

The Hackney Terrier

The Friends of Hackney Archives Newsletter

Spring 2024

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William Smyth: art and adventures of a Hackney admiral



Smyth's painting of HMS Terror in the ice: it is on display at Greenwich in the NMM 'Polar Worlds' gallery. Image courtesy and © National Maritime Museum, London.

One of the National Maritime Museum's most dramatic paintings of 19th-century polar exploration shows the 'Perilous position of HMS Terror, Captain Back, in the Arctic regions in the summer of 1837'.

Forced up on the jagged pack-ice that trapped and stranded it for 118 days in Hudson's Strait, the ship lies canted over under a canvas deck-cover, as the crew labour at varied tasks on the surrounding floe. Failure of the ice to melt rapidly that year thwarted George Back's aim to find a route from the Strait into the Polar Sea. When freed, he just managed to get the damaged *Terror* home, beaching it on the Irish coast in sinking condition. Despite this, after massive repair and in consort with HMS *Erebus*, it made two more epic polar voyages; to the Antarctic under James Clark Ross (1839–43) and then Sir John Franklin's fatal expedition, from 1845, to find the North-West Passage. That vanished, no-one survived and the ships defied repeated search for over 160 years until their near-intact sunken hulls were finally located off King William Island;

Erebus in 2014 and *Terror* 45 miles north in 2016.

The issue presented by the NMM painting, however, was long in error over the artist. When purchased in 1952 it was known to be by 'William Smyth', but for over 50 years that was assumed to be Admiral William Henry Smyth (1788–1865). He was a well-known naval surveyor, astronomer and writer, with a great gift for self-promotion but no Arctic record or as an artist beyond chart-work. No-one spotted a more likely alternative hiding in plain sight, both because more modest and not so far recognised as being a painter in oils, only in watercolour.

This was Back's first lieutenant – also later Admiral – William Smyth (1799–1877), whom Back praised as a tower of strength during their long

ordeal and who supplied many of the drawings lithographed in Back's published account of their *Terror* voyage (1838). While William Henry Smyth has been in the *Dictionary of National Biography* since 1897, plain William only joined its modern online version in 2015: even his date of birth still awaits adding there, since only pinned down in 2018 through further query linked to the *Terror* picture on the Art UK website.

Smyth was the younger son of John Greatrix Smyth and his wife Sarah Banks, who married at Bath in 1793. They had at least one other child, Edward, born in 1796, and possibly a daughter who outlived William. John Smyth made three voyages as an officer in East India Company ships in the early 1790s, the last as first mate of the *Rose* in 1794–5. He may have returned as her acting captain, since confirmed in that rank on 2 October 1795, but did not sail again and instead became a Company 'civil servant'. Whether he

continued overleaf...

William Smyth: art and adventures of a Hackney admiral *continued*

was or had links to the John Greatrix Smyth(s) who went bankrupt in 1806 as a London 'insurance broker, dealer and chapman', or as a Plymouth merchant in 1811, is still unclear.

William was born in Hackney on 13 November 1799 and baptized at St John's on 24 January 1800. His mother died in March, perhaps as delayed consequence, but he gained a stepmother in January 1805 when his father remarried at St Leonard's, Shoreditch, to Mrs Catherine Myers (née Winsloe), as her third husband. In April 1813 he entered the Navy as a boy volunteer and passed for lieutenant in 1819, though only promoted to that rank (from mate) in 1827, while in HMS *Blossom* under Frederick Beechey, in the north Pacific. Beechey named Cape Smyth (near Point Barrow) Alaska, for him and Back, on the *Terror* voyage, also commemorated him with Smyth Harbour, on Southampton Island. When in the *Samarang* (1831–34), in Atlantic anti-slaving work, he probably met Charles Darwin in the *Beagle* at Rio de Janeiro before *Samarang* went round Cape Horn to Valparaiso. From there, Smyth went up to Lima especially to draw 'the far-famed city' and then, from September 1834 to May 1835, over the Andes and fully across South America, down the Amazon. He did so as leader

of an Anglo-Peruvian group, formed at Lima, which hoped to find how far up-river its sub-tributary, the Pachitea, was navigable, but that was thwarted and the route changed when local guides refused to enter hostile tribal territory. With his junior naval companion, Fredrick Lowe, Smyth quickly co-wrote an account of their journey, published in 1836, while his drawings of Lima also formed the basis for Robert Burford's vast 360-degree panorama of the city and its environs, also shown in 1836 at *The Panorama*, Leicester Square.

