

# Approaching Nineteenth Century Irish Migration : An Overview from both Global and Local Perspectives

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# **Approaching Nineteenth Century Irish Migration**

## **An Overview from both Global and Local Perspectives**

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### **Abstract**

To all intents and purposes, the nineteenth century stands as the effective beginning of global migration. As a major European contributor to the international labour market in this period, Ireland's patterns of migration deserve to be considered in the global context. However, although Irish migration resembles most European migrations, it exhibits some characteristics that appear to be unique. Certain factors both encouraged and impeded migration from nineteenth century Ireland, and these factors are best understood in their local perspectives. In particular, social and economic conditions prevailing in the poor regions of the western counties in Ireland are vital to the consideration of some characteristics of nineteenth century Irish migration.

## **1. Introduction**

Human migration is a very old phenomenon. Its causes are not simple but complex, ranging from the environmental and demographic to the political, economic, cultural and religious. The extent and patterns of migration also vary among regions and ages, being influenced mainly by conditions in the destination as well as in the home areas of migrants.

Since around 1980 migration has tended to be studied in a wider global perspective. In 1982, as a result of considerable interests in the subject, a session entitled 'History, Models and Methods in Migration Research' was organized at the Eighth International Economic History Congress in Budapest. Around twenty papers were presented there, which showed 'the true geographical dimensions of migration movements that involved populations far beyond the frontiers of Continental Europe' (Glazier and Rosa eds., 1986, p. 3). In the field of sociology, one of the recent trends in the study of global migration has been the employment of gender and ethnic perspectives (Kelson and DeLaet eds., 1999; Castles, 2000). New and important studies, both theoretical and empirical, come out almost every time I read a catalogue on this subject.

This paper considers these research trends to some extent and reexamines the characteristics of Irish migration<sup>1)</sup> in the nineteenth century from both global and local perspectives. Although 'local perspective' generally refers to the micro analysis

of migrants in their destinations as well as in their home areas, this paper concentrates on the latter problem. While recent studies tend to focus on the details of Irish migration from the host communities' viewpoint<sup>2)</sup>, analyses of their home situation are relatively neglected.

Nor does the global perspective seem to be the norm in studies of Irish migration, contrary to recent trends in migration studies in general.<sup>3)</sup> A global perspective makes it possible to place and compare the patterns of Irish migration in a wider dimension. It is hoped that a reconsideration of Irish migration from both macro and micro levels will lead to a clearer view of some of their characteristics.

## 2. Irish Migration in a Global Perspective

In a compact yet comprehensive atlas that surveys 'human migrations from their origins in Eastern Africa to the exodus of refugees provoked by the Gulf War in 1991', Segal (1993, p. 3, pp. 14–20) classified the global voluntary migrations<sup>4)</sup> into the following five periods: 1500–1814, 1815–1914, 1919–1939, 1945–1980, 1990. Among these periods the second one, from the end of the Napoleonic Wars to the outbreak of the First World War, is the most important period in the history of global migration. For many European countries, this was the period of industrialization, originating in the British Industrial Revolution, with population growth and urbanization. In this period, in the countryside the changing pattern of land holding and the decay of domestic industries tended to stimulate migration. The development of transport and communications systems also accelerated them.

According to Segal (1993, p. 16), there were five streams of intercontinental migration in this period, excluding return migration and re-emigration: 1) about 60 million persons from Europe and elsewhere went to the Americas, Oceania, and South and East Africa; 2) about 10 million persons migrated from Russia to Siberia and Central Asia; 3) one million persons migrated from Southern Europe to North Africa; 4) about 12 million Chinese and 6 million Japanese left their homelands for Eastern and Southern Asia; 5) 1.5 million persons emigrated from India to South-eastern Asia and South and East Africa.

It is clear from the above that migration in this period is already highly globalized and the largest movement occurred from Europe. Thus, for Europe, the nineteenth century was the age of migration as well as that of industrialization and urbanization. Because Ireland was united with Britain in 1801, and because Britain was the core of global capitalism at the time, Ireland was to some extent integrated into the centre of the global economy. In this period it is estimated that 11.0 million people left the United Kingdom for America; 2.55 million for Canada; 2.0 million for Australia and New Zealand; 850,000 for South Africa. These figures include 4.1 million from Ireland, which forms 25 per cent of the whole emigrants (Segal, 1993, p. 16). Irish occupies not inconsiderable position in the migration from the United Kingdom.

