

## Chapter 3

### The Transition to Mass Migration: How It All Began

European intercontinental emigration averaged about 300,000 per annum between 1846 and 1876, the vast majority of whom went to the Americas with their main destination being the United States. Earlier emigration from Europe had been a mere trickle. Spanish migration of colonists, soldiers, merchants and priests to the Americas over the three centuries after Columbus was only 2,500 per year, and even during its peak in the first half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century it averaged only 3,900 per year (Sánchez-Albornoz 1994: 27-8, 36). Even English migration across the Atlantic was only 3,500 per year between 1600 and 1776 (Canny 1994: 64). Total Irish emigration to *all* locations (including England) averaged less than 1,650 per year over the same period (Cullen 1994: 139-40). Dutch and German migrations across the Atlantic were no bigger.

To get some sense of how spectacular was the transition from trickle to flood, consider what happened to decade averages of alien passengers entering the United States between the 1820s and the 1850s (Ferenczi and Willcox 1929, vol. I). The annual average was 12,847 in the 1820s, 53,100 in the 1830s, 152,760 in the 1840s, and 275,458 in the 1850s. Thus, immigration into the United States increased by more than *21 times* over those four transition decades! Of those reporting their origin, almost 96 percent of these were European by the end of the transition, the remainder consisting of cross-border migration from British North America from above and Mexico, the West Indies and South America from below. Nor was the US alone in this surge from trickle to flood. Immigrants through the Canadian ports of Quebec and Montreal rose by an even higher

multiple: from barely 1,000 per year between 1816 and 1826, the flow rose to an annual average of 33,550 in the 1840s (the Black Famine year of 1847 alone recorded 74,408), and 29,982 in the 1850s. Immigration into Brazil increased by *11 times* between 1825-1829 and 1855-1859. True, North America and Brazil were relatively short and cheap sea voyages from Britain compared with long distance moves like those to Australia and New Zealand, but the mass migration boom was apparent there too: arrivals by sea in New South Wales totaled only 4,673 over the three years 1825-1827, while thirty years later they were more than *10 times* that (49,262 in 1855-1857). The main source of the Australian and North American immigrants was the United Kingdom, and there the recorded passengers leaving for non-European destinations were 12,510 in 1816 (the year after the Battle of Waterloo, shortly followed by European peace) to 176,554 in 1856, just four decades later, a rise of more than *14 times*.

While European emigration surged during those four transition decades, the composition of the migration also changed dramatically. The first change was from coerced to free. As we have seen in the previous chapter, it was the rise in free migration over these transition decades that is so dramatic (Table 2.1). In the 1820s, only a fifth of the immigrants into the Americas was free, the rest being slaves and indentured servants. Only a decade later, the figure was more than half, and by the 1840s it was four-fifths! This is an amazingly quick transition for only two decades. The figures for Australia were similar: in the 1810s, convicts were about 95 percent of the immigrants to those distant shores, and free immigrants were the remaining 5 percent; in the 1830s, the free immigration share was 53 percent, and in the 1840s it was 80 percent.

The other dramatic change that took place during the transition was in the composition of the free immigrants themselves. Prior to the 1820s, the voyage took so long and the steerage costs were so great that only fairly well-to-do artisans, farmers and merchants could afford to invest in the move. It was simply out of reach of the impecunious laboring class early in the century. It was not out of reach by mid century, two generations later. This dramatic switch in mix is documented in Table 3.1. In the 1820s, only 16 percent of US immigrants reporting occupation were unskilled servants or laborers. By the late 1840s and early 1850s, the figure had almost tripled to 43 percent, and by the late 1860s and early 1870s, the figure was higher still at 51 percent. We also know something about occupation mix by source-country, and it is consistent with these aggregates (Grubb 2003: Table 3). The share of laborers and servants in total US country-specific immigration rose for: Ireland between 1820 and 1851, by 58 percentage points; England between 1831 and 1846-1853, by 30 percentage points; and Germany between 1815-1820 and 1846-1853, by 4 percentage points. The average rise in the unskilled share for all three of these European emigrating countries was 33 percentage points.

And, once again, what was true of the US was also true for every European mass emigration stream. This is not to say that by 1860 the boats were crammed with Europe's poorest since this would never be true, but it was no longer only the rich and middle class that could afford the move. Later in this chapter, we will have more to say about the role of migration costs on emigrant selection. Here we only wish to make two points: first, the cream of the working class and the small farm holder both had a chance to make the move by the end of these transition decades, while they could not afford it at the beginning; and second, even by the end of the transition, the poorest never had that

chance to move, illustrated best by the fact that even when the Irish fled their famine in the late 1840s, the poorest stayed home to die (ÓGráda and O'Rourke 1997).

