

Why did so many Irish women emigrate in the Nineteenth century and were their expectations fulfilled?

It is probably fair to say that the history of Irish women has been somewhat neglected within the historiography of Irish migration. It is not until recently that women, as a separate entity have been investigated at depth. The Irish *diaspora*, as the Emigration of nineteenth century Ireland has come to be known, is a subject that has become heavily studied over the past twenty years or so. It has not been until much more recently that women have been dealt with separately from men, however. For the most part, this has been in part to the upsurge of women historians who exerted great effort in the correction of this discontinuity. The impetus for the escalating emigration numbers from Ireland during the nineteenth century would appear quite straightforward. The aftermath of the famine and subsequent land reform forced a surplus population to migrate elsewhere. Population studies, such as those that emanate from Princeton, are useful for justifying this simplistic migration requirement for the relief of excess population. Thus, such studies shall be used below using the population studies of pre-famine Ireland to justify such arguments.

Historians of Women's Studies have supplemented the basics with other questions which have somewhat augmented both the rhetoric and possible explanation of the phenomenon, however. In part, it may be suggested that the influx of women historians has not only produced 'gender history' but indeed 'feminine history'. Some traditional historians have refused to include, or even read, much of the women's history that has been done; citing that such 'separatist histories' create a ghettoisation of women's history. Cliona Murphy expressed her concerns in the *Irish Review*, "*there are grounds for scepticism [but there will be no comprehensive history until] traditional historians are willing to integrate the findings of publications in women's history into their own research*".¹ To what extent 'feminist' ideology has shaped women's history is a concept that will be viewed within this essay in order to determine whether there were indeed the emigrating women had 'expectations' to be fulfilled. If so, and to what extent such expectations were fulfilled, the success of female emigrants will be scrutinised by investigating the living, working and social conditions of women in the United States and former British colonies. The 'established history' or historical ideology will be viewed and contrasted throughout this piece. Though lacklustre, perhaps: It is necessary to start with the basics.

Emigration, or indeed high levels of emigration, was nothing new to the Irish population. It is not a construct of the nineteenth century although does seem to have rocketed within the period. Emigration, like so many concepts that appear to be an 'Irish tradition', maintained an important function to hold the population to a number that the land could support. Emigration from Ireland is linked, markedly, to the rise of the overall fertility from about 1750. It is not necessary to explain how the Total Fertility Rate is evaluated, simply

¹ Cliona Murpy, 'Women's, Feminist or Gender History' in Alan Hayes and Diane Urquhart (eds.) The Irish Women's History Reader (London, 2001), p.24

that it was in excess of what was sustainable, a population increase of 5.25% annually according to the Princeton studies.² The Irish population boom from the 1750s was in excess of what was sustainable but it was not until 1815, with the drop in agricultural prices where the problem became endemic. Migration, as a result, fulfilled the function of 'release value' from over-population in agricultural Ireland but because internal migration was not possible due to the apparent economic retardation of the Irish economy, outward migration was the only plausible alternative. Prior to the Famine it was not unknown for the insufficiencies of the agricultural system to be supplemented by seasonal migration to Britain particularly during harvest failures – though not exclusively. Most came from the far west, where plots proved insufficiently small but all areas were represented to some degree.³ This migration was in the traditional pattern of many European societies.

The migration and emigration that occurred between 1815 and 1845 was within the European norm for agricultural society. As a whole, pre-famine Ireland could not support her population, like elsewhere. Although economic historians may argue that Ireland could support her population, and indeed it probably could, the restrictions to agricultural development made the sustainability of such a vast population growth impossible (the lack of any Tenant Right in the majority of Ireland, for example). To an extent, the problem of over-population was alleviated by the tradition of division and subdivision of land using the only sustainable crop, the potato. Unfortunately, this meant that the agricultural economy was subsistent and not cash based. Although it was relatively stable for the most part, it became apparent by the 1840s with the severe and widespread potato blight, that the agricultural system should be overhauled. Government officials had made such suggestions throughout the century, notably the Devon Commission in the 1830s. If it is such that there was an excess population and emigration was required, not only desirable, then why did the emigrants choose to leave, as many did not?

