

The Cross-Channel Migration of Irish Travellers

GEORGE GMELCH

and

SHARON BOHN GMELCH

Union College, Schenectaday, New York

Abstract: Until the late 1950s, Irish Travellers lived primarily in rural areas and travelled within relatively confined areas. With the urbanisation of the last quarter century, their traditional sources of income have dried up and they have had to adjust to very different circumstances. Emigration, whether temporary or permanent, to Britain was one means of adaptation. Plentiful opportunities for unskilled labour and generous welfare benefits were the main attraction. More recently, however, Ireland has become more attractive; in particular, Irish welfare benefits are now almost on a par with those in Britain.

I INTRODUCTION

This paper concerns the movement of Irish Travellers between Ireland and Britain. It examines the recent history and the causes of the Travellers' migration from Ireland and the return migration of some. In Ireland a 1981 government census enumerated 2,432 Traveller families, an estimated 14,821 persons; in Britain the same year there were an estimated 800 nomadic Irish Traveller families or about 5,200 persons.¹ Although their numbers are small, the nomadic Irish Traveller community in Britain is a highly visible one with families travelling by lorry and trailer from one urban centre to the next, camping conspicuously on waste ground, park land, roadside verges and official sites.

The migration patterns of Travelling People are markedly different from those of settled society. For unlike housedwellers, most Travellers do not have fixed property or steady wage employment which ties them to one

1. These figures come from *The Report of the Travelling People Review Body*, 1983, Dublin: Stationery Office. See also Dempsey and Geary (1980), and Rottman *et al.* (1985).

place. Nor do they have the same identification with a single community or ties to local residents that members of the settled community often have which might constrain their movement. Even Travelling families who have been settled for years often return to the road to travel during summer months. Whether living on the roadside or settled in housing, Travellers maintain an "ideology of travel" in which periodic movement and change is valued as an end in itself.

II METHODS

The data reported here were gathered over a 13-month period in 1980-1981, with a brief follow-up in 1984. The migration data were collected as part of a larger study, funded by the English Department of the Environment and the Welsh Home Office, on the status of Irish Travelling People and the effect of government policy on them in England and Wales.²

The statistical data are drawn from two surveys. The first, conducted in Ireland in the summer of 1980, gathered information on return migration from 40 Traveller households. The second and major survey, conducted in England and Wales over a six-month period, gathered information on cross-channel movement, internal migration within Britain, as well as work patterns, accommodation needs, and conflict with local authorities. The sample consisted of 118 Traveller households.

The later survey was conducted in 16 English and Welsh counties. Detailed migration histories from selected Traveller families were also recorded. The study also involved some participant observation, although the investigators did not live in a Traveller camp. In an earlier study (1971-72), however, both spent a year living with Travellers on the outskirts of Dublin and this research has informed the present study. Finally, interviews were conducted with the local authorities of 32 districts and 24 counties in England and Wales.

III EMIGRATION TO BRITAIN

Early Emigration

The cross-channel migration of Travellers to England and Wales is not, as is often believed, solely a post-Second World War development. English gypsologists and linguists have noted the presence of Irish Travellers in Britain for more than a century. George Borrow (1914) described meeting nomadic Irish Travellers in Chester and Bangor in 1854; Charles Leland (1874) and John Sampson (1891) both collected linguistic data from Travellers

2. We gratefully acknowledge the help of David Smith, who collaborated on the research, Michael Bach, Victor Bewley, Mervyn Ennis, Eithne Russell, Hughie Smith and Roy Todd.

in Bath and in Liverpool in the late 1800s; and K. Chesney (1970), writing on the Victorian underworld, says that Travellers were common enough in London that it was "virtually impossible to take a walk through a slum without hearing" their "secret Language", Shelta or Gammon.

Unfortunately, these early references do not give us any idea of the size of the Irish Traveller population in Britain at the time. Nor are we able to determine what happened to these early visitors: whether they remained in England and Wales and intermarried with local Travellers (or settled people) and lost their Irish identity, or whether they eventually returned home to Ireland.