What accounts for the great surge in world migration centered on these four critical decades? A European peace released some pent-up demand to emigrate, and without the peace perhaps the emigration surge would have been suppressed. The fact that international conflict increased the cost of international trade and migration is illustrated clearly during the forty years from the start of the American Revolution (1776) to the defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo (1815). During the Napoleonic Wars, transportation costs skyrocketed, and even the 18<sup>th</sup> century emigration trickles dried up. Prior to 1776, Benjamin Franklin estimated that more than 150,000 German-speakers lived in and around Pennsylvania and “only after ... the end of the Napoleonic Wars, with its disruptions on the European continent and in Atlantic shipping, did German and other migration resume at appreciable levels” (Nugent 1995: 103). And what was true of German emigration to North America, was even more true of British emigration, since the Revolutionary War was, after all, an Anglo-American conflict. Thus, part of the impressive decline in transport costs and rise in trans-Atlantic migration over the two or three decades up to 1830 was simply a return to peacetime normalcy (Grubb 2003: 5). Anglo-American transportation costs fell from £10-£12 immediately after the war to £3-£5 in the early 1830s (Gould 1979: 621; McDonald and Shlomowitz 1993: Table 2, 79). Over the same period, the American passage from France fell from 300-400 to 120-150 francs (Grubb 2003: 6).

Relative peace reigned in the Atlantic economy for a century after the Napoleonic Wars, the next major interruption to mass migrations being World War I. So, apart from

the switch from almost 60 years of European conflict to peace, what accounts for the great surge in world migration, and for the change in its composition from richer to poorer migrants, during these four critical decades? This chapter will explore three forces that contributed to the transition, forces that were overwhelmed by more conventional economics during the age of mass migration that followed after mid-century, but were important in starting the process. They are sharply declining transportation costs (and disappearing emigration restrictions), rising government subsidies, and the last great European famine. All three of these were especially important during these four transition decades, and all three began to disappear from the European scene after the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. That is, between mid-century and World War I, famines disappeared from the Atlantic economy, the revolutionary fall in transport costs (including steerage) slowed down, there were no more government emigration restrictions to remove, political violence within Atlantic economy member countries ebbed, and as did conflict between those member countries under *pax britannica*. Of course, western Europe completed the transition into mass migration earlier than did the more backward eastern and southern Europe, and the same was true of government emigration restrictions, political violence and transport costs. Thus, those four decades characterize emigration from France, Germany, the Low Countries, Switzerland and the United Kingdom far more than the rest of Europe. Indeed, by 1860 those five sources accounted for 90 percent of US immigration.

Transportation costs, government subsidy and famine can be seen as almost exogenous to labor markets.<sup>1</sup> We will argue in the remainder of Part I that when the transition was complete, labor market forces took over as the instruments driving the

mass migration. But changing labor market conditions were not the dominant forces accounting for most of the transition to mass migration across those four critical decades. The rest of this chapter will elaborate on the three forces that produced the transition.

### Transition to Mass Migration and the Cost of the Move

Until well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the cost of an overseas move from Europe was simply too great for most potential migrants,<sup>2</sup> and, except under slavery and indentured servitude, it was impossible to secure financing for the move. Declining (time and financial) costs of passage, augmented family resources generated by economic development at home, and financial help from previous pioneer emigrants' remittances would together serve to change these conditions as the century progressed. But during the great transition from trickle to flood, it was the decline in steerage rates and the time in passage that mattered most, the first lowering the direct costs of the move and the second lowering the indirect costs (mainly the opportunity costs from giving up employment during the move).

Having said as much, it is surprising how little we know about the cost of moving people, when we know so much about the cost of moving goods. Let's start with the goods.

