

Tracing migrating ancestors: Who what, where, when, why and how

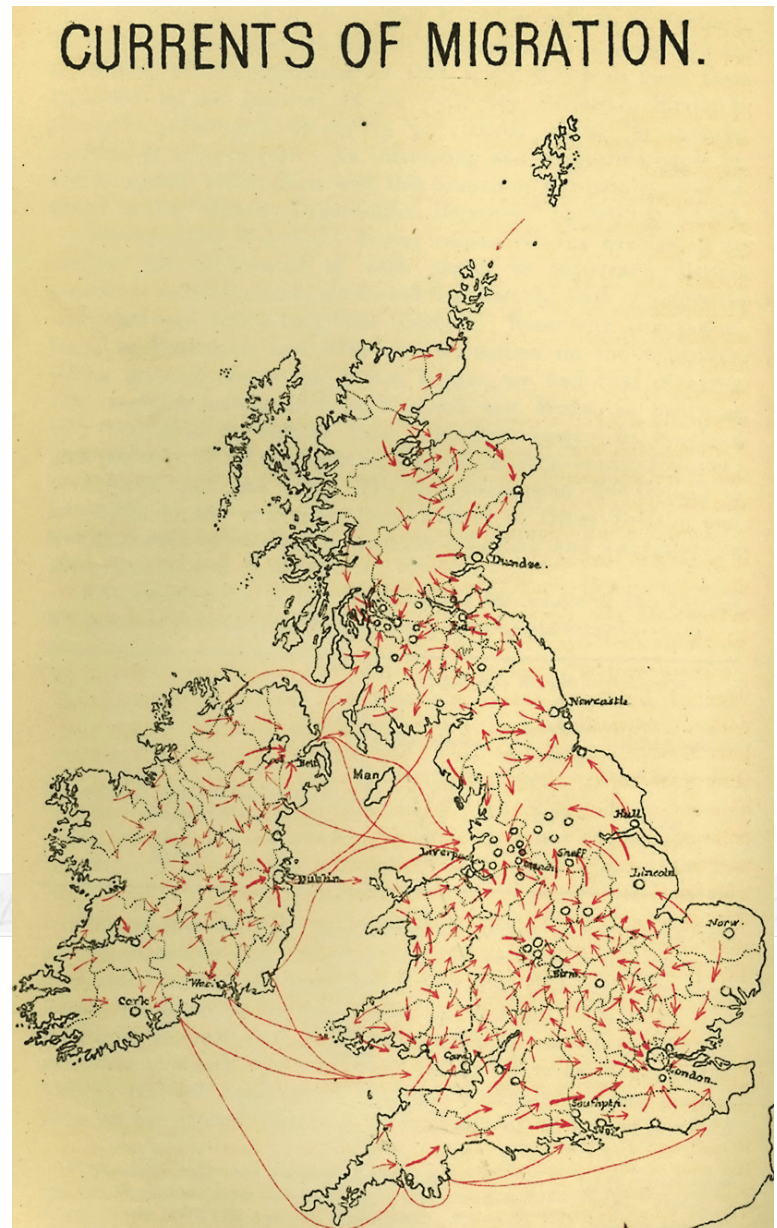
Speaker: Myko Clelland

A brief history of migration theory

Analysis of large population movements requires statistics, and big data. This only became possible in the 1800s, and was pioneered by Dr William Farr. He set up a system to record cause of death from civil registration data, and was commissioner of the 1871 census of England & Wales. He began the process of fact gathering to prove larger patterns in historical life.

The father of modern migration theory however, is Ernst Georg (Ernest George) Ravenstein. He was a noted geographer and cartographer. He was born in Germany, but lived mostly in England and was a member of the councils of the Royal Statistical & Royal Geographical Societies, working in the Topographical Department of the British War Office 1855-1875. He looked to the census and created the 'Currents of migration'.

The Currents of Migration is a seminal first step in migration theory, and is a great way to visualise movement in the Victorian British Isles.



