

When did you come over?

The story of Irish migration to Britain



Introduction

"Emigration is a mirror in which the Irish nation can always see its true face" (Liam Ryan, St. Patrick's College, Maynooth).

Why is migration so central to Irish history?

The population of the island of Ireland reached its apex in 1841, just over 8 million, after which ensued a relentless decline. The population had contracted to 6.5 million by 1851 after the Great Famine, and 130 years later in 1981 the population of the whole island was only 4.9 million. This was primarily due to emigration: for example, between 1801 and 1921 eight million Irish men, women and children emigrated. This was followed by further heavy loss of population in the 1940-50s and in the 1980s. Other west European countries have experienced substantial migration, for example, Greece, Portugal, Spain, Norway and Scotland. However, nowhere else in western Europe has a demographic profile to match this decline or experienced such long-term systemic migration. It is unlikely that Irish social, economic and political history would have been the same if this dramatic haemorrhage of population had not taken place.

When have most people migrated from Ireland to Britain?

Although the United States of America was the chief destination for Irish migrants in the 19th century, between a fifth and a quarter of the 8 million who left then are estimated to have come to Britain. During the 20th century, on the other hand, Britain has been the main destination for people leaving Ireland. Between 1951 and 1961 over 500,000 Irish migrants came to Britain, whereas approximately 90,000 went to the United States in same period. By 1971 the Irish population resident in Britain had climbed to 957,830 (including those from Northern Ireland) and represented the largest migrant minority in the country. The best estimate is that in the 1980s about 60 per cent who migrated from the Republic of Ireland came over to Britain. During the past 30 years Britain has also been the primary destination for those leaving Northern Ireland.

What is the situation today?

At the beginning of the 21st century the Irish economy is being hailed as the 'Celtic Tiger'. Since 1995 there has been net return migration to Ireland and it is estimated that in the first decade of the new century at least 200,000 immigrants will be required in Ireland if the labour needs of the booming economy are to be met. Ireland is visibly undergoing in a rapid, concentrated fashion the modernisation processes that in many other European countries took a number of decades. This brings many attendant social and economic

pressures including the transformation from a country of emigration to one of substantial immigration for the first time. However, in the midst of these changes thousands continue to leave Ireland each year. Many of these are people who cannot get jobs in the growing sectors in Ireland.

Leaving and Arriving

"In May of 1939, I came over by boat. Cried all the way. On the train and everything, cried and cried." (personal testimony from 'Across the Water: Irish Women's Lives in Britain', 1988)

Why have people left Ireland?

The primary reasons for the scale of Ireland's repeated losses of population through migration are economic. Until recently there were fundamental deficiencies in the Irish economy: declining domestic industry, under-exploitation of natural resources, small-scale and inefficient agriculture, poor dispersal of resources and a weak infrastructure. After independence in 1922 the Irish government faced the task of forging a nation state and grappling with the problems of an unmodernised agriculture-based economy from which its only significant industrial centre, Belfast, had been removed by partition. For much of the period from independence until the 1950s the government followed protectionist economic strategies in an attempt to promote greater self-sufficiency and lessen dependence on Britain. This strategy failed to generate sufficient jobs and together with a chronic balance of payments crisis and an accelerating number of people leaving rural areas, created large-scale migration in the 1950s.

Despite a change in economic strategy in the 1960s and joining the European Economic Common in 1973 emigration escalated again in the 1980s. In the 1990s the opening of the Irish economy to multi-national investment and the sustained development of the electronics and other high skill industries at last began to generate jobs in Ireland. One consequence was that since the mid-1990s there has been net-immigration to Ireland, including the return of many migrants of previous decades.

People have always left Ireland for other reasons, famously James Joyce and other literary figures. The high rate of female emigration can be explained by a combination of economic and social factors: in the past leaving to accumulate a dowry; more recently seeking advancement in occupations closed to them in Ireland; dealing with difficult personal circumstances including significant numbers who have come over to Britain for abortions. Gays and lesbians have also left Ireland in order to lead their lives in different ways to the covert manner that may have been their only option in Ireland.

How have they reached Britain?