Prior to the railway era, transportation was either by road or water, with water being the cheaper option by far. Investment in river and harbor improvements increased briskly, and the construction of canals overwhelmed the construction of turnpikes after the mid-18th century. British navigable waterways quadrupled between 1750 and 1820

(Cameron 1989: 172) and canals offered a transport option 50-75 percent cheaper than roads (Girard 1966: 223). On the European continent, French canal construction boomed, while the Congress of Vienna recognized freedom of navigation on the Rhine (Girard 1966: 224). In the United States, construction of the Erie Canal between 1817 and 1825 reduced the cost of transport between Buffalo and New York by 85 percent, and cut the journey-time from 21 to 8 days. The rates between Baltimore and Cincinnati fell by 58 percent from 1821 to 1860 and by 92 percent between Louisville and New Orleans from 1816 and 1860. While it took 52 days to ship a load of freight from Cincinnati to New York by wagon and riverboat in 1817, it took only 6 days in 1852 (Slaughter 1995: 6). Productivity in the US internal transport sector probably rose at about 4.7 percent per annum in the four decades or so before the Civil War (Williamson and Lindert 1980), and, as a result, regional price differentials underwent a spectacular fall from as high as 100 percent to as low as 10 percent (Slaughter 1995: 13). In the four or five decades prior to 1860, transportation began to destroy regional barriers to internal trade and a national goods market began to emerge within the US, within Britain, and within countries on the continent. Labor migration into the interior overseas and from the interior at home was made cheaper at the same time.

Steamships were the most important 19<sup>th</sup> century contribution to shipping technology. The *Claremont* made its debut on the Hudson in 1807; a steamer had made the journey up the Mississippi as far as Louisville by 1815; British steamers had traveled up the Seine to Paris by 1816. In the first half of the century, steamships were mainly used on important rivers, the Great Lakes, and inland seas such as the Baltic and the Mediterranean. A regular trans-Atlantic steam service was inaugurated in 1838, but until

1860 steamers mainly carried high-value goods similar to those carried by airplanes today, like passengers, mail and gourmet food (Cameron 1989: 206), especially the passengers.

The other major 19<sup>th</sup> century transportation development was the railroad. The Liverpool-Manchester line opened in 1830; early continental emulators included Belgium, France and Germany. Table 3.2 indicates the phenomenal growth in railway mileage during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, particularly in the United States, where they would play a major role in creating a truly national market. Indeed, the railroad was in many ways to the United States what the 1992 Single Market program was to the European Union. But the important point in Table 3.2 is what is missing: there are no railroad mileage statistics to report for 1830, a trivial amount in 1840, but by 1850 more than 1700 miles in France, more than 3600 in Germany, more than 6600 in the United Kingdom, and more than 9000 in the United States. Note also the tiny railroad mileage entries for Austria-Hungary, Italy and Russia, thereby serving to make any significant long distance move impossible for poor workers in the east and south of Europe, at least until later in the second half of the century. The presence of railroads in the east made the move from central Europe to Trieste, the rural south of Italy to Naples, and the Jewish Pale to Bremerhaven and Odessa much easier and far less expensive, but that would have to wait until later in the century.

To get a sense of the timing and magnitude of the transport revolution in the Atlantic economy, consider Figure 3.1. What is labeled the North index (North 1958) accelerates its fall after the 1830s – its most dramatic decline by far being 1840 to 1860, and what is labeled the British index (Harley 1988) exhibits no trend at all up to 1810,



after which it underwent the same, big fall. The North freight rate index among American export routes dropped by almost 55 percent in real terms between the 1830s and 1850s. The British index fell by about 70 percent, again in real terms, in the half century after 1840. These two indices imply a steady decline in Atlantic economy transport costs of about 1.5 percent per annum, a big number indeed.

To the extent that the direct cost of migrating paralleled this fall in commodity transport costs, it suggests immense changes. But the indirect costs – the opportunity costs associated with lost work during the trip – must have fallen as well, especially given that the time in transit fell. The voyage overseas for the European emigrant started with the difficult and lengthy trek to Amsterdam, Belfast, Bremerhaven, Cork, Hamburg, Liverpool, Le Havre, Naples, Trieste and other ports of departure, trips that were expensive and time consuming before the advent of canals, steamships and railroads. By the 1850s, every major port in the northwest of Europe was within relatively inexpensive reach of the small town and rural interior.<sup>3</sup>

