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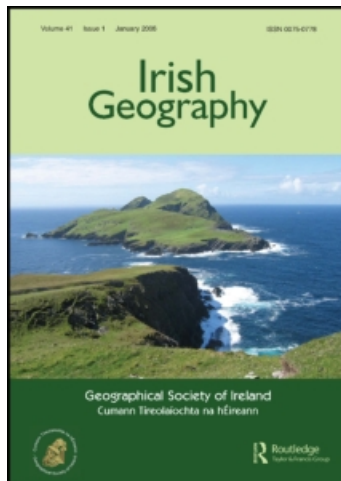
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The Sydney Irish: A Hidden Ethnic Group

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ABSTRACT

The relative position of the Irish immigrant population in Australia has been radically transformed during the present century, from being the largest non-British ethnic group to one of the smallest immigrant minorities. The elimination of race-based barriers from immigration policy has given-rise to increased variation in the ethnic composition of Australian society. Recent Irish immigrants, often from rural parts of Ireland exhibit some degree of ethnicity during the early stages of their adaptation to the cosmopolitan environment of Sydney. Eventually, however, the operation of the housing market plays an effective role in dispersing ethnic friendship patterns.

Key Index Words: Irish immigrants, friendship networks, ethnicity, adaptation, Australia.

Introduction

The Irish contribution to Australian history was, until very recently, largely ignored and the focus of the small but growing body of literature has been on the earliest period of settlement. O'Farrell (1968) documented the quiet but effective spiritual colonisation of Australia by many generations of Irish priests and religious bodies, who were not fully replaced by an Australianised clergy even as late as the 1960s. It was not until 1973 however, that Manning Clark presented a more radical interpretation of Australian history, suggesting that a key element was the sectarian conflict between the Catholic — Irish — Labour element and the English — Protestant — Liberal one. More recently O'Farrell (1986) has expanded his analysis of the Irish in Australia, illustrating their willingness to play down their Irishness in an environment which they found to be materially advantageous if somewhat culturally intolerant.

O'Brien (1984) would agree that Australian Irish Catholics were effectively an ethnic group for 150 years after their arrival in Australia and that the Anglo Saxon establishment continued to perceive them as a threat until the 1950s. By that time their Irishness had been sufficiently diluted and in the face of a more powerful threat from the growing ethnic mix of 'New Australians' the Irish became acceptable as allies. Rather than the historian's concern, however, with questions of national identity, this paper adopts a geographical perspective to analyse the attempts made by immigrants to construct social networks in a new

cultural environment, having left behind the familiarity of family and home. The focus is on recent Irish migration to Sydney.

Immigration Policy

Australian immigration policy during the postwar period underwent a radical transformation. From being effectively, if not officially, a White Australia policy until the 1960s, its most recent phase has witnessed the admittance of more than 100,000 Indochinese refugees, prompting one prominent historian to refer to the 'asianisation of Australia' (Grimond J. *The Economist* March 7, 1987). It was not until 1972, that preferential treatment towards 'British subjects' regarding visas and permanent residence was removed from Australian policy. Since 'British subjects' also included Irish persons who were born before Ireland left the Commonwealth in 1949, immigration policy had been particularly favourable to the Irish until the 1970s. Preferential treatment also extended to the assisted passage scheme, access to public housing and voting rights.

Under the assisted passage scheme preference was given to married and skilled migrants. During the post war era a major propaganda effort was focussed on London's underground where numerous notices appealed to potential emigrants to "bring out a Briton". Many Irish people also emigrated to Australia, having spent some years in England, but the flow was modest relative to the total outflow from Ireland. In 1951, for example, Australia's proportion of the Irish population living overseas was only 2.9% compared with 44.3% in the United States and 47.1% in the United Kingdom (Commission on Emigration and other Population Problems, 1955). Once it became clear that sufficient numbers of Irish or British migrants were not being

attracted to Australia it was necessary to look elsewhere. Initially during the postwar period European refugees who were referred to as 'New Australians' were admitted, and later large numbers of southern Europeans, particularly from Italy and Greece arrived. This latter movement created a new working class in Australia and numbered Sydney and Melbourne among the largest urban concentrations of these nationalities to be found in any part of the world. The most recent intake of Asian refugees resulting from the elimination of all race-based elements from the immigration policy has further added to the rich ethnic composition of Australian society, which is sometimes euphemistically referred to as "multicultural".