In addition to her proximity to Britain, it must be borne in mind that Ireland is situated between Britain and America, the leading countries in the global economy, the former in the nineteenth, the latter in the twentieth century. This unique location matters to any consideration of Irish migration, especially in the global context.

**Table 1 Recorded Emigration from European Countries, 1815–1930 (1914 boundaries)**

	Millions		Millions
Britain	11.4	Sweden	1.2
Italy	9.9	Norway	0.8
Ireland	7.3	Finland	0.4
Austria-Hungary	5.0	France	0.4
Germany	4.8	Denmark	0.4
Spain	4.4	Switzerland	0.3
Russia	3.1	Netherlands	0.2
Portugal	1.8	Belgium	0.2
		Europe	51.7

Source: Baines (1991), p. 9, Table 2.

**Table 2 Overseas Emigration by Citizens of European Countries, 1851–1913 (average annual rate per 1000 population)**

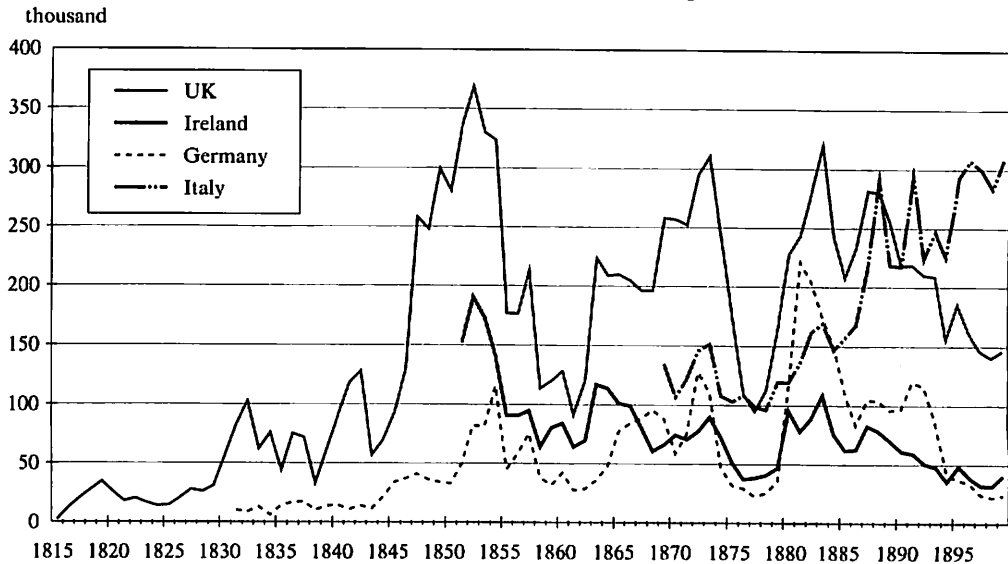
	1851–60	1861–70	1871–80	1881–90	1891–1900	1901–10	1913	1921–30
Ireland	14.0	14.6	6.6	14.2	8.9	7.0	6.8	5.9
Norway	2.4	5.8	4.7	9.5	4.5	8.3	4.2	3.1
Scotland	5.0	4.6	4.7	7.1	4.4	9.9	14.4	9.2
Italy			1.1	3.4	5.0	10.8	16.3	3.4
England & Wales	2.6	2.8	4.0	5.6	3.6	5.5	7.6	2.7
Sweden	0.5	3.1	2.4	7.0	4.1	4.2	3.1	1.8
Germany			1.5	2.9	1.0	0.5	0.4	1.0

Source: Baines (1985), p. 10, Table 2.1. Baines (1991), p. 10, Table 3.

That Ireland occupies a very important place in the history of global migration is evident from the following figures. From 1815 to 1930, which corresponds to the second and third periods by Segal's classification, Ireland sent out to the world as many as 7.3 million people (Table 1). Although this figure is somewhat lower than those for Britain and Italy, it must be borne in mind that British migrants include those who had migrated from Ireland to Britain and re-emigrated to overseas. This fact allows us to estimate the number of Irish migrants as somewhat greater than that given in Table 1.

