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## 5. Some Aspects of Nineteenth-century Irish Emigration

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Cormac Ó Gráda

'For to live poor I could not endure  
like others of my station:  
So to Americay I sailed away  
And left this Irish nation.'

AS the standard works by O'Brien, Redford, and Forbes Adams have shown, large-scale emigration from Ireland began not with the Great Famine, but several decades earlier. (1) However, many central aspects of the pre-Famine outflow require further examination. Not only do we know too little of the socio-economic and regional backgrounds of pre-Famine emigrants: there are no reliable estimates of even total emigration during the years between Waterloo and the Famine. This earlier emigration is significant in its own right: indeed, Cornwall Lewis felt entitled to argue that it was 'perhaps nearly unparalleled in the history of the world.' (2) But further research would also tell us more about the nature of the pre-Famine economy at large. For instance, did pre-Famine emigration tend to diminish or increase inter-regional income differences within Ireland? Elementary textbook economic theory would suggest the former, but the recent developmental experience of many countries implies the latter for early stages of development. More concrete information on the social class background of emigrants would thus determine whether the pre-Famine economy was 'modern' or 'backward' when compared with less developed countries today. (3)

Then there are external effects. However, not until more is known about the nature of the demand for labour in Britain before 1840, and the spread and volume of Irish emigration there, can one assess the effect on British living standards. Certainly there were fears that continued emigration would reduce the population of the three kingdoms to a common 'potato standard'. 'Is anyone sanguine enough', cried Henry Booth, the Liverpool railway entrepreneur, 'to imagine that the independent character of the British labourer .. can be sustained amidst the debasing competition, resulting from the eternal influx of poverty and degradation of Irish peasantry.' (4) Such forebodings implied that Irish labour supply at the time was infinitely elastic in the long run at the going wage: on more realistic assumptions about supply, though, such fears were exaggerated. (5) Still, the importance of Irish immigration as an ingredient in the famous 'standard-of-living debate' has never been properly considered. Besides, what should one make of Dr. E.H. Hunt's recent claim that pre-Famine immigration tended to increase inter-regional wage

\*An earlier version of this paper was given, in Irish, at University College, Galway in May 1976. I am grateful to Gearoid Ó Tuathaigh and Louis M. Cullen for their comments and suggestions.

differentials within Great Britain itself – an interesting idea, but one which is not easy to interpret in terms of economic theory? (6)

Part I of the present chapter draws attention to one previously neglected source on pre-Famine emigration, and assesses its bearing on just a few of the issues raised above. The exodus during and after the Famine is better chronicled and better understood, and its tragic elements are – not surprisingly – still part of oral tradition. But it has been subjected to less theoretical analysis than many other quantitatively less important emigrations. Part II is concerned with an aspect of post-Famine emigration: we discuss there the regional variation in the outflow during the 1850s and 1860s, and question the findings of some recent work on the topic.

## I

In Ireland, unlike Great Britain, none of the census enumerators' manuscripts for the 1861-1891 period survives. Only snippets remain for 1821-1851. All that is left, in usable form, for 1841 is the evidence for some townlands in the neighbourhood of Killeshandra in County Cavan, and for a few pockets elsewhere. The Killeshandra sample is small to begin with – 2274 families, a population of 12313 – and hardly representative of the population of the country as a whole. Nevertheless, the data do contain a number of implications regarding pre-Famine emigration. (7)

The relevant information occurs in Table 2 of the enumerators' Form A. It is there almost by accident and, indeed, was not used by the census commissioners in collated form in their published report. The table contained the following heading: 'Return to Members of this Family now alive, and whose home is in this house, but who are absent on this night of Sunday, the 6th June, 1841.' The Killeshandra manuscript reports record over 320 emigrants to America under this heading, and a substantially lower number to Britain and elsewhere. Though the instruction on the form is clearly stated, it is safe to assume that the vast majority of those listed never returned.

