

Strangers Then, Strangers Now

From Boston's Irish Past to Northern Ireland's Present

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I have frequently visited Northern Ireland since childhood and have lived here on and off for most of my adult life. Over the years, I have noticed a clear shift in feelings and attitudes towards newcomers in Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland, like most places, has always had a complicated past involving identity, immigration, and social hostility. However, something feels different now.



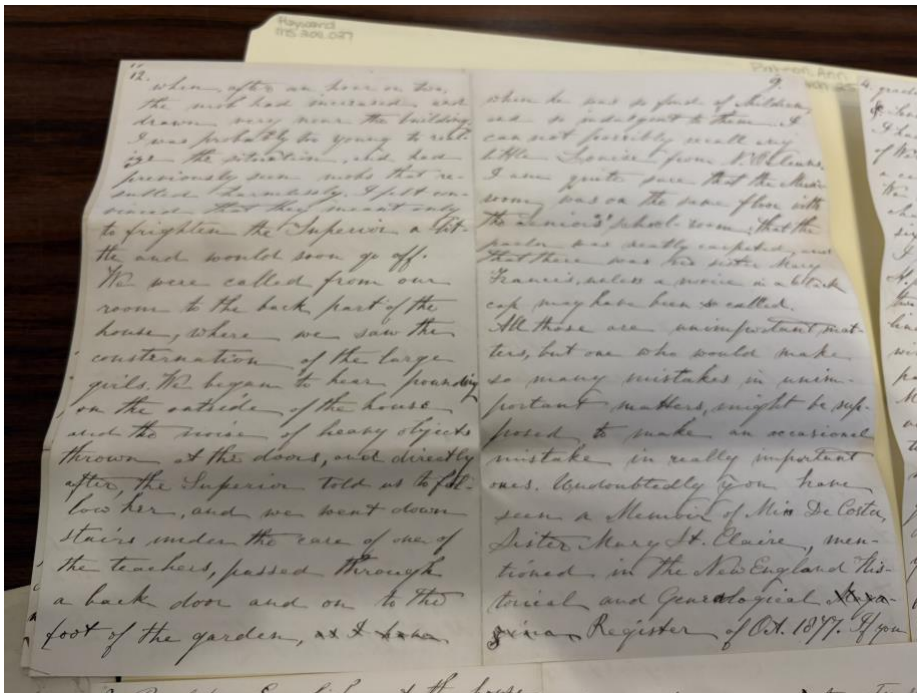
The conversation around race and immigration has changed, becoming sharper and harder to dismiss in the past three years. Northern Ireland has become too comfortable with extreme levels of racial violence. Just two years ago, I watched my neighbourhood being destroyed by racist unrest in Belfast. Since then, I have seen enough to worry that what should shock us is becoming familiar. This persistent hostility is ignored by too many. This shift has made my visit to Boston College feel profoundly resonant. It shows how embracing an immigrant past can help a city succeed. Boston reminds us of what immigrant communities endure, build, and become.

I had the privilege of being selected as Queen's University Belfast's postgraduate visiting exchange student to Boston College this March. During the visit, I met with faculty and students working on fascinating projects across Irish studies, history, politics, and migration, and I presented some of my own research. It was a valuable academic opportunity, but it was also something more than that: a chance to think through my own work in a city where immigrant history is not buried or sanitised, but publicly remembered and woven into civic life.

Not lost on me are the differences in my experience visiting Boston from those experienced by early waves of Irish immigrants to the city. I had the privilege of arriving by plane in relative comfort. I arrived with the protection of an institution, a passport, and the foresight that I would eventually go home without hindrance. Many migrants, past and present, have had none of those securities. Similarly, many newcomers arriving in Ireland and the UK now do so amid fear, instability, and danger. Though the routes, travellers and destinations differ, the vulnerability of arrival remains the same for people fleeing hardship.

I have spent much of my life as an immigrant abroad. As the son of a Nigerian immigrant to the US, these experiences were nothing new to me. I have worked for Irish immigrant communities abroad for many years, advocating for their respect, care and support. Ireland has always been a second home to me, notwithstanding some negative experiences regarding racial prejudice. However, it has largely been welcoming and generally a place of welcome. That is part of why the present moment feels so unsettling. The contrast between the Northern Ireland I thought I knew and the harder, more openly hostile climate now taking shape is difficult to ignore.

Boston is a city deeply entrenched in immigrant success and celebration. Boston is a city that has grown into one of the most influential in America, shaped by its immigrant past, present, and future. That history is visible in neighbourhoods, in symbols, in institutions, and in the confidence with which immigrant memory is woven into the city's story. In some of the places I visited, Irishness felt not confined to family memory but publicly acknowledged and celebrated. In some parts of the city, I saw Irishness celebrated as often as I saw American pride, with Irish tricolours as common as American flags.



Visiting Boston, you can see the resilience and celebration of immigrant perseverance, ingenuity and hope. It touches every aspect of Boston College's beautiful campus through buildings named for their influential immigrant alumni and founders. Boston College feels part of that longer story: a place shaped by communities that arrived as outsiders and, over time, became central to the city's life. But, of course, this is not without the realities faced by earlier Irish immigrants to America. Anti-Irish hate and sentiment were rife, and discrimination was an established reality for many who arrived in the United States. They were excluded from employment, housing, and full belonging, and were repeatedly reminded that they were seen as unwelcome. It is easy, looking retroactively, to remember only the success story of the Irish in America, but the archives remind us of the fear, exclusion, and violence that accompanied this journey.

