Caesar’s crossing that petty stream, the Rubicon, is a fact of history, whereas the crossing of the Rubicon by millions of other people before or since interests nobody at all.¹

Horizons

Laurie Lee’s memoir *Cider with Rosie* contains a marvellous evocation of life in a Gloucestershire village of the 1920s, in which he mourned the loss of the world of his childhood. With a certain poetic license he charted the end of an era of British rural life: ‘soon the village would break, dissolve and scatter’. Laurie Lee had ‘belonged to a generation which saw, by chance, the end of a thousand years’ life’. It was a time when the old estate was sold off and soon the farm and domestic servants were ‘dispersed and went to the factories’. They were off to the towns, to the factory lathes, to the war eventually: ‘We began to shrug off the valley and look more to the world’. One village boy had left early in this local dispersal and emigrated to New Zealand where he succeeded as a prosperous farmer. On his bumptious and triumphant visit back to the village he was mysteriously murdered by local lads.² He thus personified the rewards and hazards of emigration in melodrama. *Cider with Rosie* was a relatively late version of a universal, even generic, story of English rural dispersion and emigration (though less commonly marked by murder).

Virtually every family in modern society is conscious of the widening radius of its kinsfolk and its contemporaries. Sisters and brothers, children, cousins and friends, are likely to be dispersed in different suburbs, towns, counties, countries, and even in different continents. This scattering of kith and kin was already a common refrain in the letters of ordinary British families in the mid-nineteenth century and even more in those of the Irish.

Australia, where I now live, is a special case because of its remoteness for most emigrants, yet it is the second-most immigrant country in the world. It has a
very high proportion of foreign-born people among its population, and its people are extremely mobile between its main population centres. But Australia is not much different from other western-style countries, marked by its high level of internal and external mobility and a very high degree of urbanisation. Most Australians live in five big coastal cities and look to the vast inland with increasingly unconvincing nostalgia.

The Australian migrant experience is a replica of the general western template of dispersion and concentration, a paradox of modern life which creates endless tensions and challenges to political systems everywhere. But it is also a continuing and spreading pattern for other continents and the rest of humanity. By 2008 more than half of the world’s population lived in urban places. Mass mobility was, and remains, a generic phenomenon, and its nature and origins require explanation.

Humanity seems always to have been a mobile species, from its earliest African origins through to its long-term stretchings to the ends of the earth. And now we seem more mobile than ever, forever dislocating and relocating within and between countries. Mobility seems like a defining trait of the species, a constant and perpetual shifting of people through each succeeding generation – behaviour so general that it may need no history, an endless predictable seamless spreading of people in all directions. Mobility seems like a non-variable in human affairs, twirling apparently without restraint.

My own track through the twentieth and into the present century is part of this essential pattern, but a relatively late version of the western model. In rural North Wales my grandparents, until the 1930s and 1940s, were farmers and farm labourers, with families of five and eight children on each side. Some of my great uncles had gone to South Africa, Australia and Canada before the First World War. A family farm, close to the River Dee not far from Wrexham, was lost in the Great Depression and this grandfather and his damaged family retreated to the nearby town. Most of his family were then growing up and leaving for urban jobs; their collective mobility was further enhanced by the Second World War. My other grandfather was a farm labourer; he survived the hard times, but his children also left for towns and jobs beyond the home county. In the next two generations our radius widened much further, and my own daughters now move in three continents. This family history is particular in its detail, but the pattern is replicated in the common genealogies in our times. We have left the land, we are concentrated in towns and cities, and we are dispersed. But as a group in the British Isles our families were late in their dispersion – most British people left the land in the previous two centuries and now less than 5 per cent of the British population live directly off the land.

There are, of course, countless variations on this simple story and they comprise a central characteristic of modern life. The contention of this book is that emigration history is not seamless, that it contains large shifts over time and
place, and that the modern scale and velocity of mobility have very particular historical roots. These roots were first significantly manifested about 250 years ago, primarily in the British Isles; the subsequent root system has spread its way across more than half of the globe, its onward progression continuing and unstoppable. As the Economist declared, British emigration was ‘the single most widespread global dispersion of people from one small territory that the world has ever seen’.5

There was, in essence, a disjunction, a turning point, a great change, in the disposition of humanity. At its centre was a mysterious gyration which somehow galvanised millions of people into the act of uprooting. They moved both short and long distances, in all manner of formations, but most frequently as families. Ultimately some of this movement was converted into a further extending centrifugal force – and part of it was transformed into oceanic migration – to other continents, including even Australia, to the very edge of the world of mobility. These international movements were exotic manifestations of the central generic disturbances of the world, the ultimate mystery probed in this book.

