



Emigration from the UK

Summary

1. Britain is a nation of emigrants, not of immigrants. Since the middle ages our people have spread to all the corners of the globe; the country's dominant migration experience has been to send people abroad, rather than to receive them from overseas. The balance did not change until the early 1980s.

Detail

2. Henry VII encouraged John Cabot in his transatlantic ventures to Newfoundland at the end of the 15th century, around the same time as Columbus. From Elizabeth to the Stuarts, emigration to the new colonies in the Americas and elsewhere became an established part of English - and later Scottish and Irish - life. As always, motives were mixed; opportunity, improvement, making a fortune, freedom for unpopular religious views, greed. Some encouragement was given to emigration of the poor, from Tudor to Victorian times, to relieve the burden on Parish rates.

3. There are no direct data worth mentioning until the 19th century, but indirect estimates suggests a net emigration of between 5000 - 7000 people per year from the 16th to the end of the 18th century¹: about a quarter of the natural increase. By the later 19th century we know from direct data that up to 90,000 persons per year were leaving Britain. That was a major demographic contribution to the great democracies of Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United States. Peak emigration from the British Isles was reached in the last years of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th. Over 11 million British and 7 million Irish emigrants joined the total of about 52 million Europeans who emigrated across the Atlantic from 1815 to 1930². Many returned, of course - perhaps a third of those who left. Return migrants from the US exceeded emigrants from the UK in the 1930s- during the depression it was better to be back in Britain. That episode was one of the very few occasions in the last 300 years when net migration to the UK was positive, apart from the last two decades of rising immigration from the third world.

¹ Wrigley, E.A. and R.S. Schofield (1981) The Population History of England 1541-1871- a reconstruction. London, Arnold.

² Baines, D (1991) Emigration from Europe 1815 - 1930. London, Macmillan table 2.

4. After the second world war migration resumed on a large scale, encouraged by government and Commonwealth schemes of various kinds, which did not end until the 1960s. While emigration to the US never exceeded about 13,000 per year after the mid 1960s, the net loss by emigration to the Old Commonwealth (Australia, Canada and New Zealand) was 104,000 people as late as 1974. (This outflow continues today on a smaller scale but is largely counterbalanced by the popularity of the UK with young working holidaymakers from Australia and elsewhere.) Even the very large immigration from the New Commonwealth which got under way in the 1950s and which still continues, was smaller than the net outflow of British citizens until the early 1980s. In the last two decades Britain has become a country of net immigration, thus reversing an historical trend which has lasted since the time of Good Queen Bess.

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