By 1900 there was also a flow of Traveller migrants to Scotland and northern England for agricultural work, mostly potato picking. This was a form of circular labour migration in which Travellers, moving into a niche previously occupied by poor Irish farmers and labourers, left Ireland in the spring and returned just before Christmas about seven months later. Like the other migrants, most of the Travellers were from Galway and Mayo. But unlike the other migrants who left their wives behind to manage their small holdings, Travellers usually went as entire families. In recording migration histories, we found that some Traveller labour migrants stayed permanently in Scotland, switching from field work to scrap metals. Many of them are now permanent residents, and most are settled in houses. Others travelled south by horse-drawn caravan into England where some were housed, while others are still on the road.

The Post-war Period

Our survey data on Irish Travellers in the UK show that the bulk of the families travelling in England and Wales today arrived in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and except for short visits home to Ireland they have resided there continuously since their arrival. The mean number of years the families had been living in England or Wales was 19.

The primary reason for the Travellers' migration to the UK was the economic change and rural modernisation that largely eliminated the Travellers' rural niche and which subsequently pushed them towards urban areas in search of a new livelihood. As part of a general cityward migration, many families crossed the channel to Britain. According to the early migrants, they were attracted primarily by work opportunities in the large industrial centres which were being rebuilt after the war. The economic root of Traveller migration is not unlike that prompting mainstream Irish migration (cf. Jackson, 1963; Hannan, 1970; Hughes and Whelan, 1975).

Most Traveller migrants in the 1950s joined the masses of unskilled Irish emigrant labourers on construction sites, where bomb-damaged buildings and slums were being cleared and new office blocks and commercial buildings,

such as London's South Bank complex, were being put up. Once employed on construction sites they were often able to get jobs for their kinsmen, thereby encouraging other Travellers to migrate. The most popular destinations for Travellers in the 1950s were London, Birmingham and Manchester — the conurbations where the building boom was at its greatest and where jobs were available.

Another attraction was the generous welfare benefits available in the UK. They soon learned they could receive far more from the dole and children's allowance in the UK than in Ireland, and be self-employed at the same time. As a rule, Travellers migrated to English cities and to specific neighbourhoods within these cities where they already had kin. Thus, most of the Donoghues and their relations from Mullingar, for example, could be found in the Winson Green district of Birmingham; similarly relatives of the "Wexford" Connors were in the Mosside district of Manchester, and so on.

Often the first member in each family group to arrive abroad tried to lure over his or her relatives. The motive was usually to reduce loneliness and to improve the migrant family's social life by surrounding it with kin. Also, accustomed to working with kinsmen, they wished to attract reliable work-mates. Pleas for kin to join them were often made on return visits home or over the telephone. During our fieldwork with Travellers in Dublin in 1971-72 we were present when several long distance calls were made from a pub in Manchester to the coinbox in the Dublin pub where some of our informants regularly drank. Invariably, the overseas kin exaggerated the benefits of life in Manchester, claiming there was no difficulty in getting work, that accommodation was cheap, etc., all in an obvious effort to coax their relatives into joining them. Two of our informants who received these calls shortly moved their families to England.

Most Traveller migrants to Britain in the 1950s and early 1960s lived not in horse-drawn wagons or trailers on the roadside but in flats and digs, that is, they were settled and not nomadic as many are today. This was perhaps the most surprising finding to emerge from the migration case histories. It is supported by survey data which shows that 68 per cent of the households, including 85 per cent of the 1950s generation of emigrants, had for some period been housed before resuming an itinerant lifestyle.

Young single men and women typically found accommodation in the cheapest digs available; families rented rooms or squatted in abandoned housing. The neighbourhoods Travellers moved into (e.g., the Mosside in Manchester, Sparkbrook and Winson Green in Birmingham) were decayed and had large immigrant populations. Many of the Travellers who settled in these areas went back onto the road when they married. They could not afford or were not willing to pay the extra cost of renting a proper flat required for a married couple. Others who might have been able to obtain

local authority accommodation often did not know how to apply. Many families who did apply, mostly those who had contact with social workers and were high on the housing priority list, obtained council housing and are settled today.

