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## **Irish migration and return: continuities and changes over time**

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## **Irish migration and return: continuities and changes over time**

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**Abstract:** The return of first generation migrants to the Republic of Ireland (RoI) is well documented since the 1980s, based on studies that adopt both structural and more humanistic approaches but continuities and changes over time in the reasons for leaving and returning are underexplored as themes *per se*. This paper focuses on the latter dimensions, using information relating to forty-two returnees' reasons for migration and return (and repeat migration in some instances) discussed with reference to the wider literature. All of the sample interviewees migrated from the RoI, spent at least one year resident outside the island of Ireland and returned to live in the RoI for at least one year. Although a relatively small sample, their migration histories cover an extended period of time from 1947 to 2010 that offers scope for comparison with published sources. The evidence illustrates both changes and enduring continuities in the reasons for leaving and returning and associations with transnational ties which merit further attention.

**Keywords:** migration, return, Ireland, continuity, change, transnational

### **Introduction**

The return of first generation migrants to the Republic of Ireland (RoI) is well documented since the 1980s, based on features of economic and social structures and more agency-driven personal decisions (Foeken, 1980; Gmelch, 1986; McGrath, 1991; Punch and Finneran, 1999; Corcoran, 2002; Ní Laoire, 2007, 2008a). Earlier studies are usually referenced in more recent publications but continuities and changes over time are not discussed as phenomena *per se*.

This paper focuses on these dimensions using the experience of forty-two recent returnees as a context for discussing the wider literature. The sample migration histories cover an extended period of time from 1947 to 2010 and therefore provide reference points for comparison with the broader documented history of migration and return. All of the migrants maintained regular contact with their home communities whilst away and returned annually or every two

or three years on holiday, following a traditional pattern, which renewed links with family and friends (Walter, 2008). Therefore, they lived within transnational contexts, involving social exchanges and cross-border travel (Levitt *et al.*, 2003), which are known to facilitate return and repeat migration (Gmelch, 1980; Conway *et al.*, 2009). Most also had regular contact with compatriots whilst overseas. The method follows a life history approach in which the returnees recount key factors that influenced migration and return and transnational links as a migrant.

First generation migration and return to the country of birth are well conceptualised in the academic literature (Bovenkerk, 1974; Gmelch, 1980; King, 1986; Dustmann, 2003; Cassarino, 2004; Stockdale, 2004). Traditionally, both have been explained in the context of ‘push’ and ‘pull’ social and economic factors in the area of origin and the destination and the personal psychological capacities of the individual migrant to adapt to living in a non-familiar environment (Cerase, 1970; Gmelch, 1980). In the RoI case, migration is associated *inter alia* with the state of the domestic economy, accessible employment opportunities overseas, access to higher educational options and a sense of escape and adventure (Bovenkerk, 1973; Sexton *et al.*, 1991; MacLaughlin, 1994; Shuttleworth and King, 1995; MacEnrí and White, 2008). Ní Laoire (2000) has illustrated the insights to be gained from locating migration within a biographical framework, whilst not ignoring structural dimensions. The state of the Irish and overseas economies feature largely in reasons for return (Kirwin and Nairn, 1983; Punch and Finneran, 1999) and life course events, such as marriage and the education of children, are important influences for certain age groups (Ní Laoire, 2007, 2008a). The termination of work permits and visas is pertinent in some destination areas.

It is recognised internationally that a ‘myth of return’ (Anwar, 1979) is present in the imaginaries of many migrants, especially when they maintain contact with family across international boundaries, which enhances the sense of attachment with the people and place of origin (Appadurai, 1996; Chamberlain and Leydesdorff, 2004). This sense of association with and anchoring in the country and area of origin has been identified among Irish returnees from Britain (Ní Laoire, 2007, 2008a) and from the United States (Corcoran, 2002). The myth of return also features strongly in narratives of migration recorded with Irish migrants still resident in Britain (Dunne, 2003). Conway (2007, p. 425), in a Caribbean context, further refers to the selective and symbolic memories of home ‘imbued with family memories’ which can endure when the migrant feels alienated in the host society overseas, thereby ensuring the retention of the myth of return. Advances in information and communication technologies (ICTs) and the reduced costs of travel, which help in retaining links with the country of