In the 19th century, when many people first came to Britain as seasonal harvesters, domestic servants or as navvies, there were a number of established routes to Britain. From Munster people travelled via Cork to Bristol or south Wales and then often made their way through Gloucester to Middlesex and London, others branched northwards to the Midlands. Those who landed at Liverpool had usually completed an arduous journey on foot from Connaught to Dublin, often continuing on to Manchester and across to Yorkshire, Nottinghamshire, Lincolnshire and Leicester. The third main route was taken by migrants from Donegal, Derry and Tyrone who mostly went to Scotland, spreading out across southern Scotland and often into Northumberland. As a result of these patterns, although there were heavy concentrations of Irish people in particular areas, Irish migrants could be

found in most parts of England and in much of southern Scotland and south Wales. In the 20th century the three crossings of Larne to Stranraar, Dun Laoghaire to Holyhead and Rosslare to Fishguard dominated and although people were no longer travelling in 'cattle boats' the journey was still synonymous with poor conditions and facilities. The biggest change occurred in the 1980s with the advent of the 'Ryanair generation', cheap flights enabling quicker journeys and providing the shipping companies with competition for the first time.

What did they do on arrival?

People arrived in Britain with different degrees of preparation and varying networks of contacts. For many establishing themselves in independent accommodation was often more difficult than obtaining a job. Very commonly the first few weeks or months were spent living with relatives or friends in cramped conditions and in danger of eviction from landlords. This hidden form of homelessness was particularly prevalent in London. The willingness of other Irish people to help someone who had just 'come over' is apparent in many oral history accounts.

I stayed with these people I didn't know at all, for two weeks. I came over with a friend and he didn't know these people either. He knew the guy who was living with them. He rang him the day before we came over because our accommodation was messed up. He wasn't there, but the girls said to stay anyway. Then he came back and they let us stay for two weeks. Then I stayed with another friend of mine, on the floor in the sitting room, for another week. (A man who arrived in London in 1995)

Settling and Working

"We stayed with a friend for awhile.....I got a flat through a friend at work. He was a Kerryman also and he got me a flat with this estate." (Irish emigrant who arrived in London in 1949)

Where have Irish people settled in Britain?

During the past three centuries Irish migration to Britain has been very sensitive to the demands of the British labour market and this largely accounts for the dominant settlement patterns. In the early 18th century there were significant Irish settlements in London, Bristol, Canterbury and Norwich and in garrison towns such as York. However, by the beginning of the next century the heaviest concentrations were in the industrial areas of south-west Scotland and Lancashire, and in London, foreshadowing the main areas of settlement throughout the 19th century. Significant numbers of Irish people settled in other parts of England: the west Midlands, the north-east and west Yorkshire. It is in these 19th century areas of settlement that today many people who can trace one or two Irish great-grandparents are found. In the 1950s most of the new Irish migrants went to the English Midlands, the "corridor" south, taking in Bedford and Luton, and to London. The migrants of the 1980s were even more concentrated, with the vast majority settling in the south-east of England and especially in greater London. About 50 per cent of the Irish-born population now resides in this area.

What jobs have Irish people done in Britain?

In the 1950s the expanding engineering and car industries and the big construction projects of the period (the Festival of Britain site and motorways) attracted Irish men. Irish women, who often left Ireland with higher educational qualifications than men, were primarily drawn to two sectors: the profession of nursing, and to some extent teaching, and low-paid manual work (cleaning and catering jobs). In following this pattern, Irish women share many employment characteristics with African-Caribbean women. Second-generation Irish men and women have work profiles much closer to other white British-born people, though there is a greater tendency for men to follow their fathers into construction work than for women to become nurses like their mothers. There has been a small Irish middle class in Britain since the 19th century, when it was mostly made up of lawyers, journalists and officers in the British Army. In 1830, 42.2 per cent of the army was Irish. By the mid-20th century Irish professionals were employed in the media, as doctors and dentists, and later as travel agents and in banks. In the 1980s the booming service economy in London resulted in young Irish women and men being more highly represented across the board in professional and managerial jobs than previous generations of migrants, however, young Irish-born men remain clustered in areas of low-skilled casual work.

How have the Irish been received in Britain?

