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Notes on the Demography of the Famine in Ulster

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Notes on the Demography of the Famine in Ulster

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Keywords: Great Famine, Ireland

Notes on the Demography of the Famine in Ulster¹

At what level of aggregation should the Famine be analysed? Some data are available only at a fairly aggregated level, while a small number are available down to townland level. Comparative analysis involves trade-offs between the level of aggregation and the choice of explanatory variables. While an artificial unit of analysis, the province, does have the charm of dividing the island into north, south, east and west, Ulster escaped the Famine more lightly than the other three provinces. But its impact, as reflected in population change between 1841 and 1851, was more uneven in Ulster than in any of the other three provinces. At county level, the border counties of Cavan, Fermanagh, and Monaghan, where the population decline in many parishes exceeded one-third, were the worst hit. In this sense, the famine was 'lightest' in west Donegal, in central Antrim, in the Lagan valley, by the southern shores of Lough Neagh, and in north County Down. Only three of Ireland's 130 poor law unions deemed it unnecessary to distribute soup rations under the provisions of the Temporary Relief Act of 1847, and all three – Antrim, Belfast, and Newtownards – were located in the industrialised east of the province.² Two recent maps capture these contrasts in fine detail; that in John

Crowley et al.'s indispensable *Atlas of the Great Irish Famine*³ – which, it should be noted, refers to the rural population of civil parishes – and that in the study by Fotheringham, et al.,⁴ which uses the district electoral division (DED) rather than the parish as the unit of analysis.⁵

In a small number of Ulster parishes the population rose between 1841 and 1851. They include the civil parishes of Newtown Crommelin in mid-Antrim (where the population rose from 799 in 1841 to 876 in 1851; Poor Law Valuation (PLV) £795.5), the Grange of Doagh in south Antrim (from 974 to 1,117; PLV £3,215); and Ardquin near the southern tip of the Ards Peninsula (from 916 to 918; PLV £3,344.25). The last two had relatively high PLVs per head – a convenient, rough-and-ready proxy for living standards. Newtown Crommelin escaped lightly for such a poor and heavily agricultural parish: perhaps less dependence on the potato played a part. But all three parishes are too small for province- or island-wide inferences. Templecorran in southeast Antrim (1,423 to 1,472; PLV £3,891) was also relatively well off, while the County Down parish of Tullylish (12,660 to 13,400; PLV £15,047) was shielded by its linen industry.⁶

But what of the Montiags on the shores of Lough Neagh (from 3,480 to 3,581; PLV £3,653) and of Killybegs Lower in southwest Donegal (from 3,290 to 3,338; PLV £1,560)? The data extracted from rentals, parish

registers, and workhouse records by the Lurgan historian F.X. McCorry⁷ 'reflect well on the capability of the Montiagh's population to survive the Famine's chill', and he highlights the importance of the turf cutting industry ('the supplier of turf to large portions of counties Armagh and Down') and domestic weaving as factors in keeping deaths down.

McCorry also shows that while few entered the workhouse from the Montiaghs in 1847, when mortality was high, admissions were higher thereafter when deaths were fewer; an interesting finding which he interprets as evidence that 'few were sent to the workhouse to die during the Famine'. The Catholic parish of Seagoe includes the Montiaghs on the shores of Lough Neagh; its parish records, which unusually also list burials, have been insightfully analysed by McCorry,⁸ who finds that while mortality among Catholics in the Montiaghs was four times the pre-famine average in 1847, peaking in March and April of that year, it was back to normal in the following year. As for the relatively low demographic toll in west and southwest Donegal, Breandán Mac Suibhne⁹ has attributed that to heavy reliance on seasonal migration to Scotland, knitting, and sprigging, and the credit networks that those activities spawned.