The Laws of migration

From the Currents of Migration, Ernst moved to create bigger, broader rules that could be drawn from this data, and applied to movements internationally, across all kinds of cultures and nations. He came up with seven rules, which were further extrapolated.

- Most migrants only proceed a short distance, and toward centres of absorption.
- As migrants move toward absorption centers, they leave 'gaps' that are filled up by migrants from more remote districts, creating migration flows that reach to 'the most remote corner of the kingdom.'
- The process of dispersion is inverse to that of absorption.
- Each main current of migration produces a compensating counter-current.
- Migrants proceeding long distances generally go by preference to one of the great centers of commerce or industry.

- The natives of towns are less migratory than those of the rural parts of the country.
- Females are more migratory than males

Additional observations:

- Migration occurs in steps
- Large towns grow more by migration than natural increase
- Most migrants are adults
- Families are much less likely to leave their country of birth

Four years after the laws were created, a slight amendment was made. These patterns largely hold even today, but the American frontier experience presented a new conundrum...

An extra caveat was added:

- People are more willing to travel long distances to occupy unsettled land, than they would in a country more fully settled

Push and pull factors

There are five key drivers of migration that can be found, observed and give us better clues to that move – the situations we need to look for and the areas we need to understand when we go looking for missing relations. These are:

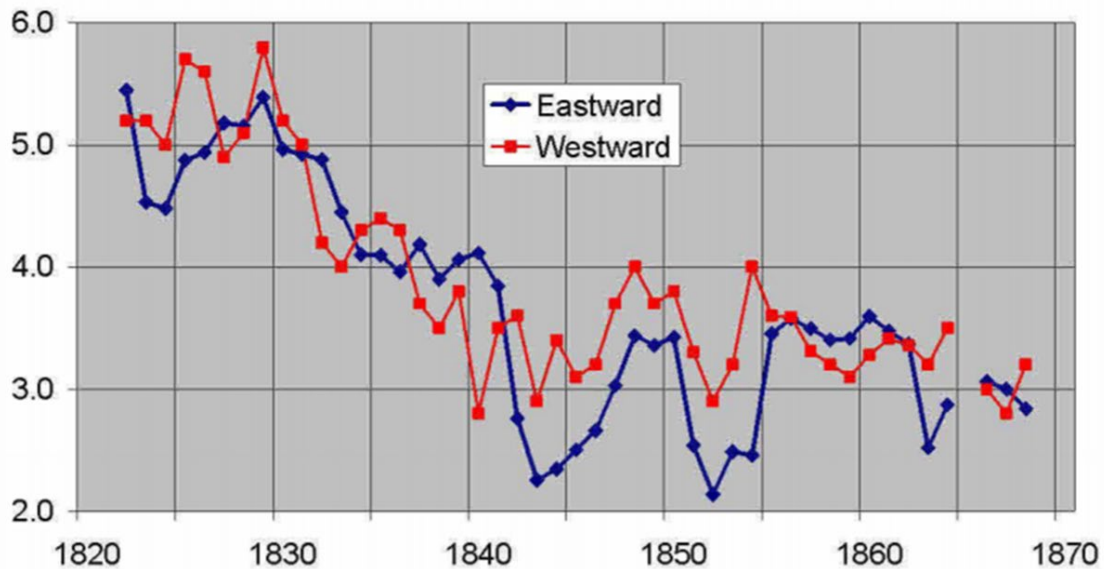
- **Economic**
- **Political**
- **Demographic**
- **Social**
- **Environmental**

The largest cause, is economic. The larger economic development that is occurring, the larger the current of migration towards it. These economic causes are deeper, technology can change things for the better.

As new industries developed, cities like Manchester and Glasgow, that were mere villages until the industrial revolution and grew almost overnight, absorbed people from all over the world. As they did, perhaps the death of an industry in the home area, or even broader changes, made migration easier, adjusting the economics of that big decision to make it less of an unachievable dream.

When we look at the cost of transatlantic travel through the mid-1800s, It was expensive, coming in at up to £6 in the early years of that century. New technology made this journey faster and cheaper, even despite inflation. That cost dropped by two thirds in just over a generation. What once was £6, was now

£2, opening the door to mass migration, which we see from this point onwards, something that previously couldn't be even imagined.