origin, are identified as serving to perpetuate the myth and its attainment (Glick-Schiller *et al.*, 1995; Portes *et al.*, 1999; Faist, 2013). Conway *et al.* (2009) suggest in a Caribbean context, for example, that the return of first and second generation migrants is facilitated by maintaining close contact with family and friends in the area of origin and visiting on a regular basis. Walter (2013) and Hannafin (2016, this issue) illustrate how annual summer holiday visits to places of parental origin embed links with places and the extended family in the lives of the second generation Irish in Britain.

Before presenting the research findings for the forty-two interviewees, documented experiences of Irish migration and return, which are discussed later with reference to the sample material, are reviewed briefly and the methodology is described.

### **Irish migration and return**

Ireland was a country of net outmigration from the 1840s until the early 1970s when net immigration was recorded for the first time in more than one hundred years (Kennedy, 1973; MacLaughlin, 1994). This was followed by renewed net outmigration during the recessionary years of the 1980s, even among the highly qualified (Shuttleworth and King, 1995; Walter, 2008), and renewed net immigration from the mid-1990s, as the economy grew at unprecedented rates (Fahey, 2007). Data from the 2011 census reveal that return migration took place even in periods when net outmigration was at its height since the 1950s (Central Statistics Office, 2012). In excess of 30,000 returnees were registered for all periods, except pre-1951 and 1951-1960 when limited economic opportunities were available in Ireland and the potential stream of returnees was also depleted through mortality. Over 117,000 migrants returned in 1991-2000 and some 74,417 in the following five years when the economy was booming. Large scale outmigration took place in response to the recession, commencing in 2008, but return also occurred (in excess of 47,000 people between 2007 and 2011) which Lunn (2012) has attributed *inter alia* to children born in Ireland accompanying returning parents and short-term migrants returning on the termination of work visas.

The reasons for return to Ireland are documented with reference to traditional structural economic and social models of migration (e.g., Foeken, 1980; Gmelch, 1986; Punch and Finneran, 1999; Jones, 2003). A biographical approach by Ní Laoire (2007, 2008a) with a sample of thirty- and forty-year-old returnees to rural Munster and Connacht, during the 1990s and the early 2000s, further revealed framing within classical counter-urbanisation discourses relating to a rural idyll and the countryside as a desirable place to bring up children, interwoven with family and kinship relationships. A similar embeddedness in social

and economic structures among higher educated returnees from the United States was described by Corcoran (2002) as a 'quest for anchorage'. Jones (2003) found that returnees to County Mayo, during the late 1990s, prioritised family related motivations, although the availability of employment clearly facilitated return. Use of earnings to establish a business is known to accompany return (Gmelch, 1986; McGrath, 1991; Farrell *et al.*, 2014; Cawley, 2015) and is present but not a key theme among the sample of interviewees discussed here. Whilst many returnees have positive memories of growing up in Ireland, both earlier studies (Foeken, 1980; Gmelch, 1986; McGrath, 1991) and more recent studies (Ní Laoire, 2008b; Ralph, 2012) illustrate that re-adaptation and acceptance are often problematic and may stimulate repeat migration.