To simplify, there are five time periods of emigration: 1815-1845, 1845-1851, 1851-1875 and 1875-1920 are those that are of importance. The underlying impetus for each bout of emigration is both consistent but immediate causes varied. The long term over population was always present but more immediate sparked outflows during any given period. The famine period created a huge number of emigrants and the ideology of the coffin ships is somewhat rooted within the diaspora consciousness. There is little available information to give us complete information about the composition of emigrants from 1815 to 1850 but, excluding the famine period, the emigrants would have been mostly families. It was only after the famine where single people, mostly women, became the driving force of emigration.⁴ What is interesting in evaluating the changes that occurred with female emigration is

² Ansley J Coale, 'The Decline of Fertility in Europe since the Eighteenth Century as a Chapter in Human Demographic History' in A J Coale and S C Watkins (eds.) The Decline of Fertility in Europe (Princeton, 1986), p.23

³ D H Akenson The Irish Diaspora: A Primer (Toronto, 1996) *hereafter* Akenson, p.192-194

⁴ Hasia R Diner, 'The Search for Bread: Patterns of Female Migration' in Alan Hayes and Diane Urquhart (eds.) The Irish Women's History Reader (London, 2001) *hereafter* Diner, p.175

that after the famine, the composition of emigrants changed. Increasing, the emigrant was single and by the 1880s, women's emigration had outnumbered that of men's and that few left Ireland within the family unit. For example, from 1881 to 1910, the percentage of female emigrants rose to 51.9%.⁵ Women's emigration began to outnumber men only from about 1881 in Ireland as a whole.

Looking only at the west, Connaught in particular, we see that women outnumber men from 1851. Using the *Emigration Statistics of Ireland*, female emigration over this period *only* exceeded male emigration in 'Catholic Agricultural Ireland': Munster and Connaught.⁶ Therefore, it is fair to say that mass female emigration was agricultural in origin that increased toward the end of the nineteenth century. Why women's emigration increased above male emigration by the 1880s is difficult to answer. Why is this significant important? Though data is scarce, it is fair to say that women made up just over 35% emigrants in the 1930s so perhaps the ratio balanced out?⁷ Indeed, total Irish emigration figures show that the ratio balanced out between 1881 and 1910. Moreover, that over the post famine period there was a male short fall of just over one thousand, a relatively small percentage.⁸ Perhaps the main impetus for women's emigration over the entire period was marriage, to equal the balance between male and female and create family units abroad that mirrored their *raison d'être* in Ireland: Production and reproduction. According to the Cork Examiner: "*Every [Irish] servant-maid thinks of the land of promise... where husbands are thought more procurable than in Ireland*".⁹

The most understandable reason why woman chose to emigrate was the lack of opportunities within the Irish agricultural system. The goal of a rural marriage was to produce and reproduce. In the west of Ireland (and east to a lesser extent) the only viable economic unit was that of the family, not industry. Following the increase in farm sizes from 1850 onwards and the increase of impartible inheritance, the number of 'marriageable farmers' decreased. Therefore, male labour was still required but the reduction of farms reduced the number of opportunities for women. This impetus for emigration is logical. Where women could not find a partner through a 'Match' (perhaps by failure to produce a dowry) they made a decision to emigrate. This was perceived to be the best course of action for many. Foremost, revisionist Irish history has added much romanticism to the question of emigration.

Take the term *diaspora*, for example. There is a capitalisation question to first overcome. Does the emigration of Irish men and women throughout the new worlds warrant the comparison with the dispersion of the Jewish population

⁵ Akenson, p.166

⁶ Kerby A. Miller *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America* (Oxford, 1988) *hereafter* Miller, p.582

⁷ Diner, p.174

⁸ Miller, p.582

⁹ Kerby A Miller with David N Doyle and Patricia Kelleher, 'For love and liberty': Irish women, migration and domesticity in Ireland and America, 1815-1920' in Patrick O'Sullivan (ed.) *Irish Women and Irish Migration* (London, 1995) *hereafter* O'Sullivan, p.53

among the gentiles? Should it be used as *diaspora* or *Diaspora*, for example? We shall not begin to formulate an answer to this definition debate here, but such a question gives an excellent example that Irish history has been romanticised during the revisionist period. Women's history is no exception to the formation of new terminology. Furthermore, it is no exception to the translation of modern ideas onto an historical people. Many historians engage in 'presentism'. By that, it is inferred that because a situation exists today, it existed within an historical population.¹⁰ In our case, it refers to the question of the emancipation of Irish women. Did women emigrate from Ireland to increase either their social status or to increase their political (or any other) freedom? The nervousness of this concept is stark. Amongst the facts and figures of history, the suggestion that nineteenth century Irish women desired greater social freedom is questionable. Further to this, the suggestion that Irish women emigrated for non-economic motivations makes many historians equally suspicious.

