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# The Irish and the Preston Lock-Out, 1853–1854

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## Abstract

The Irish have long featured as a central element in British social and labour history, but an idea still prevails that it was as strike breakers rather than strike makers that they influenced British industrial relations. The great Preston strike of 1853–1854 appears to have had a crucial role in cementing that idea and the role of Irish ‘knobsticks’ became a central, as well as a very visual component, of that dispute. The story of the ‘half alive and half dead’ impoverished Irish who arrived in Preston in March 1854 seems ideally suited to the famous images produced of the lock-out and knobstick figures, but they obscure as much as they illustrate. This paper examines the role of the Irish in broader perspective between the years of the Lune Street massacre of 1842 and the close of the strike in 1854 as a series of disputes in which people from Ireland featured on both sides, and where attitudes towards the strike, strikers and strike breakers were complex, dynamic and left enduring legacies.

In November 1833, an advert appeared in a Belfast newspaper from an employer in Kirkham near Preston, John Birley and Sons, seeking a ‘steady, sober and active man, as foreman in a machine hackling shop’. The expected candidate was to have knowledge of flax-dressing and the nature and quality of flax in general, but also ‘be totally unconnected with the Hecklers’ Club or Trade Union’.<sup>1</sup> Birley needn’t have worried – beyond the growing Belfast involvement in trades unionism at the time, culminating in involvement with Robert Owen’s Grand National Consolidated Trades Union, there was little textiles organisation in the city and wages on average lagged considerably behind those in England.<sup>2</sup> Wage differentials, a large reserve labour force, endemic poverty particularly in the post-Napoleonic Wars period, and perhaps a belief that Ireland generally was less touched by trade unionism (other more historic divisions being pre-eminent), had encouraged English manufacturers to seek Irish workers for some time. Birley’s firm had done so since as far back as the late eighteenth century, perhaps also in part as a result of John Birley’s own Irish roots, his father having come to Kirkham from Ireland via Poulton le Fylde in the early eighteenth century.<sup>3</sup> In that sense, the Birley family’s

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<sup>1</sup> *Belfast News-Letter*, 19 November 1833.

<sup>2</sup> M. Doyle, ‘Belfast and Tolpuddle: Attempts at strengthening a trade union presence, 1833/4’, *Saothar* 2 (1976), 2–12.

<sup>3</sup> J.A. Cantrell, ‘James Naysmith and the Bridgewater Foundry: Partners and Partnerships’, *Business*

infamous decision to import Irish labour in an attempt to break the Preston strike in 1854 was clearly unremarkable. The manner, however, in which it was done and the backdrop against which it occurred would make it anything but that. Sunk in the moral panic borne out of what E.P. Thompson called the ‘invasion of the Irish poor’ during the potato famine years, the myth of the Irish scab was about to come of age in spectacular fashion.<sup>4</sup>

A consistent problem in the assessment of the Irish population in Britain is what we term ‘Irish’. There are two facets to this, firstly, that it is the first generation Irish-born who count in the statistics, when their children regularly tended to consider themselves equally as Irish, and secondly, that Irish still tends to equate with ‘Catholic’. In his 1894 work, *The Irish in Britain*, the Liverpool Irish journalist John Denvir estimated that Preston’s Irish community made up about one third of the local Catholic population and added ‘the cotton factories employ a great number of them’.<sup>5</sup> However, as Catholics only made up a third of Preston’s population forty years previously on the eve of the strike, this makes the 5,122 Irish-born in the 1851 census (just over ten per cent of the town’s population) considerably less than a quarter (19.5 per cent) of that Catholic population.<sup>6</sup> However, if we include the children of Irish parents, as Lowe estimated, the ‘Irish’ population of Preston in 1851 stands at 7,068 (a slightly larger 32.1 per cent of the Catholic population).<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, there were among this group a significant Irish Protestant minority, notoriously difficult to quantify and often inadequately identified as simply ‘Orange’ (after the Loyal Orange Order, the militant Protestant commemorative and parading organisation). This group have therefore often been left out of assessments of the Irish in Britain more widely and are almost completely neglected in relation to the history of the Irish community in Preston.<sup>8</sup> It is therefore difficult to assess their strength but we can infer that a Protestant Irish community existed in Preston, even if not an explicitly ‘Orange’ community, as we will examine later on. An additional complicating factor around these issues is that previously textile workers (of the kind sought by Birley Bros mentioned above), were predominantly handloom weavers whose skilled profile is more readily associated with the Protestant section of the population in the north of Ireland. A combination of the decline of cotton in Ulster and the steady advance of the power loom effected a change in the cultural background of the Irish finding employment in cotton around mid-century. Opportunities for greater numbers

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*History* 23:3 (1981), 346–58; ‘Kirkham, 1700–1900’, <https://www.birley.org/Kirkham.htm> [accessed 7 August 2023].

<sup>4</sup> E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1963), 470.

<sup>5</sup> J. Denvir, *The Irish in Britain: from earliest times to the fall and death of Parnell* (London, 1894), 449.

<sup>6</sup> J. Hepworth, ‘Between Isolation and Integration: Religion, Politics, and the Catholic Irish in Preston, c.1829–1868’, *Immigrants and Minorities* 38:1–2 (2020), 79–80; D. Hunt, *A History of Preston* (Lancaster, 1992), 222.

<sup>7</sup> W.J. Lowe, *The Irish in Mid-Victorian Lancashire: the shaping of a working class community* (London, 1989), 48–9.