While the extant evidence makes quantification difficult, we do know something about what happened to costs associated with the ocean leg of the trip facing the European emigrant. Between the early 1840s and the late 1850s, passenger fares from Britain to New York fell by 71 percent (Dole 2003), and since this was a period of price inflation, the real fall was even bigger, 77 percent over these fifteen years. No doubt the fall would have been quite a bit bigger if it was quality-adjusted to account for better health services, sanitation improvements, increased space per passenger, and reduced voyage time. Indeed, the average time in steerage from Britain to the US fell by about 25 percent across the 1840s and 1850s (Dole 2003: Figure 6). The cost of long distance

moves fell as well. Over the twenty years between 1839-40 and 1859-60, the nominal contract price on government-assisted voyages from the United Kingdom to Australia fell by 16 percent (by sail, McDonald and Shlomowitz 1993: 80), which implies a real cost decline (during these inflationary decades) of 24 percent. Evidence documenting falling steerage costs between 1815 and 1840 is more spotty and anecdotal, but it seems to confirm this maritime revolution. Consider the Australia example where the cheapest fare from Britain fell from £30 in 1828 to £18 in 1836 (Richards 1993: 256), in real terms a cut of 55 percent over just eight years. The cost of transporting a convict from England to Australia fell from about £51.3 in 1816-27 to £15.6 in 1834-36, a 70 percent decline over less than 15 years (Meredith 1988: 18). In the case of the north Atlantic, by the time of the Irish famine in the late 1840s long-distance travel by sea had become relatively cheap: “A steerage passage from Ireland to Britain could be had for a few shillings and to one of the Canadian maritime ports – the least expensive transatlantic route – for a few pounds” (ÓGráda and O’Rourke 1997: 5).

The ocean leg was, of course, only one dimension of the total cost of the move. As we have seen, the ocean leg also took many fewer days in 1860 than in 1820, lowering the wages lost from time away from work, and these lost wages may have undergone an even bigger fall than that for time in steerage to the extent that the real wage, and thus the cost of each day at sea, was rising (Lindert and Williamson 1983). The mortality rate on ships also fell: between the late 1840s and the early 1880s they fell by 80 percent on the government-assisted passage to Australia (McDonald and Shlomowitz 1990). And, as we have seen, the cost associated with getting from the European interior to port, and from American port to interior also underwent a

spectacular fall over the four transition decades, perhaps even bigger than that on the ocean leg. Furthermore, the uncertainty surrounding port departure was eliminated with the appearance of Atlantic liners with published schedules (Keeling 1999), thereby reducing the time and cost of waiting for the ship to leave after making the trip from the interior.

While the real cost of the move dropped sharply over these transition decades, a more relevant index might be how those costs behaved relative to sending country incomes. We have such an index in Table 3.3 covering Scandinavia, Germany and the United Kingdom (Galenson 1984: Table 1). The numerator is the passenger fare while the denominator is source-country per capita income, the latter a good measure for the early years when the emigrants were artisans and farmers from the middle of the income distribution, but perhaps a less perfect measure for later years as more and more of the European emigrants were workers from the bottom half of the distribution. Still, since the wage rises relative to per capita income in western Europe across the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Table 6.1), Table 3.3 understates the size of the fall in the ratio of passage fares to emigrant incomes across the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Of course, the actual fall is also understated to the extent that the quality of steerage improved with less crowding, better food, lower mortality and so on.

What does Table 3.3 tell us? First, there was very little change in the index between 1688 and 1816-1821. Second, with the exception of Sweden (a 31 percent fall), there was very little change after the 1860s: the index fell by only 7 percent for Denmark between 1870 and 1900; it fell by only 9 percent for Norway between 1865 and 1899; and it actually *rose* by 17 percent for Germany between 1880 and 1900. An average of

these four source-countries implies a fall of only 8 percent. Most of this slow down in the rate of fall in the index is due to a slow down in the rate of productivity advance in shipping after the middle third of the century (Shah Mohammed and Williamson 2004). Third, there was a spectacular fall in the index during the transition decades themselves: between 1816-1821 and 1859-1861, the British-US route index fell by an amazing 80 percent, a fall that appears to have been shared along the Irish-US route. In short, Table 3.3 confirms that these four transition decades between 1820 and 1860 were ones of unique and huge declines in the costs of overseas emigration facing Europeans relative to their capacity to pay.

Finally, it should be added that changes in government attitudes towards emigration reinforced the revolutionary decline in transport costs during the transition. Government restrictions on emigration fell in the period before 1830 (Grubb 2003: 5-6). British laws prohibiting the emigration of artisans were repealed in 1825 and remaining restrictions on others were eliminated in 1827. The Passenger Act of 1803, which had curtailed previous emigration from Ireland and Scotland, was repealed in 1827. While many German states had tried to prohibit emigration before the 1820s, none of them tried to do so thereafter. Sweden repealed restrictions on emigration in 1840. In short, by the middle of the transition period, western European governments had adopted a *laissez-faire* attitude towards emigration.<sup>4</sup>

#### Transition to Mass Migration and Government Subsidies

The United Kingdom was by far the most important source of European emigrants in mid century,<sup>5</sup> and among British and Irish destinations Australia and New Zealand entailed the longest and mostly costly move. The high cost of the journey required government subsidies to people these far away places. How large were the subsidies, how many moved using them, and how were they financed? Since the subsidies arose during the transition, what share of the surge from trickle to flood can they explain? We use Australia to illustrate assisted migration, but we want to stress that by the end of the century one-tenth of all European emigrants traveled under government subsidy (Northrup 1995: 9).

