

Immigration - 1840s to Early 20th Century

Farewell Ireland

Irish emigration developed only slowly until the Great Famine (1846-52) that forced families to leave in droves. The Famine had a devastating effect. Over 1 million people died from starvation and disease and by 1855 another 1.5 million emigrated. Many migrants arrived in the port of Liverpool, often with the intention of continuing their journey to North America or Australia. Some had only the fare for the first part of their journey whilst others were often exhausted, destitute, became ill or fell victim to criminals who preyed on their predicament and naivety. Lancashire census returns for 1851 show the Irish born population doubled in a decade to 191,000, roughly 10% of the county population.

The percentage in Liverpool was far higher, from 17.3% in 1841 to 22.3% in 1851. Between 1850 and 1913 about 4.5 million Irish people had emigrated. Conditions on ships were harsh with high mortality rates. Poor provisions and extremely basic and cramped accommodation meant diseases were prevalent. Even the short journey to Liverpool was fraught. In 1848 the steamship from Sligo encountered stormy weather. The 150 steerage passengers were all trapped in the tiny hold below; almost half died.

The Liverpool Mercury reported in 1847: "The fact is that in the cold and gloom of a severe winter, thousands of hungry and half naked wretches are wandering about, not knowing how to obtain a sufficiency of the commonest food or shelter from the piercing cold." There was an economic consequence too. "The numbers of starving Irish men, women and children – daily landed on quays is appalling; and the Parish of Liverpool has at present, the painful and most costly task of keeping them alive, if possible."

A Lancet article in the same year revealed utter desperation as: "80,000 located themselves in dog-kennels and cellars, and remained to glut the labour market and propagate a wretched mode of life. In this unhappy year, 60,000 people were attacked with fever, and 40,000 with dysentery." Most Irish migrants worked in the worst-paid, lower forms of employment, often in mills and other factories. Over 80% were described as unskilled, often as labourers for men and domestic servants for women.

Cox, Marland and York sum up their plight. "The portrayal of the Irish as able to take on the jobs no one else wanted, to survive on very little, and to inhabit the most squalid areas of town, resonates with accounts of Irish asylum patients," Theirs was a case of abandoned hope with complete loss of self-esteem and respect in the face of dire poverty and squalor.

Stemming the Tide

The Victorians had a completely open door to foreigners and drew no distinction between economic migrant and asylum seeker until late in the Victorian century. Between 1881 and 1914 some 2.7 million Jews migrated westwards from Eastern Europe to escape persecution, poverty, conscription into military service and to seek work. The assassination of the Russian czar in 1881 was followed by a series of pogroms against Jews in the Russian empire. Jews

were forbidden from owning or settling on land outside towns or moving between villages and restrictions were placed on entering higher education and the professions.

Immigration triggered a fierce debate in the UK reminiscent of today, fuelled by a clash of values, economic anxiety and a media stoking the furnace. With the arrival of Jewish refugees the hackles of the indigenous working-class rose at higher rents, lower wages and changing inner-city neighbourhoods. Mancherjee Bhowmagrae, an Indian immigrant, not only stood for parliament in 1895 but won an anti-immigration ticket. By 1901 with increasing numbers arriving in Britain, especially Russian, Austrian and Polish Jews, immigration was a serious political issue. Some politicians, aided by parts of the media, were quick to denounce it as a threat, and an 'alien invasion.' The British Brothers' League, a forerunner of the National Front and British National Party, was founded in the East End of London in the same year.

The MP for Bethnal Green South-West, Samuel Forde-Ridley, claimed that 90,000 'aliens' had settled in Britain in the first nine months of 1901. He had no real evidence for his statistics but who could argue as no official records were kept, other than the national census. It had been claimed that many entering British ports were en-route for the USA, South Africa and other destinations. Historian V. Lipman estimates the number of Russian-Jewish immigrants who settled permanently in Britain between 1881 and 1905 was about 100,000.

The 1901 Census Report noted the highest proportion of foreigners to total population was in London where it reached 30 per thousand. This masked pockets where immigration was extremely high such as Stepney at almost 40%. Parts of Spitalfields, now Whitechapel, had a 95% Jewish population. Now it has a high proportion of Bangladeshi. Only 13 towns or cities had a foreign population of more than 1%, including Manchester, Tynemouth, South Shields, Leeds, Grimsby, Hull, Liverpool, Swansea and the expanding resort town of Bournemouth.

Debating the Aliens Bill

The anti-immigration climate led to the setting up of a Royal Commission in 1902 on Alien Immigration, resulting in the 1905 Aliens Act. The second reading of the Bill in the House of Commons on 2 May 1905 is illuminating. Sir Charles Dilke, a Liberal and radical imperialist, referred to misrepresentation of figures that he felt were a gross distortion of the actuality as many arrivals were destined for the USA in particular. In 1904 four emigrant companies had reduced their fares from London to New York to £2, much lower than the fare from Germany direct to the USA. Others followed, offering an alternative embarkation port of Liverpool.

