

Title—Emigrant Homecomings: The Return Movement of Emigrants, 1600-2000

Author—Marjory Harper

Year—2005

Categories: Migration, Colonialism, Movement, Britain

Place: Britain & The World

Time: 1600-2000

Argument Synopsis:

This essay collection aims to identify continuities and changes in the return movement of emigrants from the British Isles and Europe over four centuries. Harper notes how return movement has been largely neglected in the literature on migration and immigration and there is a need for further investigation of this subject. The collection contains eleven essays organized thematically around four sections. The four sections are: “Overviews of Return,” “Motives of Return Migrants,” “Mechanisms of Return,” and “The Impact of Return.” Harper argues that these divisions should not be seen as rigid—the experience of emigration and return defies straightforward categorization. The collection begins with long term overviews of the process of return migration before turning to address the motives of those who returned from a wide variety of locations over a period ranging from the seventeenth century to the present. The collection provides an overview of the field of emigration studies as it stands, as well as a variety of case studies.

Harper posits that all emigrants tended to construct a chosen image of their homeland as they left. These distorted memories sometimes impeded successful assimilation by those who returned to a country or community that they found was unrecognizable and alien. The onward march of time and technology brought significant changes in patterns of emigration and return across the four centuries studied at hand. The option of return became much more realistic from the mid-nineteenth century on, after the development of technologies such as the expanding railway networks, the transatlantic telegraph, and the vast expansion in the information field, especially newspapers and pamphlets. However, even in the seventeenth century, people moved back and forth across the Atlantic for reasons of business, nostalgia, or family duty. The increasing innovations in technology into the twentieth century, notably air travel, further redefined the expectations and experiences of emigrants. Another twentieth century change was the increase in state involvement in the decision-making and selection process, especially the imposition of entry restriction by a range of destinations. Every essay in the collection challenges the simplistic and unqualified correlation of success with settlement and failure with return.

All of the essays make the case for emigration as worthy of serious investigation as an integral part of the global diaspora. One chapter considers the extent to which those born overseas of Scottish ancestry returned to Scotland in the seventeenth century. Elliot’s essay examines transatlantic migration from Ireland through family letters, arguing for the importance of transatlantic networks of communication, the role of the family and ideals of masculinity in forming the lives of emigrants.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- Emigrants of all generations tended to construct or freeze their own chosen image of the homeland as they left, an image which became more indelible and unalterable as time went on
- Twentieth century rise of air travel and the telephone gave rise to mass tourism
- Conditions and opportunities in the countries of origin and destination influenced geographical patterns of return movement