But others, when confronted with the prospect of paying higher rents, simply bought trailers and returned to the lifestyle they had known in Ireland. Contributing to this trend was a sharp decline in the amount of rental accommodation in the UK housing market. Between 1947 and 1972 the proportion of British households renting privately-owned accommodation declined from 61 per cent to just 20 per cent (Sibley, 1981).

The conditions of unskilled wage labour were also an inducement for many men to return to the road and to itinerant occupations. Travellers, who highly value their independence, especially the freedom to determine their own work routine, did not like the strictures and regimentation of industrial employment. Factory work was described as mind-numbing and tedious, while construction work, though more interesting and done outdoors, was exhausting and back-breaking. Both types of employment required Travellers to live by the clock, a discipline many considered a hardship. Others could not tell time.

In discussing settlement in England and Wales with Travellers, we were constantly reminded of how little contact families had with other members of the communities in which they lived. They kept to themselves, interacting primarily with relatives and other Irish Travellers. The flats and rooms they rented were primarily places to eat and sleep, and little or no effort was made to make them into "homes". Travellers viewed their stay in houses as temporary – much like their attitude toward roadside camps.

While the bulk of the early migration appears to have been to urban housing, some Travellers did live on the roadside. The annual reports of the Birmingham Health Department, for example, cite a marked increase in the number of illegal Traveller encampments in the city in the 1950s. Many of the camp residents are unmistakably identified as being Irish Travellers. The reports of the Birmingham health inspectors are corroborated by numerous newspaper accounts of Irish Traveller "invasions" in other cities from the mid-1950s onward.

Some Travellers brought their own caravans and horses across the channel. From Dun Laoghaire the horses were sent separately on the cattle boat that preceded the passenger ferry by an hour. One veteran purser of the Dun Laoghaire-Holyhead route vividly recalled some of the early migrants and the problems they created for the crew as Travellers sometimes stayed below in their caravans, against regulations, and lit fires in their wood burning stoves filling the car deck with smoke. These early migrants who followed their traditional caravan lifestyle in the UK may have served as a model for the

settled Travellers. Certainly they were a living demonstration that one could successfully camp on vacant land within British cities.

Current Emigration and Return Migration

No reliable statistics exist on the number of Irish Travellers emigrating to the UK today. Nevertheless, all our sources of information, including Irish social workers, port authorities, ship personnel, and Travellers themselves, indicate that there are fewer Travellers entering the UK than in the past. Moreover, migration seems to have been declining for over a decade. That only 17 per cent of the Travellers we surveyed in the UK had been there less than ten years supports this view (without a decline in migration the figure would be much greater).

More convincing support is found in the censuses of Travellers in Ireland. In recent years there has been a marked increase in the number of families enumerated, from 1,461 families in 1973 to 2,432 in 1981, an increase of 64 per cent in just eight years.³ This is in sharp contrast to the 1950s when the Traveller population in Ireland actually declined, from 6,321 individuals in 1952 to 5,878 in 1961.

After 1961 the population rose gradually but well under the rate of natural increase through births, which suggests continuing outmigration. But after 1973 the annual rate of increase is five times greater than the rate in the previous 12 years. This can only be explained by a sharp decline in outmigration, a sharp increase in return migration, or a combination of the two. The former appears to be the more significant factor.

There has been some return migration, especially in the late 1970s, but there is no evidence of the return flow being large enough to explain the large increases in Ireland's Travelling population in the 1970s. In fact, among Irish Travellers currently residing in Britain we found little interest in returning to Ireland. Nearly 60 per cent of the surveyed household heads said their family did not plan to return to Ireland to live.⁴ They held this attitude despite their maintaining a strong identity as Irish, encouraging this identification in their children, and still referring to Ireland as "home". And with their homes on wheels, without fixed assets, and without being integrated

3. *The Report of the Travelling People Review Body* (1983).

