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Perceptions of Identity in Post-Famine Irish Return Migrants

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Introduction

This study will examine the ways in which Irish return migrants , following the Great Famine of the 1840s and 1850s, presented their identities as both Irish citizens and as immigrants, in order to explore how the experiences of these emigrants affected their world views and method of self-identification upon their return as well as how they were perceived by those who remained in Ireland throughout the famine.
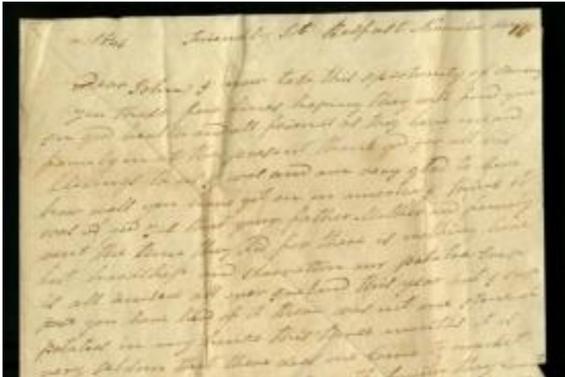

Figure 1. Letter from William Dunne to John Curtis, November 1846.

Theory and Method

History as Event, Experience and Myth

This research will explore the immigrant experience through viewing the lenses of event, experience, and myth.
The research will primarily employ analysis of letters and journals to relate the lives of the Irish through the words of the community, who shared their suffering with family and friends. Personal letters and journals demonstrate the experiences of this community from departure to arrival, their changing perceptions of their destinations, and their feelings about Ireland.

BEGGING AT CLONAKILTY.

Figure 2. James Mahoney's "Begging at Clonakilty", *The Illustrated London News* (1847).

Figure 3. Irish emigrants arrive in Liverpool.

Background

During the Great Famine, Ireland's population dropped 20-25% over the course of a decade, as a result of death and mass emigration. This influx of Irish immigrants across the world played a small part in a mass migration movement involving emigrants from all over Europe.
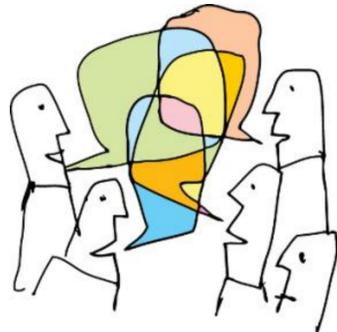

Image courtesy of Michele Brouder, book-in-a-week.com .

Perceptions of Identity

While the identities of the return migrants are the primary focus of this research, the study will also explore the perceptions of this group as seen by the Irish community. This will interpret the return migrant identity as being one that makes them both immigrants and citizens. This community faced a number of privileges as Irish-born migrants, but were often not seen as truly "Irish" because of their decision to leave Ireland during the Famine.

Sources

This research will primarily deal with sources from the personal documents of return migrants, while building off of some documents created by the immigrant community to which they also belonged. These sources include the letters passed between loved ones, often passing between Ireland and migratory destinations, as well as the personal diaries of those who chose to return.

In addition to sources created by the return migrants, this research will also employ sources created by the non-migrant Irish to provide a representation of the varied perceptions of return migrants and the perceptions of this community regarding what it meant to truly be Irish.