The colonial government sanctioned free immigration to Australia at the end of the 1820s, having relied on British convict labor until labor supply constraints made it difficult to exploit the European boom for wool exports, created in part by declining transport costs between pastoral source and industrial market. About half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century mass migration to Australia and New Zealand – almost three-quarters of a million -- was achieved by subsidy and what might be called migrant “quality control.” The share subsidized was even bigger during the transition decades when sending region wages were lower: between 1832 and 1851, 75 percent of the immigrants to New South Wales were assisted (Madgwick 1937: Table IV). The share assisted was about the same for South Australia, but a little lower for Victoria (Haines 1997: 23). For the assisted migrants, the subsidies were essential not only for the steerage cost, but also “money was needed to get to the port of embarkation and to the ultimate destination after arrival in Australia; money was required for clothes for the journey; ... and [there was] the loss of earnings in transit” (Richards 1993: 253). Australia was simply an impossible destination

for the unassisted poor. Earlier we noted that the cheapest fare had fallen dramatically from £30 to £18 in the eight years up to 1836, but what we did not point out is that £18 in 1836 *still* amounted to about 60 percent of the male farm laborer's annual earnings in England (Lindert and Williamson 1983: Table 2), well beyond his means. If that worker wanted to leave England, the options were to take the cheaper route to North America (one sixth the cost of the fare to Australia), successfully apply for a government subsidy for the Australian move, or stay. Nor was the fare subsidy large enough to make the move possible for many potential emigrants:

even those falling comfortably within the most eligible categories ... faced substantial costs of entry into the assisted emigration scheme. For instance, all emigrants in 1849 ... were each required to deposit 2£ towards the cost of the passage; they were also bound to provide their 'outfit' (and this alone would amount to nearly 5£ ...) on top of which was the cost of getting to the port of embarkation. (Richards 1993: 263)

For a young childless couple, the unassisted share of the total cost of the move comes close to £20 or two thirds of the English male farm laborer's annual earnings. The percent would have been much bigger for an Irish male laborer since his wages were half that his English counterpart (Boyer, Hatton and O'Rourke 1994), and the Irish were about half of the assisted Australian immigrants in 1839-1851 (Madgwick 1937: 234).

We note two features of this account thus far. If the total direct cost of the move to Australia was almost £40 in the late 1830s or early 1840s, the fare subsidy must have cut that cost in half. Given what we know about migrant elasticities,<sup>6</sup> the introduction of a subsidy scheme like this would have gone a long way towards explaining the surge from

trickle to flood of free immigration to Australia over the transition. Presumably, the same was true of other countries that used subsidies extensively later in the century, like Brazil (Chapter 9). Second, positive selection – an issue we have promised to revisit in Chapter 5 – was clearly at work for Australian immigrants, more powerful than for any other move being considered by potential British emigrants. The poor simply could not afford the move, and it was almost impossible for them to get loans since they had no collateral. The inference, of course, is that only those of higher ‘quality’ from the middle or upper part of the earnings distribution would have been able to make the move. This would have been true even of those selected for the government subsidy, since they still had to rely on family resources to cover non-steerage costs, an amount equal to the subsidy. Presumably, therefore, the 25 percent that left for South Australia and New South Wales in the 1840s without a subsidy were selected from far up the earnings distribution, and even those selected for subsidy could not have been very poor. British and Irish emigrants financing their own move had to have been of ‘high quality.’ Did government authorities also make an effort to select ‘high quality’ candidates among those applying for subsidy?

One of the most contentious debates between British emigrant authorities and spokesmen for colonists’ immigrant interests was over ‘quality,’<sup>7</sup> much like many debates today over the so-called Third World brain drain to the OECD (Chapter 15). Australian colonists wanted high quality immigrants, while British authorities wanted to “shovel” their low quality poor to Australia (Johnston 1972: Chp. 1), keeping the high quality labor at home. The debate was resolved after 1831, and it was all about who paid the subsidy.

