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Belgian Exiles, the British and the Great War:

The Birtley Belgians of Elisabethville

Daniel Laqua

An estimated 10 million Europeans experienced displacement during the Great War, followed by further refugee waves in its aftermath.¹ Belgium became a major source of refugees after the German attack of August 1914: around 1.5 million Belgians left their country, with the Netherlands, France and Britain as the main destinations.² While some returned relatively soon, around 600,000 remained in exile for most of the war years. An estimated 250,000 Belgians came to Britain, leading Tony Kushner to speak of ‘the largest refugee movement in British history’.³ The sympathy and hospitality encountered by these exiles explains why Panikos Panayi has described them as ‘[t]he group which has experienced the most universal approval from both British state and society over the last two hundred years’.⁴

The present article focuses on a striking manifestation of the Belgian presence in Britain: the Belgian colony of Elisabethville, which was located in the parish of Birtley, County Durham, about five miles from Newcastle upon Tyne. Elisabethville was hence situated in a major area for trade and industry, and Birtley indeed typified key features of the regional economy. Several collieries and pits were located on its territory while the ironworks and brick factory were large local employers. Nonetheless, Birtley was still a small town: the 1911 census recorded a population of 8,409.⁵ In this respect, the creation of a Belgian colony – which ultimately housed over 6,000 people – had a significant impact.

The case of Elisabethville is significant for three reasons, the first one being the distinct nature of this settlement. While Belgian communities existed elsewhere in Britain, Elisabethville differed from them as it was a purpose-built and self-contained gated village. Like Belgians in areas such as Richmond and Twickenham, the residents of Elisabethville

had their own shops, school and church – yet, in addition, their colony also featured a hospital, a post office and a police station staffed by Belgian gendarmes. The latter were charged with maintaining public order in Elisabethville, co-operating with the English police to this end. Gates to the settlement were guarded; access to and exit from the settlement were tightly regulated.⁶

The second reason for Elisabethville's significance derives from its *raison d'être*. The village was built to house Belgians who worked in Birtley's National Projectile Factory. The latter was the product of an agreement between the Ministry of Munitions, the company Armstrong Whitworth and Belgian officials. Having been planned from the summer of 1915, the factory began operations in 1916 with an exclusively Belgian labour force. As Peter Gatrell and Philippe Nivet have noted, around 500 Belgian companies existed in wartime Britain, with the Pelabon Works in Twickenham being a prominent example.⁷ Seen from this angle, the case of Elisabethville exemplifies the Belgian contribution to the British economy and the Allied war effort.

The third significant dimension is the composition of Elisabethville's population. Overwhelmingly, its residents were conscripted soldiers, many of whom were unfit for frontline service. For instance, in the winter of 1916–17, Elisabethville housed 3,521 soldiers and 476 civilians.⁸ The munitions plant at Birtley thus incorporated soldiers from a wartime ally into the British home front. In this respect, its history illustrates that the boundaries between civilians and combatants were far from clear-cut. The case seems to confirm Tammy Proctor's observation that 'war blurs the lines between civilian and military identities, putting ill-prepared citizens into uniforms and calling them soldiers while simultaneously uniforming other personnel and naming them noncombatants'.⁹ Furthermore, the demographic structure of Elisabethville indicates that not every Belgian in wartime Britain had come there as a refugee. A policy of actively seeking Belgian labour in British industry started in late 1914.

As a result, exiles from France and the Netherlands and even some covertly recruited workers from occupied Belgium crossed the Channel.¹⁰

Local studies have traced the creation and general features of Elisabethville, as well as the official Anglo-Belgian interactions that shaped it.¹¹ This article opts for a different focus as it investigates the Belgians' relationship with the people of Birtley. It has been noted that after 'evident and widespread compassion for their plight', refugees began to face 'a certain hostility from the local populations' in wartime Europe.¹² The case of Birtley seems to corroborate such views, yet support and rejection often coincided, as evidenced by the intensity of debates on the Belgian presence. The article considers three elements of social relations during the war years: firstly, the Belgians' role in the struggle against the Central Powers as viewed from Birtley; secondly, encounters that occurred in leisure-time settings; and, thirdly, socio-economic concerns raised by the creation of Elisabethville. The article concludes with a section on the memory and commemoration of the Belgian presence in the North East of England. As a whole, the case reinforces the view that 'ambivalence marked both state responses and everyday relations to this massive refugee movement'.¹³

I. War-Time Alliances

Michaël Amara has argued that few cases in the twentieth century provoked 'such an outpouring of generosity, such an astonishing movement of solidarity' as the wartime plight of Belgium.¹⁴ Charitable action in Britain was closely entwined with perceptions of Belgium's role in the Great War. It was not only Germany's violation of Belgian neutrality that triggered this response, but also the brutality of German conduct in Belgium.¹⁵ In this respect, humanitarian assistance sustained a wider narrative. Pierre Purseigle has suggested that the refugees 'supported a vision of the conflagration as a war for civilisation against barbarism'.¹⁶ Similarly, Tony Kushner has viewed '[t]he positive reception given to the

Belgians as part of a wider, rather guilt-ridden moral battle against the Germans'.¹⁷ Such mobilisation extended to the North East of England and occurred even before the construction of Elisabethville. For instance, in November 1914, the Birtley Wesleyan Women's Bright Hour raised £10 for the Belgian Refugees Fund through a tea-and-cake event, while the Wesleyan Sunday School collected £4.¹⁸ These examples highlight the extent to which sympathy for 'poor little Belgium' even extended to small local communities.

