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# The Irish in Greenock: Employment, Networks and Ethnicity – A Primary Analysis

**Shaun Kavanagh**

The Great Famine has been a natural tipping point for the majority of Irish diaspora studies. The colossal movement out of Ireland that occurred as result of this tragedy was characterised by generalised descriptions of a great 'exodus' of impoverished peoples, forced to migrate unwillingly to new, often unwelcoming, landscapes. Indeed, earlier studies have portrayed the Irish in Scotland as reluctant migrants, forced to settle in a strange and often hostile environment.[1] Yet these accounts have overshadowed the wider dynamics of Irish migration which were far more complex and multifaceted than have been firmly impressed upon the collective imagination. In recent years, scholars have offered a much more refined version of dynamics underpinning Irish migration.[2] This article will add to this growing body of literature by providing an analysis of the Irish in the Greenock labour market during the first half of the nineteenth century. Due to the restrictions in space, the importance of associational cultures and the church in fostering 'ethnic identities' is beyond the scope of this article. What this essay will show is that distinctive channels of mobility existed between the northern counties of Ireland and Greenock before the Famine. It will also be shown that employers' perceptions of 'Irishness' was a crucial factor for migrants looking to secure employment. Employers in certain industries recognised Irish migrants for their qualities of dedication and willingness to undertake jobs that others normally disregarded. This should not be viewed as negative. In fact, employers' recognition of these Irish qualities, real or imagined, was a vital component in securing employment in certain industries in Greenock.

The location of Greenock has been chosen for the purpose of this particular study for a number of factors. Greenock is part of 'Clydeside':

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[1] Tom Gallagher, *Glasgow: The Uneasy Peace* (Manchester, 1987); James Handley, *The Irish in Modern Scotland* (Cork, 1947).

[2] See in particular Liam Kennedy, *Colonialism, Religion and Nationalism in Ireland* (Belfast, 1996); David Fitzpatrick, 'The Irish in Britain: Settlers or Transients?' in Patrick Buckland and John Belcham (eds), *The Irish in British Labour History* (Liverpool, 1993).

the umbrella term often given to industrial towns on the River Clyde in Scotland. Undoubtedly, however, there have been a plethora of studies that focus on Glasgow which have overshadowed the wider experience of urban development in Scotland during the nineteenth century. As a port town, Greenock was a node of international trade and a channel of movement and migration. In the eighteenth century the Clyde port towns gained international prominence through commercial networks with North America and the West Indies, with Greenock alone controlling 22 per cent of Scotland's international trade.[3] Such commercial success demanded intense concentration of labour, which naturally led to urban development. By utilising the precocious position of Clyde ports, industrial partnerships between colonial merchants established further industries in the West of Scotland, which became some of the greatest employers of industrial manpower in those regions. Greenock and Port Glasgow particularly would become the locational nucleus of the Scottish sugar industry, whilst also benefitting from merchant investment in shipbuilding, rope-making and sailcloth manufacturers.[4] Like the rest of urban Scotland, Greenock went through significant changes throughout the nineteenth century. It is in this period that one commentator has suggested that Greenock, with its developing industries and infrastructures, may be taken as the 'archetypal port town of the Western Lowlands'.[5] Furthermore, the purpose of selecting Greenock as the location of this study is the overwhelming number of its migrants from both Ireland and the Highlands that inhabited the town at similar time periods, and contributed significantly to the expanding labour force. Out of a population of 36,882 in Greenock in 1841, 4,307 of participants were Irish-born migrants. From 1851, out of a population of 37,543, the total number of Irish-born residents was 4,986, whilst 4,719 were born in Highland parishes. In 1851 therefore, 25.8 per cent of the total population of Greenock were born in Ireland or the Highlands. In-migration from this principally Celtic inflow from rural parishes transformed Greenock and set it apart somewhat from its nearby vicinities. Competing and conflicting forms of ethnicity – Irish, Lowland Scot, and Highlander – were strongly pronounced, and tensions often developed in matters of residence, welfare and employment. Irish migrants in particular were most often found

[3] Laura E. Cochran, *Scottish Trade with Ireland in the Eighteenth Century* (Edinburgh, 1985), 143.

[4] Ibid., 37.

[5] T. M. Devine, 'Urbanisation' in Tom M. Devine and Rosalind Mitchison (eds), *People and Society in Scotland: Vol. 1, 1700–1830* (Edinburgh, 1988), 35.

in the lower echelons of the labour market, particularly as dock labourers and sugarhouse workers.

Yet it is doubtful that many Irish migrants possessed illusions of Greenock as a 'promised land'. According to Enda Delaney, for Irish Catholics especially, emigration was all about survival rather than prosperity.[6] Indeed, whilst Irish migrants typically occupied the lowest sectors of employment in Greenock, they were incredibly attuned in seeking out 'niche' sectors in the Greenock labour market. There were two reasons for this. First, social networks were important as conduits of information between Greenock and Ireland. The development of steam travel in the early nineteenth century allowed for a more porous movement between Ireland and Scotland, and migration to Scotland was not always permanent. Ever sensitive to labour market conditions, residents in Ireland were made aware of opportunities for work by returning migrants who had earned enough money working in the Greenock factories and docks. Secondly, the importance of ethnic identity was also significant in securing employment in Greenock. In some cases, employers in Greenock factories and other workplaces used ethnicity as a marker to determine whether certain workers were more employable than others. Thus, the Irish in Greenock reinforced their positions within the community by assuming control over particular sectors of employment, whilst also maintaining links with the old country through return migration. Therefore, the Irish in Greenock were economic opportunists; active players in their own situations who were willing to take risks in order to facilitate social progression, or simply to earn enough money temporarily in Scotland in order to live more comfortably in Ireland.

This article will be split into three main sections. The first will focus on early patterns of migration that can be reconstructed from the analysis of marriage registers in the Catholic Chapel. The second section will evaluate the significance of ethnicity in securing opportunities of employment through testimonies extracted from the *Report on the State of the Irish Poor*. The final section will provide a statistical analysis of Irish migrants in the Greenock labour market in the immediate post-Famine era, in comparison with Highland migrants, paying close attention to the role of ethnic agency in opportunities of employment.

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[6] Enda Delaney, 'Narratives of Exile and Displacement: Irish Catholic Emigrants and the National Past, 1850–1914' in Terence Dooley (ed.), *Ireland's Polemical Past: Views of Irish History in Honour of R. V. Comerford* (Dublin, 2010), 102–22.