Of great concern to Dilke was the exclusion of victims of political and religious persecution, notably Russia, as the Bill excluded these people. Hounding, mob violence, disappearance, immediate arrest on mere suspicion, stripping of possessions, a pension of 40 rubles for the family of Russian soldier and none for a Jewish family, escaping tyranny, - how can we just ignore such distressing circumstances he contended. Major Evans-Gordon, MP for Tower Hamlets and Stepney, instigator of the 1902 Royal Commission, and a prime contributor of evidence, protested about supposed 'window-dressing' and government insincerity. He reminded the House "some 1.5m human beings of every age, sex and religion, the healthy and hopeful, the diseased and hopeless, good, bad and indifferent, are on the move from the

South and East of Europe, pressing towards the West." He commented that the causes were mainly misgovernment and oppression, adding other forces were at work from enticement by shipping companies to the expansion of competition given escalating demand. "Every single person who can be induced to travel is another ticket sold."

Evans-Gordon emphasised that immigration was not by any means wholly Jewish though they formed a substantial part. He spoke of 5.5 million Jews in the Russian Empire of whom a large number might be considered as potential immigrants, adding ominously, "it is the poorest and least fit of these people who move, and it is the residuum of these again who come to, or are left, in this country." Regulation, he insisted, was essential. "Are we to sit still and do nothing and without reference to our own social problems and industrial conditions." He insisted "we have remarkable proof" that aliens arriving in the United States are falling off in contrast to Britain where numbers are increasing (Opposition cries of No, No and Oh!).

The American law in regard to contract labour was more stringent as 50,000 passages were refused in one year and in Naples 10,000 passages were similarly refused. "The better class of emigrants only arrive in transit to other countries, chiefly America," Evans-Gordon insisted. He questioned why all arrivals, irrespective of destination, were subjected to close medical examination on arrival in Britain with some deemed physically unfit to proceed to other countries? Why indeed but there was more. Evans-Gordon quoted figures on those rejected by America who landed back on these shores and referred to diseases brought in such as smallpox, scarlet fever, trachoma (a contagious eye disease) and favus, "a disgusting and contagious disease of the skin," not to mention miner's worm.

Uppermost in his mind was the social and industrial impact on poor working classes who had to live with this influx and problems, whilst "Members opposite luxuriate in fine and heroic sentiment," detached from the world in which these people live. "To me it is a monstrous thing that, while we are at our wit's end to find work and house-room for our own people, we should at the same time be admitting shipload after shipload of unskilled labour." Evans-Gordon cited concerns by the Bishop of Stepney. "In some districts where there was formerly evidence of comparative wealth and comfort these had been absolutely wiped out, and the East End of London was being swamped by aliens who were coming in like an army of locusts, eating up the native population or turning them out. Their churches were being continually left like islands in the midst of an alien sea."

Prominent MP Colonel Seely put his finger on the pulse and mood of the nation in curing evils associated with immigration. Yes, keep out criminals but not those who are poor. The issue of immigration had much to do with sweated labour, long hours of work and overcrowding in the East End. "These cannot be dealt with by the present measure." He urged MPs to support the Amendment, saying "it is not wise for a Christian people to begin this sinister form of legislation. We can now say that where a man is naked we clothe him; when he is a stranger we take him in. We have not done badly, and I for one will heartily oppose any attempt at legislation such as this." Immigration, tugging at the heart-strings, was amply portrayed in Edwardian literature, including Joseph Conrad's short story *Amy Foster* (1901), Violet Guttenberg's *A Modern Exodus* (1904), Edgar Wallace's *The Four Just Men* (1905) and

works of Anglo-Jewish novelist Israel Zangwill. The government knew it was on thin ice with the Liberals waiting in the wings.

The Royal Commission on Alien Immigration heard evidence of under-reporting in census returns. Landlords did not want to reveal overcrowded properties, some immigrants were fearful of conscription and of state authority too that may rescind their right to live in Britain. A young Winston Churchill, spoke out against the tough curbs proposed by the 1902 Royal Commission, lambasting it as the work of prejudice and racism. The Act watered down the original provisions in the Bill but gave government inspectors the power to exclude paupers, unless they could prove they were entering the country to avoid persecution or punishment on religious or political grounds, or for an offence of a political nature.