**Types of migration**

Elevating modern mobility into a ‘mystery’ may seem unnecessarily dramatic for something ostensibly quite simple and commonplace. After all, migration – at home and abroad – in all its varieties, is surely a straightforward matter. People ordinarily move from home to take advantage of revealed opportunities or incentives, or to avoid some negative prospect. They move when relocation is beneficial and sufficiently cheap. New employment opportunities emerge in other places, new technologies are created in other towns and countries. New lands and resources are made accessible; new transport methods facilitate movement. Cities grow, empires are opened; new economies erupt, and people shift in response to the exposed betterments on offer. Modern times are full of this narrative, and it is hardly surprising, despite the many obstacles thrown across the path of such spontaneous and rational migrations. Indeed it might be more useful to tell the entire story in terms of the impediments to movement, the politics of control and inertia, rather than the simple matter of people pursuing their best interests.

If this is so then there are few puzzles remaining about why people move within and between countries, or indeed the origins and causes of such migrations, in the past or the present. In some ways these are indeed uninteresting questions because the answers are already obvious. The prime reasons why people migrate are easily listed.

There are many who are coerced – such as slaves and convicts: in the age of slavery more than 11 million people were forced from Africa to the Americas and there have been countless other millions of slaves forcibly migrated to serve
distant masters and mistresses (within and beyond Africa). They are a large part of the wide narrative of international migration and slave migrations which continue to this day. European convicts were also shipped overseas from the sixteenth to the late nineteenth century. From the British Isles alone about 60,000 were sent to the American colonies before 1776; and after American Independence 160,000 British and Irish convicts were transported to the Australian colonies, through to 1868. And there were other flows of convicts east and west, even in recent times. The causes of these emigrations were unambiguous since they mainly excluded any volition among those coerced. They should include twentieth-century atrocities such as the forced labour recruitment into German labour camps in the 1930s and 1940s; to these should be added the involuntary migrations undertaken at the end of the Second World War across much of Europe and especially within the USSR which systematised the flow of forced labour to its gulags.

By contrast, millions of free people from the eastern Atlantic, from Europe, were spirited willingly across the ocean at the beginning of our times, the recoverable past, the start of the modern experience. These people invaded, possessed, appropriated and settled the distant west Atlantic continent; and further movements later wreaked similar consequences across other continents – the Euro-domination of much of the globe. It was, without much exaggeration, a reconstitution of the known world. It was propelled, differentially and pre-eminently, by common folk – that is, the emigrants – surging forth into entirely new territories of European expansion and so-called civilisation. But the term ‘free emigration’ masks many variations.

Coerced migration, beyond slavery and convictism, takes myriad forms and happens under many levels of pressure. Historically, very large numbers of people, mostly from conditions of extreme poverty, have translated themselves overseas under contracts which gave them free passages as indentured labour and with possible repatriation: in the eighteenth century most British and German emigrants to North America were ‘indentured servants’; millions of Indians became contracted emigrants in the nineteenth century to such destinations as Fiji, the Caribbean and Mauritius; Pacific Islanders were taken to Queensland; and large numbers of Chinese were contracted to California, Australia, South East Asia and South America. The trade in ‘bound’ contracted labour has swelled in recent times, especially from Asia to the Middle East. The sheer primitive pressure of circumstances makes these migrations appear less than entirely a free choice.

Similarly, people flee sudden crises such as famine, if they can somehow raise the fares to a distant place, the classic example of which was the great Irish exodus during and after the Great Famine of the 1840s. Among all the received theories of migration, the idea of Malthusian escape is particularly influential, namely
people avoiding the consequences of population overload, even though the costs of emigration usually militate against such rational mobility.

In the history of migration there have also been many categories of refugees fleeing wars, religious and political persecution or else seeking new contexts in which to pursue their particular ideologies and ways of life: emigration has been a theatre of social, political and religious experimentation (as well as ‘Eldorados’ of many sorts), particularly in the early colonial era before conformity became consolidated in the New Worlds. And the list of induced migration extends indefinitely to include people who were bent on avoiding military service, avoiding wives or husbands, mothers-in-law or fathers-in-law, and every complexion of family disorder or restraint. Not least has been the exuberance of youthful ‘animal spirits’ – the sheer adventurism and excitement of leaving home to gain accelerated independence. A high proportion of emigrants have always been young single males, and very young, recently married couples.

The most universal factor propelling emigration has always been the great force of economic advantage – for better living standards, a better future for the next generation – depending on the differential of incomes and prospects between home and destination. This is the universal driver of emigration. People move most obviously to take advantage of conditions elsewhere which are seen as preferable to those at home and those of previous employment. These migrants behave in a perfectly rational fashion and do not seem to require close interrogation as to motive – indeed more at issue is why more people have not made such a change when it was on offer.

Sometimes special lures and incentives have been set in front of potential emigrants: for instance, the offer of free or very cheap land or profit in the place of destination – common in nineteenth-century schemes in both North America and Australia. Similarly, powerful incentives were provided in the form of subsidised passages across the globe – notably to Australasia and Brazil, some of which operated into the late twentieth century and still lubricate the flow of certain recruitments of scarce labour to specialised parts of the globalised economy.

