

Essay Competition
Class A 2

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MOTIVES FOR MIGRATION
FROM BRITAIN
TO COMMONWEALTH COUNTRIES
IN 1658, 1858, 1958:
A CONTRAST

by

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Migrations from Britain to her Commonwealth countries in the first half of the seventeenth century were motivated by the religious and political situations of the time; those of the nineteenth, by economic distress in Britain; and present movements, by the need for man power in the colonies and the enticements offered to prospective colonists.

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The movements of people over considerable distances and on a large scale with the intention of abandoning their former homes for some more or less permanent new domicile have played an important part from the very beginning of human history.

The general causes discernible in primitive migrations have continued operative down to the present, although with changed importance and in somewhat different forms. They may be grouped in two broad categories: the physical causes, such as great cataclysms of nature and climatic changes; and the socio-economic causes, such as mass expulsion, defeat in war by invading migrants, and the more voluntary motivations, like the desire to exploit new economic opportunities or to conquer new lands.

Physical factors seem to have played an important role in pre-historic migrations. The successive advances and retreats of the ice sheet during glacial times were thus a direct cause of migrations on a large scale, for the human

occupants of northern Eurasia, and perhaps of North America, were irresistibly forced out of their habitats.

Migrations in modern times have assumed new forms. They have tended to be less predominantly movements of groups and more the movements of individuals seeking economic settlement or transient work in other lands. Modern migrations have been largely controlled by governmental policy; freedom of migration, first generally recognized in the nineteenth century has again been largely circumscribed in the post-war period in the interest of national policy. The overseas discoveries from the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries and the development of colonies in the New World precipitated important intercontinental migrations. In addition, the modern period, especially since the rise of industrialism, has witnessed the development of an unprecedented scale of international movements of workers, principally from rural to urban centres, and from one economic centre or region to another in the same country. In Great Britain, radical changes in agricultural organization and technique and the spread of enclosures created in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, a surplus of rural population, a part of which was forced to emigrate.

Three important groups of British settlements were established on the Atlantic coast in the first half of the

seventeenth century: Virginia and Maryland, the New England colonies, and settlements on several islands in the West Indies. It is estimated that at the peak of emigration during the seventeenth century about ten thousand persons left the British Isles annually.¹

The history of the Virginia colony begins in 1607 with the settlement of 105 Englishmen by the London Company.² The immigration was at first meager, and the scarcity of workers for tobacco raising led to the recruiting of indentured labour. Similar conditions obtained in the Catholic colony, Maryland, which was established in 1634. During the second quarter of the seventeenth century discontented Catholics turned to the West Indies which had been taken by England from Spain, and which were granted by the Crown to the Earl of Carlisle, a Catholic convert.

In New England, the first successful settlement, New Plymouth, was founded in 1620 by the Puritans, seeking to escape the political absolutism of Charles I and the religious absolutism of Archbishop Laud. Similar motives led to the founding of Connecticut in 1633. Rhode Island in 1636 and New Haven in 1638. With the economic development of the

¹"Migrations," Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences (1948 ed.), vol. 10, p. 431.

²Ibid., p.432.

colonies they began to attract not only discontented gentlemen, ministers, and small land-owners but also artisans, laborers, fishermen and sailors. In this manner the population of New England increased to an estimated 85,000 in 1660.³

Charles I quarrelled bitterly with his first three parliaments, mostly on account of the fact that he was resolute to sustain as minister, the Duke of Buckingham, a favorite counsellor of James I whom the Commons were determined to unhorse. Suspicious to the point of injustice, they would not trust Buckingham a yard with public money, grudging every penny and driving Charles to unconstitutional expedients for raising funds such as ship money and forced loans. Charles was unable to handle the serious, energetic men of the House of Commons. A troublesome Parliament he would at once dissolve; a specially troublesome member he would commit to prison without trial. He had no conception of an honest deal with an honest opponent. Yet the danger signals were numerous. Fifteen peers refused to pay the forced loan; London merchants refused to pay customs. Finally in the Parliament of 1628, the Petition of Right was drawn up. To no one of these signals would Charles attend. Then in 1629

³Ibid., p. 432.

the second session of the third Parliament refused to adjourn at the king's command. A resolution was read out denouncing Popish innovations in religion, and the levying and payment of customs. At that the king dissolved Parliament and initiated a spell extended over eleven years of personal rule.