1. Using Data on Baptisms

The Famine impacted on population in three ways: through excess mortality, through missing births, and through emigration. Given the quality of the data, it is impossible to be precise about which of these factors mattered most by county or by parish. The most reliable county estimates of excess mortality are those by Mokyr (see Table 1). His upper bound estimates represent ‘the demographic deficit caused by the famine’, whereas his lower bound estimates refer to excess mortality. The gap between them is a measure of ‘averted births’. The county estimates of excess mortality depend on assumptions about emigration during the Famine, on which records are lacking. While Mokyr candidly admits that his procedures are ‘very approximate’, he reassures us with the claim that ‘most of the results do not seem very sensitive to the assumptions employed’.¹⁰

[TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

A reduction in fertility is as much a hallmark of famine as an increase in deaths. While such a reduction might occasionally be planned or precautionary – as apparently happened in the western Netherlands

during the *Hongerwinter* of 1944–45 – in general it is the product of spousal separation, reduced libido or, especially, famine amenorrhoea.¹¹ Where parish registers lack data on burials, the Italian historian Guido Alfani¹² has made a strong case for working with parish birth records as a sensitive measure of a famine’s severity. In Ireland, many Roman Catholic parish registers from the Famine era have been available online since mid-2015;¹³ some, such as that for Seagoe, contain data on burials as well as baptisms, but most record only the latter. Systematic analyses of a sample of these data should in time give us a good sense of the extent and variation in lost births in the 1840s. Alas, the survival of registers for the Famine years is patchy: nothing survives, for example, for west Donegal, an area of particular interest in this respect.¹⁴ But where they do survive, there is a presumption that they are reasonably complete, given the important role of baptism in the Catholic faith.

For the purposes of this paper, we extracted data for the Catholic parishes listed in Table 2. We also report on Taughboyne and Derrylorn, two of the small number of Church of Ireland parishes whose records have been digitised.¹⁵ For comparative perspective, we compare the outcome in Ulster to that in three badly affected parishes in south Kerry: Kenmare, Tuosist and Eyeries.

[TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

Figure 1 describes the quarter-to-quarter variations in baptisms in these parishes between (when available) c. 1840 and 1852. In the parishes of Errigal Truagh, Tydavnet, Clonfeacle, and Desertcreight there was a clear reduction in births which persisted into the 1850s: this was most marked in Tydavnet and Errigal Truagh, where the annual totals halved between 1839–45 and 1847–51. In comparative famine historical terms these reductions are massive, and point to extreme famine conditions in those parishes. The failure of births to recover after the famine had abated was a product of the scale of mortality and out-migration, and perhaps the persistence of amenorrhoea. In Clonfeacle over the same period the reduction was 24 per cent, and in Desertcreight 27 per cent, but in Seagoe, despite the notable trough in 1847, there was hardly any reduction between the two periods. By the same token the impact of the Famine on Ramoan, Portaferry, and Taughboyne was much lighter than in Derryloran.

Only Tydavnet and Desertcreight matched our three Kerry parishes in terms of the fall-off in births. In Kenmare, births plummeted from 334

in 1839–45 to 181 in 1847–53 (and Kenmare’s total in the latter period was inflated by baptisms of children born in the workhouse), whereas in Tuosist and Eyeries the number of baptisms was half or less its pre-famine average in 1847–53. In these Kerry parishes, both the extent of the decline in 1847 and the failure of births to bounce back thereafter are remarkable, and atypical of famines in general.

2. A New Source on Emigration

Maps 1a and 1b describe the parishes of origin of emigrants who opened an account in the Emigrant Savings Bank in New York City between 1850 and 1858. The bank was founded by Irish-born philanthropists to help their poorer compatriots to place their savings in safe keeping; the savings history of all of those who opened an account between October 1850 and 1858 survive, and they provide information about the origins of savers, the time of their arrival (if immigrants), occupation, address in New York, and much more.¹⁶ Map 1a refers to the 1,628 who left Ireland before 1846 while Map 1b refers to the 10,000 or so who might be described as ‘Famine emigrants’. In terms of detail on the origin of pre-famine and famine-era emigrants, nothing like these maps has existed for Ireland hitherto.

Several features stand out. First is the striking persistence of emigration from those parishes which sent out most emigrants before 1846. Second, if we are prepared to accept the map as a very rough guide of broader patterns, a key feature is the almost complete absence in the pre-famine period of immigrants from east Ulster, Mayo, Galway, all of Munster, and all of Leinster south of Drogheda. Reassuringly, there is a considerable overlap between the map and the county pattern suggested by Cousens,¹⁷ which identified a heavy concentration of pre-famine emigration in west and south Ulster, northeast Connacht, and north Leinster. Cousens inferred out-migration rates from comparing those aged less than 10 years and 11–20 years in 1821 to those aged 21–30 years and 31–40 years in 1841 by county. However, this can be done only at county level.

