May You Die in Ireland: Death and Ageing in a Foreign Country

Anna Walsh

> The British, I decide, only bury people when they are so dead, you need another word for it. The British wait so long for a funeral that people gather not so much to mourn, as to complain that the corpse is still hanging around.[1]

Rituals and beliefs around death and commemoration are an important part of all cultures. In emigrant cultures, deviation from the traditions of the host country gives researchers the opportunity to understand which of the migrant traditions are important enough to import into their new homes. Some elements of death and commemoration become hybridized—a compromise between the old home and the new one. As Anne Enright's literary protagonist notes above, there are significant differences between Irish and British attitudes to death. This article explores how death rituals are embedded in Irish migrant culture in Britain. It covers the cultural and material elements of death, collective commemorations, how traumatic deaths are discussed and understood, and the ways respectability that was not always accessible in life can be attained in death.

Methodology

The main source for this article is a corpus of oral history interviews completed by the author between 2015 and 2019 for her PhD thesis. All of the interviewees were Irish or of Irish heritage, and had at some point lived or been based in the city of Leeds, in the north of England.

[1] Anne Enright, *The Gathering* (London: Grove Press, 2007), quoted in Bridget English, *Laying out the Bones: Death and Dying in the Modern Irish Novel* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse, 2017), 175.

These interviews took place in various locations around the city, from institutional offices to narrators' homes. The narrators were asked to reflect on their work, home, and social lives in England. Some interviews were conducted in groups; the author/interviewer allowed the group discussions to flow without instruction or direction. This method created some of the most memorable interviews. All narrators have been anonymized with culturally appropriate pseudonyms. Narratives have been edited for clarity, and any identifying names or places have been changed.

Death and Dying as Cultural Practices

Although change in Irish society and culture in recent decades is clear, some life-cycle traditions remain important in Ireland. In an interview in Corinne Silva's *Róisín Bán*, we see her narrator Eddie suggest that he wants his ashes scattered in Ireland—his final resting place. He wishes his connection to Irish soil to be an eternal one.[2] Bás in Éirinn, in Irish, means "may you die in Ireland." This blessing makes clear the extent to which death is seen as the final homecoming. Sometimes literally so, with migrants wishing to die at home in Ireland, or at least to be buried there. The last substantial wave of chain migration to the city of Leeds from Ireland took place in the latter half of the twentieth century, and most of these migrants are well past retirement age. Interviews with these migrants reflected the stage they had reached in their lives: the interviews displayed a reflective evaluative process, looking back at their lives and the events that have shaped them. What also became apparent was their awareness of the proximity of death; they have all lost parents or other loved ones, and are now dealing with the loss of friends and peers and sometimes even children, and their own chronic and sometimes terminal illnesses.

[2] Corinne Silva, *Róisín Bán* (Leeds: Leeds Irish Health and Homes, 2006),109. This book is a photo collection of Irish migrants to Leeds, and also contains a number of interviews with its subjects, one of whom is Eddie.

Irish migrant views on death and dying encapsulate the influence of folkloric traditions around death and funerary traditions as well as the difference between approaches to death in Ireland and the UK.[3] The testimonies of Irish migrants from a variety of backgrounds—rural, urban, wealthy and less so—interrogate their perspectives on death and ageing, and the extent to which Irish traditions around death are continued, discontinued, or reimagined in migrant communities. This reveals a continuity of traditions which spans the generations. In their study of Irish funerary traditions, *Talking to the Dead*, Witoszek and Sheeran hypothesize that Ireland, particularly its pre-Celtic Tiger iteration, had cultivated a cultural mythology, building on a colonial victim status, whereby death—and particularly a valiant death—was seen as a triumph.[4] They problematize the postcolonial Field Day approach to Irish identity, which they suggest overestimates the role of Anglo-Irishness in creating or reimagining cultural traditions, and propose an alternative view: "The discourse that really galvanized the nation was based not so much on Revivalist fictions, and not even on Republican rhetorics, but … on vernacular narratives of death."[5]

