Some Features of Irish Emigration

by

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Emigration from Ireland has always presented certain special features that differentiate it from emigration from the other principal countries of emigration. In particular its economic and demographic importance and its sex composition have been exceptional. These features are still of first importance in the movement of migrants from the country and raise difficult problems in the planning of economic policy. The following article by a well-known Irish writer and lecturer on economic subjects analyses the chief characteristics of the migratory movement from Ireland and examines ways in which the capacity of the country to maintain its population at a rising standard of living may be strengthened.

BACKGROUND

IN Ireland emigration has for long been regarded as something more than an economic phenomenon. Elsewhere it has been possible to regard an outward movement of population with approval or, at the least, without hostility. In some countries emigration has been regarded as a sign of enterprise. In others it has been welcomed as a useful outlet for a population increasing more rapidly than its means of subsistence. In such circumstances it has been possible to accept emigration as only one of a number of economic factors that help to determine the course and pace of economic development—one that can be assessed as unemotionally as a fall in the death rate.

For a variety of reasons such detachment has rarely been achieved in any study of Irish emigration. Non-economic considerations have been allowed full play and as a result the approach to the causes and consequences of emigration has been emotional rather than scientific. Such an approach, however regrettable, can be understood when some of the peculiar characteristics of Irish emigration are recalled. The volume of emigration alone does not

account for this feeling. In Germany and Italy, where emigration has been still greater, there does not appear to have been any deep feeling that the process involved a loss to the country. The difference in attitude may lie in the fact that Irish emigration has caused a fall in population, has thus exercised a far more powerful influence on the Irish economy than has been the case in any other of the great emigrating peoples.

The principal statistics can be stated briefly. At the census of 1841 the population living in the area that now forms the Republic of Ireland was 6,529,000. Earlier enumerations are unreliable, but it is clear that the population had increased steadily since the middle decades of the eighteenth century. In the period before 1841 there was a substantial emigration, which, however, fell far short of the natural increase of population. In 1845 and succeeding years there was a failure of the potato crop, on which the majority of the community relied for subsistence. A considerable famine ensued, accompanied by pestilence. By the end of the 1840s both hunger and disease had been alleviated, but emigration had begun on a scale hitherto unknown. At the census of 1851 the population was 5,112,000. Twenty years later it had fallen to 4,053,000. The demographic importance of emigration since then is shown in the following table.

TABLE I. POPULATION CHANGES IN IRELAND, 1871-1951

(Thousands)

Year	Interval	Population	Natural increase	Net emigration	Decrease (−) or increase (+) of population
1881 . . .	1871-1881	3,870	318	501	−183
1891 . . .	1881-1891	3,469	196	597	−401
1901 . . .	1891-1901	3,222	149	396	−247
1911 . . .	1901-1911	3,140	179	261	− 82
1926 . . .	1911-1926	2,972	237	405	−168
1936 . . .	1926-1936	2,968	163	166	− 3
1946 . . .	1936-1946	2,955	174	187	− 13
1951 . . .	1946-1951	2,960	125	120	+ 5

Primarily the causes that have operated to produce these results were (and are) the same that have been experienced elsewhere in Europe. Nineteenth century Ireland was a country of small farmers and labourers who lived at a level never far above subsistence. They were ready to leave the land in search of higher wages and better conditions of work. The Irish emigration was one incident in the general process by which European peoples moved from the countryside to the town and from agriculture to industry.

However, in Ireland there were further factors at work. The second half of the nineteenth century witnessed a struggle between the occupiers of the soil and their landlords. This struggle was ended by legislation which, from 1885 onwards, enabled the occupier to buy his holding from the landlord. The improvement of agricultural technique was, however, delayed by disputes over land tenure. This delay joined with factors as diverse as climate and the course of agricultural prices to determine the type of agriculture, which has remained substantially unaltered since the last century. It is a pattern in which the raising of livestock has enjoyed supremacy while the dairying industry has never been developed to the extent achieved in other countries of north-western Europe. To the present day Irish agriculture is largely seasonal and pastoral.

