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# Episode 103: The Irish Diaspora and Its Legacy

## The Irish Diaspora and Its Legacy

VOICEOVER

Welcome to Up Close, the research, opinion and analysis podcast from the University of Melbourne, Australia.

JENNIFER COOK

Thanks for joining us. I'm Jennifer Cook. It's estimated as many as 80 million people worldwide define themselves as Irish. The US, Britain, Canada, Argentina, Australia and New Zealand were just some of the destinations chosen by Irish immigrants throughout the 19th century and beyond. But what does it mean to a nation to lose so many of its children and what of the impact those immigrants have had on their new homelands?

An examination of the Irish diaspora goes straight to the heart of the question of identity and culture, just how do we define ourselves? Joining us in the studio to discuss this fascinating Irish story is the University of Melbourne's Gerry Higgins Professor of Irish Studies, Dr Elizabeth Malcolm. As President of the Irish Studies Association of Australia and New Zealand and Co-Editor of the Australasian Journal of Irish Studies, Elizabeth is in a unique position to lead us through the journey and legacy of the Irish immigrant. Elizabeth, thank you so much for joining us.

ELIZABETH MALCOLM

Thank you.

JENNIFER COOK

If I could begin by asking you, just why did so many people leave Ireland and when did this mass migration start?

ELIZABETH MALCOLM

Well, large scale migration from Ireland really begins in the 17th century, so it goes back quite a long way and it becomes substantial in the 18th century but I think most people think about the mass migration of the 19th and 20th centuries. The reasons for it vary at different times: war, famine, economic problems, there's a whole range of reasons why Irish people left. But some also were just seeking better

opportunities elsewhere. I think at times people were driven out. There's an element of forced migration, particularly during the famine of the 1840s in Ireland. But after that, you do get a lot of people just seeking better opportunities overseas.

JENNIFER COOK

So how many left, what numbers are we talking about?

ELIZABETH MALCOLM

Well, we're talking about very large numbers and I think numbers are important here. In terms of the Irish, about seven-and-a-half million left in the 19th century and about two-and-a-half million in the 20th century. Now, in terms of a lot of European migrations, they're not huge numbers but you've got to remember the population of Ireland was very small. Ireland is a small country and the peak of the Irish population was 150 years ago. In the mid-1840s the Irish population was only eight-and-a-half million and it has consistently declined virtually ever since. The decline was reversed somewhat in the last 20-30 years but the Irish population, the whole island today is only about five million so it's never got back to what it was 150 years ago. A lot of that decline, of course, is due to migration.

JENNIFER COOK

Let's talk a little bit about the impact that this migration had on Ireland itself. What does that mean for a culture, for a community, for business, for education?

ELIZABETH MALCOLM

Yes. Well obviously it has a very severe impact and particularly if there's young people who are living. It was young men and young women who mainly left, people maybe in their late teens or early 20s. Migration was heavier in certain parts, particularly in the west and in the south so you get small rural communities, which would have lost most of their young people through migration. Now obviously that has very severe social effects. I think historians and sociologists are still grappling with what exactly impact the loss of such large numbers of young people had. But you do end up with communities that are predominantly elderly and also given that a lot of women left, which I think some people don't realise, how substantial female migration from Ireland was, you end up with communities that often have far more men than women. Which means that you have communities with low marriage rates, because there just aren't the women for men to marry. That's another way in which migration contributed to the declining population, that there was a low marriage rate.

JENNIFER COOK

You mentioned this large number of single women. That is quite an unusual migration pattern isn't it? Could you take us through that a bit more? Why did these young women leave?

ELIZABETH MALCOLM

Yeah. It is an unusual pattern. I mean, you did get substantial migration from various European countries in the 19th and early 20th centuries, but you tended to get single males perhaps going who might have brought their families afterwards or

families going. Ireland was very unusual in that at times male female migration was equal or in certain periods, more women left than men. Again, it's much debated why but you get women leaving rural areas, small rural communities, presumably where they had little opportunities and particularly in the late 19th early 20th century, you're getting better educated women. Education did expand substantially in Ireland. So women are looking for opportunities, maybe to put it bluntly they don't want to marry a small impoverished farmer, so they emigrate. Often we find that one woman will emigrate and she'll send the money back for her sisters to emigrate and her cousins to emigrate. Women were very good at establishing networks of immigrants and bringing out friends and relatives after they'd left.