While the most recent phase of immigration policy does suggest an increasing acceptance of cultural pluralism, Zubrzycki (1977) claims that the harmony which exists between the various ethnic groups has been preserved largely because ethnic communities have kept to themselves. Despite adopting Australian style of dress, language, sport and diet, he suggests that there has been little real assimilation of immigrants. Other authors agree that a significant proportion of Australians believe in Anglo-conformism and are apathetic about cultural pluralism (Callan, 1983). Zubrzycki (1977) explains that in Australia where there is a strong respect for privacy of the individual, there is a lack of awareness of the persistence of cultural differentiation which occurs largely in the private, invisible world of the family and of personal relations.

It is not surprising, therefore, that one of the strongest impressions left on visitors to Australia is "the thorough Britishness of the place" (Grimond, 1987). Even in the case of British immigrants, however, researchers are beginning to question the approach that treats them merely as an extension of the Anglo Saxon core culture and suggest that they might be regarded as a third culture between the Australian and other foreign born (Burnley, 1979).

The Postwar Period

By 1947 the foreign born population of Australia reached its nadir of 9.8%. The Irish had fallen from 20.0% of the foreign born in 1901, when it was the second largest immigrant group after the English, to 6.0% in 1947. Despite its numerical increase from 44,813 in 1947 to 67,737 the Irish born counted for only 2.2% of the foreign born population in 1981 (Fig. 1). The two Australian states with the largest cities, Sydney and Melbourne attracted the highest proportions of Irish immigrants and in 1981 New South Wales had 32.0% and Victoria 28.0% of the total. Although Queensland had a decline in its share of the Irish population since 1947 and Western Australia had an increase, both states had around 13.0% of the total in 1981, while South Australia had just under

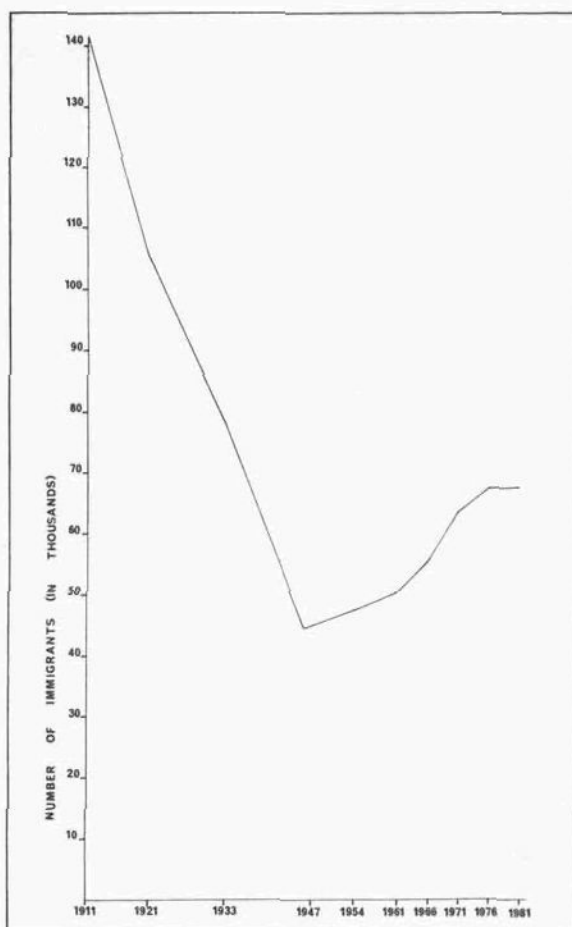


Figure 1. Number of Irish-born immigrants in Australia 1911-1981.

10.0% (Fig.2). While the Irish shared a strongly rural background with other immigrant groups to Australia their settlement was more urbanised than the total population, reflecting their involvement mainly in the urban workforce.

The annual inflow of Irish males and females increased from around 400 for each sex in the 1950s to over 500 in the 1960s and up to a peak of between 600 and 800 in the early 1970s (Fig.3). Until the 1970s males outnumbered females consistently but in more recent years females outnumbered males as the overall figure dropped to 450 males and 550 females. At a time when Australia has become more attractive to potential emigrants from Ireland, accessibility has been greatly reduced.