It is possible – if only in a rough-and-ready way – to gauge the social backgrounds of these emigrants by examining the occupation of the head of the household, given elsewhere on the same form. We have divided the emigrants into two categories, 'rich' and 'poor' – relative and arbitrary ones, it is readily admitted. In thus dividing the observations, it was assumed that the emigrating relatives of farmers, teachers, coopers, publicans, shopkeepers, and the like were 'rich', while the relatives of labourers, weavers, spinners, and so on, were designated 'poor'. In some ambiguous instances, incidental information on the enumerators' form is sometimes helpful: thus if the family is recorded as having a servant living in, or as employing labour on an occasional basis, it was consigned to the 'rich' category.

Calculations by this crude schema suggest that 183, or 56 per cent of the recorded emigrants, were from a 'rich' background, while this category accounted for only 43 per cent of the entire population of Killeshandra. The difference is highly significant in the statistical sense. (8) The implication is straightforward: in the Killeshandra area at least, the 'rich' were substantially more mobile outward than the 'poor'. This is to be expected for two reasons. First, the cost of getting

to America presumably prevented many of the 'poor' from leaving. Secondly, insofar as social status was a relevant consideration for prospective emigrants, the 'rich' man's sons and daughters were more likely to resist a labourer's job at home than a farm labourer's family: 'when they went to America and perhaps did much the same work they felt and also their people at home that they had not lowered their social standing.' (9)

Indeed, what is surprising, in view of the wealth of impressionistic comment in the *Poor Inquiry* evidence and elsewhere, is the number of 'poor' recorded as emigrants. However, too much should not be made of this. The area around Killeshandra, while already in decline by 1841, was relatively prosperous when compared with most of Ireland. Thus according to the entry in Lewis' *Topographical Dictionary*, published only a few years prior to the census, '(the) town .. has a cheerful and thriving appearance. The linen manufacture, which is carried on extensively in the neighbourhood, has contributed greatly to its prosperity, and, upon an average, coarse linens are sold in its market to the amount of £1,500 weekly. The market is on Wednesday and is abundantly supplied with provisions ..' (10) Besides, the *Poor Inquiry* assistant commissioners, though they did not conduct an inquiry in Killeshandra itself, report 'emigration to a considerable extent .. among all classes, but especially servant boys, farmers and weavers,' from the adjoining, and similarly circumstanced, baronies of Upper and Lower Loughtee. Few reports from other areas examined by the commissioners make such claims. It seems safe to assume that had the enumerators' returns for any part of, say, Mayo or Clare survived, they would imply a greater contrast in the proportions of the 'rich' and 'poor', as far as emigration was concerned. (11) The returns thus do not necessarily contradict the earlier and contemporary qualitative accounts.

The Killeshandra emigration data also provide some slight insight into a further problem, that of family succession practices. In this instance the information is even skimpier, but one must be grateful for even small mercies. The existing literature on Irish succession practices, it must be said, is rather thin. However, it is sometimes suggested, by way of generalisation, that the Great Famine destroyed the tradition of partible inheritance and subdivision, while the post-Famine decades saw the evolution of a system of impartible inheritance, associated with late marriage and the 'match'. (12) This seems to us an over-simplified scenario: we believe that impartible inheritance was common, if not the norm, in the farming community before the Famine. We have thus sought some preliminary guidance on the following problem from our data: *which* son succeeded his father on the land? With primogeniture, one might expect the younger sons of a man of some property, faced with the prospect of labouring work at home, to be helped emigrate. Neither of the acknowledged experts on past Irish marriage and family patterns, Conrad Arensberg and Kenneth Connell, discusses the issue in detail. Arensberg is content with stating, of a later period, that 'the farmer has full power over his sons,' a point echoed by Connell. Thus, at least by implication, they seem to be arguing for a random inheritance pattern. (13)

The scant Killeshandra data do not support such a picture, for in 35 of the 45 unambiguous cases, the emigrant is the eldest recorded farmer's son, who left one or more younger brothers behind on the farm. This prompts a hypothesis

worth further research elsewhere: male emigration from Irish households was supportive of a system of ultimogeniture. The hypothesis is sociologically appealing. The eldest son may not have relished staying around in a subordinate role, with potential in-law tensions in the event of his being married, so the farm fell by default to others. In America, too, it has been suggested by Easterlin that 'the question of who moved [who left the farm] depended primarily on birth order.' (14) The possibility has been stated recently by Robert Kennedy for Ireland, though without any supporting evidence. (15) But note the following from William Carleton: (16)

Shortly after his marriage his father died and Dennis succeeded him on the farm; for you know that among the peasantry the youngest usually gets the landed property – the elder children being obliged to provide for themselves according to their ability, or otherwise a population would multiply upon a portion of land inadequate to their support.

