Emigration and living standards in Ireland since the Famine

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Received December 7, 1994 / Accepted June 26, 1995

Abstract. Ireland experienced dramatic levels of emigration in the century following the Famine of 1845–1849. The paper surveys the recent cliometric literature on post-Famine emigration and its effects on Irish living standards. The conclusions are that the Famine played a significant role in unleashing the subsequent emigration; and that emigration was crucial for the impressive increase in Irish living standards which took place during the next 100 years.

1. Introduction

Within the context of nineteenth century Europe, Ireland ranks as an outlier in several respects. This essay will focus on two of the more obvious ways in which Ireland was different. First, and most importantly, the Irish Famine of 1845–1849 was the last major subsistence crisis in Western European history. Proportionally, it involved excess mortality on the scale of the Bengali famine of 1943–1944, despite the fact that it occurred in the backyard of the then dominant world power. Second, even when set against the mass migrations of 1820–1914, which brought roughly 60 million people from all over the continent to the New World, Irish emigration after the Famine was uniquely high: so high that the population declined from 8.2 million in 1841 to 4.4 million in 1911.

This paper will survey current work on the links between these two issues, drawing on the writings of several economists and economic historians. There are four interrelated themes which emerge from this work. First, the Famine played
a crucial role in stimulating subsequent emigration. ‘Revisionist’ Irish historians, writing in the 1960s, argued that the Irish population would have declined as it actually did, even in the absence of the Famine; the Famine was “not, as has been frequently claimed, a watershed — at least in any meaningful sense” (Crotty 1966, pp. 50–51; see also Cullen 1972, p. 132; Goldstrom 1981, p. 158). Recent work has been far more inclined to interpret the Famine as a major discontinuity in Irish economic history.

Second, Irish living standards rose impressively between 1850 and 1914; indeed, they converged strongly on living standards in Britain and the United States. This finding contrasts sharply with Marx's characteristic pessimism on the subject, which has had a substantial influence on traditional Irish historians (e.g. David Fitzpatrick 1980). It also contrasts with the gloomy folk memories of much of the period.

Third, emigration played a key role in boosting Irish living standards. Again, this position is at odds with traditional complaints that emigration was a hemorrhage which left the country weaker, draining it of youth and talent, and reducing the home market.

Fourth, in several respects Ireland was not quite so unique as has sometimes been thought. Post-Famine Irish emigration can be explained in much the same way as can emigration elsewhere in the nineteenth century; Irish convergence on Britain and the US was part of a broader pattern of international convergence; international labour (and capital) flows had large effects on real wages in several countries.

To survey these four themes in one paper is a daunting enough task; thus, I will not cover the well-known demographic responses to the Famine — principally a higher rate of celibacy — studied by Kenneth Connell (1950), Tim Guinnane (1991, 1995), Cormac Ó Gráda (1991, 1993), and others. There are four substantive sections. Section 2 looks at living standards before and after the Famine, and recalls the key features of that catastrophe. Section 3 argues that the Famine was indeed responsible for the very high levels of emigration subsequently experienced. Section 4 explores the extent to which emigration was responsible for the convergence of Irish living standards on British and US levels. Section 5 extends the narrative into the twentieth century. Section 6 concludes.

2. Living standards before and after the Famine

“Pretty country. Land very fertile. Beautiful road. Toll gates far apart. From time to time some very beautiful parks and rather pretty Catholic churches. Most of the dwellings of the country very poor looking. A very large number of them wretched to the last degree. Walls of mud, roofs of thatch, one room. No chimney, smoke goes out the door. The pig lies in the middle of the house. It is Sunday. Yet the population looks very wretched. Many wear clothes with holes or much patched. Most of them are bare-headed and bare-foot”

(Alexis de Tocqueville, on the Dublin-Carlow road, 1835)

“With the exception of this street and the quay, with their whitewashed and slated houses, it is a town of cabins. The wretchedness of some of them is quite curious ... As for drawing them, it was in vain to try; one might as well make a sketch of a bundle of rags. An ordinary pigsty in England is really more comfortable. Most of them were not six feet long or five feet high, built of stones huddled together, a hole being left for the people to creep in at, a ruined thatch to keep out some little portions