for the constitutional nationalism of Parnell, his political sympathies were firmly unionist, loyalist and pro-Establishment.

Sweeney's socio-political conservatism and his whole-hearted identification with British values and attitudes make him, at first sight, a rather unusual Victorian Irish immigrant. Yet, as Elizabeth Malcolm suggests elsewhere in this volume, his views may be more representative than one might think, given the relative popularity of police work among nineteenth-century Irish immigrants. That he was certainly not the only Anglophile immigrant autobiographer is confirmed by James Mullin's *The Story of a Toiler's Life* (1921), an exemplary narrative of self-improvement. Born in Cookstown in 1846, Mullin became an apprentice carpenter to a cartmaker in his early teens and remained in the trade for nine years, 'under circumstances as adverse and with prospect as gloomy as Fate could inflict on any man outside a prison'.²⁵ Despite such hardship, he was characteristically keen to emphasise the self-improving aspect of these years and the fact that they left his 'passion for books' undiminished. His intellectual perseverance eventually led him to Cookstown Academy and from there to Queen's College, Galway on a scholarship. After many struggles with economic and academic adversity, he graduated with a degree in medicine in 1880 and emigrated to Wales, where he established himself as a general practitioner in Cardiff.

In his youth, Mullin had been a member of the Fenians and was briefly an agent for the *Irish People*, to which he also contributed nationalist verse. He abandoned the movement after the débâcle of 1867, however, and maintained a contemptuous attitude towards politics thereafter, until he read the biased coverage of Irish affairs in the London press in the early 1880s. This prompted him to join the Cardiff branch of the Irish National League, of which he served as chairman for twenty-five years. During this time Mullin developed strong Home Rule sympathies, and while he was reluctant to dismiss his youthful republican militancy, it is clear from his autobiography that it had long since been supplanted by a rather complacent bourgeois imperialism:

I often smile at the irony of Fate which has made a staunch supporter of the British Connection out of such an uncompromising rebel as I considered myself. But I attribute this fact to the changed attitude of British people, my better knowledge of their character, and my complete confidence in their sense of justice.²⁶

²⁵ J. Mullin, *The Story of a Toiler's Life* (Dublin, 1921), p. 44. ²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 79. His imperialist views are again evident in the closing chapter, where he uses such phrases as 'our Empire' and 'our tropical possessions' when recalling his travel experiences in Jamaica and the West Indies during his retirement years.

The autobiographies of John Sweeney and James Mullin serve to highlight the heterogeneity of Irish immigrant culture in Victorian Britain and qualify received notions about the political radicalism of Irish immigrants and their resistance to cultural assimilation and integration. Together they constitute a significant counterpoint to the tradition of nineteenth-century Fenian autobiography which, as Seamus Deane has noted, almost constitutes a genre in itself.²⁷ One of the defining features of this tradition is the unequivocal identification of the individual with the nation. In works that are often as much history as autobiography, the private self is effectively subsumed into the political narrative of the nation. This central trope of Irish nationalist autobiography has been effectively summarised by Sean Ryder:

In its presentation of the lives of national 'heroes', the genre produces inspirational, idealized versions of national subjectivity, linking the life of the individual with the larger political collective which nationalism aims to establish. It is conventional for such narratives to suggest the absolute identification of the individual with the nation itself – the historical, contingent subject, in other words, appears to achieve authenticity and completion – its heroic realisation – through identification with the transcendent, impersonal entity known as 'the nation,' or 'national destiny.' The hero becomes, literally, the embodiment of the 'spirit' of the nation.²⁸

While the achievement of this discursive association of subject and nation proved relatively straightforward for Irish nationalist autobiographers at home, their emigrant counterparts in Britain struggled to create a satisfactory version of national subjectivity. In the remainder of this essay I want to examine the difficulties and dilemmas of self-identification evinced in the autobiographies of two Victorian Irishmen, John Denvir and Tom Barclay, both of whom exploit the potential of autobiography to be 'the text of the oppressed and the culturally displaced, forging a right to speak both for and beyond the individual'.²⁹