Promoted to Commander on return from the Arctic in 1837, Smyth was elected to the Royal Geographical Society that year and also received the Arctic Medal. From September 1838, his only naval command was of HMS *Grecian* (16 guns), in further anti-slavery operations between Africa and South America. After the ship paid off in 1843 he was promoted Captain but saw no further service and in 1875 reached full Admiral by seniority, in retirement. When he died on 25 September 1877 while visiting Tunbridge Wells, he was buried in the borough cemetery there under a simple square, stepped monument that also commemorates his second wife, Sophia (née Reynolds). They

had married in October 1858 after he lost Margaret (née Potts), the first Mrs Smyth, that January. Both marriages were childless.

Sophia died in 1891 and her will identifies four of his oil paintings, including that of the *Terror*. The other three are now unlocated, though she left 'Columbus discovering America' to her cousin and co-executor, the politician William Cornwallis-West, whose son George was later second husband of Winston Churchill's mother (m.1900 – div. 1914). There is so far no evidence of Smyth exhibiting either oils or his far more numerous and widely scattered watercolours. Some of the latter can be matched with illustrations in both Back's voyage narrative and that of Beechey in *Blossom*, though not yet any in the Smyth/Lowe account of their Amazonian trek. At present his only other known oil is a good view of old Portsmouth, in the city collection there, probably painted while he was living in the Isle of Wight (1858–69). He then returned to London where his address at death was 31 Albion Street, Hyde Park, leaving his widow sole executrix for 'Effects under £18,000': the minimum current equivalent is over £2 million.

Pieter van der Merwe,
Greenwich Curator Emeritus,
National Maritime Museum.

Unforgotten Lives

Amongst the figures in the recent *Unforgotten Lives* exhibition at the London Metropolitan Archives which presented stories of Londoners of African, Caribbean, Asian and Indigenous heritage between 1560 and 1860 were two characters living in Hackney.

Robert Pilgrim is found in the records of St John at Hackney where his mother is described as an Indian woman. She was Thu-a-Higon a Cree woman married to Robert Pilgrim, chief factor of the Hudson's Bay Company. The Company was chartered by Charles II in 1666 and granted a monopoly on trade on eight million square kilometres of what is now Canada and the northwestern United States, including lands inhabited by Inuit and First Nation peoples. The fur trade, especially beaver pelt, relied on indigenous

trappers and was highly profitable for nearly two centuries.

The Company had unsuccessfully tried to ban relationships between its employees and indigenous women but these were common by the end of the eighteenth century. While often highly exploitative, some continued beyond the posting to Canada. When Pilgrim returned to London in 1750, settling in Hackney, his wife and son, also called Robert, travelled with him but were soon separated by the terms of his will. His son's baptism prompted Pilgrim to



St Leonard's Church, Shoreditch, 1742

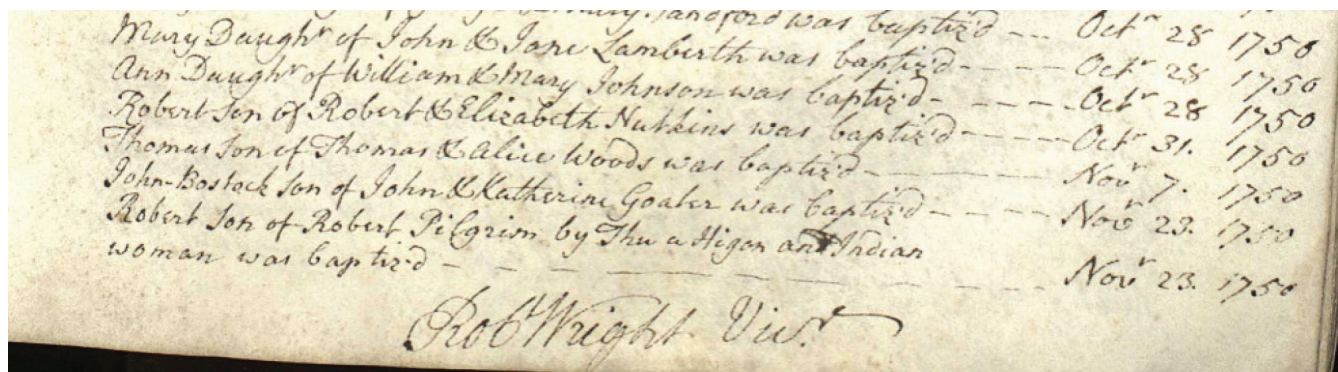


Figure 1: 'Robert son of Robert Pilgrim by Thu a Higon an Indian woman was baptised Novr. 23 1750.' LMA: Z/PROJECT/BAL/M/P79/JN1/026/1215

specify that on his death his son was to stay in England and his wife return to Canada. The Hudson's Bay Company reluctantly met the care and travel costs arising from this stipulation but women and children were thereafter banned from travelling to Britain aboard its ships. The younger Robert Pilgrim, now parentless, is lost to history.

