Criminal Conversations
Rowbothan, Judith, Stevenson, Kim

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Introduction

The first half of the nineteenth century witnessed a substantial increase in the pace and scale of Irish migration to Britain. The 1841 census enumerated the Irish-born population of England, Wales, and Scotland at 419,000. By 1851, in consequence of the massive exodus during the Great Famine, this figure had risen to 727,000. In 1861 the Irish-born population peaked at 806,000, when it comprised 3.5 percent of the total population. Thereafter, as this migration declined, the number of Irish-born migrants in Britain also fell, declining to 550,000 in 1911 (or 1.3 percent of the population). In essence, this process involved the positive movement of people in search of better economic opportunities in Britain and, accordingly, the Irish presence was concentrated overwhelmingly in the towns and cities of “the workshop of the world.”

These migrants were by no means an homogeneous group. Their ranks contained rich and poor, middle and working class, skilled and unskilled, Catholics and Protestants (and unbelievers), Nationalists and Loyalists, and men and women from a variety of distinctive provincial rural and urban cultures in Ireland. The majority were young, single, and disproportionately male. They were also notoriously transient, and the urban districts they inhabited experienced continual in- and out-migration, with only a relatively small number of migrants establishing permanent settlements. The vast majority of these Irish people were poor and Roman Catholic. It is their story, a story in many cases of triumph over adversity, that looms large in the history of the Irish in Britain. This chapter focuses on some aspects of the varied and complex conversations that surrounded the concept of the Irish and crime, but can only touch upon some of the main themes in such an intricate area.
Irish Representation in Crime Rates

The Irish presence was generally unpopular, as its print presentation underlines. Even before the Famine, British social investigators and commentators perceived Irish migration as little short of a social disaster which, it was argued, exacerbated urban squalor, constituted a health hazard, and increased the burden on poor rates. It was also argued that the Irish constituted a threat to law and order. The 1836 Report on the State of the Irish Poor devoted four pages to the examination of Irish criminality, noting that “the Irish in the larger towns of Lancashire commit more crimes than an equal number of natives of the same places.” The 1839 Report of the Constabulary Commissioners concluded that:

when large bodies of Irish of less orderly habits, and far more prone to the use of violence in fits of intoxication settled permanently in these towns [of South Lancashire], the existing police force, which was sufficient to repress crime and disorders among a purely English population, has been found, under these altered circumstances, inadequate to the regular enforcement of the law.3

That same year, Carlyle, the intellectual hero of the age, was moved to comment: “Crowds of miserable Irish darken all our towns . . . as the ready-made nucleus of degradation and disorder.”4 Similar observations were expressed by visitors to England during the 1840s.5 These are random examples, but they are illustrative of a popular belief in the innate criminality of the Irish poor which formed part of the negative side of the Irish stereotype. To many middle-class observers, Irish migrants augmented a challenge by the “dangerous classes” to authority and order.

Relatively few detailed analyses of the Irish contribution to Victorian crime rates have been conducted. This said, the chief conclusion to be drawn from selective local studies (which may therefore be unrepresentative) of crime in some early and mid-Victorian towns, including York, Manchester, Liverpool, Preston, Bradford, Wolverhampton, Chester, and Middlesbrough, is that the Irish-born were not only well represented in the statistics of crime but that their capacity for breaking the law was disproportionate to their numbers in the community.6 These studies conclude that the Irish-born were almost three times as likely to face prosecution as their English neighbors, endorsing the evidence of policemen, prison officers, and magistrates in the 1836 Report.7 However, these statistics deserve further scrutiny.

First, they refer only to the Irish-born and do not include children of Irish immigrants born in Britain, who, though perceived by the host society as
Irish, were variously classified as English, Scottish, or Welsh. Thus the contribution of the Irish to local criminality was probably higher than these figures suggest. Second, the Irish proportion of the working-class population of these towns was obviously far higher than its proportion of the population as a whole, and the statistics reflect to some extent the relative proportion of Irish in that sector of society most likely to be prosecuted. Third, many of the second- and third-generation Irish would have been Roman Catholic, hence the proportion of Catholics in crime statistics would have been higher than those of the Irish. Fourth, these localized surveys suggest that the proportion of Irish-born enumerated in crime statistics gradually declined toward the end of the century. This does not imply that the Irish were less likely to face prosecution (for they continued to be overrepresented); it merely reflects, in relative terms, the decline in immigration from Ireland and the consequent reduction in the number of Irish-born in Britain during the period.