The 1905 Aliens Act restricted peacetime immigration for the first time but, on coming to power in 1906, the new Liberal government did not rigorously enforce it and the number of exclusions was relatively small. Up to then Britain prided itself on liberty with no borders but no more given an influx with the prospect of many more arrivals. Jobs, pay and housing were major issues. Headlines talked of The Jewish Invasion and streets and areas taken over. Evans-Gordon was a former officer who served in India and his typical constituent was a working Tory. He travelled widely in Europe to assess the conditions and generated pressure to set up a Royal Commission. His approach was forensic and his views strident. Opposition came from the Liberals, notably Herbert Samuel. Agitation outside London was purely for political purposes he insisted. Many of these places had never seen an alien.

A prime requirement of the Act was to be self-supporting without being a burden on rates. Each person had to show they had £5 with £2 for each dependent. A way of overcoming this was to pass the £5 up and down the queue, or simply to lend it. The Act made provision for an immigration officer to be accompanied by a medical doctor. A concession was made for what we term asylum seekers, fleeing pogroms, persecution and oppression who invariably arrived in steerage class. A cold welcome often awaited. If you had means you were in as inspection was fairly cursory. The aim was to reduce the flow. In 1909 a report said that the barriers set up by the Act may be avoided with considerable ease. Whilst weak in operation it was the beginnings of an immigration policy. As historian David Glover comments, "The Act set the precedent for the ever-tightening web of immigration control that is in place today."

The Yellow Peril

The years leading up to the Boxer uprising in 1899-1901 had seen a period of concerted British expansion in China. As soldiers, missionaries and merchants set sail from Limehouse to defend and extend British interests a small Chinatown developed in the dockside streets and in Liverpool around Pitt Street and in Tiger Bay, Cardiff. Some Chinese sailors jumped ship to settle, opening: lodging houses, provisions stores, cafes, halls and laundries to cater for transient seamen and indentured labourers, signed up in China by merchant shipping companies. The Gentlemen Magazine reported that "The Chinese shops are the quaintest places imaginable" with Chinese writing to indicate the style and type of business, complete with a map of China and a Chinese Almanac.

Local ill-feeling grew. In 1908, in opposition to Chinese labour, hordes of British seamen prevented Chinese seamen from signing on as crew. They had to return to their lodging houses under police escort. In 1911 in Cardiff all 30 Chinese laundries were attacked by local mobs. In Liverpool great concern was expressed over Chinese men marrying English women, the extent of gambling and smoking of opium. Local women thought highly of Chinese men who were usually hard-working, often did not drink alcohol and took care of their families.

Soon stories emerged and myths with politicians manipulating local fears and writers seizing their chance to exploit the dramas of drug-trafficking, gambling and sexual ensnarement with Limehouse the magnet. The 1913 publication, the first Sax Rohmer tales about the evil Dr Fu-Manchu, created near hysteria. The perceived 'Yellow Peril' intensified after the Opium Wars with many believing the Chinese were intent on plotting revenge. The Chinese community depended on buoyant maritime trading between Britain and China but this declined in the 1930s. Only about 100 families then lived in Limehouse.

The Huddled Masses

In the first two decades of the new century a staggering 14.5m people arrived in the USA, mostly the poor and persecuted. As late as 1880 there were only a quarter of a million Jews in the USA. By 1924 there were four and a half million.

In the early 1900s as many as 15,000 immigrants a day poured into Ellis Island, gateway to New York City but first they had to face a battery of inspectors, interpreters, doctors, nurses, clerks, agents of aid societies, and not least conmen and swindlers making boastful promises for a modest down-payment. What's the procedure an elderly immigrant was asked many decades later. A look of utter incredulity was followed by just four words: "din, confusion, bewilderment, madness." Ellis Island was pure bedlam – and daunting.

A doctor held a piece of chalk. Diagnosis was instant but beware a chalk mark such as an H for suspected heart disease, F for facial rash that may mask an unpleasant disease, or an L for limp that might be a symptom of rickets or other form of undernourishment and E for some type of eye disease or degeneration. Then there was the immigration inspector. "Who paid your passage, ever been to prison, can you read and write and do you have a job waiting? It was a catch as the Contract Labour Law forbade signing up abroad.

Still about 80% made it to a promised land paved with gold. Their destination was invariably the Lower East side and an already overcrowded tenement block but they were free with a new life ahead in a land of opportunity. Engraved on a tablet on the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty is poem by the wealthy and erudite Emma Lazarus. Entitled the New Colossus, it represented the America that immigrants dreamt of. Part of it reads: :

"Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore,
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door."

The comparative ethos, values, culture, mind-set and approach to immigration was striking. In the USA. It was about forging a new nation, offering hope and opportunity and together creating the most powerful nation on earth in economic and later military terms. Folklore told of roads paved with gold. On arrival the reality soon sunk in. In this land of abundance, be prepared to pave the roads ahead to your personal destiny.

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Second Reading – motion & proposed: “That this Bill be now read a second time.”

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