<sup>8</sup> D. Holding, ‘Conflict and Assimilation: Irish Communities in Bolton and Preston, 1840–1914’, Unpublished PhD thesis, Manchester Metropolitan University (2002), 208–10.

of unskilled workers increased as a result and proportionately, more workers from Irish Catholic backgrounds began to ‘take the boat’ to England. This trend, however, appears to have occurred mainly in the 20 years or so after the lock-out.<sup>9</sup>

It seems likely that the Irish had been a feature of Preston’s industrial disputes for some time before mid-century. It is unclear if they were involved in the strikes of 1808, 1810, 1819 or the disturbances of November 1831 over the failure of the Reform Bill, but they are likely to have played some role in the spinners’ strike of 1836–1837. By that time, the Irish, at around 1,500 individuals, made up around four per cent of the Preston population with an estimated 500 being Catholic. This suggests a substantial number of Irish Protestant migrants and fits with the skilled profile of that community and experience in textiles.<sup>10</sup> Whether this is related to the emergence of a Preston Orange Lodge in 1830 is uncertain, but the Irish population was generally on an upward trajectory in a time of expansion for the cotton industry and growth of the town. The Parliamentary inquiry into the state of the Irish poor of 1836–1837 took evidence on the growth of Irish migration to Britain at this time and provided free reign to many of the prejudices of the period, with one Lancashire physician and public health official declaring:

I do not think ... that much can be accomplished to elevate the moral and physical condition of the adult Irish population. An increase in the means of subsistence would not, in their present state, materially minister to their comforts. They would still be content with meagre diet and unwholesome habitations, and I fear that the surplus of their wages would be expended in intemperance.<sup>11</sup>

In spite of this, and conscious perhaps of the wider contexts of the industrial turmoil of the mid-1830s if not the febrile and violent conclusion of Ireland’s Tithe War at this time, the learned doctor felt it his duty to alert the authorities to the dangers of Irish intrusion on English political and industrial quarrels:

At present, in times of political agitation, the large towns colonized by the Irish contain a mass of population whose passions might be very easily inflamed by political incendiaries, and, excepting the military, there is no force to put down tumult ... The gin shops and the taverns might be made, at any moment, the foci of revolutionary conspiracies, by which the uneducated Irish population of the large towns might, in some time of political agitation, be brought into collision with the troops, and a battle of barricades occur.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Lowe, *Irish in Mid-Victorian Lancashire*, 83–4.

<sup>10</sup> J.S. Leigh, *Preston Cotton Martyrs: the millworkers who shocked a nation* (Lancaster, 2008), 12–43; Hepworth, ‘Between Isolation and Integration’, 79–80.

<sup>11</sup> Command Papers, Royal Commission on Condition of the Poorer Classes in Ireland, *Report on the State of the Irish Poor in Great Britain* (hereafter *State of the Irish Poor*), *Appendix G, evidence of James Phillips Kay*, British Parliamentary Papers (BPP) 1836, 58.

<sup>12</sup> *State of the Irish Poor*, BPP, 58.

If, in talking of mills being burned down, Kay was casting his mind back to the alleged Luddite attack on Westhoughton Mill near Bolton in 1812 and suggesting Irish involvement, he was somewhat confused. As Navickas's work demonstrates, besides the activities of spies and informers, the main prosecution witnesses in the subsequent trials, Samuel Fleming and Robert Martin, were both Orangemen and members of the militia.<sup>13</sup> That is not to say that Orangeism did not operate on occasion, like the Irish Catholic lodges of Ribbonmen, as an 'enabler' of employment opportunities in certain sectors or even as a form of proto-trades unionism.<sup>14</sup> Others who gave evidence to the same parliamentary inquiry nevertheless concurred with Dr Kay and his fear of Irish labour, both as trade unionists and potential scabs. This Janus-faced characterisation of the Irish would be a trope of some endurance, waxing and waning with economic cycles and periods of industrial decline and revival. Without any apparent awareness of the inherent irony in his depiction, another witness to the 1836 inquiry, the cotton manufacturer Peter Ewart, stated that:

The Irish have not lowered the English workpeople ... by lowering the rate of wages. They have, however, lowered the English by their association and their bad example ... It often happens that when there is discontent, or a disposition to combination, or turnouts among the workpeople, the Irish are the leaders; they are the most difficult to reason with, and convince, on the subject of wages and regulations in the factories.<sup>15</sup>

Several other cotton manufacturers who gave evidence presented a similar duality in their discussion of the migrant Irish workers, describing them as being at once willing to work and subsist on very little, indeed less than English workers, and yet consistently to the fore in trades unionism and disputes to improve pay and conditions.<sup>16</sup> Giving evidence more specifically for Preston, Rev. John Clay, the celebrated prison chaplain, expressed the hope that fewer Irish would come to the town. Of an estimated 220 families, he surmised about 150 worked in weaving and spinning and about 100 in labouring occupations, though only in the latter category did he allege a reduction in wages because 'Irish spinners and weavers are to the English as only one in twenty, while Irish labourers are as one to eight'.<sup>17</sup> Other Preston witnesses were equally keen to see the town's moderate Irish population reduced further and all future migrants discouraged. The Preston Deputy Police Constable, Thomas Walton, concentrated on

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<sup>13</sup> K. Navickas, *Loyalism and Radicalism in Lancashire, 1798–1815* (Oxford, 2009), 128.

<sup>14</sup> D.M. MacRaid, *Faith, Fraternity and Fighting: The Orange Order and Irish Migrants in Northern England, c.1850–1920* (Liverpool, 2005), 154; K. Hughes and D.M. MacRaid, *Ribbon Societies in Nineteenth-Century Ireland and Its Diaspora* (Liverpool, 2018), 94, 165–7.