Carleton was writing of an area within thirty or forty miles of Killeshandra, and in the same decade as the census. Further research should establish how widely the family status hypothesis holds in space and in time.

In passing, we note that the surviving records from Killeshandra also imply that emigration had a levelling effect on the emigrants themselves. Judging from the entries in Form A, the great majority of them, whether 'rich' or 'poor' to begin with, became labourers and house servants in the New World. Male emigrants exceeded females by a ratio of eleven-to-nine in the area, but by definition the data can shed no light on family emigration.

## II

I have suggested elsewhere that Irish emigration statistics for the nineteenth century contain some serious inconsistencies and fail to show the true extent of the post-Famine outflow. In particular, it would seem that emigration to Great Britain was far greater than the figures imply. (17) But where did these 'hidden emigrants' come from? Age-cohort analysis of censal data can shed some light on this question. By definition, a particular base-year age-cohort in county or province  $j$  can be accounted for in a succeeding period in terms of survivors in  $j$ , emigrants, migrants in other counties or provinces, and deaths. Given appropriate assumptions, one could in principle calculate emigration estimates  $\hat{E}$  for all Irish counties and all pre-First World War intercensal periods. (18) In this preliminary exercise, however, we focus attention on the periods 1861-71 and 1901-11 only, and derive estimates for the four provinces. Our approach is based on comparing the survivors in 1871 with the original returns of 1861, and the same again for 1901 and 1911, respectively. The reasons for this choice of period will be seen below. All calculations refer to the 5-30 years base-year age-cohort.

We assume zero net internal migration, zero immigration, and a death rate consistent with the 'disappearance' of five per cent of the base-year age-cohort. These assumptions mean substantial computational economies, for they give us

$$\hat{E} = 0.95 AC_t^J - AC_{t+1}^J$$

where AC = age-cohort,  $\hat{E}$  = estimated emigration, and t = time period. Thus for instance there were 723,662 people in the 5-30 years age-cohort in the province of Leinster in 1861, and 524,123 in the 15-40 years cohort in 1871. It follows that calculated emigration from Leinster in this age-cohort during 1861-71 equalled  $[.95(723,662) - 524,123]$ , or 163,356.

Besides, in our opinion the assumptions are broadly justifiable for the areas and time periods chosen. Immigration was small in proportion to emigration, perhaps three to five per cent, and can be safely ignored in the present context. While there are no age-specific mortality statistics for the 1860s, the earliest available figures imply a death-rate only slightly higher than that assumed above for the 5-30 years age-cohort:

*Deaths per 1,000 per annum in different age-groups: Ireland, 1870-2*

Age	Males	Females
5-9	5.4	5.4
10-14	8.2	3.7
15-19	5.4	5.5
20-24	8.1	6.4
25-34	9.0	8.1

Source: B.R. Mitchell and P. Deane, *Abstract of British Historical Statistics* (Cambridge, 1962), p.44.

Coale and Demeny's tables for a 'western population' like nineteenth-century Ireland's, also seem to imply a somewhat higher age-specific death rate than five per cent, but it should be noted that our assumed figure excludes members of the base-year cohort who died outside the country. (19)

*Table 1 Estimated emigration (5-30 years age-cohort), recorded emigration: the four provinces, 1861-1871 and 1901-11.*

Province	1861-71			1901-11		
	$\hat{E}$	E	E/ $\hat{E}$	$\hat{E}$	E	E/ $\hat{E}$
Leinster	163,356	149,802	0.92	45,060	42,490	0.94
Munster	233,428	307,098	1.32	104,318	112,340	1.08
Connacht	158,520	114,493	0.72	91,017	85,133	0.94
Ulster	242,048	199,718	0.83	110,822	105,982	0.96

Source: For  $\hat{E}$ , see text. For E, emigration for 1861-70 and 1901-10 calculated from *Census of Ireland for the Year 1871* (Dublin, 1875), pp.434-5, and *Census of Ireland for the Year 1911* (Dublin, 1913), pp.292-3.