Death is not solely a contemporary obsession. Irish folklore contains many myths around death and dying. Some arresting folk beliefs date from the nineteenth century include: Galway fishermen would say that a blast of air from the sea was a sign of a drowning, and in Connemara, a dog's howl outside could presage the death of a loved one, depending on the direction the dog was facing.[6] In Mayo, extension-building could not take place on the west side of a cottage lest one of its occupants be dead within the year.[7] One of the most famous of these death myths involves the *bean sídhe* (banshee), an apparition of a woman who appears at

[3] An edited version of this subsection of the article appears in a 2017 Four Nations History Network blog by the same author.
[4] Nina Witoszek and Pat Sheeran, *Talking to the Dead: A Study of Irish Funerary Traditions* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998), 6.
[5] Ibid.
[6] James Mooney, "The Funeral Customs of Ireland," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 25:128 (1888): 260.
[7] E. Estyn Evans, *Irish Folk Ways* (London: Routledge, 1967).

the house as a harbinger of death, not unlike the grim reaper. The banshee is one of the most frightening figures from folk tales, and this is shown to good effect in a film full of well-worn Irish stereotypes*, Darby McGill and the Little People* (dir. Robert Stevenson, 1959), where the banshee's appearance has now terrified generations of children in Ireland and internationally. In 2021, Martin McDonagh's film *The Banshees of Inisherin* was set on fictional Inisherin, and filmed on Achill Island in County Mayo. The titular banshees spell out to viewers that this bucolic, pastoral existence is close to death, teetering on the brink of extinction, as civil war rages on the mainland, and islanders are forced to emigrate. Indeed, Tony Tracy suggests that McDonagh's film's "visuals are a knowing amalgamation of Irish tourist and Hollywood imagery," conjuring memories of the likes of John Hinde's technicolor postcards, or *Darby O'Gill*.[8]

Death is an integral part of how the Irish talk about life. It infiltrates Irish fiction, like Anne Enright's novel *The Gathering* (2007) and John McGahern's *That They May Face The Rising Sun* (2003).[9] Such a level of cultural and social engagement explains the commonality of death notices on the radio, which are still a key feature of Irish local radio stations. These notices serve a dual purpose—to publicly remember the departed, and to inform others both of their passing and their funeral arrangements. It is worth noting that death notices and death discourse become more relevant in later life stages: as death moves closer, the administration around it becomes more pertinent. Material cultures around death in Ireland are significant too; many relate to elements of religion, such as religious ephemera on gravestones or placed on graves. Most Irish graveyards are catalogued on the website irishgraveyards.ie. This may be a nod to the importance of cultural death markers, but it could just as easily be due to poor navigability of graveyards, or to the international boom in amateur geneaology. Distant

[8] Tony Tracy, "Men Behaving Madly: The Banshees of Inisherin," *Estudios Irlandeses* 18 (2023): 339-45.
[9] Anne Enright, *The Gathering* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2007); John McGahern, *That They May Face the Rising Sun* (London: Faber, 2003).

relatives in Australia or Canada might never visit their great-grandparents' grave in rural Sligo, but technology at least allows them to find and view their ancestors' final resting place. Reflecting on this type of genealogy, Nash suggests that "in many cases, the emigrant ancestor can only be sketchily known through the genealogical information that can be built up around them—names and dates of birth and marriage and death." She goes on to posit that "being in the places that they left is thus a way of knowing something of them."[10] These online visits to ancestors' final resting place may be the first step of a journey of self-discovery, or it may be satiating enough just to know and see the graves in their virtual format.

Some of the traditional practices around death in Ireland, such as waking the dead, remain popular. Sordid accounts of Irish wakes in England at the turn of the twentieth century include fights breaking out, and one refers to an unfortunate corpse being set alight by a discarded cigarette.[11] Strange cautions, however, that these accounts should be taken with a pinch of salt, as "it is difficult to read reports of the wake, formulated overwhelmingly from the English Protestant professional perspective, as anything but an exercise in prejudice against the poor Catholic Irish."[12] Public health officials did discourage waking the dead at home in order to lessen the risk of infectious disease, but they were also dissuaded by local officials and the Catholic Church as they were seen as raucous and superstitious events which perpetuated the stereotype of the Irish immigrant. It is also worth recognizing the role of religion in Irish death rituals: there are rites throughout the life course for Catholics, a religion common among most of the narrators here; death is the final rite. Taylor suggests that the Catholic church was complicit in "civilizing" death rituals away from wakes and drinking, referring to the story of "Conny the Gap" in rural Donegal, whose generic funeral formalizes and depersonalizes his

