1718 MIGRATION TO AMERICA

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The story of 1718, the first relatively largescale, planned group emigration from the north of Ireland that we know about, which went to new England, was scarcely known to people in Northern Ireland until only a couple of years ago, but with the tercentenary has come increased public awareness, especially in the area of the Bann valley, round Aghadowey and Ballymoney. Thanks to ongoing research, historians' accounts of the events are, I think, becoming more nuanced. There are interesting parallels and sidelights on modern events and attitudes, which for want of time, I will have to leave up to you to spot for yourselves. Today I'll take a look at factors and briefly then at outcomes.

What were the factors that convinced people that the time had come to abandon an area where at least some of the families had lived for a hundred years or more? The last decade of the seventeenth and the first two decades of the 18th century were (even more than most decades!) challenging and unsettling. In Scotland, the years from about 1680 to 1688 were called the Killing Time, as covenanters, radical Presbyterians, challenged the state and were hunted down; many fled to Ireland, and we can venture to guess that perhaps they did not become any less radical as a result of their experience and later they probably radicalized some of their co-religionists in Ireland.

The Williamite wars and the resulting siege of Derry were formative experiences for the people who went to new England twenty years later; many had experienced the siege. However, the sacrifices made and the losses incurred by the ordinary people as well as by minor gentry were not in the view of contemporaries satisfactorily recompensed; David Cairnes, who was a merchant in Derry and a prominent defender of the city, died in 1722, a bitterly disappointed man. His expenses in supporting the siege and for travelling to London in "sore and most dangerous journeys" to organize supplies, as well as reparation for property looted and destroyed in the wars, totalling almost £9, 000 in 17th century values, were never repaid by the victorious government. The Derry merchant Alexander Lecky, in his will, dated 1717, more than 20 years after the siege, mentioned the "debt due to me by the crown for services, sufferings and provisions for the siege of Londonderry', which he hoped would eventually be paid to his descendants, but apparently was not.

Even lower ranks felt hard done by; a surviving document records that men from captain Moore's company, raised in county Tyrone, including drummers and corporals, tried to get back pay and other redress; they sent an agent to London, who petitioned the queen herself. For their pains, captain Moore's company got £30 but were "wronged in" another £45 that was owed to them.

Fifty years after the successful efforts of James I and VIth and of the London parliament and London companies to plant the north of Ireland with protestants, the Irish government, in Dublin, no longer cared (or perhaps had never cared) whether or not the Scots in

Ulster (who were almost all Presbyterians) were thriving; the established denomination, the Episcopalian church of Ireland, actively disliked Presbyterianism and the feeling was mutual.

After the passing of the hated Test Act in 1704, Presbyterians had no role in public life unless they were prepared to conform to anglicanism. Alexander Lecky, the merchant in Derry city mentioned above, had been an alderman until 1704, when he was forced to resign because he would not take communion in the church of Ireland. 12 Derry aldermen and 14 out of 24 burgesses were forced to stand down from the corporation.

The siege of Derry, so important subsequently and right up to the present in Protestant mythology and self-belief, seems to have had a very different resonance for people who lived through it. The esprit de corps and loyalties generated during the ghastly experiences in the walled city seem to have continued strongly afterwards, but there was also great disillusionment with the establishment and even with the government and crown for which they had ostensibly been fighting. This feeling of not being recognized for their suffering and for their loyalty may have contributed to decisions taken in 1718, and maybe even up to the American revolution.

Presbyterians had to pay tithes to support the church of Ireland. A 1725 report to the Ironmongers Company in London, a London company which owned much of the land of Aghadowey, noted that in Aghadowey 'tithes were collected so rigorous a manner as is not known and scarce would be believed in England". An opposing view

(as one might expect) was expressed by Hugh Boulter, church of Ireland archbishop of Armagh who in 1728 wrote that tithes were not the cause of "such numbers of the people of the north, Scots Presbyterians" leaving the country, although he acknowledged that "it may be supposed that they do not pay tithes with great cheerfulness". No, Boulter said, it was rents being raised that casued the hardship. He said that some landlords were screwing up rents so that in some places, after paying increased rents, tenants would only have 1/3rd or even ¼ or a fifth of the income from their land, and tithes had to come out after that.