## **Methods**

This paper is based on personal interviews with forty-two returned migrants, who migrated and returned between 1947 and 2010 (Table 1). All had migrated from the RoI, spent at least one year resident overseas and returned to live in the State for one year or more; all visited whilst away (50% at least annually) and they maintained regular contact with family and friends at home and with compatriots abroad. Some, primarily recent migrants and those migrating for educational purposes, returned several times annually; many returned less frequently, although maintaining regular links with home. The periods of time spent away varied from one to forty-eight years, with an average of eleven, a mode of three and a median of six-and-a-half years. The interview data were obtained from a sample sourced through second year university geography students who were studying migration as part of an academic module, a recognised valid source of information (Ní Laoire, 2002; Fortuijn and van der Meer, 2006). The students were tasked with interviewing a family member or friend (or using their own experience if they fitted the criteria) who had migrated from the RoI in the past for one year or longer and returned either permanently or for a period of one year or more before re-migrating (and possible returning again). The respondents included grandparents, parents, aunts, uncles and siblings, resulting in a long time period being covered. A structured interview schedule with closed and open questions was made available and detailed instructions were given about the conduct of the interview. One interviewee who had re-migrated received and returned the schedule by email and three were interviewed by Skype. The schedule was self-explanatory and there did not appear to have been any problems of interpretation by the migrant who filled it remotely, although there was less elaboration than in most cases where personal interviews took place. All of the information was checked to

ensure that students were not sharing interview information with each other. Incomplete schedules were not used. The data were entered into a database and transferred to SPSS® to tabulate the quantitative variables. Sixty-six schedules were completed in full and the forty-two, where return visits took place, are included in the analysis reported here. Twenty-four sample migrants who held one- and two-year work visas in Australia, Canada and the United States, or who lacked legal status in the latter country and did not visit whilst away, are not included in the discussion. Their return was usually necessitated by the expiration of work visas and undocumented status.

**Table 1.** Decade of migration and return

<b>Decade</b>	<b>Migration (n=42)</b>	<b>Return (n=42)</b>
1940s	4.8 (2)	—
1950–1959	11.9 (5)	2.4 (1)
1960–1969	14.3 (6)	9.5 (4)
1970–1979	9.5 (4)	14.3 (6)
1980–1989	33.4 (14)	7.1 (3)
1990–1999	7.1 (3)	28.6 (12)
2000+	19.0 (8)	38.1 (16)

Source: authors’ survey

The questions in the interview schedule profiled the respondent at first migration and return. The questions covered topics such as the reasons for moving initially (and returning), whether migration and return were undertaken alone or with someone else, education or qualifications obtained whilst away, employment status prior to, during migration and after return and the occupations held. The geography of migration was captured in terms of the actual place moved from, the initial destination area, onward destinations if any, the place returned to in Ireland and the current place of residence. Transnational practices were targeted through questions relating to return visits, contact with home and contacts with Irish people in the destination area(s). The experience of being a migrant and a returnee were explored. Repeat migration(s) and repeat return(s) were also explored using the same variables as above. The schedule included both closed and open questions. Some of the open questions sought information such as the reasons for leaving and returning which were to be listed in order of importance. Most respondents provided information relating to more than one reason

as influencing their decision. They also elaborated on the positive and negative features associated with living overseas and with living in Ireland again. The respondents were given the opportunity to provide any further comments that they wished and many did so. Notwithstanding substantial time periods having elapsed since return in some instances, people recalled many of the circumstances around what were important events in their lives. The relationships between the students and the interviewees appear to have contributed to a willingness to narrate the experience of migration.

This paper is based mainly on qualitative information from the interviews which was analysed in depth in an iterative way to identify major themes and sub-themes in the reasons for migration and return and the experience of being a migrant and a returnee (Bryman, 2008). Based on this analysis, key features of migration and return were identified. Continuities and changes are identified between the interviewees who left and returned at different time periods and are discussed with reference to previous studies. The numbers are small in many instances but the objective is to identify themes not statistical representativeness. The presentation of the results is structured with reference to the reasons for migration and return and the experience following return, including repeat migration. A number of examples that illustrate more widely represented experiences within the group are then presented. Christian names are allocated to the respondents whose real names were not sought. Places of origin are described in a general way to minimise the possibility of individuals being identifiable. The results are presented in a discursive way based on identification of key themes illustrated by quotations.

