

Research Guide: a brief history of emigration & immigration in Scotland

Emigration & Scottish society

Poverty has always been noted as the main reason for Scottish emigration. Two-thirds of the land is harsh – rocky, ill-drained, swept by rain-bearing winds off the Atlantic and far from the Mediterranean and medieval centres of European trade and culture. The first Scottish communities away from home were founded by traders.

In the 17th century a new factor was driving Scots away from their homes. Schools in Lowland parishes producing a literate population resulted in five universities in a country of under a million people. This created a highly educated middle class. In an underdeveloped Scottish economy, however, there was a shortage of middle-class jobs and this caused many Scots to leave for the likes of England, to several of the Baltic States and to North America. The 19th century presented new opportunities in new destinations. Scots went to Africa as missionaries, explorers and traders. In the Far East traders conducted business in the ports of China and Japan and missionaries followed suit. For the impoverished Scot, however, Australia and New Zealand were the lands of opportunity.

Emigration was perceived by trade unions and other voluntary groups as a practical solution to unemployment and economic depression. The height of emigration corresponded with years of harsh economic depression, particularly in the late 1840s and early 1850s, the mid-1880s, and the period of 1906 to 1913. Extreme emigration in the period 1871–1931 counterbalanced the increase in population due to new births. This trend ended in the 1930s when the world trade depression saw emigrants returning home; the numbers leaving Scotland in the 1930s were at their lowest for a century.

Highlands & Lowlands

Scotland lost 10% to 47% of the natural population increase every decade in the 1800s. Until about 1855, a number of the emigrants from the Highlands were forced to leave the land because of evictions. In the Lowlands, emigration was almost always the outcome of wanting to improve one's living standards.

The eviction of Highlanders from their homes peaked in the 1840s and early 1850s as the Highland economy had collapsed, while the population still rose. When the earnings from kelp production and black cattle dried up, the landlords saw sheep as a more profitable alternative. The introduction of sheep meant the removal of people, known as 'the Clearances'. Combined with the prospect of starvation faced by much of the crofting population when the potato crop failed in the late 1830s and again in the late 1840s, emigration seemed the only option.

The poorest Highlanders were evicted but crofters who were capable of paying rent were retained.¹ The Emigration Act of 1851, however, made emigration more accessible to the poorest, with the Highlands and Islands Emigration Society set up to manage the process of resettlement. The main exodus occurred in the islands, particularly Skye, Mull, the Long Island and the mainland parishes of the Inner Sound. After 1855, mass evictions were unusual and emigration became more a matter of choice than compulsion. Between 1855 and 1895 the decline in the Highland population was actually less than in the rural Lowlands.

Historians have commented on the 'high quality' of early Scottish settlers, particularly in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. These emigrants were from middle-class backgrounds, among them doctors, merchants, farmers and a selection of other 'middle-class' occupations. However, the social status of emigrants underwent a significant transformation: increasingly, emigrants from the Highlands were landless peasants and from the Lowlands unemployed craftsmen, labourers and small farmers.

¹ The Dukes of Argyll and Sutherland and other large landowners funded emigration schemes that were linked to eviction and this left the crofter little choice.

Archive Research Guides (2)

The decline in population was mostly due to a permanent migration south, although a significant number left for North America. Those affected by the evictions of the 1840s and 1850s generally refused to move to Lowland Scotland. They opted to settle in places such as Ontario and Nova Scotia (New Scotland) in Canada where they could work on the land and continue their style of life. In the first half of the 19th century, 59% of settlers from the UK were Scots-born. From 1853, however, 50% of emigrating Scots chose to settle in the United States, and by 1850 Scots made up a quarter of the population in New Zealand.

Emigration in the 20th century

As the 19th century continued, emigration became more of an urban phenomenon, with one's social standing determining the country in which one settled. Many Scottish emigrants also moved to England, particularly after the 1920s. In the period 1841–1931, around 749,000 Scots moved to various parts of Britain compared with over two million who emigrated abroad. It was during the economic depression of the inter-war years that there was a change from emigration overseas to migration to other parts of Britain, and mostly to England. By 1931, the number of Scots in England equalled those from Ireland, whereas 60 years earlier, the Irish outnumbered the Scots by a margin of two to one.

By the 20th century, the skilled worker was the largest category among social groups who emigrated from Scotland. In 1912 and 1913, 47% of adult male emigrants from Scotland described themselves as skilled, compared with 36% of those from England and Wales. Only 29% categorised themselves as labourers. Unskilled labourers seemed to prefer emigrating to Canada and Australia, while skilled workers favoured South Africa and the United States. The middle classes strongly preferred South Africa.