Finally, it is important to recognize that incidence of crime, Irish and non-Irish, was much higher than the (notoriously unreliable) criminal statistics suggest, for they represent only those offenses reported to the police which resulted in prosecutions and convictions, as opposed to all offenses committed, many of which went unreported or unprosecuted (the so-called “dark figure of crime”). The Irish-born were also overrepresented in committals to prison. The Judicial Statistics for 1861–1901 indicate that while the proportion of Irish-born prisoners gradually declined, the Irish-born were five times as likely to be committed to prison as the English. Thus, on the surface at least, criminal statistics suggest that the Irish were more likely to be prosecuted and convicted for lawbreaking than their neighbors.

The evidence suggests that it was not just a case of men behaving badly: Irish women also figure disproportionately in the statistics. Taking but one example, in Chester between 1851 and 1871, Irish women comprised 67 percent of female convictions for assaults on the police, 28 percent for assault, 33 percent for obtaining goods by false pretences, 33 percent for begging, and 23 percent for drunkenness and disorderly behavior. A notable figure was Mary Ann Glynn of Boughton, with 101 convictions for drunkenness, disorderly behavior, vagrancy, and petty thefts. Sentenced to twelve months’ imprisonment in July 1869, she continued to defy authority in Chester Gaol, using “obscene and violent language” and subsequently destroying “13 panes of glass, 2 cell stools, 1 lamp, 8 beds, 10 jackets, 12 petticoats, 19 capes, 2 blankets, 6 chemises, 2 flannel ivylets, 6 tin-cans and 2 chamber utensils.” A muff (restraining jacket) was deployed to control her, but to little effect. Even Glynn’s record pales into insignificance with that of one Liverpool Irish woman, a street trader, who by 1897 boasted a national record, having been held 356 times for drunkenness, assaults, damage, and begging.
However, these patterns require further qualification. There is much evidence to suggest that Irish criminality was concentrated largely in less serious or petty categories. The 1836 Report concluded that “Crimes against the person, committed after long premeditation and with unrelenting cruelty, by several persons, such as murders, nightly attacks on houses, beatings, vindictive rapes, and so forth, which are unhappily so frequent among the Irish in their own country, scarcely ever occur among them in Great Britain.”¹⁴ Police superintendents in Liverpool and Manchester told a similar story.¹⁵ Some local studies of Irish crime confirm this impression, showing that whereas the Irish were overrepresented in summary prosecutions, they were less frequently committed to the Quarter Sessions and Assizes.¹⁶ Second, the evidence suggests that the Irish were not overrepresented in all categories of petty crime. Irish criminality was highly concentrated in the often interrelated categories of drunkenness, disorderly behavior, and assault (including assaults on the police) and, to a lesser extent, petty theft and vagrancy.¹⁷ On average, almost one-third of all prosecutions in these categories involved Irish people. Yet the supposed predilection of the Irish for such offenses is deserving of closer scrutiny.

Consider drink-related crime. In British eyes, the terms “drink” and “Irish” were synonymous.¹⁸ Drink, it was argued, was the Irishman’s weakness, and drunkenness was the precursor of disorderly behavior, breaches of the peace of all kinds, and assaults. It was also held that drink had a markedly more extreme effect upon the Irish. In 1877, a Cardiff magistrate, referring to excessive drunkenness among Irish dockworkers, claimed “they are not all bad fellows, but they have all the peculiarities of their forefathers.”¹⁹ This is perhaps indicative of the way in which contemporaries resorted to stereotype and conveniently ignored the drunken violence that distinguished English, Scottish, and Welsh working-class mores. However, even John Denvir, an Irish nationalist, was moved to comment that whereas the Irish did not drink more than other nationalities, “being naturally demonstrative, they put themselves in evidence when under the influence of intoxicants, where the Englishman would go and sleep off their effects.”²⁰ Of course, the Irish were far from being all inveterate imbibers.

Located as they were in marginal employments, most Irish people could not afford to drink throughout the week; those who drank confined the practice to the weekend. And while the public houses and beer shops that proliferated in working-class districts populated by the Irish poor provided plenty of opportunities for drink, they also served important social, cultural, and economic functions for them.²¹ Moreover, it was a common practice for contractors to pay Irish laborers their wages in public houses, which not only encouraged them to spend their wages on drink but also promoted disputes,
between laborers and contractors, and among laborers themselves. Public houses were not the only focus for Irish drinking practices. Some migrants brought alcohol with them from Ireland and sold it, without license, in local lodging houses. These “wabble shops” were illegal, but were very difficult for the police to detect. Some illegal whiskey stills, usually located in lodging houses. It was reported in 1836 that in Manchester these houses were “crammed with Irish the whole of Saturday night; parties of men come mad drunk out of these places.”

