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Cormac Ó Gráda: Jewish Ireland in the Age of Joyce

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Introduction

Arbutus Place: Pleasant Street: pleasant old times . . .
M. Shulomowitz, Joseph Goldwater, Moses
Herzog, Harris Rosenberg, M. Moisel, J. Citron. . . .
With swaying arms they wail in pneuma over
the recreant Bloom.
—*James Joyce, Ulysses*

Ninety-five percent of the population of Ireland is
Catholic, five percent is Protestant; I am Chief
Rabbi of the rest.
—*I. Jakobovitz, chief rabbi of Ireland, 1948–59*

THE ADVENTURES of Leopold Bloom in Dublin on 16 June 1904 (Bloomsday) are familiar to lovers of literature everywhere. James Joyce's decision to give such a prominent role to a Dublin Jew (or half-Jew) in *Ulysses* has ensured Ireland's capital city an enduring role in Jewish studies.¹ Yet although a *Ulysses* without its Bloom is inconceivable, Joyce's central character sprang from a community rarely mentioned in social and economic histories of the city or, indeed, in discussions of Jewish migration generally. There is a good reason for this: the small size of that community. In 1866, the year of the apocryphal Leopold Bloom's birth, the Jewish population of Dublin numbered about two hundred souls and that of Belfast at most a few dozen. Dublin's Jewish quarter, where Leopold Bloom would spend so many "pleasant times," did not yet exist.

In the following decades Dublin and Ireland were very much marginal destinations for the more than two million Jewish men, women, and children who left eastern and central Europe in search of a better life. On the eve of World War I the Jewish population of greater Dublin numbered barely three thousand, one-tenth that of Manchester or Montreal, and a much smaller fraction of that of London or New York. Other Irish destinations were of even less import. Yet the immigration, miniscule though it was in relative terms, spawned a vibrant Jewish community that would sustain itself for several decades. The small size of the community shaped its occupational profile and influenced its acculturation; it also compromised its viability in the long run. The unimportance of immigra-

tion in modern Irish history, at least before the era of the Celtic Tiger in the 1990s, lends the case of Ireland's Jews a particular interest.²

Over the years, Ireland's Jewish immigrants and their families have been the subjects of a small number of scholarly works and evocative and increasingly elegaic memoirs and television documentaries. Bernard Shillman's *Short History of the Jews in Ireland* (1945), Louis Hyman's *Jews of Ireland to the Year 1910* (1972),³ and Dermot Keogh's *Jews in Twentieth-century Ireland: Refugees, Anti-Semitism, and the Holocaust* (1998) are foremost among the former, while Nick Harris's *Dublin's Little Jerusalem* (2002), Stanley Price's *Somewhere to Hang My Hat: An Irish-Jewish Journey* (2002), and Valerie Lapin's documentary *Shalom Ireland* (2003) are the most recent examples of the latter. Somewhere in between, part social history, part personal or communal memoir, are Ray Rivlin's *Shalom Ireland* (2003) and David Marcus's *Buried Memories* (2004). Somewhat less accessible, though no less useful, are the unpublished dissertations of Gerry E. Moore (1981, 1984) and Mark Duffy (1985), and Micheál Ó Meachair's Irish-language introduction to Judaism (2004), which includes a brief account of Irish Jewry. Shillman and Hyman deal mostly with the pre-1900 era, while the main focus of Keogh's study is indicated by its title. Moore is also concerned with communal relations, while Duffy concentrates on the economic condition of the pre-1914 Jewish community and its first steps toward middle-class respectability. The immigrants are also commemorated in a small Irish Jewish Museum, located in a former synagogue at 3/4 Walworth Road, a little street by Dublin's Grand Canal that was once, albeit fleetingly, completely Jewish.⁴ The museum's collection of artifacts and documents also represents, sadly, an Irish Jewish community in decline, both in terms of numbers and vibrancy. More memoirs are in progress, and the expatriate community maintains a vicarious existence on the Internet.

What prompted the immigrants to forsake their (mainly) Lithuanian towns and villages? Why did they opt for Dublin and a few other places in an Irish economy not then noted for its economic dynamism? How did they fare relative to their coreligionists who chose other destinations? Did they differ from them in terms of skills, wealth, and origins? How did they and their children adapt or assimilate? Why did an apparently vibrant community begin to decline in the 1940s? Such questions, still largely unanswered, are the focus of this study. They relate to the economic and social histories of both Jewry and Ireland.