## Early Irish Settlement in Greenock: Migration Patterns and Networks

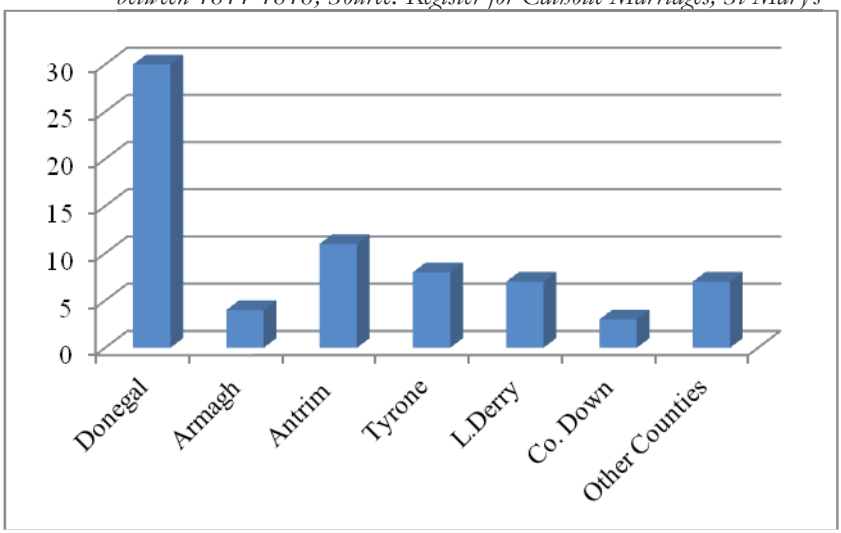
Before the analysis of Irish occupational patterns in Greenock can take place, it is necessary to explain the concept of the social network in migration theory. The concept of the network in this context is meant to suggest a measure of conscious thought among the migrants.[7] Those leaving Ireland pursued well-known mobility channels that had been shaped by economic and labour market circumstances. Migrants were responsive to employment opportunities by taking advantage of cross-border linkages between extended family members and friends. There is some evidence of this being accurate from the analysis the early patterns of Irish settlement in Greenock, which can be obtained from the Parish records for St Mary's Chapel. Built in 1808, this was, at the time, the only Roman Catholic Chapel in Greenock. Parish records for marriage do not record the birthplace of the couples involved. Catholic marriages became more frequent as the century progressed, and priests would often be sparse in writing down the personal details of couples beyond names, ages and current addresses. However, the earliest Registers of Catholic Marriages for Greenock from 1808 and 1818 contain notable exceptions that specify the birthplaces of those who were recently betrothed. Furthermore, the birthplace for Catholics married in Greenock between 1831 and 1834 were recorded for the *Report on the State of the Irish Poor*. Though this is merely a snapshot, by analysis of the Register, distinct migratory pattern from Ireland to Greenock is highlighted. Certainly there are limitations to this source. Not all Irish migrants to Greenock were Catholics. Additionally, not all marriages that took place within St Mary's were between Irish migrants. Nonetheless, the Register for Catholic Marriages still provides a useful, albeit brief, insight into the patterns of migration and the interrelation of the Catholic Irish community in Greenock. By analysis of the birthplaces of Irish migrants, the importance of networks between Irish localities and Greenock is emphasised.

Social networks were important sources of information that were based around friends, extended family, or members of the same rural communities. The presence of a family member or friend in the prospective destination had understandable benefits to potential migrants. Their presence in the new land would help to minimise the trauma and uncertainty over relocating. Personal networks also helped migration become conventional as each new wave of

[7] Enda Delaney, Donald McRaild, 'Irish Migration, Networks and Ethnic Identities since 1750: An Introduction', *Immigrants and Minorities: Historical Studies in Ethnicity, Migration and Diaspora*, 23 (2005), 127–42.

migrants developed connections and acquaintances that were available to ensuing newcomers.[8]

*Figure 1.1: Birthplace of Irish Catholics Married in St Mary's, Greenock between 1811-1818, Source: Register for Catholic Marriages, St Mary's*




The first marriage in Greenock between Irish-born migrants took place in 1811. Out of forty-seven marriages that took place in St Mary's in the subsequent years to 1818, forty involved Irish migrants. Six marriages were between natives of Lowland Scotland and Ireland; four were between Irish and Highlanders; and one between Irish and English. In all, twenty-nine marriages were between Irish-born migrants in total. Out of seventy Irish natives on the marriage register between 1811 and 1818, sixty-four were from the Ulster provinces.

Thirty of the Irish natives on the register were from Donegal; eleven were born in Antrim; eight from Tyrone; seven from Londonderry; four from Armagh and three from County Down.[9] In the first phase of migration to Greenock, then, it would appear that Irish migrants tended to marry amongst one another. However, there were exceptions. One marriage in 1814 took

[8] Enda Delaney, *Demography, State and Society: Irish Migration to Britain, 1921–1971* (Liverpool, 2000), 9; Monica Boyd, 'Family and Personal Networks in International Migration: Recent Developments and New Agendas', *International Migration Review*, 23 (1989), 641.

[9] Register for Catholic Marriages, St. Mary's Parish: Columba House, Edinburgh, 5.

place between natives of County Down and Clachan, Argyll. There were two marriages in 1815 between Irish and Highland migrants; John McDade, a native of Donegal, married Euphemia Darroch, a Protestant from Isla, whilst James Campbell, stated on the register as Irish, married Margaret McPherson, again Protestant, from Killearn, and in 1816 John Sullivan from Donegal married Ann Sutherland, from Sutherland. Only three marriages took place between 1808 and 1818 where both parties were Highlanders; three from South Uist, one from Skye; one from Islay and one from Oban.

The marriage registers between 1831 and 1834 show similar patterns in regards to the Irish. Out of forty-two marriages in 1831-34, thirteen were between Irish and natives of Scotland, of whom appeared from their names to be of Irish parents; one was between Irish and English, and one between Irish and a native of Guernsey. Out of sixty-eight Irish natives on the Marriage Register, fifty-six were from the northern counties of Antrim, Armagh, Donegal, Derry and Tyrone.[10]

Most of the Irish-born married others from Ireland. Their ethnic affiliation encouraged Irish migrants in Greenock to stick together, seek work in the same factories and find similar residences together. The numbers of migrants before the 1841 Census are vague, however Rev. William Gordon, priest in St Mary's, stated in *The Report for the Irish Poor* that there were around 4,000 people in his flock, 'whom all within about fifty are Irish.'[11] Indeed, by the time of the 1841 Census there were 4,307 Irish-born persons resident in Greenock. The relatively low number of Catholic marriages, between 1831 and 1834 especially, is perhaps key evidence that it was mostly first-generation families who were emigrating from Ireland to Greenock.

