Causes for the continued high migration rates in post-Famine Ireland: An analysis for the gender differences in rates of migration from Ireland.

Patrick Duffy writes that migration can be conceptualised as people moving from places of low opportunity to areas of higher opportunity and that through this definition most migrants can be viewed as individuals moving by their own volition in a response to knowledge about other places and therefore making a rational decision to move.¹ This essay will itemise the causes for the continued high migration rates in post-Famine Ireland and will study these factors through a gendered lens. Combining secondary sources such as the writings of Robert E. Kennedy, David Fitzpatrick, Kerby A. Miller and Janet A. Nolan alongside primary sources such as Parliamentary Papers, Bills and letters written by Irish emigrants, this essay will explore how migration, especially female migration, took on a compelling role in post-Famine Irish society.

From studying House of Commons Papers on emigration from the British Isles for the decade 1857-67 a clear depiction of the rate of post-Famine Irish migration can be observed. Irish migrants greatly outnumbered English and Scottish in their flow to the United States and the British Colonies. For example, in 1853 over 150,000 Irish migrants emigrated to the United States compared to just over 26,000 from England and 7,000 from Scotland.² The tables included in these papers portray the fall of Irish migration between 1857-67 but not drastically and the rate continued to consistently outnumber that of English and Scottish. In relation to the gender differences in rates of migration from Ireland, the House of Commons Papers record 23,775 male general labourers in 1867 and 11,227 females categorised as ‘spinsters’.³ What is striking from the figures is that Irish female emigrants greatly

² Return of Number of Emigrants from United Kingdom for British Colonies or United States of America, 1857-67, 1869, 2, Session Paper, 397.
³ Return of Number of Emigrants from United Kingdom for British Colonies or United States of America, 1857-67, 1869, 5, Session Paper, 397.
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outnumbered their female counterparts from England and Scotland. In 1857, just over 13,000 Irish ‘spinsters’ migrated to America and a decade later the figure had only fallen by 2,000.\(^4\) A notable observation is that even though the rate of ‘spinsters’ migrating from Ireland in the ten-year period from 1857 reduced, the amount of skilled female migrants emigrating to the United States increased from over 2,000 in 1857 to over 5,000 in 1867.\(^5\) The high rate of skilled female migrants leaving Ireland during this post-Famine period could be due to the lack of opportunity for women in Ireland at this time, especially skilled women. Janet Nolan writes that Irish females regained the lead in emigration totals in the mid-1880s. Between 1885 and 1920 females outnumbered males among the 1.4 million people leaving Ireland by almost twenty thousand.\(^6\) Nolan typifies the large amount of female emigration as a reflection on the economic downswing in the United States in those years. Male emigration rates were tied to the prosperity of industry while women could easily find work as domestic servants in American cities.\(^7\)

When studying causes for the continued high migration rates in post-Famine Ireland one must not look past the legal power of landlords over their tenants. Acts such as the Deasy Act in 1860 made the eviction process even easier for landlords.\(^8\) Robert Kennedy writes that evictions and terrorism increased during and immediately after the 1845-48 famine.\(^9\) Parliament enforced power to the landlord class by passing twelve coercion acts between

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\(^4\) Return of Number of Emigrants from United Kingdom for British Colonies or United States of America, 1857-67, 1869, 4-5, Session Paper, 397.

\(^5\) Ibid.

\(^6\) Janet Nolan, Ourselves alone: women’s emigration from Ireland, 1885-1920 (Kentucky, 1989), p.49.

\(^7\) Ibid.


\(^9\) Ibid.
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1847 and 1857 which suspended the few rights had previously by tenants.\textsuperscript{10} For example, the Landlord and Tenant (Ireland) Bill passed by Parliament in 1850 stated that tenants found cutting or carrying away crops on Sundays or by night, with intent to prevent a Distress of Rent could be punished by fine and imprisonment.\textsuperscript{11} The Bill also declares that the landlord may seize the goods in the act of being removed and the horses and carriages used for carrying them.\textsuperscript{12} Bills such as this gave a power to landlords that was almost draconian.