International emigration has also depended on the basic facilities of migration. The development of railways and shipping was crucially important in the great age of migration in the nineteenth century: safer and cheaper lines of expatriation reduced costs and increased the sense of security among the pools of potential migrants. On top of this was the accessibility of ‘new lands’: enticing opportunities opened up to migrants, and all in a remarkable context of free movement for ordinary people leaving and entering many countries. The great empires of settlement were magnets for migrants of every description and category – into the American, African and Australian continents and eastwards from continental Europe towards Siberia, which provided a less well-known
counterpoint to the ‘go west’ syndrome. Added to this were very large but barely measurable movements of populations within China and India and across Asia.

This is an extendable list which, taken together, and with much more detail, offers a straightforward and reasonable explanation of migration in modern times. Migration seems timeless, an invariable human characteristic. And there seems little reason to ponder migration any further: the mystery becomes a chimera.

Long views

The story of mobility continues today: very large flows of people are on the move in all directions within countries and across the world. This swelling phenomenon has the widest significance for the distribution of the world’s population and for the stability of political relations between nations, not least for distant destinations such as Australia, my own distant and hospitable haven.

But Australia is a very small player in the global game in terms of absolute numbers – especially compared to the extraordinary numbers of people now on the move between rural and urban conglomerations in other continents. Thus the astonishing creation of mega-cities in our own times – cities such as Shanghai, Djakarta, Mexico City, Delhi, Seoul, Mumbai, Manila, Sao Paulo, Los Angeles, Lagos, Casablanca, Cairo and many more, especially in China, during the past two decades. Most public attention is monopolised by the emergency migration of refugees out of war crises, but these flows tend to be more sporadic and smaller than the ongoing transit of people from the land.

The modern world is seething with the sheer movement of people, but most of all in the exit of rural folk into urban conglomerations in recently industrialising countries. More than half of the world’s total population is now urbanised, with very large numbers of people cut away from their rural origins. But there is nothing new about the magnetic attraction of towns and cities – though the velocity and scale of modern urbanisation is probably unprecedented. The United Nations’ World Population Report announced that humanity would make ‘the historic transition from a rural to an urban species’ in 2007 or 2008. This movement of people off the land and into cities and abroad is at the heart of the process of ‘modernisation’ which accompanies industrialisation. The transition almost always entails both urbanisation and migration. Rural people flock to the cities – but they also emigrate. Urbanisation and emigration have been driven by similar forces at work in rapidly modernising societies.

Proposing the phenomenon in this form runs against the idea of endless continuity – modern migration is different in scale and scope in comparison with most previous history. And the stark argument of this book is that there has been an acceleration in the pace of change, which has distant and common roots. The most telling marks of this underlying discontinuity were twofold,
namely the explosive growth of cities in the nineteenth century and, equally, the unprecedented surge in international migration – most of all in the 53 million people who left Europe in the long nineteenth century.

The world has fundamentally changed and the search for its historical antecedents – the agenda of this book – leads back to the eighteenth century and to the British Isles. The shift from the countryside to the cities is a modern generic tendency which was first seriously manifested in the British Isles in the late eighteenth century. These origins in islands off the shores of north-west Europe were connected with an explosive population growth, which was associated with the revolutions in agriculture, industry and transport. These changes in the bedrock of life were also expressed in the extrusive movement of people overseas – into oceanic migration. This was the British and Irish Diaspora which had earlier origins but which moved up to top gear in the 1820s and 1830s – the beginning of modern mass migration. It mostly pre-dated, by several decades, similar outpourings from other parts of western Europe. It was a fundamental historical discontinuity and constituted the authentic start of mass migration. It was the prototype of modern mobility.

The Australian case is significant because its own development coincided and interlocked with the changes on the other side of the world. Colonial Australia was initially peopled from the core of the British process which later became the universal model of industrialisation. Far more people emigrated to America and those flows had a longer history, but they too exhibited the same acceleration during the early decades of the nineteenth century. H.J. Dyos, the historian of urban Britain, memorably characterised these vast intercontinental transfers of population as ‘one of the hinges of history’. 12

A central question is how this recurrent process has shifted over historical time and evolved into the present world of migration. Its stirrings began in the deepest root systems of those pioneer rural societies. Only after 1850 did urban origins overtake the rural genesis of the story.

The Atlantic shift

Many of these propositions about historical discontinuities are not only debateable but also defy definitive measurement. Most fundamental is the idea of an extraordinary and unprecedented shift in the location and mobility of population which somehow fed into international migration flows by the late 1820s. In terms of causation it is most likely that the process had rural origins but the activation of the underlying system remains a mystery. How indeed was the mechanism established and set in motion?

