

Gerry Daly - Crown, empire and Home Rule : the Irish in Portsmouth, c.1880-1923

Supervisors: Brad Beaven and Matt Taylor

The Irish community in Portsmouth in the period 1880-1923 formed a significant section of the town's population. They were distinct from most other Irish settlements in urban Britain in that service to the crown and empire, whether through the army, navy or royal dockyard was, for many, the reason for their presence. This study examines this community within the broad context of diaspora studies, but more especially, the historiography of Irish migration to Britain. Most of the Portsmouth Irish were Catholic, although a smaller Irish Protestant presence was notable. The Irish resided throughout the town and were present in all sections of the town's socio-economic structure. Many of them originated from Cork which had naval and dockyard links with Portsmouth. This ensured that for many of the Irish settling in Portsmouth, a common service culture was shared with their host community.

Ostensibly, the Irish in Portsmouth should have experienced easy integration into Portsmouth's society. Instead, frequent manifestations of anti-Irish and anti-Catholic prejudice or racial stereotyping suggests that integration was fragile. Most prejudice was articulated by those who preached an English Protestant view of the world. These outsider views defined the Irish community as a homogenous 'Other' and question the idea that the Irish were unconditionally integrated into British society by the early twentieth century.

Within Portsmouth's Irish Catholic population the notion of an ethnically Irish community was self-ascribed by religion, politics and Irish nationalism. The Catholic Church expanded rapidly in the town during this period, serving to both sustain an Irish identity and highlight differences. Within this growth, a strong Irish influence ensured that an Irish ethnic awareness continued within Catholic schools. Most Catholic Irish community life involved the Church and family with carefully prescribed gender roles. Community leadership was assumed by a group of aspirant or middle-class Irishmen who both represented the community and mediated between the Irish and local society.

The Portsmouth Irish took pride in matters of crown and empire but many of them actively supported Home Rule for Ireland. In a period when tensions over nationalism were apparent, this meant an inherent ambiguity existed. The Irish in the town supported constitutional methods of obtaining Home Rule. Nevertheless, the often imprecise aims of the Home Rule campaign allowed the prospect of complete separation from Britain. This aspect fuelled opposition concerns over the integrity of the British Empire and the United Kingdom. Despite this, the nationalism expressed by the Portsmouth Irish was a conservative and romanticised view of a Gaelic-Celtic past, which omitted more radical republican demands. The Irish community invariably advocated a continuing allegiance to the crown and empire. The Catholic Church underlined this loyalty with the wide use of military and naval pageantry. Equally, celebrations of Irishness, most notably St. Patrick's

Day events, acclaimed the notion of one 'global' Irish community which included the host community in the 'wearing of the green.'

The Portsmouth Irish demonstrated a capability to embrace multiple identities. In a town which prided itself on its patriotism and the British Empire, the Irish accepted this culture whilst upholding an Irish Catholic ethnicity. Despite the existence of prejudice, the Irish community succeeded in achieving an accommodation with the host community. Through complex attachments with both Ireland and Britain they rationalised their lives by an ability to espouse both Irish and British cultures.