In the first place, the results reassuringly confirm our earlier argument about under-recording for Ireland as a whole. This is seen when  $\hat{E}$  is adjusted to account for emigration outside the age-cohort. Assuming that four-fifths of all emigration

in 1861-71 and ninety per cent of the total in 1901-11 was in the 5-30 years age-cohort, the data imply under-recording of between ten and fifteen per cent at least in the 1860s, though not in the 1900s. (20)

More interestingly, though, the  $\hat{E}$ 's in Table I also suggest that under-recording was most serious in Connacht in the 1860s: by the 1900s  $E/\hat{E}$  varied far less between provinces. We are thus led, in roundabout fashion, to the conclusion that the 'hidden emigrants' of the early post-Famine period came mainly from the west and north-west of the country. Contrary to what the recorded statistics imply, it is possible that the true emigration rate from those areas exceeded the national average. (21) This finding rather conflicts with the dominant interpretation of post-Famine economic change in the west.

In a series of influential papers published in the early 1960s, Dr. S.H. Cousens, in attempting to explain regional variations in the emigration statistics, argued that the west was too poor and backward to adjust in the expected, orthodox manner. (22) Thus the apparent paradox of low recorded emigration is resolved, at least in part, by appeal to a Myrdal-style argument: 'Lack of movement from the west was a result of a reluctance to leave as well as inability to pay the passage to America .. The poverty of western Ireland still restricted emigration between 1861 and 1881, despite population pressure and therefore the need to reduce it. The result was a lack of regional variation in emigration from Ireland at that time.' (23) Cousens' interpretation has been widely endorsed. (24) It is certainly ingenious and persuasive, but leaves a few basic points unresolved. For instance, if inability to pay prevented emigration even in normal times in the west, then why should the outflow — by Cousens' admission, largely unaided — have tended to peak at times of harvest failure, or more general economic depression? And why, if emigration from the west was lightest and most sporadic, did incomes there rise more than in any other province, not simply in the wake of the Famine, but also in the decades preceding the Land War? Cousens has drawn attention to the peaking of emigration at times of crisis. There is evidence that some landlords did in fact aid destitute tenants to leave in bad years, as part of a land clearance policy. But Cousens does not rely on this debating gambit, and such action can hardly explain more than a small part of the peaking. (25) Thirdly, Cousens' interpretation does not explain why emigration from the west should have 'taken-off', as it were, in the 1870s. Surely, if the west was too backward to begin with, increasing population pressure there — in the absence of sharp domestic demographic adjustment (for which no evidence is adduced) — must have made large-scale emigration a more difficult proposition as the years passed. (26)

It is doubtful whether the factors mentioned can be comfortably accounted for within Cousens' framework. But Table I shows, I believe, that the dichotomy between east and west has been exaggerated in the literature. To be sure, it is possible that emigration overseas from the poorer areas was restricted by the lack of funds or credit; however, to the extent that emigration to Britain was important, the problem posed by the data is a *faux problème*. Evidence on the county origins of emigrants to Britain is thus far lacking. Still, given the prevalence of seasonal migration and the resultant emigration flows, it seems not far-fetched

to argue that substantial numbers of westerners settled permanently in Great Britain, though unrecorded. That the west remained (and remains) poor in comparison with the rest of the country is self-evident: more interestingly, however, it seems that emigration alleviated, rather than exacerbated, this regional inequality from the Famine period on.