Solving a mystery requires a hypothesis: here it entails a fundamental generic question about the way in which people are released from the land and shifted towards urban and overseas destinations. According to American historian,
Winifred Rothenberg, this was explicitly a ‘long and mysterious transformation in which the countryside was propelled from a millennium of inertia’, affecting the very foundations of all economic life: it remains one of the most compelling questions facing modern historians and social scientists.\(^{13}\)

The case for the existence of this mystery is deepened and enhanced in the work of another influential American historian, Bernard Bailyn. He presents the idea of the entire Atlantic world being in unique turmoil in the late eighteenth century. According to Bailyn there was a great structural transformation which caused the massive mobilisation of peoples from one end to the other of the linked oceanic system, from Luanda to the Hebrides, from the Elbe to the Mississippi.\(^{14}\) Bailyn’s language is rich in metaphor and full of geological imagery, of subterranean layers residing beneath the human structures of the times, of ‘deeper elements’ which generated ‘mysterious social strains’. This was the ‘Atlantic System’ shaken by seismic changes affecting the very foundations of economic and demographic existence.

Thus the colonisation of the Americas, notably in the later eighteenth century, was a crucial part of an oceanic system which connected very large movements of people on both sides of the Atlantic, rearranging population patterns in the three inter-connected continents: it produced massive transfers of migrants between Europe, America and Africa. Bailyn speculated about ‘grand tectonic forces’ that impelled vast movements of people.\(^{15}\) The entire Atlantic basin was convulsed into intercontinental flows of human beings over a territory that stretched across the Atlantic Ocean. He imagines immense movements of people ‘outward from their original centres of habitation – the centrifugal Völkerwanderungen that involved an untraceable multitude of local, small-scale exoduses and colonizations, the continuous creation of new frontiers and ever-widening circumferences … and, in the end, the massive transfer to the Western Hemisphere of people from Africa, from the European mainland, and above all from the Anglo-Celtic offshore islands of Europe.’\(^{16}\)

Movements of people on this scale challenge not only the requirements of explanation but even the limits of language. Eric Hobsbawm has employed terminology which matched that of Bailyn, describing the parallel mobilisation of the rural people of Germany as the mass Landflucht of the peasantry, ‘the then current term’.\(^{17}\) But Bailyn went further in his speculations to invoke what he termed ‘latent events’ that ‘conditioned and set boundaries’ to these developments across his Atlantic system, by which he meant those ‘events that contemporaries were not fully or clearly aware of, at times were not aware of all’. The point is that historians – including Bailyn – have lapsed into a curiously theatrical vocabulary when they reach for explanations of the great saga-like narratives of migration which they are able to describe in such rich detail.\(^{18}\)

Historians have thus resorted to a language of mystery and metaphor when they come to grapple with the great structural changes which underpin the array
of contributory causes of migration. There is a search for local origins which eventually possessed universal and massive consequences. It suggests, at the very least, a hierarchy of causes to deal with the needs of historical explanation.

These unexplained forces were manifested and activated at the level of the family and the special locality. In the British Isles, individuals, families and entire communities responded increasingly to new horizons and new pressures, which were eventually revolutionary in their effects within and beyond their national boundaries. In this essential mixture were the ultimate origins of international migration.

**Modern migration historiography**

Migration history comes in three main schematic forms: first the individual account, second the general narrative of migratory behaviour, and third the grand theories of migration. The most universal account of emigration is the rich and multiplying body of personal and family stories of the emigrant experience. This form of documentation is at its most generous and uninhibited in the extraordinary expansion of genealogy which often illuminates migrant trajectories in so many family histories. Emigrant letters between home and destination, sometimes from people who were barely literate, provide a direct *entrée* into these deeply personal worlds. In addition the oral recollections of emigrants have been garnered to document large swathes of the twentieth-century story of international migration. Both of these methods of direct migrant documentation have been successful in reconstructing the individual experience of the act of emigration, and also the repercussions of those actions in the onward career of emigrants. But individual experience is by definition atomistic: individual testimony is often unrepresentative and highly selective.

Charlotte Erickson, the historian of British emigration to nineteenth-century North America, believed that emigrant letters give undue emphasis to those who failed and those ‘who did not break their ties with the homeland’; others think the bias is more likely to favour the successful and, of course, the literate. Moreover, while both sources offer much insight into the general ways of thinking and behaving among migrants, they are often disappointing about the propellants of their great decisions to emigrate: they are typically shy about their activating impulses, and uninterested in self-interpretation. As a genre, these personal testimonies are surprisingly inarticulate and unrevealing about what actuated or generated the act of emigration, even the great transoceanic migrations.

The second primary category of migration history has a broader remit, the middle-level narration which describes the process of emigration, often in fine detail. It deals with the voyages, the conditions, the circumstances, the personnel, the destinations, the conditions at reception, and the subsequent lives of the immigrants. Here the administrative details of the passages are prominent: the
recruitment and shipping systems, the organising institutions, the bureaucrats, the *empresarios*\textsuperscript{22} and the *padrones* who famously recruited Italian migrants for America. This is the infrastructure of international migration and must include the political framework, often critical in the determination of emigration and immigration. It also involves the composition and organisation of emigration: the panoply of the means and forms of emigration, the grouping of migrants, in families and as individuals, female and male, urban and rural, age cohorts, and the categorisation of emigrant populations. These matters occupy the middle terrain of international migration – describing how the great flows of people were achieved, their timing and the shifting of destinations and the sources of migrants. Such mechanisms and basic apparatus of migration determined the character of particular emigrant flows, and are utterly crucial in working out how the systems operated, how sometimes they retarded and sometimes smoothed the extraordinary flows of people across the globe.