Denvir was born in 1834 into an immigrant Antrim family, which had settled in Liverpool in the early part of the century. He followed his father into the building trade, and eventually established his own business in Liverpool. His publishing activities began in the late 1850s with his managership of the *Catholic Times*, of

²⁷ See Deane's preface to the extract from Thomas Clarke's *Glimpses of an Irish Felon's Prison Life* in *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, ii, pp. 280–1. Sweeney may well have encountered Clarke in the course of his professional duties during the early 1880s. Another Fenian autobiographer, Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa, was certainly known to him; his notoriety earned him a special mention in chapter seven of *At Scotland Yard*. ²⁸ S. Ryder, 'Male Autobiography and Irish Cultural Nationalism: John Mitchel and James Clarence Mangan', *Irish Review*, 13, Winter 1992/93, p. 70. ²⁹ J. Swindells makes this point in relation to female, black and working-class autobiography in her introduction to *The Uses of Autobiography*, (London, 1995), p. 7.

which he later became editor, and continued throughout the rest of his life. In 1870 he launched the popular *Illustrated Irish Penny Library* series which consisted of cheap volumes of biography, fiction and poetry, and later wrote a major survey of the Irish in Britain, as well several novels. He was a founder member of the Home Rule Confederation and later became its national agent and organiser. His autobiography, *The Life Story of an Old Rebel* (1910), comprises his recollections of the politics and personalities of Irish nationalism in Britain from the 1840s to the early 1900s, with particular emphasis on Liverpool.

Like Sweeney, Denvir reveals little about his private or emotional life, focusing instead on his youthful association with Fenianism and subsequent involvement with the Home Rule movement. The implicit purpose of the narrative is to stress the need for individual and collective perseverance in the face of oppression and persecution in order to bring about the deeply desired goal of national independence. Irish nationalism, whether in its parliamentary or physical-force form, is represented throughout as an elevating and energising force which, rooted in the cultural landscape of rural Catholic Ireland, unites Irish people at home and abroad in a common bond. The author's personal experience serves as the embodiment and vindication of nationalist resolution, and the autobiography ends in vatic mode, with Denvir issuing a spirited appeal to the youth of Ireland to remain true to God and nation in anticipation of the imminent victory of nationalism over imperialism.

One of Denvir's main autobiographical motives was to bear accurate historical witness to the growth and development of Irish nationalism in Britain from O'Connell to Redmond, and thereby assert its moral authority. Like Mullin, he was keenly sensitive to the distortions of British press coverage of Irish affairs and strove to provide a nationalist corrective to anglocentric accounts of Irish history in his writings. His autobiography is not simply a recapitulation of an agreed past, therefore; it is a strategic intervention in a contested historical narrative. We see an example of his method in chapter seven, when he digresses from his account of the 'breaking of the van' in Manchester to criticise previous descriptions of the 1867 Fenian rescue attempt, claiming that 'it is important that the information given in books for the benefit of the present and future generations of Irishmen should be correct'.³⁰ The meticulous, almost pedantic, nature of Denvir's historical amendments – he clarifies the precise location of the rescue attempt and the direction in which the police van was travelling – reveals much about his view of the past and about his sense of autobiographical duty to act as a literary custodian of vital national truths. In particular, it bears out the truth of Julia Swindells' observation that:

In making a claim to a political voice, the autobiographer is often also in the process of contesting, explicitly or implicitly, what the authority of the

³⁰ J. Denvir, *The Life Story of an Old Rebel* (Dublin, 1910; repr. Shannon, 1972), p. 99.

'educated' account has to offer. Certain experiences, particularly those associated with systematic oppression, have not been recorded, or have been represented partially, in stereotype or with flagrant bias. In this context, autobiography can appear the most direct and accessible way of countering silence and misrepresentation.³¹

As Denvir's scrupulous attention to historical detail suggests, the testimonial purpose of his text is itself a function of his use of autobiography to establish a unified, coherent national identity for himself and the immigrant community to which he belonged. He was keen to bring emigrant and second-generation identities, which were marginalised in revivalist and nationalist ideals of Irishness, into the centre of contemporary debates about culture and ethnicity. This desire is apparent in the opening chapter, in which he eulogises the patriotic identity of the Irish community in Britain:

Anyone who has mixed much among our fellow-countrymen in England, Scotland and Wales knows that, generally, the children and grandchildren of Irish-born parents consider themselves just as much Irish as those born on 'the old sod' itself. No part of our race has shown more determination and enthusiasm in the cause of Irish nationality.³²

His own life story then becomes a paradigm of exilic patriotism in which personal contact with Irish political leaders and activists becomes a substitute for personal experience of Ireland.³³

Denvir's emigrant status, however, problematises his self-identification with the nation. Despite Leon Ó Broin's assertion that 'Physical dissociation took nothing . . . from his essential Irishness',³⁴ the text suggests an underlying insecurity about the author's cultural identity. In chapter three, for example, in the course of his recollection of the time he spent as a child with his relatives in Co. Down in 1846, he recalls how friends and neighbours would gather in the evening for "'a cailey'". His anglicised phonetic rendering of the word causes him such unease as to prompt an immediate apology to his Irish audience: 'I hope my Gaelic League friends will forgive me if I don't give the correct sound of this word, but that is my remembrance of how they pronounced it some sixty years ago in Co. Down'. As if to compensate for any perceived lack of 'authentic' Irishness, he immediately goes on to recall his enthusiastic public readings of speeches by O'Connell, while simultaneously betraying a latent anxiety about his nationality which is registered in his

31 Swindells, *Uses of Autobiography*, p. 7. 32 Denvir, *Old Rebel*, p. 2. 33 There is a certain symbolic aptness in the fact that his first impression of Ireland was in representational form – a map on the back of one of O'Connell's Repeal cards – since the country existed for him as an imaginary homeland for much of his life. 34 L. Ó Broin, 'Introduction', *The Life Story of an Old Rebel*, p. v.

memory of being referred to by neighbours as the “wee boy from England”.³⁵ Denvir’s later involvement with a company of travelling players and musicians called the Emerald Minstrels, whose primary aim was to cultivate ‘Irish Nationality’, suggests a continuing need for cultural self-definition, a need to have his Irishness publicly demonstrated and endorsed. His autobiography can therefore be read as the final, *textual* expression of this need, an attempt to persuade his Irish audience to sanction the self-identity manifest in the story of his lifelong devotion to the cause of Irish nationalism. Read thus, his text is an act of imaginary recuperation, an assertion of his right to belong to what Benedict Anderson terms the ‘imagined political community’ of the nation.³⁶

Denvir’s preoccupation with issues of cultural and national identity is replicated in Tom Barclay’s *Memoirs and Medleys: The Autobiography of a Bottle Washer* (1934). Written over a period of seven years (1924–31) when the author was in his seventies, *Memoirs and Medleys* is a compelling account of the material and mental struggles of a self-taught ‘proletarian working man’³⁷ of the mid-Victorian era. Born in Leicester in 1852 to parents who fled Ireland during the Famine, Barclay’s early years were spent moving from one cramped, disease-infested slum dwelling to another, shadowed by hunger, ill-health and his father’s alcoholism. At the age of eight he was sent to a rope factory where he worked a seventy-hour week for a shilling and sixpence. This was the first of Barclay’s many menial jobs in as many as twenty factories in the Leicester area where, apart from short periods in London and Ireland, he lived and worked until his death in 1933.

Despite the book’s subtitle, Barclay’s narrative is structured around his intellectual rather than his occupational development. Vivid early descriptions of the material poverty of the Leicester-Irish immigrant community are followed by a detailed and lively account of the author’s intellectual and political progress. His autobiographical motives were twofold: to testify to a life dedicated to self-learning and the pursuit of knowledge, and to justify his ideological evolution from pious young Catholic to freethinking secularist and socialist activist. Thus, his autobiography is an expression of individualist self-identity, the antithesis of the spiritual autobiography which sought to promote piety, supplication and the abnegation of the individual personality. His text, moreover, is highly polemical and often openly propagandistic on behalf of socialism and the writings of his great hero, George Bernard Shaw, to whose works and ideas he refers throughout. His style of conversational intimacy is reminiscent of the Irish oral tradition, and he shows a highly self-conscious awareness of his putative audience. Digressions from the main narrative are frequent; he apostrophises his mother, conducts an imaginary debate with the reader and harangues the politically apathetic masses. The most revealing