Certainly 21 and 31 year leases, granted on favourable terms to tenants in the difficult times after 1689, were due to finish, in the 1710s. The London companies owned much of the land in county Londonderry. Leases granted by the Merchant Tailors Company to the middlemen lessees, the Jackson family of Coleraine, were due to come to an end, in 1720; the Jackson estate had to find money to pay to have their leases renewed by the London company, and this clearly had a knock-on effect. Captain Jackson's rental income went from £310 to £582; tenants' leases renewed in 1717 involved rents of double or treble what they had been, as demand for land began to exceed supply.

There was also drought, crop failure, and an epidemic of cattle disease. The bishop of Derry, William Nicholson in 1718 in his diocese found "dismal marks of hunger and want", "the brink of a famine". As a summary of grievances that people complained of, I cannot do better than quote at length from the anguished protests in

1729 of a middleman called Ezekiel Stewart of Fortstewart, county Donegal, who bitterly opposed the migration of the Presbyterians which he regarded as madness.

“The raisons those unhappey people give for their goeing are as various as their circomstances, The poorer sort are deluded by ye accounts they have of ye great weages is given there to labouring men, their ignorance leads them in, not knowing ye value of their money.

“The Presbiteirien Ministers have taken their shear of pains to seduce their poor ignorant heares by bellowing from their pulpits against ye landlords and ye clargey, calling them rackers of rents, and servers of tythes, with other reflections of this nature, which they know is pleasing to their people, at ye same time telling them that God had appoynted a country for them to dwell in (nameing New England) and desires them to depart thence, where they will be freed from the bondage of Egipt and go to ye land of Cannan, etc. Here ye rents are soe small they can hardly be caled such, noe Tythes nor Tythmongers, noe County [calls ?/cess] not parish taxes, noe serviters money, [Ester] groats, nor Bailifs corn, these and ye like expressions I have red in several of their letters, at ye same time setting forth that all men are there upon a levill and that it is a good poor mans country where there are noe opressions of any kind whatsoever.

“I will venture to say that all these put together bare noe proportion to those grevences which are only imaginary and which people clamour against in order to have some excuse for their goeing.”

The reliance on finding a promised land picks up themes familiar to anyone who read Scripture, (as every Presbyterian was supposed to do), and the leaders of 1718, especially the ministers, may have, consciously or unconsciously, sought an exodus that would prevent violent upheavals in society, and would at the same time permit them maintain leadership roles. The memory of the rebellion of 1641 in Ireland, and of the covenanters’ rising in Scotland at the end of the seventeenth century was still fresh enough. Ministers would probably rather see themselves as Moses, the honoured patriarch of a freed people, rather than sharing the fate of the reverend James Renwick, the covenanting leader executed by the government in Scotland in 1688.

Certainly James McGregor, Presbyterian minister of Aghadowey, actively played up the motif of the promised land and of his leadership of a dispossessed people, using Biblical imagery in exhortations to strengthen the resolve of his community. McGregor’s final sermon in Aghadowey was on a text from Exodus chapter 33, in which the Israelites are told by the Lord to “depart, and go up hence” “unto a land flowing with milk and honey”*. McGregor is said to have reminded his people that they were departing to avoid oppression and cruel bondage; second to shun persecution and designed ruin; third to withdraw from the communion of idolaters and fourth to have freedom to worship*. Other biblical injunctions could be adduced to support

departure; in Genesis 12, verse 1 we find “now the Lord said unto Abram. Get thee out of thy country and from thy kindred and from thy father’s house, unto a land that I will shew thee. And I will make of thee a great nation”.

These texts would have been completely familiar for McGregor’s hearers and all the other families from local congregations.