Britain has been a place of welcome and opportunity for many Irish people but there has also been persistent evidence of inequality, prejudice and discrimination. People have many tales to tell. Some recall the 'No Irish, no blacks, no dogs' signs of the 1950s and 1960s. Many Irish people at that time changed their names, for example, dropping the 'O' in the surname or changing 'Seamus' to 'James'. Yet others say they never met anything but kindness. Perhaps more people recount how they found London, for example, to be a daunting, impersonal place where it was hard to make friends. People's experiences depended very much on where they lived and who they worked with. Many Irish people say they have not experienced direct discrimination but have been made aware of being of secondary status. There is no doubt that negative attitudes to the Irish in Britain were exacerbated by 'The Troubles'. During the 1970s and 1980s Irish-born people, readily identified by their accents, maintained a low public profile. People from Northern Ireland, regardless of their own identifications, are perceived as 'Irish' and not as 'British'. This is especially true in England, the destination of most migrants for the past half century, rather than in Scotland where knowledge of and ties with Northern Ireland are far more extensive.

Surviving and Campaigning

"The psychological journey of migration takes far longer than the geographical one" Fr. Bobby Gilmore, Irish Chaplaincy in Britain, 1988

What organisations have Irish people created in Britain?

Throughout the past 150 years a wide variety of organisations have been set up by Irish people to cater for their educational, welfare, cultural, political and business interests. In the 19th century many were branches of Irish organisations: political movements (Repeal societies, Fenians, Home Rule), cultural organisations (the Gaelic League, Irish Literary Society, GAA). Other needs, especially welfare and education, were catered for by a range of religious organisations.

The 1950s migrants set up many organisations including County Associations and various welfare agencies that operated alongside services run by the Catholic Church. The Federation of Irish Societies developed as an overarching co-ordinator of the organisations of this era. In the 1980s newly arrived migrants, often with young second generation Irish people, established a diverse range of groups that not only catered for welfare needs but represented the interests of a heterogeneous population: London Irish Women's Centre, Action Group for Irish Youth, Green Ink Bookshop, Positively Irish Action on AIDS.

What has been the role of religion in Irish peoples lives?

The Irish in Britain are usually associated with Catholicism, despite the fact that at any one time up to 20 per cent are Protestant. We have far less information on Irish Protestants partly because they could join a range of established and other Protestant churches. In the 19th century the English Catholic Church developed a mission to its new Irish congregation which established many new parishes. Particular effort was put into building Catholic schools. The objectives of these schools were to transform the children of Irish immigrants into useful citizens, loyal subjects, respectable members of the working class and good Catholics. For those from a Catholic background Catholicism has been a cultural identity as much as a religious belief. This has been particularly true for the second generation.

Irish Catholics have been erratic in the practice of their religion. For example, in 1930s-south London only some 20-30 per cent of the estimated Catholic population attended mass regularly, however, nearly 70 per cent of those attending mass were women. In Manchester where overall attendance at mass was higher, averaging above 50 per cent throughout the inter-war period, there was also a wide difference between male and female levels of participation. Later in the century when Irish immigrants were coming over in the 1950s they were leaving a culture where attending Sunday mass was almost universal. As a result new churches and schools were built to cater for them in Britain and attendances at mass increased dramatically. Today they are tailing off sharply.

How healthy are the Irish in Britain?

The Irish in Britain experience more ill health than can be explained by their demographic and socio-economic status alone. Illness is often taken as a marker of social disadvantage with a strong link between illness and low incomes, low educational achievement, poor diet and bad housing conditions. Irish-born men are the only migrant group whose mortality is higher in Britain than in their country of origin. According to the 1991 census, limiting long-term illness was systematically higher than average amongst Irish women and men. Recent research shows that poor health amongst the Irish population persists into the second generation, especially cancers and respiratory disease. Irish people also report above average mental-health problems.

What political organisations have Irish people been involved in?

This is one of the least well documented areas of Irish lives in Britain. In the main migrants from Ireland have got involved in three types of political organisations: the British labour movement, Irish nationalist organisations and, in Scotland, at least, in Orange Lodges. The majority of the Irish in Britain have been transformed from a group whose political attitudes were largely shaped by nationalism to a group who, in the 20th century, substituted class interests for nationalism (at least in the public sphere) and have voted overwhelmingly for the Labour Party. Between 1929-79 Catholic working class was the most reliable section of the Labour Party's working

class vote. Since 1979 the Irish vote may well have been more divided and we have yet to accumulate detailed evidence about the political attitudes or activities of Irish migrants of the past 20 years.

The events in Northern Ireland have contributed to a situation where the Irish have kept their heads down on Irish issues while participating out of all proportion to their numbers in trade unions and the Labour Party. Partly because of the history of the impact of Irish events on British domestic politics Ireland became a taboo subject in the Labour Party and many trade union circles. At a national level Catholics are under-represented in the political life of the country and organisations in Britain were slow to take up civil liberties issues in Northern Ireland.