These mechanisms worked in different combinations for multitudes of migrants over four centuries. Systems were constructed to convey, for instance, indentured labour out of London in the eighteenth century. Other schemes were devised for crofters from the Scottish Highlands; for copper miners from Cornwall; for farmers from Aberdeenshire; for the onward migrations to New Zealand, or Fiji; and most of all for the slaves and convicts emigrated forcibly to the Caribbean and the Americas.

At this level, in this category, we are probing some of the basic essentials of international migration, explaining how it was facilitated and made possible. Such considerations also provide a large part of the explanation as to why emigration happens. For instance, once certain channels were constructed for emigrants, these conduits became positive generating systems in their own right – helping to establish the self-reinforcing mechanisms of emigration. Similarly much emigration history is about the way these channels were discovered, constructed, maintained and funded – and how some people found them more attractive or resistible than others. Describing these apparatus, and the variations, is one of the main modes of migration history.

In modern migration historiography, the third level of endeavour deals mainly in aggregates and abstractions – this is the effort to capture the entire phenomenon in its fullest scale and the way in which it was activated from its sources. This type of emigration history operates across the entire horizon of oceanic migration and attempts to reveal the fundamental propellants of these great movements of humanity. Here the endeavour is to locate the essential origins of mobility – which, of course, induces much theorising, especially among economists, demographers and geographers. But it is also home to a great corpus of empirical work which inevitably leads to masses of numbers and variables: statistical data in large tranches and correlations galore.
Thinking on this scale, against a background of millions of migrants in motion, has produced grand panoramic versions of the story. And most of it has been focused on the Atlantic theatre, the earliest and the biggest of the intercontinental migrations. Oscar Handlin famously depicted the North American version as that of migrating Europeans, in their millions, being ‘Uprooted’ from the Old World, seeking haven in the New, meaning the United States.  

Frank Thistletwaite in the early 1960s re-shaped the subject by insisting on linking the two sides of the Atlantic into a connected explanation of this migratory turmoil. In essence he tried to wrench the question of emigration out of its America-oriented obsession and to break through the implied ‘salt water curtain’ which separated the grand immigrant story from the worlds whence the emigrants came. Linking the two sides of the curtain is indeed the prior requirement of any explanation of the underlying causes involved in the transmission of tens of millions of people from one side of the Atlantic to the other (and the return of many of them as well).  

Meanwhile the economists and economic historians have sought the fundamental conditions which activated the great waves of emigration. The Welsh economist Brinley Thomas discovered a reciprocating mechanism of economic cycles, evolving in interacting formation on each side of the Atlantic – and which generated sequences of migration in response to supply and demand conditions on each side. It was a theoretical construction, reinforced with elaborate statistical data, not unlike a clever well-greased steam-driven Victorian engine, clattering along and then feeding tens of millions of people out across the globe. Even simpler, and notably deterministic, is the standard model employed by the Harvard economist Jeffrey Williamson and his associates – a model which sees emigration as a perfectly rational long-distance response to differentials of income between the Old World and the New. Migrants are here depicted as a potential international labour force, always prompted to seize opportunities to maximise incomes where better wages beckoned, and therefore always working to produce a convergence of international wage levels and induce rate-reducing differentials at all times. The mechanism operates across all decades and centuries, but is subject to shocks and exogenous crises (such as war and banking catastrophes) which impede the process of convergence. In a perfect but improbable world there would be a natural and satisfying resolution of economic differences to the mutual benefit of the merging economies.

It is curious that there persists a continuing disconnection between these large thinkers. It is symptomatic of the fractured character of modern knowledge that although two of the most influential people mentioned here, Williamson the economist and Bailyn the historian, are both at Harvard, their work never intersects: there is no dialogue, no connection, and yet they deal with basically the same problem. Their ideas of motion stand in opposite positions and it is a
very odd spectacle, perhaps especially to an antipodean. Nor is there much obvious connection between the three levels of my schema.27

Still more mysterious, amid these theories and mechanisms, is the prior problem of what set the engines in motion, most especially what generated the universal differentials which seem so entirely critical in these schemes of migration. But if differentials of income and prospects were the *primum mobile* of migration, the critical prior question must address the determination of the differentials. What caused the widening differentials which were required to mobilise millions of migrants?28 This is one of the mysteries at the centre of the migration puzzle.

**Chains of causation**

These great changes in migratory behaviour, it will be argued, possessed small beginnings: they started with people moving along country lanes from cottages into the towns and villages of a now lost rural world. The broad story is traceable in the genealogies of individual families, travelling backwards over their emigration to their origins, showing the steps undertaken along the way.29 But the precise propellants, even in the most microscopic analysis, remain mostly obscure.

