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## **IRELAND'S LATEST EXPORT: ITS PEOPLE**

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A sense of dismay pervades **Ireland** as its people in their tens of thousands once again take to the ferries and planes, voting with their feet as they leave their native land.

Everywhere across the country, from Dublin to Cork and back, they talk about little else but how bad things are, who is about to leave, who has just left, and which families have waved their latest tearful goodbyes.

What is there to stay for, they ask each other gloomily.

**Ireland** has always exported its problems. Divorce is barred by the constitution, so couples who want to divorce, and those who do not care to see their second families stigmatised as illegitimate come to England. Abortion is illegal, so unwanted pregnancies are terminated in England.

And the problem of surplus people is dealt with by exporting them. The **Irish** attitude has long been to see emigration as a kind of safety valve which reduces the unemployment figure.

For a brief and comparatively expansive period in the 1970s the population drain ceased as the EEC money poured in. It has resumed with a vengeance. Two thousand **Irish** a month are now said to be landing in the UK, where access is simply a matter of arriving. **Irish** hostels in Kilburn and Victoria are packed to the ceiling.

Official estimates put the numbers who have departed for the UK, US, Canada and Australia since 1983 at 100,000. The Australian Embassy in Dublin is flooded with **immigration** requests. The Americans were recently overwhelmed with 250,000 applications for visas, a hair-raising one in ten of the total population, though clearly some of them must have submitted multiple applications.

With the economy in desperate straits it would take a Berlin-style wall to keep the **Irish** at home, let alone down on the farm. On the west coast peninsulas, small towns and villages have been stripped of their young people over the last few years. In border communities the parlous state of the high-cost Republic is reflected in boarded-up stores and empty petrol stations, as the locals flock North to shop and hundreds of thousands of **Irish** pounds are spent outside the country in Ulster where petrol is half the price it is a few yards away.

When a group of students from Trinity College, Dublin, was asked by reporters in **Ireland** for this week's election what they intended to do when they graduated, every one of them said: leave the country. The saddest feature of the latest wave of **Irish** emigration is the huge loss to **Ireland** of its educated young, far more than merely an economic loss.

These are the very people who might have stayed to contribute to political and social change in **Ireland**, a country where the Church remains unchanging and the foundation of the two main political parties, both of them conservative, still harks back to the Civil War of 60 years ago.

**Ireland** is justly proud of its education system. The country gives a far higher proportion of its young people a tertiary education than the UK, as Dr Garret Fitzgerald curtly pointed out to an English journalist during an election press conference.

While public spending was subject to cuts all round by the outgoing administration educational spending rose by 11.5 per cent in the last Budget. Education in **Ireland** is especially costly, with 50 per cent of the population under the age of 25. But the sad truth remains: **Ireland** is educating many of its young people for the benefit of others.

**Irish** emigration, which began with the mass exodus of poverty-stricken refugees from the potato famine in the 1840s, has been historically viewed in a number of ways, often enough far from flattering to the **Irish**.

Friedrich Engels wrote crudely in his Condition of the Working Class in England of drunken, filthy, savage **Irish** immigrants, arriving at the rate of 50,000 a year, against whose cut-price labour the English worker had to compete. There were **Irish** convicts for Australia and large, poor, ill-educated families for Ellis Island and the US.

Today the exodus is of qualified engineers, first-class-degreed scientists, highly qualified social workers and professionals of all kinds.

The Australian Bicentennial will undoubtedly celebrate the great contribution made by the **Irish** to Australia and marvel at the number of Kellys, Walshes, O'Briens and Ryans Australia can lay claim to.

But at the same time the Bicentennial might prompt some thought about the great contemporary cost of mass skilled emigration to a little country on the wrong side of Europe with a melancholy past and the immediate prospect of a melancholy future. Given the youth of the population, emigration on this scale is becoming a threat to national stability.

But some things remain unchanged. One lunchtime last week I looked through the doors of Dublin's Catholic cathedral to observe, with astonishment, a packed, standing room only Mass as the **Irish** sought their eternal consolation in Mother Church.

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