## **Results**

### *Migrants and motivations*

The sample was evenly balanced between males and females. Aligning with the geographical origins of many of the students, a majority of the interviewees migrated from and returned to small and medium sized towns and rural areas and only a limited number of city locations were involved. A majority of the respondents came from counties along the west coast of Ireland from Donegal to Clare but there were also respondents from the midlands, Dublin and other east and south coast counties. The places of origin of most of the sample contrasted markedly with the cities to which they migrated and must have served to highlight a remembered sense of community and rurality which emerged in reasons for later return. Skilled and semiskilled occupations were overrepresented and professional, managerial and technical occupations were underrepresented, by comparison with the structure of the national



workforce in the 2006 and 2011 censuses. Commonalities among the migrants related to the age and conjugal status when migration took place; most left in their late teens or early- to mid-twenties as single people, following long-established international evidence (Sjaastad, 1962). Differences over time were apparent in the human capital held by the sample migrants in terms of education and its implications for the occupations held and those accessible on migration. Thus, most migrants of the 1950s and the 1960s, before access to free second level education was introduced in 1966, had a primary education only and held manual unskilled employment. From the 1970s, the number of migrants with second level education and skilled occupations increased. From the 1980s, when the economy entered a deep recession, the number of higher qualified migrants with technical and university education increased, as noted earlier by Shuttleworth and King (1995); migration also took place to gain university qualifications in Britain from the late 1980s, as documented by Clancy (1997). Britain dominated as a migration destination among the total sample but some migrants also moved to the United States throughout the period involved and to Continental European countries, following Ireland's accession to membership of the now EU in 1973. Australia grew in importance as a destination after 2008 because of the availability of one-and two-year work visas (Glynn *et al.*, 2014). Most migrants moved to major cities with existing Irish communities, such as London, Leeds, Manchester, Boston, New York, San Francisco, Perth, Melbourne, suggesting path dependency, to some extent at least (McDonald and McDonald, 1964), although a larger sample would be necessary to investigate the extent to which new destinations may have become established over time (Walter, 1980).

The reasons given for migrating reveal, not surprisingly, unemployment (or employment below the skill and educational levels held) in Ireland at a given time and actual or expected opportunities in the destination area, as reported in earlier research (Gmelch, 1986; Sexton *et al.*, 1991). Most respondents in the current study cited more than one reason for migrating and the sequencing of these motivations varied according to employment status in particular. A quest for work was the main reason cited among the unemployed whilst employed people prioritised gaining experience of working in another environment, a secondary reason for some of the unemployed. Skilled employed migrants, who left during the years of economic growth in the 2000s, also often referred to a desire to travel which their portable qualifications made possible (e.g., chef, hairdresser, electrician, bar tender, waitress) although, as Bovenkerk's (1973) research illustrates, the desire for travel and adventure among Irish migrants is not new. A twenty-seven-year old chef's motivations for migrated to Sydney for three years, in 2007, are illustrative. Lisa wanted 'to travel... see how the Southern

Hemisphere lives... to get on, gain new experiences... meet new people'. Some recent graduates referred to a desire to travel before taking up employment. Monica graduated with a BSc from a Welsh university, in 2007, and spent two years travelling and working in South East Asia and Australia, with a friend, before returning to much reduced employment opportunities in her home area. Restricted access to particular educational qualifications in the RoI also influenced migration to Britain in the mid-twentieth century and more recently. Corroborating Ryan's (2004) evidence, a number of women reported moving to England during the 1950s and the 1960s to gain nursing qualifications in hospitals where accommodation and basic wages were provided, at a time when fees were required in Irish hospitals. Some migrants during the past two decades cited restrictions on entry to particular professional courses in Ireland (e.g., pharmacy) as influencing their migration to Britain.