Leopold Bloom's creator lived between 1882 and 1941. The main analytic focus of this study is the economic history and demography of Dublin's and Ireland's Jewish community between the 1870s and the 1940s—hence “the age of Joyce.” The history of Irish Jewry in this period—or, to be more precise, of the numerically dominant newcomers from eastern

Europe—is one of resilience and successful adjustment to the challenges and limited opportunities it faced. This is reflected in the growing size of this always close-knit and sometimes fractious community, in its wealth of communal institutions, and in its shifting occupational profile and geographical location. Ireland’s relative economic backwardness shaped both the number and the occupational profile of its immigrants. They started out as a classic proto-capitalist “middleman minority,” carving out trading niches previously unimagined or shunned by the native majority. Like the other ethnic “Mercurians” (devotees of Mercury, the Greek god of merchants), merchants, and other service providers described by historian Yuri Slezkine, they peddled dry goods and household furnishings on credit to the Irish poor, and engaged in petty moneylending—socially useful but low-prestige callings reliant on a poor clientele.⁵ The small size of the Irish Jewish community meant proportionately more self-employment, fewer masters, and fewer servants than in larger urban communities such as New York’s Lower East Side and London’s East End. Even before World War I the number of rambling peddlers in Ireland was declining, although the credit draper (who sold dry goods on the system of installment credit known colloquially as the “never-never”) survived into the 1950s and 1960s. For the immigrants acculturation entailed shifting to more “respectable” and more rewarding ways of making a living, mainly in manufacturing and the professions. The shift was also associated with movement from the initial areas of settlement to more middle-class neighborhoods.

In Dublin the very first immigrants settled in tenement housing, but they soon moved on to modest streets off the South Circular Road and Lower Clanbrassil Street on the southern edge of the city, engaging in petty trading and skilled craftwork for a living. Within a decade or two, the more successful switched to middle-class housing in the same area. On the eve of World War II many of these (or their children) had already shifted across the Grand Canal, leapfrogging the area immediately to its south as far as the middle-class suburbs of Rathgar and Terenure. They left the traveling, the moneylending, and the tailoring behind them, opting instead for careers in dentistry, medicine, and the law, or became merchants and factory owners. In Belfast’s Jewish community, these patterns were replicated.

The economic trajectory of post-1870s Irish Jewry has left its mark on a wide variety of sources. Manuscript census enumeration forms provide snapshots of first-generation immigrants and their children. School enrollment records capture the community’s eagerness to educate its children, and reveal the community’s shifting occupational structure and its gentrification in suburbia. Naturalization records from the 1910s offer complementary insights into how the immigrants made a living in the early de-

cares. Commercial directories chronicle the community's settlement patterns. Autobiographical memoirs and taped conversations and interviews offer insights into the immigrants' acculturation and adaptation. Communal records, newspapers, and numerous public and private archival sources at home and abroad add their own insights. Moreover, the Jews of Ireland should not be examined in isolation: the numerous studies of Jewish populations in Britain and further afield offer useful comparative perspectives. While in certain respects the fortunes of Irish Jewry replicate those of so-called frontier Jewries in places as far apart as South Africa, Latin America, and northern Europe, Irish geography and history also lent them a certain uniqueness.⁶

The chapters that follow are thematic rather than chronological or narrative in structure. The plan of the book, briefly, is as follows. It begins by placing the immigration in context. Late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Ireland was, to say the least, an unlikely destination for Jewish immigrants. Whether the choices of Ireland or Dublin as destinations were miscalculations or rational choices based on the relative status or skills of the small subset of migrants who settled there is an interesting issue. The immigrants settled in cities where, in contrast to rural Ireland, numbers were rising. Their skills and religious obligations account for why most of them opted for the larger towns and cities of Ireland; but why did Dublin receive more immigrants than the booming and (at this stage) bigger city of Belfast? Chapter 1 describes where most of the immigrants came from, why they left their homes, and why they came to Ireland.