Jonathan Strong, baptised at St Leonard's Shoreditch in 1765, was born enslaved in Barbados and brought to London by the planter, David Lisle. London slaveowners believed they could exercise the same rights over their 'property' as they had enjoyed in the Caribbean and Strong was almost blinded by Lisle who attacked him with a pistol and threw him out of his house. Severely injured, Strong was treated by William Sharp at his Mincing Lane surgery for the poor and William and his brother Granville took up his case. After months in St Bartholomew's hospital, he found work running errands for a Quaker apothecary known to the brothers.

Two years later, in 1767, Lisle saw Strong in the street and worked with London-based slave catchers to sell him to James Kerr, a fellow planter, for £30. Strong managed to get word to Granville Sharp who persuaded the Lord Mayor to stop the ship returning him to a Barbadian plantation and rule that, as Strong had committed no offence, he was free. This case began Granville Sharp's long and famed involvement with the abolitionist cause. Strong had a less happy future, dying five years later when he was just 25. There were further attempts to abduct him on the street and Kerr took his bill



Shoreditch in the 1760s

of sale to court eight times to argue that a slave remained the chattel of his master on English soil.

Thankfully the exhibition drew on two projects that are online and accessible through the LMA catalogue and website. *Switching the Lens*¹ is the long-established rediscovery project that has unearthed these biographical traces. *Mapping Black London* plots the baptisms, burials and, occasionally, marriages that allow us to locate Londoners of African, Asian, Caribbean and Indigenous heritage in particular parishes. There are 565 records at St Leonard's Shoreditch, 44 at St John the Baptist Hoxton, 25 at St John at Hackney and 4 at St Mary's Stoke Newington. Information about places of origin – sometimes a specific town, sometimes simply a continent – has been used to create

¹ For Jonathan Strong see <https://www.cityoflondon.gov.uk/things-to-do/history-and-heritage/london-metropolitan-archives/collections/switching-the-lens-project-jonathan-strong>

a flow map illustrating 135 journeys made to London. The records do not usually tell us whether individuals were enslaved or free and, as Jonathon Strong's story shows, the law was unclear. Any Londoner with black skin could be targeted by the slave catchers as illustrated by the story of Charles Ignatius Sancho – musician, author, composer, shopkeeper and the first person of African descent to vote in a British general election – who also featured in the exhibition.

These two men featured in *Unforgotten Lives*. There are others of whom we know – the abolitionist Olaudah Equiano and his daughter Joanna, buried in Abney Park – and others who are almost certainly new. The LMA has yet to add the materials assembled for this exhibition to its home page. There is a wealth of yet unexplored material – clearly not to be forgotten.

Wendy Forrest

Richard Price in Hackney

Last year saw the 300th anniversary of the birth of Dr Richard Price, political theorist, moral philosopher, Nonconformist minister and mathematician.

Born in Llangeinor, Glamorgan, in 1723, Price came to London in 1740. After studying at the dissenting academy in Moorfields he became family chaplain to George Streatfield at Stoke Newington. In 1757 he married Sarah Blundell in St Mary's Church, Stoke Newington; the couple set up house in Hackney. The following year he was appointed preacher at Newington Green Meeting House and moved to a house on the Islington side of the Green. Later he was to become, in addition, morning preacher at the Gravel Pit Meeting House in Hackney. Price is often said to be a Unitarian, but in his time the Meeting House was simply described as Dissenting, and Price would have been considered an Arian, denying the Trinity but ascribing some divine quality to Christ.¹

Today, Price is probably best known locally as a part of the radical community living around Newington Green, many of them attending Price's Chapel. He was a very sociable man who enjoyed intellectual discussion. His circle at this time included John Howard, the prison reformer; his neighbour Thomas Rogers, father of the poet Samuel, Benjamin Franklin, Joseph Priestley, John Addams, Mary Wollstonecraft and Elizabeth Montague, one of the Blue Stocking club of women.