Comparing Maps 1a and 1b, the continuity of patterns established in the pre-famine era into the post-1845 period is striking. This calls for some more formal spatial analysis. But note also the implication of more emigration than before from much of the west and south. An obvious caveat is that migrants from places with no EISB presence headed elsewhere than New York, to Canada or to Philadelphia. For example, the lack of emigrants from parishes in west Donegal is explained by the

preference of those who left places like Ardara and Killybegs for the coal mining districts of Pennsylvania;¹⁸ and the absence of depositors from Gweedore might be explained by the generally low rate of permanent migration from that area, where Scotland – to which there was a high rate of seasonal migration – would emerge as the permanent destination of choice.

[MAPS 1a and 1b ABOUT HERE]

An intriguing feature of both maps, on which information was previously totally lacking, is the within-county variations. The literature on migration highlights the central role of migration networks and immigrant clusters (e.g. the high concentration of Irish immigrants in parts of New York's Sixth Ward). Our maps pinpoint the persistent clustering also at points of departure; note in particular the clusters of savers in parishes on the borders of Cavan, Leitrim, and Longford; in south Monaghan; and in mid-Tyrone. What the maps are silent on is whether there were clusters elsewhere producing no EISB account holders in New York but lots of migrants to places such as Philadelphia, New England, and Canada.

Did pre-famine migration mitigate the impact of the Famine? And if so how; by removing poor people, by providing a reachable destination, or by establishing a source of remittances? In what follows I provide one rough-and-ready, non-technical answer based on these EISB data. I define the number of EISB account holders who left before 1846 as a percentage of the 1831 population as a proxy for the emigration rate. My other variable is the rate of population growth between 1821 and 1841 in parishes in seven adjacent counties in Ulster or adjacent to it (Longford, Sligo, Leitrim, Westmeath, Cavan, Monaghan, Fermanagh) where account holders were numerous. The included counties are all inland (setting aside Leitrim's short coastal strip and Sligo's scenic beaches). Across parishes in these seven counties, the variation in the emigration rate, defined as above, helps to predict the rate of population growth. The elasticity (using the mean values of *population change between 1821 and 1841* and the emigration rate is about 0.15; a doubling of the emigration rate (or in the number of account holders) would be associated with a reduction of 15 per cent in the rate of population growth (e.g. from 20 to 17 per cent).¹⁹

Again, in the same counties, the more account holders' parishes supplied before 1846, the smaller was the population decline in them between 1841 and 1851.²⁰ Of course, no causal inference is justified here:

having more account holders could have made parishes less vulnerable to the famine, but the presence of account holders could also have been a function of other unidentified factors which would also have reduced vulnerability. Perhaps the fact that people had been able to leave indicated that they were less vulnerable in the first place?

The relatively small numbers involved must not be forgotten. It must be noted too that this kind of exercise is clearly subject to omitted variable bias: after all, population change will also have depended on excluded factors such as the share of employment outside agriculture, literacy, the wage rate, or being able to speak English, and clearly more sophisticated analysis is required. Still, these outcomes hint at the possibility that insofar as emigration was a form of disaster relief during the Famine, high emigration before 1846 may have tempered the impact of the crisis in some areas.

3. Concluding Remarks

Ulster was 'different' in the sense that proportionally fewer people died there during the Famine than in the rest of the island. Its more diversified diet and economy certainly played some part in this. So too, perhaps, did its landed proprietors, who were less likely to be encumbered before the

Famine and therefore better positioned to pay rates due and to fund relief, and also less likely to evict, when the crisis struck. The percentage of townlands in which land was auctioned in the Incumbered Estates Court in the wake of the Famine – a good measure of financial pressure on landlords before the Famine²¹ – was much lower in Ulster than elsewhere; in Ulster's poorest county, Donegal, that percentage was miniscule. In addition, the distribution of landholdings and farm sizes was much less unequal in Ulster, as indicated by the lower ratio of farm labourers to farmers in 1841. In Ulster the ratio was 1.5 to 1, whereas in the rest of Ireland it was 3 to 1. Equally striking is the variation in population change across the province. As noted earlier, Donegal, and particularly its western parishes, stand out; of Ulster's nine counties, only Derry and Down escaped with proportionally fewer deaths.