The realities of Irish drinking were more complex and varied than this imagery suggests. Drink was a key element of leisure culture in rural Ireland, playing a central role in the main rituals of life: birth, marriage, and death. Consumption of whiskey (“water of life” in Gaelic) was fundamental to this. In Ireland, patterns of drink consumption were variously influenced; rural drinking was irregular, confined largely to weekends and special occasions, whereas urban drinking was more regular and, in some instances, daily. Nevertheless, the persistence of the Irish reputation for drunkenness was based partly on the assumption that expatriate (migrant) drinking habits were also characteristic of Ireland, which was not wholly true. Arguably, the key questions which should be addressed should not be “Why Paddy Drank?” (which assumes the validity of the stereotype) but rather “Did Paddy Drink?” (suggesting both “yes” and “no”) and “Which Paddy Drank?” After all, the efforts of temperance crusaders such as Father Mathew met with some success in both Ireland and Britain. Mayhew noted the presence of mutual aid societies, including temperance groups, among London’s Irish Catholics in the 1840s, while one of the motives for Mathew’s visit to Glasgow in 1842 and to other English towns in 1843 was to raise the reputation, soiled by drink, of the Irish in Britain, sometimes administering the pledge in Gaelic. Thus “Teetotal Paddy” reflects the other side of the coin. It is worth noting that between 1841 and 1871 Irish spirit consumption was actually below the annual United Kingdom average, while beer consumption in England, Scotland, and Wales was almost four times higher than in Ireland.

Consider, too, the link between the Irish and disorder. A closer analysis suggests that incidents were essentially multicausal, coming in various shapes and sizes. Sometimes they comprised disturbances among the Irish themselves; on other occasions they involved collective violence, either by or against the Irish, or a combination of both. Moreover, they operated on both intra- and intercommunal levels within specific communities, revealing different types of behavior according to time and place. Disorders confined to Irish districts consisted largely of drunken brawls, quarrels between neighbors and domestic disputes, mainly between rather than against Irish people. When combined with the drunkenness, noise, and casual violence associated
with Saturday night saturnalia in so-called “Little Irelands,” these disorders made the Irish more visible, reinforcing popular perceptions of the Irish predilection for drink and disorder. Yet these “Irish rows,” as the press described them, which so horrified “respectable” opinion, were generally of little interest to the police or magistrates unless they spilled over into the public domain.

By contrast, violence bred of sectarian rivalries sometimes spilled over into the public domain in cities with substantial Ulster Protestant and Irish Catholic populations, most notably in Liverpool and Glasgow. Here, communal conflicts were compounded by the activities of the Orange Order. Orange marches, important in Protestant working-class culture, were frequently accompanied by sectarian violence well into the Edwardian period. In mid-Victorian west of Scotland, sectarian violence also erupted in smaller towns with Irish populations, including Airdrie, Port Glasgow, Greenock, Dumbarton, Kelso, Coatbridge, and Paisley, where, in 1857, three members of the local night police, once off-duty, joined an Orange procession in their uniforms, carried flags, and led an assault on a body of Irish Catholics, one of whom was stabbed to death. In England, sectarian violence also disfigured community relations in the industrial townships of late-Victorian Cumbria. Nevertheless, sectarian conflict appears in general to have been less evident in most Irish communities in nineteenth-century Britain.

Clashes between the Irish and the police had a character of their own. At such points, distinctions between intra- and intercommunal violence becomes blurred. Whole Irish communities often stood shoulder-to-shoulder in face of what they popularly held to be police harassment. The overrepresentation of Irish people in statistics pertaining to assaults on the police, of frequent occurrence during these disorders, could be seen as partly an index of Irish hostility to police interference. It is not surprising to discover that Irish people comprised 33 percent of all prosecutions for assaults on the police in Liverpool and Manchester between 1841 and 1871. In Birmingham, 1862–77, it was 20 percent, although they comprised only four percent of the local population. It is difficult to lay exclusive blame on either side during some of these intercommunal disorders. There were some famous battles between Irish and English railway navvies during the 1830s and 1840s, which were partially rooted in the harshness of that kind of life. Yet navvy riots were also multi-causal. In some instances they involved violence by the Irish as a protest against their exploitation by contractors and gangers; in others they may be ascribed to English or Scottish xenophobia.

