

Emigrant Homecomings: The Return Movement of Emigrants, 1600–2000

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Like many another Roundhead, George Downing had a problem when Charles II returned in 1660, not least because he had been inconveniently prominent in urging Oliver Cromwell to become king. Luckily there was a way out. In 1638 the Downing family had decamped to Massachusetts, where young George had become the second person to graduate from Harvard. He had, he explained, ‘sucked in principles which since his reason had made him see were erroneous’. Fast forward to 1995, when the Scottish National Party was poised to win a by-election in Perthshire. Their candidate, Roseanna Cunningham, was articulate, forty-something, every inch a winner, but for one awkward problem—she wanted a Scottish republic, and hostility to the monarchy might not play well in caber-tossing country. SNP spin-doctors came up with the answer: Ms Cunningham, they explained, had spent her early life in Australia where she had picked up a few strange ideas that were definitely not party policy. Few voters would appreciate that Australia’s republican movement was a relatively-recent and shallow-rooted fad. The ploy worked in both cases. Downing escaped disembowelment and pulled off the Whitehall property deal that still gives Britain’s prime minister an Ivy League address. The SNP won their parliamentary seat.

Nobody really knows how many migrants came back. Official statistics usually deal with passenger movements, the raw numbers of people who passed through the ports. Passengers were not always sojourners, nor did the returnees necessarily make a tidy reverse journey by the same routes. In her useful introduction to *Emigrant Homecomings*, Marjorie Harper assembles estimates suggesting that two-fifths of

emigrants from England came back in the half century before 1914, along with about one-third of wandering Scots. These are notably sizeable proportions within massive global movements of people, but they are only just starting to make an impact upon the scholarly literature in this field. Who were they? Why did they come home? Did they repatriate fresh ideas? What impact did they make upon their communities? This volume, handsomely produced by Manchester University Press, is an attempt to start providing some answers. The contributing essays are grouped into four sections: an overview, a discussion of motives, an examination of mechanisms and finally an attempt to evaluate impact.

Emigrant Homecomings opens with a paper by Mark Wyman that offers an analytical model to account for the varying balances of motive and circumstance. Patrick Fitzgerald argues that return migration was an established feature of pre-Famine Irish migration, even if the flows cannot be counted. Steve Murdoch demonstrates not only a major two-way movement of people in and out of seventeenth-century Scotland, but also a perhaps surprising level of ethnic identification with the homeland even among ‘Scots’ who were born and raised in the Baltic. Eric Richards covers a great deal of ground looking at Australia, suggesting that as many as five per cent of transported convicts anticipated Roseanna Cunningham and made it back to Britain. Richards interweaves a complex picture of tourists, failed emigrants, successful colonists and long-distance workers. As communications improved, so nostalgia for the old country made migration less of a once-for-all decision. Yet, as Alistair Thomson argues in his survey of post-1945 British migrants to Australia, homesickness is far from being a simple concept, although it probably gave Australian authorities an easy way of explaining away the difficulties of adjustment experienced by many Poms. Paul Basu interprets the idea of ‘homecoming’ in an even more precise manner, examining the rise of ‘roots’ tourism to the Scottish Highlands. The loose-worded trend among popular writers to hint that Gaelic Scotland suffered some form of genocide encourages overseas visitors to impart some form of meaning to their own derived identities through making a symbolic pilgrimage to places such as Culloden. Bruce S. Elliott ranges widely through his important work on Irish migration to highlight the return journey as, literally, a passage rite within a trans-national community. Kathleen Burke lifts the veil on the Canada Club, a mysterious elite London dining club founded in 1810 and initially closely linked to powerful interests in the fur trade. Marilyn J. Barber investigates the Fellowship of the Maple Leaf, an Anglican missionary organization that seems to have helped its members foster a joint sense of British-Canadian identity throughout the central decades of the twentieth century. Alexia Grosjean offers a four-hundred year overview of the impact of returned migrants on the Aberdeenshire parish of Belhevie. It is hardly surprising that she doubts whether a single overarching model can explain so much diverse human mobility, although the perennial pull of ‘home’ is evidently a continuing theme. Andrew McKillop rounds off the collection with an example of a (presumably) small but highly-visible group, the Nabob who came home from India loaded with loot. In the case of Sir Hector Munro of Novar, acquired wealth underpinned existing social and landed authority, making it all the easier for him to reshape his community. As McKillop says, the homecoming of one rich man resulted in the forced emigration of many of his poorer neighbours.

Thus the collection combines attempts at categorization with explorations of specific examples. Like all such books, its strengths are its weakness, and vice-versa. There is certainly much useful material here for the university seminar course on migration, and enough questions are posed to stimulate further work in the field.

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