Much of the literature on the Famine in Ulster has focused heavily on the role of the poor law and the workhouse regime.²² While there were exceptions – e.g. McCabe and Ó Gráda have documented gross mismanagement and dereliction in Enniskillen – the system seemed to work better in Ulster than in the rest of Ireland. On the whole, the workhouses were up and running before the potato failed, there was less overcrowding and fewer deaths from infectious diseases, and fewer boards

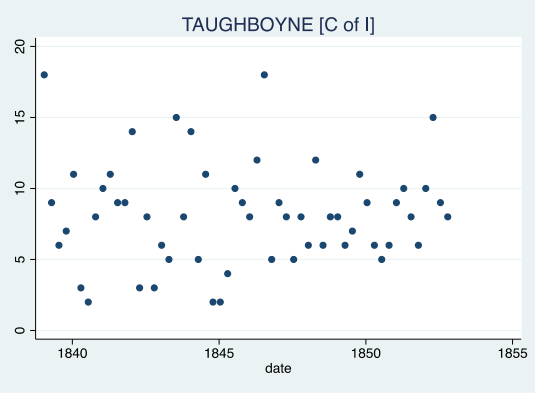
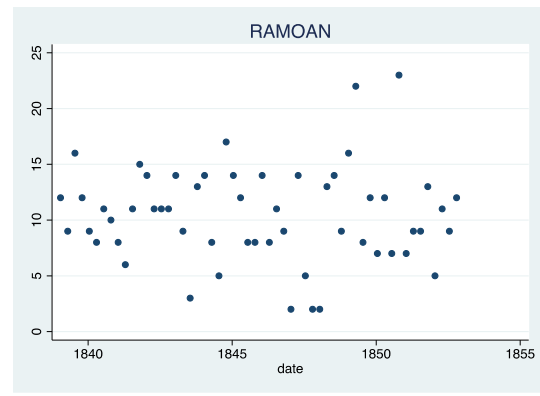
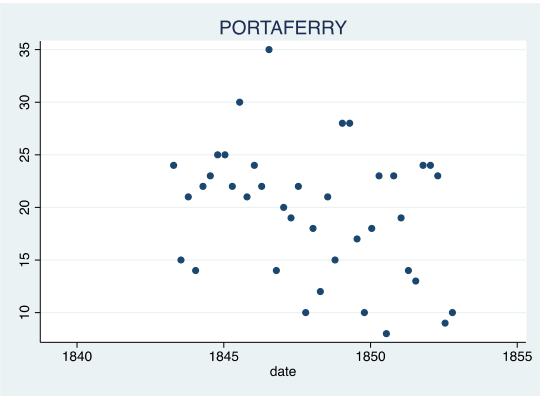