Thus there has been a degree of underemployment in agriculture and, in the nineteenth century as today, a constant flow of population from the land. This movement could not be absorbed within the Irish economy, on account of the lack of industrialisation. It thus came about that the migration known in other countries became emigration in Ireland; the movement of population was from the Irish countryside to the cities of North America.

This emigration soon developed characteristics which tended to make it self-perpetuating. Irish economists have largely agreed to classify the causes of emigration under the summary headings of "push" and "pull". The first is taken to represent those causes that may force a person to emigrate, the loss of his farm-holding or the extremes of hunger or poverty. By the second is meant all those influences which persuade a person that, whatever may be the prospects at home, a better standard of living may be obtained elsewhere. Very generally, it may be said that the forces of "push" had lost most of their strength by the end of the nineteenth century. The former dependence on the potato crop had disappeared. With the settlement of the struggle over land tenure, evictions became less frequent and had virtually ended by the close of the century. Thus the forces within the Irish economy that had made for emigration were greatly weakened.

But the forces of "pull" had developed in the 50 years after the famine of the 1840s. The heavy emigration of those post-famine years had created Irish communities in the cities of the United States. Their members had succeeded in winning a degree of prosperity that could not have been hoped for at home. They kept in touch with their relatives in Ireland; they urged that their brothers and sisters, or nieces and nephews, should come out to join them. They saved from their wages and sent the passage money home so that their relatives might come out. Thus emerged two characteristic features of Irish emigration—a minimum of risk

and a minimum of hardship. Emigrants had their passage paid; they were going to join relatives and friends who would meet them and find work for them. No barrier of language or unfamiliar custom existed to discourage them. In their turn they, too, would save money and send it home so that another member of the family might join them. Thus emigration became a process that fed upon itself and gathered fresh strength as time went on. To a boy or girl in the Irish countryside emigration presented fewer difficulties and less changes of habit than a search for work in Dublin or Belfast, which, although Irish cities, were less familiar than New York or Boston. The Irish people were highly mobile as regards the rest of the world but highly immobile as regards their own country, and this lack of economic integration is not yet repaired. More will be said on this subject later, but attention may be drawn here to two aspects of this form of emigration.

In the first place it will be seen that emigration of this kind would not necessarily be ended by an improvement in conditions in Ireland. These might improve; but it was highly unlikely that they would improve as quickly and as greatly as conditions elsewhere. There would always be more jobs and higher wages in the United States than in Ireland. Thus emigration transcended political influences. It follows that emigration would not necessarily be ended by domestic economic policy alone. A change of outlook would also be needed. But it was perhaps natural that popular thought should lag behind the event and, even today, there is a disposition to regard emigration as the result of a failure of the State to devise appropriate economic policies.

The second point goes deeper. There is a further lack of integration in popular thought. As has been said, emigration is still popularly regarded as a national weakness. But in this matter there is a great difference between the outlook of the community and that of the individuals who compose it. As individuals, people will still congratulate themselves if they or their children obtain good employment abroad; they acquiesce personally in what they disapprove of as a community. The contradiction of thought is evident. It is also comprehensible; but it does nothing to aid clearer thinking on the issues involved.

Characteristics of Irish Emigration

We may now turn to examine some of the salient characteristics of Irish emigration. It is well known that between the 1840s and the 1920s it was directed principally to the United States. Since then, in the period with which we are more immediately concerned,

it has been directed mainly to Great Britain. Despite these changes it has largely preserved the same characteristics. Such preservation has been all the easier on account of the virtual immunity of Irish emigration from regulation either in the country of arrival or in Ireland itself.

There were no restrictions on European immigration into the United States until 1921, when quotas were established by legislation. The quota for the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland was fixed at 77,342. An Act of 1924 provided a quota of 28,567 for what was then the Irish Free State and is now the Republic of Ireland. In 1929 the quota was reduced to 17,853 and in 1930 general restrictions were imposed on the entry of persons without capital or the promise of secure employment. Even before 1929, however, the Irish quota was not filled, and the depression caused many emigrants to return to Ireland. In the 1930s emigration to the United States was negligible and has not been revived on any significant scale since the war. The movement of population is now directed to Great Britain.