<sup>15</sup> State of the Irish Poor, Appendix G, BPP, evidence of Peter Ewart. 63–4.

<sup>16</sup> State of the Irish Poor, Appendix G, BPP, see evidence of John Potter, James Aspinall Turner, James Guest, Thomas Harbottle and Joseph Bell Clarke, 64–8.

<sup>17</sup> State of the Irish Poor, Appendix G, BPP, evidence of Rev. John Clay, 90.

blaming the Irish for a rise in illicit distillation and did not foresee Dr Kay's vision of a 'battle of barricades'. However, that, in a sense, was exactly what took place in 1842.<sup>18</sup>

The events of 1842 when the military opened fire on a crowd of striking workers, killing four and injuring others, is normally aligned with the so-called 'Plug riots' of that year. This was a wave of protests across the country originally seen in revolutionary terms until later dismissed as a largely fleeting phenomenon, though not one untouched by the rising Chartist movement of the time.<sup>19</sup> Soldiers of the 72<sup>nd</sup> Highlanders (later the Seaforth Highlanders), commanded by Colonel Charles George James Arbuthnot (1801–1870), fresh from campaigning in Cape Colony against the Xhosa people, infamously fired around twenty rounds at a protesting crowd advancing up Lune Street on Saturday, 13 August 1842.<sup>20</sup> The journalist and local historian Anthony Hewitson rightly records eight people shot, though most accounts suggest only seven.<sup>21</sup> Among those shot were at least one and possibly two Irishmen, Bernard McNamara, a seventeen-year-old stripper employed in Oxendale's mill who lived with his family in Birk Street, and perhaps also a twenty-six year old tailor from Heatley Street named Michael Moore. Moore was mentioned in early press reports as being shot in the chest, but disappears from subsequent reports.<sup>22</sup> He appears to have continued living in Preston, and may have been wrongly listed as among the injured, or more likely, suffered a minor injury from the fusillade. Both Moore and McNamara were single men at the time. The latter shows up in the 1841 census living in Gildon Street with his mother, Rosa and siblings Elizabeth, Honour, James, and Francis along with a lodger, Mary McKeighan, a twenty-year-old Irish linen weaver. Bernard and Elizabeth were both, like their forty-year-old mother, born in Ireland, most likely County Mayo, though the others were born in Lancashire.<sup>23</sup> Another McNamara sibling, Bridget, gave evidence at her brother's inquest, which returned a verdict, as with the other victims, of justifiable homicide. She recalled seeing Bernard leave for work on Saturday morning around six and saw him brought

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<sup>18</sup> State of the Irish Poor, Appendix G, BPP, evidence of Thomas Walton, 91.

<sup>19</sup> A.G. Rose, 'The Plug Riots of 1842 in Lancashire and Cheshire', *Transactions of the Lancashire and Cheshire Antiquarian Society* 67 (1957), 75–112; M. Jenkins, *The General Strike of 1842* (London, 1980); A.E. Musson, *British Trade Unions, 1800–1875* (London, 1972), 48; M. Chase, *Chartism: A New History* (Manchester, 2013), 211–14.

<sup>20</sup> Leigh, *Preston Cotton Martyrs*, 44–50; D. Savage, 'The Plug Strike of 1842', in M. Lavalette and P. Marsden (eds), *Mark Our Words: We Will Rise: Episodes in Preston's Radical History* (Preston, 2014), 30–45; R. Cannon, *Historical Record of the Seventy-Second Regiment, or the Duke of Albany's Own Highlanders* (London, 1848), 60. Perhaps unsurprisingly the regimental record does not mention Preston, merely Lancashire.

<sup>21</sup> A. Hewitson, *History of Preston* (Preston, 1883), 176. The four killed were John Mercer, George Sowerbutts, Bernard McNamara and William Lancaster, the injured included Bryan Hodgson, Lawrence Pilling and James Roberts. Clemesha also suggests eight shot, but five killed: H.W. Clemesha, *A History of Preston in Amounderness* (Manchester, 1912), 220.

<sup>22</sup> *Preston Pilot*, 13 August 1842; *Northern Star*, 20 August 1842. Early reports refer to a William Moore of Heatley Street, but also name McNamara as John rather than Bernard. The 1841 census however shows only one Moore, Michael, living in Heatley Street. Census of England (1841), Michael Moore, Heatley Street, Preston.

<sup>23</sup> Census of England (1841), McNamaras, Gildon Street, Preston.

home injured between eight and nine, bleeding from a wound on the right side of his stomach. He said he had been at the Corn Market when the soldiers opened fire and he was hit. Attended by a surgeon named Holden, who testified that he had inspected and dressed the victim's wound, which had divided and split open the intestines, the teenager died eventually on Monday afternoon. An additional witness, a police constable named Thomas Cuerdon, said that he had seen McNamara near the front of the crowd when stones were thrown at the police and soldiers, though he could not be sure. Bridget McNamara was paid two shillings and six pence for her testimony and appears to have married and later re-located to Blackburn.<sup>24</sup> In the close-knit families and kinship networks identified in Anderson's work, the killing of McNamara must have had a terrible emotional as well as an immediate financial impact. His funeral took place in the burial ground of St Wilfrid's after requiem mass on Wednesday, his body no doubt having had the customary two-day wake when the Irish community would gather round to offer their support and sympathy to the McNamara family.<sup>25</sup>

The Lune Street shootings of 1842 appeared to many, like the so-called 'Plug riots' in general, as an aberration. They were certainly presented and remembered as such, and although shocking and unprecedented, perhaps this was less so for the Irish migrant community, many of whom had direct experience of the exercise of lethal power by the police and army in Ireland. Indeed, just two months before the events in Preston (which featured in a number of Irish newspapers), another young man named McNamara was one of several victims of a police shooting in the town of Ennis, County Clare, as hungry people tried to intercept a grain shipment.<sup>26</sup> Though localised, those events were indicative of the increasing catastrophe towards which Ireland was inexorably heading with a rise in the frequency of crop failure against the backdrop of a growing population, an intolerant, entitled and frequently oppressive landlord class, an unsympathetic administration in London and an approaching global recession.