This history provides a useful perspective for understanding the challenges migrants face today.

I had the privilege of spending two days in the Boston College Burns Library sifting through remarkable testimonies from Irish immigrants over the last two centuries. Many of them detailed the difficult journey via the coffin ships. Some discussed the challenges of being Irish in America, as xenophobia and prejudice towards immigrants were so rife and popularised. The archival material gave real texture and depth to a story too often remembered in triumphal terms. I found one account particularly profound. It was a series of letters from a woman named Elizabeth Hayward discussing her life and experiences at the Ursuline Academy just outside Boston. In 1834, an angry racist mob, motivated by rumours and anti-Irish sentiment, surrounded their school and burned it while they (women and children) were inside. She explained her initial confusion as:

"when after an hour or two, the mob had increased drawn very near to the building. I was probably too young to realize the situation, and had previously seen mobs that resulted harmlessly. I felt convinced that they meant only to frighten the Superior a little and would soon go off. We were called from our room to the back part of the house, where we saw the consternation of the large girls. We heard pounding on the outside of the house and the noise of heavy objects thrown at the doors, and directly after"

I found this testimony equally disturbing and compelling for many reasons. There is something especially haunting in the child's confusion: the familiar recognition of racial violence and the slow realisation that the crowd outside does not simply mean to frighten, but to harm and act on this senseless prejudice.

This account felt all too similar to the experiences of recent migrants to Northern Ireland. During a race riot in Belfast in 2023, a racist mob attempted to break into a hotel housing asylum seekers. And, in June 2025, in Larne, motivated by rumour and anti-immigrant hostility, race rioters set a leisure centre on fire, which was providing emergency shelter for families following racist riots that took place earlier that week in Ballymena. The parallels are uncanny and unsettling. The contexts are not identical, and I do not want to force them into a crude historical equivalence. But the resemblance is still morally unsettling. Violence stirred up by rumour, public licence, and the targeting of vulnerable people whose only "crime" is their presence in a new home.

Northern Ireland cannot be reduced to a single identity or tradition, and any honest reflection on this place has to acknowledge its intertwined Irish and British, and neither, traditions. But regardless of one's constitutional position, migration and diaspora are hardly foreign themes here. This is part of what makes the present moment feel so frustratingly mindboggling.



During my visit, I was fortunate to share a paper at the Boston College Meitheal, where I disseminated some of my recent work analysing racial attitudes in Northern Ireland. The picture is complex and ambiguous. The data does not show a simple story of straightforward attitudinal decline. In many respects, racial attitudes in Northern Ireland have improved over the past decade, as most ethnic groups have seen significant increases in public acceptance. At the same time, self-reported prejudice also rose. In my research, that figure rose from 24 per cent in 2014 to 33 per cent in 2020, before remaining elevated thereafter. That matters because it suggests that even where attitudes improved overall, some of the restraint around openly expressing

prejudice may have weakened. And about one-third of Northern Irish people describe themselves as prejudiced, an uncomfortably high proportion. This suggests that civic tolerance and deeper inclusion do not always move in step, and that there is still a long way to go to achieve a truly tolerant and welcoming society.

That tension is also visible in the official figures. The growing racial violence that has been recorded by the PSNI, with race-hate incidents breaking records year on year, sits uneasily alongside those longer-term improvements in acceptance. With 2,049 race-based hate incidents across NI, 2024 marked the highest level on record and a rise of 646 incidents from the previous year. Race-motivated incidents have also outnumbered sectarian incidents since 2016. If there is one lesson in these findings, it is that progress may have been real, but also fragile and uneven.

In Boston, that fragility looked different. There, one sees what time, endurance, and institution-building can produce when an immigrant community once viewed with suspicion is eventually allowed not only to survive, but to belong and build alongside other communities. The Irish in Boston were not always welcomed, but over time, they became part of the city's social and institutional fabric.

I was fortunate to have this wonderful experience, as it gave me some perspective, allowing me to look back and recognise how perseverance and time can sometimes allow newcomer communities to grow into being celebrated, beloved and heralded, much like the Irish have been able to do in Boston over the last century. That, perhaps, is the sharpest contrast with the present mood in Northern Ireland. Too often, newcomers here are discussed not as neighbours in the making, but as burdens or

threats. Boston stands as a reminder of how shortsighted and limiting that outlook can be.

This is not to point to the United States as a prime example for the treatment of immigrants, as the current administration wages war against families and communities. That tension was not absent from the visit. If anything, it sharpened the point. Boston's Irish past does not offer a simple or sentimental model of welcome for other communities to adopt. Rather, it offers a reminder that public feeling can change dramatically over time, and that communities once cast as suspicious, once given the opportunity, can go on to shape the fabric of their new home.



I hope that we can find a way to inspire recognition of the success of the Irish abroad and afford the same positive sentiment of hope and vision for those who have relocated to Ireland. Boston shows us that the story of Irish migration should be a source of pride. It should also be a source of humility. And it should remind us that communities once treated with suspicion later became indispensable to the places that first rejected them.