Ireland's place in the history of global migration becomes even more significant if we look at it in terms of the number of migrants per population. Table 2 shows the annual average rate of migration per thousand in the major emigrant countries in Europe from the late nineteenth to the beginning of the twentieth century. Throughout the late nineteenth century Ireland took the top position among European countries. Only in the early twentieth century was Ireland overtaken by Norway, Scotland and Italy. According to Baines (1985, p. 10), who compiled this table, 4 per thousand in a decade is defined as a high emigration rate. Of the major European countries, only Ireland and Scotland reached this figure throughout the period under considera-

**Graph 1 Emigration from Europe**



Note: Statistics on Ireland refers to all natives who left Irish ports, including to Great Britain.  
 Source: Mitchell (1981), pp. 146-149.

tion.

Graph 1 shows the migration patterns of the major European countries. There is a broad similarity in their patterns as the graph of each country peaked almost every decade from the early 1850s, with the exception of Italy at the end of the nineteenth century. Ireland is one of the most important countries in migration history and her migration patterns fit those of European migration at that time, particularly with respect to the fluctuations in migrant figures. This broad similarity in the patterns of European migration highlights the strength of the pull factors drawing migrants away from the major European countries including Ireland. At any rate the following by Baines (1985, p. 17) is worth examining for their description of the general relations between push and pull areas in migration.

The general propensity to emigrate (that is, the willingness of people to consider emigration) could largely have been produced by the conditions they were facing within Europe, while the fluctuation of opportunities abroad could largely have determined the precise years in which that emigration occurred.

In the nineteenth century Irish migrants widely settled in the world; in Britain, America, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and even in Argentine. This fact also indicates that Irish migration is globalized and must be considered in the development and structure of the global economy of the time.

Language is a very important factor in migrants' social and economic life in host countries, especially for those migrants with little or no skill to earn a living there. Irish migrants, many of whom were employed as unskilled or casual labourers in the host countries, still possessed a cultural advantage among migrants' group in adapting themselves to life in English-speaking countries above mentioned<sup>3)</sup>, though there were

some who spoke Gaelic only.

In comparing migration movements around the world, Castles and Miller (1988, pp. 8–9) pointed out five trends likely to play a major role in the next twenty years: globalisation, acceleration, differentiation, feminisation and politicisation of migration. Migration in the nineteenth century already shares these trends to some degrees, particularly it has begun to take the form of globalization as mentioned above.

In case of feminisation, Irish women already played an important role in nineteenth and twentieth century migration, especially as domestic servants in urban areas in America. One indication of growth of academic interest in female migration is the publication of the fourth volume of *The Irish World Wide, History, Heritage, Identity*, which is entitled as *Irish Women and Irish Migration* (O'Sullivan ed. 1995). In an article in this volume, Traverse (1985, p. 148, Table 7.1) shows that Irish female migration outnumbered male migration in the following six decades: 1871–81, 1881–91, 1901–11, 1926–36, 1946–51, 1961–71, in net migration. According to Baines (1985, p. 32), male emigrants outnumbered females in Europe by about two to one, and together with Sweden, which had a relatively large number of male emigrants, Ireland is one of the exceptions in the European migration patterns as far as feminisation is concerned.

Although female migrants sometimes exceeded male migrants as stated above, the more important fact is the relative balance of sex ratios in the Irish migrants. The balance of the sexes among migrants allowed them to find marriage partners among themselves and to form and develop their own communities in host countries (Fitzpatrick, 1980, p. 137). Many case studies on Irish communities abroad confirm these intermarriage patterns between Irish migrants. The existence of wide marriage market may partly explain the infrequency of return migration to Ireland, in itself another unique feature of Irish migration (Fitzpatrick, 1984, p. 5).

In his introduction to *Irish Women and Irish Migration*, O'Sullivan (1995, p. 1) emphasizes the importance of Robert Kennedy's *The Irish: Emigration, Marriage and Fertility* (1973), as he says several important studies on Irish female migration published afterwards 'all direct our attention back' to it. Kennedy (1973, Chap. IV) places Irish migration, mortality and marriage patterns in a wide comparative perspective, interrelating these factors to the demographic trend in Ireland, which is unique in European record. He stresses the subordinate status of Irish females, especially of single females in rural areas, as a push factor in their massive migration to urban Britain and America.