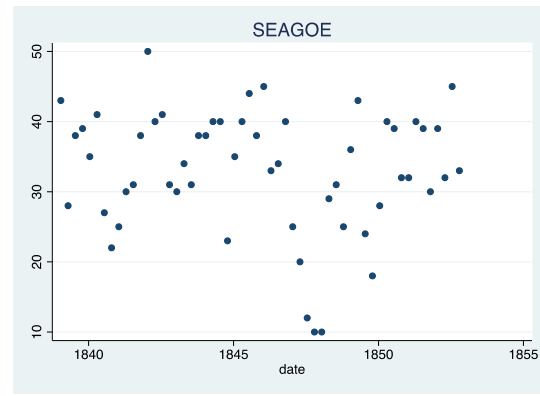
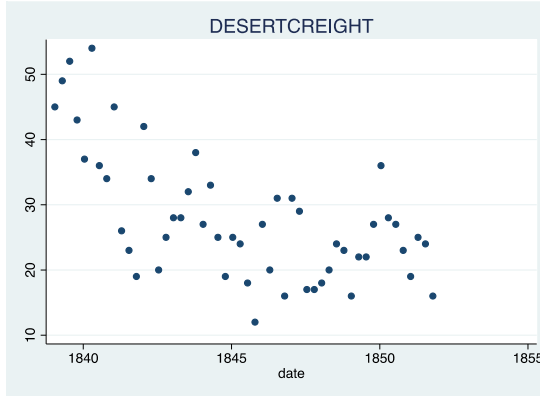
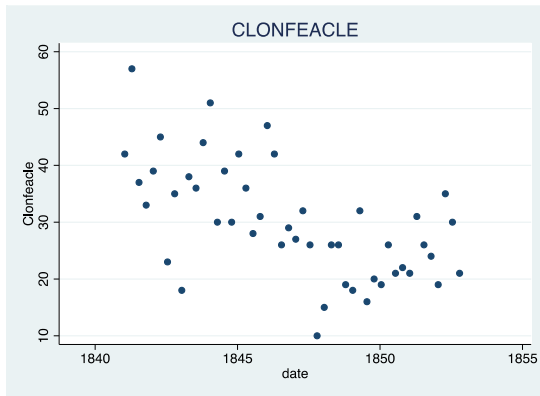
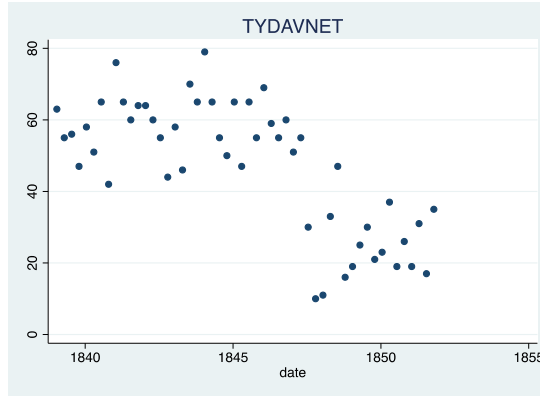
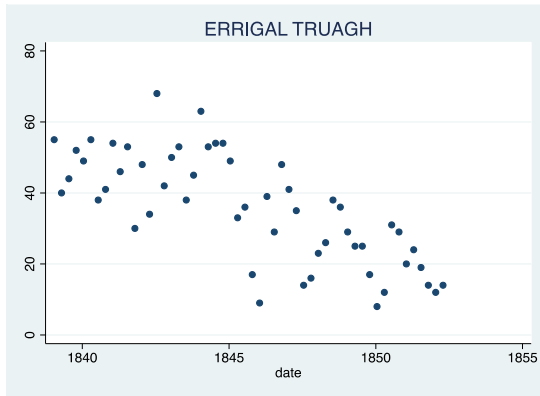
of guardians were dissolved. But the pressures facing the system were also much less than in Mayo or Clare. Indeed, the rate-in-aid act, so controversial in Ulster before its passage in May 1849,²³ was a measure of that. So the issue is to compare like with like, by choosing the appropriate yardstick.²⁴ It is to be hoped that ongoing and future research at the Ulster University and elsewhere will come to grips with this issue.