Belgians in Britain were far from passive recipients of aid. Shortly after their arrival, Belgian workers at Birtley set up a committee whose members donated six pence per week, aiming to support the population in occupied Belgium and Belgian front soldiers, as well as assisting Belgian prisoners of war.¹⁹ Indeed, aid for POWs was a prominent feature of wartime charity in Western Europe. As Heather Jones has noted, a 'complex food parcel scheme' was in operation in several countries, ensuring that 'prisoners of war received food aid by post'.²⁰ Such mechanisms allowed the Belgians at Birtley to connect with compatriots in several locations – the homeland, the diaspora and sites of captivity. A report from June 1916 is a case in point: it records that Belgian workers at Birtley collected £40 for the widow of a resident who had died in an industrial accident, £60 for the Belgian Relief Fund and £14 for Belgian POWs in Germany.²¹ Such activities could take the Birtley Belgians beyond Elisabethville. For instance, when they staged a fundraiser in June 1916, they did so at the Theatre Royal in Newcastle.²² The sheer scope of charitable activity underlines the bond that Belgian exiles sought to maintain with their mother country; it thus illustrates Peter Gatrell's observations about the role of refugees in national mobilisation during the Great War.²³ Coverage by the exile press amplified the significance of these efforts. For example, the leading liberal newspaper of pre-war Belgium, *L'Indépendance Belge*, was published from London during the war. Its pages regularly featured accounts of fundraising by Belgian exiles in Britain, thus fostering the image of a 'Belgium abroad'.²⁴

While seeking to support the national cause, the residents of Elisabethville also engaged in activities that connected them to their host country. For instance, in December 1916 the Birtley Belgians returned to Newcastle's Theatre Royal – this time for a musical performance whose receipts were donated to the Christmas Gift Fund of the Birtley and District War Emergency Hospital Committee.²⁵ In June 1917, Elisabethville's brass band performed in front of English invalids at nearby Low Fell as well as giving a concert in Gateshead to support Allied POWs; in the same summer, Belgian war relics were exhibited at Birtley Co-operative Hall to collect money for the orphans and widows of British soldiers.²⁶ At Christmas, Belgians donated half-a-day's wages (altogether £440) for impoverished children in Birtley.²⁷ Such activities indicate the exiles' efforts to strengthen the bonds that humanitarian aid and wartime alliances had created. Indeed, in many instances, activities simultaneously raised funds for both Belgian and British charities. This was the case in March 1918, when a Belgian gala transformed Birtley Hall 'into some semblance of a continental pleasure home'.²⁸ On other occasions – for example a Belgian concert at Newcastle Town Hall – efforts encompassed other allies: the performance sought to support both Belgian POWs and the Serbian Red Cross.²⁹ As these examples demonstrate, aid was far from being a one-way street.

It has been noted that wartime representations cast Belgians as both 'victims' and 'heroes'.³⁰ Yet, sympathy for victims can erode over time, and notions of heroism can be open to doubts. Furthermore, hospitality and charity tend to raise the question of gratitude. Seen from this angle, Belgian charity for British causes could be a way of managing a potentially delicate relationship with hosts and benefactors. Such steps were all the more important as reproaches of Belgian 'ingratitude' did indeed arise. In March 1916, Newcastle's *Illustrated Chronicle* reported that the head of a relief fund from Sherburn in County Durham had denounced the reception accorded to British soldiers in the small

unoccupied zone of Belgium. He reported ‘acts of incivility and unkindness by Belgians in refusing them water at wells, etc.’.³¹ His reproaches related to a wider wartime issue. As Tammy Proctor has noted, ‘[s]oldiers from “friendly” countries often expected to be welcomed with open arms by local civilian populations, so they were surprised when they were treated with disdain, fear, or rudeness’. At the same time, civilians often experienced ‘billeting or provisioning soldiers ...[as] an inconvenience at the least, whether they were enemy soldiers or friends’.³²

Accusations about the treatment of British soldiers in Belgium made it into the pages of the *Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, whose coverage included Birtley.³³ The newspaper regularly carried news and letters from the front, exemplifying the capacity of local newspapers to connect home front and battle front.³⁴ In June 1916, one such letter was sent by a member of the Royal Army Medical Corps, Private Stephenson. He started by mentioning that he was ‘very pleased to read all the local news’ in the newspaper, which he received ‘every week from home’. Stephenson then went on to criticise anti-Belgian statements by people who had ‘never seen the sights we witnessed as the poor people had to leave their homes, carrying small bundles of their valuables on their shoulders’.³⁵ Stephenson cited the battle of Ypres as well as the destruction of both the town and ‘thousands of quiet villages’. His defence was an attempt to remind the residents of his hometown of Belgium’s wartime sacrifices:

It is easy and safe work...to write accusing letters against these poor people. Would the position of the war have been the same had the Belgians not taken our side, and given their sea front to the Germans, before we had landed valuable troops to check the enemy advance?³⁶

Stephenson intervened in a local debate that he could connect with his own experiences. His letter inspired other soldiers to add their perspective via their local newspaper. Some endorsed Stephenson’s positive representation of the Belgians,³⁷ but another letter painted a

more negative picture and repeated the story of being ‘unable to get a drink of water’ from the inhabitants of a billet.³⁸ Moreover, its author directly challenged Stephenson’s credibility: he argued that, as a member of field ambulance, Stephenson would have operated ‘well out of the danger zone’. This remark triggered a shift in the debate, with subsequent letter writers focusing on the risk exposure of field ambulance men.³⁹ Matters took a tragic turn in September 1916, as Stephenson was killed ‘while bearing a wounded comrade from the trenches’. In reporting his death, the *Chester-le-Street Chronicle* noted his earlier ‘testimony of the Belgians’ and cited apologies from those who had questioned his proximity to the ‘danger zone’.⁴⁰ Clearly, the presence of Belgians in Birtley and the experience of Birtleyites in West Flanders created multi-layered intersections between Belgium and the British home front.