The Irish in Sydney

In 1981, just over a quarter of the 67,738 Irish born immigrants in Australia lived in Sydney, making up a mere 0.5% of the metropolitan population. The Irish

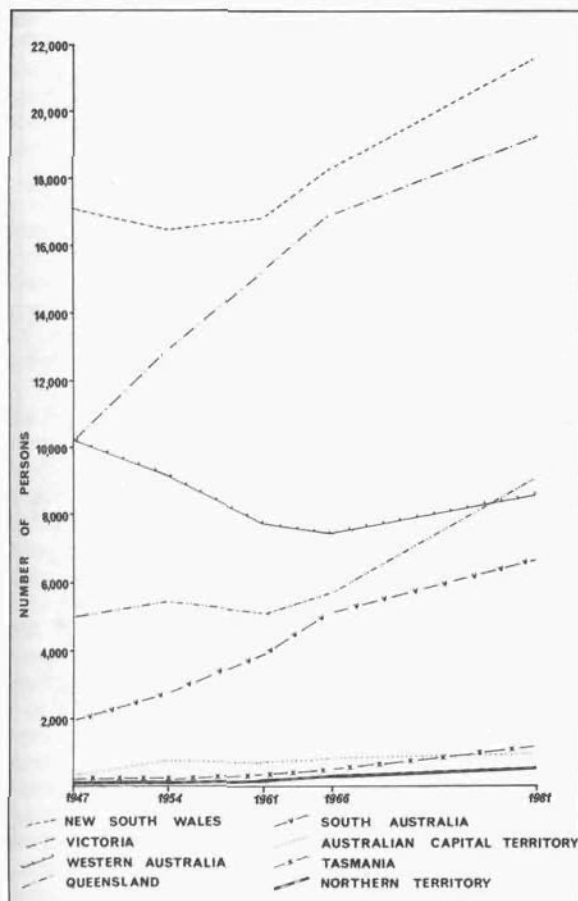


Figure 2. Trends in Irish-born population 1947-1981 by State.

were outnumbered not only by the dominant English group but also by many others including Italians, Asians, Greeks and Yugoslavs. Unlike many of the non-English speaking immigrants, however, the Irish were well dispersed residentially throughout the metropolitan area. The main difference between the Irish and the remainder of the population was a higher representation of the Irish in the lower status western subdivision while fewer Irish resided in the higher status northern and southern subdivisions.

An analysis of the 1971 Irish population at the Collectors District (CD) level (the smallest statistical unit), revealed selective clusters in contiguous CDs (Fig. 4). Major clusters were apparent in the western suburbs, the inner city, and the mid-western suburbs. Despite the relative dispersion of the Irish throughout the metropolitan area, some degree of concentration was evident at the neighbourhood level. These clusters of Irish immigrants also revealed a strong male bias, particularly in the mid-western suburbs and in the inner city.

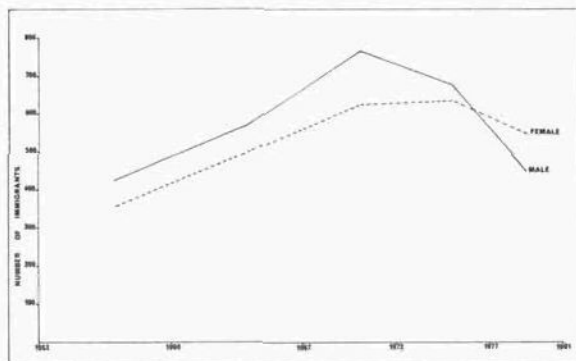


Figure 3. Average number of male and female Irish immigrants per annum.

Background Survey

A major obstacle to the analysis of social interaction of Irish immigrants was the absence of a base population from which a random sample could be derived. Because of this two separate sources of information were utilised to obtain background information on the Irish and to help choose a study area for more detailed analysis. The first of these sources was a survey of a wide variety of Irish social activities in Sydney and the second consisted of membership files of the main Irish club in the city. Based on this information a network analysis of Irish friendship patterns was carried out in the midwestern suburbs. Before turning to this more detailed analysis, attention will be given first to the preliminary surveys. In the first instance 619 respondents attending a variety of social activities in the city answered a brief questionnaire. These activities included concerts, football club dances, Gaelic Athletic Association sports days and events organised by the main Irish clubs. The significance of these social gatherings reflected more a desire on the part of the Irish for interaction within a familiar atmosphere rather than an interest in promoting an Irish identity. Unlike many non-English speaking immigrants such as the southern Europeans, the Irish maintained a low profile.