In contrast, intercommunal disorders which, on the surface at least, were rooted in religious differences between the Irish and the host society were frequently the product of violence directed against Irish Catholics. This was
particularly evident during the mid-Victorian period, when the resurgence of popular Protestantism in the wake of the reestablishment of the Catholic hierarchy provided an additional cutting edge to Anglo-Irish tensions and contributed to a number of serious anti-Catholic and anti-Irish disorders, notably at Stockport in 1852. The homes of Irish Catholics in Rock Row were besieged by a Protestant mob and the local Roman Catholic Church was desecrated.37 The activities of anti-Catholic lecturers also fomented communal violence. William Murphy, a member of the Protestant Evangelical Mission and Electoral Union, became the apostle of popular anti-Catholicism between 1867 and 1871. Until his premature death from injuries inflicted upon him by Irish miners as he prepared to address Whitehaven Orangemen in the Oddfellows Hall in 1871, his lectures sparked serious disorders in the Irish districts of many towns.38 Thus variety was hallmark of the disorders in which Irish migrants became embroiled, many reflecting purely local and regional tensions. Yet the extent to which disorder invariably accompanied the Irish presence in the Victorian city remains problematic. Studies of the Irish experience in Coventry, Chester, and Leicester paint a different picture.39 Here, the relative absence of disturbances involving the Irish signifies a measured degree of accommodation into local society. Victorian towns were far from monochrome, and accordingly, the Irish urban experience was itself characterized by diversity.

Outcasts and Scapegoats?

So why were the Irish poor generally overrepresented in certain categories of criminal behavior? Any examination of Victorian Irish crime and disorder needs to be placed in the broader context of English attitudes to the Irish, with its complex history.40 Although hostility to the Irish had ancient roots, the growth of anti-Hibernian sentiment during early and mid-Victorian years was a consequence of the economic, social, political, and religious currents of the period, and intimately linked to the scale of immigration from Ireland during the Famine.41 This exacerbated hostility to the Irish poor by raising the profile of contemporary social ills for which the Irish emerged as convenient scapegoats.42 The effects of the restoration of the Catholic hierarchy in England and Wales in 1850 has been mentioned. Over the next twenty years both public and government went through a phase of anti-Catholicism in response to perceived “Papal aggression.” Most anti-Irish disorders belong to this period, notably in South Lancashire.43 There, the situation was compounded by the activities of the Orange Order.44

Political factors also fanned the flames of anti–Irish feeling, particularly
between 1865 and 1868 when Fenian activities on the mainland brought a sense of fear of Irish nationalist violence to the host population. Dramatic events in 1867, including the abortive Fenian raid on Chester Castle, the case of the “Manchester Martyrs,” and the Clerkenwell bombing, all served to raise Anglo-Irish tensions, albeit temporarily. In the latter incident, a barrel of explosives, placed outside the exercise-yard wall at Clerkenwell Gaol in an abortive attempt to release Fenian prisoners, exploded, killing twelve civilians and injuring 120. It resulted in popular outrage and panic, witness Tenniel’s famous *Punch* cartoon, *The Fenian Guy Fawkes*, which not only condemned the Fenian dynamiter but also played on old anti-Catholic prejudices in a new version of the Gunpowder Plot. It has also been argued that economic competition between English and Irish workers exacerbated native reactions to the newcomers because the Irish threatened to undercut wage levels and were prepared to work as strikebreakers. Thus, it might appear that poor working-class Irish Catholic immigrants were in some respects the “outcasts” of mid-Victorian society because of their poverty, ethnicity, religion, and politics.

In fact, the Irish experience in the Victorian city was more diverse and complex. Nevertheless, Irish nationalists claimed that the perceived association between the Irish, crime and disorder was only one manifestation of the sustained hostility, rooted in English prejudice, directed toward the Irish. In June 1868 *The Nation*, a Dublin weekly newspaper, observed that “Nowhere in England can our countrymen consider themselves safe from English mob violence.” In 1892 John Denvir noted, “We know how, by studied insults to his creed and country, the hot-blooded Irish Celt is often made to appear the aggressor.” More recently, this theme has been developed further by work pointing not only to the overrepresentation of the Irish in the statistics of crime and disorder, but also to violence in the workplace. There, psychological terror, small-scale brawls, attacks on individuals, and a routine diet of discrimination were common means by which the non-Irish vented their aggressions on Irish migrants.

