

IRISH AND UK MIGRATION TO SOUTH AFRICA 1900-2002: WHO WENT? WHY DID THEY GO? WHAT IMPACT DID THEY HAVE?

Tara McIndoe

Senior Sophister

In this essay, Tara McIndoe examines the forces that resulted in Irish and UK migration to South Africa over the last century. She analyses the impact that this migration had on the South African economy at the time and comments on the effects that are still being felt today.

Introduction

The mass migration of economic factors of production impacts immensely on the state of the world. The reallocation of capital, labour, and goods and services determines relative and absolute standards of living as well as economic development in general. The culmination of the mass migration of these three factor resources has led inevitably (if not continually – recall the war and inter-war period at the beginning of the 20th century) to globalisation over the last 200 years.

The mass migration of these resources has not however, always developed in unison. The migration of labour especially faces a complex combination of push and pull factors and as such its relative migratory freedom has differed over time to that of capital and goods and services.¹ There is no doubt however that the mass migrations of labour since the early 19th century have altered fundamental aspects of the world, as we know it.

Although land, labour, and capital work symbiotically to effect economic development, the presence of people is the necessary and sufficient condition for initialising this development. As such examining the reasons that have led to the variety of labour movements over time and space and the impact that these movements have had on both the economies they have moved from and those they have moved to, can be a highly instructive exercise. It may also offer insightful

¹ Chiswick and Hatton (2002:1) state that “trading in goods and services and capital flows are fundamentally different then trading in labor (sic) services (people).”

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understanding into some of the major economic, social and political issues that we face today.

The characteristics of labour movements have been significantly different through history and continue to change; the questions that enable us to understand these changing patterns must be: Who goes? Why did they go? What impact did they make and do they continue to make?

In light of these three interrelated questions and the economic (and political/social) fundamentals that form their answers I would like to examine UK and Irish migration to South Africa over the last 100 years, and its apparent reversal today. By analysing the established literature relating to mass international migration, its causes and effects, over the significant and well documented eras of mass migration (which in itself is a relatively recent phenomenon), potential answers for the economic underpinnings of migration to South Africa will be formed, namely labour response to market signals. Investigations of the specific context that characterised the migration of interest, the actual and relative numbers of migrants and their timing as regards their migration, and finally the skill set of the migrants seeking new lives in Africa, are carried out in an attempt to answer these questions in a systematic way.

By going some way towards answering the questions posed above, in relation to South Africa; it is hoped that increased insight will be gained into the present reversal of migration trends between Africa and Europe; as well perhaps, as the current state of economic development that South Africa faces.

Mass Labour Migrations

Economic Reasons

“The volume of migration is best viewed as an international redistribution of labour between sectors of an integrated (if imperfectly so) market, constantly adjusting the respective supplies of labour towards those values which, given the respective *demands* for labour, would bring about the equilibrium wage differential” (original emphasis)(Gould 1979: 663).

In attempting to understand the core factors that influence migration, O’Rourke and Sinnott acknowledge that many variables can potentially determine attitudes to migration not all of which are economically motivated (2003). They find econometrically, that on the whole, economic factors controlled migration flows in the 19th century (including the introduction of anti-immigration policies) and that “mass migration undermined itself via the distributional changes which it provoked” (O’Rourke et al. 2003: 27) i.e. wage convergence between destination

and source regions. Conversely, attitudes towards migration (by destination countries) in the 20th century have been driven by economic as well as non-economic factors most notably patriotism, racism, and chauvinism. This will be amply illustrated by the migration flows to South Africa in the decades immediately following World War II. In investigating the legacy of these non-economic factors it will be seen that these may have had a significant negative impact on the South African economy in general, as such liberal democracies in the developed world currently bowing to the anti-immigration sentiment displayed by voters may find instructive examination of the long term consequences of introducing immigration policies driven by emotive rather than economic reality.

The importance of examining migration flows via an economic decision-making framework, where the full set of expected future costs and benefits is weighed up by potential migrants, has become an established departure for analysing migration patterns (Chiswick et al. 2002: 14).

Finally it must be noted that different combinations of motivating factors may define long run and short run migration streams. Empirically, wage rates as well as employment rates in both destination and source country affect yearly migration variations, thus migrants weigh up the option value of waiting. The longer run factors correspond to those previously discussed and do not include a large role for real wage ratios, whose short term influence is weakened in the long term (ibid: 15-16).