The fact that most workers at the National Projectile Factory were conscripted Belgian soldiers complicated matters. Defenders of the Belgians could point out that those working in the factories had been deemed unfit for frontline duty, rather than shirking their responsibility. Yet, the very status that increased the likelihood of acceptance by the English bred tensions within Elisabethville itself. The Belgian workers were subject to military authority and forced to wear their uniforms at work and in many leisure-time situations. The heavy-handed policing of this requirement culminated in a riot on 21 December 1916, which revealed the Birtley Belgians’ discontent with their (Belgian) gendarmerie.⁴¹ Subsequent relaxations were partly due to British actions, as the Ministry of Munitions was keen to keep further unrest at bay. While neither the *Chester-le-Street Chronicle* nor *L’Indépendance Belge* reported the riot, the latter alluded to the case in criticising Belgium’s treatment of its invalids: ‘in each ceremony, we cover these heroes with rhetorical flowers but, in practice, what do we make out of them? Slaves.’⁴² To reinforce this point, the author cited the case of a Belgian soldier who had been partially blinded and lost three fingers. Having found a clerical

job in Paris, he was forced to move to Birtley to work under strenuous and poorly paid conditions. Aimed at a Belgian audience, the piece illustrates how victimhood and heroism were debated within the exile community itself.

While the debate on the Belgians' wartime role decreased in prominence during the final two war years, the Armistice reinvigorated notions of Anglo-British fraternity. Like other parts of England, the North East saw large-scale celebrations after news about the end of fighting had been received.⁴³ Such enthusiasm extended to the residents of Elisabethville who staged a parade through Birtley. The *Chester-le-Street Chronicle* dedicated substantial space to the celebrations, noting that the Belgians 'gave practical demonstrations of their great delight that the war was over and no one was more enthusiastic in their display than these Allies, who had found so great hospitality as refugees'.⁴⁴ Subsequent festivities included bonfires and a torchlight procession. Furthermore, in the evening of 13 November, the 'British public were allowed into the colony for the first time since it was established three years ago, and thousands availed themselves of the opportunity'.⁴⁵ Further celebrations in Birtley and Chester-le-Street followed over the subsequent days, and the local press also reported the warm welcome accorded to British soldiers in liberated Belgium.⁴⁶ In this respect, the end of the war involved a symbolic renewal of the wartime alliance at the local level.

II. Social Life

It may have taken until the Armistice before large numbers of the Birtley population visited Elisabethville, yet traffic in the opposite direction occurred much earlier. For instance, Belgians regularly organised social events at Birtley Hall, which was located beyond the gates of their settlement.⁴⁷ One such case was the revue *Faut pas s'en faire*, written by an Elisabethville resident and performed by his compatriots in March 1917. Primarily aimed at a

Belgian audience, one of its performances was staged in front of local dignitaries, including the Dean of Durham Cathedral and a son of the Earl of Durham. According to a Belgian observer, the evening ‘marked once more the pure cordiality that exists between the English and the Belgians’.⁴⁸ Less than four months later, Birtley Hall hosted another event with English guests, this time on the occasion of Belgian Independence Day. The *Chester-le-Street Chronicle* claimed that this venue had never ‘entertained a more numerous and cheerful crowd’, noting renditions of both the Belgian national anthem and ‘God Save the King’.⁴⁹ As with the cases discussed in the preceding section of this article, the revue raised funds for a variety of causes: Belgian front soldiers and POWs, child welfare, but also the widows and orphans of British seamen.⁵⁰

Such events indicate that, despite their physical separation, the Birtley Belgians interacted with English people in leisure-time contexts. Sporting events were another element. The Elisabethville football team played against nearby villages such as Framwellgate Moor and Witton Gilbert, and there were also boxing matches with fighters from both countries.⁵¹ Sometimes sports were combined with charitable activity. For example, in August 1918, the Belgian Neptune Swimming Club hosted a gala in the River Wear, including diving and other activities, to raise funds for Belgian POWs.⁵²

These activities did not prevent grumbles about a lack of entertainment.⁵³ Such discontent was partly due to the Belgians’ dependency on diversions organised within Elisabethville. The focus on the colony can be linked to alien policy in wartime Britain. The Aliens Restriction Act of August 1914 imposed limitations on the movement of aliens. Its provisions extended to Belgians, who were ‘being defined as aliens, even if generally treated as “friendly” ones’.⁵⁴ As a result, the travel and residency arrangements of Belgians were subject to strict policing. Peter Cahalan has gone so far as to state that ‘[b]y a curious irony, the most pitied and admired foreign community in Britain was also the most heavily

supervised, except for the more unfortunate enemy aliens'.⁵⁵ Police-court proceedings in Chester-le-Street highlighted the limitations on the freedom of movement, with Belgians facing penalties if they failed to comply with residency regulations.⁵⁶ This situation was not peculiar to Elisabethville, yet the fact that its inhabitants lived and worked under military authority imposed further limitations on their ability to venture outside their colony. A degree of liberalisation occurred after the riot of December 1916; nonetheless, the settlement itself remained a key focus for leisure.

Nearby hostelries were one reason why Elisabethville residents sometimes left their village – as illustrated by court proceedings against Belgians who had been 'drunk and disorderly' in Birtley or Chester-le-Street.⁵⁷ In some instances, drunkenness resulted in brawls between Belgian and English males.⁵⁸ There were also cases of unprovoked attacks, with assailants on both sides.⁵⁹ Such incidents triggered debates in Birtley, leading parish councillor Bertram Bolam to defend the Belgians. He argued that '95 per cent of the Belgians are respectable and law-abiding citizens' and pointed out that 'a certain number of our own native residents ... are as ready for a fray as the five per cent of the Belgians'. Having noted the small number of problematic individuals on both sides, Bolam pointed the finger at the local pub: 'the two sections of men referred to gravitate to the public house, and unfortunately they fill themselves with drink until the devil in them gets the upper hand, and hot words inside find expression in blows when they get out into the street'.⁶⁰ Yet, such tensions seem to have been of low-level nature. There was no equivalent to the anti-Belgian riots that happened in London around May 1916.⁶¹

Newcastle offered particular attractions, serving as 'the leisure centre for a wide area'.⁶² In a sarcastic account, one Belgian commented on the questionable 'pleasure' of such excursions.⁶³ Faced with a six-day working week, workers had to wait until the end of their Saturday shift before they could leave for the city. The trip involved a journey on an

overcrowded bus, followed by travel on a similarly busy tram. Tickets for the Empire – a popular variety theatre with an adjoining cinema – were hard to come by, forcing the Belgians to seek out alternative venues. Yet, inebriation and language barriers limited their actual understanding of the performances. The journey back was even more complicated, as space on trams and buses was limited. The account nonetheless concluded that soon after returning, people were anticipating their next trip to Newcastle.⁶⁴ Why voluntarily face such trials? Joseph Schlesinger and Douglas McMurtrie – whose role in collecting testimony from Birtley Belgians will be discussed later on – have noted that former Elisabethville residents had ‘mixed feelings about Elisabethville’. Many of them viewed the place as a ‘haven...but one surrounded by a fence and policed by gendarmes’; for this reason, ‘to travel into the surrounding countryside, or even up to Newcastle, was really a treat’.⁶⁵ Seen from this angle, an evening in the city proved appealing despite the inconveniences that it entailed.