International migration originated in specific and localised conditions, often within rural family economies. The processes of oceanic mobilisation require analysis at the local level, involving changes which, however, accumulated consequences at a compound rate into massive relocations of population. It was in families that the underlying shifts in the structures of society were first confronted. That is where decisions were made which, in enormously aggregated forms, eventually erupted into overseas migration. The intellectual challenge is to connect the microscopic study of specific documented cases with the macro level of aggregated statistics and theorising. The prototype was located in the British Isles, somewhat before it spread its roots to the rest of Europe and beyond.

The flight or drift from the land in Britain and Ireland was widespread across most decades of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It was the lament of many commentators in the last decades of the nineteenth century, when British farmers and landlords were beginning to express alarm about their shrinking pools of agricultural labourers, especially when the new trade unions were urging some of their members to emigrate, thereby creating upward pressure on rural wages. Many travellers, it was claimed, found parts of rural England ‘as deserted as the veld of Africa’.30

There was a continuous diminution of the British agricultural population. In 1909 C.E.G. Masterman described it as ‘the largest secular change of a thousand years: from the life of the fields to the life of the city’. It would be more than surprising if this structural transformation in the lives of almost everyone was not connected ultimately to the vast flows of emigrants out of Britain, nor also
in the very psychology of migration and in the expectations that those genera-
tions carried with them to overseas destinations. Masterman believed that ‘Nine 
out of ten families have migrated in three generations’.31

To accord the central role to the agrarian transition in the original propulsion of migration is not, of course, to exclude other factors such as technology, educa-
tion, government policy and communications, all of which figure repeatedly throughout the following account. It does, however, assert the original priority of rural change in the mechanisms of fundamental change. The British case was the prototype of modern rural-urban migration and has been replicated, with important variations, across the world through to the present day.

A synoptic view of the likely mechanisms which activated the system suggests some simple propositions. After about 1750, as witnessed in many parts of the British Isles, there was a revolutionary rise in agricultural productivity. This was connected with the continuous migration of people off the land, usually labourers and peasants and their offspring. These original agrarian movements were integral and essential to the activation of modern economic growth and urbanisation.

At the same time there was fundamental demographic expansion – a massive, unprecedented growth of numbers far in excess of rural labour needs. The much more efficient new agriculture in the modernising economy began to shrink its employment opportunities at a time when the population was growing at a totally unprecedented rate and scale.

These dislocated peoples then flowed, willingly or not, through myriad chan-
nels into internal and external migration systems, including overseas diasporic outflows. Moreover this historical experience, first activated in the British Isles, became the model of modern mobility replicated across the world to the present day.

The British Isles was the prototype case of agrarian transformation associated with industrial growth and mass migration. Here agricultural productivity increased by extraordinary leaps in the years 1750–1860. It was connected with the radical re-organisation of farming methods – often with great turmoil and distress (including eviction, enclosure and dispersal) in many parts. But mostly the change was in the form of more gradual, intermittent and unco-ordinated evacuations which eventually and decisively reduced the populations of all rural regions, feeding urban growth and emigration too.

These workings of rural society under radical change produced outflows which were erratic, unpredictable and sporadic – with simultaneous forces of inertia and release operating to inhibit or accelerate the seemingly chaotic movements. These two fundamental processes (agrarian and demographic) produced net out-migration in many different patterns and at different velocities. How all this worked – statistically, logistically and in the minds of the people at the time – is at the very centre of the perceived relocation of population. Until about 1840
rural folk dominated the outflows of emigrants from the British Isles. Thereafter the cumulative urbanisation of the British population began to change the character of the outflows from Britain, and increasingly its emigrants became townsfolk. The genesis of such migration was formed in its rural phase, before it was transformed into an overwhelmingly urban phenomenon.

The enhanced mobility and rapid urbanisation emerged vitally in this context of agrarian and industrial acceleration in the late eighteenth century. A little later, by 1830, these economic transformations were also feeding the movements of mass emigration out of the British Isles. There was a simultaneous and unparalleled expansion of population in the British Isles, a trebling of numbers in less than a century. This concurrent demographic revolution was equally crucial in the creation of migratory outflows. In addition, the widening of income differentials (between regions, between countryside and the towns, and between home and abroad) was reinforced by the emergence of a new social psychology of mobility, which altered the horizons of British people on the move.

All this migration was an unspecified turmoil manifested across a vast terrain, but which has never been closely expounded or explained. The consequences are clearer, but the original causes are mainly unattended. It was probably related to the great re-alignment of land availability: as it became tighter in Europe it became more available in America and Australasia. These were links along the chain of causation towards the migration of millions of the British people in their confusing permutations. Making the final connection with the act of emigration is often the most teasing problem.

**The widening gyre**

These structural transformations underpinned the massive redistribution of the British population, and the evidence of the consequences was displayed across the migratory contexts of the times. Moreover, it will be argued, the process was much replayed in other parts of Europe in different combinations and following different chronologies. The reception of migrants abroad – the final link in the chain – should carry the marks of the original centrifugal forces from which they emanated. The emigrants were the final expression of the underlying propellants which powered the exoduses, the human witnesses of structural changes in their homelands.