The high proportion of emigrants from Donegal, Antrim and Tyrone were connected with declining economic opportunities in the north west of Ireland. As Brenda Collins has shown, the flax-growing families in the north-west counties of Ireland were affected by competition from mainland Britain after the introduction of mechanised cotton production in Lancashire and Paisley.[12] The decline of the domestic linen industry in north-west Ireland meant that migrants had little to lose by emigrating. Dundee was the pre-eminent centre for linen production in Britain attracted the largest number of

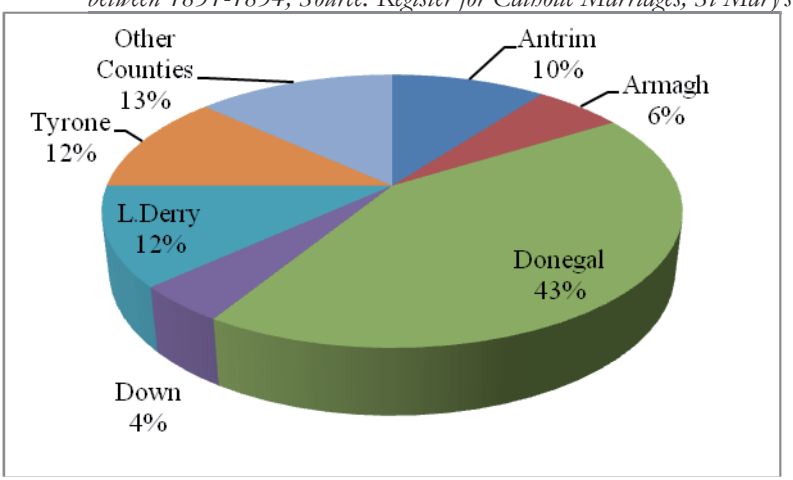
[10] Ibid, also noted in British Parliamentary Papers (BPP), *Report on the State of the Irish Poor* (1836), 138.

[11] BPP, *Report on the State of the Irish Poor* (1836).

[12] Brenda Collins, 'Early Evidence of Irish Immigration to Scotland: A Note on the Catholic Parish Register', 1-6: http://www.localpopulationstudies.org [accessed 18 March 2014].

Irish emigrants outside of Liverpool.[13] Textile manufacturers and rope-works certainly existed in Greenock at this time, although not to the same extent as Dundee, or even nearby Paisley. Yet Irish immigration to Greenock, before the Great Famine at least, was geographically specific to the counties suffering economic decline in the textile trade.

*Figure 1.2: Birthplace of Irish Catholics Married in St Mary's, Greenock between 1831-1834, Source: Register for Catholic Marriages, St Mary's*




The pull-factor of home ties therefore that were replicated through continued migration was clearly a strong factor for choosing Greenock as a destination. Steamboats from Derry and Belfast to Greenock began in the early 1820s, and competition between rival companies kept fares low enough for weavers to make the journey with their families.[14]

## Ethnicity, Social Networks and Opportunities of Labour

Though the term 'ethnicity' can be traced back to the ancient Greek *ethnos*; its current application in the sociology of migration is more historical and inclusive. Sociological studies locate ethnic membership within a multifarious

[13] Brenda Collins, 'The Linen Industry and Emigration to Britain during the Mid-Nineteenth Century' in Margaret E. Crawford (ed.), *The Hungry Stream: Essays on Emigration and Famine* (Belfast, 1997), 153.

[14] Brenda Collins, 'The Origins of Irish Immigration to Scotland' in Tom M. Devine (ed.), *Irish Immigration and Scottish Society* (Edinburgh, 1991), 8.

cooperative process, a socio-historical and political discourse between dominant and subsidiary groups. Simply put, there can be no ethnic 'them' without an ethnic 'us'.[15] A cultural construction, ethnic identity is defined and projected in two main ways: through opposition to an 'alien' other and by the invocation of deep-rooted, self-referential myth 'based on a sense of distinctiveness, a common history, the transmission of a common cultural and religious heritage and the belief in a common fate.'[16] One source which highlights the importance of ethnicity as a factor in determining opportunities of labour amongst migrants in Greenock is the *Report on the State of the Irish Poor*, which was published in 1836. An essential source for studies of Irish migration in nineteenth-century Britain, it concluded that Irish immigration was 'an example of a less civilised population spreading themselves, as a kind of substratum, beneath a more civilised community, and, without excelling in any branch of industry, obtaining possession of all the lowest departments of manual labour.'[17] None the less, the Report contains favourable testimony from employers in Greenock in regard to the need for Irish labour. As will be shown, various employers actively sought Irish workers to work in their factories and yards as they believed that the Irish possessed qualities that were synonymous with hard work and willingness to do work that natives or Highlanders would normally refuse. Moreover, testimonies within the report are crucial in furthering our understanding of the importance of social networks in assisting further migration from Ireland.

John Robb owned a construction works in West Blackhall Street, Greenock that employed eighty people; sixty of which were masons, and twenty labourers. Robb stated that Irish workers rarely became masons, as they had not learned the trade in the old country, but all the labourers were Irish 'without exception'.[18] Robb furthermore revealed that the Irish were more likely than Scots to be employed as farm labourers as they were acknowledged

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[15] See John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith (eds), *Ethnicity* (Oxford, 1996). As the Project Director conceded, research funded by the European Science Foundation on 'Comparative Studies on Governments and Non-dominant Ethnic Groups in Europe, 1850–1940' concentrated on ethnic minorities, see F. M. L. Thompson, 'Series Preface' in Max Engman (ed.), *Ethnic Identity in Urban Europe* (Aldershot, 1992), xix. See also, Richard Williams, *Hierarchical Structures and Social Value: The Creation of Black and Irish Identities in the United States* (Cambridge, 1990).

[16] Robin Cohen, *Global Diasporas: an Introduction* (2nd Edition, London, 2008), 17.

[17] BPP, 1836 XXXIV, First Report of Inquiry into the Condition of the Poorer Classes in Ireland. Appendix G, State of the Irish Poor in Great Britain, 456–7.

[18] Ibid., 140.

by employers for their industrious qualities and willingness to accept a lower rate of wages:

> The Irish are industrious and hardworking, and in general they are good labourers. They are quite the reverse of drunken during their working hours. In most cases, they are very poor … If it were not for the Irish, masons labourers could not be got at the present wages. Men might be got from the Highlands; but I suspect that the Highlandmen would not like to work at the same rate of wages … As far as I can ascertain, from 300 to 350 persons are employed here on the quays in loading and unloading vessels, about 150 of whom are Scotch, chiefly Highlanders; the rest are Irish.[19]

This statement suggests that the mass supply of labour in certain industries came predominantly from Ireland and the Highlands. However, it is also an insightful indication of the tendency of Highland migrants' not to work for the inadequate wages provided by labouring, as opposed to Irish migrants.

Although Irish migrant labour is the main discussion point, the *Report on the State of the Irish Poor* for Greenock also reveals the employers' attitudes towards Highlanders at this time. For some contemporary commentators, Highlanders were not well suited to urban life on account of their language differences and a belief in the crude stereotype that they were lazy.[20] According to Engine works owner Robert Gordon Esq:

> We decidedly prefer the Irish as labourers either to the English or Scotch; they work with more heart and good will, and are more civil and attentive. Highlanders could be got in sufficient numbers, but we do not like them so well, they are not so willing and obedient, nor so hardworking and industrious.[21]

Greenock was well recognised in the nineteenth century for its dominance over the sugar industry in Scotland. Sugar cane was imported from the West Indies from 1745 and processed in various factories between Greenock and Port Glasgow.

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[19] Ibid.

[20] Charles Withers, *Urban Highlanders: Highland-Lowland Migration and Urban Gaelic Culture, 1700-1900* (East Linton, 1998), 133.

[21] BPP, *Report on the State of the Irish Poor* (1836), 140.