## NOTES

1. G. O'Brien, *An Economic History of Ireland from the Union to the Famine* (Dublin, 1921), pp.207-21; A. Redford, *Labour Migration in England 1800-50* (Manchester, 1964), pp.132-70; W.F. Adams, *Ireland and Irish migration to the New World from 1815 to the Famine* (New Haven, 1932).
2. G.C. Lewis, *Report on the State of the Irish Poor in Great Britain*, H.C. 1836 (XXXIV), 429.
3. For elaboration see J.G. Williamson, 'Regional Inequality and the Process of National Development: A Description of the Patterns', *Economic Development and Cultural Change* XIII (1965), pp.3-45.
4. Cited in R.D.C. Black, *Economic Thought and the Irish Question 1817-1870* (Cambridge, 1960), pp.208-9.
5. The actual movement implies a rather low elasticity, given the huge wage differential.
6. E.H. Hunt, *Regional Wage Variations in Great Britain 1850-1914* (Oxford, 1973), pp.286-305. Since the Irish headed for the high wage areas in Great Britain, how, other things being equal, could they have increased the differential within Britain?
7. Public Record Office, Dublin, I A, 45. 27, I A, 45.28. I am grateful to the Deputy Keeper for permission to use this material.
8.  $X^2 = 6.89$ . However,  $X^2_{.99}$  for one degree of freedom = 6.63.
9. Coimisiún Béaloideas Éireann (Irish Folklore Commission), Ms. 1403, p.100.
10. S. Lewis, *A Topographical Dictionary of Ireland* (London, 1837), II, 142.
11. *Poor Inquiry (Ireland)*: Appendix F, H.C. 1836 (XXXIII), 139.
12. For example. K.H. Connell, 'Peasant Marriage in Ireland before the Great Famine', *Past and Present*, no.12 (1957), 76-91; 'Peasant Marriage in Ireland: its Structure and Development since the Famine,' *Economic History Review*, 2nd ser. XIV (1962), 502-23; 'Marriage in Ireland after the Famine: the Diffusion of the Match,' *Journal of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland* XIX (1956), 82-102.
13. C. Arensberg, *The Irish Countryman* (Gloucester, Mass., 1959); K.H. Connell, 'Catholicism and Marriage in the Century after the Famine,' in *Irish Peasant Society* (Oxford, 1968), p.117. Connell is somewhat equivocal – see *op. cit.*, pp.116, 118 – but his main emphasis is on the power of the father to decide on the 'elect', 'his worthiest son', etc.
14. R. Easterlin, 'Population Change and Farm Settlement in the North-eastern United States,' *Journal of Economic History*, XXXVI (1976), 45-75.
15. R.E. Kennedy, *The Irish: Emigration, Marriage and Fertility* (Berkeley, 1973), pp.151-2.
16. W. Carleton, *The Party Fight and Funeral* (Cork, 1973), p.20. Note that in Rosmuc in southern Connemara 'the eldest and other sons usually emigrated .. It was the youngest son who remained at home. All this was going on before 1900.' In Bearna, County Galway, 'the eldest son usually remained at home to inherit the farm – that was the custom .. unless there was a very large family with younger brothers. In that case the eldest brother might emigrate as he would have to wait a very long time until the younger brothers were all gone,

before he could take over the place and marry.' Cf. Irish Folklore Commission, MS. 1409, pp.42, 213. This account refers to a later period, though. The enumerators' reports from the 1901 census, at present being investigated by the author, promise to give us a better understanding of farm succession practices.

17. C.Ó Gráda, 'A Note on Nineteenth-century Irish Emigration Statistics,' *Population Studies*, March 1975, 143-9.

18. For a useful survey of the possibilities see D.E. Baines, 'The use of published census data in migration studies,' in E.A. Wrigley ed. *Nineteenth Century Society: Essays in the Use of Quantitative Data* (Cambridge, 1972).

19. If there was net migration inward, then  $AC_{t+1}^j >$  survivors in  $j$ , implying that  $\hat{E} <$  real emigration. On the other hand, net outward migration would mean  $\hat{E} >$  real emigration. There are no estimates of internal migration in our period, but the census reports provide some clues. The tables below draw together the most relevant information for 1861-71:

#### A. 1861

Province	Number of Persons Born in Province and Living in Ireland	Irish-born Inhabitants of Province
Leinster	1,399,311	1,422,144
Munster	1,502,364	1,495,547
Connacht	913,052	907,609
Ulster	1,905,836	1,895,263
Total	5,720,563	5,720,563