As with all things, the government can be involved in migration, and knowledge of these schemes can really help in getting our heads around the reasons for movement our families may have come across.

These can involve criminal deportation, where an estimated up to 120,000 were transported to north America before the revolution, and then to Australia, where 162,000 convicts were sent all the way until 1867, when the last convict ship, the 'Hougomont', left British shores.

There were other attempts to remove people, such as the highland clearances, that ejected people from land, and those then were made to seek new lives elsewhere. Some were lucky, in the use of schemes like the Highlands & Islands emigration society, they had passage paid for them to Australia, but then many were just told they had nowhere to live anymore and had to move on.

Governmental Migration

Government schemes were used to bring people to new areas, mostly in places where a nation had vast tracts of unused land. The US offered homesteads to those who would work the land, Australia would pay for passage of migrants to get them to travel such long distances and get them set up in their new home, something that carried on even up until the mid-20th century.

In Canada, former Napoleonic War Veterans of the British Army were offered free land and cash payment in exchange for giving up their pensions and moving out there to settle. In Libya, Italy gave free land and homes to those who were healthy and were willing to live in North Africa instead of the US.

English parishes set up Colonial Land and Emigration Commissioners from 1833 to offer free passage to those under 40, able to work and of good character, vaccinated against smallpox. This excluded workhouse inmates and those receiving parish relief, but Poor Law Commissioners could arrange emigration, paid by the local parish.

In this scheme many people were sent to Canada, with 36,000 people sent between 1835 and 1899. These schemes are well publicised, and knowledge of these will give you further avenues of research, in addition usually, to more documentation to discover too.

Phases of migrant community

Phase one - Exploration: A time that can last in some cases for centuries, and in many migrant flows it never progresses considerably beyond this point.

You see few initial visitors, travelling mostly for economic reasons, to trade or do business. They were usually skilled workers, artists, artisans, merchants, and more, they usually found their success, and could just as likely return to their homeland as stay and live in their target area.

Phase two – Concentration: The second phase has the most visible evidence today. The visitors give way to more working class and unskilled folk, who come in larger numbers, but often cannot speak the language, and have less to offer their new home. To make a success of things, they will band together in an area, forming an 'ethnic enclave'

Here they can still thrive. They can work for and with people who speak their language, who may not discriminate the way other local businesses may, they may have relatives or friends from their hometowns already in the area to rely on and fall back on. This safety net, allows the migrant experience to broaden to a greater scope of person.

Phase three – Integration: People will become more confident in their new homes and branch out, broaden their horizons and leave their ethnic area, they'll start to blend in with the rest of society, and often we'll see little clues of their presence in elements of their former lives that become part of their new home.

These phases are organic, you can sometimes find cultures in 'midshift' as we see this integration and flow taking place.

Final Summary

Migration theory is complex. It's unrealistic that one theory can explain and predict every single migration event. Migration is not however, chaotic or unpredictable. These are the tools to start to understand the times your ancestors arrived in a certain place, or if your relatives vanish from your family tree in the old world, where, by looking at the sort of patterns that exist, and the kind of point in history we're at, to look next.

It *CAN* be made sense of, especially with big data. Even if your ancestors moved only from village to town in the same nation, these rules can still help us to understand why and where to find them.

There are hosts of records to explore. Familiarise yourself with passenger lists, registration cards of aliens, citizenship records in the countries you are exploring, naturalisations, government registers of migration, local historic newspaper ads that might give ideas of who might be in town trying to recruit people to move and to where.

National census records from different nations can give you those concentrations of people from certain places to give you an idea of where your countrymen may be concentrating. It's all about plotting yourself on that timeline and working out where in the process you are, and which factors matter.

All of them can give you more, try searching with details like just a place of origin when searching, to see where groups of compatriots have arrived at different points in history, these patterns might give clues where to find your own missing family.

Have questions? Reach out to me on Twitter @dapperhistorian