Of greater importance was the widely held perception that Irish peasant society was inherently brutal, demonstrating a fundamental weakness of the Irish national character. The stereotype of the brutalized “Paddy” was entrenched in the public mind even before the Famine, and the subsequent experiences of the pauper Irish, who brought rural traditions with them and yet had to adapt to the *mores* of urban industrial society, served only to reinforce these ingrained perceptions. Thus, Irish districts were expected to be hotbeds of crime, and antisocial behavior by the Irish merely confirmed preconceived notions regarding the irresponsibility and criminality of the Celt. It also, of course, influenced the attitudes of police and magistrates in their attempts to maintain law and order in urban Britain.
Irish criminality in Victorian Britain also needs to be examined and understood in the context of patterns of crime in Ireland which, fluctuating in time and place, were in some ways different from those of England and Wales. With the exception of Dublin and Cork, crime was overwhelmingly rural, and convict records shed some light on the nature of Irish criminality. Approximately 160,000 convicts were transported to Australia between 1788 and 1868. Of the quarter of all Irish transported to Australia who were transported direct from Ireland, the mix contained both those convicted for ordinary offenses and social and political protesters. They comprised 62 percent of all persons transported from Ireland and Britain for crimes of protest during the period, but while a minority of these were political prisoners (United Irishmen, Young Irelanders, and Fenians), the majority were the representatives of various Irish agrarian movements.

Thus to many contemporary observers, Irish peasant society appeared inherently lawless, violent, and brutal. Faction fights provide one illustration of this. Observing the proceedings at Waterford Assizes in July 1835, Alexis de Tocqueville commented:

> These assizes gave us the very clear impression that the lower classes of this county are very prone to quarrelling and fighting; that nearly every village forms a kind of faction. . . . Factions that began nobody knows when and continue nobody knows why, without taking on any political significance. When men of these different factions meet each other at a fair, a wedding, or elsewhere, it is rare they do not come to blows for the sole pleasure of the excitement that a fight gives. These quarrels very often end in the death of someone.

Faction fights proliferated in nineteenth-century Ireland. Although motives varied, they could also be regarded as an illustration of violence as sport in nineteenth-century Ireland. Such fights were distinguished by clearly defined rules, willing participants, a sense of pleasure and an absence of malicious intent. Their scale was underreported in crime statistics because parties were rarely arrested; even when serious injuries and fatalities resulted. In the case of brawls, characterized by the use of fists, feet, teeth, stones, and even knives, severe punishment of offenders was unlikely because there was usually an absence of malice. The strength of this tradition, which provided further evidence in British eyes of the inability of the Irish to govern themselves (thereby endorsing the value of the Union), explains its maintenance by some Irish migrants in British cities. Given the violent nature of so much “crime” in Ireland it is somewhat surprising that Irish crime in Britain was not more violent than was actually the case.
The realities of Irish criminality were therefore at odds with British perceptions, a theme examined in the *Dublin Review* in 1857:

There are some people who live and die in the belief that everything Catholic is inferior to anything Protestant. They have always been told so, everybody says so, and of course it must be so... on the particular subject of crime the phrase commonly adopted and circulated will be flavoured with Protestantism and love of country, two very acceptable ingredients, and thus of course become the reigning belief of general society... and doubtless every English foolometer will repeat that the people in Catholic countries are far more criminal than in Protestant countries, and especially that Ireland is very black indeed when compared with England.57

In seeking to challenge this, Gainsford compared and contrasted the Criminal Returns for England and Wales with those for Ireland and observed that “Ireland is more addicted to crimes of personal violence and England to crimes of fraud or of violence arising from motives of lucre.”58 His concluding remarks are interesting, if not entirely surprising:

These returns vindicate the character of poor and Catholic Ireland, when compared with rich and Protestant England;... the convictions for crime, and especially for the more heinous crimes, are considerably less in proportion to the population in Ireland than in England and Wales. The greater poverty of Ireland would prepare us to expect a greater number of invasions upon property there; the contrary is the fact... The lesson which these returns teach to Ireland is, that her character, though bearing on the whole an advantageous comparison with that of England and Wales, yet does not shine with that degree of superior brightness which would otherwise distinguish her, because so many of her sons are yet slaves to passion, and revenge, and drink, for to these causes... may be attributed the assaults and riots which form one-sixth of all the crimes for which Irishmen are convicted... [D]ishonesty and fraud, in all the forms in which they can develop themselves, seem peculiarly to preponderate in England and Wales.59

