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**Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8nt8b6w0>

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**Publication Date**

2018-04-01

# “By the Accident of Birth”: British Subjects, Free State Citizens, and the Irish Diaspora in Britain, 1922-1950”

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Gideon Oliphant Murray (Peirage Genealogical Survey)

## All the Benefits of a British Subject?

In an address to the House of Lords on December 20, 1934, Gideon Oliphant-Murray, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Viscount Elibank, declared, “Mr. de Valera (*President of the Irish Free State Executive Council*) says that in future the British will be regarded as foreigners, so far as the South of Ireland is concerned. Are we, therefore, to regard citizens who come from the South of Ireland as foreigners in this country, or are we to continue to treat them as British subjects, and go on conferring upon them all the benefits which British subjects enjoy in this country?”

While Viscount Elibank is right that Irish Free State citizens were considered British subjects, did the Irish really receive all the benefits associated with that distinction?

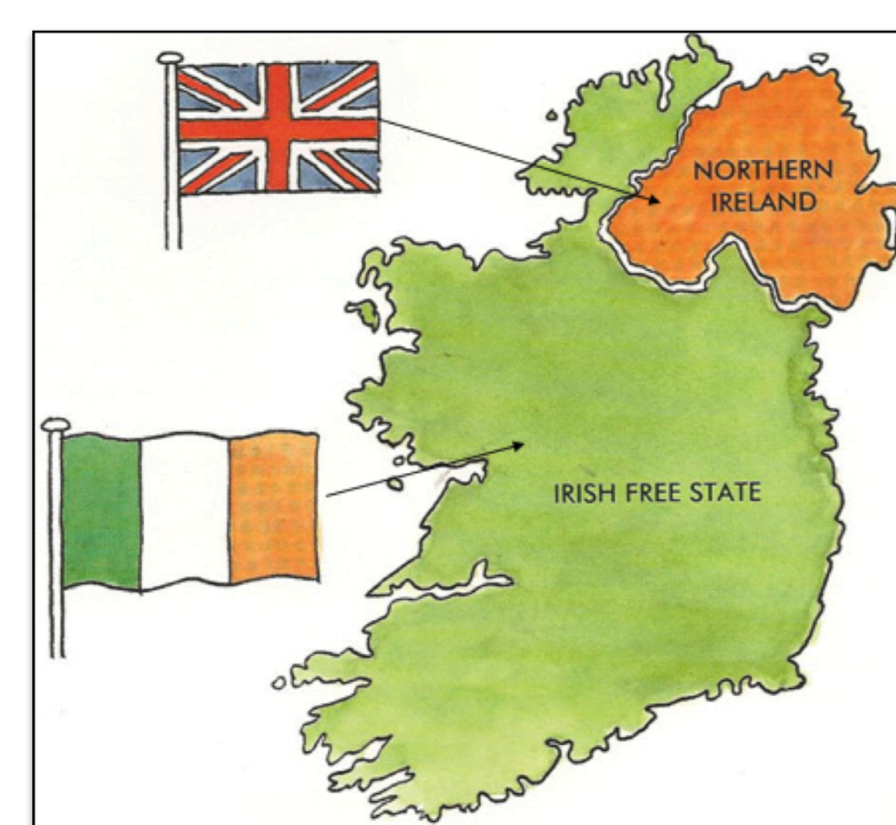
## Irish Free State as Precursor to Postwar Decolonization

Historians of the British Empire have traditionally viewed the era of decolonization as the period following the end of the Second World War to the late 1960s. One of the key issues that arose as a result of decolonization after WWII were questions of belonging and who had the right to lay claim to British identity as a wide array of British subjects from former colonies came to Britain in search of employment, opportunity, and a better life. Their presence, however, called into question Britain’s immigration practices, such as the free flow of peoples from the empire and who was considered a British subject. Looking back to the 1920s and the establishment of the Irish Free State, it is evident that these questions were not new.

Following three case studies, this project argues that the Irish Free State was a testing ground where unprecedented questions around citizenship shed light on the paradox of a global British identity. More specifically, this project highlights an earlier case of decolonization that raised tough, fundamental questions about imperial belonging versus local autonomy, which in turn had implications for migration policies that we usually associate with the era of postwar decolonization and Commonwealth migration to Britain.



Above: Irish delegation to 1921 Treaty negotiations (National Library of Ireland)  
Right: Map depicting the partition of Ireland in 1922



## Case Study: “Flooded with Outsiders”

Beginning in 1926 and extending well into the 1930s, Southern Scotland, Manchester, and areas of Merseyside County (including Liverpool) frequently reported being “flooded with outsiders” from the Irish Free State who were thought to be taking advantage of unemployment benefits. This led to several calls for Britain to repatriate those individuals back to Ireland.