The background survey also revealed considerable differentiation within the Irish population regarding their socio-economic status which was in keeping with their wide residential dispersal throughout the city. It was clear that the inner, eastern and mid-western suburbs acted as receiving areas for the most recent arrivals while the outer suburban areas had a more settled and established immigrant population. Immigrants in the mid-western suburbs were predominantly in lower occupational categories, had low levels of home and car ownership and more than half did not consider themselves as settled in Australia. In the low status far western suburbs, on the other hand, at least three quarters of the Irish were married,



Figure 4. Irish born population distribution in 1971.

had four or more children and were home owners. Not surprisingly, the northern suburbs had the highest proportions of Irish in professional and service occupations and fewer respondents had an Irish spouse.

There was considerable residential movement within the metropolitan area, with the predominant movement being from inner transient areas to outer suburban neighbourhoods. Much of this movement was associated with marriage and the acquisition of homes, and the major flow was in the direction of the relatively less expensive far western suburbs. Between 1966 and 1981 the inner western and central subdivisions lost 1,050 Irish persons, while the two western subdivisions gained 3,260. Residential moves to the far western suburbs frequently involved a distance of more than 20 kilometres, which placed considerable strain on efforts to maintain contact with Irish persons in former residential areas.

Frequent short distance moves between flats characterised the transient Irish population. The mid western suburbs appeared to have an attraction for

those who were involved in construction. Job opportunities were more accessible here, and the central location suited those whose job location shifted frequently.

The Irish Club

Access to the 1975 membership files of the Gaelic club, which had 1,530 members, provided further insights into Irish residential patterns. The club represented about 10.0% of the immigrant population and it was located in Surry Hills, an inner city neighbourhood in which Ruth Park's novel *The Harp in the South* was set. It had been an important Irish settlement until the 1950s. The club's members were found in most parts of the city, but there was a significant concentration within easy access to it (Fig.4).

Three areas of residential concentration of club members were evident, the eastern suburbs, the inner city and the mid-western suburbs. The sex ratio of membership was more balanced in the eastern suburbs

than in the remaining two concentrations where male membership was predominant. The occupational background of members in the eastern suburbs was broadly based with a predominance of young, single or recently married immigrants employed mainly in service occupations.

Membership in the inner city was made up of both young transients and older unmarried males. In contrast with the Australian born, high celibacy rates characterised the older male Irish population in Australia. Despite the westward shift of the Irish population in Sydney since the 1960s, centrally located cheap accommodation continued to attract a small proportion of the Irish population.

The biggest concentration of club members was in the mid-western suburbs where 32% lived (Fig. 5). The Burwood area, in particular, had a special significance for Irish immigrants in construction work. The residential pattern of club members in this area revealed a preference for the home unit blocks which were located close to the two main western railway lines connecting the central metropolitan station. There was a definite pattern of flat-sharing by the Irish in this area. The data also revealed a remarkable concentration of labourers, semi-skilled workers and tradesmen in the mid-western suburbs. The frequently mentioned occupations were 'plant operator', 'drainer' and 'pipe layer', indicating the near monopoly of Irish contractors since the 1960s. Their occupational background, instead of illustrating their social status, was more revealing of an ethnic work network which guaranteed regular employment to fellow countrymen. The significance of such a network for the Portuguese in Toronto has been documented by Anderson (1974).

General Observations

A recurrent theme in conversations among fellow immigrants is their attitude towards the host society, and the communication problems which arise from cultural differences. Most of these differences are related to subtleties and nuances in the ways people present themselves in day to day situations. They may refer to difficulties in finding a common topic of conversation or to differences of accent or idiomatic expression. Such differences often result in Irish immigrants showing a preference to socialise with fellow countrymen in order to attain a deeper level of communication.