While this article is not focused on the social, economic and political ramifications of the potato famine, it is important to note that the crisis did have a serious and sustained impact on attitudes towards the Irish in Preston, as elsewhere in the country, and its effects were still being felt by the time of the lock-out. It contained echoes of the incongruous duality exhibited in the parliamentary inquiry of the earlier decade before mass immigration, and at its heart was an occasionally racialised discourse about the utility as well as uselessness of the migrant labour that began to crowd the streets, dispensaries, fever hospitals and workhouses of the region. Preston was not to receive a deluge of Irish migrants like the bigger centres of Liverpool and Manchester, but the increase in the

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<sup>24</sup> Coroner's inquest, report of fees, 6–23 August 1842 ([www.ancestry.co.uk](http://www.ancestry.co.uk), accessed 28 March 2023); *Preston Chronicle* (hereafter *PC*), 20 August 1842.

<sup>25</sup> Michael Anderson, *Family structure in nineteenth century Lancashire* (Cambridge, 1971), 101–5; *Preston Pilot*, 20 August 1842. George Sowerbutts was buried on the same day as McNamara in St Peter's churchyard.

<sup>26</sup> *Mayo Constitution*, 21 June 1842; <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/ireland/irish-news/when-the-ric-opened-fire-on-a-crowd-in-ennis-during-the-clare-grain-riots-1.4182271> (22 September 2023).

Irish amongst the poorest sections of the working class was significant. From a figure of 1,700 making up 4.3 per cent of Preston's population in 1841 to 5,120 and 10.5 per cent in 1851, it is clear the proportionate growth as well as its rate, likely larger again if we include Lowe's figure of just over 7,000, was remarkable.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, it seems clear that many of these people arrived in the more concentrated period dominated by the potato famine. With over 100,000 Irish migrants arriving into Liverpool alone in 1847, it was clear an overspill to other Lancashire towns was likely, especially if these desperate people were to avoid the immediate dangers of being sent back through the notorious Laws of Settlement and Removal.<sup>28</sup> There was an obvious early sympathy with the plight of the starving with a Preston Soup Committee established in December 1846 to cater for the growing numbers of malnourished and destitute crowding into the town.<sup>29</sup> By February 1847, a collection taken up in Cannon Street independent chapel raised £24 which with subsequent other donations increased to £50.<sup>30</sup> Equally, of course, not all responses were sympathetic and within a few months, a correspondent wrote to the *Preston Chronicle* complaining of the recent 'infestation' of poor Irish who were

in the habit of drawing from the benevolent, sums of money during the day time, to deposit in the hands of some one in the company, who takes lodgings at a private house, while the rest of them resort to the poor office, where they receive tickets for lodgings and one meal at least; and not a few of these feign themselves unwell, to become inmates of the workhouse in order to prevent being removed ... But this is not all. These people are spreading fever in every populous town in the kingdom.<sup>31</sup>

The Irish had long faced suspicion, prejudice and animosity in varying degrees, but the years of the potato famine exodus created a particular kind of moral panic built around famine fever, increasingly referred to simply as 'Irish fever'.<sup>32</sup> Of course, notions of contagion were not merely about miasmatic disease but extended to social and cultural habits as well as fears of political turbulence, all of which drew the Irish poor as both victim and perpetrator.<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, by the end of 1848, a Parliamentary report showed that Preston's Poor Law Guardians had dispensed relief to some 1,783 Irish migrants

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<sup>27</sup> Hepworth, 'Between Isolation and Integration', 80; Lowe, *Irish in Mid-Victorian Lancashire*, 48–9.

<sup>28</sup> L. Darwen, D. MacRaild, B. Gurrin and L. Kennedy, "'Unhappy and wretched creatures': Charity, Poor Relief, and Pauper Removal in Britain and Ireland during the Great Famine", *English Historical Review* 134:568 (2019), 592.

<sup>29</sup> Lowe, *Irish in Mid-Victorian Lancashire*, 32.

<sup>30</sup> *PC*, 27 February 1847.

<sup>31</sup> *PC*, 17 July 1847.

<sup>32</sup> L. Darwen, D.M. MacRaild, B. Gurrin and L. Kennedy, "'Irish Fever' in Britain during the Great Famine: immigration, disease and the legacy of 'Black '47'", *Irish Historical Studies* 44:166 (2020), 270–94.

<sup>33</sup> G. Davis, 'The Irish in Nineteenth Century Britain', *Saothar* 16 (1991), 130. Many of these tropes are explored in P. Wald's *Contagious: Cultures, Carriers and the Outbreak Narrative* (Durham, NC, 2008).



at a cost of over £840.<sup>34</sup> Pressure grew to have the Irish ‘sent back’, although talk of removals of both ‘Irish and Scotch poor’ pre-dated the famine crisis among Preston’s Guardians and seems to have been a valued part of the toolkit of local relief committees more generally. Darwen’s research has drawn attention in particular to the influential role of the *ex-officio* Guardians in Preston, who were mostly magistrates, and exercised considerable power as supporters of the New Poor Law regime and its rigours over those more critical of its emergence and operation.<sup>35</sup> Thomas Langton Birley (1811–1874), scion of the famous Kirkham, Birley Bros family was to the fore among fellow magistrates in seeking Secretary of State approval as early as January of 1846 for the removal of Irish paupers.<sup>36</sup> There is no evidence that Birley served as an *ex-officio* Guardian, but we know that removals were authorised ultimately by the magistrates, a number of whom were also millowners. What becomes clear during the lock-out itself therefore, is that if it was not often the same people who were determining freedom of movement for the Irish poor (who were, it should be remembered, British subjects), it was certainly a prominent characteristic of their class to purloin or spurn migrant labour according to their personal and collective needs. Pauper removal remained a feature of elite responses to Irish migration as the Preston strike loomed in 1853, even amidst a growing desire for labour, which would ultimately be sought from the same sources to which previous migrants had been despatched.