*Figure 1.3: Map denoting the Locations of the Various Sugarhouses in Greenock and Port Glasgow*


The work was notoriously exhausting; with employees operating heavy machinery over long hours in extremely hot conditions. It was certainly an industry that was dominated by Irish labour from the early nineteenth century. Most of the refineries in Greenock relied on German expertise on how to properly refine sugar; and Irish graft to work the furnaces. Thomas Fairrie operated one of the largest sugarhouses in the town at the Cartsdyke Bridge in Rue-End Street, and employed over sixty Irishmen in his industry. In his response to the investigators, he explained the necessity for Irish labour in Greenock:

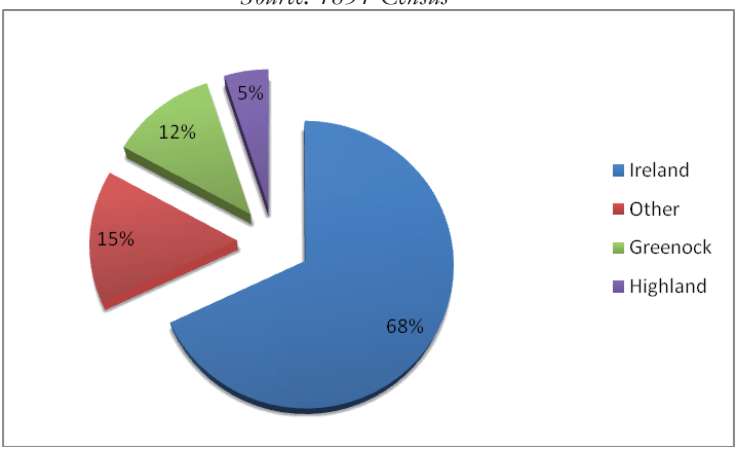
> The natives of this town do not like this work, chiefly on account of the heat, and, as it requires no apprenticeship, it is not considered as a trade, and the Scotch prefer bringing up their children to trades. The men working in the sugar houses required to be admitted into the trades' union of the town, but were refused … the Scotch will not work in sugar houses; the heat drives them away in the first fortnight.[22]

There are a number of important points from Mr Fairrie's testimony. The Irish were certainly willing to brave the gruelling conditions of sugarhouse labour in order to earn a living, whilst native Scots were more reluctant, both on account of the strenuous working environment and, perhaps more crucially,

[22] Ibid.

that sugarhouse work was not considered as a trade; which would have held more job prospects and, no doubt, better wages.

*1.4 Birthplaces of Workers Employed in Sugar Refining in Greenock in 1851 by Percentage,*
*Source: 1851 Census*




Nevertheless, it is revealed in the analysis of wages for Farrie's sugarhouse that Irish workers, as well as Germans, were amongst the highest earners.

*1.5 Numbers of Persons Employed in Thomas Fairrie's Sugar Works and Weekly Warnings of Workers, Source: Report on the State of the Irish Poor, 1836*

| Weekly Earnings | Scottish | Irish | German |
|---|---|---|---|
| 16s.–22s. | 0 | 13 | 3 |
| 13s.–15s. | 2 | 45 | 0 |
| 6s.–8s. | 3 | 4 | 0 |

Mr Fairrie also states that his sugar works also employed a selection process in which Irish migrants were actually preferred to Scottish applicants:

> We have opportunities of selecting the men employed in our works, and the Irish are more serviceable to our purpose and more manageable than the Scotch … If it were not for the Irish, we should be forced to give up trade, and the same applies to every sugarhouse in town; this is

> a well-known fact. Germans would be our only resource, and we could not regularly get them; Highlanders would not do the work.[23]

Despite a relatively favourable testimony from Thomas Fairrie, which expressed the fundamental need for Irish labour in the sugar industries, other employers were not so complimentary in their opinion of Irish workers. The Irish in Greenock were often at a disadvantage in the labour market as a result of the construction of discriminatory stereotypes by employers. Despite the assertion that sugar refiners would have to give up trade without the labour of Irish migrants, William MacFie, who owned a sugar refinery on Bogle Street, Greenock, found them a disreputable influence:

> We have received supplies of men chiefly from the Highlands. The Irish in Greenock are, in general of the working classes. I think the introduction of the Irish has deteriorated the lower classes with us. It has diminished the wages of labour.[24]

It would appear from his testimony that William MacFie was the only sugar refiner in Greenock who decidedly preferred Highlanders, and found them willing, to work in his sugarhouse. It may also be more than coincidental that William MacFie's father Robert was a native of the Isle of Bute, and formerly a member of the Glasgow Highland Society.[25] William MacFie himself was also president of the Gaelic School Society in Greenock, which was established in 1820.[26] This is perhaps an indication of the favouritism of a senior industrialist for his 'own kind', and the commensurate ethnic discrimination towards Irish workers. Indeed, Charles Withers has demonstrated how Highlanders established common networks in the Lowlands, which advanced occupational prospects of later migrants from Highland parishes. Norman McLeod, a Highland minister who held a parish in Barony, Glasgow, described how Highland migrants in the city would take care of their counterparts: 'we are very clannish; and those who come from one Island do it for the men of that Island who have to get employment.'[27] Highland migrants searching for work in the Lowlands therefore could benefit from the common heritage of

[23] Ibid.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Withers, *Urban Highlanders*, 136.

[26] *Fowler's Commercial Directory for the Lower Wards of Renfrewshire for 1834–1835* (Renfrewshire Directory Office, Paisley, 1835), 106.

[27] Withers, *Urban Highlanders*, 93.

prospective employers. In Greenock however, William MacFie not only utilised forged networks in the Highlands as a source of labour for his sugarhouse, but also operated a system of occupational exclusion based on ethnic identity.

Rev. William Gordon, the resident Catholic priest of St Mary's Parish, again further indicated the typical occupation patterns of Irish workers, which showed a relative spread across the lower to skilled trades:

> The Irish in this town belong almost exclusively to the working classes; there are a few small shop-keepers, some cloth merchants, some brokers and some provision sellers. Many of them are also hawkers; but these do not stay constantly in Greenock; the rest are labouring men, many of whom work at the quays, loading and unloading vessels; others are engaged by the farmers in the neighbourhood in their improvements in agriculture; a good many work as ship carpenters; a great many are engaged in the sugar manufactories; some in the foundries …[28]

An interesting point to be made is the permeable nature of migration between Ireland and Scotland, and the relationship this had on influencing further migration. The development of steam travel in the nineteenth century helped facilitate a route way access in the Irish Sea that was significant in producing information networks between Scotland and Ireland. Thomas Fairrie stated that the Irishmen employed in his sugar works would regularly go back to Ireland for a year to 'enjoy themselves on the money they have saved, and then come back at the end of the time.'[29] This suggests that Irish migrants in Greenock still maintained their links with the old country, and that migration for many was certainly not permanent. Those sugarhouse workers could have been an important source of information for other would-be migrants; earning enough money to leave Scotland for several months to come back home and encourage friends and family members to do the same. Indeed, Brenda Collins has noted similar circumstances for the growth of the Dundee Irish community in the nineteenth century. As young girls were not typically employed as farm servants, Irish families were attracted by the prospect of sending their children to work in the mills to contribute to the family upkeep. By immigrating to Dundee, whole families could maintain a family economy based on the textile industry.[30]

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[28] BPP, *Report on the State of the Irish Poor* (1836).

