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Emigration, Immigration and Migration in Nineteenth-Century Britain

Amy J. Lloyd

University of Cambridge

Various source media, British Library Newspapers



From moving down the street, across the country or overseas, migration was a common experience in Britain during the nineteenth century—not only for native Britons, but also for substantial numbers of immigrants who chose to make their homes in Britain. Communities were never completely static, with people moving in and out—or simply around. While much of the time this movement generated little comment, at other times it became a topic of heated debate, particularly in the newspaper press—from hostility to increasing immigration into Britain from Ireland or Eastern Europe, to debate over the wisdom and utility of high rates of emigration from Britain.

Internal Migration

During the nineteenth century, there was a high rate of internal migration in Britain. The vast majority of moves took place over short distances, with people and families remaining rooted in particular localities over generations. However, while not making up the bulk of all internal migration, it was net movement from the countryside to Britain's fast-growing urban areas that was one of the most important demographic features of this period. Indeed, it has been estimated that 40 percent of the demographic growth of urban Britain during the nineteenth century was due to this movement; there was also an absolute decline in the population of Britain's agricultural areas during the second half of the nineteenth century, losing more than four million people between 1841 and 1911 through internal migration. When choosing to move to an urban area, most rural migrants simply moved to the nearest town. However, some moved to a number of heavy industrial areas and large towns (usually choosing the closest one), with London, Liverpool, Leeds,

Birmingham, Manchester, Glasgow and the coalfields having substantial net gains. London was the most popular destination, gaining 1.25 million migrants (net of returns) between 1841 and 1911. Offering the greatest range of employment opportunities, it attracted migrants from all over Britain and was the only city that played a major role in the national migration system. During the late nineteenth century, however, out-migration from the countryside started to slow, and trends of counter-urbanisation and suburbanisation started to develop.

As a whole, most migration was usually done in family groups. However, it was young, single men and women who more often undertook the longer distance moves. The most common reason for migration was to obtain access to better work opportunities, moving to places where economic gains were anticipated; indeed, migration was an important part of the pattern of economic growth in Britain during this period, as migrants provided much-needed labour in certain areas and industries. However, not all migration was work-related. For example, women often migrated upon marriage, and transiency seems to have been quite common, with high rates of population turnover within towns (a number of factors contributed to these unstable residence patterns, including minutely variegated rented housing markets, many people having a small margin between their income and subsistence needs, and the avoidance of creditors and landlords).

Immigration

During the nineteenth century and earlier, Britain had an open-door policy towards immigration; it was not until 1905 that any controls were put in place to limit the entry of immigrants into Britain. However, while there was an open door, immigrants were not always warmly welcomed. Blanket hostility to immigration, though, was uncommon; instead, interactions were complex, moulded by the past, as well as the immediate present.

The largest group of immigrants who settled in Britain during the nineteenth century was the Irish. Irish immigration into Britain quickened after 1815, but it was during the 1840s and 1850s that it dramatically swelled as a result of the potato famine in Ireland (1845-51). By 1861 the Irish-born population in England and Wales had risen to 602,000 (3 percent of the population) and to 204,000 in Scotland (7 percent). Many initially settled in Britain's major towns and cities—where labour demand was high—and their impact there was strongly felt (in 1851 Irish immigrants formed 22 percent of Liverpool's population, 19 percent of Dundee's and 18 percent of Glasgow's). Mostly working at the bottom end of the labour market in semi- and unskilled labour, they generally lived in areas of cheap rent that often suffered from overcrowding and poor sanitary conditions; many, however, did not live in ghettos, although distinct and cohesive Irish communities did develop in some areas. The influx of these poor, mostly Catholic immigrants attracted much criticism and anti-Catholic hostility, and there were periodic outbreaks of violence between the native working class and Irish immigrants. The Irish were

criticised for depressing wages, causing overcrowding in areas of working-class housing, and demoralising society through their drunkenness and criminality. These criticisms were often based on pre-existing stereotypes of the Irish, who were often branded as being uncivilised, ignorant, filthy, immoral, violent, drunken and priest-ridden. Irish immigration into Britain—and hostility to it—persisted long after the famine, although falling into decline by the late nineteenth century.

Another major source of immigrants was continental Europe. For much of the nineteenth century, Germans were the second largest group of immigrants in Britain after the Irish, with 33,000 living in England and Wales in 1871. However, after 1880, large numbers of Jewish immigrants fleeing anti-Semitism, economic changes and political repression in Russia and Eastern Europe started immigrating to Britain and, by the 1890s, had surpassed the German community in size. Between 120,000 and 150,000 settled in Britain in the period leading up to the First World War, particularly in east London (in 1901 they formed almost one-third of the population of Whitechapel), Manchester and Leeds. There was much hostility to this new immigration; by the turn of the century, many politicians, journalists and social reformers were characterising Jews as physically and morally enfeebled, and they were blamed for introducing sweated labour into the cabinet-making and clothing trades in the East End of London and for ousting native Britons from the housing and labour markets. This eventually led to the passage in 1905 of the Aliens Act which, for the first time, imposed restrictions on immigration, requiring immigrants to show that they could support both themselves and their

dependents and giving power to authorities to expel immigrants who were criminals, mentally ill or likely to become a public charge.