However, the links between eviction and emigration after the famine are not as connected as may be expected. The numbers of persons who were officially reported to have been evicted made up a small minority of all reported emigrants between 1849 and 1882.\textsuperscript{13} From 1849-82 over 500,000 tenants were evicted and over 3,000,000 people emigrated from Ireland which meant that evicted persons only made up one sixth of the overall number of emigrants.\textsuperscript{14} Robert Kennedy concludes from these figures, that the great majority of emigrants during this period did not wait to be evicted before deciding to leave Ireland.\textsuperscript{15} Factors such as the high rents demanded by many landlords and their refusal to lower them during times of distress and the passing of acts that gave landlords more power and authority over their tenants certainly contributed to emigration.\textsuperscript{16} The threat of eviction and the rising power of landlords would have affected both male and female’s equally as many tenant families would have been driven to emigrate. It could be concluded that it was the threat of eviction and the factors that could lead to eviction that had an impact on emigration, not eviction itself.

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{11} \textit{Bill, intituled, Act to amend and improve Relations of Landlord and Tenant in Ireland}, 1850, 4, Bills, 551.  
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
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Chain migration played a major role in the continued high migration rates in post-Famine Ireland. Robert Kennedy writes that having arrived in America and the British Colonies, many immigrants sent money back to their relatives in Ireland so they could emigrate also. Kennedy estimates that between 1848 and 1900 ‘America money’ paid for at least three-quarters of all Irish emigration to the United States and that without it Irish mass emigration would not have been possible.\(^{17}\) Links forged through family and friends in America and the British Colonies helped to sustain migration. Letters from Irish immigrants back home to their relatives conjured emigration.\(^{18}\) According to Fitzpatrick letters were also used to influence home decisions and to regulate future emigration.\(^{19}\) The trend of chain migration can be seen in the letters of Biddy Burke in Brisbane Australia to her family in Balroebuck Beg in Co. Galway from 1882-1884.\(^{20}\) Throughout her letters Biddy emphasis her brother’s success in saving as well as earing money in Queensland.\(^{21}\) Biddy also writes: “I am sorrow that I hadn’t come 5 years before I did come I would have a lot of money now”.\(^{22}\) The positive declarations of economic prosperity in Biddy Burke’s letters contribute to the promotion of further emigration and feed directly into the concept of the chain migration that Fitzpatrick writes of. Biddy’s writings of the economic gain experienced in Australia gives


\(^{21}\) David Fitzpatrick, *Oceans of Consolation: Personal Accounts of Irish Migration to Australia* (Cork, 1994), p.149.

\(^{22}\) David Fitzpatrick, *Oceans of Consolation: Personal Accounts of Irish Migration to Australia* (Cork, 1994), p. 150.
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an additional insight into the one of the main causes for the continued high migration rates in post-Famine Ireland, the desire for improved opportunities and prospects.

Throughout Biddy Burke’s letters an ongoing bond with home is evident. Biddy writes: “I hope in God that you will live to see the day that we all meet together in the old home again.” 23 Biddy Burke toys with the idea of going home but notably she does not state that it would be a permanent return writing: “I am coming home one of these days… I don’t suppose I could live there now”. 24 There is no sense from Biddy’s letters that she was an unwilling exile. For many Irish settlers to both Australia and North America the migration was made smoother by the networks of relatives and neighbours already there and could be viewed as a pull factor for the continued high migration rates in post-Famine Ireland. Kerby Miller states that nearly all post-Famine emigration was channelled by existing family networks. 25 Janet Nolan argues that the excess female migration was not necessarily a migration of single women, it often represented a female emigration pattern of women following a male relative’s earlier journey abroad. 26 According to Nolan, by the early 1850s the emigration of wives joining their husbands already abroad raised overall female emigration totals considerably. 27 Another important ethnic network for Irish migrants was the Catholic Church. Fitzpatrick writes that the Catholic Church not only acted as a moral mentor, but

26 Janet Nolan, Ourselves alone: women’s emigration from Ireland, 1885-1920 (Kentucky, 1989), p.47.
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also an emigration agency. Biddy Burke writes: “I go to Mass every Sunday a nine clock and to vespers at night”. Robert Kennedy writes that throughout the nineteenth and into the beginning of the twentieth century that the economic and social discrimination faced by Irish Catholics was a major motivation for emigration. Kennedy states that for the majority of the Catholic population, to be born poor was to remain poor as long as one remained in Ireland and that throughout the nineteenth century and into the beginning of the twentieth, social and economic discrimination experienced by Irish Catholics was a major motivator for emigration. Kennedy acknowledges that Irish immigrants in the United States did face religious prejudice and social discrimination, however, legal discrimination on the basis of religion which characterised Ireland for more than a century was unknown in the United States. Although Biddy Burke makes no reference to religious persecution being a motivator for her emigration, the legal discrimination on the basis of religion which was prevalent in Ireland was fairly unknown in both the United States and Australia and it could be concluded that for some migrants the religious discrimination faced in Post-Famine Ireland was reason for their decision to leave their homeland. Biddy Burke’s emphasis in her letters to reassure her family at home that she continued to be a devout Catholic shows the importance of Catholicism for the Burke family. The cultural baggage brought by Biddy to her country of emigration prevails throughout her letters.