#### JENNIFER COOK

I'm Jennifer Cook and on Up Close this episode we're talking with Dr Elizabeth Malcolm about the fascinating Irish story of immigration. Now Elizabeth, let's just follow that fascinating journey for a moment of a single Irish woman leaving her home and coming to another country. Let's just say well Australia, United States, New Zealand, what is her life like when she arrives? Does she build a life for herself, still see herself as very much Irish?

#### ELIZABETH MALCOLM

Well, it depended where a woman went. In the 19th century most typical, I suppose, Irish immigrant women would have gone to the United States, 20th century it would have been to Britain. In the United States in the 19th century she probably would have worked for a while as a domestic servant. Irish women were very heavily involved in domestic service in the United States, in Britain, also here in Australia. She would have probably worked for a few years until she married and she may have married an Irishman, but because there were a lot of Irish women often Irish women married out. They didn't actually marry Irish men, although Irish men were more likely to marry Irish women.

I mean, she would have been a working class woman but from working as a domestic servant, she probably accumulated, saved a bit of money. She was in a reasonably good economic position, by the time she decided to marry and she might have had good opportunities to select a husband. But the other thing she would have done, which is important, is that she would have been sending money back home and I think that's what we should keep in mind. That these young people, although they left Ireland they didn't most of them lose contact with their families. We have lots of emigrant letters that have been studied in recent years to show the close contacts that were kept between families and as I said, sometimes someone would go and then bring further relatives. But they also sent back money and these are called remittances and they were very important actually to small farms, say in the west or the south of Ireland. You might have three or four of your children overseas. They'd be sending money back to help support the family farm.

#### JENNIFER COOK

But the immigrants are still continuing to have a positive benefit back home in building up the country and in some ways sustaining the family?

ELIZABETH MALCOLM

Yes. Well this is where migration cuts both ways. As I said, it had some detrimental social effects in Ireland. I think there's no doubt about that. But certainly the money that the immigrants sent back was very important and of course today you see with emigrant groups, people going overseas and working and sending money back to their families. That was the typical Irish pattern in the late 19th century.

JENNIFER COOK

The first major study conducted on Irish immigrants and it's still the most influential. It was done on those who migrated to the United States. Perhaps you could just take us through and discuss what this was and how is that experience different to the Irish immigrant experience in other parts of the world?

ELIZABETH MALCOLM

Yes. Well the early work was done on the United States in the 1930s, 1940s. And it is true in the 19th century, the majority, about three-quarters of Irish immigrants went to North America. A lot of them went to the big cities of the north east and this is where you get large Irish communities in New York, in Boston, Philadelphia, perhaps also Chicago. A lot of those people who came at the time of the famine in the late 1840s or in the wake of the famine, were very poor and they did struggle.

So in the early studies you get this picture of the Irish as impoverished, as downtrodden, as discriminated against, particularly because they were Catholics and at that stage the United States was overwhelmingly a Protestant society. That picture is true. I wouldn't say it's inaccurate but it's only part of the picture. That story usually leaves out the women and portrays most immigrants as men, which of course we now know they weren't. It leaves out other aspects, I mean like there had been substantial Irish migration to the American colonies and also to Canada in the 18th century. This is a group that's known as the Scots-Irish and they mainly came from the north of Ireland, from the province of Ulster. Many of them - well most of them were Protestants.

So the immigrants you get in the 19th century are really following paths that have already been established. Also, the experience in the big north eastern cities is not the only Irish experience in the United States. I mean, studies have been done of the Irish in the south, the Irish in California and they had rather different experiences. They actually, particularly in California, they did very well.

JENNIFER COOK

Let's talk about some other places that Irish immigrants went to, Elizabeth. You're talking about Argentina, Australia, New Zealand as well.

ELIZABETH MALCOLM

I mean, the truth is that the Irish went perhaps not everywhere but virtually everywhere and larger numbers went to certain places, but I think you could look say for instance in South Africa, a large Irish population in South Africa and in other parts of Africa as well. Large Irish populations in parts of Asia. There's been a lot of work done recently on the Irish connection with India and that's a whole fascinating story as well.