Janet Nolan's "*Ourselves Alone*" suggests that women's status had been in freefall since the 1830s and that by the 1880s, a major motivation for emigration was to fulfil their desires of freedom by migration to Irish cities or by emigration. Joanna Burke's main example of this is that many women found positions not as 'mere house servants', but as house managers. She suggests not only that such positions held great power, but that opportunities within Ireland ensured that there was another option to 'marriage or emigration'. Without even looking at statistics, which would be scarce to say the least, it is relatively apparent that there would have been insufficient jobs available to receive such vast numbers of job seekers. Furthermore, the question of whether women emigrated to increase their status is questionable. There is no social history that points to a drop in female status over the period and little evidence that those migrants held 'feminist' ideas of emancipation or suffrage. Despite accounts that there was a shortage of household servants,¹¹ Bourke's work seems to be unrepresentative of the population at large: True, some found themselves as house managers but the vast majority of those women that stayed within Ireland away from an agricultural background did not achieve such status. Even so, her argument only seems credible within the period 1885-1920 that she covers; it takes no account of the earlier period from 1815 where half of the emigration took place.¹²

Hasia Diner, in addition, argues that if marriage was the motivation then they would not have settled in the eastern American cities where the gender ratios were so female dominated. Remarkably, these historians "*provide little or no evidence to prove [their] assertions*" as Kerby Miller noted.¹³ Such glorifications of women's roles do not necessarily suggest that women had emancipating goals or expected to be fulfilled more than economic sustainability. Nonetheless, Nolan's suggestion that women had lost status is

¹⁰ Akenson p.158

¹¹ Diner p.176. Urban Ireland was not left unaffected by emigration but even Diner's evidence in support of Bourke seems anecdotal.

¹² Akenson pp.161-162. Nolan's work was unavailable but the general argument is summarised within Akenson's work, and elsewhere.

¹³ O'Sullivan p.43

convincing, to an extent. The 'surplus' female population at home could explain why women might have been considered to be of lesser status. Thus, although the contemporary belief in emancipation is difficult to quantify, we shall see whether the success of Irish women abroad was significantly improved; whether it was envisaged or not.

Although much attention has been paid to the potential emancipating experience that emigration might have been for young, single, Irish women, was it in reality? It has been mentioned, above, that the revisionist historians writing emigration works have some gone some way to romanticise Irish women's lives, particularly with reference to the US immigration. This is in no small part to the general attitude of the American, or indeed, Irish-American audience. Take Hasia Diner's comment, for example: "*Because women outnumbered men as migrants and new Americans they played a strikingly significant role in the economic life of Irish America*". With respect to her work, she does not make clear what she infers as 'strikingly significant'. Diner takes for granted, virtually, that because women were statistically in ascendancy that they were socially emancipated too. However, it is not made clear how such a conclusion has been formulated. She does, for example, note that Irish women provided the largest ethnic group of domestic servants but this does not necessarily infer that such a situation was significant.¹⁴

It is common for historians concentrating on Irish women's issues to focus on anecdotal evidence but there is little correlation between a large workforce in a particular area with emancipation as is suggested. Diner makes further comments that appear similarly unfounded: "*Irish women [emigrated] in huge numbers ... because of the greater opportunities that awaited them... they made their journey with optimism*".¹⁵ Again, there is little evidence to justify such a comment. It was probably hope, not optimism, which made so many single women emigrate. Many of the arguments that surround female success are conjectural, lacking any significant basis for quantification. Studies of the diaspora, male or female, "*have frequently not been based upon evidence, but upon wishful thinking, prejudice, evidentiary bias, and downright silliness*" commented Donald Akenson.¹⁶