A century after Price's death, Benjamin Clarke, author of *Glimpses of Ancient Hackney and Stoke Newington*, described Price as 'the celebrated calculator', a reference to his interests in mathematics and probability, demography and government finance.² He failed to mention Price's involvement in political issues, for which he was probably better known in his own lifetime, but which later came to be regarded as dangerously radical.

Price established his credentials as a 'calculator' through his work as literary executor of his friend Thomas Bayes, whose unpublished papers included a note on probability theory. He improved Bayes' presentation

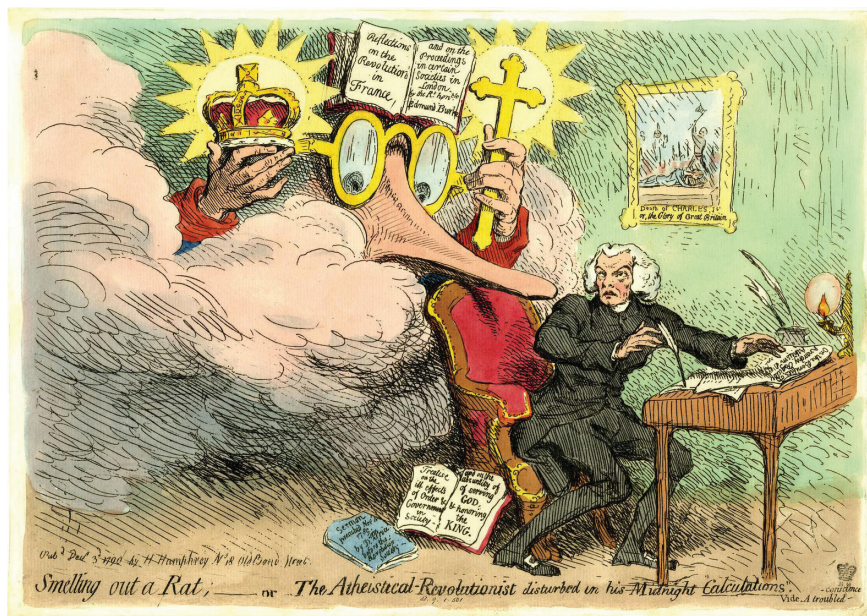


Figure 1: *Smelling out a Rat; or The Atheistical Revolutionist disturbed in his Midnight "Calculations"*, James Gilray, 1790. National Portrait Gallery, D12411.

and developed his arguments, before the paper was presented at the Royal Society in 1763.³ In response to the ground-breaking nature of the paper, Price was elected a member of the Royal Society, and became much in demand to provide advice to the emerging field of annuities and life insurance, a task he eventually passed on to his nephew William Morgan who was to become the first modern actuary, working for the Equitable Life Assurance Society.⁴

In the early 1770s Price was increasingly drawn to political controversy, giving his support to the movement to remove the constraints placed on dissenters in public life which, however, proved unsuccessful at this time. He supported the American colonists in their dispute with Britain, publishing in 1776 a pamphlet entitled *Observations on the Nature of Civil Liberty, the Principles of Government, and the Justice and Policy of the War with America*, which sold around 180,000 copies. In 1778 the American States invited Price to go there to help with their financial administration, an offer he turned down; but his value in supporting and advising them was acknowledged in

several honours bestowed on him by American institutions.

Price's correspondence with Thomas Jefferson, who in 1785 had been appointed America's representative in Paris, kept him in close touch with the events leading up to the French Revolution. In summer 1789 he obtained more personal reports from his nephew George Cadogan Morgan, who, *en route* to Switzerland, found himself in Paris on 7 July 1789. He stayed there until 19 July, witnessing the unfolding events and reporting them to his uncle in several letters.

On 4 November 1789, the 101st anniversary of the English 'Glorious Revolution', Price preached a sermon to the London Revolutionary Society called *A Discourse on Love of Our Country*, concerned with the nature of society, and touching on civil liberties and citizens' rights. This was published as a pamphlet a month later. His enthusiastic support for events in France, and his questioning of the relationship between monarch and people, was controversial. There ensued a 'war of pamphlets'. Edmund Burke had been shaken by the disorder

in France, and, provoked by Price's sermon, replied with a pamphlet entitled *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, which, as well as contesting Price's arguments, contained damaging attacks on his character. Thomas Paine and Mary Wollstonecraft, among others, came to his defence, with the latter penning her own pamphlet, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790). The Gillray cartoon [Figure 1] shows Price at his desk, threatened by a vision of a bespectacled Edmund Burke flourishing both crown and cross. Above the spectacles is a copy of Burke's *Reflections*; on the floor a copy of Price's *Sermon preached before the Revolutionary Society*. The picture above Price's head shows the execution of Charles I bearing the subscription: 'Death of Charles I, or, the Glory of Great Britain'.