Immigration into Scotland

Immigrants came into Scotland (and the rest of Britain) in search of a better life as a result of hardship in their own country. For example, immigration from Ireland began in the 1840s as a result of the Great Famine. Although life did improve after the 1840s, as many as five million Irish people left their homeland in the period up to the 1920s. Many emigrated to America and Canada, while others decided to start a new life in Britain (in particular Scotland). Polish immigrants also came to work in key industries that experienced a shortage of workers (e.g. coalmines) and to train in the armed forces in preparation for the Second World War. In the period between 1890 and 1914, approximately 4,000 southern Italians came into Scotland to evade the growing poverty in their country. Other immigrants, particularly from eastern Europe, arrived in Scotland to escape from religious persecution (e.g. Jews), from Hitler's tyranny (Poles and Lithuanians) and to join family members who were already established in Scotland.

Early Irish immigration

The largest group of immigrants to settle in Scotland are the Irish. From the early 1800s most of the emigration, however, was on a temporary basis, and peaked during key points in the farming calendar, such as the harvest. Irish settlement became more distinct with the development of cotton weaving, the construction of railways and the general expansion of the economy. The great famine of 1846–47 resulted in floods of Irish immigrants coming into the UK. According to the 1841 census, the Irish-born population of Scotland stood at 4.8%. Ten years later it increased to 7.2% as compared with 2.9% for England and Wales. Between 1841 and 1851 the Irish population of Scotland increased by 90%. Nevertheless, as the century progressed the numbers of Irish immigrants shrank to 3.7% in 1911. The census figures, however, only recorded those who were Irish-born, while children of Irish immigrants born in Scotland were classified as Scottish.

Irish immigrants were inclined to settle in or around their point of disembarkation, usually the west coast of Scotland, because of their poverty and ill health.¹ The Irish also settled on the east coast,

¹ By 1841, the nearest counties to Ireland, Wigtownshire and Kirkcudbrightshire, had a substantial Irish population.

Archive Research Guides (2)

particularly Dundee, where a large female Irish community was established. Edinburgh, however, only had a small Irish community of 6.5% of the total population in 1851. The industrial towns of the west of Scotland saw large concentrations of Irish immigrants, with almost 29% of all Irish migrants settled in Glasgow.

The Irish Catholic generally settled wherever physical strength was sought-after, and therefore became involved in coal mining, dock work and labouring of all kinds. In 1851, it was estimated that between 50% and 75% of all dock-labourers and miners in Britain were Irish. Many were also involved in less skilled weaving and textile work. In 1851, for example, 44.3% of textile workers in Greenock were Irish women. However, sectarianism, lack of education and, in many cases, language (Gaelic), hindered their involvement in the more highly paid skilled trades.

The lowly occupational status of the Irish Catholics and their willingness to work for less than minimum wage did not bode well for the Scottish working class. In addition, Catholicism became a factor which brought about discrimination from all sections of Scottish society¹ and assaults and harassment of the Irish became a regular feature in newspapers, and were witnessed in pulpits and on the streets.² The Irish were regarded as drunks, lazy, uncivilised and damaging to the moral character of Scottish society. They were also perceived as carriers of diseases such as typhus, which was known as 'Irish fever'. This was particularly due to unsanitary housing and the fact that many of the immigrants who fled the famine were weak and had low resistance to diseases.

Despite antagonism and poverty, the Irish Catholics established sustainable local communities.³ Within 10 years the number of churches and schools had doubled, all financed to a large degree out of the contributions of low-paid workers. The Catholic Church also supplied other recreational and social services and hence there was little need for Catholics to venture beyond the Church boundaries, since all their needs were accommodated. The Irish Catholic community was also further strengthened by the level of inter-marriage. In 1851, 80.6% of Irish men and women in Greenock had found marriage partners amongst fellow Irish Catholics. Forty years later the numbers were still high at 72.4%. This state of affairs made it problematic for the Irish Catholics to integrate into the mainstream of Scottish society.

Irish Protestants

As the number of Irish Catholic immigrants dropped in the late 1870s and 1880s, Scotland experienced an influx of Irish Protestants, particularly from the Orange counties like Armagh. Historic economic and religious links had been established between the west of Scotland and Ulster and, therefore, the Irish Protestants did not experience the level of discrimination suffered by the Irish Catholics. The influx of Ulster Protestants, with their Orange traditions, however, increased the rate of sectarian hostility. Nevertheless, as the Irish did not encroach into the area of skilled employment and kept themselves to themselves, there were relatively few skirmishes between them and the native locals. Although parts of Glasgow and other towns became associated with Irish Catholics, residential integration resulted in a sense of common grievance among slum dwellers, whether Catholic or Protestant, which helped to alleviate tensions.

¹ Scotland was mainly a Protestant country after the Reformation in 1560, and Catholicism was largely ill-favoured.