29 Ibid.
31 Ibid.
33 Ibid.
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Although greatly outnumbered by migrants to Britain and the United States, David Fitzpatrick writes that between 1840 and 1914, about a third of a million Irish people emigrated to the Australian colonies.\textsuperscript{34} An intense influx of Irish migrants to Australia took place in the early 1860s and Fitzpatrick suggests that this was due to the United States being involved in Civil War which made it a temporarily unattractive destination for Irish migrants.\textsuperscript{35} During the American depression in the mid-1870s the last great wave of Irish immigration to Australia took place.\textsuperscript{36} Australian colonies offered financial encouragement for emigration, under schemes. Settlers from England or Scotland were preferenced over the Irish and there was a desire for Protestant settlers over Catholic.\textsuperscript{37} However, the Irish eagerness and the need for unskilled labourers in the colonies ensured that the Irish became the majority among assisted immigrants.\textsuperscript{38} Fitzpatrick writes that Australia was “chronically starved of women”.\textsuperscript{39} The importation of Irish girls as servant and potential wives proved as greatly beneficial for Australia’s development. Irish women greatly outnumbered men among assisted immigrants to both Victoria and New South Wales until the mid-1850s.\textsuperscript{40} What makes this emigration pattern unusual is that every other immigrant flow from other countries was predominantly dominated by men.\textsuperscript{41} Clearly Irish females were pulled as much as pushed out of post-Famine Ireland. The higher amount of Irish female emigrants in

\textsuperscript{34}David Fitzpatrick, \textit{Oceans of Consolation: Personal Accounts of Irish Migration to Australia} (Cork, 1994), p. 6.
\textsuperscript{35}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{36}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{37}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{38}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{39}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{40}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{41}Ibid.
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comparison to other countries was because in many cases their home communities held no future for them.

Kerby Miller writes that in relation to the ‘push factors’ of female emigration from Ireland, most scholars conclude that the reason few women left Ireland between 1815 and 1844 was that their status in pre-Famine rural society was relatively favourable.42 Prior to the Famine, most Irish rural women were content to remain in Ireland and Irish emigration to North America was predominantly male.43 However, Miller also acknowledges that the lack of pre-Famine women emigrating may have had more to do with their subjugated condition in early nineteenth-century Ireland, than their alleged high status and contentment.44 Giving an example of this, Miller displays a positive correlation between literacy and emigration. Not until 1850 did female literacy rates rise and it was not until 1861 that Irishwomen were twice as likely as Irishmen to be bilingual which would account for the high rate of female migration in post-Famine Ireland as before the famine there was a high, negative correlation between Irish speaking and emigration.45 A rise in women becoming both literate and bilingual in post-Famine Ireland would have made them more marketable in America and therefore would explain the high rate of female migration during this period.

Miller states that nearly all scholars agree that in the post Famine period, a great increase in female emigration occurred because of the deterioration of the socio-economic status of rural Irishwomen. According to Kennedy the relatively greater emigration of females than males

42 Kerby A. Miller, Ireland and Irish America: Culture, Class and Transatlantic Migration (Dublin, 2008), p.301.
43 Ibid.
44 Kerby A. Miller, Ireland and Irish America: Culture, Class and Transatlantic Migration (Dublin, 2008), p.306.
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from Ireland after 1870 was due to several factors. Kennedy writes that while women were gaining social status in Britain and urban America during the period, the status of young single women in Ireland was declining, Kennedy judges this from age-specific mortality rates of the sexes. Kennedy identifies the desire for Irishwomen to escape the degree of male dominance and the attraction of emigration to the United States with its rapid urbanisation as important factors in the increase in emigration of young Irish females at the time.\(^46\) After 1850 the de-industrialisation of the Irish countryside took place and women’s wage-earning opportunities greatly reduced.\(^47\) Miller writes that coupled with economic changes was a shift among small-farm families from partible to impartible inheritance, which meant that women were not only obliged to marry less frequently and at later ages but their choice in marriage partners were determined by the dowry system.\(^48\) Miller concludes that the consequence of these changes was massive in post-Famine emigration by young, single women whose numbers often equalled or exceeded those of Irish emigrant males.\(^49\)

