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CASE STUDY 6 BACKGROUND: LIVING IN THE BRITISH EMPIRE: MIGRATION

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✿ Migration in the British empire

One aspect of the British empire which is sometimes ignored is the vast amount of movement of people which took place. The most obvious is the huge forced migration of millions of Africans as slaves from West Africa to America. It is important not to forget the appalling suffering of these Africans in the slave ships and on the plantations in the West Indies and mainland North America.

There were other migrations as well. The sending of convicts to Australia in the 1700s and 1800s was another form of forced emigration. The British shipped millions of Chinese to various parts of their empire. Chinese labourers played a key role in the building of North America's railways. They also worked in the mines of South Africa. The British moved huge numbers of Indians to North America, Africa and Pacific islands like Fiji. India's vast human resources were exploited by the British to turn unpromising lands into rich opportunities for farming, mining and other commercial enterprises. Around 1.6 million Indians migrated as a result of British rule, often travelling, living and working in conditions that were not much better than that of the African slaves.

Many British people gained as a result of the empire, but huge numbers of British citizens also lived in great poverty, even when the British empire was at its height of power and wealth. As a result, huge numbers of British people emigrated, especially in the later 1800s and early 1900s. It is impossible to lump all of these emigrants into one category.

- Many were poor and desperate people. One of the solutions to poverty was assisted emigration from Britain's crowded and squalid cities. Local Councils and Poor Law Boards were given money by the government to help them to organise schemes that allowed the poorest to emigrate, usually to Canada. There were also many schemes that took young criminals away from their homes and families and set them up in new lives in Canada or Australia. Other schemes took unmarried women who were pregnant abroad, or took their children and gave them up for adoption. As you can imagine, these schemes were controversial. Some felt that the authorities were helping those being sent abroad. Others felt it was terrible to separate them from their families and homes.
- Some emigrants were from better-off backgrounds. They generally emigrated to take up jobs and gain new opportunities. Many women became maids or governesses in the empire. Many men found work in building, engineering and farming.

The Welsh, Scots and Irish travelled all over the world as a result of the British empire. Scots were especially closely associated with the empire as military officers, doctors and engineers. However, the Highlands of Scotland suffered from over-population and economic decline in the 19th century and thousands of Scottish families emigrated to Canada to start new lives on new land.

Most people know about the vast scale of emigration from Ireland during and after the disastrous Great Famine of 1845-51. However, there had been a steady stream of emigrants before then. In the 1700s most Irish emigrants were Presbyterian Protestants. They were relatively well-off emigrants. They wanted new land and new opportunities in America. They also wanted to get away from restrictions put on them by Anglican Protestants. From the 1840s the majority of emigrants were poorer Catholic peasants, although there were still large numbers of Protestant Irish emigrants as well. The majority of the emigrants went to the cities of England and Scotland, and millions found work there and made their homes. Millions of others went to Canada and the USA, but huge numbers also went to Australia.

We should not forget that many of the emigrants, whatever their country of origin, suffered death and disease on the journeys they made, and discrimination and poverty when they arrived in their new countries. We can admire the determination and the achievements of the emigrants who survived and prospered and who helped to shape the world as it is today. The multi-cultural make-up of Australia, South Africa, Canada, the USA and many other countries is one of the legacies of the British empire.

✿ Links



History of International Migration

<http://www.let.leidenuniv.nl/history/migration/>

Leiden university web site, but accessible for the majority of KS3 students

Migrations in history

<http://educate.si.edu/migrations/start.html>

Impressive site from America's Smithsonian Institute

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