Until 1921 the area now comprised in the Republic formed part of the United Kingdom. There was therefore no restriction whatsoever on the movement of persons between Ireland and Great Britain until 1939. In that year British wartime regulations made it necessary for the Irish Government to furnish its nationals with travel permit cards, which were visaed by the British authorities. The use of these cards and of other documents of identity was gradually discontinued during the years after 1945 and was finally abolished in April 1952. Since then, the movement of Irish nationals to Great Britain has been as free as it was before 1939 and, as then, no document of identity is required. The establishment of the Republic and its departure from the Commonwealth in 1949 did not affect this freedom.

Restrictions on emigration imposed by the Irish Government were in operation between 1942 and 1952, though in practice they were waived long before the latter date. The object of these restrictions was to retain within the State an adequate supply of labour for essential purposes, particularly the production of food and fuel.

Accordingly, between 1942 and 1945 the issue of travel permits was withheld from men (other than seasonal migrants) who were resident in rural districts and experienced in agriculture and the production of turf. There was no restriction on the issue of travel permits to professional workers or to migratory workers. These measures were abandoned for most practical purposes soon after the end of the war.

It may well be that the quite exceptional freedom of the Irish

people to seek a living abroad is best illustrated by this summary account of the short-lived restrictions that have been placed upon it. The Irish people are situated between two great labour markets with which they have close historical and cultural ties ; in such circumstances emigration is as easy and free from obstacles as it well could be.

From time to time suggestions have been made that the Irish Government should impose some restriction on emigration. These proposals have rarely been well thought out. They have never received a sympathetic reception from public opinion, on account of a deep feeling that restrictions of any kind, except in the special circumstances of wartime, would be a thoroughly undesirable extension of state control. It is doubtful if such restrictions would be defensible against a charge that they infringed the constitutional rights of the individual ; it is fairly certain that they would be politically impracticable. However greatly emigration may be deplored, there seems to be no weakening of the traditional feeling that people should be free to find work where they wish. Thus, the attempts that have been made to offset and reduce emigration have taken the indirect approach of measures designed to expand the economic development of the country.

Some details of the emigration returns will now be examined. Female emigrants have usually outnumbered male emigrants. This was first noted at an early stage in the post-famine emigration and remained true throughout the following decades. In 1920 United States immigration returns showed that for every 100 female immigrants from Ireland there were 78 males. In the case of all other countries except Canada the contrary has been true. A majority of males emigrated during the war years, but the census of 1951 showed that 1,397 women emigrated for every 1,000 men during the five-year period 1946-51. The preponderance of women emigrants is usually explained by the comparative lack of opportunities for female employment in Ireland, though employment opportunities have increased in the last 30 years.

A second point to be noted is that Irish emigration has for long been a movement of the young. In the middle years of the nineteenth century there was a wider spread over the age groups, representing the emigration of entire families. That has been the exception rather than the rule for many years now. The development may be seen by comparing the age groups of emigrants to the United States with the age grouping of emigrants to Great Britain in a more recent period (tables II and III).

These figures may also reflect the consequences of emigration assisted by relatives who have already settled abroad. It may be added that generally women appear to emigrate at an earlier age

than men. In recent years the age of emigration seems to have fallen for both sexes, probably because emigration to Great Britain does not involve so complete a severance of family ties as was the case with emigration to the United States. One further point of some demographic importance may be noted here : this emigration of young people is largely, though not completely, the movement

TABLE II. AGE DISTRIBUTION OF EMIGRANTS FROM IRELAND TO THE UNITED STATES, 1880 AND 1920

(Percentages)

Age	1880	1920
Under 15	14.3	8.5
15-24	54.4	62.0
25-44	27.3	26.1
45 and over	4.0	3.4

TABLE III. AGE DISTRIBUTION OF EMIGRANTS FROM IRELAND TO GREAT BRITAIN, 1945-51

(Percentages)