Contributing and Achieving

"They built all the country.....it would be a quare country without the Irish" (Man interviewed in Birmingham in 1995 for the Commission for Racial Equality report on the Irish in Britain)

How have the Irish succeeded in Britain?

The generation of migrants who came over in the 1940-50s were less likely than the population as a whole to move to better paid, higher status jobs over the course of their life time. Their children, the second generation, many of them the product of Catholic schools, have been more socially mobile. In the past successful social mobility into the middle class or success for a middle class emigrant was often dependent on playing down Irishness. However, more recently many Irish immigrants, if they have degree level qualifications, have gone straight into professional or managerial jobs or been successful with their own businesses. Some of the success of Irish people is very high profile because of their presence in the media and entertainment industries. Irish-born people and people of Irish descent are, therefore, now to be found in all areas of the labour market and are not restricted to certain traditional niches.

What have been the main contributions of the Irish to British society and culture?

It is difficult to estimate the full extent of Irish contributions to British society and culture because for so long there has been a habit of subsuming 'Irish' achievements into a conglomerate story of 'British' success. Much goes unsung as a consequence. In many areas the Irish contribution has been substantial and the stories have yet to be told: music, comedy, business, trade unions, football, the war effort, education and charitable works are just some examples.

As just one example, Irish labourers contribution to the building of Britain's industrial infrastructure is immense. For example, Jack Dash in his biography *Good Morning Brothers* describes the building of the tunnel from Wapping to Rotherhithe. This was the first tunnel under the Thames and was one of the finest feats of 19th century engineering. Dash writes that it was built at the cost of many Irish lives. Most of them were drawn from the St. George's area of Southwark, one of the main Irish communities in 19th century London. First the canals, then the railways, later motorways and recently the building of the Channel tunnel have all relied substantially on Irish labour.

Irish writers have had a profound influence on English language, literature and drama. The list is endless: Shaw, Wilde, Yeats, Synge, Joyce, O'Casey, MacNeice, Beckett, Friel, Heaney, Jordan, O'Brien. Many have lived in Britain for significant periods. It can certainly be argued that British culture in general has benefited from the inter-play of the two cultures. A cross fertilisation of intellectual life has occurred the extent of which is not widely recognised. For instance, neither

in Ireland nor Britain is fiction and drama about being Irish in Britain yet recognised for the distinct contribution that it represents.

Celebrating

"If there is anything that defines us as being Irish it is our way of expressing ourselves. It is the assertion of and celebration of our identity through writing and drama particularly that is the embodiment of our Irishness" (Seán Ó Domhnallain, London, 1991)

How have the Irish celebrated their culture and identity in Britain?

For a long period Irish culture was celebrated self-sufficiently within Irish communities with little or no links being made with the rest of British society. Partly this was a response to British attitudes, in part it was due to a lack of any feeling of permanency in this country. Irish centres, dance halls, the GAA and county and district associations, based on Irish localities and parishes, served many of the mid-twentieth century migrants. Their children first went to Irish dancing classes in this often family orientated and heavily church-influenced context. The Irish Post newspaper established in 1970 both represented this community and formed a bridge to a wider culture if only at first by its mere presence in newsagents.

As the second generation grew up and new migrants arrived from a very different Ireland new areas of cultural activity developed: Irish Studies courses emerged, Irish language classes mushroomed, Irish artists and writers formed various groups, for example, the Irish Video Project, and Irish Women's Groups were set up in many cities. In recent years the proliferation of Irish theme pubs in Britain and the success of shows like 'Riverdance' are two high-profile examples of the extent to which Irish culture has now become more visible in British society.

What has been the role of music and dance in this celebration?

For well over a century, the majority of Irish people coming to Britain have had English as their first language. Various other cultural symbols and practices such as St. Patrick's Day celebrations, Irish festivals and dance competitions have therefore become crucial for maintaining Irish identity and celebrating Irishness. Paramount has been music, ranging from traditional rebel songs to the best selling Daniel O'Donnell. Much of that activity was hidden as was evidenced by the surprise which greeted the emergence of the Pogues in the early 1980s, a band which combined punk-rock music with Irish traditional music. More recently, all forms of Irish music are booming in pubs and other venues from traditional music 'sessions', to the Corrs and Afro-Celt Sound System.