I mean, the big stories are the United States, Canada, Britain, Australia, New Zealand but I think we shouldn't think the other places the Irish went to. Of course a lot of them were poor, a lot of them were escaping poverty in Ireland but you do get the whole story of the professional Irish. You get the Protestant Irish who were immigrating. You get the Irish who are doctors and lawyers and soldiers and administrators and policemen and of course there's whole religious diaspora, the Irish priests and nuns and so forth, so it's a very, very, varied and complex story.

JENNIFER COOK

I'm Jennifer Cook and on Up Close this episode we're talking with Dr Elizabeth Malcolm about the fascinating Irish story of immigration. Elizabeth, let's talk a bit about the diaspora and the effect of the diaspora on those countries, the descendants of the diaspora, those immigrants and their children who made such a great impact on their new homelands.

ELIZABETH MALCOLM

Well, the Irish and their descendants have a big impact in cultural terms of course but also in politics and you get obviously most famously John F Kennedy as President of the United States. I think a lot of people think he might have been the first Irish President or of Irish descent I should say, but he was the first Catholic president. But there had been a significant number of presidents before his time who were of Scottish Irish descent and so were Protestants, so the Irish actually were quite substantial among presidents. Equally if you look at prime ministers in Canada, in Australia, in New Zealand, you also get significant numbers of them who were of Irish descent.

JENNIFER COOK

How have the Irish immigrants and their descendants contributed to their new countries say in the areas of arts, culture, letters?

ELIZABETH MALCOLM

Oh well yes. I mean, Ireland's famous for its literature. I think Ireland's won three Nobel Prizes for Literature. If you look at the Irish diaspora, virtually all the countries that you might look at have people of Irish descent who are notable among their artists. Now, that can be writers, it can be musicians also. Irish music has been a very, very powerful influence around the world and the Irish have been famous since indeed the medieval period. Visitors commented on the wonderful nature of Irish music and you see that still expressed today throughout the Irish diaspora.

JENNIFER COOK

Now let's talk about Ireland itself as a magnet of immigration, the Celtic Tiger era of growth.

ELIZABETH MALCOLM

Well, that was such a change from what it had been before, having lived in Ireland before the Celtic Tiger and of course up until the 1980s and certainly 1990s, I mean Ireland had a tradition of migration. Ireland had all sorts of political problems and

there was the sense that it was not a very wealthy or successful country and suddenly in the 1990s it was transformed and had one of the highest growth rates, economic growth rates in the world. Suddenly also after 2000 it began to attract a lot of immigrants and for the first time in more than 150 years, you had a lot of people coming into Ireland and I think that was an enormous change.

JENNIFER COOK

So where is Ireland today, where is its position in the world today in terms of immigration?

ELIZABETH MALCOLM

I think it's a little hard to be sure at the moment. Obviously Ireland has experienced a major economic downturn in the last two years and a lot of the immigrants who came, particularly from parts of Eastern Europe have now been leaving. But we're also noticing now a lot of Irish people starting to leave again and this is causing great concern and heartache in Ireland, because a lot of Irish people associate immigration with decline, with poverty, with problems. So to see young people starting to immigrate again makes Irish people rather worried about what the future is going to be like for the country. Will it go into a more long term economic decline? Will immigrations, large scale immigration set in again? I think it's too early to know at this stage. Ireland's got serious problems. Perhaps they will be rectified but I don't think we just know at the moment.

JENNIFER COOK

Elizabeth, I'd like to thank you so much for helping us unravel this fascinating Irish story. Thank you so much for your time.

ELIZABETH MALCOLM

Thank you.

JENNIFER COOK

Relevant links, a full transcript and more info on this episode can be found at our website at [upclose.unimelb.edu.au](http://upclose.unimelb.edu.au). Up Close is brought to you by Marketing and Communications of the University of Melbourne, Australia. Our producers for this episode were Kelvin Param and Eric van Bommel, audio engineering by Gavin Nebauer. Up Close is created by Eric van Bommel and Kelvin Param. I'm Jennifer Cook and until next time, good bye.

VOICEOVER

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