Table 1. Annual excess mortality per 1,000 population, 1846–51: Ulster counties

| County | Upper Bound | Lower Bound | County | Upper Bound | Lower Bound |
|---------------------------|-------------|-------------|-----------|-------------|-------------|
| Antrim | 20.3 | 15.0 | Down | 12.5 | 6.7 |
| Armagh | 22.2 | 15.3 | Fermanagh | 39.1 | 29.2 |
| Cavan | 51.8 | 42.7 | Monaghan | 36.0 | 28.6 |
| Derry | 10.1 | 5.7 | Tyrone | 22.3 | 15.2 |
| Donegal | 18.7 | 10.7 | Ulster | 25.6 | 18.9 |
| | | | | | |
| Leinster | 14.2 | 8.9 | Munster | 36.3 | 24.9 |
| Connacht | 61.7 | 50.9 | IRELAND | 33.1 | 24.4 |
| Source: Mokyr 1985: 266–7 | | | | | |

Table 2. Some details on the parishes described in Figure 1

| Parish | Location | Denomination | Pop. 1841 | Pop. 1851 | PLV (£) |
|---|--------------------------|--------------|-----------|-----------|---------|
| Errigal Trough | Monaghan/ Tyrone | RC | 9,585 | 7,171 | 12,004 |
| Ballyphillip and Portaferry | Down | RC | 3,086 | 2,833 | 5,013 |
| Tydavnet | Monaghan | RC | 11,645 | 8,442 | 14,755 |
| Ramoan | North Antrim | RC | 4,807 | 4,102 | 7,545 |
| Desertcreight | Derry–Tyrone | RC | | | |
| Seagoe | North Armagh | RC | 11,004 | 10,503 | 11,267 |
| Clonfeacle | Tyrone | RC | 18,930 | 13,810 | 26,010 |
| Taughboyne | St Johnstone, Donegal | C of I | 5,782 | 4,851 | 9,745 |
| Derrylorn | Derry–Tyrone | C of I | 8,480 | 7,552 | 13,103 |
| Kenmare | South Kerry | RC | 5,839 | 7,495 | 3,597 |
| Tuosist | South Kerry | RC | 7,485 | 4,034 | 2,472 |
| Eyeries | South Kerry | RC | | | |
| Note: Kenmare workhouse held inmates 3,353 in 1851. | | | | | |



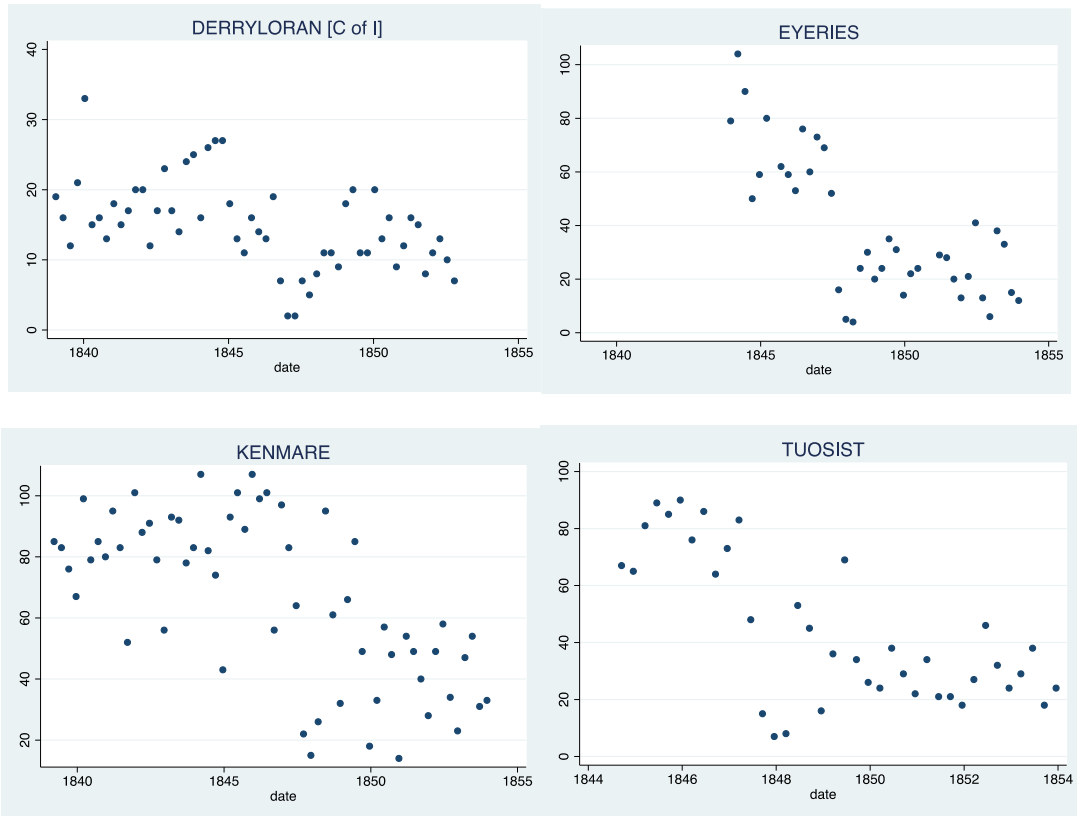
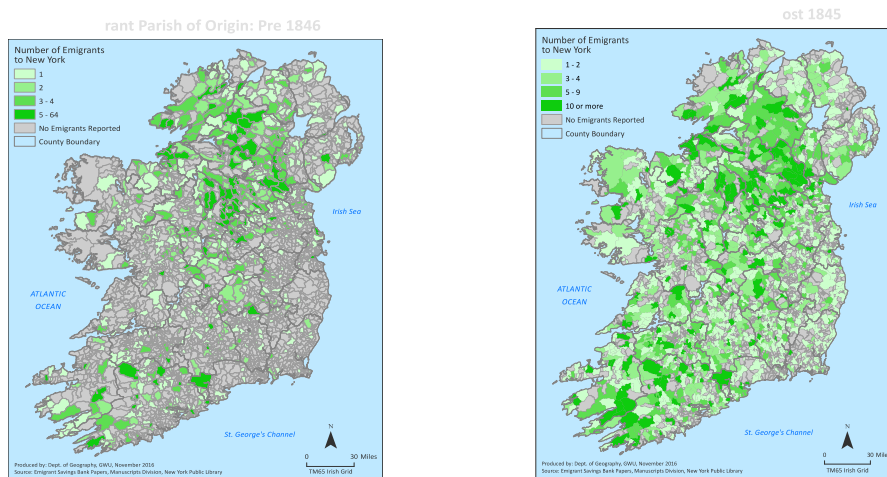