Other immigrant groups of note (albeit of small sizes) that settled and lived in Britain during the nineteenth century included Italians and Lithuanians (coming particularly during the late nineteenth century), Americans and people from Britain's white settler colonies, and small groups of Chinese, Africans and people from the East and West Indies.

Emigration

While the number of immigrants entering Britain during the nineteenth century was not insignificant, during every decade after the 1830s, emigration from Britain vastly exceeded immigration. Between 1815 and 1914, approximately ten million people emigrated from Britain—about 20 percent of all European emigrants. Indeed, during this period, Britain had one of the highest emigration rates in Europe, superseded only by Ireland, Norway and Italy.

Emigration rates fluctuated greatly, although there was, in general, a strong upwards trend throughout the century and until the First World War, when the numbers emigrating fell dramatically. Emigration was at its highest during the 1900s and early 1910s, when as many as 8.7 per thousand in England and Wales, and 18.7 per thousand in Scotland, emigrated. As these figures indicate, rates of emigration were generally higher in Scotland than in England and Wales

throughout the century, although in absolute numbers the English were the largest group. The vast majority—more than half—of British emigrants settled in the United States of America, with most of the rest going to Australia and Canada, and smaller numbers settling in New Zealand and South Africa. Smaller numbers still went to the East and West Indies, South America and continental Europe. After 1900, the flow of British emigrants was dramatically redirected from the USA to Australia and particularly Canada.

During the first half of the nineteenth century, many British emigrants were farmers, agricultural labourers or skilled artisans and craftsmen from traditional trades; many emigrated in family groups and were from rural areas. This pattern began to change in the second half of the nineteenth century, when many emigrants started coming from urban areas, and young, single, male labourers and agricultural workers predominated. Moreover, with fast and comparatively cheap steamship passages becoming prevalent during the late nineteenth century, many of these emigrants ended up returning to Britain (a figure of 40 percent has been estimated for the period 1861-1900). Thus, during the nineteenth century, the composition of emigration from Britain transformed greatly, turning from the movement of families into labour migration.

Emigration during the nineteenth century was primarily propelled by relative wages and employment rates in Britain and in the main 'receiving' countries, with emigrants being enticed by the prospect of a higher income and better life abroad. However, when deciding whether to emigrate and where to emigrate to,

economic factors were one among many factors that people had to think about, with other important considerations including the presence of friends and family overseas and the costs of emigrating. Most emigrants during the nineteenth century travelled without assistance. It has been estimated that between 1815 and 1914 fewer than 10 percent of emigrants had their travel subsidized by private, charitable or government emigration schemes. Assisted passages, however, were more important in the cases of distant (and thus costly to get to) Australia and New Zealand, which offered programs of free, assisted and nominated passages at various times throughout the nineteenth century.

While for much of the century emigration was a gradual and silent seepage, at other times it became an issue of political and public discussion and debate. Sometimes emigration was promoted as the answer to problems such as overpopulation and unemployment. During the early nineteenth century, Malthusian ideas took hold and there was anxiety over Britain's rapidly rising population. Emigration came to be seen as a safety valve through which Britain could rid itself of its redundant and potentially dangerous surplus population; the British government was even persuaded to institute several limited programs of assisted emigration during the 1810s and 1820s. During the late 1860s and again during the 1880s, economic depression elicited noisy pressure groups calling for state-assisted emigration to relieve problems of unemployment; in a time of rising imperial sentiment, it was also argued that this emigration would serve to benefit and strengthen Britain's under-populated colonies and dominions. However, the British government had by

now adopted a non-interventionist stance towards emigration, and its only concessions were an office to provide information regarding emigration and a limited scheme to help some Hebridean crofting families relocate to Canada. Debate and discussion regarding emigration was also stimulated by periods of high emigration such as the 1880s. During these years, with so many people leaving Britain to seek better opportunities abroad and pressure groups noisily advocating state-assisted emigration, emigration became a major topic of interest. This trend that can particularly be seen in newspapers and periodicals, many of which carried articles, editorials, letters to the editor and advertisements regarding emigration—offering advice and information to those readers thinking of emigrating, and debating the wisdom of high emigration and state-assisted emigration.

Conclusion

While migration was usually a quiet and personal matter that attracted little national comment or debate, it still left traces that historians can today examine and study. One of these traces can be found in the newspaper press. From editorials and news generated during periods of intense debate and anxiety over "undesirable" immigration, to the many advertisements that appeared in newspapers regarding cheap passages to the USA or assistance programs to Australia, newspapers have proved to be an invaluable source for historians seeking to study various aspects of nineteenth-century British migration.

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