The earliest Irish appearance on the stage of the great Preston lock-out is not, however, on the side of sequestered labour but as a defender of that labour. This should come as no surprise, and it remains curious that the strike-breaker image stands in front of the Irish as trade unionists. This is in spite of some well-established research that foregrounds often militant Irish trades unionism in Britain at all levels.<sup>37</sup> However, the popular influence of Dickens’ and Gaskell’s works and the contemporary writings of both Marx and Engels all underlined in different ways the more enduring image of the Irish scab.<sup>38</sup> It is an image that would have been known to one of the early leaders of the Preston strike, the spinners’ secretary, Michael Gallaher, a schoolmaster who lived off North Road and played

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<sup>34</sup> Return of Irish Poor Relieved out of Poor Rates to December 1848, paper no. 342, BPP (1849), 2.

<sup>35</sup> L. Darwen, ‘Implementing and administering the New Poor Law in the industrial north: a case study of Preston union in regional context, 1837–1871’, unpublished PhD thesis (Nottingham Trent University, 2015), 30–1, 40.

<sup>36</sup> *PC*, 10 Jan. 1846.

<sup>37</sup> S. and B. Webb, *The History of Trade Unionism* (London, 1894), 104–6; H. Pelling, *A History of British Trade Unionism* (London, 1963), 28; R.G. Kirby and A.E. Musson (eds), *The Voice of the People: John Doherty, 1798–1854* (Manchester, 1975); D. Thompson, ‘Ireland and the Irish in English Radicalism before 1850’, in J. Epstein and D. Thompson (eds), *The Chartist Experience: Studies in Working Class Radicalism and Culture, 1830–60* (London, 1982), 120–51; M.J. Mitchell, *The Irish in the West of Scotland, 1797–1848: Trade Unions, Strikes and Political Movements* (Edinburgh, 1998), 20–62.

<sup>38</sup> L. Litvack, ‘Dickens, Ireland and the Irish: Part 1’, *The Dickensian* 99:459 (2003), 34–59; S.S. Cammack, ‘“You have made him what he is”: Irish Laborers and the Preston Strike in Elizabeth Gaskell’s *North and South*’, *New Hibernia Review/Iris Éireannach Nua* 20:4 (Geimhreadh/Winter 2016), 113–27; K. Marx, ‘The Troubles at Preston’, *New York Daily Tribune*, 31 March 1854; F. Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844* (New York, 1887).

a prominent role throughout the dispute. Dutton and King make the point that although an educated man, Gallaher was also familiar with factory work, and he was noted in an early study of the strike published in 1860 as a lyrical and forceful organiser.<sup>39</sup> We get some sense of this from a speech he gave very early in the strike when after a short historical background of the spinners' union, Gallaher claimed that all but four of the employers had agreed to the wage claim of ten per cent before meeting as a body to close their mills and thereby wantonly throwing 20–24,000 people out of employment. It was, he claimed the union that they wanted to destroy and pleaded with the crowd of several thousand to 'show the masters that they were determined to have the ten per cent, and their union too'.<sup>40</sup> Like others and the crowds attending the strike rallies, Gallaher was noted for using the defiant slogan 'Ten Per Cent and No Surrender', a phrase that seems redolent of Ulster in many ways and was used by the Preston operatives throughout the strike and lock-out of 1853–1854.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, in a speech that could have come out of late twentieth-century Belfast, one newspaper reported Gallaher declaring to a crowd his defiance of the idea of abandoning the strike, stating 'let every man, woman, and child in Preston exclaim, so help us God! Never! Never! Never!'<sup>42</sup>

If the Irish were clearly on one side of the unfolding dispute early on, there was evidence of a belief at least that they were also likely to feature on the other side. In an early violent encounter, a young Irishwoman was assaulted and labelled a 'knobstick' by a protesting crowd.<sup>43</sup> The woman, Mary Leonard, a 21-year-old power loom weaver, was from County Fermanagh. The four teenage boys convicted of the mobbing and assault were released from prison on appeal in the face of considerable opposition to the convictions, extending even to Belfast.<sup>44</sup> The Leonard case is salutary in some ways because although there was no reference to the victim's nationality, it could not have been unknown to those who assaulted her, and this remarkable association of a young Irishwoman with the 'knobstick' moniker presaged later events and linkages.

Of course, the infamous Irish involvement with Preston's lock-out comes with the importation of the blackleg labour in 1854, but potentially hundreds of Irish workers were also among the thousands struggling with their fellow workers over the months preceding this. There was also considerable solidarity from workers in Ireland itself, which is a feature not often discussed, the focus being on the regional support received to sustain the strikers. Mortimer Grimshaw, the Lancashire Thunderer, referred in January 1854 to this support,

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<sup>39</sup> H.I. Dutton and J.E. King, *Ten Per Cent and No Surrender: The Preston Strike, 1853–54* (Cambridge, 1981), 50; J. Lowe, *Trade Societies and Strikes. Report of the Committee on Trades' Societies Appointed by the National Association for the Promotion of Social Science* (London, 1860), 234.