4. Further support for this pattern was found in the survey of Irish Travellers in Ireland in which 83 per cent of the return migrants had lived in the UK six years or less. The Irish Traveller population currently residing in England and Wales has been there for an average of 19 years. In short, it seems that most Travellers interested in returning to Ireland have already gone back. As discussed earlier, the increase in the numbers of Travelling People in Ireland in the 1970s indicated some return migration at that time. But at present, Traveller migration and return has stabilised. There is still considerable movement between Britain and Ireland but most of it is visiting and stays of only a few months.

into any community in Britain, returning to Ireland would be relatively easy. Given this, their disinterest in returning is somewhat surprising. The UK survey results show that the longer an individual or family has been living in England or Wales the less likely they were to believe they would someday return home. Conversely, the families most interested in returning to Ireland are those who have been in the UK the shortest period of time.

What are the reasons for the current status in Irish Traveller migration? Several factors appear to be responsible, but of greatest importance is the improvement in economic opportunities for Travellers in Ireland. The wide gap in both employment levels and wages that existed between England and Ireland in the 1950s and early 1960s has narrowed.

Many Travellers believe they can now earn as good a living at home in Ireland as in Britain. And while there are still excellent work opportunities for Travellers in England and Wales, especially in tarmacking and carpet peddling, it has become difficult for newcomers to break in. Both activities require large capital outlay, particularly for tarmacking equipment. Furthermore, tarmacking requires a network of local contacts who can provide information about jobs. Irish Travellers who have been in the country for some time fare reasonably well but new arrivals find few jobs. It is no surprise that the wealthiest Irish Traveller families in Britain are those who have been there the longest.

For the poorer Travellers, those dependent on government assistance, there is less of a financial advantage to living in the UK today than there once was. Irish welfare benefits are now almost on a par with those in Britain. And the few families who were once able to collect the children's allowance in Britain while simultaneously letting it accrue at home have been thwarted by a new government policy (the Department of Health and Social Security now requires Irish citizens to turn in their Irish allowance books while drawing the allowance in Britain).

Once it was not uncommon for Travellers in trouble with the law to flee to Britain. But according to Dublin social workers, few offenders today board the ferry for Holyhead or Liverpool for this reason. The Troubles in the North have resulted in closer scrutiny of passengers and more diligent enforcement of a regulation requiring passengers to give a forwarding address in the UK.

Many of the Travellers who emigrated in the 1950s and 1960s are now middle-aged and have raised their children in England and Wales. The children, having only made brief visits, do not know Ireland. In explaining why they do not wish to live in Ireland, young Travellers raised abroad often use the word "lonely" – "Ireland is a lonely place". Lonely in this context means they do not know many people in Ireland, and consequently their social life would be limited. They also complained that outside Dublin there

are few of the entertainment opportunities, especially large dance halls, that they have grown accustomed to in Britain. Although they identify themselves as Irish, they are more comfortable in England or Wales where they were raised. Some middle-aged Travellers said they would return to Ireland if it were not for their children, who, they believed, would be unhappy here and would not stay.

Adults who have spent years away from Ireland themselves often no longer have close ties with Travellers at home, ties which might draw them back. Their closest kin are also living in Britain. Nearly two-thirds of the respondents' brothers and 61 per cent of their sisters were currently resident in England or Wales.

Men whose success at work depends upon having an effective network of contacts to provide them with information about work opportunities would not be as competitive in Ireland, and for women return migration was perceived as meaning more work, particularly having to beg. Irish Traveller women typically do not beg in England and Wales, perhaps because it is unprofitable in the predominantly Protestant society (Gmelch and Gmelch, 1978). They usually remain home with the children, while their husbands work. In Ireland, however, Travelling women assume responsibility for daily subsistence needs.

Some Travellers speak of being discriminated against when in Ireland. Wherever they go in Ireland they are recognized as Travellers and are treated accordingly. In Britain local authorities routinely discriminate against them as do the housedwellers, but once they are away from their campsites they are not usually recognized as Travellers and are treated no differently than working-class Irish. They are, for example, freely admitted to pubs, cinemas, dance halls and the like. In short, as Erving Goffman (1963) notes, the decoding capacity of the audience is an important factor in determining one's visibility: most Britons are not sensitive enough to the indicators of Irish Traveller identity to recognize Travellers when they are away from their encampments.