While the British were debating what to do about their poor and their poor laws in the 1820s and 1830s, emigration entered the conversation as a partial solution to poverty – namely, export it. However, just as parish revenues funded the operation of the poor law, the same revenues were seen as the source of funding for emigration subsidies. Britain wanted to export these wards of the state, but taxes on parish property-holders were thought to be the proper source of the funding. If British tax payers were being asked to pay the freight, it was thought that they should be able to use their taxes to get rid of the poor – that is, they wanted *negative* selection. Previous experimental efforts to export paupers to Canada and the Cape of Good Hope proved too costly, and failed. It didn't work for Australia either, but perhaps for different, political economy reasons.

The policy debate started with Wilmot Horton who was Under-Secretary in the Colonial Office in the 1820s. Horton was “the greatest proponent of the view that public money should be employed to assist large-scale emigration from Britain, to be financed mainly from parish rates” (Richards 1993: 258). Horton failed in his efforts, but the policy was resurrected by Edward Gibbon Wakefield in 1830. All of Horton's most important ideas dealing with pauper emigration as a British and Irish safety valve were retained *except* that revenues from the sale of colonial (state) land in Australia would be used to finance the subsidies, not taxes on parish land in England. Since land values were booming in Australia and slumping in England (Chapter 6), the idea had a lot going for it. Indeed, booming export prices in Australia implied booming land prices and revenues from land sales, and thus a growing tax fund for assisting immigrants (who might then augment the capacity of the export sector). Slumping export prices would have the opposite effect, thus helping account for the striking instability in the immigration time



series. But since the Australian colonies were now paying the subsidy, they wanted full authority over who got the subsidy, and that meant *positive* selection not the negative selection favored by Britain.<sup>8</sup> The colonists won this brain drain policy battle, and positive selection was the order of the day.

Even though the composition of European emigrants shifted dramatically during the transition between 1820 and 1860, away from middle class merchants, comfortable farmers and skilled artisans and more towards laborers, the Australian example illustrates that positive selection was still at work. Even with the large subsidy, the cost of that long-distance move was out of reach of the really poor, and the immigration authorities made sure that their subsidies financed only the “best and brightest” among farm laborers and domestic servants who wished to leave the United Kingdom. This was true of the Irish immigrants to Australia (Fitzpatrick 1980), Scottish immigrants to New Zealand (McClellan 1990), and English immigrants to both (Madgwick 1937: Chp. XI; Richards 1993; Haines 1997: Chp. 2).

This section cannot end without emphasizing that it has used Australia as an excellent example, but that other “empty” regions were also trying to lure European immigrants with subsidies. For example, Brazil established a system in 1850 and 1854 whereby immigrants were given public land free of charge. The Brazilian “enactors of the 1850 land law saw [it] as absolutely necessary ... to compete with the US, Canada, Australia, Argentina and other countries in the market for immigrants” (Nugent and Saddi 2003: 12). By the 1860s, both the US and Canada had generous homestead acts whereby any adult (including immigrants) could get public land at small cost, and by the

1880s about half of Argentina's immigrants were subsidized by the state (Nugent and Saddi 2003: 14).

### Transition to Mass Migration and the Irish Famine

The third exogenous and once-and-for-all event that contributed to the transition to the age of free migration was the Irish famine. That sentence implies an agenda for this section: Was the famine really exogenous? How big was the contribution of famine-induced overseas emigration to surge in mass migration during the transition decades? Was it the poorest and most vulnerable to famine conditions that moved? And did the famine-induced emigration have a permanent impact on subsequent Irish emigration?

Let's start with the first question. There have been two traditions in the literature. One tradition is Malthusian, and it argues that Irish emigration was just another way to deal with over-population (ÓGráda 1984). High fertility and early marriage initiated increasing pressure on the land, declining living standards and increased vulnerability to harvest shortfalls. The harvest that mattered in the Irish case was the potato, the key wage good for the Irish working poor in the pre-famine years. When a harvest shortfall hit, the "excess" population either succumbed at home, or escaped death by emigration. In either case, the population fell to some new equilibrium. According to the Malthusian view, the Great Famine was inevitable and unavoidable, and since it was the dominant view held by British authorities at that time, it helps explain why Irish famine relief was so modest. For example, one of the most influential economists in the United Kingdom, Nassau Senior, wrote in an 1849 issue of the *Edinburgh Review* that poor relief was the problem,

not the famine (ÓGráda 1988: 112). Senior and the other economists who had the ears of politicians at that time certainly were not without their critics:

To leave all the misery consequent upon improvidence and ignorance, to say nothing of imprudence and vice, to their own reward ... and to refuse any relief by charity to those who are perishing ... would require a heart of iron – a nature from which the natural instinct of sympathy or pity have been expelled or destroyed. (Comment attributed to novelist Maria Edgeworth in ÓGráda 1988: 113.)