Two tropes were present in the motivations of sample migrants of the mid-twentieth century that were not mentioned explicitly by more recent migrants. A number of both males and females who left in the 1950s and the 1960s referred to supporting family (parents and siblings) as a reason for migrating, as Ryan (2004) documented among Irish women who moved to nursing careers in London during the 1930s. Jim explained that he left a small town for Manchester, as an unemployed twenty-year-old lorry driver in 1963, because 'there was no work available and (I) needed to earn money to provide for family at home'. A number of sample females, who left rural areas and small towns in the 1950s and 1960s, incorporated a desire to escape and attain independence, as identified by Bovenkerk (1973), Walter (1991) and Ryan (2004) among earlier migrants. Carmel's motivations in migrating to London in 1952 from another small western town, to obtain a nursing qualification, are illustrative. She was 'unemployed and bored at home, wished to receive a nursing qualification and gain experience of life on my own away from family and parents'.

Motivations for migration emerge over time, therefore, as being multi-layered, including economic necessity but also a desire for career development and personal fulfilment, impelled by limited opportunities and lack of personal freedom in the area of origin. Migration took place both during periods of recession and economic growth when return to employment, on gaining experience or travelling overseas, seemed guaranteed. The destinations moved to, especially among the lower skilled, point to continued migration to places that were more or less accessible at particular points in time, facilitated by family and friendship links. Particular British cities remained important destinations throughout the study period, as did cities in the United States to a lesser extent. During the last decade, Australia and Canada, whose economies were less impacted by recession, have become destinations of increased

importance for career motivated migrants with required qualifications and the former has also attracted those who wish to fund travel through work.

The presence of kin and friends in overseas locations is a traditional source of information about employment opportunities among lower skilled Irish migrants, in particular, and contributes to international migration, as it does among other established migrant groups (Jackson, 1963; Massey and Aysa-Lastra, 2011). All of the unskilled and semiskilled and some skilled employees, throughout the period of time covered by the sample, cited links with friends and relatives in destination areas as sources of information about employment, as identified by Walter (1980) among earlier migrants to Bolton and Luton. This evidence follows Granovetter's (1973) hypothesis relating to the role of 'strong' ties with family and friends as sources of employment among non-managerial and non-professional employees, which Massey *et al.* (1998) have identified as operating among migrant communities in the United States. By contrast, professionals and skilled employees in the sample who migrated long distances to Australia, for example, used formal sources such as agencies and advertisements – 'weak ties' in Granovetter's terms (1973).

#### *Motives for return and the experience after return*

The changing state of the RoI economy has important implications for outmigration and immigration, including return migration (O'Hagan and McIndoe-Calder, 2011). Survey data illustrate the influence of individual and family related social factors within the framework of broader economic structures (Jones, 2003). Recent studies of Irish return migration reveal particular priority being assigned to social motivations, relating to the welfare of children being better served in a remembered idyllic countryside, village or small town, than in a major urban area (Ní Laoire, 2007, 2008a) and a more general desire for re-anchoring in societies of origin (Corcoran, 2002). Given that the sample of interviewees included people who migrated at various points in time and were absent for varying periods of time, a range of different motives for return emerged. There were, however, recurring themes of which an established theme of reconnecting with family and friends was of particular importance, supporting previous research (Gmelch, 1986; McGrath, 1991; Ní Laoire, 2007). Echoing Ní Laoire's interviewees (2007, 2008a), a remembered rural idyll (reflecting the dominance of rural and small town places of origin) as a better environment for children to grow up in than a highly urbanised area, coupled with a high value placed upon education in Ireland, dominated among motivations for return among couples with children who had spent more than a decade away from Ireland. The prioritisation of the rural is illustrated by Eddie, a tradesman who spent