<sup>40</sup> *Manchester Times*, 22 October 1853.

<sup>41</sup> *PC*, 29 October 1853. It is at least possible that the presence of some Ulster weavers among the strikers suggested the term.

<sup>42</sup> *Liverpool Weekly Courier*, 20 March 1869.

<sup>43</sup> For a further discussion on violence and intimidation during the dispute, see Darwen's paper in this collection.

<sup>44</sup> *PC*, 17 September and 29 October 1853; Census of England (1851), Leonards, Seed Street, Preston; *Northern Whig*, 27 October 1853.

informing his audience, estimated at ten thousand strong, that a group had been set up in Belfast to send them support ‘in order to beat down tyranny and oppression’.<sup>45</sup> Further support from the ‘artisans of Ireland’ was mentioned a month later at another gathering when Luke Wood of Stockport noted reports had been received about the masters sending men ‘the length and breadth of the land to bring “foreigners” into Preston to supply the place of the operatives’.<sup>46</sup> These reports came to fruition soon after, when on 27 February a band of 57 operatives engaged at Manchester by George Galloway, partner in the Preston firm of Sharples and Wilding, were brought to Preston with a significant number of Irish among them. Fortunately for the union, the strike committee had advance warning, including from a Mr Kelly in Manchester itself, and Michael Gallaher was soon put on the case of meeting and speaking with the potential scabs, 50 of whom returned to Manchester. Despite Gallaher’s involvement, perhaps in the belief that a word from a fellow countryman would dissuade potential scabs, two, most likely Irish, individuals, Patrick Conway and Mary Doyle (another, Christopher Riley was a Lancaster-born son of a warehouseman), proceeded into the factories and later gave evidence against the strike leaders.<sup>47</sup>

Perhaps given the apprehension of the earlier band of blacklegs, the masters moved towards a greater level of subterfuge in finding hands to try and break the strike. A warehouseman, William Abbott, was engaged by Birley Bros to go to the Belfast Workhouse and seek potential workers, though interestingly proceeding from Fleetwood. This was partly because the route through from Fleetwood to Kirkham, where the Birleys had their base, had been a familiar one for the importation of Irish labour in the past, and it was serviced by two regular steamers, the Prince of Wales and the Royal Consort from Belfast.<sup>48</sup> Belfast Workhouse had opened in 1841 and was one of the largest in the country, having space to accommodate 1,000 individuals, though during the potato famine, its numbers swelled to 2,825.<sup>49</sup> We know from the subsequent court case against the trade union leaders, that Abbott arrived in Belfast on Thursday, 2 March and proceeded to the workhouse, but the Belfast Guardians’ minutes reveal nothing of his presence or indeed, of his request, which must surely have been made beforehand, perhaps by letter, though again, a search among the correspondence read out at meetings in the weeks previous to this reveals nothing. However, the raw data from the workhouse census of population given at the beginning of each set of minutes does show a decline between the meetings of 25 February and 4 March of 1,814 to 1,684.<sup>50</sup> Abbott returned on an overnight sailing to Fleetwood with 141 of the workhouse inmates, many of them, it is reported, young boys and girls, arriving on 3 March. By some means, however, their arrival was discovered. The union delegates

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<sup>45</sup> PC, 14 January 1854.

<sup>46</sup> *Preston Guardian* (hereafter PG), 25 February 1854.

<sup>47</sup> Dutton and King, ‘Ten Per Cent’, 177–8, 125; *Belfast News-Letter*, 3 March 1854.

<sup>48</sup> ‘Kirkham, 1700–1900’, <https://www.birley.org/Kirkham.htm> (accessed 7.9.23); *Northern Whig*, 2 March 1854.

<sup>49</sup> M. Farrell, *The Poor Law and the Workhouse in Belfast, 1838–1948* (Belfast, 1978), 30, 65.

<sup>50</sup> Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI), Belfast Board of Guardians’ Minute Book, BG/7/A/15, 25 February, 4 March 1854.

took advantage of Abbott's temporary abandonment of the workers at the quay whilst he went off to arrange transport to Preston to talk with the new recruits and present them with the reality of their 'opportunity' in the Victoria Inn. Supplied with food and drink and small sums of money, 101 of these decided to return to Belfast accompanied by James Dolphin, one of the delegates. Undoubtedly, the rest decided instead for whatever reason to carry on to Preston with Abbott. When they arrived, they no doubt learned of the minor riot averted there the previous day, when another batch of imported 'knobsticks' were stoned and two young men, one of whom, Patrick Bennett, was Irish were quickly arrested.<sup>51</sup> Surrounded by police and ushered into a converted former railway station on Fishergate not long after the reading of the Riot Act, the would-be migrant operatives could have been left in little doubt about the state of siege that prevailed in Preston.<sup>52</sup> Further trouble did await them, but the strike leaders and presumably many local workers, especially the Irish among them, evinced sympathy with the newcomers. At a meeting in a field at Cottam (both the Orchard and then Ashton Marsh had been placed off-limits by the authorities) the day after the migrants arrived, Mortimer Grimshaw said the 'poor people from Belfast were brought under a most vile statement, and when they got to the station and heard the correct version of the affair, he saw them with tears in their eyes'. Gallaher added that the new hands' importation was the fault solely of the masters who were 'responsible to the country at large, and to Heaven itself, for the degradation, the privation, and the misery which they were bringing upon the town of Preston, and for the dark deeds that they had committed that week'. The meeting concluded with appeals for people to avoid Preston 'as the city of a plague'.<sup>53</sup>