A large-scale inquiry took place in 1928 in order to determine if there was an actual problem with delinquent Irish migrants.

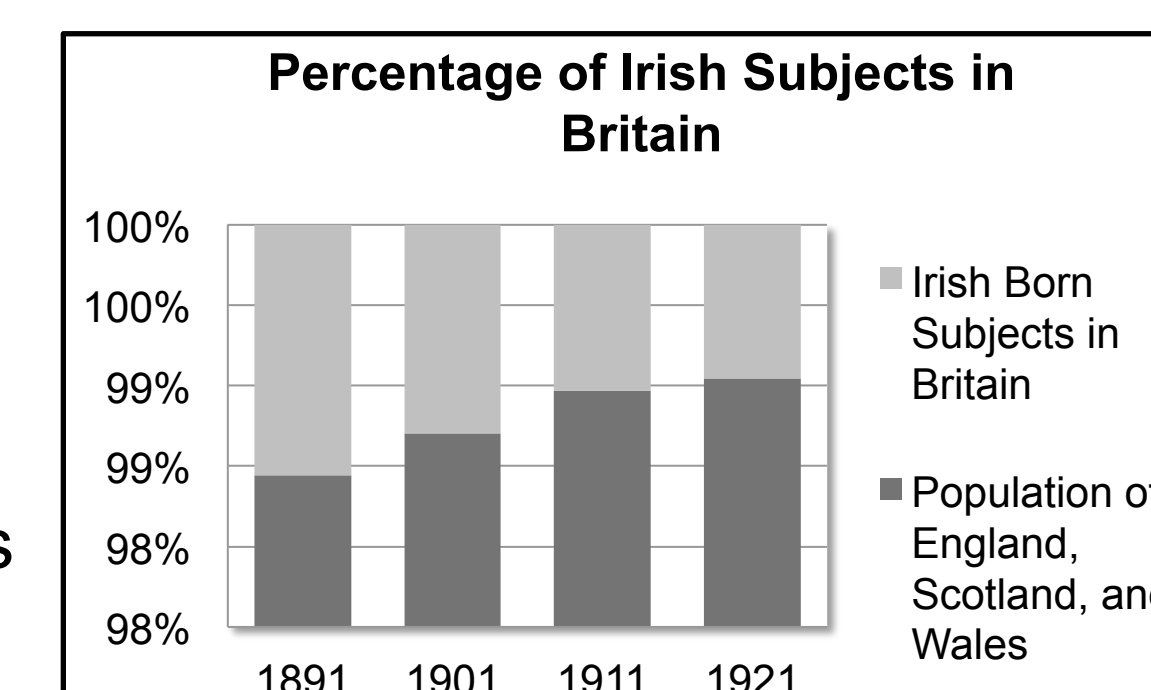
The report’s findings suggested the contrary:

- ◆ Negligible impact of Irish migration (even a decrease)
- ◆ Most migrants were women domestic servants
- ◆ A majority seeking unemployment were established residents, not migrants.
- ◆ The report reiterated Britain’s position that as **British subjects**, people from the Irish Free State *could not legally be denied free entry to and the right to domicile in England, nor could they be repatriated legally.*

...war to preserve her independence from England. The great loss of life and expense that this caused England, I am afraid has already been forgotten, but I do think we have now sufficient grounds to ensure the treatment of these Irishmen as aliens. I also know that these boys come from families that were actually engaged in rebellion against this country. We pay only on goods entering the Irish Free State. Why should we be dumped with their unemployed? Not long ago I read

Does it not seem unfair that these men should be allowed to come to England and procure work, and probably take after a few months, when so many of our own young men are tramping the streets and money is short for sale.

Excerpts from a 1932 letter from Mrs. Jean Dandridge to her MP regarding Irish Migrants (HO 45/14635 National Archives)



Data from Home Office records, National Archives of Britain

## Case Study: Irish Girls “Gone to the Bad” in London

- ◆ Between 1923 and 1938, the bulk of Irish migrants to London were women seeking work as domestic servants.
- ◆ Sometimes described as “penniless and alone” and “innocent and ignorant”
- ◆ There was worry that Irish girls would fall into “moral decline”.
- ◆ London viewed as “danger to their virtue”.