In the case of the Irish, however, such differences are considerably ameliorated by entrée into Irish-Australian circles, particularly through involvement in parish and school activities. In the case of rural immigrants, in particular, the experience of living in a large metropolis was also part of the adaptation process. Having left an environment with a less demanding pace of life, they were becoming attuned to

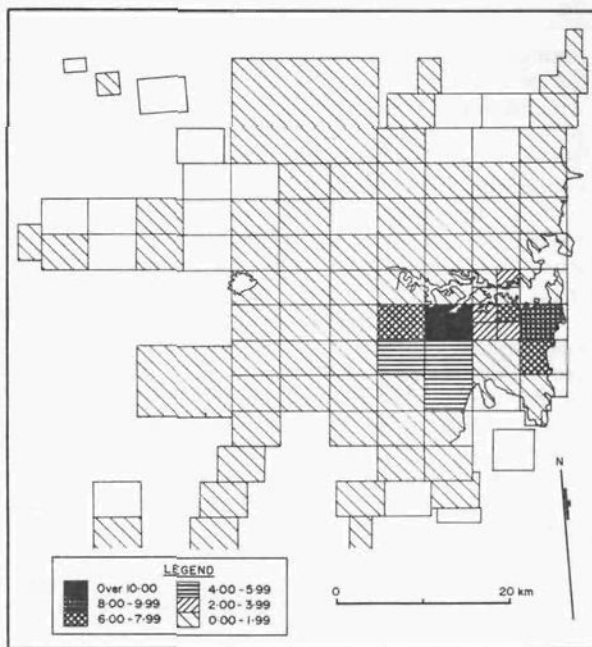


Figure 5. Distribution of Irish club membership in Sydney, 1975.

a rapidly moving metropolis where one's social life involved greater co-ordination and planning.

Immigrants were also forced to come to terms with the considerable social differences between the two countries. Social relations in Australia were greatly affected by the economic levelling of what was perceived to be a more egalitarian society. While recent analyses have disputed the reality of this egalitarianism, access to a wider variety of recreational opportunities such as holiday homes and the greater absence of class consciousness seemed to prevail. On the other hand Australia had a more permissive moral climate with wider acceptance of divorce and abortion. There was a common tendency for immigrants to have an exaggerated positive perception of their home country and a more negative attitude towards the one they had adopted.

In comparison with non-English speaking immigrants, the Irish and British were culturally closest to the Australian host population. In addition to being residentially concentrated non-English speaking migrants tended to develop a greater level of institutional completeness. A typical Greek neighbourhood in Sydney was marked by a large Greek orthodox church and many shop names in Greek. The Irish, on the other hand, are a relatively invisible ethnic group. Zubrzycki (1960) noted, however, that while the Dutch had few national organisations in comparison with the Ukrainians, he found that the Dutch were no less inward looking in their friendship patterns than the Ukrainians.

An important difference between the Irish and other

immigrant groups such as the southern Europeans, was the absence of kin in the Irish migration pattern, whereas many Greek families arrived in Australia as part of a transplanted village community. Hence the 100 or so social clubs which exist in Sydney with direct connections to various Greek island communities. The Irish, on the other hand, had to substitute friends for former kinship contacts, and this partly explains the close knit friendship patterns which emerged among many of them.

Despite the language barrier and the closed nature of non-English speaking immigrant networks, the common experience of migration and an understanding of the difficulties encountered by immigrants did create a basis for friendship between Irish and non-English speaking immigrants. Nevertheless the tendency for Irish people in ethnically mixed neighbourhoods was to seek the closest social contact with the Australian born. A common concern of Irish immigrants in such neighbourhoods was that their children's education was being retarded by the poor level of English among the children of other nationalities.

Friendship Patterns

Both the background survey already referred to and the Irish club data indicated that despite the well dispersed distribution of the Irish in Sydney, there was considerable evidence of an ethnic pattern of social interaction. To shed some light on the processes underlying this pattern, an in-depth interview with 100 Irish household heads was carried out in the mid-western suburbs. It should be stressed that while the background survey and the Irish club data provided useful insights into the immigrant population, they did not provide the basis for analysing friendship patterns. Rather the 100 households were traced in an attempt to give as complete a coverage as possible to one small part of the metropolitan area. In addition to collecting data about the interviewees, information concerning 484 friends living within the metropolitan area was also obtained. While 76% of all their friends were Irish, their residential distribution was dispersed widely throughout the metropolitan area, reflecting the distribution of the Irish immigrant population (Fig. 6). A variety of friendship patterns ranging between ethnic and non-ethnic was uncovered, and the case studies represented a good cross-section of the different phases of Irish immigration during the postwar period.