The ecclesiastical policy of William Laud led to the foundation of the New England colonies and the the armed rising of Presbyterian Scotland against the Anglican Prayer-book, which precipitated the Great Rebellion and the overthrow of Charles I. To have been the means of launching two movements of such magnitude is a measure not of Laud's statesmanship, but of the extraordinary resentment aroused by his policy. At Oxford, where he reformed the University and Colleges, he was in his true place. His attempt to harry the English people into the acceptance of ceremonies which at that time were believed to have a Romanizing tendency met with signal and inevitable disaster. Light indeed as compared with the fierce persecutions in Spain, Holland, and Bohemia were the penalties inflicted upon those who refused to accept the uniform high church pattern which the archbishop was determined to impose upon the English Church. The "Laudian martyrs" were deprived of their livings and in some extreme cases sentenced to whipping and the loss of an ear; but they were neither burned, beheaded, tortured

nor enslaved. Yet the policy of the Archbishop was sufficiently detestable to a large section of his countrymen to promote a stream of emigration to the shores of North America. Every year from 1629 to 1640 hundreds of English gentlemen and yeomen, farm servants and ministers of religion not dissenting from the Church of England, but desiring within the ambit of that Church to worship God after their own fashion, left their native land and settled upon the shores of Massachusetts.⁴

Emigration from the British Isles declined after the Restoration as a result of improved conditions at home and because of the navigation acts imposed upon the colonies, a return movement set in. The closing of continental markets to direct American exports of tobacco by the second half of the seventeenth century ruined the small planters in the tobacco colonies; only the large planters with their Negro slaves were able to cope with the unfavorable conditions.

Previous emigration in modern times may be accounted for by religious or political causes but the impulse to the world's greatest migration (that of the nineteenth century) has been chiefly economic. Distress or the fear of distress or hope of greater advancement has been the motive which has animated the millions who have faced the dangers of the seas and risked a new life in new worlds.⁵

⁴H.A.L. Fisher, A History of Europe (London, Edward Arnold & Co., 1936), p.651.

⁵W.A. Carrothers, Emigration from the British Isles (London, P.S. King & Son, Ltd., 1929), p.1.

This fear of economic distress was for the most part due to radical changes during and following the Industrial Revolution and the enclosure of open fields and common wastes.

During the half century that followed the accession of George III, Britain led the world in the scientific progress of agriculture, largely because the land-owners loved their country estates, and being dependent on them for their vast incomes, invested much money in their improvement. As a result, rents often rose to four or five times what they had been in the former generation. Arthur Young, "practical and literary leader of English country life during the period of its revolution"⁶, saw that, if properly enclosed and cultivated, the waste lands would yield far more than the gains made by the poor of the neighborhood whose cattle wandered by right over these commons. He was no less against the great open field of the midland village with its hundreds of tiny strips and desired to see it hedged round into a score of fair-sized fields under farmers with enterprise and capital. Undoubtedly, more corn had to be grown - the French wars hindered its importation - and could best be grown on large farms. Young saw his dream realized: enclosure of

⁶George Macaulay Trevelyan, British History in the Nineteenth Century (1782-1901) (London, Longmans, Grun and Co., 1924) p. 145.

open fields and common wastes was conducted by a series of private Acts of Parliament promoted by local landlords and passed by two Houses composed almost entirely of that same class.⁷ Unfortunately, however, while the enclosures did produce more corn and wealth and thus helped England in the economic struggle with Napoleon, too often the compensation given to the dispossessed commoner or small holder was inadequate, usually taking the form of a small sum of money; the recipient had seldom any chance of setting up again as a farmer under the new system where considerable capital was required, if only for the necessary fencing. The enclosures had increased the food supply and the national wealth, but the increased wealth had gone chiefly in rent to the landlord, in tithe to the parson, and to the pocket of the more fortunate of the big farmers. The lower middle class had become poor and the poor had become paupers. Agricultural progress had been so handled as to bring disaster to the working agriculturist.

The pauperization of rural England, the long drawn-out disaster with which the nineteenth century opened, can only in part be ascribed to the mistakes accompanying the necessary enclosure of the land. It was equally due to the decadence of the cottage industries.⁸

⁷Ibid., p.146

⁸Ibid., p.149

As textile and other trades were year by year gathered round the new machinery and the new factories, the corresponding industries disappeared out of cottage after cottage, and village after village, at the very time when efforts were being made in so many districts to convert common wasteland and small holdings into large farms. The small yeoman or laborer, losing sometimes his own sources of income, sometimes those of his wife and children, and sometimes losing both together, was left in a helpless dependence on the big farmer, who, just because the rural proletariat had nothing now to live on but the farm wage, was able to cut that wage down to the starvation rate.

