

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

Brenda Collins

Brenda Collins is a research fellow at the Institute of Irish Studies, Queen's University, Belfast. She has worked extensively on mid-nineteenth century census material of England and Scotland and on the 1901 census enumeration schedules of Belfast. She has published articles on Irish immigration to nineteenth century Scotland and on the social history of Edwardian Belfast.

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.³ 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.⁴ 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. Nevertheless 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 enumeration 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 unfortunate 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 demonstrated 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 production 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. However, 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 encouraged 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

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 residents 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 century⁷ 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.⁸ 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.⁹ 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 1836.¹⁰

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.¹¹ 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.

County	Males	Females	% Total
Donegal	16	11	26
Tyrone	16	6	21
Londonderry	4	4	7
Down	2	2	4
Antrim	1	2	3
Armagh	1	2	3
Sligo	2	—	2
Fermanagh	1	—	1
Dublin	1	—	1
Limerick	—	1	1
Ireland	1	—	1
Paisley	2	5	7
Other Scots	3	16	18
Unknown	2	3	5
Total	52	52	100

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

County	1 and under	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9-11	12-13
Donegal	—	8	4	2	—	2	3	—	—	3
Tyrone	—	5	4	—	—	2	1	—	—	—
Londonderry	—	1	1	—	—	1	3	—	—	—
Antrim	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	1	—	—
Sligo	1	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Ireland	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1	—	—

NOTES

1. See L. H. Lees, **Exiles of Erin**, 1979; D. Mageean, 'Pre- and post-famine, migration from the N.W. of Ireland to North America', unpub. paper, 1981; J. Handley, **The Irish in Scotland 1798-1845**, 1943; H. S. Irvine, 'Some aspects of passenger traffic between Britain and Ireland', **Journal of Transport History**, IV, 1960, pp. 224-41.
2. M. McCarthy, **A social geography of Paisley**, 1969; T. C. Smout, 'The strange intervention of Edward Twistleton: Paisley in depression, 1841-3' in T. C. Smout (ed.), **The search for wealth and stability**, 1979, pp. 218-42; **Paisley Pamphlets** 1821-23 Vol. 11, Paisley Public Library.
3. Matrimonial Register of the Paisley Mission. St Mirin's Paisley, 1808-1812, Scottish Record Office R.H. 21/8/9. McCarthy, p. 104.
4. B.P.P. 1843 XV **Children's Employment (Trades and Manufactures)**. Appendix Second Rept., Pt. II, pp. 125, 124-9.
5. Brenda Collins, 'Irish emigration to Dundee and Paisley during the first half of the nineteenth century' in J. M. Goldstrom and L. A. Clarkson (eds.), **Irish population, economy and society**, 1981.
6. B.P.P. 1826-7 V **Emigration. Select Committee**. Report, 1813, 1814. B.P.P. 1843 VII. **Report on Distress (Paisley). Select Committee**. Mins. of Evid. 205 *et seq.*...
7. On the development of the slate quarries see, Margaret McDonald, 'The economic and social development of the Easdale slate quarries, 1745-1914', M.Litt., Strathclyde, 1978.
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 ...'.
9. W. F. Adams, **Ireland and Irish emigration to the New World**, 1932, p. 142; T. C. Smout, **History of the Scottish people**, 1969, p. 408.
10. B.P.P. 1836 XXXIV **First Report of Inquiry into the Condition of the Poorer Classes in Ireland**. Appendix G, State of the Irish Poor in Great Britain, p. 133.
11. Brenda Collins, 'Aspects of Irish immigration to two Scottish towns (Dundee and Paisley) during the mid-nineteenth century', M.Phil. Edin. 1978.

A New LPS Supplement

POPULATION STUDIES FROM PARISH REGISTERS

A Selection of Readings from Local Population Studies with an introduction by Michael Drake

A selection of contributions from **LPS** compiled around a series of important topics: Marriage, Baptism, Burial, Migration and Area Studies. It brings together some of the most valuable items to have appeared in **LPS** during the last sixteen years.

Michael Drake's introduction outlines some of the basic procedures of parish register analysis and identifies the pitfalls and difficulties which can so easily trap the unwary.

252 pages including an index. Soft cover. ISBN 0 9503951 7X.

Population Studies from Parish Registers can be obtained from book-sellers or direct from Mrs. M. Ballington, Tawney House, Matlock, Derbyshire DE4 3BT. Price £4.95 (plus 70p postage and packing).

Paid-up members of the **Local Population Studies Society** can purchase **Population Studies from Parish Registers** at the special price of £3.95 (plus 70p postage and packing).