fourteen years in New York and returned with his spouse and children in 2000 to a small town in the midlands (and was one of the few who referred to difficulty in finding employment because of moving to a town where he ‘knew nobody’ and lacked social capital), who juxtaposed the freedom of small town life with the negative features of city life: ‘it was great in New York when single but as I had married and had the kids it was better to move home... [New York] was not for a family’. A desire to marry and start a family in Ireland, which Ní Laoire (2008a) identified among some of the women whom she interviewed, was cited by two returnees. A number of others expressed a sense of national- and place-belonging in returning to ‘roots’ or ‘grass roots’. Carmel, referred to above, returned as a qualified nurse, in 1958, to her place of origin with her Irish husband-to-be because they ‘wanted to set up life in Ireland’. Migrants who had left to gain educational qualifications or training reported returning to find employment, enhancing employment opportunities, being a motive for original migration. A sense of obligation to care for ill and ageing parents and to take over the running of farms, long-established tropes in motivations for return (e.g., Foeken, 1980; Gmelch, 1986), were referred to by two males who returned in 1966 and 1974, respectively, and care of ill parents was cited by two females who returned in 2000 and 2009.

Whilst all couples with children prioritised the welfare of their children as a reason for return, economic motivations also featured frequently in the guise of employment being available or references to the growing Irish economy during the 2000s. The small number of professionals in the sample returned to employment, following Punch and Finneran’s (1999) evidence of an association between higher levels of education and a higher probability of obtaining employment on return. Renewing contact with family and friends and a sense of recapturing a rural idyll were cited by retirees, following earlier evidence (McGrath, 1991).

Research internationally and in Ireland illustrates that expectations associated with return migration are not always met (Gmelch, 1980; Ralph, 2012). A number of common themes, identified in previous studies, emerged when the respondents were asked about their experiences after return. In particular, the idyllic image of open countryside, fresh air and friendly communities in rural Ireland was counterbalanced by poor services, inadequate public transport and inquisitive neighbours, as noted by McGrath (1991) and Ní Laoire (2008a). The loss of a fast paced life and diverse cultures was regretted by some sample returnees of the 1980s, whereas increased cultural diversity was an aspect of change noted by returnees of the 2000s. A loss of anonymity was mentioned by some returnees like Alice who migrated, as an unemployed teacher, to Perth in 2001, to visit relatives and see the world, and referred negatively to ‘everyone knowing you and a lack of privacy’ on her return in 2006.

Retirees found that friends had passed away and people were less sociable than when they visited on an annual holiday. There was regret for friends left overseas and a sense of isolation and loneliness among younger returnees in rural areas where their age cohort had emigrated, as noted by Ní Laoire (2007, 2008a). It is well established from international evidence that dissatisfaction on return can spur repeat migration (where economic and social circumstances permit), usually within five years, after which the returnee tends to re-adapt (Gmelch, 1980). There were several instances of repeat migration among younger returnees without family obligations and a number of respondents migrated and returned a second time, pointing to increasing circulation over time.

#### *Return across the life course: examples*

Examples are provided to illustrate a number of commonly reported experiences of migration and return among the sample which are related broadly to stages in the life course (return to employment on completing education or training, care of parents, the quest for an idyllic rural environment in which to bring up children and retirement). A need for readjustment on return is a recurring theme, even after a relatively short absence, regular contact and return visits, pointing to the fact that migration is a transformative process (Castles, 2010) and communities and places of origin also change. Some returnees used their overseas (transnational) links to migrate again.

A small number of interviewees migrated initially for educational purposes and returned to seek employment on graduating, experience that is identified but less extensively documented in other studies. Although away for relatively short periods of time, they revealed new senses of awareness of their home environments and a need for social adjustment. Sharon left Galway City, aged eighteen in 1995, to study in a British university. She visited home a few times a year, kept in contact by telephone and read a local newspaper. There was some disruption associated with the move. She referred to the ‘Change from living in rural Ireland (although she lived in Galway City, *authors’ comment*) and moving to an urban city. Culture change – mixed with various cultures... the (absence of the) Irish language... culture shock’. Her social life was, however, closely focused around meeting other Irish people: ‘Attended the Irish Centre; involvement in college events; joined a Gaelic football girls’ team; many Irish students attended the College; our landlord of two years was from Ireland’. She returned in 1998 to Galway City on graduation, seeking work. The features that she enjoyed were: ‘The freedom of the countryside... clean, fresh, crisp air – no pollution... Sense of safety in my hometown... food, culture and Irish language and traditions’. She also referred to adjusting to

a slower pace of life. Other short-term migrants, who visited whilst away, also expressed a new sense of appreciation of their home environment and a sense of disruption on return.