Concurrently with his involvement in national politics, Price had taken on more local causes. From the late seventeenth century there had been several dissenting academies in London, particularly around Newington Green, but they tended not to be long-lived. Following a number of closures, a committee was formed, including Dr Price, to establish a new college in London. A site was chosen in Hackney, and the New College opened in Hackney House, near Homerton High Street, in April 1786. Despite Joseph Priestley's concern about the wisdom of such a heavy commitment, Price agreed to lecture on morals and philosophy; in addition, he would contribute in the fields of 'the higher mathematics, fluxions etc., Newton's discoveries and of assurances, life annuities, public finances etc'.⁵

There had been changes in Price's personal life. His wife Sarah had died on 20 September 1786. In his correspondence he wrote of 'losing a companion, partner and friend to whom for 27 years the happiness of my life has been in great measure owing'.⁶ In 1787, he moved back to Hackney, to 2 St Thomas's Square, off Mare Street, possibly more convenient for his duties at the Gravel Pit Meeting House and New College. Price's nephew George Cadogan Morgan later joined him in St Thomas's Square, followed by his widowed sister Sarah.



Figure 2: Detail from 'St Thomas's Square Chapel and Schools', F. Ireland, London 1841. HAD, P12121.

On the south-west side of the square, facing on to Mare Street, was Trinity nonconformist chapel, opened in 1772; next to it was Chapel House, and then Price's house. Census entries for the years 1851-1871 show these houses still in place. A detail from a lithograph of *St Thomas's Square Chapel and Schools* shows a dwelling attached to the chapel, which drainage records describe as Chapel House.⁷ Price's house would presumably have been further to the left, out of sight, though it is difficult to identify its exact location from nineteenth century maps. In the 1891 census however three houses are listed between Chapel House and in St Thomas's Square, which correspond to those shown on the 1891 OS 25-inch map and to the late Victorian terrace which still stands today. The house closest to Chapel House was named 'Penprys', Welsh for 'Price's Head'; presumably its earliest occupants were aware that Dr Price had lived on or near the site of their home.

Early in 1791, Price's declining state of health became evident. In late February he gave up his post at the Gravel Pit Meeting House; he died on 9 April. Over the years he has tended to be remembered as a footnote to his more famous friends and colleagues, such as Thomas Paine and Mary Wollstonecraft. Nevertheless, he was clearly a remarkable man who deserves to be celebrated, particularly

for his championing of the rights of all people, both men and women, and those of all nations, through reasoned argument rather than force. These qualities make him an ideal former resident for Hackney to commemorate, ideally through a plaque in St Thomas's Square.

Anna Brueton

1 Paul Frame, *Liberty's Apostle – Richard Price, his Life and Times*, Cardiff, 2015, p 30.

2 Benjamin Clarke, *Glimpses of Ancient Hackney and Stoke Newington*, London 1894, p 127.

3 Thomas Bayes, *An Essay towards solving a Problem in the Doctrine of Chances*, 1763. Bayes' Theorem is regarded as the foundation of modern statistical theory.

4 Nicola Bruton Bennetts, *William Morgan, eighteenth-century actuary, radical, mathematician and radical*, Cardiff 2020. p 25.

5 Paul Frame, *Liberty's Apostle – Richard Price, his Life and Times*, Cardiff, 2015, p 198.

6 Paul Frame, *Liberty's Apostle – Richard Price, his Life and Times*, Cardiff, 2015, p 187.

7 HAD, Hackney Drainage Plan for Chapel House, St Thomas's Square, 25 November 1896.

Why I love: *Duffy Is Dead*, by JM O'Neill

Ken Worpole on Jerry O'Neill

O'Neill surely deserves a revival of critical interest, and a starting point for anybody interested in Irish London is the fully realised dark comedy of *Duffy is Dead*.