Age	Males	Females
16-19	12.6	31.1
20-24	33.4	37.9
25-29	19.9	14.8
30-34	12.1	6.8
35 and over	22.0	9.4

of sons and daughters or younger brothers and sisters from the family holding. The holding itself has been maintained by those who remain. Thus emigration has not in recent times been accompanied by any redistribution of land on a large scale. The home remains, to be a source of further emigrants in the next generation. Emigration, in other words, is not merely a movement of people from uneconomic holdings. If it were so, it would come to an end sooner or later when the distribution of land had been brought nearer to an economic basis. In fact, it is a movement of the younger members of families from one generation to another ; it is almost self-perpetuating in so far as it is a movement of the rural population.

This point is further emphasised by an examination of the origin of emigrants. Statistics derived from the issue of travel permits between 1943 and 1949 inclusive show that 70 per cent. of h e recipients of permits came from rural areas, 20 per cent. from

urban areas other than Dublin and 10 per cent. from Dublin. It is possible that the proportions shown for Dublin and other urban areas in this period were rather greater than they would have been in normal conditions because the war, by cutting off supplies of raw materials, interrupted industrial production and employment. It is certain that the bulk of emigration has been from the rural areas.

This is shown in another way by the analysis of emigrants overseas according to occupation. The proportions between 1924 and 1939 are shown in table IV.

TABLE IV. DISTRIBUTION OF EMIGRANTS BY OCCUPATION, 1924-39

(Percentages)

Males		Females	
Occupational group	Per cent.	Occupational group	Per cent.
Labourers (agricultural, etc.)	68.4	Domestic service	64.25
Skilled workers	6.7	Clothing trades	0.8
Transport workers	2.0	Commerce, insurance, etc.	2.8
Professional and independent workers	6.7	Professional	2.9
		Wife or housewife	9.8
Other occupations	3.1	Other occupations	8.2
Under 18 years of age	9.1	Under 18 years of age	16.3

Broadly speaking the same position appears from the returns of travel permits issued between 1940 and 1949, which show that 73 per cent. of the men were agricultural or unskilled labourers and 72 per cent. of the women were engaged in domestic service or nursing.

TABLE V. DESTINATION OF IRISH EMIGRANTS, 1924-38

Period	No. of emigrants to Great Britain	No. of overseas emigrants
1924-28	51,200	131,100
1929-33	50,200	40,000
1934-38	127,400	6,300

The statistics quoted in table IV relate to two different forms of emigration. In 1924 emigration was still predominantly to the United States, but long before 1939 it had changed course. The turn is shown in table V.

In all, it is estimated that between 1841 and 1925 roughly 4¾ million persons emigrated from Ireland to the United States, 670,000 to Canada and 370,000 to Australia. The number of persons of Irish birth living outside the country is still amazingly great, if markedly less than was the case 50 to 60 years ago (table VI).

TABLE VI. DISTRIBUTION OF IRISH-BORN (32 COUNTIES) PERSONS

(Thousands)

Year	United States	Canada	Australia	United Kingdom	Total population of Ireland
1841	*	122	*	415	8,175
1891	1,872	149	227	653	4,705
1931	924	108	79	565	4,184 [1]
1951	678	86	*	722	4,332

An asterisk indicates that figures are not available.

[1] Estimated.

To put the matter in another way, there are now more persons of Irish birth in Great Britain than in the United States, whereas in 1891 the number was only about one-third of the number in the United States.

A further point arises here. Irish emigration to the United States was permanent. The Irish emigrant remained in the United States and rarely returned with his savings to settle in his native land. The separation was final. The more recent emigration to Great Britain is another matter. The ease of travel between the two countries facilitates frequent visits home. It also makes possible a return of emigrants in great numbers if economic conditions in Great Britain should prove unfavourable to employment. In some years since the war a return of workers (to take up employment in building schemes) has been noted. The movement of population is still, of course, outward ; but an emigrant's decision to return is obviously much easier to take when the journey is only a matter of hours.