**Irish Girls—Beware!**  
We wish to utter a grave warning to Irish girls misled by advertisements offering apparently good employment abroad. If they are compelled to leave Ireland let them seek advice and information before doing so, as the neglect of this commonsense precaution has had lamentable consequences for many good-looking but unsuspecting daughters of Irish homes. There are various organizations, both in Ireland and Great Britain, for helping them, and we would strongly exhort such girls to communicate with them before arranging about or taking up employment. May we also respectfully request the clergy and teachers to take note of the following addresses so as to have them to hand when occasion arises!  
**LONDON:**  
Catholic Women’s League, Windsor House, Victoria Street, S.W.  
Catholic Girls’ Society, 29, Gloucester Street, Vic., S.W.1.  
National Vigilance Association, 12, Old Tyne Street, Westminster, S.W.1.  
**ALL NECESSARY INFORMATION ABOUT PLACE AND KIND OF EMPLOYMENT, ADDRESSES OF LODGINGS, HOSTELS, ETC. MAY BE HAD BY WRITING TO ANY OF THE ABOVE ADDRESSES.**  
**THE CATHOLIC BUREAU, MOUNTJOY SQ., DUBLIN, WILL ALSO BE PLEASSED TO GIVE ANY HELP NEEDED.**  
If a girl arrives in London, without having made any arrangements, she ought to lock out for ladies at the Railway Station, wearing a yellow, red, white and blue cuff-band and a white enamel badge with ribbon of the same colours. This denotes that she is an official of the National Vigilance Association, appointed to give girls information and help. There are branches of these Organizations in the various cities of Great Britain, the addresses of which can be had on application to:  
**THE EDITOR OF “ASSISI” WHO WILL BE VERY PLEASSED TO GIVE FURTHER INFORMATION IN THIS MATTER.**

Advertisement in *Irish Franciscan Monthly* January 1937 (4/NVA/4/02) Women’s Library, London School of Economics

- ◆ London Council officials, in cooperation with the Catholic Church, led calls to stem the flow of Irish girls based both on moral grounds and the fear that they would become a drain on social services.
- ◆ Highlights one of the ways British subjects were redefined.

**Irish Girl Emigrants**  
**THE DANGERS THEY ENCOUNTER**  
ROOT OF THE PROBLEM IS IN IRELAND  
**RESCUE SOCIETIES’ WORK**  
ARTICLE I.  
(By Gertrude Gaffney.)  
HOW many people in this country are aware that there are so many who have been taking place for the past four years women and men into England that has occurred since the famine years?  
Young men and women, mainly driven out of the country in search of work through the agricultural depression, though these will always be a certain proportion of their number that look back purely in the spirit of adventure.

First in a series of articles by Gertrude Gaffney for the *Irish Independent* detailing the conditions for Irish girls in London and Liverpool (1936) Women’s Library, London School of Economics

## Case Study: The Unwed Irish Mother in 1930s London

In addition to Irish girl domestic servants migrating to Britain during the interwar period, an increasingly acute problem was the influx of unmarried women who were pregnant in London.

- ◆ These women were often fleeing the scorn and shame of their families.



St. Patrick’s Mother and Baby Home in Dublin, one of more than a dozen homes that received Irish women and children from London.

(c) Extent of the problem in London.

Records have been kept to ascertain the number of persons from Ireland who were admitted to the hospitals and maternity wards of the Metropolitan Asylums Board during the period 1st September, 1927, to 28th February, 1938, who were admitted from the date of their arrival in London. The figures obtained from these records are summarized as follows:-

Persons from	Institutions				Hospitals				Maternity wards			
	Men	Married women	Single women	Children	Men	Women	Children	Married women	Single women	Children	Married women	Single women
Northern Ireland	5	-	2	-	5	10	10	-	2	14	23	23
Eire	51	5	87	1	46	67	45	3	11	64	13	13

◆ pregnant on arrival in England  
◆ pregnant on arrival in England

Data showing the “burden” of Irish migrants on London council services over a six month period between Sept. 1937 and Feb. 1938. (London Metropolitan Archives)