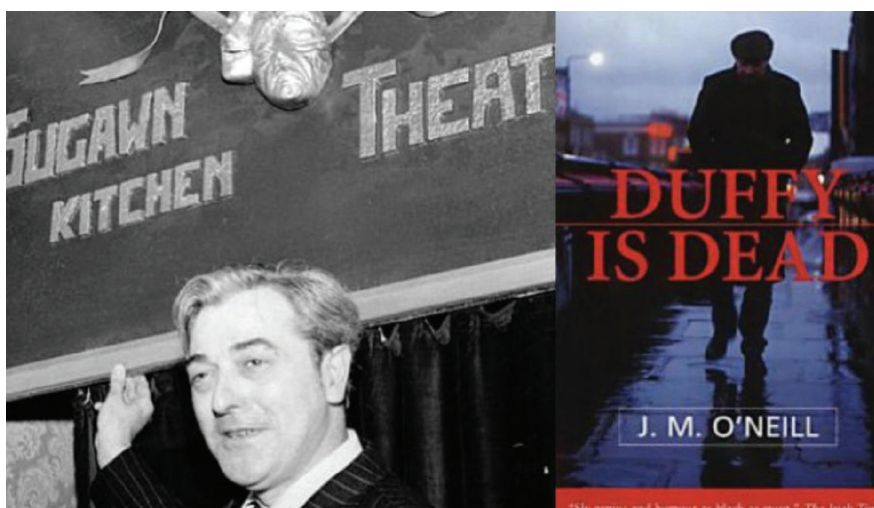
Duffy is Dead is perfection itself. It has wonderful comic set-pieces in the bar, at the undertaker's, all on a fast-flowing tide of Guinness and brandy. It has pathos and a deep understanding of the lives of men without women, who have no papers of identity, who change their names with every job, who live outside the state in a no-man's-land of casual work, poor health and precipitate death, and yet bounce back from the blows through the comradeship of a shared mordant humour.

Jerry O'Neill was the quiet, but charismatic manager of the *Duke of Wellington* pub in Balls Pond Road, Hackney, from 1967 to 1980. This was a pub which sold Irish newspapers and cigarettes and had a billiard hall at the back which O'Neill – a man of serious literary interests – converted into the *Sugawen Theatre*.

Born in Limerick in 1921, O'Neill worked for Barclays Bank in Africa for many years before arriving in London towards the end of the 1960s to run the pub. The pub and the theatre became a meeting place for Irish writers and theatre people, as well as a venue for all kinds of performances. I got to know him a little as a result of organising poetry readings there in the 1970s.

As well as being something of an impresario for Irish culture in London, O'Neill himself began to write towards the end of his days as a publican, firstly with the play, *God is Dead and living on the Balls Pond Road*, and then with a sequence of six very fine novels, the first two of which, *Open Cut* (1986) and *Duffy is Dead* (1987), deal specifically with the hard and dangerous lives of Irish building workers in London, lives often lived physically *in extremis*.

Of all the novels, and they are all terrific, *Duffy is Dead* is my favourite, as it achieves an almost Beckett-like



mixture of humour and tragedy, set largely within the classical unities of time and place: a pub in Hackney mostly over 24 hours, during which two Irish labourers, Mackessy and Neelan, attempt to raise enough money to bury their drinking companion, Duffy, who has suddenly died of heart failure on a pavement in Holloway Road. For this they involve the landlord of the pub himself, Calnan, a world-weary Irishman, who himself has problems with drink. He also has to deal with the local police who constantly harrass him for some of his clientele's republican sympathies, and the wayward, unhappy lives of many of other customers, for whom the pub is the only home they know.

“To every pub its guv'nor and to the guv'nor his sheet-anchor. At half-past ten, with a rattle of keys, Morgan came: brisk, stocky, white teeth always ready to smile, or grin, in warning. Brennan stood by the door for him and announced like a bellman in plague, ‘Duffy is dead.’

‘Lucky,’ Morgan said; he was moving, peeling off his coat, expressionless.

Calnan watched the traffic: its creep and twist was an endless stool with some moist sickly fascination that held him there. Reflected in the window, too, he could see the bar behind him. Morgan, assessing, rearranging, planning his day, looking now at the ravaged brandy bottle, lobbing

it the length of the counter to his waste-bin. Calnan drew in breath and the long exhalation clouded the window. He rubbed it carefully with his handkerchief: he could see Brennan now, rolling a cigarette, the mop standing in dirty water.

‘We shouldn't joke about it,’ Brennan said with an air of foreboding. ‘Duffy. God rest him this day in the Divine Presence.’

‘Your mop's drying out,’ Morgan told him.

‘Dropped dead!’ Brennan said with all the fearful undertones of meeting God with an unwashed soul. ‘Outside the bank at the Archway.’

‘Breaking in or running out?’”