35 Denvir, *Old Rebel*, p. 37. 36 Anderson’s celebrated definition of the nation occurs in his *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, 1991), p. 6. 37 T. Barclay, *Memoirs and Medleys: The Autobiography of a Bottle Washer* (Leicester, 1934; repr. Coalville, 1995), p. 82.

digression of all occurs in chapter six where he frankly admits to a calculated violation of the autobiographer's unspoken pact with the reader to remain true to his or her subjective response and give a truthful account of the individual 'life': 'Let no one who may happen to see these things I write imagine that I am telling the whole truth and nothing but the truth about myself. I'm omitting to turn my worse side towards you, and why not?'³⁸ This flagrant confession of selectivity, couched in a typically conversational idiom, reveals Barclay's sophisticated – one might almost say postmodern – awareness of the artful, self-conscious nature of autobiography, and of its function as calculated self-portraiture.

As David Nash has observed in his Introduction to the 1995 edition, *Memoirs and Medleys* is 'a unique document for the study of the Irish diaspora in England', not least because of the insights it offers into the formation and expression of a second-generation Irishman's cultural identity.³⁹ Catholicism, that most distinctive social marker of the Irish in Victorian Britain, was central to Barclay's childhood identity. Like thousands of other nineteenth-century Irish immigrants, the Barclay family relied upon Catholicism, which in their case was made up of an amalgam of orthodox devotionism, folk religion and peasant superstition, to sustain them in the face of grinding poverty. Young Tom received a thorough induction in the faith and developed an intense personal piety. As he matured, however, his faith, based as it was on ritualistic observance, could not withstand the weight of intellectual inquiry. Hungry for knowledge, he enrolled at the Leicester Working Men's College in the early 1870s and, with the zeal of the autodidact, began to renounce Catholicism for freethinking secularism, which led in turn to his adoption of the philosophy that became his new religion, socialism. Together with a group of like-minded individuals who 'believed in Heaven on Earth as fervently as ever the Religionist believes in a Blessed State of Immortality',⁴⁰ Barclay worked tirelessly for the socialist cause for the rest of his life, organising lectures, distributing bills and writing for the *Countryman*, a free Leicester socialist newspaper. Much of his autobiography comprises a trenchant exposition of his lifelong belief in the potential of socialism to ameliorate the harsh living and working conditions of the poor, tinged by an exasperation borne of the indifference with which his fellow workers responded to his advocacy.

If, as Nash claims, Barclay's postive rejection of religious faith makes him a rather exceptional Victorian Irish immigrant, then his dilemma of identity makes him a more representative second-generation Irishman. Growing up in the 1860s, Fenianism was as much a part of Barclay's childhood as Catholicism. He recalls how his parents cheered the rescue of James Stephens in 1865 and lamented the hanging of the Manchester Martyrs two years later, while their English neighbours 'danced and rejoiced'. As this statement suggests, the Barclays' reflexive anti-English sentiment was reinforced by a prevailing anti-Irish prejudice, the casual intimacy of which is graphically evoked in his recollection of being 'hounded and harrassed'

by the English children with whom he shared the slum. In such a politically charged atmosphere, local rows could easily assume mythic significance. Once, when besieged by a gang of local youths led by a boy named Billy, young Tom instantly transformed the confrontation into a miniature re-enactment of one of the defining contests of Irish history: 'My imagination went to work: Billy was King William and we were the Irish: it was the siege of Limerick being in some mysterious manner enacted over again'.⁴¹

