Irish Migration, 1650–1700

The flows of immigration and emigration over our four centuries came closest to equilibrium during this half-century. Ireland’s draw on the population of its neighbouring island remained strong and immigration in these five decades was actually greater than in the previous half-century. Inflows and outflows were particularly strong in the wake of the Cromwellian and Williamite military victories of 1649 and 1690 respectively. As in the first decade of the century, the 1650s saw emigration by large numbers of Irish Confederate forces to the Catholic continental powers, which added to the attraction of Ireland to the point that new settlers arrived and former settlers were sufficiently encouraged to return. The final decade of the 1690s proved decisive in consolidating British settlement in Ulster as newcomers were both pushed from Scotland by devastating famine and pulled into a buyer’s land market. Although the Cromwellian transplantation to Connacht is still remembered as a brutal example of deliberate migration policy, it demonstrates how limited early modern governments were in their power to engineer the societies they desired. Warfare, the land market, the economic cycle and urban growth did more to shape patterns of internal migration than government policy. Strong ties with Europe persisted, but emigration to the new world, particularly the West Indies, increased significantly. To potential Irish migrants, the Americas in 1700 seemed somewhat closer and the Atlantic less broad than in 1607.

Immigration

The volume, origins and rhythm of migration

About 190,000 migrants arrived in Ireland from Britain during these decades. As before, approximately two-thirds (110,000) were from England and Wales, and the other third (80,000) from Scotland (Canny 1994, 64; Smout, Landsman and Devine 1994, 87–8). This migration, again as before, was characterised by distinct peaks and troughs rather than a steady, regular, annual flow, with marked peaks
at the opening and close of the half-century. A peak in the 1650s saw an average of 8,000 immigrants a year entering the island (Smyth 2006, 100). Estimating the flow from Britain in this decade, however, is particularly difficult. Our only contemporary guide to social statistics is Sir William Petty (1623–87), a physician-turned-political economist. Calculations based on his figures suggest an inward movement of some 100,000 English and Welsh migrants during the Cromwellian period, 1649–60 (Petty 1672, 17–18; Canny 1994, 62; Smyth 2006, 100). Taking into account the somewhat inflated estimates offered by Petty and the fact that he did not include the pre-1641 settlers who returned to Ireland after leaving during the wars of the 1640s, this figure of 100,000 immigrants does not appear wildly inaccurate. Scottish immigration, into Ulster in particular, was also heavy during this decade, with something like 20,000–30,000 migrants crossing the north channel in the years immediately before 1660 (Houston 1992, 62).

The later 1670s saw a further peak in immigration from Britain (Smyth 2006, 100, 385). The final peak in the 1690s was almost exclusively composed of Scots taking up favourable opportunities to acquire and rent land in Ulster as an escape from devastating famine. It is likely that somewhere in the region of 50,000 migrants were involved in this crucial ‘topping up’ of British settlers in Ireland, in particular of Scots settlers in Ulster (Fitzgerald 2004, 79). Although the rate of immigration, year on year, was generally more sluggish in the three decades between 1660 and 1690, cumulatively the volume of movement was still substantial. Religious conflict in Scotland and economic opportunities in Ireland served to sustain the migration flow from Scotland to Ulster, with somewhere in the region of 10,000–20,000 Scots arriving. New settlers also came from England and Wales and were more evenly distributed across the island: about 10,000 between 1670 and 1700. Allowing for an additional 5,000 during the steady movement of the 1660s, we have about 15,000 English and Welsh immigrants arriving between 1660 and 1700 (Gillespie 1988, xvii–xviii; Canny 1994, 63). This scale of immigration across the island was spectacular in contemporary European terms: by 1700 almost 30 per cent of the entire population was of recent British origin (Smyth 2006, 100). As had been the case before 1650, some immigrants returned to Britain, temporarily or permanently. For example, between 1688 and 1690 significant numbers of the Scots settled in Ulster returned to Scotland, recoiling from the increasingly stringent Jacobite regime under the Earl of Tyrconnell (Simms 1969, 40–59; Young 2004, 11–32). Overall, the key point to stress is that the largest numbers of British settlers migrating to Ireland did so after the era which is traditionally framed as Plantation Ireland (1556–1641).

Continental migrants

While most immigrants came from Britain, some came from further afield. Undoubtedly, the most significant group were Calvinists from France, the