Belgian excursions into English nightlife also relate to another issue: amorous exploits and sexual liaisons. As early as June 1916, a Birtley resident complained to his newspaper about Belgians ‘and our young girls going out with them’. He stressed that ‘it would do our eyesight good to see some of our young lads back home from the trenches walking with the girls in the streets again’.⁶⁶ The author indicated his misgivings about the Belgians’ distance from frontline action. Why, he wondered, would women go out with the Belgians when he had ‘never seen a smart looking soldier among them yet’?⁶⁷

Comments such as these reveal concerns with the exiles’ impact on gender relations. As Susan Grayzel has noted, Belgian refugees were ‘stereotypically represented as feminine and helpless’.⁶⁸ Yet, given its overwhelmingly male population, Elisabethville shows that Belgian masculinity also featured in public discourse. Police courts repeatedly tackled relations between Belgian men and English women, often in connection with violations of the residency stipulations. Several of these cases concerned Belgian involvement with the wives

of absent English soldiers.⁶⁹ By the summer of 1917, concerns about public morality – in particular regarding prostitution – led the District Council to debate the issue. One magistrate argued that the Belgians were hardly worse than the local population. He claimed that they did not corrupt local women as it was mostly ‘women who came from Newcastle, Gateshead, Durham and other places’ to render sexual services. Other councillors, however, expressed concern about the Belgian presence, arguing that ‘that a great number of women who had hitherto been decent were being prostituted by these chaps because the men have a lot of money’.⁷⁰ Such claims reveal limitations to British tolerance. In a controversial case of April 1917, five Belgians were sentenced to hard labour after having visited prostitutes in Durham – despite the same act not being illegal for British subjects.⁷¹ Furthermore, in August 1917, the police court heard the case of a Belgian who had lived with a 19-year old English female without notifying the authorities. Although the couple claimed to have met when both had been London-based, the chairman was unsympathetic: he ruled that ‘as long as he [the Belgian male] remained in this country he would have to leave English women alone, or he would be deported’.⁷²

This is not to say that binational relationships were impossible. With regard to wartime Britain, Michaël Amara has noted that 39 per cent of the 4,093 Belgian weddings between October 1914 and June 1918 were mixed.⁷³ The Belgians’ church in Elisabethville recorded 25 instances of Belgian men marrying British-born women. This figure amounted to nearly 30 per cent of marriages registered in their church parish.⁷⁴ Interestingly, only four of the women had been born in the region, raising questions as to whether some of them, like the Belgians, had been recent arrivals. The implication would be that at least in some cases, intermarriage may have involved people who, in different ways, were outsiders from the local community. Regardless of this question, it is striking that Elisabethville – which, unlike other Belgian communities, was physically segregated from the main town – saw a substantial

degree of intermarriage. These links also meant that some descendants of Birtley Belgians remained in the region.⁷⁵

III. Local Concerns

In discussing broader developments in the Great War, Peter Gatrell and Philippe Nivet have noted that ‘local people criticised refugees for upsetting the balance for the micro-societies represented by town and country communities, and feared their presence as a destabilising force’.⁷⁶ Beyond the moral debates discussed in the previous section, it is therefore necessary to consider the socio-economic concerns raised with regard to the Birtley Belgians. Elisabethville was hardly located in a crisis region. Newcastle and its surrounding area ‘were at their economic zenith’ in the late Victorian and Edwardian era, with the city experiencing ‘high levels of prosperity and innovation’.⁷⁷ The outbreak of war did not cause an immediate economic downturn. Indeed, government orders meant that Armstrong Whitworth – the company that built both the National Projectile Factory and a neighbouring plant for cartridge cases – experienced significant growth, nearly tripling its workforce and consolidating its pivotal role in the regional economy.⁷⁸ Nonetheless, concerns about the Belgian exiles’ social and economic impact emerged at various points in the history of Elisabethville.

One factor was the piecemeal fashion in which plans for the creation of a Belgian colony were communicated. From September 1915, it was well-known locally that a munitions factory would be built, but not that its workforce was going to be Belgian. The immediate issue for the press, for the Birtley Parish Council and for the District Council was therefore the fear of a ‘house famine’: the question of how Birtley could build accommodation for up to 6,000 workers.⁷⁹ One month later, it was announced that the local authorities would not have to concern themselves with this matter – because the workers at the new factory would be Belgian, to be housed according to arrangements by the Ministry of

Munitions.⁸⁰ The news caused controversy, especially as it was anticipated that the new settlement would double the town's population. By early November, one resident reported that Birtley was 'in a perfect ferment about the proposed Belgian Colony that is to be planted in its midst.'⁸¹ Another correspondent went further, labelling the Belgians 'a lazy, dishonest, dirty, immoral, degrading class of people'. He predicted that 'if these Belgians are allowed to settle in Birtley there will be a greater war to be fought by the working class. If once they are here they will not only have the monopoly of the Muniton Works, but the various Brick Works, and Iron Works.'⁸² Others rejected such views, arguing that the town 'should rather be ready to welcome and help the poor Belgians who have been driven from their homes and means of living' whilst defending the Belgians as 'a good class of people'.⁸³ By December, the *Chester-le-Street Chronicle* had received so many letters that it was unable to print all correspondence on this matter. To allay local fears, it published an interview with a Belgian who addressed various concerns.⁸⁴