Another context concerns contemporary efforts to combat crime and disorder in Victorian British cities and, in particular, the impact of developments in provincial policing. The practices of the “new police” forces represented an intrusion into working-class districts not previously kept under regular surveillance. The targets of these provincial forces were, essentially, varieties of “street crime,” including drunkenness, disorderly behavior, petty theft, vagrancy, and unruly forms of popular leisure.60 Police forces were sometimes
under considerable local pressure to achieve results to justify their expense to ratepayers. Since Irish migrants tended to live in the most intensively policed inner-city districts and were distinguished in the public mind by an unenviable reputation for the very offenses that the police were directed to control, they were doubly vulnerable. There is evidence to suggest that the Irish districts of some towns were deliberately targeted by the police, which partly explains the high level of prosecutions of the Irish-born in specific criminal categories in so many towns.61

This raises the question of the extent to which the police were prejudiced against the Irish per se. It has been suggested, for example, that police prejudice was evident in Birmingham during the 1867 Murphy Riots of 1867, when police did little to prevent the rioters’ entry into the Irish quarter or the destruction and ransacking of Irish houses. However, a majority of those prosecuted after the riot bore Irish names and were charged with throwing stones at the police from inside their houses.62 It is thus possible that many assaults by the Irish on the police represented a response by the Irish to a perceived victimization, although it is important to acknowledge that an antipolice culture was prevalent among many in Ireland before they migrated to Britain. Clashes with British policemen in Victorian towns could therefore be regarded as partly an extension of a traditional dislike of police authority in Ireland.63 It also possible that the deliberate policing of the Irish, as well as other outcast groups, enhanced local police popularity. In an echo of Taylor’s chapter, it could be argued that by creating scapegoats (the habitual criminal, or drunkard, the disorderly Irish), Victorian anxieties were displaced and focused on the enemy within.64 But many policemen were themselves Irish. Of forty-seven chief constables appointed between 1839 and 1880, fourteen possessed previous experience in the Royal Irish Constabulary.65 There was a significant proportion of Irish policemen, Catholic and Protestant, in some provincial forces, including Manchester.66

Despite evidence of intensive policing in Irish districts in some towns (often counterproductive as it fomented more serious clashes between the police and the Irish), many provincial policemen were afraid of executing their duties in volatile Irish districts without considerable support. When provided, this only fueled Irish suspicions that they were being discriminated against. Police “prejudice,” therefore, might perhaps be better explained in terms of a general discrimination against the “dangerous” or “criminal” sections of working-class society, a category within which the Irish were particularly vulnerable, rather than as prejudice against the Irish per se. Of greater significance, as Taylor points out, is the fact that more forms of behavior were criminalized during the Victorian period. The overrepresentation of the Irish in committals to prison also requires further qualification. It cannot be
explained simply in terms of a general prejudice by provincial magistrates against the Irish when determining sentences. It may well be that the petty offenses for which the Irish were largely prosecuted carried a greater likelihood of successful detection and prosecution, making imprisonment a more likely scenario for those convicted, although further research on this subject is necessary before any conclusions may be drawn in support of either claim.

Finally, there is the context of Irish poverty, which many British Protestants ascribed to the deleterious effects of Roman Catholicism. Much Irish criminality was clearly the by-product of a poverty-ridden and brutalizing urban slum environment, although even here it is important to acknowledge that many poor people, Irish and non-Irish, were law-abiding. The Tablet observed in 1846,

> there are two classes of Irish labouring people who differ about as widely as light and darkness. There are many who are industrious, methodical, orderly, thrifty and generous in the highest degree. But ask anyone to show you where “the Irish” live. He will take you to a miserable cul-de-sac, which you are afraid of penetrating, and which, bad as it is physically, bears a moral character even worse. There are times when no policeman who is careful of his life dare show himself within that sacred enclosure.67

Thus the worst-off Irish poor were associated in the public mind with crime and disorder. In a sense this mirrors the more negative attitudes of the period toward the poorest sections of the English working class.

Vagrancy, a constant nineteenth-century problem, offers another illustration of the relationship between Irish poverty and crime. Vagrants were placed firmly within the “dangerous classes” category.68 The 1839 Constabulary Commission argued that much crime was the product of migratory criminals in general and vagrants in particular, noting that many of the latter were Irish.69 Although research has shed considerable doubt on the “migratory thesis,” it was nonetheless a powerful force behind contemporary perceptions of criminality, and the transience of Irish migrants made them particularly vulnerable to it.70 While the stereotype of the Irish beggar was firmly fixed, much so-called “vagrancy” was in fact the seasonal movement of Irish harvesters and the migration of Irish navvies to new construction projects.71 However, movement of thousands of poor Irish into British towns during the 1840s reinforced popular perceptions of the Irish vagrant as the carrier of crime and disease.