When analysing the ‘pull factors’ in Irishwomen’s emigration, Miller writes that historians disagree as to what were the prevailing motives. For example, Hasia Diner argues that Irish females emigrated because they were consciously rejecting Irish male domination and wanted to achieve economic independence.\(^50\) Diner’s evidence for this thesis is that Irishwomen in the United States had significantly lower marriage rates than did other immigrant women.\(^51\) Diner is dismissing the argument that Irishwomen migrated primarily to find the husbands

\(^{48}\) Ibid.  
\(^{50}\) Ibid.  
\(^{51}\) Ibid.
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they could not find at home. In a contrasting argument, Janet Nolan contends that Irishwomen emigrated to recover the opportunity of early marriage they had lost. Nolan argues that women emigrated so that they could recover their lost importance in Irish life. Nolan asserts that in the United States Irish immigrant women’s marital rates were higher than among females who remained in post-Famine Ireland. In relation to the two conflicting arguments, Miller claims that the assumption that post-Famine Irishwomen married more often and earlier in the United States than in Ireland must be considered highly likely. At the centre of Miller’s analysis of Irish female emigration is that no single model can apply to all female emigrants from Ireland. Depending on class, regional and cultural backgrounds, women had varying motives for emigration. Miller identifies the women whom the dowry system could not accommodate as being a large proportion of those who emigrated to American cities in the post-Famine era and he asks the question did they emigrate primarily for economic opportunities, as Diner argues, or to secure husbands and families, as Nolan contends? To attempt an answer to this question Miller uses the analysis of Rita Rhodes who pointed out that many young women left home willingly because female emigration stemmed from the desires to escape unpaid farm work and seek independence overseas. In applying Rhodes analysis, Miller identifies Nolan’s hypothesis as being more

52 Ibid.
54 Kerby A. Miller, Ireland and Irish America: Culture, Class and Transatlantic Migration (Dublin, 2008), p.303.
55 Ibid.
56 Kerby A. Miller, Ireland and Irish America: Culture, Class and Transatlantic Migration (Dublin, 2008), p.305.
57 Kerby A. Miller, Ireland and Irish America: Culture, Class and Transatlantic Migration (Dublin, 2008), p.313.
58 Ibid.
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accurate: young Irish women emigrated to establish families in which they could obtain the moral authority of homemakers but in a separate domestic sphere. 59 Irish post-Famine female emigrants desired what Mary Brown called ‘love and liberty’, they wanted both economic opportunity as well as domestic bliss.⁶⁰ Robert Kennedy writes that for rural Irish females the choice was not between rural employment or urban work as a domestic servant but rather it was a decision to abandon the subordinate role of an unpaid helper in her own family for the freedom and independence which a paying job in a new city promised.⁶¹

To conclude, when analysing the causes for continued high post-Famine migration there is no one or set factors that apply to all Irish emigrants from this period. Migration took on a compelling role in Irish society. In post-Famine Ireland emigration became a prevailing fact of life and between 1856 and 1929 it is estimated that as many as 5 million people left the island.⁶² The great majority can be viewed as leaving Ireland for essentially mundane reasons that are not too dissimilar to reasons for emigration from Ireland in the present day, such as improved opportunities and developed networks. However, factors such as the process of modern agrarianism, industrial capitalism and chain migration can be viewed as being pivotal in post-Famine Irish emigration.⁶³ In relation to the gender differences in rates of migration, Ireland was unique in its mass exodus of young women. Women faced several push and pull factors in terms of migration but most forceful was the transitional state of their place, or lack of place, in Irish society, an awareness of the dearth of their opportunity in Ireland compared

59 Ibid.
60 Kerby A. Miller, Ireland and Irish America: Culture, Class and Transatlantic Migration (Dublin, 2008), p.315.
62 Kerby A. Miller, Ireland and Irish America: Culture, Class and Transatlantic Migration (Dublin, 2008), p.79.
63 Kerby A. Miller, Ireland and Irish America: Culture, Class and Transatlantic Migration (Dublin, 2008), p.80.
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to other Western countries and the desire for independence. Periods such as 1885-1920 where Irish female migration often outnumbered that of male was a reflection on the conditions in America at the time, male emigration was tied to industrial prosperity while women could easily find work as domestic servants no matter the economic situation of the country. Finally, the Irish were among the last Western European nations to industrialise and this had a major impact on the continued high migration in post-Famine Ireland, this coupled with the high number of women seeking opportunities abroad that were unavailable to them at home makes the story of post-Famine migration a unique one.

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