In many respects, the use of Belgians in armaments work was a response to the challenges faced by the wartime economy. As Antoine Prost has noted, 'nowhere were there sufficient numbers of men to supply both factories and armies at the same time'.⁸⁵ As the factory population largely consisted of soldiers who had been injured, the Belgian and British authorities could counter allegations that they were employing 'shirkers'.⁸⁶ This did not prevent some local respondents from making claims to the contrary. As early as April 1916, one resident suggested that 'the people of Birtley will have asked themselves the question as to whether they live in Birtley or Belgium' and then commented:

What seems to be the strangest feature about is the quantity of young men of 'fighting weight' who are employed. It's bad enough having those who are past fighting, but when we have hundreds of men of military age taking the place of our own men, it calls forth the real English spirit.⁸⁷

In addition, Belgian workers faced suspicions that they would drive down wages.⁸⁸ In 1917, W. T. Kelly of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers commented on this issue in an interview with the *Indépendance Belge*. The newspaper introduced Kelly as the ‘best friend of the Belgians’ and noted that he had intervened ‘to good effect’ in Birtley. Kelly conceded that many people had initially been distrustful of Belgian labour, just as earlier generations had expressed apprehensions about migrant labour from Ireland and Scotland. This situation had now improved as ‘Belgians respect the working conditions of English workers’. Jokingly, he claimed that their only fault might be that they worked too much.⁸⁹ Such statements need to be read with caution. In addressing a Belgian audience, Kelly arguably sought to convey an optimistic picture of the situation. On average, Belgians did indeed work longer hours than their British counterparts, yet their labour conditions made them take industrial action in several workplaces.⁹⁰ Furthermore, the strategy of employing an all-Belgian workforce – with Birtley being but one example – highlights fears that a mixed factory population might produce tensions.

The Belgian presence in Birtley also triggered questions about access to public services. Shortly after the arrival of the first Belgians, the vice-president of the Board of Guardians, J.R. Mole, mentioned the case of a Belgian who had sought treatment at the workhouse hospital, asking who would pay for such services. Access to local health provision did not turn into a recurring issue, as Elisabethville received its own hospital.⁹¹ There were, however, further concerns about the Belgians’ impact on local facilities: in 1917, Birtley Parish Council received complaints about their use of the post office, ‘though they have a fully equipped office in their own village’.⁹² A more serious issue arose in March 1918. Mole – who sat on the Rural Food Control Committee – claimed that Elisabethville and the National Projectile Factory were benefiting from higher meat allowances.⁹³ The allegations of preferential treatment met with an official denial. They also inspired the Ministry of

Munitions to invite the press on a tour of Elisabethville, including a ‘meatless lunch’ as well as a school choir’s renditions of ‘Rule Britannia’ and the national anthems of both countries.⁹⁴ Subsequent complaints arose with regard to fuel controls – although the end of the war prevented them from becoming a major issue.⁹⁵ Such examples indicate that the authorities had to maintain a delicate balancing act when it came to the socio-economic footprint of the Belgian community.

IV. Remembering the Birtley Belgians

As both Tony Kushner and Peter Gatrell have noted, refugees have only met with limited commemorative activity.⁹⁶ For host societies, past acts of hospitality often sit uneasily alongside contemporaneous debates about immigration. At the same time, countries of origin have not always taken active steps to commemorate the experience of their exiles. The Belgian case suggests potential reasons for such reluctance. Sophie De Schaepdrijver has argued that there had been ‘two Belghiums’ during the war: ‘one occupied, the other in exile’.⁹⁷ A commemoration of wartime displacement would therefore have served as reminder of the divisions between the two parts. It is worth noting, however, that the history of Belgian exile did not end in 1918 as the German attack of 1940 resulted in further displacement. While the scale of this movement was much smaller – Belgian exiles in Britain amounted to around 15,000 in this period – the Second World War did cause a renewal of Anglo-Belgian bonds, with London hosting the Belgian government-in-exile.⁹⁸

What about local legacies? Elisabethville ceased to exist soon after the Armistice. Between December 1918 and February 1919, seven ships sailed from Hull to Antwerp, taking around 6,000 Birtley Belgians with them.⁹⁹ Only a small number stayed behind whilst their former village was put to different use: in the interwar years, it housed British workers in what had now been turned into a ‘Government Instructional Company’.¹⁰⁰ The subsequent

demolition of nearly all the colony's buildings may explain why present-day accounts tend to describe the case of the Birtley Belgians in terms of a 'forgotten history'.¹⁰¹ However, at least locally, the term 'forgotten' is hardly accurate. In 1988, a project involving academics from Durham University and local teachers investigated the history of Elisabethville, initially with a focus on the former Belgian cemetery, whose derelict nature had caused consternation already in the late 1970s.¹⁰² This initiative resulted in a publication by Joseph Schlesinger and Douglas McMurtrie, gathering information and testimony on Elisabethville. The authors noted various traces left by Elisabethville: 'In the locality, where the cemetery is known as "the Belgian Graveyard" and the village "the huts", the story of "Elisabethville" is well known and often talked about. Older members of the community remember its existence, and children have heard stories from their parents.'¹⁰³ In 2006, Schlesinger and McMurtrie's work spawned a follow-up publication, authored by John Bygate, a retired schoolteacher.¹⁰⁴ Since then, the centenary of the Great War has attracted further interest, from the local press to the BBC's 'World War One at Home' project.¹⁰⁵

It is not only the media that has raised awareness of Elisabethville. In May 2009, Beamish, the North of England Open Air Museum, launched a project on the Birtley Belgians. This initiative included an exhibition that was also displayed at Birtley Library, the Gateshead Heritage Centre and local schools.¹⁰⁶ The educational dimension was important, as the museum produced a tool pack, explaining how school teachers might use the case of Elisabethville for different classes and age groups. Its authors pointed out the connection to a theme of the National Curriculum, namely 'Identities and Diversity: Living Together in the UK'.¹⁰⁷ The notion that Elisabethville might offer lessons on coexistence was already inherent in Schlesinger and McMurtrie's 1988 publication:

Many of us are probably unaware of the extent to which our local environment has been affected by influences from the rest of Europe, and of how the discovery of these associations

can be the starting-point for useful lessons about ourselves and our Continental neighbours... [T]he exercise has been a study in ‘international understanding’, especially in coming to understand our near neighbours; the breaking down of ignorance – which often leads to fear and distrust – and the fostering of not just ‘knowing about’ but also sympathetically appreciating others and their way of life.¹⁰⁸

This statement illustrates why Elisabethville has been taken up in various public history contexts: evidently, the colony’s history suggests the possibility of coexistence in an era of conflict. The settlement’s instructive potential was noted during its own lifetime: in June 1918, an article described it as ‘a memorial raised by the British Government in honour of the tie which binds England to Belgium’.¹⁰⁹ While it is indeed possible to consider Elisabethville as an instance of wartime hospitality, it is equally important to acknowledge the frictions provoked by the Belgian settlement. As this article has shown, the local response to Elisabethville and its residents involved debates about the nature of the Anglo-Belgian wartime alliance, about foreigners’ impact on public morality as well as various ‘bread and butter’ issues.

At the same time, the case offers more general insights into the Great War. Firstly, it confirms Peter Gatrell’s argument that ‘[t]he history of wartime displacement is also a story of cultural contacts, the construction of new social and national identities and the demonstration of philanthropic concern.’¹¹⁰ These aspects all figured prominently in Elisabethville, whose existence cannot be separated from the large refugee wave that had preceded its creation. Secondly, the case of Elisabethville draws attention to Tammy Proctor’s argument that the home and battle front cannot be divided into ‘two easily defined zones’ as such distinctions would ignore ‘not only the overlaps between the two but also the movements between them.’¹¹¹ As this article has shown, debates around the Birtley Belgians connected the local English community with local sons who served in Flanders. The Belgian settlement added a further dimension, namely a diasporic Belgian ‘home’ front.¹¹² In this

respect, the case of Elisabethville forces us to consider the intersections and interactions far from the battlefields of the Western Front.

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Notes

¹ Proctor, *Civilians in a World at War*, 115. See also Gatrell, *Making of the Modern Refugee*, 19–51; Marrus, *The Unwanted*; Kushner and Knox, *Refugees in an Age of Genocide*.

² Gatrell and Nivet, 'Refugees and Exiles', 190. Amara, *Des Belges à l'épreuve de l'Exil*.

³ Kushner, 'Belgian Refugees in Britain', 2.

⁴ Panayi, *Immigration History of Britain*, 278.

⁵ University of Portsmouth, 'Birtley through Time / Population Statistics / Total Population', *A Vision of Britain through Time*, http://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/unit/10132307/cube/TOT_POP (accessed May 11, 2015).

⁶ Entry passes for English people were issued by the Chief Constable of the County of Durham. See e.g. 'Entry Pass, Elisabethville, Birtley (1917)', GL002961, Gateshead Library, online via <http://www.gatesheadlocalstudies.com> (accessed 20 March 2016). On the agreement for the general policing arrangements in Elisabethville, see Bygate, *Of Arms*, 49.

⁷ Gatrell and Nivet, 'Refugees and Exiles', 197. See also Holmes, *John Bull's Island*, 91.

⁸ Schlesinger and McMurtrie, *The Birtley Belgians*, 30; Amara, *Des Belges à l'épreuve de l'Exil*, 220.

⁹ Proctor, *Civilians in a World at War*, 2–3.

¹⁰ Amara, *Des Belges à l'épreuve de l'Exile*, 201; Cahalan, *Belgian Refugee Relief*, 247–252.

¹¹ Fabry, *Nos 'Hors-Combat'*; Bygate, *Of Arms*; Schlesinger and McMurtrie, *The Birtley Belgians*. See also the informative website <http://www.birtley-elisabethville.be> (accessed May 22, 2015).

¹² Gatrell and Nivet, 'Refugees and Exiles', 195. On changing attitudes, see also Holmes, *John Bull's Island*, 110; Marwick, *The Deluge*, 84.

¹³ Kushner, 'Belgian Refugees in Britain', 11.

¹⁴ Amara, *Des Belges à l'épreuve de l'Exil*, 15. For examples, see Cahalan, *Belgian Refugee Relief*; Grant, *Philanthropy and Voluntary Action*.

¹⁵ On British representations of German actions in Belgium, see Gregory, *The Last Great War*, 40–55 and 63–69. On the actions themselves, see Horne and Kramer, *German Atrocities*; Zuckerman, *The Rape of Belgium*; Lipkins, *Rehearsals*.

¹⁶ Purseigle, 'A Wave On Our Shores', 433.

¹⁷ Kushner, 'Local Heroes', 7. See also Cahalan, *Belgian Refugee Relief*, 5–6,

¹⁸ 'For the Belgian Refugees' (*Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, 23 October 1914); 'Helping the Belgians' (*Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, 6 November 1914); 'Belgian Friends at Birtley' (*The Illustrated Chronicle*, 21 November 1914).

¹⁹ 'Les Nôtres. Réunions, avis, etc.' (*L'Indépendance Belge*, 2 March 1916).

²⁰ Jones, 'Prisoners of War', 273. For the wider context, see Jones, 'International or Transnational'.

²¹ 'Les Echos' (*L'Indépendance Belge*, 15 June 1916). On the fundraising of Elisabethville's associations, see Fabry, *Nos 'Hors-Combat'*, 54–55.

²² Ibid. See also 'Les Nôtres. Réunions, avis, etc.' (*L'Indépendance Belge*, 4 September 1916).

²³ Gatrell, 'Refugees and Forced Migrants', 94.

²⁴ On the newspaper's importance in pre-war Belgium, see Van den Dungen, *Milieux de presse*.

²⁵ 'Belgian Comradeship to the British' (*Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, 15 December 1916).

²⁶ Fabry, *Nos 'Hors-Combat'*, 57; 'Belgian War Relics' (*Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, 24 August 1917).

²⁷ 'Generous Belgians' (*Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, 4 January 1918).