[10] Catherine Nash, *Of Irish Descent: Origin Stories, Genealogy, and the Politics of Belonging* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2008), 71.
[11] Julie-Marie Strange, *Death, Grief and Poverty in Britain, 1870-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 88.
[12] Ibid.

death. Taylor also considers the materiality of Catholic remembrance of the dead, in the form of the Mass card, a small, laminated memento of the deceased which combines a photograph memorializing the person with generic prayers and religious iconography. These would be kept in drawers or cupboards and when stumbled on would remind the receiver not just to remember the deceased but to pray for them.[13]

Discussing Death in Oral History Narratives

The majority of the interviews undertaken for this author's thesis were with men, many of whom worked in the macho worlds of construction and civil engineering. Hearing them discuss the illness and loss of their family, friends, and acquaintances, one was struck by their struggle to find the words to describe these events. Two men of great verbosity lacked the emotional vocabulary to describe their feelings towards ageing and death. They focused instead on physical descriptions of the events around death, paying particular attention to funny events at funerals, or the bizarre behavior of a particular local grave digger. One particularly poignant anecdote was around a heavy-set man whose cancer had become terminal; as he was described when they visited him in hospital "you could have slipped his shirt right over his head without undoing the buttons." This emphasized the stark difference between the lively fellow they once knew and the dying man, rendered unrecognizable by the ravages of his illness.

The interviews were also liberally sprinkled with mentions of friends and acquaintances who had died. Often short epithets were attached, as though their death was another way to identify them:

[13] Lawrence J. Taylor, "Bás in Eirinn: Cultural Constructions of Death in Ireland," *Anthropological Quarterly* 62:4 (1989): 184.

EAMONN: Mickey was one, he died there a few years back, they were all cousins, Danny was a right little, anyway, he was getting beat every time, we were all steaming, and you know big Mick Kilroy that died not very long ago, he was that height, [motions] that much above Reilly…

The deaths of the anecdote's protagonists have thus become part of the anecdote themselves, woven into the story in the same way a physical description might be. Danny was small, and died a while ago—Mick was taller than Reilly, and died recently. Most of the men interviewed had grown up in Ireland during the 1940s and 1950s, when the rifeness of tuberculosis and other illnesses meant many interviewees suffered the loss of siblings and parents at an early age. Such experiences may be expected to presage an approach to death as something matter-of-fact and very much a part of everyday life.

So, many of the men who worked on construction sites were no stranger to death, and some of the deaths they had experienced had been tragic work accidents. Even fifty years on it was clear that being witness to such events had been an uncomfortable experience. Again, descriptions of the events, though hazy (and sometimes disputed in group interviews) focus on facts and events and steer clear of graphic descriptions, replacing a depiction of the moment of impact with an onomatopoeic CLAP:

KATHLEEN: His machine fell over and killed him

EAMONN: They reckon he was probably shouting over the diesel man

SIMON: They say he went to let the dog in

INTERVIEWER: Yeah you said about that, was that the one with the steam roller?

SIMON: Yeah

ROSE: But this one in Whiston with Paddy was to do with the water

SIMON: it was yeah

EAMONN: It was, he was with the tank

SIMON: He shouldn't have been where he was

EAMONN: He was spraying water on the dust just to keep it down, cos he was getting sacked didn't he, and the dowsers were set, he was getting sacked because he'd burned the clutch out of one the riders or something, and they said no, the contractors want you gone, take out that old tanker, it was only an old thing with holes in the back of it, spraying the road with water, and he wasn't used to the carry on, and he went to turn around where the dust was, and *CLAP*[14]

The moment of death is reenacted here by Eamonn using a sensory description which is at once a dysphemistic and a euphemistic approximation of the awful sound of this kind of industrial death. These numerous losses make plain the need for more stringent health and safety legislation at work, which would arrive the following decade. Deaths litter these migrants' narratives, and clearly there is something violent in the descriptions of the on-site deaths which suggests that the memory is uncomfortable for the narrators. John McGahern's short story "Faith, Hope and Charity" (1975) deals with just this difficulty, creating a cultural narrative around this relatively commonplace misfortune:

> The only warning given was a sudden splintering of timber before the trench caved in. Murphy fell backwards from the edge but Cunningham had no time. The boards and clay caught him. His head and shoulder remained above the earth.