There was nothing automatic about any of these transitions, and much of the present quest is directed to the vital release-mechanisms, the pressures, the opportunities, the differentials, the responses, the resistances, the time-delays and the extreme local variations in the reactions to agrarian and demographic changes. Migration was famously subject to surges and declensions, to frenzies and humours of every sort which certainly mesmerised participants and their contemporaries. Meanwhile our general understanding of migration is still gripped
The migration mystery

by simple notions of ‘push’ and ‘pull’ and by dense descriptions of the recruitment of the migrants and their subsequent travails.

The present account concentrates on the categorisation of migrants in terms of, for example, the prevailing degrees of duress, expulsion, coercion, initiative, volition, escape, desperation and adventure. This, of course, is slippery work because migrants rarely gave direct expression to their actual and psychological status on departure. But our working hypothesis is that the original impulses for dislocation began in the villages and local communities of the British Isles (before spreading across many parts of Europe). Our proposition needs to be tested against the evidence at that level. The historical approach can establish a longitudinal account of the great processes by means of accumulated documentation covering many decades and variants. A longer bow is drawn when we claim that it connects a central question in modern economic growth with the widening gyre of migration (including even as far as Australia), past, present and future.

Campsites

The great hazard in this approach is that of homogenising a story which is composed of millions of lives with all their individualities and unique characteristics, properties and contexts. The search for recurring patterns, for connecting tissue, leads into the swallowing cavern of unicausality – even worse, of attributing large processes to necessarily large causes. After all, the story of migration, even from Britain alone, can be told in terms of the millions of family histories, in all their dense detail, idiosyncrasy and human interest.

Ultimately the migration question is that of establishing the conditions of change and their connections with the world-wide outflows of British people over the century after 1750. Rather than seeking a universal law of migration, the question is more directly practical: what indeed potentiates a home population towards migration? What creates the pre-disposing conditions? And how did the early modest flows of people across the Atlantic become converted into floods of humanity (later encompassing most of Europe too)? For Australia and elsewhere the critical question is: how did the initial flows of free migrants after 1788 relate to the grand structural changes occurring in the British Isles in the age of rural transformation? Most of all, were these subterranean changes the ultimate, generic, activating sources of the emigrating masses?

The programme here is to find a way of linking the precise detail of the local experience to the large-scale transitions affecting entire societies. It particularly involves identifying the stages in the emigrants’ transit from rural origins to ultimate destinations. It locates the classic pathways out of Britain through individual and family experience to create a series of models of migration. This exposes the conditions out of which migrants departed, the manner in which
their worlds were activated to this end, and some of the general uniting lines of causation.

There are always general and local considerations in this agenda and the method of this book is that of interspersing particular concrete chapters between more discursive treatments of the generic process which is the quest of the study. So there follows a series of ‘campsites’—pilot studies of specific migrations within the broader British context. These constitute closely localised investigations of migrations from districts which produced prolific emigrations to North America as well as to Australasia. There are innumerable candidates and those chosen have been selected for their variety of conditions as well as their relatively rich documentation. They include a number of islands (the Isle of Man, St Kilda, the Channel Islands), some southern rural sites (West Sussex, Cornwall, Shropshire), some remote zones (the West Highlands, Tipperary and West Cork), some semi-industrialised localities (the West Riding of Yorkshire, Tayside), London, the Welsh Uplands (Montgomeryshire), as well as the overwhelming and unavoidable case of Ireland. They provide a spectrum of cases, seeking some common denominators.

Within these selections there are some especially interesting connections—for instance between the Scottish Highlands and New South Wales in the 1830s, and with Victoria in the 1850s; between the Isle of Man and Ohio in the 1820s and 1830s; between the Yorkshire Dales and the United States in the 1840s; and between Cornwall and South Africa and South Australia in the later nineteenth century. The method, therefore, is to create a series of exact chains of events and processes from closely defined localities in the British Isles. Thus, the rural economy and demography of the Isle of Man is very well documented in primary and published sources and provides a good case study of the precise circumstances which gave rise to a twenty-year migration of certain types of farmers to Ohio in the 1820s. Such studies offer more penetration of the generic processes at work. Beyond the particular case there is interspersed some treatment of the spread of these changes to continental Europe and the interconnections created with North American and Australasian destinations, necessarily in programmatic form.

The big question is the realignment of population across the globe towards international migration and, subsequently, hyper-urbanisation—of which Australia comprised a distinct but well-defined variant. Local studies are employed to build towards the grand question of oceanic movement. How were the great changes translated into oceanic migration? What were the patterns, the varieties, the sequences?