At this crisis in the fortunes of the poor, prices rushed up; the harvests from 1792 to 1813 were exceptionally bad; the French wars interfered with the importation of corn; food was at famine prices. The population increased with a rapidity hitherto unknown. Many went off to the new factories and helped to lower industrial wage rates. Some went to the New World, though the great tide of emigration only came in the second quarter of the nineteenth century. Enough of them remained on the countryside to prevent a rise of wages there and even to create a danger that multitudes would perish of inanition.

In order to avert widespread famine the magistrates of Berkshire attempted a remedy that perpetrated and increased the evils of the time - the famous poor-rate in aid of wages. The original idea was that these men fix and enforce a living wage for the country, in relation to the price of bread. This might have diverted England's modern social history at its source into happier channels. Unfortunately, however, the magistrates were persuaded instead to supplement wages out of the parish rates. The result was that agricultural wages were kept unduly low because the parish was maintaining the laborer and labor was plentiful. Too often wages fell and prices rose until it was no longer possible to maintain even this wretched poor-rate. This principle of supplementing wages out of rates while it kept down wages, destroyed the self-respect of the labourer, by making pauperism the shameless rule instead of the shameful exception. The net result of the enclosures and of the Speenhamland Act, as this "remedy" was called, was that the laborer had small economic motive for industry, sobriety, independence, or thrift - he was a pauper for life.

The system of poor-relief thus greatly extended was so devised as to encourage early marriage and large families. The scale drawn up and published by the magistrates of Berkshire provided that every poor and industrious person

should receive from the parish enough to make up the deficiency of his wages to 3s. a week for himself, and for every other member of his family 1s. 6d. when the loaf of bread cost a shilling. At the same time, greater medical knowledge and the adoption of practical sanitary reforms reduced the death rates which had hitherto prevailed, especially among young children. The population leapt upwards - in England and Wales it was more than doubled between 1750 and 1830.⁹ The vast multiplication in the numbers of Englishmen was one of the causes of their misery. But it helped the development of British industries, and in the following generation peopled Canada and Australia with men and women of the British race.

The most outstanding feature of the emigration movement from the British Isles during the nineteenth century was the large number of emigrants proceeding from Ireland. The majority of those who crossed to North America were persons who had held small lots of land, and had been in a position to accumulate sufficient money to pay the cost of the passage. This migration was due to the sudden and complete failure of the potato crop in 1846. There had previously been partial failures of the crop in 1839 and 1845 and during the winter

⁹E. A. Belcher and J. A. Williamson, Migration Within the Empire, (London, W. Collins Sons & Co. Ltd., 1924) p. 9.

of 1845-46 rot appeared extensively in the tubers which had been stored. Attention was drawn to the impending famine, and the seriousness of the situation even at that date was admitted. Relief measures had been taken; the trouble seemed once again to have passed. In the early summer of 1846 there was every prospect of an abundant crop. But towards the end of July the potato disease appeared and in a few days the whole potato crop was a blackened rotting mass. Naturally the greatest distress occurred amongst the laborers; the farmers were unable to give them employment. Some of them were without even the smallest piece of land, and the amount held by the most fortunate was entirely inadequate to support them even in seasons when crops were bountiful. The Prime Minister, Lord John Russell, stated that the situation was especially serious because of the previous state of destitution of a great part of the population.¹⁰ The whole world rushed to the rescue of Ireland but the absence of adequate means of communication, and the remoteness of many of the most stricken districts made relief difficult and many perished before relief came. It was impossible for the Poor Relief system to meet the situation and the Public Works, then established, interfered with the regular work of the people. In order to obviate this, the system of giving food

¹⁰Carrothers, p. 189.

to those in want was established. The distress gradually spread to the higher classes. Some of the landlords began to evict their tenants. Disease followed in the wake of famine and the sufferings of the people were in many instances gruesome and horrible. It was little wonder that the first impulse of the people was to get away from the stricken land.