- ²⁸ ‘Belgian Performance and Presentation’ (*Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, 18 March 1918).
- ²⁹ ‘Théâtres et concerts. A Birtley’ (*L’Indépendance Belge*, 16 November 1917); ‘Concerts et Festivités’ (*Birtley Echo*, 1 December 1917).
- ³⁰ Amara, *Des Belges à l’épreuve de l’Exil*, 72.
- ³¹ ‘Ingratitude! Soldiers’ Complaints of Unkindness by Belgian Peasants’ (*Illustrated Chronicle*, 9 March 1916).
- ³² Proctor, *Civilians in a World at War*, 129.
- ³³ Anon. [Three of the Birtley Boys, somewhere in Belgium], ‘What Birtley Boys Think of Belgium’ (*Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, 17 December 1915).
- ³⁴ See, for example, with a focus on Liverpool: Finn, ‘Local Heroes’.
- ³⁵ ‘Birtley and Belgians. Soldier Defends Our Allies After 20 Months’ Experience’ (*Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, 16 June 1916). His letter responded to ‘A Young Man’s Opinion’ (*Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, 26 May 1916).
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*
- ³⁷ ‘Birtley and the Belgians’ (*Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, 11 August 1916).
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*
- ³⁹ ‘The Danger Zone’ and ‘The Danger Zone: Further Opinions’ (*Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, 1 September 1916). A belated contribution to the debate came from Mesopotamia: ‘The Danger Zone’ (*Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, 3 November 1916).
- ⁴⁰ ‘The Danger Zone: Tragic Commentary’ (*Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, 22 September 1916); ‘PTE. Stephenson, R.A.M.C.’ (*Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, 14 October 1916); ‘As It Should Be’ (*Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, 20 October 1916).
- ⁴¹ On this riot, see Bygate, *Of Arms*, 77–91.
- ⁴² A. de Lavaux, ‘Pour nos réformés’ (*L’Indépendance Belge*, 19 February 1917).
- ⁴³ Liddle, ‘Britons on the Home Front’, 77.
- ⁴⁴ ‘Tidings of Peace. How They Were Received Locally. Great Rejoicings’ (*Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, 15 November 1918).
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁶ ‘Great Peace Service: United Gathering’ (*Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, 22 November 1918); ‘Anglo-Belgian Effort’ (*Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, 6 December 1918); ‘Belgians Welcome Liberators’ (*Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, 20 December 1918).
- ⁴⁷ ‘Concerts et théâtres. Birtley-Elisabethville’ (*L’Indépendance Belge*, 2 November 1917); ‘Un grand concert à Birtley’ (*L’Indépendance Belge*, 6 April 1918).
- ⁴⁸ Raoul le Brun, ‘A Birtley: Un heureux changement’ (*L’Indépendance Belge*, 24 March 1917).
- ⁴⁹ ‘Belgian Independence: Enthusiastic Ceremony’ (*Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, 27 July 1917). See also Fabry, *Nos ‘Hors-Combat’*, 90.
- ⁵⁰ ‘Comité des fêtes Elisabethville Birtley’ (*L’Indépendance Belge*, 20 July 1917).
- ⁵¹ ‘Football’ and ‘Le Boxe’ (*Birtley Echo*, 24 November 1917); ‘Football’ and ‘Le Boxe’ (*Birtley Echo*, 15 December 1917).
- ⁵² ‘Belgian Gala. For War Prisoners’ Benefit’ (*Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, 9 August 1918). See also Fabry, *Nos ‘Hors-Combat’*, 78–79.
- ⁵³ ‘A Elisabethville (Birtley)’ (*L’Indépendance Belge*, 8 August 1918).
- ⁵⁴ Kushner, ‘Local Heroes’, 22; Gatrell, ‘Refugees and Forced Migrants’, 91.
- ⁵⁵ Cahalan, *Belgian Refugee Relief*, 402.
- ⁵⁶ ‘Police Court’ (*Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, 13 July 1917); ‘Police Court’ (*Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, 27 July 1917).
- ⁵⁷ ‘Police Court’ (*Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, 6 April 1917); ‘Police Court’ (*Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, 5 October 1917).
- ⁵⁸ ‘Police Court: Englishman and Belgian at Blows’ (*Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, 18 May 1917).
- ⁵⁹ ‘Police Court: Belgian Assault Case’ (*Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, 23 March 1917); ‘Police Court: Assault on Belgian’ (*Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, 29 June 1917).
- ⁶⁰ Bertram Bolam, ‘Act as Comrades’ (*Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, 2 June 1916).
- ⁶¹ Amara, *Des Belges à l’épreuve de l’Exil*, 346; Kushner, ‘Local Heroes’, 16–17. On tensions in this period, see also Purseigle, ‘A Wave On Our Shores’, 441.
- ⁶² Purdue, *Newcastle*, 256.
- ⁶³ Jean Meganck, ‘Croquis et silhouettes: Le “plaisir” d’aller à Newcastle’ (*Birtley Echo*, 24 November 1917). *The Birtley Echo* had been founded in 1917 as a publication specifically for the Birtley Belgians: ‘Les Echos’ (*L’Indépendance Belge*, 30 June 1917).
- ⁶⁴ Meganck, ‘Croquis et silhouettes’.
- ⁶⁵ Schlesinger and McMurtrie, *The Birtley Belgians*, 16.
- ⁶⁶ Anon. [A Britisher], ‘A Grumble’ (*Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, 9 June 1916).