[29] Ibid.

[30] Collins, 'The Linen Industry and Emigration to Britain during the Mid-Nineteenth

According to Donald H. Akenson, the 'Gaelic-Catholic-Disability' model may have hindered the advancement of individual Irish Catholics in urban America, but may have facilitated an ethnic base for resource organisation at a collective level. Thus, according to Akenson, Irish-Americans utilised their common cultural backgrounds in order to reinforce their positions within society.[31] In some cases, employers in Greenock factories and other workplaces used ethnicity as a marker to determine whether certain workers were deemed more employable than others. Thus, the Irish in Greenock reinforced their positions within the community by assuming control over particular sectors of employment, whilst also maintaining links with the old country through return migration. Therefore, the Irish in Greenock were not necessarily 'exiles' who were never to return, but economic opportunists; active players in their own situations who were willing to take risks to facilitate social progression, or simply to earn enough money temporarily in Scotland in order to live more comfortably in Ireland.

Rev. Gordon revealed significant information regarding the importance of the cohesive network of the pre-Famine Irish migrant community in encouraging and providing support for new migrants coming from the old country:

> The Irish in this town certainly have the will to assist one another in times of distress or sickness, as far as their abilities will permit them. They often harbour friends, relations, and neighbours when they first come from Ireland, before they can get work.[32]

Tellingly, the priest revealed further details of the migration process that highlight a careful degree of rational decision-making amongst those who departed and their families. In order to diversify risk, some family members remained in the local economy, whilst, others, notably the young within the family, were sent to work in Scotland:

> They sometimes invite their own relations if they be destitute at home; generally the young come first, and, if they succeed, they send for the other members of their families, chiefly their parents, in order to support them. There is a great deal of family affection amongst them;

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Century', 158.

[31] Donald H. Akenson, *The Irish Diaspora* (Belfast, 1996), 237–42.

[32] BPP, *Report on the State of the Irish Poor* (1836).

> making allowances for their poverty, they appear to me to pay every attention to their children.[33]

The rationale for leaving Ireland for Greenock, certainly in the pre-Famine era, was one of conscious determination rather than desperation. According to Rev. William Gordon, however, the internal cohesion of the Irish Catholic population in Greenock acted as a barrier in further assimilation with the host community. Generally through competition for labour and partly through religion, many within the native working class held views that the Irish were adversely set apart from the rest of the population:

> The Irish in this are treated in this town with a kind of exclusive policy, principally by the lower classes: I do not think there is that feeling among the higher classes; the lower classes consider them as a distinct class of persons. The religious prejudice may probably also contribute something; this is now fast wearing away.[34]

Discrimination towards Irish workers in Scottish workplaces has been well documented. Martin J. Mitchell has challenged the common perception of the use of Irish migrants as strike-breakers in Scottish workplaces, which added to the native Scottish resentment towards the Irish.[35] According to Callum Brown, 'partly through the use of immigrants as strike-breakers and partly through sectarianism, Catholics were generally isolated from the trade unions and Labour movements before 1890.'[36] Mitchell ascertains that whilst there can be no doubt this took place on several occasions, it was far more commonplace in areas with high employment in coal manufacturing, especially Lanarkshire. Indeed, there is evidence that Irish workers participated in strike activity in Greenock in the mid-nineteenth century. A joiners' strike that took place Greenock in 1833 was blamed on 'bellowers against the bill for suppressing disturbances in Ireland'.[37] Irish workers were identified with the roughest of manual labour. At that level, ethnicity could prove a functional means of mobilising resources. In Greenock, however, ethnic identity among working-class Irish was often a means of coping with disadvantages in the

[33] Ibid.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Martin J. Mitchell, *The Irish in the West of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1998).
[36] Callum Brown, *Religion and Society in Scotland since 1707* (Edinburgh, 1997), 120.
[37] *Greenock Advertiser*, 25 April 1833.

lowest tiers of the labour market. The Greenock Catholic Friendly Society was established by a number of Irish Catholics as a defensive measure against the dangers of sickness and unemployment. Ethnic and religious identity was interwoven in this society that was formed on the basis of mutual support for Catholics alike:

> . . . Chiefly working men . . . the Roman Catholics in Greenock . . . live in houses of the poorest description, and when sickness or death visits us, we are too often (contrary to our spirits) forced to seek a poor pittance from the powers that be, or what is even worse, become the dejected outcasts of society.[38]

One of the more remarkable personal testimonies in the *Report on the State of the Irish Poor* for Greenock, reveals however, that Irish migrants were used as blackleg labour to fill positions of other Irish workers, as well as Scots, who formed a trades union and struck work:

> Last August the sawyers in my yard struck, fourteen couple of whom were Irish. The Irish were not the ringleaders; they were earning from 35s. to 40s. a pair per week, frequently as much as £3. We refused their terms, and employed common labourers, chiefly Irish, to fill the pits; by degrees they learnt the trade, and are now earning from 30s. to 35s. a-week; some come up to 40s. The hands who struck are now beginning to be employed on their former wages, and have entirely dissolved the union they formed.[39]

The statement from Charles Scott, a shipbuilding magnate, also demonstrates how Irish and Scottish workers were willing to unite on common ground and form a trade union, albeit unsuccessfully. Furthermore, by the use of Irish labourers to fill the vacant positions of their fellow countrymen who had struck work, it raises the question of just how much of a 'community' the Irish in Greenock really were. It is certainly evident from this statement that ties of ethnicity were cut across readily when there was a promise of work to be had. Moreover, numerous local newspaper reports detailed faction fighting between Irish migrants in Greenock workplaces. The *Greenock Advertiser* noted in 1829 that the Angus and Co. Sugarhouse had become a 'favourite arena for the

[38] NAS FS4/1107 Rules and Regulations of the Greenock Catholic Friendly Society.
[39] BPP, *Report on the State of the Irish Poor* (1836).

decision of pugilistic contests' between Irish employees.[40] It may be suggested that regional rivalries existed between Irish migrants in the workplace. It is difficult to comprehend how this may have affected their self-perceptions of 'Irishness'. Nonetheless, participants were perceived by employers and by the press as one and the same: Irish.

Whilst the *Report on the State of the Irish Poor* is a valuable source in order to gain some perspective on the early occupational choices of Irish migrants in Greenock in the pre-Famine period, there are limitations to its usefulness. The overall intention of the Report is an inquiry on the Irish poor in Scotland; therefore any examples of middle-class Irish migrants were ignored in favour of a distorted picture of Irish at the bottom rung of the social ladder. Furthermore, the *Report* does not contain any testimony from Irish migrants themselves. This would have been far more useful to evaluate the motivations for emigrating, the experience of life and work in Greenock in the early nineteenth century, and how this influenced their own perceptions of ethnic identity.