During the 1950s many of the Irish who arrived in Australia were young single persons from rural areas. Frequently it was necessary to "go bush" in search of employment and a number of years may have been spent on camp jobs in different parts of Australia. A major source of employment for immigrants of this period, including the many displaced refugees from Eastern Europe, was the Snowy Mountain Hydroelectric Scheme.

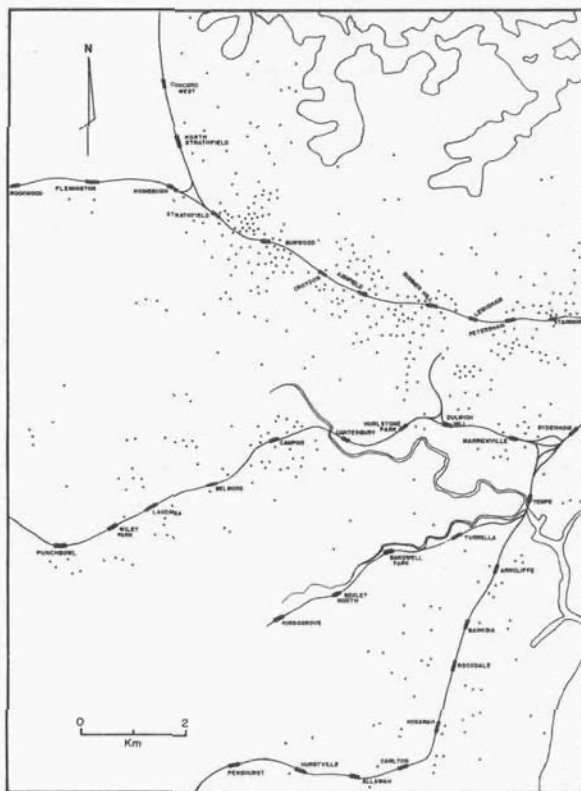


Figure 6. Distribution of Irish club members in the mid-western suburbs.

The traditional life style of these single Irish males revolved around periods of earning money in the bush and returning to spend it in the city. It was a life of wandering with few commitments until they married and settled in the city. Marriage came relatively late and a low marriage rate characterised these earlier immigrants. Their experience was summed up in the words of one interviewee when he said "we worked hard, we drank hard and we batched together". As a consequence of late marriage, few children or childless marriages were common, while some of those who remained single ended up in the cheap accommodation of the inner city.

Since there was an excess of males in the Irish immigrant population of the 1950s, it was the exception rather than the rule to have an Irish wife. Australian wives, however, were often second or third generation Irish and a number of examples of two Irish friends marrying two Australian sisters of Irish descent were encountered. Such a pattern of interaction was partly facilitated by the dances held in the Irish National Association in the inner city, which was referred to as "the marriage bureau" at that time. The picture which emerges, therefore, is of a close-knit community of immigrants who remained rather inward looking during their initial period of adaptation, and whose friendships were predominantly Irish.

Some remnants of close-knit friendship patterns dating back to the 1950s still survived in parts of the mid-western suburbs. They survived in the form of male drinking groups and were strongly influenced by the fact that the members shared a common area of origin in Ireland, and by their residential proximity in Sydney. The majority of immigrants from the 1950s, however, had become dispersed throughout the metropolitan area, but because of their period of residence, their dispersal tended to be to middle distance as opposed to suburbs on the fringe of the metropolis. Residential dispersal usually accompanied marriage and family expansion and it contributed significantly towards the weakening of former Irish friendships.

Among those who were involved in construction work there was a greater likelihood of maintaining Irish friendships, but in many cases the established immigrants had become part of the broader metropolitan labour force. While many did have close friendships with fellow countrymen in Sydney, opportunities for meeting were sporadic unless they arose through common interests such as their childrens' school activities. With the passage of time much of their social commitments became more parish and neighbourhood based.

Patterns of circulation among Irish immigrants in Sydney were differentiated to a considerable extent according to phases of immigration. While contact between the Irish was not exclusively related to their phase of arrival, generation gaps did emerge between the different groups. Immigrants of the 1960s shared many features with those of the 1950s but there were some differences. By the 1960s Irish wives were more numerous and many immigrants arrived in Australia after having spent some years in England.

During the 1970s the mid-western suburbs contained a variety of Irish immigrant types, many of whom were part of close-knit Irish friendship networks and some of whom were isolated from such contact patterns. A major source of contrast which differentiated these patterns was whether immigrants came from a rural or urban background. The core of the Irish ethnic social world in Sydney was comprised mainly of immigrants from a rural background, who were involved with Irish contractors in construction. They formed close-knit networks by working and socialising together, encapsulating themselves in an Irish world (Fig.7).

