EARLY EVIDENCE OF IRISH IMMIGRATION TO SCOTLAND: A NOTE ON A CATHOLIC PARISH REGISTER

Brenda Collins

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Although the heaviest influx of Irish immigrants into Great Britain took place during the famine years of the 1840s recent research has demonstrated the extent to which the famine emigration was a continuation of a much earlier movement of temporary and permanent migrants. In the eighteenth century there had been an Irish settlement in the agricultural districts of south west Scotland which was related to the transportation of store cattle from the north of Ireland, via the short sea crossing, to the north of England markets. Increasingly, during the nineteenth century, the Irish went, not to the countryside, but to British towns, particularly those on the west coast such as Glasgow and Liverpool which were the first ports of disembarkation from the passenger ships. This rural Irish—urban British migration, like the more localised population movements of the Industrial Revolution, was in response to the demand for labour in the growing industrial centres.¹

One west of Scotland town which exemplifies this pattern was the textile town of Paisley. In 1801 it was the third largest Scottish town, after Glasgow and Edinburgh, with a population of 31,000. Between 1801 and 1821 it increased by over 50 per cent to 47,000 as shawl weaving, thread manufacture and cotton spinning became the staple industries. According to the 1821 census, in the burgh part of the town alone (excluding the Abbey parish which had non-burghal status until the 1830s) nearly 60 per cent of the population were immigrants (i.e. born outside Paisley) and about one-sixth of the incomers were Irish-born.²

One source which records the Irish immigrant settlement in Paisley in the first decades of the nineteenth century is the marriage register of St Mirin's, the first Roman Catholic church to be opened in Scotland since the Reformation. At the opening of the church in 1808, the Catholic population of the town was said to be 861; by 1816 they were over one
thousand and by 1821 probably two and a half thousand. Moreover, the
detailed nature of the register in its early years enables us to go beyond
mere numbers in exploring wider aspects of the Irish community. There
are however, some limitations in using the material for this purpose: not
all the Roman Catholics in Paisley were Irish: some were Highlanders,
especially girls from the Western Isles who came seasonally to work in
the bleachfields and dyeworks. Equally, not all Irish who lived in Paisley
were Roman Catholics. Many came from relatively Protestant areas of
Ireland and one indicator of the settlement of Protestant Irish was the
existence of Orange lodges in the 1830s. Over time, also, the adherents
of Catholicism intermarried with non-Catholic Irish and Scots. Neverthe-
less the register provides a source of information on a Catholic Irish
community which was relatively newly established and a framework for
comparison with the Irish community portrayed through the census enum-
eration books of 1841 and later.

For the years 1808-1812 the register provides details, not merely of the
Irish presence in the town but also of the county of origin of many of the
marriage partners and their length of residence in Paisley. It is unfortune-
ate that this full form of recording appears to have been dropped midway
through 1812, coinciding with a change of incumbent. The change in
practice also coincides with a steady increase in the number of marriages
each year which, reflecting the increase in the size of the congregation,
may have necessitated a reduction in time spent on such minor parochial
business as the completion of the register of marriages. Presumably also
the small size of the early Irish community made it possible for the priest
to know the backgrounds and families of the spouses to a degree which
diminished with the increase in numbers.

Between September 1808 and August 1812 there are fifty-two marriage
entries written in the register by the priest, William Rattray. Of these 104
spouses, 73 or seventy per cent are Irish-born. Their counties of birth are
listed in Table 1. The overwhelming predominance of the north west
counties of Ireland, Donegal and Tyrone, which, together with Londonderry,
comprised over half the birthplaces, suggests that mere proximity
was not the chief mechanism of migration (which might have been demon-
strated by a strong movement of Irish from County Antrim settling in Paisley).
The relative selectivity of emigrants from the north west counties of
Ireland reflects the commonplace nature of emigration even at this early
period and was probably connected with declining economic opportunities
in those areas. In particular, the farming-flaxgrowing families of north west
Ireland were affected by the expansion of mechanised cotton yarn pro-
duction in Lancashire and the west of Scotland. Initially in the middle
decades of the eighteenth century Irish hand spun linen yarn was used
in the cotton industry to provide a strong warp for cotton calicoes. How-
ever, technological developments in the last quarter of the century made
machine spun cotton yarn sufficiently strong to permit the use of cotton
for both weft and warp. Thus demand from the cotton industry had en-
couraged the spread of flax hand spinning but, by the early 1790s, exports
of linen yarn from the port of Londonderry were less than half the quantity
of thirty years earlier. Nor were farmer-weavers able to use the yarn in
their own linen cloth manufacture because regional shifts in linen hand loom weaving within Ulster led to its increasing domination by the putting-out system in the east of the province. Thus the entire basis of the standard of living of the rural communities of parts of north west Ireland was eroded in the first twenty years of the nineteenth century and for many families there was little to lose and much to gain by moving to the expanding industrial centres of the west of Scotland.5

Two additional pieces of information which are often used in a study of migrant communities are the extent of intermarriage and estimates of the length of residence of the migrants. Both aspects are thought to be positively correlated with the degree of assimilation of a migrant group into its new society.

Most of the Irish-born married others from Ireland; fifty-six per cent (29) of the marriages were of both partners born in Ireland, twenty-seven per cent (14) were mixed Irish/Scots marriages while seventeen per cent (9) were either of Scots partners or those of unknown origin. Just under half of the exclusively Irish marriages (fourteen out of twenty-nine) were in fact intra-county marriages — Donegal men marrying Donegal women etc.; though this tendency was not confined to those of one county more than another. Those Scots who married Irish spouses were almost equally split between Highland migrants and those native to Paisley and its surrounding district who may well have been of Irish descent themselves. It has frequently been observed in studies of migrant communities that immigrant men are more likely to marry native women than the converse (because of different perceptions of the links between gender and social status). This immigrant group was no exception with eighty-seven per cent 45 of the bridegrooms but only fifty-four per cent (28) of the brides being Irish. Of course, to get a full picture of inter-marriage, the concurrent Church of Scotland registers would need to be examined.