Kennedy (1973, p. 9) regards Ireland, especially in the middle of the nineteenth century, as being 'like present-day developing countries in some important attributes'. This remark refers to the traditional peasant nature of Irish society. However, his discussion, as a sociologist, is focused on the social aspects of peasant life and on economic aspects such as the function of the traditional land holding practice known as 'rundale' system, which survived in some western parts of Ireland well into the nineteenth century, is somewhat neglected.

### 3. Irish Migration in a Local Perspective

As Fitzpatrick (1984, p. 48) sees it, Kennedy's work '— includes elaborate

discussion of emigration patterns assuming that individual self-interest governed decisions; covers period since Famine, with only occasional reference to regional variation'. In Ireland good examples of regional (local) analysis have been published by two historical geographers, Johnson and Cousens, whose work deserve further attention.

Johnson's research began in the late 1950s with local studies on Co. Londonderry. In his articles, Johnson (1957, 1959) compared population changes before and during the Famine between the northern parishes, where agriculture was improving, and the south-eastern parishes, where it was in decline due to the high population density, subdivision of land holdings, and the survival of 'rundale' system. Johnson found marked contrasts in the population change and migration (transatlantic emigration) pattern between these two regions. His main findings can be summarized as follows: 1) In both pre-Famine and post-Famine periods, population was decreasing in the north of the county, while in more congested areas of the south-east it increased; 2) Emigration was the most important factor contributing to local variations in population; 3) There were two important migrations from the county, a permanent emigration to North America and a temporary migration to harvest work in Great Britain. Each migration had a broadly different origin. The north of the county mainly sent permanent emigrants to America, while most of the harvest migrants came from the south-east of the county (Johnson, 1957; 1959; 1967).

Johnson (1957, p. 283) emphasizes the fact that 'the most prosperous districts suffered the most emigration', which seems contrary to common sense. However, his remark is basically borne out by Cousens, another historical geographer on Irish migration. In a series of articles published in the 1960s, Cousens (1960, 1961, 1964, 1965) discusses the regional patterns of migration and population changes in Ireland from the pre-Famine period to the late nineteenth century. His analysis is in many ways a modified version of Johnson's local analysis<sup>6)</sup>, which dealt with the complicated relation between poverty and emigration in Co. Londonderry as mentioned above.

Cousens emphasizes the regional difference between east and west in Ireland in considering the patterns of migration and population changes and finds that 'lack of movement from the west was a result of reluctance to leave as well as an inability to pay the passage to America' (Cousens, 1964, p. 313). Between 1861 and 1881 the pre-Famine demographic pattern of early marriage still persisted in the west of Ireland, and he indicates that 'the typical rhythm of emigration from the west was one of a sharp burst of activity in times of crisis, followed by a rather desultory movement' (Cousens, 1964, p. 311) <sup>7)</sup>. Therefore, following crop failures, the west of Ireland showed a rise in family migration, suggesting that push factors are still stronger in this region.

Ó Gráda (1977, p. 66) also demonstrates in a case study on Killeshandra parish, Co. Cavan that 'the rich' were substantially more mobile outward than 'the poor'. He refers to Cousens' argument as 'poverty trap' (Ó Gráda, 1986, p. 93) and by reconsidering emigration statistics, casts doubt on its plausibility after the Famine. According to him 'the dichotomy between east and west [of Ireland] has been exaggerated' (Ó Gráda, 1977, p. 70). Ó Gráda (1986) pioneered the use of passenger lists in the studies of Irish migration. His research uncovered some important profiles of Irish migrants to America, such as their origin, occupation, age, family and sex

compositions. He showed that toward the end of the nineteenth century the majority of Irish migrants were increasingly younger and therefore well suited to the growing demand for the labour market in America.

Because passenger lists give straightforward information on migrants, they are useful in considering the local conditions of their home areas. Since the 1980s a number of passenger lists have been printed and some studies using these materials have been published. At the Budapest Conference, which I mentioned at the beginning of this survey, three papers using these materials were presented (Ó Gráda, 1986; Mageean, 1986; Erickson, 1986).