Migration was encouraged also by the extension of the settlements in the United States beyond the Appalachian range and the rapid development of industry which required free labour. British settlements (in Canada) were also expanding and although the vast majority of Irish emigrants went to the United States, Canada was greatly favored, mostly on account of the fact that aid under the Poor Law Amendment Act could only be extended to people whose destination was one or other of the colonies. From 1870 to 1890, free or cheap land gave the proletarian immigrant of farm origin some assurance against the insecurity of cyclical unemployment in industry. Cheap passage due to improved ocean transportation made it easier for the emigrant to return to his native country in times of crisis.

Public regulation of emigration and immigration was more lax during this century than ever before largely because the governments found the spontaneous migratory move-

ments to be in accord with national interests as they conceived them. The European countries transported a great number of convicts and paupers to the colonies: between 1787 and 1867, 160,663 convicts were shipped to Australia from the British Isles.¹¹ In periods of crises Great Britain, and some European countries, subsidized the emigration of unemployed, paupers, and vagrants. By the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, local bodies were permitted to provide financial assistance for emigration, a power which was used extensively, especially during the potato famine of 1846-47. The countries of immigration on the other hand did not as a rule subsidize immigration although they placed their natural resources at the disposal of the immigrants.

The emigration from the British Isles in the 1820's fluctuated in accordance with changes in economic conditions. Although the United States received about one-half to two-thirds of the emigrants from Great Britain, between 1820 and 1840 on the average about 20,000 British emigrants went to Canada annually, and large numbers also emigrated to South Africa and Australia.¹² Australian emigration originated entirely with the government - 80% of all emigrants were

¹¹Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences, vol.10, p.433.

¹²Ibid., p.433

assisted from the Land Fund.¹³ to a great extent because the cost of the passage was prohibitive to the class usually desiring to migrate. The year 1851 marked the end of the era of beginnings in the Australian colonies for in that year gold was discovered. A large voluntary emigration to Australia from the British Isles commenced, but this was directed mainly to the gold-fields. An era of prosperity was inaugurated, success was assured. The period from 1830 to 1850 was characterized by one of the greatest mass migrations. But even after 1880, immigration was still increasing, reaching immense proportions, until World War I.

Today the British Empire is changed greatly. No longer are Englishmen seeking to escape tyranny or misery. Instead in this, the twentieth century, they are looking for improved conditions, and economic security.

The Commonwealth countries of the New World are young and still developing. Compared to England, they are sparsely populated, and vast stretches of their land still lie unused. As far as their natural resources are concerned, the surface has only been scratched. There is much more room for industries to build and grow, using these natural re-

¹³Carrothers, p.116

sources, to expand and improve in the young countries of the New World than in the Mother Country. And so, these young countries in invite, indeed they are petitioning for men to populate their uninhabited territories and to fulfill their need for manpower in their flourishing industries.

With this invitation, Commonwealth countries offer enticements: greater job security, better grade housing, the latest in modern living, and a better system of education. Although, in Canada for example, the main occupation is agriculture, the country has become one of the leading industrial nations. In Britain, primarily an industrial nation, raw materials are imported and the manufactured products, exported. Canada, in her earliest days, supplied not only Britain but other European countries with such raw materials from her unlimited natural resources. But this situation is gradually changing. Canada instead is promoting home industries to exploit her resources, and to make new and better products for home markets. For this she needs men and she offers the well-trained not only job security but regular advancement.

In addition, prospective colonists are offered homes with what in Europe, would be considered luxuries--indoor plumbing and central heating. But not only is this available to the new homemakers, but also modern appliances and equip-

ment to lighten the load and increase the number of leisure hours. The up-to-date is readily available in the New World.

This is applicable to education also. The democratic system of education is the prevailing idea in the Commonwealth countries of the New World. The American Revolution gave a new trend to education by making it public and free--the new nation laid great stress on education. Canada's system is very similar to that of the United States in all respects. Every child attends school until he is at least fourteen. The public schools are built, their teachers paid, and the courses of study, selected by provincial and local superintendents of education. In some provinces, the French are granted separate schools (Catholic parochial), which receive tax funds. McGill University, and the University of Montreal in the province of Quebec and the University of Toronto in Ontario are among the leading universities of North America.

One more point needs mention. While other migrants have become citizens of countries alien to the land of their birth, British Migrants alone have been able to find new homes under their own flag and allegiance -- in this great British Empire, the Commonwealth of Nations.

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