Vagrancy laws were often applied against Irish paupers, particularly for begging. The Bath Chronicle, for instance, gleefully reported such cases between 1847 and 1852. John Williams, “an Irishman and his wife, destitute
and two children" applied for relief. On being searched, “a bottle of whiskey and 10d” were found in their possession. Williams was “discharged with a caution to leave the city immediately.” More harshly, the *Yorkshire Gazette* claimed that “there is no doubt that our gaols obtain a large amount of their inmates from the class of vagrant children who infest our streets.” Preston Gaol’s chaplain reported that twenty out of twenty-four Irish juveniles who had been imprisoned during the previous twelve months had been convicted of begging, although he acknowledged that they had been driven to Britain by pressure of extreme want and were in a state of great wretchedness. He added he knew of “several exceptional cases in which Irish families have turned out the most industrious and in every way praiseworthy.” In reality the actual scale of Irish vagrancy was generally at a lower level than contemporary perceptions allowed. Allegations that that the Irish threw themselves disproportionately on local poor relief were based on prejudice not fact. Even public concern with the subject was in many respects transient, evaporating with the gradual decline in migration from Ireland toward the end of the century.

This provides some possible explanations for the overrepresentation of the Irish poor in the statistics of crime. Fundamental to these, however, were the problems of adaptation faced by newcomers to British society at a time of acute social and economic transformation, given the social tensions arising from this process. Much of the evidence pertaining to Irish criminality relates to the early and mid-Victorian years and is limited, selective and highly subjective, representing the views of the non-Irish and, in particular, those of the “authorities.” By contrast, relatively little is actually known of the relationship between Irish migration and crime during the late Victorian period, though the reputation persisted. This subject needs proper investigation to assess how far patterns of Irish criminality characteristic of the earlier period persisted into the 1880s, and beyond. Quite simply, we don’t know. This said, it does appear that from the 1870s onward, public concern with Irish criminality in British cities was less urgent than during the mid-Victorian years, reflecting the changing social, economic, political, and cultural contexts of the late Victorian period as well as the growing stability, consciousness, and adaptability of Irish Catholic communities themselves. The nature and pattern of urban crime, and attitudes toward it, were also changing, which had some bearing on the perceived link between the Irish and crime. The marked decline in the incidence of major disturbances involving the Irish (which, as we have seen, were often “anti-Irish” disorders) during the late-Victorian period offers one illustration of change.

Decline of disorders involving the Irish needs to be placed in the broader context of the general decline of violence and disorder and the emergence of a more orderly society during the late Victorian period, where improved
policing and techniques of riot control played their part. This was a reflection of the changing face of protest in the context of the growth of more organized and institutional procedures for expressing working-class grievances, the impact of social reform, the extension of the franchise, and the distinctive cultural influences which shaped late Victorian society. It has been generally assumed that the sudden increase in anti-Irish violence was a consequence of the Famine influx coupled with mid-Victorian fears of Catholicism. So, with a subsequent decrease in Irish immigration, newcomers and hosts reached an accommodation, while the Catholic Church became less of a perceived threat and more part of the national religious fabric. Thus Irish immigration was no longer contentious in the same way. The Irish were drawn into the institutions and social life of the areas where they lived, although sectarian rivalries persisted in Merseyside and Clydeside. Ironically, the perceived threat to society in the 1880s and 1890s came not from the Irish but from the thousands of poor Jewish immigrants fleeing from persecution in Eastern Europe who received almost as hostile a reception from the host society as that earlier accorded to the pauper Irish. Finally, the tendency of the Irish, as a dynamic rather than a static group, to disperse within and between late Victorian towns and to integrate into urban society over time made them less visible. This reduced their exposure to riots and other expressions of ethnic conflict, although anti-Irish sentiment may well have been expressed in more subtle and less public ways within working-class communities.

Conclusion

Systematic studies of the statistics of Irish crime are required if further light is to be shed on the precise relationship between Irish migration and settlement and urban crime. The relationship between Irish women and crime (a vastly underresearched subject) is certainly worthy of attention. There is evidence that the Irish-born figured disproportionately in prosecutions for intimate homicide (of female spouses, in particular) between 1835 and 1905. This also opens up the whole question of how far the Irish-born were overrepresented in prosecutions for certain categories of serious crime. Finally, there is need to place Irish crime in urban Britain in a wider comparative context, by reference to Irish criminality in the countries of the Irish Diaspora, most notably the United States and Australia.