² The Church of Scotland could still publish a pamphlet entitled 'The Menace of the Irish Race to our Scottish Nationality' right up to 1923.

³ A study on Dundee reveals that in the early 1860s there were only two Catholic churches and three Catholic schools, one of which the *Dundee Advertiser* described as a 'cellar under the Chapel', which served a community of around 20,000. Their circumstances were still dire in 1876, when there were only 192 Catholic schools, staffed by 171 teachers and 357 pupil teachers. ('Irish Emigration to Scotland in the 19th and 20th Centuries', www.educationscotland.gov.uk/higherscottishhistory/migrationandempire/experienceofimmigrants/irish.asp, n.d.)

Archive Research Guides (2)

Most Irish males did not qualify for the vote as they did not reside long enough in any one constituency. As large numbers were ineligible to vote until reform of the franchise in 1918, the Irish, with the encouragement of the Catholic hierarchy, focused their political vigour on Home Rule for Ireland. Those eligible to vote voted for the Liberal Party, as the only party which might deliver on the subject of Home Rule. With the partition of Ireland in 1921, the Irish, now more politically aware and involved, primarily supported the Labour Party, and this allowed them entry into mainstream political life in Scotland. However, when the State supported segregated religious schooling and utilised income from the rates, there were numerous protests from Protestant churches. The progress of the Irish Catholics led to further paranoia of the Protestant community. In the 1930s, Protestant extremist groups, such as the Scottish Protestant League (SPL) in Glasgow and the Protestant Action Society (PAS) in Edinburgh, made significant short-lived political capital out of sectarian rivalries.¹

World War Two brought an end to sectarianism as both communities got involved in the war effort and in the spirit of Christianity sectarianism was pushed to the margins of Scottish society. Scots of Irish Catholic descent were able to flourish in Scottish society and benefit from better opportunities in education. Furthermore, as the traditional heavy industries went into decline, new companies with foreign ownership began hiring people from all religious backgrounds. Today, sectarian problems still exist in Scottish society but on a less intense level.

Other European migrant groups

Other immigrant groups that have enriched Scottish society on an economic and cultural level in the first half of the 20th century have mostly been from Europe. By 1914, Scotland had nearly 25,000 European residents who mostly came from southern and eastern Europe. Between 1891 and 1901, 25% of the immigrants came from Italy. The majority of immigrants, however, came mainly from Russia and Poland, and they mostly settled in the west of Scotland. Almost 50% of the male immigrants worked in coalmining and about 12% in tailoring, while most of the Italian immigrants became more involved with restaurants and the wholesale and retail trade.

English migrants settled in Scotland for industrial and commercial reasons. At each census until 1921 the number of England-born settlers increased from 1.5% in 1841 to 4% in 1921. As the 19th century continued, the number of English-born residents was higher than the Irish-born, particularly in Edinburgh. Edinburgh attracted the professionals who became involved in the industrial development of Scotland. Many of the early skilled workers and managers in the Scottish cotton industry were of English origin.

Italian settlers began to arrive in Scotland from the late 19th century onwards, primarily from northern regions such as Tuscany, and later from the Naples region. The influx of Italian immigrants rose when America altered its immigration policy and restricted entry to many of the poorest Europeans. Most of the Italians emigrated due to economic reasons as poverty and famine were widespread; their country's agriculture-based economy was suffering and industrialisation was sluggish when compared with other European countries. By the early 1900s Italian immigrants were becoming more successful as their businesses, mostly in the catering industry, flourished.²

Jewish immigrants arrived in Scotland throughout the 19th century: Edinburgh in 1816, Glasgow in 1823, Dundee by the 1870s and Aberdeen by 1893. Initially, Jews were most likely to be from Russia, Lithuania, Estonia and Latvia. Their migration can be attributed to the 'pogroms' (persecution instigated by the government against a minority group) in Russia which began in the 1800s. In 1881, 3.5% of the total foreign

¹ In Glasgow, the SPL won 23% of the total votes cast in the 1933 local elections, and similar impressive gains were made in Edinburgh by the PAS a few years later.

² They originally established themselves in areas of Glasgow (Partick and Garnethill in the West End of Glasgow) and later in the Grassmarket area of Edinburgh.

Archive Research Guides (2)

population of Scotland were Russian Jews. In 1901, this number had increased to 24.7%. By 1879, there were 800 Jews affiliated to a synagogue in the Garnethill area of Glasgow. This was one of the first synagogues built in the Victorian era in Scotland and Europe. A strong Jewish community also emerged in the Gorbals. In 1881, the number of Russian Jews relative to other foreigners increased from 19.1% to 45.9%. Many other Jewish immigrants arrived in the 1930s as a result of Adolf Hitler's persecution across Germany. The Jewish community in Scotland prospered and made a substantial contribution to Scottish society, particularly in the legal profession. Integration of Jews into Scottish society was such that attempts by the British Union of Fascists in the 1930s to spread anti-Jewish propaganda were largely unsuccessful.

