Attempting to analyse early modern British emigration in quantitative terms is impossible, although that has not stopped some scholars from trying.\(^1\) This fundamentally separates the history of early modern British emigration from that for the modern period, when government statistics on emigration began to be generated and there is census data available. That data may not be perfect, but it opens up a different perspective in terms of potential sources that is not really available for the early modern period. It is very difficult to identify evidence for the period before 1803 that might help determine why people emigrated, or why some migrated while others stayed put.\(^2\) Emigration has often been analysed in isolation from internal migration, and it is in this respect that there now appears to be an opportunity to develop new perspectives on the phenomenon of early modern emigration from Britain. Attempts to measure the scale of emigration yield estimates that appear modest, although when considered in relation to the overall population in Britain and Ireland, contemporary concern at what appeared to be an escalating social problem becomes more understandable. James Horn has argued that in proportion to the existing population, English emigration to the West Indies and mainland North America during the seventeenth century exceeded that to the United States and the Empire during the second half of the nineteenth century.\(^3\) In Scotland and Ireland in the seventeenth century, emigrant destinations were still to Europe, but there is considerable evidence to suggest that the extent of the phenomenon as it spread north to Ireland and Scotland during the eighteenth century had an impact
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every bit as great as that which affected England in the seventeenth century. Was it the result of economic changes that produced increased population mobility? Or was it the result of expanding trading networks which brought the possibility of transatlantic emigration to societies whose traditional emigrant destinations were, indeed, with each other, and beyond that to Europe? As Nicholas Canny has pointed out, ‘the transport factor was so important that it appears from the experience of the early modern centuries that persistent long-distance migration occurred only where it was profitable for merchants to promote it.’ That is a basic truth about early modern emigration from Britain that not all of its historians have understood fully.

During the eighteenth century over 250,000 Irish Presbyterians emigrated to America at a time when the number of Presbyterians in Ireland can be estimated at about 500,000, almost all of them, of course, in Ulster. The Presbyterian population in Ireland was not extinguished during this period, but further immigration of Presbyterians from Scotland into Ireland fell away, and any increase from a high birthrate continued to be lost due to the remarkable tradition of emigration which developed in northern Ireland that spread in turn to Scotland by the second half of the eighteenth century. Of course not all Irish emigrants to America during the eighteenth century were Presbyterian. About half as many again, approximately divided between other Protestants and Roman Catholics, also left for America, but it is clear that emigration had a major impact on British settlement in Ireland and made possible the important advances secured by the Roman Catholic population of the island in public life and the economy over the course of the eighteenth century. ‘Even in the early 1750s southern migration ... was close to northern. The only years in which southern numbers fell sharply below northern were ... when warship and privateer-infested southern waters discouraged migration, and when the northern route was still open to unimpeded navigation. Indeed ... the figures for arrivals from identifiable southern ports exceeded the highest 1730s level during three years in the first half of the 1750s and the last four years of the 1760s.’

While some might argue that the seeds of what followed were sown in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, it is difficult