[14] This exchange took place at Eamonn's house, and was a discussion between Eamonn, his wife Kathleen, their friend Simon and his wife Rose.

> He stayed alive while they dug him out, but as soon as they released the boards he died. The boards had broken his back.[15]

The bald, factual recollections of death that appear in oral history accounts are faithfully recreated here in a literary narrative—McGahern's spare and unemotional prose lending itself to the factual way these deaths are recounted by the observers. A similar, very visual depiction of death at work is seen in O'Grady's *I Could Read The Sky* (1997), where strong sensory memories of the trauma are clearly retained by the narrator:

> He puts the tip of the hammer to the pavement then and begins to dig. I see the little girl in the window reading a book with the sun shining onto her face. I see the black man with the rings fixing a rose to the lapel of his jacket. I see Francie smiling. Then there's a fierce hiss and a blaze and the air around Francie is shimmering in the heat. Flames pour out of his boots and his trousers and his shirt. His hair too is on fire. There is fire in his mouth. There is fire on his hands. His skin flames and then blackens. The jackhammer falls to the pavement and Francie along with it. Myles and John and Pat and the Iroquois and myself and the girl and the black man all look at him lying dead on the pavement beside the hole and the mains cable he cut through with the hammer, the insulation boiling and smoking and the coloured wires inside like the stems of cut flowers.[16]

[15] John McGahern, "Faith, Hope and Charity," in *Collected Stories* (London: Faber, 2003), 105.
[16] Timothy O'Grady, *I Could Read the Sky* (London: Harvill, 1997), 136.

The narrator here retells the story of Francie's death step by step. The bystanders all see what happens, but none of their responses are recorded, nor are their emotions shared. The focus is on Francie and his charred remains.

Abrams attests that "negative or upsetting emotional feelings in particular are difficult to express" for people who have suffered traumatic experiences; she suggests that many observers of trauma "recount their experiences matter-of-factly, without much emotion."[17] It was well known to workers that these jobs were dangerous, as John B. Keane, reflecting on the death of a character on a building site in his novel *The Contractors* (1993), makes plain:

> Although Eddie's death had been an accident there were few of the kneeling men who inwardly accepted it as such. To them Eddie Carey's death was the toll for the money they earned and the drink they consumed. It was the Paddy's tally. Every tunnel Paddy dug was a toll-tunnel, every bridge a toll-bridge. Every road had its toll-booth and the toll-man was death. They accepted it as part and parcel of the game they played.[18]

This relationship with workplace trauma is not limited to workers in construction. Schooler and Baum also find a lack of emotional language in a study of qualitative interviews with petrochemical workers after a tragic incident. They suggest that:

> Another finding, or lack thereof, in the content analysis, was the striking absence of emotion-laden words. Even within narratives comprising 250 words, an average of 2 emotion words were found. Perhaps this predominantly male population of petrochemical workers viewed the task as more descriptive of events than an outlet for

[17] Lynn Abrams, *Oral History Theory* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), 94
[18] John B. Keane, *The Contractors* (Dublin: Mercier, 1993), 261.

> emotional expression, or perhaps they inhibited expression of emotional responses for other reasons. It is difficult to conclude that memories of this fatal accident are exclusively emotion-free and descriptive.[19]

In studying memory and reliability, some accounts are more trusted than others. Aside from aspects of status and power that dominate prevailing discourses, there are physiological reasons that reside in the way that the memory system processes traumatic experiences. There are no hard and fast rules around remembering traumatic experiences; some memories are completely repressed whilst others recur in grim and exact detail. Abrams notes, however, that the memories are not complete—that is, the events of the past have not yet been dealt with by the respondent. This leads to fragmented, "emotional and disturbing" accounts, as "survivors have not achieved closure."[20] More recently Bryson concurs that trauma narratives can be recognized by narrators speaking without emotion, repeating stories, and struggling for vocabulary. Traumatic stories can be difficult for narrators to tell. An example of a narrator in this research who had experienced trauma was a woman named Lizzie who was interviewed at an over-55s club. She had an engaging tale about moving to Britain, and about her life there, but she also shared references to the death of her husband, and the more recent and sudden death of her son. She relived in minute detail the events leading up to her son's death. She spoke about it in a matter-of-fact way, but it was clear from the amount of time she spent talking about it and the frequency of its appearance in her testimony that she was still processing the events around his death:

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[19] Tonya Y. Schooler and Andrew Baum, "Memories of a Petrochemical Explosion: A Cognitive-Phenomenological Study of Intrusive Thoughts," in *Trauma and Memory*, ed. Linda M. Williams and Victoria L. Banyard (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1999), pp.199

[20] Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, 93. The concept of "closure" is controversial; some traumatized individuals have not and will not achieve closure.

> LIZZIE: and he'd never been ill, and then he was at work and of course, he did driving, and they said they couldn't have him back, so he was off for a year, and then we went shopping one morning, 28th of December, we'd been shopping, and came home, and I said to him will you open the door for me, he parked the car on the other side of the door, and I said, he dropped the shopping in, and I went to go put the kettle on, and he went to close the car and dropped dead on the drive, yeah, 56 … .And that was that. And I didn't have any other children, I only had him, so he lived with me, so that was my life really. I've enjoyed it. I get on with things: you have to do haven't you?

It seems that this was her way of keeping her son's memory alive, to share her stories about him with others as a way of grieving. Her memories of the events are clearly vivid, but as mentioned above, Abrams concludes that people who have experienced suffering find it difficult to express their emotions around the trauma.[21] Here, Lizzie could recall the events, but not her feelings around the death of her son, as this may have been too much to countenance. The lack of emotional adjectives echoes the findings of Schooler and Baum above. Lizzie remembers the day, as O'Grady's and McGahern's narrators do, through a timeline of events. She has not reached the point where those traumatic experiences have been processed. The feelings of grief remain unattached or unacknowledged, and the story continues to be told exactly as it was, remaining stuck that way in her memory.

Commemorating Those Who Died during the Great Hunger in Leeds

An acknowledged and ritualized death is something Irish migrants carry with them as an important element of humanity and dignity. Correspondingly, a lack of funerary dignity arises as a consistent issue around prior waves of migration: in the case of Leeds, this pertains to the

[21] Abrams, *Oral History Theory*, 95.

Famine-era migration of vast numbers of Irish people to an area known as the Bank, in the east of central Leeds. Many of these migrants lost their lives to illness in their new home, despite traveling hundreds of miles to escape famine. Brendan McGowan suggests that over 2000 Leeds residents died as a result of typhus in 1948, which spread uncontrollably, particularly in areas in the east of the city with poor living conditions such as the Bank, which was inhabited mostly by Irish famine migrants.[22] A hundred and fifty years later, in 1995, the city's Irish community came together to recognize this tragic loss of life and to memorialize those buried under the city center's tarmac roads. An interviewee, Sean, suggested:

> SEAN: They wanted to show some respect to the graves that was down there. They did a lot of work previous to the march to clear the graves.
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> INTERVIEWER: So people had been down and…
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> SEAN: And been repairing it, yeah
>
> INTERVIEWER: So that's where the graves of the Irish are, is it?
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> SEAN; Yes. Nobody has any idea how many, but a lot of them died from typhoid, which when they come from Ireland, they weren't used to the food and that here. A lot of them died from typhoid. And there's no record of where they was buried or anything like that.
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> INTERVIEWER: So it was a kind of statement of trying to… for those people… rather than actually knowing that that was definitely them, or…
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> SEAN: It was a statement just to show the people. That we still respected the people, even though it wasn't a proper cemetery. We respected them. And we went there and prayed over their graves, which was… when there's no proper tombstones, or proper graves, there's not much more you can do. We just circled the whole area where we

[22] Brendan McGowan, Taking the Boat: The Irish in Leeds 1931-81 Killala, 2009.

thought the graves were, and then the priest started praying. [It was] just simply people putting their heads together in the Irish community to say 'we're doing this.'

INTERVIEWER: These are our people?

SEAN: Yeah. See there was no... nobody could go and visit their graves. Because nobody knew where they were buried. So it had to be like a communal thing, to show respect to the people that had died.

INTERVIEWER: and to have somewhere where it's commemorated?