Figure 1. Baptisms in selected parishes, c. 1840-1852



Maps 1a and 1b: parishes of origin of Irish-born account holders in the Emigrant Savings Bank in New York City between 1850 and 1858

¹ Thanks to Breandán Mac Suibhne for very useful comments on an earlier draft. The research that generated the maps in the text was funded by a Collaborative Research Grant (with Tyler Anbinder and Simone Wegge) from the National Endowment for the Humanities. A slightly different version of this paper is to appear in a volume edited by Patrick Fitzgerald and Anthony Russell.

² See, J. Grant, 'The Great Famine in County Down', in L. Proudfoot (ed.), *Down: History & Society* (Dublin: Geography Publications, 1997), p. 368; J. Grant, 'The Great Famine in the Province of Ulster; the Mechanism of Relief', unpublished PhD dissertation, Queens University Belfast (1986).

³ J. Crowley, W. J. Smyth and M. Murphy (eds), *Atlas of the Great Irish Famine* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2012), p. 19.

⁴ A.S. Fotheringham, M.H. Kelly and M. Charlton, 'The Demographic Impacts of the Irish Famine: Towards A Greater Geographical Understanding', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 38, 2 (2013), Map 2.

⁵ Mac Suibhne points out that the DED is probably a more meaningful measure than the parish, given the considerable size of parishes in the west and on marginal land. See, B. Mac Suibhne, 'A Jig in the Poor House', *Dublin Review of Books*, 23 April 2013; <http://www.drb.ie/essays/a-jig-in-the-poorhouse> (accessed on 10 May 2017).

⁶ See, M. Cohen, *Linen, Family, and Community in Tullylish, County Down, 1690–1914* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1997); M. Cohen, 'Towards an Historical Ethnography of the Great Irish Famine', in David Nugent (ed.), *Locating Capitalism in Time and Space; Global Restructurings, Politics and Identity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), pp. 113–36.

⁷ F.X. McCorry, 'The Montiaghs of North Armagh', *Seanchas Ardmhacha, Journal of the Armagh Diocesan Historical Society*, 18, 2 (2001), pp. 148–52.

⁸ Ibid. pp. 150–52.

⁹ B. Mac Suibhne, ‘“Bastard Ribbonism”: The Molly Maguires, the Uneven Failure of Entitlements and the Politics of Post-Famine Adjustment’, in E. Delaney and B. Mac Suibhne (eds), *Ireland’s Great Famine and Popular Politics* (London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 186–231.

¹⁰ J. Mokyr, *Why Ireland Starved*, 2nd edition (London: Allen & Unwin, 1985). See also, J. Mokyr, ‘The Deadly Fungus: An Econometric Investigation into the Short-Term Demographic Impact of the Irish Famine, 1846–1851’, *Research in Population Economics*, II (1980), pp. 237–77.