Chapter 2 outlines the economic and social conditions faced by the immigrants between the 1880s and the 1930s, both in late Victorian and Joycean Dublin and elsewhere in Ireland. Its main focus is on Dublin, where a majority of the immigrants settled. There the small preexisting Jewish community, comfortably off and English speaking, sought to integrate the newcomers quickly "in accordance with Anglo Jewish ideas"; in due course, the immigrants adapted in their own way.⁷ Despite the city's relative lack of industry, its evident poverty, and its disproportionately large casual laboring class, there was some improvement in living standards in this period. While Dublin had more than its share of substandard housing, its newer neighborhoods contained an ample stock of modest but well-built units that met the immigrants' needs. Moreover, in the late nineteenth century the market for rented housing was an active one, making it easier for the immigrants to cluster.

Chapters 3 and 4 describe how the immigrants made ends meet. Most first-generation males engaged in service occupations such as peddling clothes and house furnishings for credit, trading in secondhand goods, or petty moneylending. As so-called weekly men or credit drapers, they

offered many of the urban poor their first taste of borrowing on the installment system. Chapter 3 explores why peddling and moneylending played such a key role in the economic life of the immigrant community at the outset. Like other middleman minorities, the immigrants engaged in work at which the natives were less adept or toward which they were less inclined. Not all immigrants were middlemen, however, and as the community grew in size, for a time the proportion of journeyman tailors and cabinetmakers grew in tandem. Yet even the humblest wage earner aspired toward self-employment or employer status; the canvasser or collector yearned to be a self-employed peddler, the peddler looked forward to a less peripatetic means of survival, the tailor aspired to owning a clothing factory, and so on.⁸ Chapter 4 chronicles the gradual shift from middleman minority to manufacturing and the professions. It also seeks to account for the low proportion of “ordinary working men” among the immigrants relative to, say, the proportions in Leeds, London, or even New York.

Like immigrants everywhere, the Jews clustered in a particular area—in Dublin this would become “Little Jerusalem”—on arrival. Within a generation—and here, too, experience elsewhere offers strong parallels—the more successful began to create another cluster a few miles south of the original settlement. Chapter 5 devotes special attention to a selection of streets in Little Jerusalem that were once heavily Jewish, and analyzes their shifting ethnicity over more than half a century. It also describes Jewish settlement in Belfast and Cork.

Surprisingly, perhaps, a significant minority of Ireland’s pre-1914 immigrants were illiterate, or virtually so. However, like east European Jewish immigrants elsewhere, they were quick to take advantage of the educational opportunities available to their children. In Ireland a century ago, schooling beyond the age of thirteen or fourteen was very much the exception for working-class or middle-class children, even in the cities. Yet almost from the start, the more successful of the immigrants were sending their sons to fee-paying secondary schools, whether in Dublin, Cork, or Belfast. Chapter 6 describes the schooling choices of first- and second-generation immigrants—mainly Lithuanian Jews or “Litvaks”—and their implications for acculturation.⁹

Chapter 7 addresses the historical demography of Irish Jewry. The demography of minority Jewish populations in Europe and America has attracted considerable scholarly attention. Like the role of Roman Catholicism in delaying the demographic transition, the Jewish example seems to give pride of place to the impact of culture and religion on demographic trends. Jewish marriage and marital fertility patterns elsewhere have attracted considerable scholarly interest. Some Jewish populations have been identified as forerunners or pioneers in the European transition to

low marital fertility, but the marital fertility of Jewish immigrants elsewhere on the eve of World War I is known to have been high.

The demographic impact of ethnicity has been widely noted.¹⁰ In practice, however, it is not easy to disentangle the relative importance of culture and economics: in the case of Dublin a century ago, for example, there would be little point in comparing Jews living in modest comfort off the South Circular Road with, say, Catholics in the slums of the Coombe or inner-city Gardiner Street, or Protestants in the middle-class suburbs of Rathmines or Pembroke. Here I attempt to control for socioeconomic and environmental factors by analyzing differences between Jewish and non-Jewish families living in the same neighborhoods. This helps isolate the impact of “culture,” since both Jewish and non-Jewish households on the streets with a significant Jewish presence would have shared the same water and air quality, and the same access to public services (such as they were) and retail outlets.