SEAN: It is, and it brought a lot of tears on the day. To think that your own people could be just buried in a heap, basically. And no record of who they were or anything.

This march from the edge of the Irish district into the city center, as well as exhibiting a pride in an Irish identity which had for so long been a source of shame due to the Troubles, was a reclamation of these forebears whose lives were so gruesome and short. There may not be individual gravestones for the dead of the Bank, but the famine memorial stone was paid for and prayed over by those that came after. As the huge, ornate church at Mount St. Mary's, built from money raised by these poverty-stricken immigrants, still hovered over the skyline, the belief that God would provide failed them. A hundred and fifty years later, their compatriots were then at least able to acknowledge them, memorialize them, and pray for their souls.

Death and Respectability

The concept of a respectable death is not just a historical issue for Irish migrants. Another interviewee whose ideas on the end-of-life process and a respectable death are enlightening is Gerald. Gerald was interviewed initially as part of a project for a local organization who support older Irish people. Gerald is a street drinker who has had a chaotic life but who, thanks in part to Leeds Irish Health and Homes, has managed to sustain a life for himself and a flat to which

he can retire of an evening. He referred consistently to the role of fate in his life, suggesting that he had always been destined for an itinerant existence, and that he had acquiesced to this fate at quite an early age. Gerald's ideas around death and dying highlight what he deems important:

> GERALD: I'm a controlled drinker now. I manage to keep clean and pay my rent, and keep my head above the water. Leeds Irish Health and Homes helps me to do that. I'm no longer destitute. I've saved some money for a funeral and a burial plot—there's a story of the alcoholic who could not afford a funeral—I'll make sure that doesn't happen to me. I won't have a pauper's grave.
>
> I hope I won't end up in a home; they're sad places. I knew someone once who was visiting a home for the mentally ill. He said the worst thing was that they were all sitting in the day room. The day room faces onto the cemetery. That's where they'll end up in forty years. It comes to us all.

Gerald has struggled financially in his life, and was not always able to conform to what he suggested was the mainstream 'white shirt' mentality of Irish migrants in Leeds.[23] However, there is a curious performativity in his attitude to death and his desire to be recognized and buried in the same way as his compatriots who had shunned him in his life. His wish to avoid a pauper funeral, Laqueur suggests, is because it condemns the dead to "dying bereft of the final signs of communal membership."[24] This illustrates the importance of death rituals, a 'proper send-off' and a type of respectability to migrants regardless of social status. It also confers the importance of this respectability to migrants.

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[23] The importance of—and difficulty of attaining—respectability in parts of Leeds' Irish community is documented in detail in Anna Walsh, "The Irish in Leeds 1960-2020," PhD diss. (University of Liverpool, 2020).
[24] Laqueur, "Bodies, Death and Pauper Funerals," *Representations* 1:1 (1983): 117.

The Leeds Irish Health and Homes CEO, Ant Hanlon, gives an example of a staff meeting where colleagues are instructed to attend funerals of service users. Hanlon sees this as an extension of the care extended to clients during their life, and is particularly aware that showing respect to the dead is a cultural expectation for Irish people. Service users for Leeds Irish Health and Homes often live lives, like Gerald, outside of the respectability paradigm that is so important in migrant communities.

> ANT: Not everybody wants a church burial. But, you know, even where there isn't a church, people will turn up to whatever memorial is held for that person because it's really important to give somebody a good send off, you know, as a part of the community because generally, that person has touched the lives of other people and I think that's the thing that most of us realize that. We were talking in the staff meeting the other day and just saying, you know, one of the things that's quite unique about us as an organization is that people can go to funerals in their work time. They are going to represent the organization and they may know that person. You know, we may have worked with that person, but equally we may not know that person, but we go to acknowledge that that is a person of worth who has passed away. It's a really healthy part of our community response as an Irish charity..

He also makes the point that:

> ANT: each of each of the people that we deal with, you know they have histories, they have journeys, they have stories and it's trying to sort of think and to remember when somebody passes away, not to have judgement on their lives because you know they might be a drinker, or they might have had what from the outside looks like a really

> dreadful life. But actually, what do you know? I had really lovely conversations with John. I had conversations about his childhood in, you know, Mayo or wherever and I hold that deeply as my knowledge of him as a person or her as a person that, you know, you can think, that's a really important part of who they were.