So much for the questions regarding: who migrates and why. It is apparent that the reasons for choices between different overseas destinations have not yet been fully accounted for. In fact Hatton concludes that this constitutes the least understood aspect of the global integration of labour markets. He does observe however that 'emigration streams from a given country were often dominated by one destination' (Hatton 1999: 14). He also indicates that although the destination question is resolved via economic calculus in a similar fashion to the resolution of the other migration questions, additional factors including cultural and linguistic affinity with the country of origin are also important, which may be re-enforced by immigration policy and/or prejudice in the destination country.

Last, let us investigate the impact that mass migration has had for destination and source economies over time especially as regards skill level. The skill composition of migration was increasingly influenced by immigration policies of destination countries in the immediate pre-war and post-war period, with a bias towards skilled workers that has increased the gap between skilled and unskilled wage. This has also had consequences for the flow of skills and the skills premium, and as such may have large impacts on underdeveloped countries.

Although previously these economies may have been recipients of highly skilled labour, they are now losing this labour before it has been able to increase the standards of living for low skilled labour unable to move freely to developed

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economies, which exhibit higher wages for unskilled labour than do less developed countries.

Mass Migration between the UK and Ireland, to South Africa

Migrants to South Africa

Table 1: South Africa-International migration, 1910-2002 ('000s)

Year	Immigrants	Emigrants	Net Migration	Year	Immigrants	Emigrants	Net Migration
1910-1914	227.2	215.3	11.9	1960-1964	126.1	52.5	73.6
1915-1919	67.9	92.2	-24.3	1965-1969	207.2	51.3	155.9
1920-1924	129.3	103.0	26.3	1970-1974	170.0	39.4	130.6
1925-1929	37.2	31.4	5.8	1975-1979	158.9	88.3	70.6
1930-1934	24.7	21.7	3.0	1980-1984	176.0	43.8	132.2
1935-1939	41.7	20.9	20.8	1985-1989	54.0	49.0	5.0
1940-1944	5.5	7.4	-1.9	1990-1994	53.3	30.6	22.7
1945-1949	97.0	39.0	58.0	1995-1999 ¹	22.7	44.8	- 22.1
1950-1954	82.6	62.2	20.4	2000-2002	14.4	33.4	- 19.0
1955-1959	73.8	55.1	18.7				

Source: Mitchell, B.R., (2003), *International Historical Statistics – Africa Asia and Oceania*, Palgrave Macmillan: New York, table A8, pp. 86; Statistics South Africa (2003), *Stats SA Report No. 03-51-03(2002)*, Statistics South Africa: Pretoria, pp. 2.

Data from Statistics South Africa diverges from Mitchell between 1994 and 2002. Statistics South Africa states lower figures for both migration and immigration. This leads to systematic net emigration during these years where Mitchell estimates continued net immigration. South Africa became a multi-party democracy in 1994, at this time clearly there were divergent migration measurements introduced between the South African authorities and those consulted by Mitchell.

South Africa has been an area of net inward migration for at least a century. The only significant periods of net emigration were, until 1995, during the two World Wars. Immediately after the Second World War South Africa received a huge number of international migrants, this peaked during the 1965-1969 period at nearly 160,000 net immigrants. There was a significant decline in net migration after 1984 and this has turned recently to net outward migration.

In tracing British settlement in its colonies Tinker notes that South Africa did not succeed where the other colonies did in attracting British migrants, despite its administration being wholly provided by Britain (Tinker 1995: 16). Thus the hope that South Africa would become an English-speaking country would never be realised, despite various attempts to by the administration to attract British migrants from 1820 onwards, including subsidised passage and active recruitment first by the British authorities and then (after the Second World War) increasingly by the South African authorities. The organised business of peopling the British Empire with Britons occurred as ‘Darwinian philosophy became dominant’ and it was assumed that the ‘inferior races’ would give way to the white man wherever he went. As such those bits of Africa colonised by the English represent some of the few areas of the British Empire where the white population has never been in the majority and often represented a statistically insignificant minority (Tinker 1995: 14).