## The Irish in the Greenock Labour Market: Evidence from the 1851 Census

The occupational and social status of migrants is of considerable interest in studying the patterns of migration out of Ireland. The census data makes it possible to determine the most notable features of the Irish settlements in Greenock. The enumerator's sheets allow us to examine such quantitative data as spatial distribution of migrants, their age, occupational profile and marital status. Yet, any attempt to reconstruct the Irish migrant experience in Lowland Scotland requires more than census data. First, census statistics provide decennial 'snapshots' of the Irish in certain parishes at particular stages in time, and in doing so ignore the reciprocal patterns of migration, settlement and re-emigration.[41] Second, matters of religious adherence, involvement in politics and trade unions, and appearance in local crime statistics require further investigation beyond the analysis of census statistics. However, the census data provides the essential boundaries within which the discourses of these matters can take place. As a point of comparison, the patterns of

[40] *Greenock Advertiser*, 29 April 1829.

[41] Roger Swift, *The Irish Migrants in Britain, 1815–1914: A Documentary History* (Cork, 2002), 27.

Irish employment will be analysed alongside the other major migrant group in Greenock, the Highlanders, in order to examine whether conflicting opinions of ethnicity were prevalent amongst employers in providing jobs to migrants.

The census confirms that the steady flow of Irish migration to Scotland peaked in 1851, with 207,367 of the total population of Scotland originating from Ireland. In Renfrewshire alone, one in ten people were born in Ireland, with most of these migrants concentrated in the towns of Greenock, Paisley and Port Glasgow. Due to deficiencies in the national census that did not specify the parish of birth for Scottish-born participants, it is difficult to quantify accurate numbers of Highland-born migrants in Greenock before 1851. Out of a population of 36,882 in Greenock in 1841, 4,307 of participants were Irish-born migrants. From 1851, out of a population of 37,543, the total number of Irish-born residents was 4,986, whilst 4,719 were born in Highland parishes. In 1851 therefore, 25.8 per cent of the total population of Greenock were born in Ireland or the Highlands.

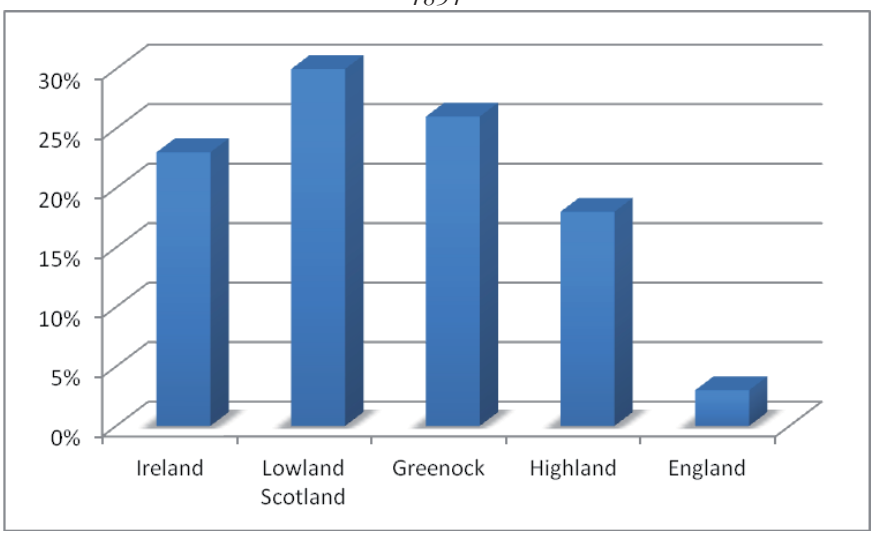
The census returns which were copied into enumeration books were used to discover the general pattern of the occupations undertaken by Irish and Highland-born migrants living in Greenock, over the age of fourteen, in 1851. The occupational classifications adopted by W. A. Armstrong will be used, which are divided into professional/managerial *(Class I)*, clerical and commercial (*Class II*), artisans and skilled workers (*Class III*), semi-skilled and self-employed (*Class IV*) and unskilled workers (*Class V*).[42]

From Figure 2.1 we can see the pluralistic nature of Greenock in 1851. Whilst there was a steady increase in migration from Irish and Highland parishes to Greenock in the first half of the nineteenth century, it is clear that this was part of a much bigger picture. Indeed, from an analysis of the Greenock labour market in 1851, it is clear that Irish and Highland migration to Greenock was part of a larger migratory pattern, with Greenock-born persons forming just over 25 per cent of the total labour force in the town. Certainly this suggests that Highland migrants to Greenock were just one element of a nation 'on the move'. Notwithstanding this point however, it is clear that Irish and Highland migrants made a massive contribution to the

[42] W. A. Armstrong, 'The Use of Information about Occupation' in Edward A. Wrigley (ed.), *Nineteenth-century Society: Essays in the Use of Quantitative Methods for the Study of Social Data* (Cambridge, 1972), 191–310. For further analysis of statistical census data for Greenock in the nineteenth century, see R. D. Lobban, 'The Migration of Highlanders into Lowland Scotland, c. 1750–1850, with particular reference of Greenock', unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Edinburgh (1970).

labour market in Greenock, providing a combined total of almost half of the entire workforce of the town, which totalled 10,222 people.

*Figure 2.1 Birthplaces of Greenock Workforce in 1851: Source: Census for Scotland 1851*




The majority of Lowland-born workers in Greenock were employed as skilled workers in the heavy industries of shipyard work and engineering. Indeed, only 13 per cent of workers born in Greenock were to be found in the unskilled sectors. The occupational patterns of Irish and Highland migrants in Greenock that are revealed in the 1851 census show some notable distinctions against this general trend, and even more so between the two ethnic groups. Whilst both groups tended to be found generally between the skilled (*Class III*) and unskilled (*Class V*) sectors of employment, there were certainly many cases of dissimilarity in specific job choices between the Irish and Highland workers. It is evident that a slight majority of Highland-born migrants in Greenock were artisans and tradesmen. A total of 58 per cent of Highlanders who were employed in Greenock were skilled workers, which is almost on par with the general trend of the host population; 64 per cent of Greenock-born workers were employed as tradesmen and in other skilled sectors.

For Irish-born migrants however, this trend differs considerably, with only 33 per cent of those represented in the *Class III* group. The Irish-born labour force in Greenock was overwhelmingly employed in the unskilled sector (*Class V*). The Irish are represented in the *Class V* group at 61 per cent, which contrasts remarkably with those born in Greenock, and furthermore

with workers born outside Renfrewshire who made up only 7 per cent of the unskilled workers in Greenock. Nearly a third of the total of Highland born workers were also employed in the *Class V* subdivision, yet they were still under-represented in this group when compared with the Irish. It is evident from the analysis of the statistical data that the Irish dominated the unskilled sectors of employment in Greenock in 1851.