Despite these apocalyptic warnings, people still came. The next batch of 35 Irish workers from Manchester arrived on the Monday morning train. This group was apparently so infested with parasites that boiling water was poured over their bedding and the station platform in an act of physical as well as metaphorical public cleansing that speaks of the still prevailing idea of 'Irish fever' common at the height of the potato famine. Lowe describes the Irish in his account of the strike as a 'mass of filth and pauperism', and quotes from a London newspaper reporter on the way in which the associated masters treated the people:

The polite way in which these otherwise haughty gentlemen hand the females out of the carriages, inquiring after their bundles, and even dandling the babies, affords considerable amusement to the bystanders.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Dutton and King, 'Ten Per Cent', 178, 126; Henry Ashworth, *The Preston Strike: An Enquiry into its Causes and Consequences* (Manchester, 1854), 71; *Belfast Mercury*, 6 March 1854.

<sup>52</sup> *PG*, 4 March 1854; Lowe, *Trade Societies and Strikes*, 235. Lowe's account refers to the former Maxwell House Railway Station, which closed in 1844, being converted into accommodation for the blackleg labour with a sign affixed to the front which read 'The Factory Immigrants' Home'.

<sup>53</sup> T. Linehan, *Scabs and Traitors: Taboo, Violence and Punishment in Labour Disputes in Britain, 1760–1871* (Abingdon, 2018), 52–3; *PG*, 11 March 1854; *PC*, 11 March 1854.

<sup>54</sup> Lowe, *Trade Societies and Strikes*, 236.

Tuesday, 14 March proved a remarkable day for the Irish. It began with the parade of an entirely different collection of Irish imports, the 88<sup>th</sup> Regiment or Connaught Rangers with their band no doubt playing ‘Brian Boru’s March’, the regimental tune, through the streets of the town on their way to Fulwood Barracks (and ultimately soon after, the Crimea). At the other end of the town, two young men accosted a young Irish woman working in Thomas Naylor’s mill while she was visiting her sister. Mary Murray alleged she was called a ‘bloody knobstick’ by one and kicked by another, John Missett, who seems to have been Irish himself. Later that evening amidst fighting in Friargate involving different groups of Irish immigrants, a group of local men on strike entered 11 Westmorland Street where a number of young Irish women employed in Humber’s Mill (nearby Bushell Street Mill), were lodging. The women were attacked physically and verbally and sought support from some Irish men a few doors away, who managed to remove the intruders and alert the police but one of the assailants returned and kicked the door, being arrested soon after. Around about the same time that evening, a young Manchester Irish woman, Catherine Kelly, was also arrested for allegedly calling another young woman, Caroline Thompson, a ‘knobstick’ in Church Street and harassing her.<sup>55</sup> Out of this confusing interplay of events in the days leading up to St Patrick’s Day, unsurprisingly free of celebrations by all accounts, there is a clear demonstration of how the strike and lock-out affected the Irish on both sides of the duality often presented about them. As Hepworth has noted, the Irish part in the lock-out is not quite as straightforward or one-dimensional as Dutton and King present it.<sup>56</sup> Equally, however, it is clear that the experience was not one solely affecting the Catholic Irish but extended to the Protestant Irish as well, perhaps even more so. This much was always clear from the decision to import people from an overwhelmingly Protestant city, Belfast, something that sits anachronistically alongside the caricatured depictions of the ‘Irish knobsticks’, mingling as they do with traditional racialised stereotypes of the Irish poor from the potato famine years and before. This is because, whilst research has shown that city to have been very severely affected by those years in a whole host of ways, it was far from the rustic poverty which accounts of the imported labour force suggest. Moreover, if the immigrants did not have some previous working experience in Belfast’s numerous mills, they certainly had access to the industrial training provided by Belfast’s workhouse, especially the younger inmates.<sup>57</sup> This is also slightly at odds with the prevailing image presented by both the contemporary accounts and the later academic literature, which stress the inability of the migrants to operate machinery or adapt to the new working environment.<sup>58</sup>

Aside from its impact on historians as the origin myth of the Irish strike-breaker, the Preston lock-out left an enduring legacy in Ireland as well as in Preston’s Irish community. A report in the nationalist paper, the *Dublin Weekly Nation*, offered one of the many

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<sup>55</sup> *PG*, 18 March 1854.

<sup>56</sup> Hepworth, ‘Between Isolation and Integration’, 89–91.

<sup>57</sup> PRONI, Belfast Board of Guardians’ Minute Book, BG/7/A/15, 22 February, 11 March 1854.

<sup>58</sup> See, for example, the depictions of Irish ‘knobstick’ workers in the images analysed by Sarah Kennedy elsewhere in this volume.