The starting hypothesis is that the answers lie within the documentation of localities in the source districts. The greatest challenge is to discover the ways in which the larger forces (e.g. population growth) were responsible for delivering migrants to the seaports. Mostly the evidence is essentially circumstantial: here
we track them from their own hearths and listen to what they said. They were most often silent witnesses to their own history, yet they were the carriers of historical change. We need the earthy details of actual lives juxtaposed with the grand shifts in the structures of British life.

But finally there were those structural subterranean seismic changes in the eighteenth century invoked by Bailyn – the mysterious forces let loose in the offshore islands of north-western Europe. This ultimately is a holy grail – though it may seem also like a search for historical phlogiston. Nevertheless the search starts in the Isle of Man and the Channel Island of Guernsey. Such insular cases provide our first concrete examples of the accelerated emigration from Britain in the 1820s – the exact phenomenon in miniature we seek to explain.

Notes

3 See Independent, 27 June 2007; Guardian, 28 June 2007. The latter argues that ‘In the first wave of urbanisation [in the early nineteenth century], overseas migration [to North America or Australia] relieved the pressures on European cities … Restrictions on international migration today make this almost impossible’.
6 For a summary of the numbers involved, see Bernard Bailyn, ‘Considering the slave trade: history and memory’, in Sometimes an Art (New York: Knopf, 2015), pp. 6–8. The Anglocentric and Eurocentric versions of the migration narrative have been severely criticised in recent times, notably the notions of ‘the White Atlantic’ in a context in which three-quarters of the people who crossed the Atlantic between 1500 and 1820 were Africans. This, of course, was prior to the onset of European mass emigration.
7 The ejection of minorities from nation states has a long and unsavoury history. See, for example, Matthew P. Fitzpatrick, Purging the Empire: Mass Expulsions in Germany, 1871–1914 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).
8 See, for example, Andrekos Varnava (ed.), Imperial Expectations and Realities: El Dorados, Utopias and Dystopias (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015), and Rowan Strong, ‘Pilgrims, paupers or progenitors: religious constructions of British emigration from the 1840s to 1870s’, History 100 (2015), 392–411.
9 On the frequency of emigration after the death of a wife, husband or parent and similarly the desire to end a marriage, a family scandal, or simply ‘dissipation’, see Charlotte Erickson, Leaving England, p. 25.
There are currently reported to be about 200 million internal migrants in China. See Xin Meng and Chris Manning, *The Great Migration: Rural-Urban Migration in China and Indonesia* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 2010). The scale and character of these ‘tidal waves’ of internal migrants is well discussed in Delia Davin, *Internal Migration in Contemporary China* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999).

As reported by David Satterthwaite in the *Guardian*, 17 Jan. 2007.


He refers to ‘deep-lying cultural tectonics that undermined the foundations of the whole of Atlantic civilization and led to profound transformations’. Bailyn, *Sometimes an Art*, p. 167.


See Bailyn, *Voyagers to the West*, p. xx.

The international study of such documentation now encompasses correspondence from the great Chinese Diaspora, opening up possibilities of cross-cultural comparisons. See, for example, Ding Lixing and Zheng Zongwei (eds), *Chinese Qiaopi and Memory of the World* (Wuyi University, 2014), especially Gregor Benton, ‘Documenting the lives of emigrants through their letters: the overseas Chinese case’, in *Chinese Qiaopi*, pp. 484–507.

The challenge of individual testimony, collected in large anthologies, is to detect ‘the patterns that run through much of the material’. See W.A. Armstrong, in *The Encyclopaedia of the Victorian Era*. vol. 2, edited by James Eli Adams et al. (Danbury, Conn: Grolier Academic Reference, 2004).


These were agents recruiting for Mexico and Texas in the 1820s. See Graham Davis, *In Search of the Better Life* (Stroud: History Press, 2011), p. 207.


26 See Timothy J. Hatton and Jeffrey G. Williamson, *Global Migration and the World Economy: Two Centuries of Policy and Performance* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2005), which takes the long view and offers explanations of international factor movements, and supply-and-demand conditions in the evolving international labour market.


28 A straightforward account of the problem of explaining mass mobility is contained in the excellent Introduction to Shula Marks and Peter Richardson (eds), *International Labour Migration: Historical Perspectives* (Hounslow, Middlesex: Temple Smith for the Institute of Commonwealth Studies, 1984), especially p. 19ff.


32 The recent migration of rural populations to the cities of Europe (for example, in North Germany, Portugal, Spain, France, Slovakia and Greece) has been described as ‘a silent blight, a steady, almost unremarked haemorrhage of people leaving the countryside for the cities’. See Sarah Tisdall, ‘Silent blight as the young leave the villages for cities’, *Guardian Weekly*, 28 Aug. 2015.

33 Michael Frayn, in more philosophical mode, employed a similar method: ‘We can’t look at everything, but we can choose a few particular sites, a few vantage points with wide views. What I’m proposing is that we should go this way and that, without any particular system, wherever a path seems to offer, to get the lie of the land’, *The Human Touch* (London: Faber & Faber, 2006), p. 8, for which reference I owe Ngaire Naffine my thanks.