In short, much remains to be done if we are to assess adequately the Victorian criminal conversations about the extent to which the Irish were guilty of “behaving badly” in the Victorian city. If “behaving badly” is defined simply in terms of committing an action which violates the criminal law at a specific
time and suffering the consequences, the answer, on the evidence to date, is both “yes” and “no.” Some Irish migrants did break the law, for some of the reasons explored here. So too did many more English, Scottish, and Welsh people. By contrast, countless Irish were essentially law-abiding and faced the day-to-day difficulties and uncertainties of life in the Victorian city without coming into formal contact with the law. Nevertheless, the study of the relationship between Irish migrants and crime offers insights into contemporary debates about “the other” in Victorian society.

The very presence of the Irish poor in British cities enabled contemporary tensions in society to be deflected onto external factors, thereby helping to define English, or Welsh, or Scottish identities. The particular emphasis on the capacity of the Irish for breaking the law served also to highlight in British eyes the relative orderliness of the non-Irish (even if it was little more than a myth). Pearson, for instance, argues that even the derivation of “hooligan” as a term, coined by the popular press to describe the behavior of rowdy youth gangs during the August Bank Holiday celebrations, was not without significance. It was “most ingenious of late Victorian England to disown the British hooligan by giving him an Irish name.” Print reportage of Irish lawlessness provides a window on the complex and diverse experience of Irish migrants, and attitudes toward them, not least in terms of their relationship with the police and the criminal justice system. In a sense, that experience, influenced as it was by issues of identity, community, and nationality, and involving processes of alienation, regulation, adaptation, and accommodation, provides an historical exemplar which is not without relevance to the study of immigrants and minorities in a pluralist society today. But that is another story.

Notes


9. Judicial Statistics, England and Wales, 1861–1901, House of Commons Papers, 16. The Irish comprised 15 percent of all committals in 1861 (an index of overrepresentation of 4.9), 14 percent in 1871 (5.7), 12 percent in 1881 (5.7), 8 percent in 1891 (5.3), and 7 percent in 1901 (5.6).

10. For example, in Carlisle gaol in 1861, 23.4 percent of males were Irish-born, 12.6 percent female; in 1871, 18.9 percent males were Irish-born, 16.6 percent female: MacRaild, Irish Migrants, 163.


12. Chester Chronicle, 2 January; 9 January; 13 February; 3 July 1869; Chester City Gaol, Matron’s Daily Report Book, 4 February 1870.


21. The Chief Constable of Wolverhampton observed: “many are tempted to spend their time and money in these places from the total want of comfort at their own houses,” that failing the public house, “they would rather remain out in the open air if the weather was not severe”: Sanitary Condition of Wolverhampton, 1849, 28–29.


31. For further details, see Donald MacRaild, Culture, Conflict, and Migration: The Irish in Victorian Cambria (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1998).
32. Sanitary Condition of Wolverhampton, 1849, 28.
33. Lowe, The Irish, 102.
37. See especially P. Millward, “The Stockport Riots of 1852: A Study of Anti-Catholic and Anti-Irish Sentiment,” in The Irish in the Victorian City, ed. Swift and Gilley, 207–24. These disorders offer an illustration of the extent to which interplay of a variety of factors influenced violence against the Irish. Thus riots may have arisen from antagonism between Irish immigrants and hard-pressed English cotton workers resenting incursion of cheap Irish labor. Insufficient in itself to cause initial violence, the actual spark was restoration of the Catholic religious hierarchy, fanned to a flame by local Anglican clergymen and electorally vulnerable Tory politicians playing the Irish card.
41. Alan O’Day, “Varieties of Anti-Irish Behaviour in Britain, 1846–1922,” in


48. The Nation, 6 June 1868.


51. Finnegan, Poverty and Prejudice, 153.


58. Ibid., 151.

59. Ibid., 156.


64. David Taylor, “Policing and the Community: Late Twentieth-Century Myths and Late Nineteenth-Century Realities,” in Social Conditions, ed. Laybourn, 56–87.
67. The Tablet, 24 January 1846.
69. Constabulary Commission, 1839, 67. It was noted of migratory criminals that “three parts of those who are travelling now throughout the kingdom have Irish blood in them, either from father, mother, or grandmother.”
83. I am indebted to Professor Martin Wiener for this information. Referring to a range of sources, he has identified 1,050 convictions for domestic homicide during the

84. See Donald Akenson, The Irish Diaspora: A Primer (Belfast: Institute of Irish Studies, 1996), 118–19; 181–82.

85. O’Leary, Immigration and Integration, 184–85.