

IN SEARCH OF ROOTS

THERE is a growing interest in the history of the Irish in Britain. Much of that interest is coming from the second generation — especially from students. Two years ago London - based historian Bernard Canavan founded the Irish in Britain History Group. It meets monthly at the Irish Centre, Camden. The other evening he spoke on the Irish experience in Britain. YVONNE HART reports.

“THE RECORDED history of the Irish in Britain has left many significant gaps”, Bernard Canavan said. There has been virtually nothing at all written about the Irish community in the Fifties — the decade of massive immigration. The Irish experience during the Industrial Revolution has not been recorded nor is Bernard Canavan aware of anything written about the Irish in Britain during the years of the slump.

Historians tend to see the Irish in Britain either as a political force or a social force, he submitted. They have concerned themselves with what the community here has done in the context of the struggle for Irish independence — or for Catholicism in Britain. But they have ignored the role of the Irish as immigrants. Moreover, they have tended to write only about the Irish middle-class.

Where traditional history has failed, Bernard Canavan argued, community history could fill the gaps. He defined community history as a branch of social history — something gleaned from personal letters, old photographs and interviews.

“We researched one Irish community, in the Isle of Dogs in the East End of London, simply by looking into the history of one family there. That family came from Tralee in about 1880. We

studied the family’s history from that period until 1920”, he said and went on to tell something of what they learned.

The Isle of Dogs experienced a large influx of Irish immigrants in the last century. They came mainly from Munster and many of the men worked in ship - building. Once marshland, the Isle of Dogs had its first docks built in 1802. By 1860, it was a major European ship-building base. They were still then building wooden ships. Today on the Isle of Dogs, no street has more than 5% Irish.

Wapping is another East End area which had a substantial Irish community. Irish people were settling there early in the 18th century. In 1760 there was an anti-Irish riot.

Traditional history tells nothing about the Irish during the Gordon Riots of 1780. Yet those riots were essentially anti-Catholic and the Irish must have felt the impact. As a result of the riots, parts of Wapping were devastated.

Newham (formerly known as East Ham) is another dock area in London’s East End where the Irish settled. When Fr. Matthew came over from Ireland on his temperance mission, it was here that he held his largest meetings.

In the course of discussion following his talk, Bernard Canavan gave pointers as to what areas a community history group

could usefully research: the Irish in employment, Irish women, and the Irish who came in the Fifties were all comparatively easy targets.

He also suggested that Irish organisations had a role to play and gave the example of how history could be enriched if the Gaelic League in London would compile a history of its own very significant past.

At the conclusion of the evening, the secretary of the group announced that they hope to acquire space in the elaborate Irish Cultural Centre which is due to open in Brent in about a year’s time.

The Irish History Group envisaged basing its archives there and seeing those archives grow as a great repository of manuscripts, books, films, photographs and all such things relating to the Irish in Britain down the generations.

Building up such archives will require financial assistance and the History Group hopes to qualify for a GLC grant.

The group meets at the Irish Centre, Camden, on the first Thursday of each month. A new series of interesting talks is being planned and details will, no doubt, appear in due course in this newspaper.

These monthly sessions are open to everybody and the History Group always welcomes new members.