At first glance, the evidence appears to be consistent with this Malthusian view. After all, Irish population increased by more than 70 percent over the fifty years before the Great Famine, from 4.8 million in 1791 to 8.2 million in 1841 (O'Rourke 1991: Table 1). And it fell by almost a third between 1841 and 1861, from 8.2 million prior to the famine to 5.8 million a decade or so after the famine. Whether Ireland's working poor were driven to "subsistence" over that half century before 1841 can be debated, but two assertions *cannot* be debated. First, whether they were driven down to subsistence or not, wages were at or very close to subsistence prior to the famine: "the typical farm worker in prefamine Ireland was paid a potato wage not much above subsistence" (ÓGráda 1988: 18). Second, whether subsistence or not, in the middle of the century Irish farm wages were only a little more than half of those in Britain, and Irish building wages were only a third of those in the US (Boyer, Hatton and O'Rourke 1994: Figs. 11.1 and 11.2). Obviously, the Irish working poor were much more vulnerable to harvest disaster than were farm laborers in England and elsewhere in western Europe. In short, the

demographic events we just summarized can be seen as consistent with the Malthusian interpretation.

An opposing view has risen in favor of late, led by Joel Mokyr (1980, 1985) and Cormac ÓGráda (1988, 1994), and it argues that the potato blight was an exogenous event, unrelated to the half century that preceded it. Even a brief summary of this exogenous-shock view would take us too far afield, but perhaps a quote from one of the proponents will offer a flavor:

The [Malthusians tend] to view the Great Famine as both unavoidable and inevitable. I see it instead as a tragic outcome of three factors: an ecological accident that could not have been predicted, an ideology ill geared to saving lives and, of course, mass poverty. The role of sheer bad luck is important: Ireland's ability to cope with a potato failure would have been far greater a few decades later, and the political will – and political pressure – to spend more money to save lives greater too. (ÓGráda 1988: 122)

This opposing view has more to it than simply that the potato failure was truly an exogenous event. It starts with Amartya Sen's (1981) insight that starvation is not only the result of a harvest shortfall but also the result of a market solution under conditions of unjust property rights (e.g. lack of entitlements). While perhaps true of Asian and African famines over the last century, ÓGráda (1988: 79) has argued persuasively that the Irish famine is an exception to Sen's rule: food availability *was* the problem.

How big was the famine-induced Irish exodus? That the Irish made an important contribution to the mass migration surge from trickle to flood is not in doubt. The contribution of the Irish to overseas migration during the critical years 1846-1850 was

immense, since they accounted for 71 percent of all European overseas migration over those five years, and they were 50 percent of the US immigration (Ferenczi and Willcox 1927: 230, 380). True, many of those Irish migrants would have moved even in the absence of famine, but it appears that the “famine emigrants ... numbered more than half of the one and a half million ... who left Ireland for good between the mid-1840s and the early 1850s (ÓGráda and O’Rourke 1997: 4).” They were also important over the longer transition that includes the Great Famine: the rise in Irish immigration to the US between the 1820s and the 1850s was a third of the rise in all US immigration. The Great Famine accounts for much of the transition to mass migration between 1820 and 1860.

Did the poorest and most vulnerable emigrate from Ireland? So far, we have characterized the transition between 1820 and 1860 as a change from *very* positive selection among free European emigrants to just positive selection. That is, more and more of the working class were able to move, but the poorest of them could not and did not. What about the Irish during the famine? Did a poverty trap prevent emigration from being an efficient form of Irish famine relief (ÓGráda and O’Rourke 1997: 5)? It appears so. The poorest provinces report the largest human cost of the famine, the biggest population loss was recorded for Connacht (the poorest of the four provinces) and the smallest for Ulster (the richest). Nor were the emigrants the poorest:

... the migrants were not the very poorest or the worst affected by the potato famine. Most of them relied on their own resources in funding their emigration; perhaps fifty thousand of nearly a million were assisted by landlords or the state ... This implies that the very poorest, those with no savings or [compensation for

eviction to fall back] on, could not travel. The implication is that the receiving countries were not getting the paupers. (ÓGráda and O'Rourke 1997: 12)

Recent estimates imply that excess mortality from the Irish famine was about one million, and they were likely to have been the poorest.