Chapter 7 first describes the 1911 census of Ireland, the basis of the analyses of marital fertility and of infant and child mortality a century ago. The census contains household-level data on infant and child mortality, on the duration of each marriage, and on age at marriage. It also reports proxies for household income such as housing quality, the presence of domestic servants, literacy, and male occupations, and thus offers a guide to the influence of living standards on fertility and mortality. Samples of Jewish and non-Jewish households in Dublin, Belfast, and Cork are used to analyze the variations in marital fertility by ethnicity and socioeconomic status in Ireland’s Jewish neighborhoods. Was the fertility of Ireland’s immigrants as high as the fertility of the native Irish, well-known for their half-hearted participation in the European fertility transition? The answer is both yes and no. The marital fertility of couples living in rural Ireland was higher, but not that of Catholic and Protestant couples living in the same neighborhoods as the immigrant Jews. The statistical analysis reported in chapter 7 confirms Jewish exceptionalism in this respect, and variations in the socioeconomic conditions faced by native and immigrant couples fail to account for this fertility gap. While the 1911 census offers the basis for a detailed picture of fertility behavior at the level of the individual household, the decennial censuses offer useful snapshots of shifting fertility strategies. Chapter 7 also tracks fertility trends over time and assesses how immigrants’ sons and daughters assimilated to a shifting Irish norm. The fertility strategies of other confessional groups also shifted over time, but the rapid transition of Jewish couples to low marital fertility in the 1920s and 1930s is particularly remarkable.

Also of interest is the seemingly universal or near universal pattern of lower mortality rates of Jewish infants and young children. Over three

decades ago Israeli demographer U. O. Schmelz offered ample documentation that diaspora Jews succeeded in reducing their mortality sooner than the populations among whom they lived. Others since have added to the evidence.¹¹ Researchers have invoked a variety of cultural and socio-economic factors in attempts to explain why Jewish infants and children fared better. These include greater attention to personal hygiene and housekeeping in Jewish households, the benefits of Jewish dietary regulations, differences in breastfeeding practices, better maternal care, lower illegitimacy rates, and the higher value put on children's education. The Jewish tradition of living in congested urban environments may also have lent them some immunity to certain infectious diseases. While the mortality advantage of Jewish infants and young children is well documented, it deserves further study, since both the advantage and the culture that underpinned it varied considerably across space and over time. Ireland and Dublin, where a majority of the Jewish immigrants settled, offer an interesting case study.

Social and economic historians debate the relative importance of cultural and economic factors in accounting for the relative success of immigrant Jewish populations. Chapter 8 describes some aspects of Irish Jewish culture—its politics, its tensions, its religiosity, its wealth of social capital—and how they might have influenced the health and material progress of the immigrants. Of particular interest are the possible roles of personal hygiene and diet in accounting for the Jewish mortality advantage.

Chapter 9 explores the social interaction between native and newcomer at the street and neighborhood levels. This remains a largely unexplored topic. To this day stereotypes inspired by the famous Limerick “pogrom” of 1904¹² and official reluctance to allow in would-be refugees from Nazi Europe, on the one hand, and the election of Robert Briscoe as lord mayor of Dublin in 1956 and 1961, on the other, still govern scholarly perceptions. However, popular impressions are more likely to be influenced by the nostalgia or, on occasion, the bitterness of autobiographical memoirs. In reality, attitudes on the part of both natives and newcomers shifted over time. Ireland's remoteness and poverty had long insulated it from significant immigration, while before their arrival in Ireland, the Litvaks' interaction with non-Jews had rarely strayed very far from the cash nexus. That followed from their status as a classic middleman minority. They and their children were determined to adapt to Irish society, however, to an extent that would have been undreamt of in pre-1914 Lithuania. The focus in chapter 9 is on adaptation and the degree of acculturation, and on how Dublin's Little Jerusalem (and its Irish satellites) in time became successful experiments in multiculturalism. Given the boundaries created

by dietary requirements and by a preference on the part of both Jew and Gentile for “marrying in,” in practice this meant that most intimate friendships, at least beyond childhood, were confined to one’s own group. Chapter 10 concludes by offering an account of the decline of Jewish Ireland since mid-century and some comparative perspective on the immigrants’ progress and acculturation.