The curtailment of personal aspirations in order to meet a family obligation has been documented in Irish return migrant stories in the past (e.g., Foeken, 1980) and was present in the accounts of a number of returnees. Bríd had a second level education but was able to obtain only factory work which she disliked, during the recession of the 1980s, which influenced her to leave rural northwest Ireland, in 1987, aged twenty-two, for New York. She was awarded a Donnelly work visa through the NP-5 programme, under which Ireland received 1,735 visas (Folan- Sebben, 1992) (NP-5 was a special lottery awarding 10,000 visas to countries deemed by the State Department to have been discriminated against by the 1965 Immigration Act). Bríd stayed with a relative in a ‘very Irish’ area, found work in a legal firm and studied for a diploma in legal studies. She returned on holiday, every two or three years, kept in contact by telephone and letter and received a local newspaper (a prized source of local news among Irish migrants in the past). In 2000, she returned alone to care for her father who was seriously ill. Notwithstanding her on-going links and return visits, she referred to having to readjust on return in ways that were personally constraining: ‘settling back into the old way of life involved reeling yourself back in, fitting in again... (you) weren’t an insider or an outsider... readjusting lingo’.

Thomas and his family illustrate the recognised trope of a remembered rural idyll and a desire to bring up children in Ireland, referred to more briefly in the case of Eddie above. He held a primary education and was working in commercial peat extraction when he left the northwest, aged seventeen, in 1947. He moved to Scotland as an agricultural labourer to a job obtained through a strong tie with friends, seeking ‘better work and better pay’, following a traditional pathway for many male migrants from western Ireland (Johnson, 1967). He returned on an annual holiday and kept in contact by letter and remained in close contact with Irish people whilst away: ‘Lived with them, worked with them, socialised with them (very little, couldn’t afford it), in pubs, at Mass’. He later moved to England to obtain ‘better pay’, again working on farms. He returned in 1970, with his wife and children to his area of origin because they ‘missed home, thought it would be a better place to raise children and had enough money to start life in Ireland, as there was some work becoming available’. Theirs was a return of success, according to the traditional migration model (Bovenkerk, 1974), made possible by prudent savings, even when earning relatively modest wages, and improved opportunities in Ireland. Return for similar reasons were reported by a number of more recent returnees from the United States and from Australia.



Return migration on retirement, particularly from Britain, has been associated with requiring financial resources (to purchase a house, for example), that are not within the means of some emigrants, for whom the myth of return remains as such (Malcolm, 1996; Leavey *et al.*, 2004). The experience of one retiree illustrates how childhood memories and experiences during holidays influence return but that the reality of everyday life may differ significantly after a long absence. Michael left rural Mayo in 1954, as an unemployed nineteen-year-old with a primary education, to seek ‘employment, new opportunities and a better quality of life’. He obtained work in road construction through a friend in Leeds. He returned annually on holiday, kept in contact by telephone and letter, and socialised (when younger) with Irish people in pubs and dance halls. He and his wife returned to his area of origin in 2002 to retire because their ‘children and extended family all lived here’ – an interesting example of the ‘return’ of the second generation influencing their parents to come back to live in Ireland – and ‘to escape busy city life’. There was ‘peace associated with rural life, living so close to family, meeting old friends, having time to explore the countryside... something that had been forfeited up until then’. There was also ‘less interaction between neighbours, the older generation had passed away and had been replaced by new faces, there was an erosion of religious faith... people did not spend as much time with (you) as they did when on holiday’.

