
Kyle Hughes’ study of elite Scottish migration to Belfast explores areas that have been largely ignored by previous migration historians of Ireland and Scotland; namely inward migration to nineteenth-century Ireland and short-range Scottish migration. Hughes frames this migration as occurring within a north Irish Sea industrial zone characterised by a mobile, skilled workforce responsive to fluctuating economic opportunities on both sides of the Irish Sea. He contends that, as the century progressed, this process meant that the region, including the industrialised towns of western Scotland, Cumbria, Lancashire, and Belfast, experienced social, cultural and economic convergence.

Shipbuilding featured heavily in this process, as it does in the book, providing many of the characters who feature throughout. The first substantive chapter is based on a meticulous reconstruction of the city’s Scottish-born population at the 1901 census. The data suggest evidence of some limited geographic clustering in the wards surrounding the major shipyards of Harland and Wolff and Workman Clark. Also noticeable are the preponderance of skilled and semi-skilled workers among the Scottish-born population and an over-representation of Scots Presbyterians in a variety of skilled industrial trades related to the shipyards and heavy industry. If the latter conjunction of religion and place of birth seems overly particular, it is necessary given the problems of category and definition that Hughes has to negotiate: the census included not only those who would have described themselves as ethnic Scots, but also many who were the Scottish-born children of returned Irish migrants. This, and much else, are
illustrated best in a series of micro-analyses of individual streets based on the census data.

The restrictions of available material mean that subsequent chapters focus largely on economically successful, middle-class, male migrants. Despite this, Hughes shows the issues of ethnic categories and definitions to be even more complex as the book progresses. This is particularly the case in the chapters where he considers Scottish associational culture and the interaction of Belfast’s Scots with the Home Rule question. As those attuned to Belfast’s history will guess, this complexity derived from the fact that these Scots migrants were arriving to a city and host population, a significant part of which portrayed itself already as belonging to a wider Scots diaspora. Thus the associational and political culture that Hughes considers were shaped by the expectations and exigencies of the host population, as well as by those of the migrants themselves. There was a suite of political and religious opinions, as well as cultural pursuits, to which the host Ulster Scots population expected Belfast’s Scots migrants to adhere, and these circumscribed and shaped the latter’s diasporic activities. Thus, while easily reconciled undertakings such as Burns Clubs remained popular for Scot and Ulster Scot alike, the local press queried overly Gaelic representations of Scottishness. Perhaps unsurprisingly, migrants who pursued Liberal or pro-Home Rule politics also met with opposition, as Hughes demonstrates when he examines how Belfast’s various Scottish associations interacted with the controversial Lord Lieutenant, Lord Aberdeen. In the book’s final chapter, Hughes suggests that these limits extended to the spiritual sphere, when he considers the relationship between three Scottish Presbyterian ministers and the ultra-conservative Presbyterianism of Belfast, dominated by Henry Cooke.

Hughes’ study puts one elite section of a small, migrant group under the historian’s microscope. In doing so, he demonstrates the importance of considering the local and specific within migration and diaspora studies. Although he connects the experience of his subject group to the wider Scottish diaspora, Hughes’ Belfast Scots were not the same as those of Canada, New Zealand or Australia. The factors around their migration, their interaction with Belfast’s existing population and the nature of their
continued relationship with Scotland all differed from those of Scots in other destinations; the more so as so much of their experience was shaped by the presence of a pre-existing population claiming historic connections to Scotland. In this regard, Hughes’ study not only adds to our understanding of the nineteenth-century Scots diaspora, but speaks to a wider phenomenon of new migrants who arrived to a destination with an already established, even hyphenated, population which claimed the same cultural background. In the case of nineteenth-century Belfast this is complicated further by the emergence of a parallel British identity and the very different relationships of Scotland and Ireland to the British state. That Hughes does this, while at the same time producing a very readable portrait of a migrant community, is of great credit to him.

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