The information in the register also enables us to analyse the length of time which the Irish had been resident in Paisley (see Table 2). Despite the small numbers there appear to have been two clusters of settlement among the marrying couples, those who had been in Paisley between two and three years and those who had been resident for six or seven years.

As the information on length of residence is only given for couples marrying from 1810 onwards it would tend to indicate immigration in waves around 1803-1804 and 1807-1808. It may also be the case that the collection of information on length of residence was a response to growing awareness within the town of the numbers of Irish settling there particularly in relation to the operation of poor relief. The clustering around the third and the seventh year, or at least the frequency with which those years are stated, would lend support to this cynicism because of its relevance to the treatment of paupers. Before the 1844 Poor Law, eligibility for relief varied across the country but the most commonly recurring requirements were proof of length of residence for either three or seven years. Later in the nineteenth century such entitlement was to be rigorously contested, and indeed disregarded, by Paisley burgh authorities; in 1826 over 1500 Irish people were removed from Paisley by 'a sort of moral compulsion' and their passage paid back to Ireland.6

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Observers of migrant communities often try to estimate the extent to which the migrants are single people, generally young and unattached, or are family groups of parents with young children. In the Irish context it has often been held that pre-famine migration was primarily of young single people, while the effects of the famine years led to a stream of migrant pauperised families. However, both families and young single adults were part of the Irish migrant stream from the mid-eighteenth century and the relative proportions going to any particular place must surely have reflected the opportunities available in terms of jobs and housing. Certainly there is considerable evidence of Irish family migration to Paisley in the 1820s and 1830s, at a time when there was expansion in the town’s mechanised textile industries. In general the use of a marriage register to analyse family/single migration is a poor indicator as it is likely to bias upwards the numbers of single migrants. This register, however, gives details of fifteen marriage partners who were definitely stated to have emigrated to Scotland with their parents at a period several years before their marriage. One type of family migration was that which sought work for the men of the household in quarrying or construction work. An example of this type which also shows the geographical extent of migration is the entry for 14 June 1810, of the marriage between

‘John McKerral, son of John McKerral and Katharine Ryan, both deceased in Dublin, and who has resided in Paisley these three years past’ and ‘Jean Stewart who has lived hitherto in the house of her lawful parents, Robert Stewart and Margaret McCoy, natives of the county of Antrim but residenters at the Slates these eight years past.’

The slate islands of Easdale, Luing and Seil near Oban were extensively quarried from the middle of the eighteenth century and the migration of Irish families to work for the quarry companies underlines the extent to which Irish emigration, even in the closing years of the eighteenth century, was in response to economic opportunities abroad.

Another type of family migration which was the outcome of changing family circumstances was that of widows and their children. One third of the Irish marriage partners who were described as having been brought over to Scotland by their parents were children whose fathers had died in Ireland. The death of the man of the household may have been the occasion for the eviction of a widow and her family from a smallholding or it may have provided a momentum for emigration. An example is that of the entry for 24 May 1811 of marriage between

‘Michael Hardie, cabinet maker and who has been these twelve years in Scotland and is lawful son of Charles Hardie, dead, and of Sally Divan, county of Donegal, to Fany McAnalty, who is lawful daughter of the late William McAnalty, county of Donegal and of Nelly Weir, and who has lived with her mother these six years at the Bridge of Weir.’

As newspapers and handbills testify, widows and their families were in great demand by the early textile mills because of the need for child and
adolescent workers. The Paisley mills were no exception to this, as witnesses to the Commission of Inquiry into the Condition of the Poorer Classes in Ireland commented in 1836.

Subsequent records of St Mirin’s chapel do not give as full a picture of the Irish community though the numbers of baptisms, marriages and burials which are recorded show a steady increase in the size of the Catholic congregation in the 1820s. By the early 1930s the register records about fifty marriages each year, the same number as the total for the four years 1808-1812. Already in the 1820s baptisms were over three hundred each year. Information on the birthplaces of the Irish community is not available systematically again until the manuscript census enumerators’ books of 1851 and later. These confirm the retention of early migration networks for nearly 70 per cent of those who gave a county-specific birthplace in the 1851 census enumerators’ books came from Donegal, Tyrone or Londonderry. The value of this parish register is thus not only the information which it provides in its own right but also the extent to which it provides a context in which to evaluate other source material.

Table 1. Birthplaces of marriage partners, St Mirin’s Paisley, 1808-1812.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>County</th>
<th>Males</th>
<th>Females</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Donegal</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>26</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tyrone</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>21</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Londonderry</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Down</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Antrim</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Armagh</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sligo</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fermanagh</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dublin</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limerick</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ireland</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paisley</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Scots</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>18</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unknown</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>52</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>100</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Years of residence of Irish people marrying at St Mirin’s Chapel, Paisley 1810-1812.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>County</th>
<th>1 and under</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9-11</th>
<th>12-13</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Donegal</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tyrone</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Londonderry</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>—</td>
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<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Antrim</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sligo</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ireland</td>
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<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

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NOTES


8. B.P.P. 1836 XXX First Report of Inquiry into the Condition of the Poorer Classes in Ireland. Appendix A, pp. 12e, 13e, 14e. In answer to a query on the position of a widow, 'She would not get the house a day ...'.


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