However, Irish migrants were also prominent in skilled trades, notably as sawyers and masons. They also represented 35 per cent of the tailoring trade, and 33 per cent of shoemakers. This is not uncommon. English journalist and reform advocate Henry Mayhew noted that Irish migrants formed a large component of the tailoring and shoemaking trades in London. Despite the skilled nature of this work, however, tailoring was a sweated industry with excessive hours and very little reward:

> When the Irishmen reached the sweater's place, near Houndsditch, they found him in a den of a place, anything but clean, and anything but sweet, and were at once set to work at trouser making, at 1s. a pair, finding their own trimmings … they could not clear more than 5s. by constant labour, and the sweater offered to teach them, if they would bind themselves apprentices to him.[43]

The Highlanders of Greenock did not necessarily deviate from the typical occupational trends of the host population. Most Highland males were employed in the heavy industries of shipbuilding and engineering, which coincided with the general trend of the rest of the Scottish-born males residing in Greenock. Yet there were certain other industries in which Highlanders were more prevalent, setting them apart from the rest of the population - notably the police force, alcohol distillation and selling, gas works and transportation.

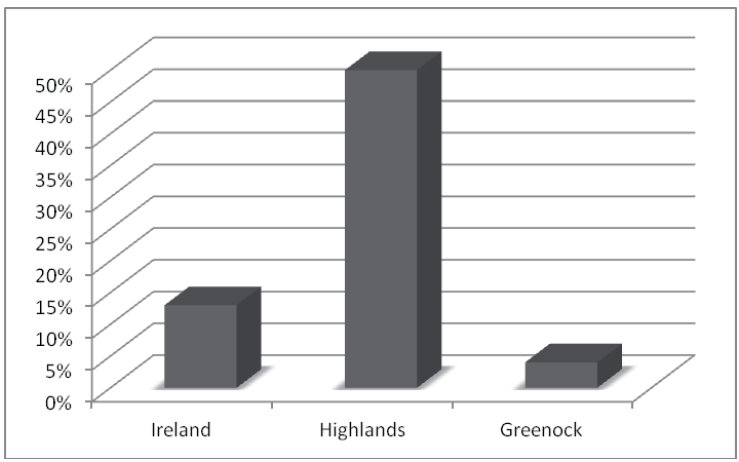
Out of forty-six police constables in Greenock in 1851, twenty three were born in Highland parishes, whilst Irish migrants contributed six constables to the police force. Only two policemen were born in Greenock, with the others who made up the force were born in various other Lowland parishes. This is not unique to Greenock, as Charles Withers has shown in his research on Glasgow that a notable presence of Highland migrants were found in the police regiments there in the nineteenth century.[44] This would suggest

[43] *The Morning Chronicle*, 18 December 1849, quoted in Swift, *The Irish Migrants in Britain*, 57.

[44] Charles Withers, "'The Long Arm of the Law": Migration of Highland-Born

that Highland males typically possessed the desirable qualities, usually strong and disciplinarian, that were deemed necessary for police work in the nineteenth century. Highland males also composed half of the labour force employed in alcohol production in Greenock in 1851.

*Figure 2.2: Birthplace of Greenock Police Force by percentage in 1851, source: 1851 Census for Scotland*




Conversely, there were certain industries that employed curiously few Highland migrants. Highlanders made up only 5 per cent of the labour force in the sugar refineries, whilst contributing only 2 per cent of the workers of the rope-work factories, and none in the potteries. However, almost a third of all occupationally active Highlanders were involved in unskilled trades in Greenock, mostly laboring. Where Irish and Highland migrants competed most in the Greenock labour market was in 'navvying'. The 'navvy', abbreviated from 'navigator', was ascribed to workers who 'cut the navigation' of canals, roads and railways in Britain in the nineteenth century.[45] In Greenock, these workers were overwhelmingly hired hands from Ireland and the Highlands. This type of labour required no skill nor apprenticeship, but merely brute strength, and was vital to the construction of the harbours and railways in Greenock, and indeed to the development of trade in the town. The growth of the sugar trade in Greenock was the catalyst for the construction of new harbours and

Policemen to Glasgow, 1826–1891', *Local Historian*, 18 (1988), 127–35.

[45] James E. Handley, *The Navvy in Scotland* (Cork, 1970), 8.

improvement to existing docks in the first half of the nineteenth century. The evidence relating to the origins of the workers in the construction of the early harbours has been lost, however in the *Report on the State of the Irish Poor* William MacFie stated that large-scale Irish migration to Greenock commenced with the construction of the East India Harbour, which was the first to be completed in 1805: 'About the year 1800 and upwards, when the new harbours were begun . . . they generally came of their own accord, I am not aware of them being sent for.'[46] The Custom House Quay was further developed in 1818. Yet it was the beginning of the construction of the Glasgow, Paisley and Greenock Railway in 1838 that employed thousands of men, many from Ireland and the Highlands. At its peak, the railway line employed in the excess of 3,500 men, with over 1,000 of those concentrated at the section between Port Glasgow and Bishopton. So concerned were ministers of the churches as to the moral character of these labourers that they requested money from the railway directors to establish a temporary mission at Bishopton in order to conduct masses for the men; to be addressed in Gaelic as well as English:

> The Rev. Mr Stewart, finding it impossible to accommodate so many in the parish church, promoted to the directors that a missionary should be appointed especially for the workmen and offered if the company would contribute £30 to raise another £30, so far as to make his salary £60 a year. Mr Stewart's offer was readily agreed to and Mr McMaster labours with ability, faithfulness and zeal. He preaches both in Gaelic and in English. His labours are very useful, not only in promoting good order and correct conduct but in giving that religious instruction of which men deprive themselves in leaving their homes and which is of no much importance they should enjoy.[47]

The most notable contrasts between Irish and Highland work patterns in 1851 however lie in the breakdown of occupations of female migrants. Domestic service was the greatest employer of female labour in Greenock in 1851. Over 1,200 women were employed in this sector, with 316 of those women born in Highland parishes, more so than any other migrant groups in Greenock. Curiously however, Irish women were far less likely to be employed as domestic servants than any other group, with only 7 per cent of Irish women contributing to the overall total. Considering the similar numbers of Irish

[46] BPP, *Report on the State of the Irish Poor* (1836), 140.
[47] *Greenock Advertiser*, 9 July 1839.

and Highland females residing in Greenock in 1851, these figures suggest a clear disparity in the preference of the employers of domestic servants, where Highland females were more employable than their Irish counterparts. However, whilst preference may certainly be a factor in explaining the low prevalence of Irish domestic servants, there is evidence to suggest that Irish women and girls were actively discriminated against in this mode of employment. In a remarkable statement George Williamson, the procurator fiscal of Greenock and Renfrew, remarked that Irish females were unlikely to be employed as domestic servants as they were supposedly deceitful and uneducated:

> The Irish females, from their not being much liked as servants in families, are forced to remain in their parents' houses, and become dissolute and untidy, and marry persons just like their parents. The females are disliked as servants because they are not trustworthy, and have not had a good education. The female servants of Greenock are chiefly from the Highlands.[48]

