

Rural Migration and the Difference between Rural and Urban Outlooks

Black, Jeremy and Donald M. MacRaid. *Nineteenth-Century Britain*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.

During the Industrial Revolution there was a highly significant linkage between rural depopulation and urban growth, particularly in the 30 years after 1820. During the French Wars (1793-1815), the effects of rural population growth were absorbed by the prospect of steady work and of increasing wages. With a slump in post-war demand, increasing commercialisation, and the move to larger farm units (via enclosures and the like) the pull of the town and the push from the land exerted a complementary force on the increasing pool of unskilled farm labour. By 1831, there were five landless labourers in England and Wales to every owner-occupier, a ratio that had doubled since the 1690s. As agriculture became more efficient, with more food being produced by fewer workers, rural labour demands became more seasonal. Consequently, under-employment was added to the problems of this landless class. While farm-workers in Lancashire or Warwickshire could make their way to Manchester or Birmingham, the effects of the agricultural revolution were felt most acutely in those regions where alternative work, whether rural or urban was not available in remote places like Dorset or the Scottish Highlands.

Patterns of population change in rural areas between 1851 and 1911 show that there was a broad band of decline. It reached from Cornwall, Devon and Dorset in the southwest of England through to the Fens of East Anglia in the east; it cut across the middle and northern parts of Wales to the Vale of York in central-northern England. From there, it cut north along the Pennines to the Borders region of north Northumberland. Norfolk's population decreased after 1851 and it was not until about 1880 that it returned to the 1851 level. In more detail, much of the county experienced a population fall in the second half of the century, as growth was concentrated on major towns. The loss of population in the countryside reflected the difficulties of farming as well as of village handicrafts. There was a similar pattern in Lincolnshire, with growth in urban areas such as the county town of Lincoln and the rural impact of agrarian depression. Other areas that grew reflected particular economic developments such as tourism at Skegness and metallurgy at Scunthorpe. Similarly, in Berkshire there was a depopulation in some agricultural areas while other parts of the county from which people could commute to London, such as Bracknell and Maidenhead, grew.

Migration tended to move in a wave-like motion. Rural incomers to towns came first and foremost from the immediate countryside, usually in the same county. The motion of migration then carried in waves of people from more distant points. This has been demonstrated, for example, in Charles Withers' study of Highland migration to Dundee, Perth and Stirling. Overall, rural population depletion was consistent and general throughout the Victorian period, falling only after 1901 when there was an economic upturn.

Migration from rural areas was both more frequent and shorter in distance than movements between urban areas. There had long been a degree of short-distance mobility among rural workers, notwithstanding the rigours of the Elizabethan Poor Law and the various Acts of Settlement which were aimed to restrict population movement. Indeed scholars now recognise that there was significant pre-industrial labour migration, with young people from far and wide finding apprenticeships and work in domestic service-- especially in London. The highest levels of rural out-migration occurred in short hops, especially from the immediate hinterland of large cities such as Liverpool, Manchester and

Leeds and around closely situated new towns, as in Durham, west Cumberland, the west Midlands and Clydeside. The rural hinterlands of major urban centres usually had higher wages than was the case in other rural areas; but the major towns also offered the highest industrial wages. Thus,

although nearby industrial activity is thought to have forced up agricultural wages, differentials remained relatively balanced in a regional context so that rural-dwellers still migrated. For this reason, even farmers in prosperous regions were concerned about their inability to hold on to hired labour. Transient, well-paid workers, such as navvies, carried the message and example of occupational as well as physical mobility to the envious farm-hand. The disturbing effects of progress were felt long and hard in the shires. Commentators feared urban and industrial growth when they lamented the emptiness of rural communities. In *The Condition of England* (1907 edn), C.F.G. Masterman captured the foreboding of what was a common viewpoint:

Outside this exuberant life of the cities, standing aloof from it, and with but little share in its prosperity, stands the countryside. Rural England, beyond the radius of certain favoured neighbourhoods, and apart from the specialised population which serves the necessities of the country house, is everywhere hastening to decay. No one stays there who can possibly find employment elsewhere. All the boys and girls with energy and enterprise forsake at the commencement of maturity the life of the fields for the life of the town.

