S

1 Patrick’s Day, 17 March, is the Irish national holiday and is celebrated with equal enthusiasm in Dublin, Belfast, Birmingham, Glasgow, Liverpool and London. The Irish connection to Britain is well founded as it is based on our geographical proximity and complex political relationship over the centuries. As we celebrate the first day of our patron saint (although it seems that St Patrick was probably Welsh), it is worth considering the origins of psychology in Ireland. Specifically, we are interested in how the emergence of psychology in Ireland has been influenced by the pre-eminence of psychology in Britain.

Arguably the phrase ‘long past but short history’ has particular resonance when one reflects on the status of psychology in Ireland. For example, although several notable pioneers of philosophical and empirical psychology (e.g. George Berkeley, William James) had deep roots in Ireland, the psychological science of Ireland is a relative newcomer, having been founded in 1970 (Swan, 2013).

Furthermore, universities in Ireland have only offered formal qualifications in the discipline of psychology since 1958, and the country has yet to implement a statutory registration scheme. However, a closer look at the origins of psychology in Ireland gives rise to a different story – and Irish people, as we know, are especially proud of their stories.

Looking back

A number of pioneers of psychology with Irish roots marked their mark on the field through their positions in other countries. Notwithstanding the historically problematic political definition of Ireland (see Kibrid, 1997), many of our great scientists and thinkers, like Robert Boyle, were born in Ireland of Anglo-Irish descent (Stewart, 1979).

Furthermore, much of their research and scientific contributions occurred in Britain (Brock, 2011). This was true of the Irish-born pioneer of education for women, Sophie Bryant, who was to become one of the 10 founding members of the British Psychological Society (Clark-Carter, 2001).

Not surprisingly then, the tendency to look eastwards towards the social structure and climate of Great Britain was commonplace for many of our scholars. However, there were two pioneers who worked in Ireland. Firstly, Dr William Saunders Hallam (who received medical education in Edinburgh) wrote the first Irish textbook of psychiatry in 1810 when in Cork working as superintendent at the Cork Lunatic Asylum (Kelly, 2008). Secondly, and the philosopher George Berkeley was educated at Trinity College, Dublin (Winkler, 2003). Berkeley was the Bishop of Cloyne from 1732, spending much of his working life in Ireland.

Nevertheless, all were part of the Anglo-Irish intelligentsia of colonial Ireland. The same could be said for an Irish family who left their five-act poem in County Carlow, for Albany, New York – the James family.

Looking east

In 1789 an Irish family left our shores for the United States and two generations later their descendants (Henry, Alice and William) would become world famous for their contributions to art, literature and psychology. In 1910, the Irish editor and art historian, Frank W. Hancock published his seminal two-volume textbook Principles of Psychology in 1900, defining psychology as ‘the science of mental life, both of its phenomena and their conditions’. This description is still relevant today (see Hancock, 1910).

In 1875 James established the first psychology laboratory in the world at Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Although the Leipzig laboratory of Wilhelm Wundt is often cited as the birthplace of the psychology laboratory, scholars have noted that the German lab was actually opened in 1879, seven years after James (Brock, 2006). James went on to become the third President of the American Psychological Association, in 1894 (Goodwin, 2011).

Looking west

A key aspect of the Irish Journal of Psychology in 1994 explored the influence of colonialism, post-colonialism and postmodernism on the Irish psyche (see Halliday and Coyne, 1994; Mooney, 1994).

The period from independence in 1922 to post-war Britain was an inauspicious one in which the church dominated the political and social scene. In 1979, the hosting of the British Psychological Society (BPS) at University College Dublin was occupied by a Catholic priest (Brock, 2011) – which is not surprising given the close links that existed in the country between the Church and the political system. In this context, the reactions against imperial Britain were replaced with a cultural and political parallelism (Kibrid, 1997). Hence, Ireland mirrored many of the structures of British society by the 1950s and the subsequent secession of its neighbouring island.

Unlike Britain, the origins of psychology in Ireland are not as well documented in the laboratories of our universities but in the provision of mental health support services (Brock, 2011). A Scionman of Irish descent, John McKenna (1917–1998) helped to establish the first qualification in psychology at University College Dublin in 1958 (see McKenna, 1986) and directed its attention towards mental health states that were underdeveloped in terms of mental health personnel. The Irish government responded by introducing professional psychological services in healthcare (Brock, 2011).

The 1960s were a key time for psychology in Ireland, with the Northern Ireland Branch of the British Psychological Society (NIBPS) founded in 1960 (McLoughlin, 1980) and the 1958 foundation by George Sellar of the School of Psychology at University College, Cork (Sellar et al., 1958). This was followed in 1962 by the School of Psychology at Trinity College, Dublin (Byrne et al., 2012), and around a decade after the first graduates from these institutions appeared, the Psychological Society of Ireland (PSI) was founded. Not surprisingly, given the aforementioned origins, clinical psychology emerged as the first division within the PSI (Carr, 1999). Other key milestones across the four decades of the PSI include the founding the European Federation of Psychological Associations (EFPA) Congress at UCD with 1600 delegates in 1997, the hosting of the British Psychological Society Conference in Dublin in 2008 and, most recently, the establishment of the division of sport, exercise and performance psychology in 2012.

Looking north

A number of important anomalies in the psychological definition of Ireland had created bridges for researchers, practitioners, and students respectively. The conflict in Northern Ireland influenced psychological activity across the islands of Ireland. The development of intergroup contact and intergroup relations has led to a proliferation of psychology research across the decades (e.g. Bull, 2006; Monaghan, 2013; Muldoon et al., 1998).

Another field notable for its North-South cooperation in Ireland is sport psychology. For example, Kremer et al. (1998) edited a special issue of the Irish Journal of Psychology devoted to Current research in sport and exercise psychology in Ireland.

Today there is still considerable organisational overlap between Irish and British psychological associations. For instance, Gerry Mulhern, currently the PSI’s Director of Professional Development, was President of the BPS in 2010/11. The late Professor Noel Sheehy (1935–2011), who was President Elect of the BPS in 2011, lectured on both sides of the border, firstly at University College Dublin, and subsequently at Queen’s University Belfast. Joint events between NIBPS and PSI are held regularly including an annual careers day, an All-Ireland Student Congress and a regular lecture series to enhance public engagement. The border previously held few barriers to academic mobility and cooperation.

With the advent of the Health and Care Professions Council and the commensurate statutory registration process (see Swan, 2013), the currency for practitioner psychologists in fields such as education, health and clinical psychology to have dual accreditation status is paramount. Dual membership of PSI and BPS allows researchers and practitioners to enhance public engagement. The border previously held few barriers to academic mobility and cooperation.

Psychology in Ireland cannot be said to have evolved in isolation (Humphreys & Guerin, 2013), and the contribution of the BPS to the PSI should be acknowledged. But that’s another story…

Out from the shadows

Tadhg MacIntyre, Aidan Morran and Mark Campbell shed light on the origins of psychology in Ireland.

Sophie Bryant