Research Focus

- Role of Irish communities abroad in preserving the traditions and identities of Irish immigrants
- Motivations behind return, or changes at home that counteracted their original motivations
  - Determine how the return migrants overcame these motivations in order to return.
    - What about this group made their experience or situation in emigrating different?
- Perceptions of Irish identity by emigrants and non-migrant Irish
- Homeland mythology as a motivation for return
  - Distance and time from their homeland affected the way emigrants perceived their own memories, constructing an image of their nation that deviated from its reality
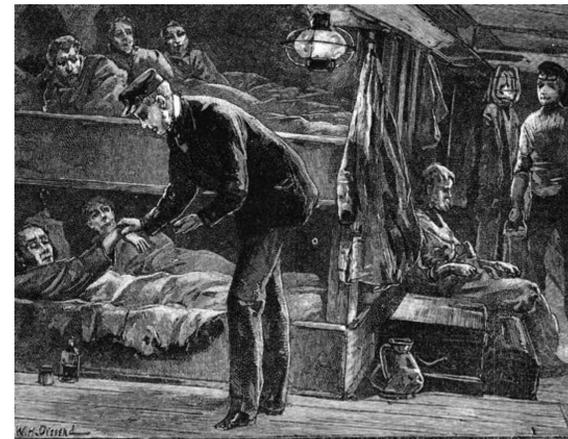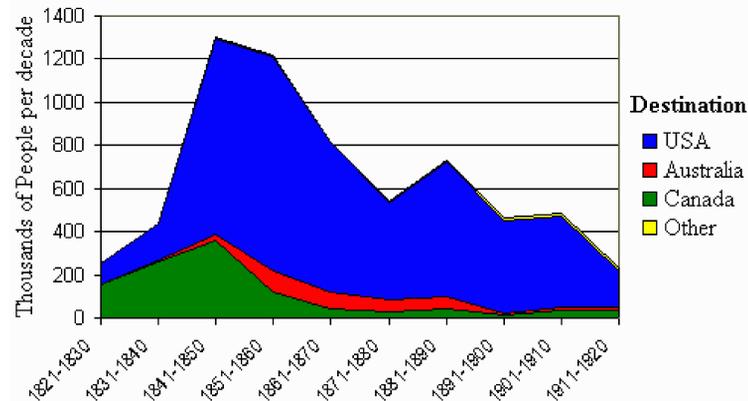

Figure 4. Victims of the Irish Potato Famine immigrating to North America by ship.

Table 1. Trends in Emigration from 1821-1920.

Destination of Overseas Emigrants from Ireland 1821-1920

Destination
- USA
- Australia
- Canada
- Other

Unlike the rest of this site, this chart is declared to be in the public domain.

Preliminary Findings

Communities across the world, particularly in the United States, grew out of the need to preserve Irish identity amongst immigrants.

Around 10% of Irish emigrants during this period returned in the decades following the famine.

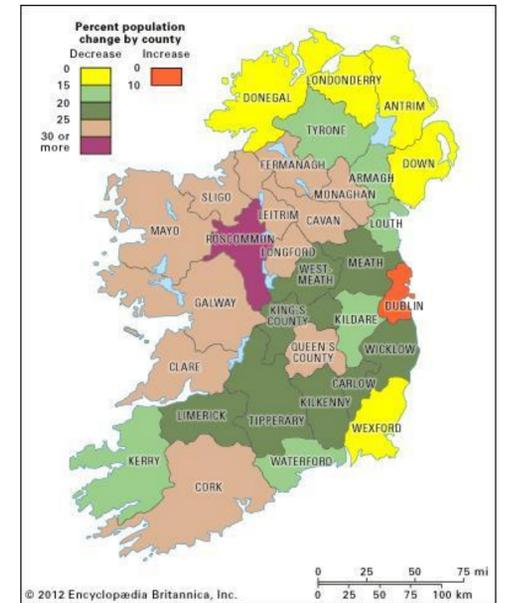Population change was greatest towards the interior of Ireland and towards the west coast.

Figure 5. Population change during the Famine, organized by county, courtesy of the Encyclopedia Britannica.

Research Timeline

Ongoing primary research will begin in January 2015 during a five-month research period in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. The research will be presented at the Phi Alpha Theta Conference in Spring of 2016.

Acknowledgements

I owe a great deal to my History 398 professor, Dr. Carolyn Vieira-Martinez, who has encouraged me to interpret theory and think critically about it's application to my thesis research. I would also like to thank my senior seminar advisor, Dr. Lee Estes, for helping refine my original thesis study, as well as my field advisor, Dr. Shira Klein for guiding me towards theories and sources that have already impacted the development of my thesis and my understanding of migration history.

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