In the Victorian period the rural population declined in absolute and relative terms. However, while the absolute number of rural-dwellers fell only by around 11.5 per cent, the large rise in the overall population meant that the proportion of rural dwellers had declined by more than half. In the former year, 9,936,800 people (49.8 per cent), lived in rural areas in 1911 the figure was 7,907,556 (22.9 per cent). Significant out-flows occurred in the 1850s, which, although stemmed in the 1860s, were greatly increased in the 1870s and 1880s, with the end of Britain's so-called agricultural 'Golden Age', and the beginning of a period of agricultural depression. Although there was considerable return migration, the overall trend was one of permanent contraction and decline. Between 1851 and 1871, the total number of agricultural workers fell by more than 250,000. However, most of the loss from rural areas-- which, between the 1850s and 1890s, occurred at around 75,000 per annum-- was offset by the natural increase of high birth rates.

The decision to migrate from the rural areas was not taken lightly. The first link forged in the chain of migration or emigration was often made by farm-workers whose ancestors had worked the land for centuries. Once the process had been initiated, however, future movements became more likely. Further stimulus was provided by the success stories of previous generations of migrants. As early as 1833, the Petworth Emigration Society had produced a one-shilling booklet of letters from previous emigrants to Canada. The letters were re-issued within a year. Poor Law officials and private charities also sometimes assisted overseas migration or emigration.

Departures from the poor rural south were slow. Earlier in the period, laws of settlement still bound men and women to their parishes. If they fell on hard times while tramping to other places, they risked removal to their place of origins (as occurred in Liverpool in the late 1840s when many Irish migrants were forcibly returned to Ireland, despite the likelihood that death would befall them). The financial outlay of labour migration was also significant and rural workers tended to lack the complex networks and institutionalised support systems-- other than those provided by family and friends-- that facilitated the often peripatetic lifestyles of skilled migrants.

A brake was also applied by what might be termed the 'rural mentality'. Rural folk, especially in the most isolated communities, were particularly suspicious of strangers and hostile to change. To them, London might have been on the other side of the world, while a journey of just 20 miles was more than an adventure-- it meant the trauma of uprooting. These people may have seen trains but probably had not travelled on them. They undoubtedly knew of nearby towns and cities but may not

have visited them. They listened to their religious leaders who sometimes preached of the immorality, vice and unhealthy living conditions that awaited for the unsuspecting country folk. Then, again, more enlightened individuals acted as facilitators of migration, with some clerics encouraging the outward flow. Canon Girdlestone organised the migration of labouring families from Halberton, Devon, to Kent and the northern counties in the late 1860s and early 1870s, and had to do everything for those who departed, As F.G. Heath, in *The English Peasantry* (1874), recalled:

their luggage [had to be] addressed, their railway tickets taken, and full and plain directions given to the simple travellers. The plan adopted when the labourers were leaving for their new homes was to give them, as Canon Girdlestone did, plain directions written on a piece of paper in a large and legible hand. There were shown to the officials on the several lines of railway, who soon getting to hear of Canon Girdlestone's system of migration [whereby he acted as *de facto* agent], rendered him all the assistance in their power by helping the labourers out of their travelling difficulties.

The image conveyed is one of a pathetic group almost incapable of helping themselves. Indeed, some were so ignorant of geography that they even asked if they were travelling across the sea. Yet these same rustics were keen enough to take their families from a backward region where wages were no higher than 8s per week to northern towns in Lancashire where they earned not less than 13s.

Rural out-migration greatly increased in the 1880s, which caused an upturn in the economic conditions of those left behind. However, workers in the towns became increasingly restive at the sight of so many agricultural labourers moving in to search for work, citing the depressing effect upon wages and worsening overcrowding in what became a new assault on the problem of rural depopulation. Observers in the shires also noted the depletion of population, lamenting its economic origins and its social effects. Smallholdings Acts were passed in 1892 and 1907 in an attempt to encourage the rural population to hold its place. This legislation offered landless labourers a stake in the land they worked, but, as Chambers and Mingay pointed out, 'more than Acts of Parliament were needed to turn a centuries-old rural proletariat into a race of peasant cultivators' and 'the drift from the land continued to disturb observers of the rural scene. From census material of 1901 it can be inferred that fewer than half the farmworkers aged 15-24 a decade earlier remained in the industry.' Over the duration of our period, the share of the population engaged in agriculture, horticulture and forestry in England and Wales had declined from around 50 per cent to about a much-diminished, though still significant, one-third.