In the early 1890s, a large number of immigrants from Lithuania began coming into Scotland. Many of them were farm workers who left their country because of depression in agriculture, whilst some fled tsarist oppression. The Lithuanians were persuaded by agents of the large iron and steel companies to dig coal in company-owned mines. As a result, a small Lithuanian community was established in the west of Scotland, particularly in Coatbridge, where the local mining community was often hostile. The Lanarkshire coalfields had a history of sectarian rivalry, and the Catholicism of the Lithuanian and Polish incomers only added to the opposition from Protestant miners.¹ The Lithuanians were accused of being unhygienic and posing a danger to the health of the local community. In time, however, the Lithuanian miners began to join with their fellow Scottish miners in fighting to improve conditions in the mining industry and were then accepted into the Lanarkshire Miners' Union, and gained respect from the locals. When the First World War began many men in the Lithuanian community saw themselves as Russian rather than Scottish and therefore refused to fight for Britain. This brought about the collapse of the Lithuanian community. Those who left for Russia did not return and, after the hostilities, the British authorities began to repatriate those who remained. Women and children were offered repatriation in place of poor relief. Those who were left were assimilated into Scottish life and only a few traces of this once vibrant community remained.

¹ Complaints about the undercutting of wages in which Lithuanian miners were working became the subject of STUC attention at its 1892 Congress in Glasgow. There were also major discussions in the Glasgow Trades Council and controls on the entry of immigrant labour were demanded.

Archive Research Guides (2)

Selected websites on Scottish immigration and emigration

The Scottish Archive Network: www.scan.org.uk

The Scottish Archive Network holds the emigration archives. This site supports many primary sources, including images.

Electric Scotland: www.electricscotland.com

This is an educational and research site about the history of Scotland, the Scots and Scots-Irish, and people and places around the world of Scottish descent.

BBC Education: www.bbc.co.uk/scotland/education

This website offers excellent resources on the topic of immigrants and exiles. It incorporates newspapers, personal accounts, songs, pictures and official documents focusing on Scots abroad and the Irish in Scotland.

Genuki: www.genuki.org.uk

This site provides a virtual reference library of genealogical information of particular relevance to the UK and Ireland.

Scotlands People: <http://www.scotlandspeople.gov.uk/>

This is the official government source of genealogical data for Scotland.

National Archives: <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk>

The National Archives is a government department and an executive agency of the Ministry of Justice. This site covers British topics and does not focus only on Scotland.

BBC Immigration and Emigration:

http://www.bbc.co.uk/scotland/history/scotlandonfilm/media_clips/index_topic.shtml?topic=newlife&subtopic=immigration_emigration

This site offers primary sources which cover the areas of emigration to Australia and New Zealand, and Italian immigration.

National Library of Scotland Exhibitions: <http://www.nls.uk/exhibitions/original-export/index.html>

This website provides stories from Scottish emigrants. It gives coverage of preparing to leave, experiences when they arrived and building communities, as well as identity issues.

National Library of Scotland: Scots Abroad:

- <http://www.nls.uk/catalogues/online/scots-abroad>
This site provides a great deal of material that pertains to America.
- <http://digital.nls.uk/emigration/resources/>
The Scots Abroad database provide access to brief descriptions of the collections of emigrants' correspondence, emigrants' guides and personal accounts.

Learning Teaching Scotland – Sectarianism:

<http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/supportinglearners/positivelearningenvironments/inclusionandquality/challengingsectarianism/about/index.asp>

This Learning Teaching Scotland websites provides information on Irish Immigration and anti-sectarianism.

Archive Research Guides (2)

Scots Italian: http://www.scotsitalian.com/your_stories.htm

This site contains stories and information about Italians living in Scotland.

Ancestry.co.uk (Immigration and Travel):

<http://search.ancestry.co.uk/Places/UK/Default.aspx?category=40>

In this family history research page there are record collections, history and genealogy resources to help you trace your United Kingdom ancestors.

John Gray Centre: <http://www.johngraycentre.org/collections/local-history-centre/historic-newspaper-at-the-john-gray-centre/>

'The Haddingtonshire Courier' Index via the John Gray Centre website.

Census UK: http://www.census.ac.uk/guides/brief_history.aspx

Scottish Genealogy Society – Scottish Emigration:

<http://www.scotsgenealogy.com/Links/Emigration.aspx>

The National Archives: Emigration: <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/records/research-guides/emigration.htm>

The University of Aberdeen Scottish Emigration database: <http://www.abdn.ac.uk/emigration/>

Archive Research Guides (2)

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