At Budapest Conference, another important session was held, entitled 'Proto-industrialization: Theory and Reality'. As Ireland was one of the major domestic linen producing country, two papers on the Irish linen industry had been already published as its case study. These studies, by Almquist (1979) and by Collins (1982), merit attention from the viewpoint of migration studies, for both try to relate the decline of the linen industry to migration from rural Ireland.

These studies show that the patterns of migration differ according to the type of linen industry that was in decline. In north-west and north-central Ireland, where the linen industry developed on the basis of farmer-weaver households, permanent emigration occurred as a result of its demise, although the timing of migration was different between these two regions as Collins (1982) stressed. However, in Co. Mayo, where the linen industry specialized in the spinning sector by female labour, the decline of the industry did not result in permanent family emigration but resulted in seasonal migration to Britain, mainly by male harvesters (Almquist, 1979, pp. 715-716). In this case, seasonal migration compensated for the decline in the spinning industry in the family economy in Mayo, the poorest county in Ireland.

As the decline of rural industry can be widely observed in Europe at that time, Irish migrants coming from the regions of the linen industry, whether permanent or seasonal, needs to be considered in a wide European setting. Although the theory of Proto-industrialization certainly sets Irish migration in a new perspective, local conditions in traditional rural society, especially in such remote western parts of Ireland as Co. Mayo has yet to be fully analysed.<sup>8)</sup>

As I mentioned earlier, the relation between permanent emigration and seasonal migration is one of the main preoccupations of Johnson and Cousens. Cousens set these two types of migration into a wider perspective and made a following observation (Cousens, 1965, p. 25).

Seasonal migration tended to be most common from those infertile areas where there were few large farms and virtually no possibilities of employment. Emigration to the contrary tended to occur from the more fertile, more fully cultivated areas, where opportunities for an extension of settlement were severely limited.

We are still waiting for a detailed study to combine this perception with other data on local conditions, such as pattern of agriculture, domestic industry and social structure of village communities.



## Concluding remarks

The purpose of this paper was not to review recent issues in the study of Irish migration. Rather the intention has been to reevaluate the studies by Johnson and Cousens, which were published in the 50's and 60's of the last century. These studies remain important and constitute a useful starting point for any consideration of Irish migration from local perspective, and for studies on the relationship between poverty and emigration.

Until now, most studies on Irish migration have originated in the host communities. These studies, setting Irish migrant labourers in their local (host country) perspectives not only at city level but at parish and even street level, have tended to emphasize the diversity of the migrants experience and characteristics.

However, Irish migration needs to be placed in the global perspectives as well, in order both to identify similarities and differences in a comparative framework. Although the demise of the linen industry is important, it is only one of many factors in Irish migration. We need to know more about the conditions of migrants in their home areas and relate these to conditions in the host communities, in order to grasp continuities as well as changes in the migrants experience.

Moreover, simple push-pull analysis cannot in itself provide an adequate explanation for Irish migration. More attention needs to be given to intermediate factors in the process of migration, many of which lie between the local and global dimension, such as the availability of information regarding the routes of migration and conditions in the destination, access to passage funds, and the role played by agencies and brokers.

## Notes

- 1) Throughout this paper, 'Irish migration' refers to 'Irish emigration'.
- 2) There is a large body of literature on Irish migrants in Britain and America. For recent work on the Irish in Britain, see Swift and Gilley (eds.) (1999). On the Irish in America and other countries, see O'Sullivan, P. ed. (1992).
- 3) For example, see Hoerder and Moch (eds.) (1996).
- 4) According to Segal (1993, p. 14), absence of physical coercion is a key criteria for voluntary migration. Although Segal regards Irish migration as voluntary movement, he seems to ignore those migrants evicted by landlord.
- 5) However, Greenslade (1992) emphasizes mental illness among Irish migrants in spite of having several distinct advantages over other, more recent, migrant group.
- 6) Johnson (1990) later developed his argument from local to national dimension.
- 7) Cf. Cousens (1964, p. 309) on emigration from the east of Ireland: 'Emigration from east Ireland was less susceptible to variations from one year to another. The drain of people was continuous, and seemingly inevitable'.
- 8) For a detailed analysis, see Almquist's Ph.D. thesis (1977), a prototype of his work.

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