Cross Channel Movement Today

While there are few Irish Travellers permanently returning to Ireland today, many do cross the channel for short periods of time. Irish Travellers living in England and Wales had made on average 13 trips home to Ireland during their 19 years abroad, that is, about one return visit for each year and a half away. There is considerable variation, however, with some families not returning for many years and others going back several times each year. Half the respondents had been to Ireland within the previous 12 months; only 15 per cent had not been home within the past 4 years. Among the many reasons given for visiting Ireland social factors were primary. On their

last visit, 40 per cent of the respondents had gone primarily to visit family and kin; 33 per cent had gone to attend funerals.

Large-scale emigration to the UK has also ceased, at least for the present. The few first-time Traveller migrants today are mainly young newly-weds. Most intend to stay less than a year. For them, travelling to England or Wales is an opportunity to strike out on their own and to be free from the influence and pressures of parents and in-laws. For Traveller men, migration is a rite of passage, marking the transition from being economically subordinate to their parents to becoming the head of an independent household.

IV SUMMARY

Ireland and Britain comprise a single migration field in which Travellers move freely between the two countries. Irish Travellers have migrated to Britain for many generations, although most of the current generation of Travellers arrived in the 1950s and early 1960s. Most of this generation initially settled in flats and lodging houses, returning to the road upon marriage perhaps due to a shortage of affordable rental accommodation.

Migration began to decline in the 1970s as economic conditions improved for Travellers in Ireland. At present there is little movement between the UK and Ireland except for short-term visits. And as the current generation of Irish Travellers living in England and Wales ages, the prospect of any appreciable return migration diminishes. Despite their social isolation within British society, the Travellers' commitment to remaining in Britain increases as their children, who do not feel at home in Ireland, mature. As these children marry and establish families of their own, their parents are also less likely to return to Ireland since it would require leaving their children and grandchildren behind. While the population of Irish Travellers on both sides of the channel is more or less static at present, the situation could change if the economic opportunities on which Travellers depend should significantly worsen or improve on either side of the channel.

REFERENCES

- BORROW, GEORGE, 1914. *Wild Wales: Its People, Language and Scenery*, London: John Murray, (First edition 1862).
- CHENSNEY, KELLOW, 1970. *Anti-Society: An Account of the Victorian Underworld*, Boston: Gambit.
- DEMPSEY, M., and R.C. GEARY, 1980. *The Irish Itinerants: Some Demographic, Economic and Educational Aspects*, Dublin: The Economic and Social Research Institute, Broadsheet No. 18.
- GMELCH, GEORGE and SHARON GMELCH, 1978. "Begging in Dublin: The Strategies of a Marginal Urban Occupation", *Urban Life*, Vol. 6, No. 4, pp. 439-454.

- GOFFMAN, E., 1963. *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, Englewood Cliffs, N.J: Prentice-Hall.
- HANNAN, DAMIEN, 1970. *The Rural Exodus*, London: Chapman Press.
- HUGHES, J.G., and B.J. WHELAN, 1975. "Emigration: An Overview of the Irish Experience Since 1871", Dublin: The Economic and Social Research Institute (unpublished).
- JACKSON, JOHN A., 1963. *The Irish in Britain*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- LELAND, CHARLES, 1874. *The English Gipsies and Their Language*, London: Trubner and Co.
- ROTTMAN, D., A. TUSSING and M. WILEY, 1985. *The Population Structure and Living Circumstances of Irish Travellers: Results from the 1981 Census of Traveller Families*. Dublin: The Economic and Social Research Institute.
- SAMPSON, JOHN, 1891. "Tinkers and Their Talk", *Journal of the Gypsy Lore Society*, Vol. 2, pp. 204-221.
- SIBLEY, DAVID, 1981. *Outsiders in Urban Societies*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- STATIONERY OFFICE, 1983. *Report of the Travelling People Review Body*, Dublin: Stationery Office.