¹¹ C. Ó Gráda, ‘“The Last, the Most Dreadful Resource of Nature”: Economic-Historical Reflections on Famine’, *Atlantic Economic Journal*, 44, 2 (2016), pp. 225–41.

¹² G. Alfani, *Calamities and the Economy in Renaissance Italy: The Grand Tour of the Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2013).

¹³ Available from Catholic Parish Registers at the National Library of Ireland:

<http://registers.nli.ie>.

¹⁴ Even when complete some of the registers are extremely hard to read, though this matters less when only a monthly count is needed. Some contain gaps in the 1840s, e.g. data are lacking for Glenravel between late September 1841 and early October 1848.

¹⁵ Available from Parish Registers at the Representative Church Body Library:

<https://www.ireland.anglican.org/about/rcb-library/online-parish-records>.

¹⁶ See, T. Anbinder, S. Wegge and C. Ó Gráda, ‘The Savings, Mobility, and Networks of New York’s Irish Famine Immigrants: Preliminary Evidence from the Emigrant Savings Bank’ (forthcoming, 2017); C. Ó Gráda, ‘The Famine, the New York Irish, and Their Bank’, in A.E. Murphy and R. Prendergast (eds), *Contributions to the History of Economic Thought – Essays in Honour of R.D.C. Black* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 227–48.

¹⁷ S.H. Cousens, ‘The Regional Variations in Emigration from Ireland Between 1821 and 1841’, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 37 (1965), pp. 15–30.

¹⁸ B. Mac Suibhne, 'Them Poor Irish Lads in Pennsylvania', *Dublin Review of Books*, 1 March 2015; at <http://www.drb.ie/essays/'them-poor-irish-lads'-in-pennsylvania> (accessed 10 May 2017).

¹⁹ I have also checked the impact of excluding parishes with no EISB account holders; this makes no difference.

²⁰ In this case I have added a dummy variable valued at 1 if there was a workhouse in the parish.

²¹ A. Eiríksson and C. Ó Gráda, *Estate Records of the Irish Famine* (Dublin: Irish Famine Network, 1995); A. Eiríksson and C. Ó Gráda, 'Bankrupt Landlords and the Irish Famine', in C. Ó Gráda, *Ireland's Great Famine: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2006), pp. 48–62.

²² See, J. Vincent, 'A Political Orchestration of the Irish Famine: County Fermanagh 1847', in M. Silverman and P. H. Gulliver (eds), *Approaching the Past: Historical Anthropology Through Irish Case Studies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), pp. 75–98; C. Kinealy and T. Parkhill, *The Famine in Ulster* (Belfast: Ulster Historical Foundation, 1997); B. Logan, *Ballymena During the Great Famine* (Ballymena: Brian Logan, 2000); G. Mac Atasney, 'This Dreadful Visitation': *The Famine in Lurgan/Portadown* (Dublin: Beyond the Pale, 1997); B. McDonald, 'A Time of Desolation: Clones Poor Law Union 1845–50', *Clogher Record*, XVII, 1 (2000), pp. 3–146; D. McCabe and C. Ó Gráda, 'Destitution, Human Agency, and Relief: Enniskillen Workhouse During the Irish Famine', in M. Denie and S. Farrell (eds), *Power and Popular Culture in Modern Ireland: Essays in Honour of James S. Donnelly, Jr.* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2010), pp. 7–30.

²³ J. Grant, 'The Great Famine and the Poor Law in Ulster: the Rate-in-Aid Issue of 1849', *Irish Historical Studies*, 27, 105 (1990), pp. 30–47.

²⁴ See, T. Guinnane and C. Ó Gráda, 'Workhouse Mortality and the Great Irish Famine', in T. Dyson and C. Ó Gráda, *Famine Demography: Perspectives from the Past and Present* (Oxford:

Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 44–64; C. Ó Gráda, ‘Yardsticks for Workhouse Management During the Great Famine’, in V. Crossman and P. Gray (eds), *Poverty and Welfare in Ireland 1838–1948* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2011), pp. 69–96.

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