A common pattern was to have emigrated as single males in twos or threes from the same parish, and in some cases to have spent a period of "apprenticeship" in England. During the 1960s an Irish contractor became involved in installing high voltage cables underground in Sydney having previously obtained experience in England, and in a short period the Irish had monopolised this type of work in Sydney. This contractor played an important role as a catalyst within Irish networks, sub-contracting work to Irish

contractors, who in turn employed mainly Irish gangs of labourers.

Apart from whatever affinity for this type of work which Irish rural immigrants had, the opportunity for good remuneration was the main attraction. While tax evasion was not possible on a grand scale, nevertheless there was a good understanding between employer and employees and with a reputation for hard work and long hours of overtime the money was good. Because of the casual nature of this work insurance cover was not always adequate and injured workers sometimes depended on a generous collection among colleagues in place of compensation.

Since particular hotels (pubs) were frequented by Irish contractors in the Burwood area they were often referred to as "the office". This was for the good reason that contractors used them as a base for paying out wages and they were also places in which to find job opportunities. This ethnic work network gave rise to close-knit friendship patterns not dissimilar to those found in rural Ireland. In this way the Irish immigrants gave meaning and identity to their new environment. All male drinking groups were also part of this social environment, and the inner city Irish club was a popular centre for interaction.

Despite the familiarity, however, of this ethnic milieu, it was also very unstable. News of higher wages in other parts of Australia sometimes resulted in workers disappearing for long periods. Consequently there was a strange mixture of an absence of attachment, on the one hand, to a particular place or job and yet a strong tendency, on the other hand, to gravitate back towards this close-knit social world upon returning from the bush. Completing the networks based on construction and drinking groups was a range of Gaelic Athletic Association sporting activities, including football and hurling teams.

The mid-western suburbs during the 1970s also contained a different but equally homogeneous and well interconnected group of Irish immigrants, who were predominantly young married couples from Dublin. They were availing of the assisted passage scheme as a two year trial period in Australia. They also had connections with young Catholic Belfast couples and with immigrants from rural areas, but generally their pattern of socialising was influenced by their urban working class background, and they regarded the rural Irish as being less sophisticated. In common with the rural Irish, however, localism in their place of origin, usually consisting of neighbouring streets in Dublin, influenced their pattern of friendship in Sydney. Having left close knit communities in Dublin they became involved in equally close knit friendship patterns in Sydney.

Compared with their fellow countrymen from rural areas these young Dubliners married earlier and their social life in Sydney took the form of a number of such couples visiting a local Australian football club. With the expansion of their families, socialising became