English moral endangerment tropes that featured in much of the Irish public discourse around migration to Britain for decades after the potato famine. It began: ‘The following is one of the many cases in which the poor Irish introduced to the prejudice of the Preston artizans [*sic*], have had bitter reason to repent their emigration’ and proceeds to relate the story of one of the Birley Bros employees, a young Belfast Protestant woman, Matilda Taylor, being sent back to Ireland. Taylor had been appointed housekeeper to the other migrants, presumably in the ‘Factory Immigrants’ Home’ and when dispensed with was offered work in the mill, according to the employers, which she refused. In a subsequent court case brought by the destitute Taylor, she denied this offer of work and claimed millowner Richard Threlfall’s manager (Ringland) said he had no more responsibility for her. The magistrate, Mayor Thomas Walmsley, accepted Taylor’s version of events, asked if she wished to go home, and ruled that Threlfall (who replaced him as mayor not long afterwards) should pay for her passage back to Belfast.<sup>59</sup> Other cases provide similar testimony but are less about the moral questions around strike-breaking than their evidence of the essential emptiness of promises about a better life in Britain and the dangers of desolation as well as disappointment.<sup>60</sup> Unsurprisingly, these were mostly used in the service of post-famine nationalist endeavours to stem the flow of emigration in general as well as propagating ideas about perfidious Albion. Ironically then in a sense, if the English feared pollution, the Irish feared being polluted. For those in the middle of the actual process, there is some evidence of a belief among the Preston Irish in later years that they were the descendants of the Irish knobsticks, which in some ways shows the power of the myth as well as, perhaps, a lack of knowledge about the community’s origins and development. The reality is a bit more mundane. The mobility of Irish migrant labour flows to Britain in the nineteenth century meant that Irish communities were regularly made and re-made in the course of the century. Whilst a residual cluster remained and settled in all communities, most people moved on, following the work or the step and chain migration patterns influenced by family, kin and friendship networks. A cursory examination of the Preston census in the decade between 1851 and 1861 for the Belfast-born residents does reveal a rise, perhaps partly accounted for by the general increase in Irish-born between those census years or a willingness on the part of the enumerators to make the unusual choice of including the actual place of birth rather than simply ‘Ireland’.<sup>61</sup> More likely, it reflects the agency of the people in those census households to identify as Belfast natives. Of course, there is

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<sup>59</sup> *Dublin Weekly Nation*, 8 April 1854.

<sup>60</sup> *Preston Pilot*, 10 June 1854; *Irishman*, 14 August and 13 November 1858.

<sup>61</sup> R. Swift, ‘Identifying the Irish in Britain: Recent Trends in Historiography’, *Immigrants and Minorities*, 27:2–3 (2009), 134–51; M. Smith and D.M. MacRaild, ‘The Origins of the Irish in Northern England: An Isonymic Analysis of Data from the 1881 Census’, in R. Swift and S. Gilley (eds), *Irish Identities in Victorian Britain* (London, 2011), 24–49; Census of England (1851 and 1861), Preston urban only lists 35 Belfast-born individuals in the 1851 census and 50 in the 1861 census. This includes families sharing the same surname but is nevertheless a worthwhile sample for extracting occupational data. The surname and first name combinations suggest a mixture of both Catholic and Protestant, though perhaps with a slight majority of the latter.

little direct evidence that these, or some of these people (in the 1861 census obviously), were the original individuals who landed on a lonely windswept pier at Fleetwood in the middle of the decade, but the absence of all but a handful of names for the actual people involved, makes it worth at least examining. A further exploration of their occupations presents an interesting profile in keeping with what might be expected from their native origins, but which are at odds with the profile of scabs in the local cotton mills. With but one or two exceptions, the majority of the Belfast-born employed are engaged in the linen industry rather than cotton.<sup>62</sup> The former industry was just about clinging on in Preston and nearby Samlesbury by mid-century, though it had declined sharply in the early nineteenth century with the Birley interest maintaining their flax mill at Kirkham and possibly providing a gateway for Irish workers to the smaller operations in Preston.<sup>63</sup> This would suggest that very few of the Irish employed during the lock-out actually remained in Preston. Indeed, the so-called 'Factory Immigrants' Home' was closed in the summer of 1854 after the strike collapsed and the contents, worth about £100, divided among various local charities.<sup>64</sup> Perhaps everyone wished to forget the episode.

Karl Marx famously likened Preston to St Petersburg after the strike. A liberal Belfast newspaper, the *Northern Whig*, saw Barcelona as a more suitable comparison.<sup>65</sup> Neither quite fit the peculiar and dramatic circumstances of the lock-out whatever the merits of their other comparable features. The importation of the 'knobsticks' was not new but given the cataclysmic changes of the potato famine years, the dislocation, distress, poverty, disease and death alongside inflexible and parsimonious poor relief, it was given a different dimension. The combination proved enduring and is most striking when placed in the context of the policy of poor law removals, then reaching an apogee just as the strike began. Removal in a sense was but one part of a wider elite response to Irish pauperism which oscillated between expulsion and importation. Frequently the same class (maybe even on occasion, the same individuals) who were Poor Law Guardians and industrialists, had the power or monopoly of freedom of movement, which they applied in the interests of their class and capital. This could make Irish migrant labour both the heroines and villains of any given social and economic crisis, and sometimes, as in Preston in 1853–1854, both at the same time.

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<sup>62</sup> Census of England (1861), Preston urban. Some of those included are John Cunningham, a 39-year-old flax dresser living in Mount Pleasant, Isabella Foggett, a 21-year-old spinster and linen spinner in Simpson Street, Sarah Hodgson, a married 32-year-old linen spinner at Bleasdale Street, Jane Johnston and Mary Kelley, both unmarried linen spinners, aged 18 and 30 at Vicar and Harrington Streets respectively, and the various Nesbitts and Flemmings, the latter from County Monaghan, who lodged together in Seed Street, most of whom were employed in linen.

<sup>63</sup> G. Timmins, *The Last Shift: The Decline of Handloom Weaving in Nineteenth-Century Lancashire* (Manchester, 1993), 142, 161; A.J. Warden, *The Linen Trade* (London, 1967), 385; E. Roberts (ed.), *A History of Linen in the North West* (Lancaster, 1998), 84–6.

<sup>64</sup> *PC*, 3 June 1854.

<sup>65</sup> *New York Daily Tribune*, 1 August 1854; *Northern Whig*, 15 April 1854.