South Africa has always received immigrants from a diverse range of European countries as well as Asian and other African states. Similarly it is a natural intermediate destination for international immigrants intending to settle in other areas of Southern Africa, or intending to leave the continent for extra-African destinations. Attempting to disentangle these various migration flows is thus complex in the extreme, especially given the country’s race history and thus the importance that was placed for many years on delineations along racial rather than national lines. As such the following will attempt to focus on Irish migration to South Africa over the last century in an attempt to gain an insight into the characteristics and effects migrants in general and the Irish in particular had on the South African economy. This will necessarily entail detailing British migration prior to the early 1920s and in some cases acknowledging that the British/ Irish separation is difficult to maintain. We will examine Britain then as a new destination country for South Africans in the late part of the 20th century. Ireland is increasingly becoming such a destination for Southern Africans, however the majority of these are categorised as asylum seekers and do not constitute as yet a purely labour-related issue (Mac Éinrí 2001).

Answering the Migration Questions

Who Came to South Africa?

A limited amount of research has been carried out on the Irish in South Africa, this is due in the most part to the difficulty in differentiating Irish migrants from British ones. Irish migration to South Africa was part of a general pattern that saw Irish emigration to a large extent occurring to Britain or British colonies

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(Akenson 1991). Akenson views this as part of the wider tendency for collaboration between the Irish and British as regards the general maintenance of the greater British Empire; for our purposes it means that any discussion on Irish emigration to South Africa must be viewed in light of British migration to the country.

Table 2: Net white migration into South Africa from Ireland and the UK, 1924-1970

	Ireland	UK	Other ³	Net Total
1924-1929 ¹	583	12,295	82	12,960
1930-1034	396	6,707	517	7,620
1935-1939	825	13,120	9,092	23,037
1940-1944	196	3,278	- 5,849	-2,375
1945-1949	2,157	57,898	- 5,742	54,313
1950-1954	207 ²	20,507	- 2,879	17,835
1955-1959	-	13,753	4,692	18,445
1960-1964	-	16,258	57,877	74,135
1965-1970	-	76,012	101,646	177,658

Sources: International Defence and Aid Fund, (1975), *Southern Africa: Immigration from Britain*, UN Economics and Social Council, London. pp. 24; Akenson, D.H. (1991), *Occasional Papers on the Irish in South Africa*, Langdale Press, Canada, pp. 61.

¹Figure for Ireland does not include 1924-1925

²1950 figure only, thus the 'Other' column from 1951-1970 also includes Irish migrants.

³This figure is estimated from the other three columns; many of these may have been Southern Rhodesian migrants.

As such, Table 3 indicates first that between 1924 and 1959 UK and Irish emigration to South Africa accounted for the majority of net inward migration, and immediately after the Second World War the Irish figure counted for almost 4 percent of overall inward migration to South Africa.

Although the Irish in South Africa were not a coherent ethnic group, they were significant in key areas of the South African state: the military, the management of imperialism, and the spread of the capitalist economy (Akenson 1991: 43). Irish migration from the mid-1800s although initially driven by the famine was always a "conscious individual choice" aimed at improving living conditions (Akenson 1999: 34). Thus emigrants to South Africa, either direct from Ireland or via the UK, were predominantly Protestant, overwhelmingly from the east and thus the urbanised and early-modernised areas of Ireland and, when considered as a group, they were highly skilled. The Irish who came to South Africa came to join an occupational, cultural, and racial elite. Even after 1948 when the British no longer ruled South Africa the Irish contributed to an imperialism driven by an elite racial minority.

The people who emigrated to South Africa did so mainly of their own volition, South Africa was never a destination for the forced migration of British prisoners as the USA and Australia were. Although in 1849 the *Neptune* sailed into Table Bay carrying 288 ‘ticket-of-leave’ prisoners to establish a penal settlement, the Cape colonists strongly and successfully opposed the idea and the *Neptune* had to sail to Van Diemen’s Land (McCraken 1987: 12). Thus as Akenson notes the immigrants were self-selected and often thought like South African whites before they left the British Isles, the structure and values of South Africa and of the British Isles were not very different and when taken together, South African society and the position of immigrants, were “exceptionally conducive to newcomers conforming to the social and racial attitudes of the host society” (Akenson 1999: 45).

Why Did They Come?

This question is comprised of two parts: first why did immigrants to South Africa leave their homes in Europe and second, why did they choose South Africa of all the competing destinations for European migrants.