Effects of the Economic Development of Ireland

It has already been noted that state policy has been directed to reducing emigration by developing the economic resources of the country. This has occurred principally in the field of industrialisation and the establishment of public utilities. It is only natural that attention should have been directed to industrial development.

In the nineteenth century the failure to retain population was generally attributed to the lack of industries. Thus, in the movement to regain self-government, the power to impose protective duties was regarded as one of the most important attributes of sovereignty.

Industrial development, however, has necessarily been influenced by the comparative dearth of native raw materials for industry. Minerals are scarce and difficult to mine, so that, where they exist they cannot be profitably developed in periods of stable prices. In general, therefore, the new industries are dependent on the importation of raw materials. As will be seen, their development has certainly increased the amount of industrial employment. This, however, has increased rather than diminished the need to import, since a higher standard of living and increased purchasing power has created a growing demand for goods which, in one form or another, must be brought in from abroad. The importance of this rise in imports is increased by the fact that the volume of Irish exports has not increased in the same proportion. As the greater part of industrial development is composed of tariff-protected production, there is a constant danger that the level of costs will rise to a point at which the exporting trades will be priced out of their markets. Already some forms of export that were flourishing 20 years ago are unable to sell abroad at a competitive price. Attempts to maintain or increase industrial employment through higher tariffs—a temptation that is even greater in Ireland than elsewhere—only intensify this danger. There is also the danger that both capital and labour will move away from forms of production that are of greater economic importance even if their capacity to give employment is not so obvious. The shift in employment is already evident.

In table VII the stability of the total of persons employed is as significant as the trend of the changes in the various sectors of production. The movement is out of agriculture into industry and services and from the countryside to the city. This is reflected also in the fact that between 1926 and 1951 there has been a rapid change in the balance of the town and rural populations. In 1926 the town population (i.e., the population living in towns of not less than 1,500) was 944,000; by 1951 it had increased to 1,228,000, an increase of 30 per cent. In the same period the rural population fell from 2,028,000 to 1,733,000, a decrease of 15 per cent. The town population today is greater than in 1841, although the total population is rather less than half of what it then was. The expansion has occurred for the greater part in Dublin; the capital and its surroundings now contain over one-fifth of the total population and very nearly one-half of the total town population.

TABLE VII. OCCUPATIONAL DISTRIBUTION OF PERSONS AT WORK IN IRELAND, 1926-51

(Thousands)

Occupation	1926	1936	1946	1951	Percentage increase (+) or decrease (−), 1926-51
Agriculture	647	609	572	500	−22.7
Industry	164	206	212	268	+63.4
Commerce, finance	114	127	128	144	+26.3
Personal service	127	122	113	104	−18.1
Administration, defence	76	78	89	93	+22.4
Professions	39	44	51	55	+41.0
Transport, etc.	39	38	43	47	+20.5
Other	14	11	20	21	+50.0
Total	1,220	1,235	1,228	1,232	+ 1.0

At the same time the decline in the rural population appears to be proceeding at an accelerated pace. The number of males engaged in agriculture has been falling steadily. In 1941 the total was 556,000; in 1952 it was 441,000. But the total decrease in the five-year period 1941-46 was 36,000 and in the subsequent five years 67,000. This fall in manpower seems to be spread all over the country and to be as notable in areas of fertile land as in areas of poor land. The reduction also seems to affect members of farmers' families as well as employees. It is notable, however, that as yet the number of holdings has not been seriously affected. There has been a fall in the number of very small holdings of 15 acres or less, but there is no sign of a significant change in the total. It seems that farmers' relatives are emigrating in greater proportions than was the case between the wars.

In itself this movement is merely an Irish counterpart of the general trend away from agriculture and rural areas that is common to most countries. But in Irish circumstances it is of peculiar importance. Elsewhere, if the generalisation may be risked, the movement of population away from the land has not impeded an expansion of agricultural production. In Ireland, on the other hand, the volume of gross output has only now regained the level of 1938. Taking 1938-39 as a base of 100, the index number of gross output was 95.2 in 1948 and 100.5 in 1952. It may be added that the consensus of opinion appears to be that the output of Irish agriculture has varied very little in the last 50 years.