The less poor emigrated: one and a half million of them managed to escape the famine by emigration. That the figure is so high might seem somewhat surprising given the poverty of Ireland even among its richer provinces and among its more favored classes. Surely one of the reasons that the famine emigration was so high is that Ireland had been sending its sons and daughters abroad to North America and Britain for some time, although not in the famine numbers. The Irish started crossing the Irish Sea in significant numbers in the 1820s, so that by 1841 there were 416,000 Irish-born in Britain (Williamson 1986: 707). The Irish were entering the US at the rate of 30,000-50,000 per year by the late 1830s and early 1840s (Ferenczi and Willcox 1927: 380). Thus, there were Irish pioneers abroad ready to help many of the Irish escaping the famine in the late 1840s. This friends and relatives effect became a very powerful force during the age of mass migration after 1860, but, though weaker, it was already at work for the Irish when the disaster hit.

Did the famine-induced migration from Ireland have a permanent impact on that country's emigration experience for the rest of the century? As we shall see in the next chapter, these famine-pushed emigrants were able to finance the moves of subsequent emigrants. In addition, real wage improvements at home – permanently raised by the famine de-population (Boyer, Hatton and O'Rourke 1994) – would have made it easier for the Irish working poor to finance their move. Evidence in support of this position can

be found by comparing the elasticity of emigration to wage differentials between Ireland and abroad, before and after the famine. Low elasticities would be consistent with poverty constraints on the move. High elasticities would suggest that the poverty constraint had been at least partially released by remittances from abroad, or by rising wages at home induced by greater labor scarcity, or both. It turns out that the elasticities were indeed *much* higher in the 1850-1880 post-famine decades than in the 1829-1836 pre-famine decades, almost *16 times* higher (ÓGráda and O'Rourke 1997: Table 8).

### Looking Ahead from the Transition

By 1860, the transition to the age of mass migration was complete, at least for western Europe. Transportation costs had fallen enough to put the cost of an overseas move within reach of a good share of the working class in countries where living standards were highest. Industrial revolutions had begun to raise real wages enough in western Europe to make it easier for families to finance the move using their own resources. Pioneer emigrants had during the transition established a large beach-head abroad so they could be used as an additional source of financing for subsequent moves. Demographic transitions in Britain and on the continent began to generate increasing numbers of young adults eager to move. And not only had emigration policy become *laissez faire*, and not only was immigration policy open, but some governments were actually subsidizing the moves, especially to overseas locations that were distant and expensive to reach. The Atlantic economy was now ready for the age of mass migration.

## Endnotes to Chapter 3

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<sup>1</sup> “Almost” exogenous, since it could (and has been) argued that rising migration lowered steerage fares due to scale economies on the traditional trans-Atlantic routes. It is also true that government subsidies in host countries were most often funded by export sector performance, another component of the 19<sup>th</sup> century global boom. See below.

<sup>2</sup> One of the best recent accounts of the fact that only the well-to-do could afford the expensive 18<sup>th</sup> century trans-Atlantic move is in Wokeck (1999).

<sup>3</sup> For an excellent description of the difficulty of reaching the European port of departure, see the 18<sup>th</sup> century account in Wokeck (1999: Chp. 4).

<sup>4</sup> East European governments did not. Russia, it will be recalled from Chapter 2, restricted emigration until long after the 1860s.

<sup>5</sup> In 1846-1850, Britain accounted for 78 percent of European migration overseas (Fererenczi and Willcox 1929, vol. I: Table 1, 230).

<sup>6</sup> Emigration was sensitive to steerage and other costs of the move (Dunkley 1980: 356), and a large part of that sensitivity was reflected in destination choice. See also Chapter 4.

<sup>7</sup> Actually, until the 1860s the assistance scheme was implemented by the Colonial Land Office and the Emigration Commission in London.

<sup>8</sup> Between 1835 and 1841, Australia experimented with a bounty system in which the colonists ... themselves choose emigrants in England and [brought] them to the colony, receiving from the colonial Government a bounty equal to the cost of passage. From this scheme ... the colonists expected several advantages. They would import people whose occupations fitted them for colonial life and there would no longer be any danger of an over-supply of tradesmen for whom no demand existed. The cost of selecting the emigrants in England would disappear,



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for the colonists would bear the whole cost, as well as the whole responsibility for the selections. (Madgwick 1937: 150)

The bounty system failed since they were not big enough for settlers who were averse to risk.