Racial hostility eventually took its toll, however, and the boy's proto-Fenianism was soon replaced by its antithesis: a sense of shame at his Irish origins. His changing perception of his Irishness is recorded in a passage which vividly encapsulates the attenuation of his heritage under socio-cultural pressures, leading to psychological division.⁴² It was several years before Barclay's Irishness reasserted itself, but when it did, it did so with compelling force.⁴³ Chapter six opens with a dramatic revelation: 'One day, somewhere in the [eighteen] nineties, I became impressed (I might say *obsessed*) with the thought that I couldn't be really Irish without a knowledge of the Irish language' (emphasis in original).⁴⁴ This essentialist conviction (which he subsequently rejected in favour of a more pluralist conception of Irishness) led him to attend Gaelic League classes in London and to establish a short-lived branch of the League in Leicester in 1902. It was shortly after this that he visited Ireland for the first time, to attend the annual Oireachtas festival. His lyrical recollection of this visit as a 'holy' event suggests that for him, as for many members of the second-generation Irish community, Ireland was not so much a physical place as a mythic realm of psychic wholeness, what Salman Rushdie terms an 'imaginary homeland',⁴⁵ forged from the symbols and narratives of Irish cultural nationalism.

Although disillusioned by his subsequent failed attempt to settle permanently in the country, Ireland remained his spiritual lodestar, never more so than during the revolutionary period. A diary entry from July 1919 records his desperate desire 'to *do* something – within three days of being sixty-seven . . . – for poor, distracted, ill-fated Ireland!' (emphasis in original).⁴⁶ Three years later, however, the Civil War had changed his mood to one of dismay. The social conservatism of independent Ireland was a great disappointment to him, and he railed against the restrictions

41 *Ibid.*, p. 8. **42** See *Memoirs*, pp. 23–4. Barclay's account of the socio-cultural influences that shaped his cultural inferiority complex about being second-generation Irish in England is replicated to a remarkable extent in the autobiographical trilogy of Bill Naughton, who grew up in Lancashire during the interwar years. See L. Harte, 'Migrant Memories: The recovery of self in the autobiography of Bill Naughton', *Critical Survey*, 8: 2, 1996, pp. 168–77. **43** It would be wrong to assume that Barclay sublimated his ethnicity entirely during his early manhood. His continuing engagement with Ireland is evident from a letter he wrote to the *Leicester Chronicle and Mercury* in May 1882 in which he expressed his abhorrence at the Phoenix Park murders of that month. See *Memoirs*, p. 139. **44** Barclay, *Memoirs*, p. 95. **45** S. Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism, 1981–1991* (London, 1992), p. 10. **46** Barclay, *Memoirs*, p. 138.

imposed on cultural and intellectual expression that were an affront to his liberal pluralism. Yet his patriotism prevailed throughout, though he could never escape entirely the feeling of being detached from his cultural moorings and remained prey to a lingering sense of ethnic longing, poignantly evoked by his description of himself as 'a would-be Irishman'.⁴⁷

The autobiographies of John Denvir and Tom Barclay constitute an account of cultural otherness in which the immigrant subject represents himself as an interstitial figure, suspended in a stasis between two cultures, resisting full integration into the life of Britain yet unable to achieve 'authentic' selfhood through identification with the Irish nation. Both write from a problematic, indeterminate position outside essentialist definitions of Irishness, from where they endeavour to insinuate themselves into the nationalist version of subjectivity. Their negotiation of cultural identity, therefore, proceeds from, and is continually shadowed by, an awareness of identity loss and cultural amputation, as neither writer ultimately manages to overcome the debilitating contingencies of geographical and generational dislocation. As such, they bear out the truth of Stuart Hall's observation that 'Migration is a one way trip. There is no "home" to go back to'.⁴⁸ 'Home' was clearly a much more flexible identification for the likes of John Sweeney and James Mullin, both of whom evince a deep-seated regard for the ideologies and value-systems of late Victorian Britain in their autobiographies. Their early nineteenth-century antecedents seem equally reconciled to prevailing bourgeois values and show clear signs of their ideological incorporation within an overarching British identity. And yet, their ethnicity cannot be wholly erased, for it is possible to read their autobiographies as oppositional texts that challenge the negative construction of the immigrant Irish in Victorian discourse. For them, as for their fellow immigrant autobiographers, self-writing served as a subtle and effective means of constructing, performing and negotiating a complex self-identity in the public realm of discourse.

47 Ibid., p. 102. 48 S. Hall, 'Minimal Selves' in L. Appignanesi (ed.), *Identity: The Real Me* (London, 1987), p. 44.