Acknowledging that everyone, no matter their station or situation in life, should have their life celebrated and accepting that each has their own story and intrinsic human value should not be radical, but in a community scarred by internalized oppression in the shadow of both the Troubles and the Catholic church, Hanlon's approach is somewhat revolutionary, and is a support to those, like Gerald, whose lives fail to live up to the narrow cultural script of success. To attend these funerals, to walk beside the prodigal sons and daughters of Ireland on their final journey, is an important act of remembrance.

The desire for public respectability and parity continues beyond the grave, as we see in the death and memorialization of Margaret Keane. Keane, an Irish-born migrant who lived in Coventry, was active in her local Irish community, and particularly in the Gaelic Athletic Association in the city. She maintained a lifelong engagement with her home country, and wished for that to continue after her death in 2018, with an Irish-language inscription on her headstone. Mrs. Keane had requested the inscription *In ár gcroíthe go deo,* meaning "in our hearts forever." This was expected to be a straightforward request, but it ran into some arcane rules around the language allowed on graveyards in Coventry. The Chancellor of Coventry, Judge Steven Ayre QC, challenged Mrs. Keane's inscription in a 2020 ruling, suggesting that in "English-speaking Coventry,"

> Not only would the message of the inscription not be understood but there is a risk of it being misunderstood. Given the passions and feelings connected with the use of Irish

> Gaelic there is a sad risk that the phrase would be regarded as some form of slogan or that its inclusion without translation would of itself be seen as a political statement. That is not appropriate...[25]

This conception of the Irish language as a threat was at odds with the many years of relative peace between the two countries, as well as the harmonious spirit of the message the Irish inscription conveyed. Moreover, Mrs. Keane was considered unable to rest peacefully while this ruling lasted, and her family appealed the verdict. Mrs. Keane's son explained that "Mum was very proud of her Irishness, and brought us all up to be Irish, with the girls dancing and me and my brothers playing football. That's why we wanted the GAA crest and the words 'in ár gcroíthe go deo' on the headstone." He also added that "we can't get past the grieving process going down to the grave and just having a wooden cross to look at. We want the headstone that we can go down to and remember mum by the words that were chosen for her." Local neighbours respected Mrs. Keane and her wishes, and were confused as to why these wishes could not be granted.[26] Laqueur's expectation of communal membership was denied to Mrs. Keane.[27] Though in life she was able to live a pluralistic cultural existence, living in England while fully involved in the Irish community, in death the Chancellor's decision forced her—or more accurately her family—to choose between the acceptable rituals of the host society or dying with an acknowledgement of her ethnicity and culture, of which she had been so proud during her life. Her family's persistence paid off, and the ban was overturned in 2021, with the proviso that an English translation of her epitaph be entered into the parish records.

Conclusion

[25] Caoilfhionn Gallagher to Doughty Street Chambers Insights blog, 3 June 2020.
[26] Sean Whelan, "Family Wins Appeal for Irish Inscription on UK Headstone," *RTÉ News*, 24 Feb. 2021. https://www.rte.ie/news/uk/2021/0224/1199063-margaret-keane-uk/.
[27] Laqueur, "Bodies Deaths and Pauper Funerals."

Irish literature and funerary customs suggest that death is part of the discourse of everyday life. Death customs are certainly different from the UK in Ireland, from the short time between the death and the funeral to the community elements of funerals and the popularity of wakes. Some of the differences are rooted in religion; the Catholic church in Ireland is heavily premised on the materiality of traditions and rituals across the life course, the final one being death. The church also feeds into to a very narrow expectation of social respectability to which it is difficult for some migrants to conform, and this struggle for respectability can continue beyond the grave. Both individuals and organizations have challenged the social cruelty of indignity in death, whether that indignity be created by English bureaucracy, poverty, and famine, or the expectations of one's own compatriots. Clearly, some of the narrators here have also been witness to traumatic deaths, and the way that they process and talk about these events is illuminating, and has been faithfully reproduced in contemporary literature. Although their descriptions lack emotional adjectives, their use of Hiberno-English lends a lyricism and poignancy to their stories. Some of the narrators included in this research have since died. This article is dedicated to their memory.