- ⁶⁷ Ibid.
- ⁶⁸ Grayzel, 'Men and Women at Home', 101. On representations of refugees, see Gatrell, *Making of the Modern Refugee*, 35–41.
- ⁶⁹ 'Belgian and Soldier's Wife' (*Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, 21 September 1917); 'Police Court' (*Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, 22 February 1918); 'Birtley's Morality: Hard Labour for Belgians. Soldiers' Wives in Trouble' (*Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, 24 August 1917); 'Encouraging Belgians: Magistrate's Strictures. Hard Labour for Soldier's Wife' (*Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, 24 August 1917).
- ⁷⁰ 'Local Morality: Drastic Action Required' (*Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, 31 August 1917).
- ⁷¹ Cahalan, *Belgian Refugee Relief*, 401; Amara, *Des Belges à l'épreuve de l'Exil*, 360.
- ⁷² 'A Belgian and an English Woman' (*Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, 24 August 1917).
- ⁷³ Amara, *Des Belges à l'épreuve de l'Exil*, 316.
- ⁷⁴ 1916-1919: Register of Baptisms, Marriages and Deaths kept from 1916 to 1919 at the church established at Birtley for Belgian Catholics [C/B13/23], Tyne and Wear Archives, Newcastle upon Tyne.
- ⁷⁵ Schlesinger and McMurtrie, *The Birtley Belgians*, p. 32.
- ⁷⁶ Gatrell and Nivet, 'Refugees and Exiles', 199.
- ⁷⁷ For these quotes respectively: Purdue, *Newcastle*, 245; Lendrum, 'An Integrated Elite', 46.
- ⁷⁸ Vall, 'The Emergence of the Post-Industrial Economy', 49. See also Purdue, *Newcastle*, 266–267.
- ⁷⁹ 'Notes and Comments' (*Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, 3 September 1915); 'Notes and Comments' and 'Around Birtley' (*Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, 17 September 1915); 'Notes and Comments' (*Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, 1 October 1915).
- ⁸⁰ 'Notes and Comments' (*Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, 22 October 1915); 'Belgians at Birtley' (*Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, 29 October 1915).
- ⁸¹ Anon. [Birtleyite], 'Birtley Belgian Colony' (*Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, 5 November 1915).
- ⁸² Mitchell Street, 'Birtley Belgian Colony' (*Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, 14 November 1914). See also idem, 'The Proposed Belgian Colony at Birtley' (*Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, 29 October 1915).
- ⁸³ Anon. [Within the Parish], 'Birtley Belgian Colony' (*Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, 12 November 1915); letter by J. Clark (*Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, 26 November 1915).
- ⁸⁴ 'Notes and Comments' and 'Birtley Belgians: Plea to Fairplay. Immigrant Interviews' (*Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, 3 December 1915).
- ⁸⁵ Prost, 'Workers', 331.
- ⁸⁶ Editorial statement (*Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, 28 April 1916).
- ⁸⁷ Anon. [A Birtley Lad], 'Birtley or Belgium' (*Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, 28 April 1916).
- ⁸⁸ On these tensions, see Cahalan, *Belgian Refugee Relief*, 257.
- ⁸⁹ 'Interview de M. W.T. Kelly' (*L'Indépendance Belge*, 17 March 1917).
- ⁹⁰ Amara, *Des Belges à l'épreuve de l'Exil*, 213.
- ⁹¹ 'Birtley Belgians: Chairman's Strong Allegations' (*Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, 4 February 1916). On Elisabethville's hospital, see Bygate, *Of Arms*, 140–1 and Fabry, *Nos 'Hors-Combat'*, 26–7.
- ⁹² 'Birtley Council Growls and Grumbles' (*Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, 12 January 1917).
- ⁹³ 'Rural Food Control' (*Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, 22 February 1918). On meat rationing in this period, see Marwick, *The Deluge*, 236.
- ⁹⁴ 'Rations Not Exceeded: Rural Food Committee's Statements Denied' and 'The Belgian Colony: Interesting Visit' (*Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, 18 March 1918).
- ⁹⁵ 'Fuel Rationing: Belgian Village Deadlock' (*Chester-le-Street Chronicle*, 15 November 1918).
- ⁹⁶ Gatrell, 'Refugees and Forced Migrants', 105. See also Kushner, *Remembering Refugees*.
- ⁹⁷ De Schaepdrijver, *La Belgique et la Première Guerre mondiale*, 106.
- ⁹⁸ Belgian exile during the Second World War is discussed in seven chapters of Conway and Gotovitch (eds), *Europe in Exile*.
- ⁹⁹ Fabry, *Nos 'Hors-Combat'*, 48–9; also cited in Schlesinger and McMurtrie, *The Birtley Belgians*, 31–32.
- ¹⁰⁰ Letch, *Gleanings from the History of Birtley*, 60.
- ¹⁰¹ 'Project Revives First World War Tale of Birtley Belgians' (*Evening Chronicle*, 18 February 2014).
- ¹⁰² 'Birtley "Boot Hill" Shame – Who Is to Blame?' (*Gateshead Post*, 26 January 1978).
- ¹⁰³ Schlesinger and Murtrie, *The Birtley Belgians*, 3.
- ¹⁰⁴ Bygate, *Of Arms*. See also Mike Amos, 'The Birtley Belgians' (*Northern Echo*, 10 April 2006).
- ¹⁰⁵ Chris Lloyd, 'A Corner of an English Field Forever Belgium' (*Northern Echo*, 8 November 2013); 'Project Revives First World War Tale of Birtley Belgians' (*Evening Chronicle*, 18 February 2014); Barbara Hodgson, 'Remembering a Brave Family' (*The Journal*, 12 August 2014); 'Birtley, Tyne and Wear: A Village for 6,000 Belgians', *World War One at Home*, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p01qcrzq> (accessed 15 May 2015).

¹⁰⁶ ‘Elisabethville – The Belgian Community in Birtley’, via <http://collections.beamish.org.uk/pages/elisabethville> (accessed 24 May 2015). See also ‘Looking Back at the Life of the Birtley Belgians’ (*The Journal*, 27 May 2009).

¹⁰⁷ *Educational Resource for Teachers* (Beamish Museum, 2009), via <http://www.beamish.org.uk/file/uploaded/BeamishElisabethvilleResource.pdf> (accessed 3 May 2015).

¹⁰⁸ Schlesinger and McMurtrie, *The Birtley Belgians*, 33.

¹⁰⁹ Dodds, ‘The Story of Elizabethville’, 52. I am grateful to Jennifer Howkins for sharing this article with me.

¹¹⁰ Gatrell, ‘Refugees and Forced Migrants’, 105.

¹¹¹ Proctor, *Civilians in a World at War*, 9.

¹¹² Amara, *Des Belges à l'épreuve de l'Exil*, 381.

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