The vast majority of the many Irish and British emigrants did not in fact migrate to Southern Africa. However those that did were driven by the economic goals that stimulate migration demand over time and space, primarily as a means to increasing their lifetime earnings potential. Although there was a constant demand for Irish (and British) immigrants from the authorities in South Africa (first the British and then the South African regimes) it seems that they were unable to attract migrants due initially (in the early 1800s) to the reputation Southern Africa had for being “unsettled and teeming with hostile Africans” (MacCraken 1992: 9), and in the late 1980s and onwards, because Irish (and British) migration patterns had by then become firmly established, despite the boom at that time of the gold and diamond mines.

“We are afraid we could not induce the Irish labouring classes to come to this colony in anything like sufficient numbers. They know nothing of it beyond a dim idea that it is associated with Kaffir wars; but they know all about America and Australia, or think they do, having heard them talked about from their infancy by those who had friends there” (Cape Town Daily News 1876, cited in McCraken 1992: 10).

Various schemes were implemented from 1820 onwards to entice the Irish to South Africa with limited success, including assisted passages either by the government or by Irish companies with branches in South Africa. Towards the end of the 19th century some success was attained in attracting single, transitory,

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Irish men to South Africa to work on the mines and in the British armed forces (at various levels). As these migrants tended to move either back to Ireland or on to Australia after bouts of work in Southern Africa, they did not establish permanent Irish settlements. Many however came privately either paying their own way or having the passage paid by a relative already resident in Southern Africa (McCraken 1992).

After the Second World War an intricate policy initiative was set up expressly to attract European emigrants to Southern Africa (namely Rhodesia and South Africa). This was driven by the demand of these Southern African economies for skilled, white labour, initially to facilitate economic growth and then as a crucial means in maintaining the Apartheid regime. The immigration policy included “private companies, travel agents, and employment bureaux [covering] Europe with the explicit or – more frequently – implicit complicity Western governments, national airlines and, last but not least, some international organisations” (Angola Comité et al. 1975: 1). Thus assisted passages were available, though these did not compare to the famous £10 fare to Australia. The emigrants left because “immigrants were offered jobs enabling them to earn more than they could earn in Britain, or people they knew recommended South Africa as a place of economic opportunity” (International Defence and Aid Fund 1975: 9). Stone maintained that South Africa did not attract “bigoted racialists,” rather ordinary people reacting to real economic incentives, who when confronted by a specific social structure tended to conform to its implicit attitudes, norms and values (Akenson 1991: 45).

What Impact Did They Have?

“These (immigrants) are people coming to South Africa in the hour of its need to stand by the Whites here” (Prime Minister Vorster 1970, cited in Angola Comité et al. 1975: 241).

The skill structure of the migrants will go a long way to indicating what impact they may have had on the South African economy both through history and as a lasting economic legacy that stretches into the future. As such the following illustrates the skill profile of British Isles migrants from the beginning of the 20th century to its end.

Thus immigration prior to the World Wars comprised predominantly of skilled labour, which had a large impact on the Southern African economies. For example, the Irish impact on the region was particularly disproportionate to their relative numbers; the settlers came because they wanted to exploit the area’s economic potential. McCracken holds that Africa attracted the ‘rugged, the colourful, the adventurous, the foolhardy Irish who drew attention to

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themselves...the settlers often had initiative and enterprise which with time could see them through to the top of their profession' (MacCraken 1992: 19).

Table 3: Occupational distribution of male migrants to South Africa from the UK, selected years, 1912-1930 (%)

Occupation	Irish			English and Welsh			Scottish		
	1912-1913	1921-1924	1925-1930	1912-1913	1921-1924	1925-1930	1912-1913	1921-1924	1925-1930
White collar									
Commerce, Finance, Professions	48.7	53.0	39.8	48.0	46.8	48.8	34.2	34.4	35.7
Skilled Trades	32.1	29.3	41.5	43.8	37.1	34.5	60.1	53.4	50.5
Blue collar									
Transport and Communications	-	2.2	2.3	-	3.3	3.5	-	3.3	3.2
Agriculture	17.0	13.1	12.7	7.4	11.6	12.4	5.5	8.2	9.8
Labourers (including Agriculture and Transport)	2.2	2.4	3.7	0.8	1.2	0.8	0.2	0.7	0.8
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Akenson, D.H. (1991), Occasional Papers on the Irish in South Africa, Langdale Press, Canada, pp. 81.