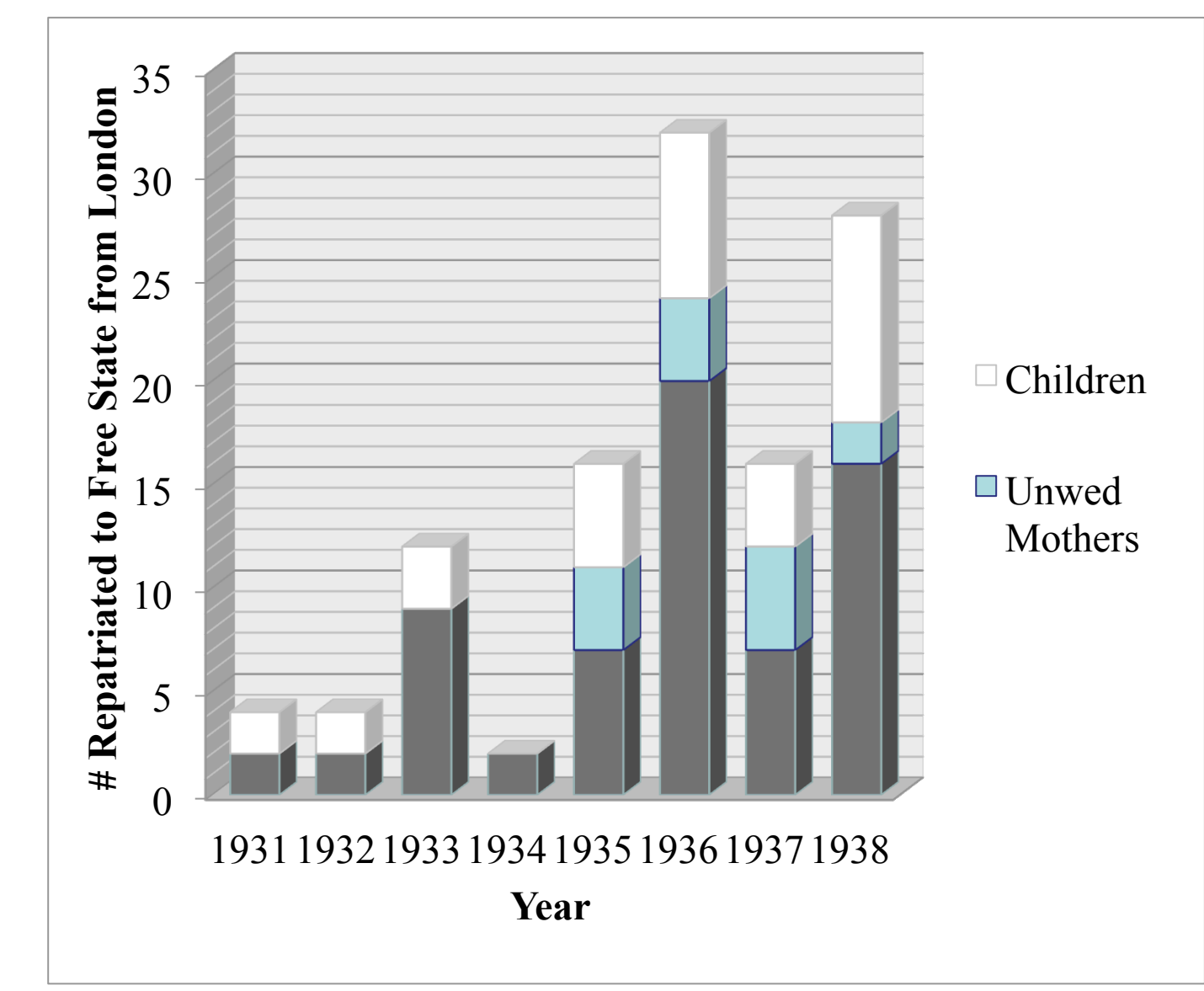
- ◆ They were viewed in London as a burden on local social services.
- ◆ Represented the perceived problem of lower class moral decline.
- ◆ Since the women could not be forced to leave (exceptions mentioned below), every effort was made to persuade them to return to Ireland.

## Conclusion: Repatriation by any Means Possible

This project has followed three case studies that demonstrate the limitations of inclusiveness with regards to imperial migration during the interwar period and the impact it had on the Irish diaspora in Britain. In each case, efforts were made to curb migration or return migrants back to Ireland through legal channels or persuasion.

*This enquiry was undertaken owing to a journal of the old-standing objection made by Irish girls arriving pregnant in this country, frequently allege that they have not face the disapproval of their families & friends, and moreover that the treatment in the Home for unmarried mothers is harsh and the period of detention very long. As these girls cannot be legally deported they have to be persuaded to go back to their own free will and the said...*

“The Irish Repatriated Un-married Mother”, enquiry by Doctor Letitia Fairchild in London 1938. Since legal repatriation did not exist, girls must be “persuaded to go back at their own free will”. (London Metropolitan Archives)



Although Irish migrants could not be repatriated legally, a loophole existed where officials could appeal directly to the High Commissioner. This chart shows how often that method was used from 1931-1938. (Women’s Library, London School of Economics)

Certain classes of Irish migrants, I argue, did not fit into changing conceptions of the ideal British subject. Furthermore, each case study has viewed responses to Irish migration during the interwar period as part of a larger endemic sentiment in Britain about the perception of difference and the status of the Irish as not “one of us” despite their legal status as subjects.