#### B. 1871

Leinster	1,266,010	1,294,046
Munster	1,375,600	1,367,025
Connacht	849,246	839,698
Ulster	1,815,901	1,805,788
Total	5,306,757	5,306,757

In 1861 and 1871 only Leinster was a net gainer from internal migration. However, the figures imply very small gains and losses, when compared with the  $\hat{E}$ 's in Table I. While internal migration was an important factor in several counties (e.g. Donegal, Cork, Dublin, Antrim) most internal migration at this time would appear to have been intra-provincial. Our use of  $AC_{t+1}^j$  may thus seem reasonable for analysis at provincial level, but the short-cut would be invalid for some county-level analysis. Thus for instance its use gives us an  $E/\hat{E}$  of 3.77 for Antrim and 0.32 for Donegal in 1861-71.

On the assumption about death-rates we consulted A. Coale and P. Demeny, *Regional Model Life Tables and Stable Populations* (Princeton, 1966), pp.44-5, 142-3. Taking a death rate of 22 per thousand for the population as a whole implies a death rate of slightly over seven per thousand for the 5-30 years age-cohort. Twenty-two per thousand was considered 'normal' for mid-century by S.H. Cousens, 'Regional Death-rates in Ireland during the Great Famine, 1846 to 1851,' *Transactions of the British Institute of Geographers*, XXVIII (1960), 62.

20. *Commission on Emigration ...*, Table 91, p.122.

21. According to the 1871 Census Report (p.435) the average emigration rate for the whole of Ireland during the 1850s and 1860s was 17.5 per thousand per annum. However, the reported Connacht annual average was only 13.8 per thousand, while Munster's was 24.5 per thousand. The contrast with age-cohort

survival ratios for 1861-1871 is notable:

Leinster	: 0.72
Munster	: 0.64
Connacht	: 0.61
Ulster	: 0.70

22. Most relevant are S.H. Cousens, 'Emigration and Demographic Change in Ireland, 1851-61,' *Econ. Hist. Rev.*, 2nd ser. XIV (1962), 275-88; 'The Regional Variation in Population Changes in Ireland, 1861-1881,' *ibid.*, XVII (1864-5), 302-21.

23. S.H. Cousens, 'The Regional Variation ..,' p.313.

24. For a sampling see J.S. Donnelly, *The Land and the People of Nineteenth - Century Cork* (London, 1975), pp.230-1; B.M. Walsh, 'Marriage Rates and Population Pressure in Ireland, 1871 and 1911,' *Econ. Hist. Rev.*, 2nd ser. (XXIII) (1970); C. Ó Gráda, 'Seasonal Migration and Post-Famine Adjustment in the West of Ireland,' *Studia Hibernica*, no.13 (1973), 48-76.

25. For regional wage trends, see A.L. Bowley, 'The Statistics of Wages in the United Kingdom during the last hundred years: Agricultural Wages (Ireland),' *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, LXII (1899), 400-3. Bowley's wage data suggest that nominal agricultural wages rose by almost ninety per cent in Connacht between 1850 and 1870, and by about sixty per cent nationally.

26. Curiously enough, some of Cousens' ideas are presaged in L. Paul-Dubois' *Contemporary Ireland* (Dublin, 1908), pp.356-7. Paul-Dubois argued:

To become an emigrant, one must first save up the price of a ticket and also the small amount of capital required of intending immigrants into America. Besides which, morally speaking, a man must have risen a degree or two above his neighbours before he feels a desire to emigrate. He must have emerged from the doubt and despair around him, and have become imbued with the wish to try his fortune. Thus even at the present day, certain districts of the extreme west, some of the most poverty-stricken in Ireland, are those from which there is least emigration. In the County of Kerry, for instance, from the districts of Dingle and Cahirciveen, there is hardly any outflow of population, whereas there is a very high average of emigrants from Kenmare and Killarney, which are more 'civilised'.

However, the census figures suggest that Paul-Dubois' claim is a non-starter. Age-cohort disappearance in the 5-30 years group was almost 39 per cent in the Dingle and Cahirciveen P.L.U.s in 1901-11, while the loss in Kenmare-Killarney was only 32 per cent.