The influence of recession and the migration of friends in encouraging repeat migration among younger people are illustrated by Pat, a qualified electrician, who moved from a large western town to London, aged twenty-one in 2006, because of being unemployed, lacking job security and seeking ‘opportunities’. He found employment as an electrician through friends, returned home annually, kept in contact through a range of media and read a local newspaper. He met with family and with other Irish people through the GAA, like Sharon above. He returned to Ireland in 2008, feeling that he had worked ‘long enough’ in London, wishing to see family and friends and (perhaps facetiously) said that he was ‘afraid that I was developing an English accent’. He regretted parting from friends and relatives but enjoyed ‘seeing family and friends on a regular basis and joining up with my local team mates’. A year later he migrated to Melbourne because ‘all my friends were migrating’, given the lack of work in the construction industry in the wake of recession, and he lived there when interviewed in 2011. His housemates were Irish and he met other Irish people through ‘playing for the local GAA club’. He summarised the advantages of living in Melbourne, as ‘Better job opportunities... better wages... better weather’. An appreciation of a warmer, drier climate than Ireland’s was mentioned by others who moved to Australia and reiterates a theme identified by Gmelch (1986) among earlier returnees from the United States. Some members of the sample

associated climate with the different lifestyle that it afforded, which may become an issue in influencing a decision to remain overseas if the option is available.

## **Conclusion**

This paper sought to contribute to the study of Irish migration and return by focusing on continuities and changes over some six decades using sample data contextualised with reference to published studies that relate, broadly, to the same period of time. The evidence points to considerable continuity in the reasons cited for migration: unemployment, underemployment and a desire for work experience are enduring themes, as is access to particular types of training and education unavailable in Ireland. A desire for freedom from family and experience of life in another society are also not new. Overseas travel before taking up employment emerges as a feature of the late 1990s and the 2000s, in particular, when the domestic economy was growing and return to employment seemed guaranteed before recession commenced in 2008. Strong ties with friends and family overseas continued to be invoked in sourcing employment among the lower skilled and contributed to continued migration to destinations where Irish communities are established and offer support on arrival. Higher skilled and professional employees found work through the weak ties of agencies and advertisements but many moved to international cities with established Irish communities. The periods of time spent away diminished over time, particularly in the last two decades as migration for education, overseas experience and travel became more common (sometimes based on one- and two-year visas). Continuities and changes are apparent in the media used to maintain contact with home with letters and telephone calls having been replaced by ICTs which facilitate more regular contact. Pubs and Irish centres continue to function as meeting places for migrants and playing GAA games was mentioned to a greater extent by recent migrants than those of the 1970s and the 1980.

Renewing acquaintance with family and friends was a highly valued part of returning for all, pointing to the importance of family structures and culture. Bringing up children in the countryside was a key motivator for parents, as documented in earlier studies (Ní Laoire, 2007, 2008a). Employment opportunities and growth in the domestic economy were of underlying importance in facilitating return, even if social factors were prioritised when reflecting on decision-making. Many in the sample mentioned employment directly or indirectly with reference to improved economic conditions in Ireland, as one of the factors that influenced their return. Most returned to the areas they had left, pointing to associations with place and the social capital that remains embedded in places of origin and is renewed



through the maintenance of links and return visits, particularly among skilled and unskilled migrants (Walter, 2008).

As documented in earlier studies, re-adaptation was required on return when the realities of poor services in rural areas, migration of peers and social distance from communities left behind became apparent (Ní Laoire, 2008b; Ralph, 2009, 2012). The decision to re-migrate or not emerges as being associated with stages in the life course and the social and economic obligations and costs which constrain the freedom for repeated moves. Families with children and migrants who returned out of family loyalty, or to 'lay down roots', in Ireland readapted, even if encountering difficulties in doing so. Some younger returnees, who had fewer family commitments, left again to obtain employment in overseas cities where they had worked, had knowledge of labour markets and friends who could provide support on arrival. Transnational identities are identified by Ralph (2014) as emerging features among Irish return migrants. The evidence presented here serves to underline the role of transnational links in facilitating migration, return and repeat migration and merits further attention in studies of Irish migration.

#### **Note**

The names are not the real names of the respondents and the locations are generalised.

## Acknowledgements

Inserted following review.

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