Similarly, the majority of immigrants during the time of active recruitment of white European migrants by the Nationalist Party (between 1960 and 1975) was then of skilled or managerial labour. It must be noted however, that the total immigration into South Africa (and Rhodesia) was not by any means predominantly white. Quite the contrary, migration of non-white (mainly black) unskilled labour into these economies was large throughout the period under discussion. But black workers were forbidden from holding skilled jobs and were not even given official 'immigrant' status, rather they were required to return to their countries of origin when their (usually short – 12-18 month) contracts expired (Angola Comité et al. 1975: 3).

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Table 4: Occupational distribution of (white) immigrants to South Africa, 1968-1973 (%)

Occupation	1968	1969	1970	1971	1972	1973
White collar						
Professional	24.7	25.0	27.1	25.9	28.7	31.9
Managerial/Administrative	5.1	6.2	4.7	4.1	4.6	3.7
Clerical	16.1	18.0	20.3	19.1	15.7	18.3
Salesmen, etc.	4.8	4.9	5.0	4.7	4.6	6.2
Blue collar						
Manufacturing and Construction	41.7	38.4	35.0	37.7	40.8	35.0
Mining	1.1	0.6	0.5	1.4	0.4	-
Other	6.5	6.9	7.2	7.1	5.2	4.9
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: International Defence and Aid Fund, (1975), *Southern Africa: Immigration from Britain*, UN Economics and Social Council, London. pp. 5.

Thus European (including Irish) emigration to Southern Africa over the course of the 20th century explicitly aided in the oppression of the black majority and, due to the low numbers of skilled workers available to work in the economy, promoted capital intensive rather than labour intensive growth which may have seriously depressed future African employment (ibid: 12).

Unfortunately, although the policies aimed at attracting white skilled labour into the economy have been abandoned, and positive active measures are being taken to encourage the up-skilling and skilled employment of black South Africans, the economic climate in the country has led recently to net emigration of skilled professionals, mainly to the developed world.

Abedian and Standish contend that the most important policy implications for South African leaders today are the results of the ‘previous attempts to keep blacks out of the major urban areas’ (Abedian et al. 1992: 12). Second in order of importance then is the consequences of past training and education policies and their far reaching effects on the skills-set of the labour force (ibid).

Table 5: Occupation distribution of self-declared migrants (net figure) to and from Africa, 2000-2002 (%)

Occupation	2000	2001	2002
White collar			
Engineers, Scientists, Medical workers, Educationalists, Humanities	-32.4	-32.5	-29.8
Managerial, Clerical	-29.2	-28.8	-29.5
Services, Entertainment	-6.5	- 6.5	- 5.6
Blue collar			
Mining, Artisans, Agriculture, Transport	-7.4	- 6.8	- 5.5
Unspecified	-24.5	-25.4	-29.6
Total	-100.0	-100.0	-100.0

Source: Statistics South Africa, 2003, Stats SA Report No. 03-51-03(2002), Statistics South Africa, Pretoria. pp. 3.

This is undoubtedly harming the country's present and future economic prospects. To what extent this is due to the migration history the country has experienced remains to be seen. Clearly the aggressive affirmative action that is currently being practiced in South Africa is a direct result of Apartheid and results in limited employment prospects for young skilled non-Black South Africans who may be forced to seek employment abroad.

Conclusion

Having identified the characteristics of migrants from Ireland and the UK to South Africa over the past 100 years, and having investigated the decisions they faced when deciding whether to emigrate, as well as what destinations would maximise their lifetime income flow, it is seen that South(ern) Africa attracted skilled, single men until the World Wars and skilled married men and their dependents thereafter. Currently however, South Africa is a net loser of skilled migrants to the developed world. Although the country displays positive future economic potential, to achieve this it must confront and deal with the mixed legacy that international migration policies and facts have bequeathed South Africa.

An investigation into the magnitude of these effects will aid South Africa's efforts to mitigate them, as well as instructing global immigration policy as to the potentially harmful effects of limiting labour migration to the skilled. As evidenced by the Irish experience in the late 19th century, free migration of skilled and unskilled labour has the potential to cause factor price (wage) ratio convergence between economies of both the skilled and unskilled which results in overall aggregate gains for all involved.

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