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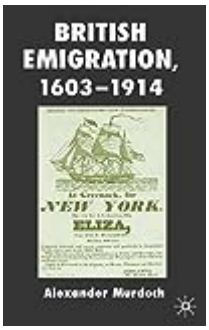

Alexander Murdoch. *British Emigration, 1603-1914.* Houndsmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. 176 pp. $75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-333-76491-6.

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To write a synthesis of the experience of emigration from the British Isles from 1603 to 1914 requires a magisterial command of an array of tools: clarity of conceptual apparatus, precision of vocabulary, mastery of an immense body of secondary literature, and an intimate knowledge of several sprawling, complex data-sets, plus a more-than-passing knowledge of the histories of the several countries to which the British Isles migrants went. And to do this in 140 pages of expository writing is a task for a master historian.

Alexander Murdoch writes clearly, is manifestly good-hearted, and has penned one serviceable chapter in this book–on British emigration to the United States, 1860-1914, which he rightly calls "hidden history."

Murdoch, a former antiquarian book seller, now senior lecturer at Edinburgh University, has a commendably warm memory of his grandfather, a Scottish migrant to Philadelphia in 1885, and that largely explains the strength of his book (the one good chapter) and the weaknesses. He candidly admits that the history of Scottish emigration forms the core of his story, and he demonstrates that the vector from Scotland that counts in his thinking is to the United States. This is nice family piety, but to conceive of Scottish-U.S. migration as the spine of an historical exposition of one of the most complex patterns of diaspora in modern history is silly.

If that were the only problem, one could pass quietly by. But, sadly, the whole enterprise has other huge flaws. To begin with–even the title of the book gives away this matter–Murdoch slides back and forth between "British" and "British and Irish," and cannot make up his mind what he means. Are we reading a book about emigration from the British Isles or about emigration from Britain: England, Wales (which is ignored), and Scotland? This is not a mere matter of word play. Ireland was the largest single source of emigration to various parts of the English-speaking world from 1815-1914 and, in total migrants, probably for the entire period of Murdoch's study. So it cannot be a sometimes-mentioned, sometimes-elided item, as Murdoch has it. Hence, the least defensible defining term for the home country is "Britain." A study of English emigration would be useful (indeed, an update of the usual story is badly needed) and so too would a conspectus of British Isles out-migration. But not Murdoch's confused "British" entity, especially not one with Scotland as its center.

Further, Murdoch, despite a passing reference to New Zealand and half a chapter on Australia, asserts that the Thirteen Colonies and their derivative, the United States, are the destination that counted. True, the United States did count most in the period of his grandfather's migration, but projecting that back into a long period of

history is bad business. In fact, in the first six decades of Murdoch's period, emigration to the West Indies was much more important, both economically and numerically, than to the mainland colonies. And in the first half of the nineteenth century (from 1815-1845), the chief destination was British North America.

One could go on. Murdoch shows not the slightest acquaintance with the major data-sets that encompass the British Isles diaspora. More surprisingly, he has not done his homework in the secondary historical literature of English and Irish out-migration, the latter of which is very rich indeed. He deploys essentially no history of the receptor countries, save the United States. It really is hard to see how this effort can be much of a tribute to anyone.