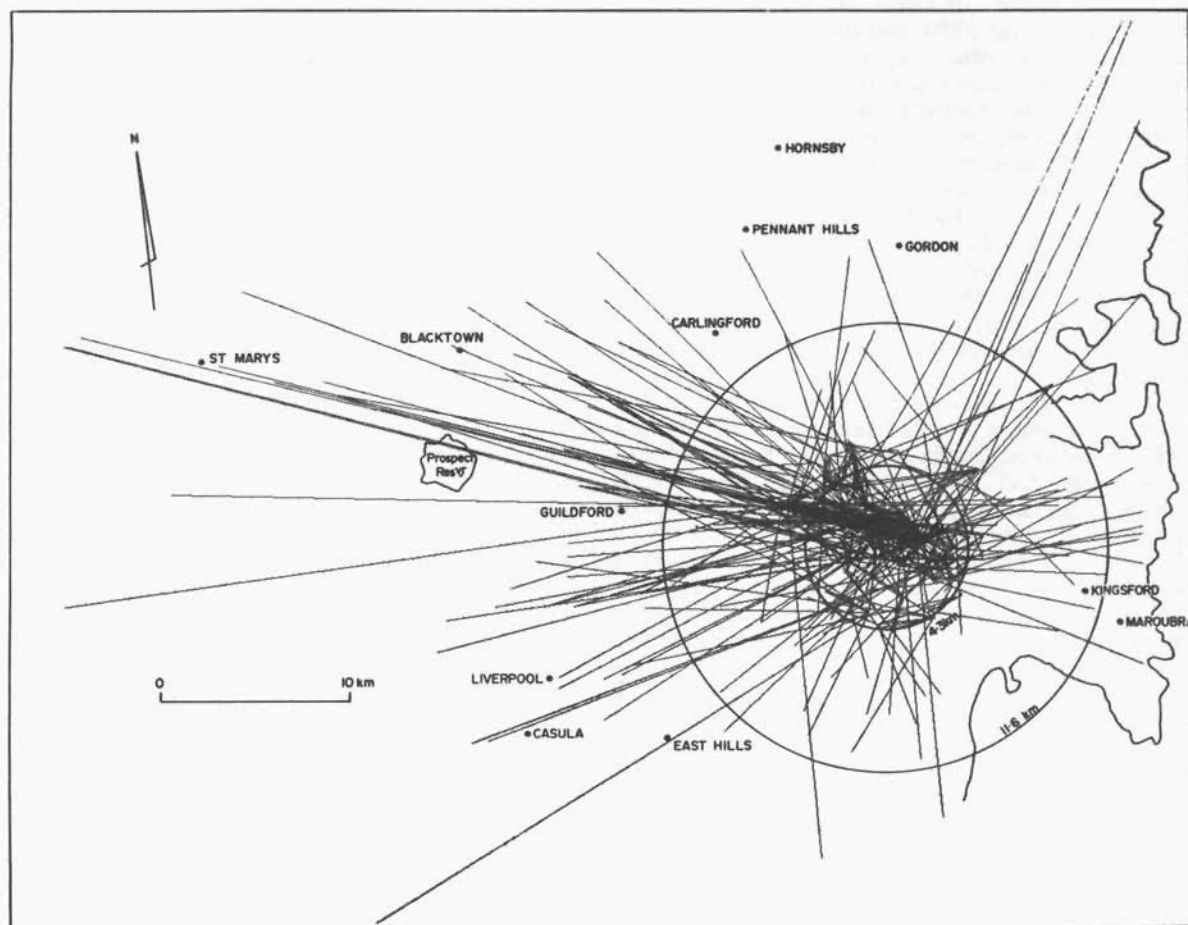


Figure 7. Friendship linkages of interviewees.

more home based and centred on major events such as christenings and anniversaries. Since many of these Dubliners came to Australia having completed an apprenticeship for some trade, they had a good entrée into the wider occupational structure of the city. Their interest in soccer rather than in gaelic games also provided an avenue into the cosmopolitan population. Thus while not becoming part of the larger ethnic Irish world, urban immigrants did form very clannish circles and only gradually emerged into the wider community. During their initial period of settlement their close knit circles helped to dispel loneliness but with time many found these restrictive Irish circles unsatisfactory and began to broaden their perspectives.

Alongside these interconnected Irish immigrant networks there were other Irish persons who remained isolated from such ethnic patterns. These were usually from skilled or professional backgrounds, and in some cases lived alongside other Irish immigrants but quite unaware of their existence.

The one remaining group of immigrants for whom it is very difficult to get information are those who have

left Australia and while little data on this question are available, a recent survey suggested the return rate of Irish and UK born to be as high as 23.0% (Australian Population and Immigration Council, 1976). It is interesting to note that while British immigrants were assumed to have had least difficulty in adapting to Australia, they have had the highest rate of return (Burnley, 1979).

Conclusion

Historians of the Irish identity in Australia point increasingly towards a cultural separateness which previously was little understood and frequently ignored. This detailed analysis of Irish friendship patterns in Sydney cautions against settling for an over simplistic explanation of immigrant adaptation. Each successive wave of immigrants must come to terms with forming a totally new social world in what is an increasingly cosmopolitan environment, having left behind at a considerable distance the familiarity of home and family. For many Irish in Sydney their initial

period of settlement was characterised by the re-creation of a social environment similar to what they had left behind. For those from a rural background, in particular, working together in construction formed the centre of this social world, while for urbanites their more anglicized perception opened up other avenues into the wider cosmopolitan society. While some have resisted the disintegration of an ethnic pattern of social

life for many years, the housing market of the city plays a very effective role in dispersing these close-knit networks. Over time, with marriage and family expansion, the role of ethnic friendship patterns, which played an important substituting role for the absent kin group is greatly reduced, and involvement in neighbourhood and community activities demands greater attention.

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