Duffy is Dead, chapter 2

For over 200 years much of the most dirty and dangerous work in the building trade in London was done by Irish immigrants, yet their lives have only very occasionally been given serious fictional representation: Tim O'Grady's *I Could Read the Sky* (1997), with photographs by Steve Pyke, is exemplary. Edna O'Brien has published a series of short stories about such men, in *Saints and Sinners* (2010), also very fine and deeply sympathetic. There are others. However, *Duffy is Dead* is perfection itself. It has wonderful comic set-pieces in the bar, at the undertaker's, all on a fast-flowing tide of Guinness and brandy. It has pathos and a deep understanding of the

lives of men without women, who have no papers of identity, who change their names with every job, who live outside the state in a no-man's-land of casual work, poor health and precipitate death, and yet bounce back from the blows through the comradeship of a shared mordant humour.

“He walked the long stretch from Dalston to Shoreditch Church and stood looking at the roads fanning out to Hackney, Bethnal Green, Gardiner’s Corner, the City, London Bridge, Clerkenwell. This was his London, always traces of

elegance but like himself growing old. Shoreditch Church, at the gates of the City, was always reassuring in the stillness of early morning.”

Duffy is Dead, chapter 7

The novel also captures wonderfully the borderlands of Dalston and Highbury Corner in the 1970s, where, in between streets exhibiting growing gentrification, an older, poorer life of tenement living, street markets, and corner pubs, still survived. O’Neill surely deserves a revival of critical interest, and a starting point for anybody interested in Irish London is the fully realised

dark comedy of *Duffy is Dead*.

Ken Worpole is a former English teacher and oral historian who has lived in Hackney for more than 40 years. His 1983 book Dockers & Detectives (revised edition 2008) brought to light many forgotten writers of the 1930s and ‘40s, and he has written biographical introductions to Alexander Baron’s King Dido (Five Leaves, 2009) and Simon Blumenfeld’s Jew Boy (London Books, 2011). He has also written books about public architecture, landscape and social history and is emeritus professor at the Cities Institute at London Metropolitan University. His website is worpole.net

In the Archives

Breaking Ground

Hackney Archives holds a copy of the film *Breaking Ground* which tells the story of the London Irish Women’s Centre (LIWC), a radical organisation founded to support generations of Irish women in London and based at 59 Stoke Newington Church Street.



Different Irishnesses

Numerous voices tell of individual decisions to leave Ireland and settle in London and of the sometimes disturbing uncertainties of their new lives. Of Ireland one contributor states: ‘I didn’t feel at home with the conservative attitudes. It was narrow and repressive.’ Another woman describes escaping the ‘stiflingness’. The film distinguishes the migrants of the 80s from those of previous generation who arrived in the 50s and with whom they ‘didn’t have much in common’.

Radical Activities

The movement itself pre-dated the Church Street Centre. It was part of the radical politics of the time. The newly-arrived Irish women found common cause in and support from the radical women’s movement but heightened by the particular consequences of ‘The Troubles’. One speaker states that the Irish in general

were regarded as ‘turbulent if not terrorist. You felt a foreigner’.

The Centre at Work

Fundraising to acquire a building began in 1982. In 1984, a GLC grant brought the funding up to the £45,000 needed to buy the Church Street premises. Stoke Newington was not the preferred location since it was not on the Underground. ‘Why would you put it in an Irish desert?’ asks one contributor. ‘You had your bit of Irishness then went back out into the world – and that was it.’ But the centre widened opportunities. ‘Protests and marches – that’s just how things were’; but there were other ways of building self-expression and self-confidence. There were cultural courses. There was also free nursery provision at a time when there was greater freedom to improvise than would be permitted today.

When Mary Robinson was elected President of the Irish Republic, the Centre invited her to become their Patron. She accepted, visiting the Centre along with the *Taoiseach* who, being a man, was not allowed into the building. He was taken to a pub down the road and was said not to be displeased.

1988 saw expansion into work and welfare services – sex and racial

discrimination, Union rights, housing rights. It offered help in cases of domestic violence and had links to women’s refuges. Because Irish Traveller women did not come to the Centre, the Centre worked through Hackney Council’s Traveller Officer.

Funding Cuts and Consequences

Concurrently with the expansion of services, 1988 also saw a 25% cut in the Centre’s funding. One poster on the Centre wall stated: ‘Women Lose Pounds Instantly!!!! – 89% of government cuts directly affect women’. The co-operative organisation was reluctantly abandoned for a hierarchical structure. Funding became based on ‘service provision’. Women became ‘clients’. One of the original Co-operative commented: ‘Once you become a service provider without the wider involvement as it had been in the early days and if you don’t have activities that bring people in, then your connections become fewer and fewer.’ The vitality that had marked the early years dissipated into spreadsheets.