This is all the more important because of the overwhelming importance of agriculture to the export trade, which may be illustrated by an analysis of the main groups of exports in 1952 according to value. Livestock accounted for 32 per cent. of the value of exports, foodstuffs for 45 per cent., drink and tobacco for 6 per cent. and various raw materials and manufactured goods for 13 per cent. The balance was made up by transactions through the parcel post. These figures are taken for a year that was typical of normal trading, apart, perhaps, from a fall in the export of livestock and an increase in the export of meat. But the balance between agricultural and non-agricultural exports in 1952 was representative of the general composition of Irish trading.

These figures may illustrate the limitations of policies directed to the retention of population by the development of industry and services. As in other primary producing countries, the demand for imports is increasing and will continue to increase with further development, while the capacity to export is weakened. In Ireland, as elsewhere, two trends are apparent. The exportable surplus is diminished by increased domestic consumption, while competitive capacity is affected by rising costs. There has perhaps been too great attention paid to the more obvious sources of employment in industry and services, and there has been too little realisation that such employment depends in the last resort on the earning power of agriculture.

On the other hand the very fact that agricultural output has remained stable while the rural population has declined seems to suggest that there has been, and still is, a considerable degree of underemployment in agriculture. If that is conceded, the presumption appears to be that the fall in the rural population will continue and that the present sources of unbalance in the economy will persist. In addition, it would appear that emigration will continue, since expansion in industries and services has not been (even in the favourable circumstances of the last 25 years) sufficient to absorb the numbers leaving agriculture.

Other Factors

There are, however, some developments which, in the long run, may affect these conclusions. In the first place, Irish agriculture has been carried out by family labour in the past. It was a form of production that possessed some obvious advantages—above all, that it could survive in times of low prices when forms of husbandry that depended on paid labour would fail. But it could not be ranked as an efficient form of production. The virtual disappearance

of farmers' relatives may bring about circumstances in which agriculture may be forced into better techniques.

In the second place, the family farm in the past was comparatively self-contained. The rural population today is reaching out for better material standards of living; in order to achieve them it must pass from a subsistence to an exchange economy. When there is the desire to buy more things there will be an obligation to produce and sell more. It may be that increased consumption will in the long run bring increased production.

In the third place recent years have witnessed a gratifying increase in the processing of various forms of agricultural produce, in several of which there is now a lucrative export trade. Of these, the trade in dressed meat is the most recent and, potentially, is of the greatest importance. Other industries, such as the manufacture of chocolate crumb and various forms of confectionery, have expanded greatly since the war. Progress of this kind will possess the added advantage of introducing a degree of industrialisation based on raw materials that are available within the economy, and the conflicting interests of industry and agriculture of the last quarter-century may be reconciled.

Conclusion

It seems that it is along such lines that the capacity of the country to maintain its population at a rising standard of living may be strengthened. But it will be apparent that this does not imply that emigration will end, or even be substantially reduced. It has been remarked that the forces of "pull" have predominated in recent decades; that emigrants have been attracted by the comparatively higher standards of living that are obtainable in the United States or Great Britain. It must be confessed that there is no sign that these tendencies have been weakened; indeed, most indications point the other way.

To many in Ireland this would appear to suggest a failure to solve the economic problems that have been inherited from the nineteenth century. But, it may be argued, these problems have been wrongly stated. The goal of Irish economic policy should be directed not to the ending of emigration but to its reduction to a level at which it no longer cancels out the natural increase of population. It may be that the manner in which that can be best achieved is not an artificial increase of employment but a genuine improvement of the economy. Superficial improvements may only mask a failure to solve problems that lie deeper in the economy. It is natural that there should be emigration from an agricultural

community (with a high birth rate) that lies between two great markets for labour. If, however, agriculture becomes more efficient and (as is possible in Irish conditions) is thus capable of providing opportunities for employment in the processing of its produce, there seems no reason why a stability of population should not be attained that may serve as a platform for further improvement.