NINETEENTH CENTURY GOVERNMENT-ASSISTED AND TOTAL IMMIGRATION FROM THE UNITED KINGDOM TO AUSTRALIA: QUINQUENNIAL ESTIMATES BY COLONY*

Robin Haines and Ralph Shlomowitz
School of Social Sciences
The Flinders University of South Australia
GPO Box 2100
Adelaide SA 5001

This paper provides the first comprehensive estimates of total and government-assisted United Kingdom immigration to Australia in the nineteenth century using the vast array of primary source material published in British and colonial parliamentary papers. It concludes that about 47 per cent of United Kingdom immigrants were government-assisted.

Introduction

Because of the high cost of the passage from the United Kingdom to Australia relative to the passage to the Americas, the governments of Australian colonies paid either in full or in part the passages of selected immigrants, and the Imperial government also paid the passage of some immigrants to some Australian colonies in certain years.¹ In some colonies in selected years the passages of German immigrants were also paid, and in 1877 and 1878 the Government of New South Wales even paid the passages of 934 selected immigrants from the United States of America.

There is, unfortunately, no complete statistical series on the number of immigrants arriving in Australia in the nineteenth century, nor on the number of immigrants whose passage was paid either in full or in part by colonial governments or by the Imperial government (the so-called 'government-assisted' immigrants).² This paper attempts to fill the hiatus in the literature,

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¹ Most notably, the Imperial government paid the passages of all the 5,322 government-assisted immigrants to Western Australia between 1850 and 1872. See Vanden Driesen (1986:67-68).

² Some of the government-assisted immigrants were selected by British or colonial officials and conveyed to Australia in government-chartered vessels. In contrast to these so-called 'government' immigrants, other government-assisted immigrants under a variety of what were called 'bounty', 'remittance', and 'land-order' schemes were generally conveyed to Australia in what were called 'private' ships. (Under the remittance scheme, for example, colonists could nominate friends and relatives in the United Kingdom.) Some of the government-assisted
by providing the first comprehensive analysis of immigration from the United Kingdom. Estimates of total and proportionate government-assisted United Kingdom immigration by colony, are presented in Table 1. The paper also attempts to assess the historical significance of our results.

Primary Sources

Several years ago, the following comment was made by one of our colleagues, with particular reference to British emigration:

the study of emigration is a well-known statistical quagmire, a pit in which several good historians have been lost almost without trace; there is a paucity of statistics, the sources are generally poor, subject to distortion and fictionalisation, bias and misrepresentation (Richards 1985:474).

Bearing this cautionary note in mind, we attempt to place on a sound quantitative foundation the study of nineteenth century free (that is, non-convict) immigration from the United Kingdom to Australia, by investigating the vast array of primary source material in British and colonial parliamentary papers. Ironically, our expectations of the sources and statistics were contradicted by the overwhelming availability of data, so far as colonial immigration from the United Kingdom is concerned. The burgeoning Victorian penchant for gathering statistics, coupled with the introduction of assisted passages (paid for by colonial land-sales which demanded detailed book-keeping), ensured a rich legacy of quantitative and qualitative evidence.

In any investigation of nineteenth century data on immigration, it is important to distinguish between data on the numbers who departed and who arrived. These two types of data differ because of voyage deaths and births, and in any one year totals will usually differ because some voyages will arrive in the following year. (Emigration data in any year relate to voyages departing in that year; immigration data for the same year relate to voyages arriving in that year.) In addition, as the data on departures were collected by government agencies in the United Kingdom and data on arrivals were collected by colonial authorities, discrepancies often arose. The coverage of the arrival data collected by colonial authorities was more comprehensive, resulting from direct contact between immigrants and the immigration officials at the point of entry. Immigration agents interrogated arrivals and kept detailed records which were reported in quarterly and annual returns.

Data on the total number of emigrants departing from the United Kingdom were collected by Customs House officers of the Board of Trade as part of their supervision of the Passengers Acts. These data were initially in the form of passenger lists given by the captains of vessels on departing from United Kingdom ports. The data were collated by the Board of Trade, and reported

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immigrants were conveyed in what were called 'short ships'—merchant vessels that conveyed less than 50 passengers and which were exempt from some of the provisions of the Passengers Acts, which regulated the emigration of people from the United Kingdom. In a companion paper (Shlomowitz 1991), the numbers of selected and nominated government-assisted immigrants are estimated.