Closure and Reformulation

On 9 March 2012, the Centre held its closing-down party and the building was sold. The proceeds went to set up a charity – *Mind Yourself* – which provided advice on health and housing to both Irish women and men.

Much of the documentary material used in the film is held by London Metropolitan University. It records a history within touching distance – startlingly influential yet too easily taken for granted.

Irish Encounters in Hackney

The curtain rises on a Saturday night at the *Duke of Wellington* pub on Balls Pond Road. It's the mid 70s The bar is at bursting point. A queue with its own impenetrable logic forms three-deep around the bar. It's hard to know who to serve first. The room is filled with smoke and animated conversation. A few women are staked out at their own tables; the clientele is overwhelmingly male.

Draught Guinness is the drink of choice and on a special night a whiskey chaser. The men taught me how to pour Guinness properly: a drink that needs time to settle, topped up several times until the right-sized creamy head – not too big, no short changing – filled glasses to the brim. Settlement time meant serving several customers at once to avoid a backlog.

Sometime after 7pm a bohemian crowd would drift from the bar into the back room – the *Sugawon Theatre* – to watch a play or to listen to poetry readings or to music. For Jerry O'Neil, the publican – theatre impresario and author – his theatre was what mattered. Jerry's first play, *God is Dead and Living on the Balls Pond Road*, was staged in the back room during my time there. He would introduce the plays while his wiry manager ran the drinking end of things and his wife would arrive from the upstairs flat at closing time to give staff a parting drink and their pay. Jerry made only fleeting appearances in the bar – once to scorn customers who were drinking orange juice instead of ordering a 'proper grown-up drink'.

My encounters with Irishness at the 'Welly' on a Saturday night were a coincidence. I needed a job. I was a student at City University and lived with other students in Highbury. My rent was £5 a week and I had a full student grant, stretched by working in the holidays. But by the mid-seventies I needed a regular source of extra income during term-time and an

Irish pub vibrating with masculinity somehow seemed a solution. I'm not sure why. Perhaps because I was formed in earlier encounters with an Irishness I didn't much think about.

My maternal grandfather was from Ballymascanlon near Dundalk. He moved to the West Country rather than to Manchester or Liverpool, thereby cutting the family off from the migrant Irish mainstream. His route out of Ireland just after the Easter Rising of 1916 was through the British army, a 'choice' that remained controversial for the rest of his life. A protestant and an Irish nationalist enlisted with the colonial army; he was full of ambivalence. He disavowed his Irishness while telling us vivid stories about Ireland; but only once returned to visit his family. My grandfather's West Country exile made the characters I encountered at the *Wellington* seem unfamiliar, exotic even.

On a Saturday night I tuned in to fragments of conversations full of humour. Many of the building site labourers worked 'on the lump', informally and insecurely employed by contractors in exchange for cash and no rights. Stories from the sites were full of jokes and pranks that made the day go faster – sending the new guy to the stores for a 'sky hook' for example. I listened to customers that 'signed on' to social security instead of working. Mickey: *Did they find you a job when you went to the labour exchange?* John: *Ah, no I told them I was a shepherd. They won't find me a job like that in London.*

I overheard reverent whispers about St Joseph's Hospice, where Irish men living in the lodging houses nearby went to die far from their families back in Ireland. And as the evening went on, tales from those dodging Sinn Fein back in Ireland were tuned up. Young, handsome Davey would tell me stories of his time in The Maze. Of course I lapped it up. Sinn Fein men came to his house one night to hide a gun in the window casing. Police arrived soon after and went straight to it – clearly a set up. Davey was sidestepping this particular bit of Irishness by living in London.

Outside the *Wellington* in the city beyond, the mainland bombing campaign in London (from 1973) would puncture the workings of the city. Maybe it was London Sinn Fein that showed me how to pour Guinness. I have no idea. Hackney had several Irish pubs at that time and I don't know whether the *Wellington* was favoured by paramilitaries. Davey's tales from The Maze were the closest I got to their tactics.

As time went on Saturday night, the curtains covering the windows were drawn, the door was locked and the (pre-paid) drinking went on into the night under the watchful but sometimes menacing eye of the coppers from the Dalston police station around the corner. Leaving its warm beery-smoky conviviality and stories I would walk back along the Balls Pond Road to Highbury and to student life.

Caroline Knowles

Professor Knowles's latest book *Serious Money: Walking Plutocratic London* is published in paperback by Penguin. A condensed version of her talk to the Friends can be found in *Terrier* 114.