Time is running on; I will just mention other contemporary factors, not mentioned in any local document that I have seen, but which must have been known to merchants and other educated people, and which surely would have de-stabilized society by promising easy acquisition of vast riches across the Atlantic. Scotland invested heavily in the Darien Scheme of the late 1690s; 20% of all Scotland’s capital was poured into a ruinous project to set up a trading colony called Caledonia on the isthmus of Panama. Also in the late 1690s, Scots and Ulster merchants were building up trade with Surinam, and establishing settlements in the jungle there. The Scots-born economist John Law almost ruined France when a land company he set up to exploit Mississippi led to feverish speculation and eventually in 1720 to the bursting of the “Mississippi bubble”. Another bubble, the better known South Sea bubble, based on a trade monopoly in the South Seas, also burst in 1720.

In 1717, a Ballymoney-born merchant, Archibald McPhedris who had settled in Portsmouth New Hampshire wrote to his mercantile network in Ireland, urging them to send “servants and good farmers” to the new plantations. The rivers had “more salmon and all manner

of fish than in any place in the world and plenty of good middow and timber of all sorts". A man who knew the business might cure a thousand tons of salmon in a season, creating a good estate for himself in two years McPhedris dangled an even more tempting proposition in his letter to his mercantile network in Ireland, to encourage them to send emigrants; Irish settlers in new England would provide a guaranteed market for Irish made linen.

In vain Stewart and other opponents warned of folly; according to Archbishop Boulter in 1728. "The humour has spread like a contagious distemper, and the people will hardly hear any body that tries to cure them of their madness".

So for better or for worse, in summer 1718, hundreds of people went with the reverend James McGregor, other Presbyterian ministers and merchants to New England, where they thought that they would get land, promised by the authorities in the colonies. We should note that as well as saying farewell for ever to neighbours, friends and families, the emigrants left behind church buildings, church organization, schools, shops, trade, a nascent linen industry, newspapers even, law courts, access to universities and to the wider world. Travelling across the Atlantic was like going to the backside of the moon but also like travelling back in time a hundred years. In America, when they arrived, literally and figuratively, there was no Promised land. The emigrants were split up, they were pushed out to the edges of the existing colonies, the long freezing New England winter was completely beyond their experience and unprepared for; there were snakes, native Americans, French opponents, mosquitoes, and

nothing but rocks and forests. Almost worst of all, the English origin Puritans hated and distrusted them as Presbyterians, whether Scots or Irish.

The emigrants had been misled, possibly in modern terms some had been trafficked; they had no way back.

McGregor is said to have preached a sermon standing under a tree in the middle of the wilderness into which they had been pushed out. This sermon features a lot in American historical accounts of the emigration, and is generally portrayed as being a thanksgiving sermon; but it is not in my opinion thanksgiving. The fact that it has been interpreted as a thanksgiving speech shows once again how the history of our emigrants is so often viewed from the other side of the Atlantic; by historians who are so conditioned by the concept of the American Dream, that they can only see the decision to emigrate and to leave Ireland, to go to America, as absolutely and only a Good Thing.

McGregor's text was from Isaiah Chapter 32, verse 2; And a man shall be as a hiding place from the wind, and a covert from the tempest; as rivers of water in a dry place, as the shadow of a great rock in a weary land. It is hard to make anything of this text, but it is likely that there was a millenarian promise in this verse; McGregor was holding out the hope that Christ's second coming might rescue the believers from the parlous conditions in which the new community found itself.

The chapter immediately before McGregor's text begins "Woe to them that go down to Egypt for help", possibly suggesting that the transfer to America, back to the power of the Anglicans and bishops, was in fact returning to slavery in Egypt rather than a move to the promised land of Canaan. Later in the same chapter as McGregor's text, we read "Upon the land of my people shall come up thorns and briers…because the palaces shall be forsaken; the multitude of the city shall be left; the forts and towers shall be for dens for ever, a joy for wild asses". McGregor's text from Isaiah was not chosen by a preacher exulting in new opportunities for his flock.