The concept of 'ghettoisation' does not sit comfortably with female emancipation. So what was the case for Irish immigrants to the US, for example? Were they freed or were they trapped? Diner points out that large numbers of women immigrants to the US explains the urbanisation over rural settling. This is one example of how women were freed from the constraints of agricultural sufficiency at home but does not suggest that they prospered in any way. Furthermore, the large concentration of Irish immigrant women within domestic service suggests that they were linked to the traditional 'other job' as much so as new opportunities. If the motivation for immigration to the US was marriage then expectations were fulfilled. According to Miller, the motivation for emigration was both social and economic, marriage and to send remittances home. Women emigrated young and worked for many years

¹⁴ Diner p.178

¹⁵ Diner p.179

¹⁶ Akenson, p.217

saving as much money as was possible before quitting work for marriage.¹⁷ Perhaps work and the choice of whom they could marry fulfilled their expectations, rather than the 'match' and dowry system at home. Not all emigrants chose to leave of course, though the ideology of the 'Exile' is still prominent, to many women that were forced to immigrate to Australia, happiness was not guaranteed. Early women immigrants sent to Australia from Irish workhouses were regarded as 'cargoes of juvenile prostitutes' and were forced to enter the job market at rates below the average.¹⁸ It seems unlikely that the Australian population welcomed these 'cheap labour' importations. For example, in 1855 a group of 5000 single (mostly Irish) women arrived in Adelaide. They settled in badly and most left as soon as they could. Others "*sent into the outback as agricultural labourers, barely survived.*"¹⁹ In addition, there were immigrants in US cities so keen to marry, and fulfil their expectations perhaps, that they entered "*abusive, drunken and often broken marriages*" and whose embrace of 'liberty and love' forced them to the "*poverty of prostitution*".²⁰ The housing conditions in many US cities failed to meet expectations, no doubt. Not all, therefore, fulfilled their expectations.

Let us be cryptic for a moment. 'How' is perhaps as useful a term as 'why' to understand the relative high levels of women's emigration. Women were enabled to emigrate overseas due to family members that went before, for example. The family unit remained important in the new worlds. Under the Australian nomination scheme where the government would part-pay the passage cost for emigration, for example, the majority were family members – almost the sum total. The majority of those family members were single non-dependent women such as sisters; very few were wives or betrothed. This was indeed similar to the pre-paid tickets sent back from Boston or Toronto. Thus, it is important to remember that although many travelled individually, there was an entire family based support network upon arrival. As a result, single Irish women may well have been the majority but they are probably best described as 'non dependent' rather than 'independent'.²¹

Emigrants had both the security of a family life with the opportunity for a different, non-agricultural way of life. If Nolan is correct in suggesting that the status of women had dropped at home, then the demand for women in the new worlds was a stark contrast. All of the new nations required an influx of single women and they were always the majority. An already established family, meaning a married woman, did not need such security. Their emigration patterns differed, therefore. Emigration to South Africa, for example, shows that single women were the minority – 61.6% of those that travelled there were married, compared with approximately 17% to the US, Australia and New Zealand.²² Most single women must have lacked the

¹⁷ O'Sullivan pp.54-57

¹⁸ Trevor McClauglin, 'Barefoot and Pregnant? Irish Famine Orphans In Australia' in Alan Hayes and Diane Urquhart (eds.) *The Irish Women's History Reader* (London, 2001), p.169

¹⁹ Akenson p.175

²⁰ O'Sullivan pp.57-58

²¹ Akenson pp.173-174

²² Ibid. p.168

security or independence (and bravery) to travel alone, unaided. Women emigrated to fulfil the simple expectations that they held: Economic and social security. Potential marriage was a driving force for single emigrants, the opportunities for jobs, and the possibility of happiness and economic comfort. It is true; let us not discount this, that many women achieved much success abroad with the help of a family-based support network. These were probably not expectations but, instead, successes beyond their imagination. Not all were so successful abroad, high levels of asylum inmates were Irish women; perhaps they were truly independent: Fully emancipated, fully independent. There was no support network to help those deeply traumatised women that left 'home' with no insurance policy.

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