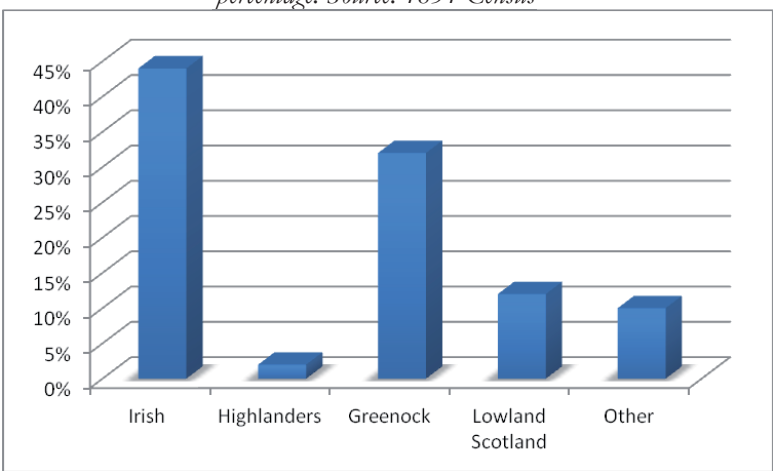
Irish females in Greenock, then, were at a disadvantage in trying to secure jobs in domestic service. According to Williamson, certain employers in this sector considered 'Irishness' as axiomatic with raggedness and deceitfulness. Conversely, Irish women were far more likely than Highlanders to be employed in the factories. Many Highlanders were employed as dressmakers and lodging housekeepers. Irish female migrants however contributed more workers to textile production (44 per cent) and rope-work factories (60 per cent) than any other resident group in Greenock in 1851. Irish females in Greenock also dominated the labour force of the paper mills, with 75 per cent of employees in that sector born in Irish counties. In comparison, Highland women contributed only 4 per cent of those employed in the rope-works, and only 2 per cent of textile workers.

This is a considerable disparity that suggests that Irish workers were much preferred by employers of these industries. This can perhaps be explained by the prevalence of the textile trades in the northern counties in Ireland. Female migrants from these counties no doubt possessed valuable experience that was utilised in the Greenock factories. Furthermore, the large numbers of workers in the textile factories in Greenock may correlate with the fact that the

[48] BPP, *Report on the State of the Irish Poor: Greenock* (1836).

largest textile production company in the town was co-owned by three Irish migrants – John Fleming, Robert Neil and James Reid of the Neil, Fleming and Reid Company of Overton. In similar fashion to William MacFie having a preference for Highland workers in his sugar refinery, this is perhaps evidence of Irish employers in Greenock favouring people of similar ethnicity to work in their factory.

*Figure 2.3: Birthplace of Female Employees in Greenock Textile Factories by percentage: Source: 1851 Census*




It was evident from the analysis of the 1851 Census that employers were averse to employing Highland women in the factories. Only twenty Highland women were employed in the textile factories, whilst four girls worked in the mills. These figures are remarkable considering that the particular industries in question employed almost 1,300 women in Greenock. Whilst opportunities in work for females in Scotland at this time were still relatively limited, the startling near-absence of Highlanders from factories in Greenock between 1851 is difficult to comprehend. Omission of Highland migrants from certain industries in Greenock initially may be explained by ethnic preference of employers in 1851. Indeed, this correlates with Joan MacKenzie's analysis of Glasgow, who found that industrial employers were prejudiced against Highland labour: "A great majority of the West Highland hands are quite useless; they are deficient in the aptitude to learn, and they do not work heartily; in general, they are a lazy, idle set, we decidedly prefer the Irish to these

Highlanders."[49] Close scrutiny of the Census data for 1851 suggests that both Irish and Highlanders in Greenock occupied mainly working-class positions in employment. However, male migrants from the Highlands also penetrated some higher-end employment sectors. It would also appear that Irish migrants were more readily available to apply themselves in lower-skilled trades than any other group in Greenock in order to secure employment. The Census also confirms that ethnicity was a crucial element in securing work in various sectors of employment for both Irish and Highland migrants. Preconceived notions of 'Irishness' or 'Highlandism', could either be a positive influence or a hindrance to securing employment, depending on the nature of the work. For example, the census for 1851 corroborates with the statements from the *Report on the State of the Irish Poor* that male Irish workers dominated the sectors of sugarhouse labour and dock work, meanwhile Irish females were predominantly found in factory employment. Highlanders, however, owing to the prejudices of certain employers that they adverse to certain modes of employment, were far less likely to be employed in factories. Instead, Highland males monopolised the police force, and were also prominent in the customs trade and as spirit dealers. Highland females were far more likely to be employed as domestic servants as they were deemed to be 'more trustworthy' than Irish girls. Clearly then, preconceived notions of Irish or Highland 'qualities', real or imagined, were often at play in matters of employment.

## Conclusion

By the scrutiny of the evidence it is likely that the Irish in Greenock were involved in ethnic-based informal networks, societal and economic, that were important for settling in their new communities. Across time and between several locations, social networks in a variety of forms were a fundamental element of the Irish diasporic experience. Two key points emerge from the analysis of the marriage patterns of Irish Catholics in Greenock in the early nineteenth century.

First, the relatively low numbers of Irish Catholics marrying suggests that the first waves of migration to Greenock were largely first-generation families or married couples. Irish Catholics who married in Greenock overwhelmingly married partners who belonged to the same ethno-religious group. In some

[49] Joan MacKenzie, 'The Highland Community in Glasgow in the Nineteenth Century: A Study of Non-assimilation', Ph.D thesis (University of Stirling, 1987), 87.

cases, this could be attributed to the migration of pre-wed couples who waited until migrating before deciding to marry.

Second, by focusing primarily on the labour market in Greenock, this study demonstrates how Irish migrants formed networks by maintaining links with the homeland, but was also partly shaped by the urban space that the migrants inhabited. Also important in this process was the perceptions of 'Irishness' that was held by the host society. Irish workers were recognised by employers for their hard-working qualities and willingness to undertake jobs that others did not. This should not be viewed as negative. In fact, employers' recognition of these 'Irish qualities', real or imagined, was a vital component securing employment in certain industries in Greenock. With the exception of William MacFie, who refused to employ Irishmen in favour of Highlanders, sugar refiners in Greenock readily employed Irish labour over any other ethnic group in the town.

Indeed, the predominance of Irish labour in the textile mills in 1851 can perhaps be linked to the owners being Irish-born. Returning migrants, and family members who were already in Greenock, were important sources of information that could enlighten prospective Irish migrants to opportunities of work and life in Greenock. As previously stated, the Irish migrants in Greenock would not have considered Greenock as a biblical 'promised land', but merely a land of new, humble prospects. The Irish in Greenock may have occupied the lowest-paid jobs and lived in the poorest quarters of town, but they were certainly not helpless casualties of migration. The implication for the historical study of the Irish in Greenock, therefore, is not a narrative of reluctant migrants who became 'strangers in a strange land', but conscientious decision-makers and economic opportunists. Furthermore, by maintaining links with the old country through return migration and personal networks, they made sure that home was never far away.

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