

**Frank Neal.** *Black '47: Britain and the Famine Irish.* London: St. Martin's Press, 1998.  
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During the 1980s there appeared to be developing a minor academic industry popularly known as 'The Irish in ....' It was concerned with describing the experiences of Irish immigrants in nineteenth century Britain and seemed destined to embrace every British city. In fact this research was never quite so all inclusive as its critics suggested and focussed predominantly on Dundee, Glasgow, Leeds, Liverpool, London, Manchester, Salford, and York. It could also be justified in terms of the quantitative dimensions of Irish immigration, particularly during the decade of the Great Famine. Between 1841 and 1851 the Irish-born percentage of the population of England and Wales rose from 1.8% to 2.9%, or from 291,000 to 520,000. In Scotland the proportionate increase was even greater, from 4.8% to 7.2%, or from 126,000 to 207,000. Nevertheless, the sheer volume of such single city studies did pose the question whether further research was likely to yield more than marginal gains to our existing knowledge of the Irish in Britain.

In *Black '47* Frank Neal, Professor of Economic and Social History at the University of Salford,

proves conclusively that there is still a lot to be learned. That this is so, owes much to five features of his research. First, he adopts a very narrow time horizon, essentially the events of a single year, 1847. Secondly, he concentrates on a tightly focussed area, Lancashire, the county that exceeded all others in the number of Irish-born residents, and in particular on Liverpool, the main port of entry for famine refugees. Outside London, Liverpool had the greatest number of Irish-born within its boundaries and the greatest proportion of its population who were Irish-born. By comparing Liverpool with Glasgow, Manchester, and Salford, the four towns which accounted for 27% of all Irish-born in Britain in 1851, the sheer concentration of Irish immigration and the resulting problems are starkly revealed. Thirdly, he is aware that much previous research has been 'going over old ground' and responds by utilizing a wider range of primary source material, including county and church archives, newspaper reports, and personal testimony. Fourthly, he regards what might be described as the mechanisms of migration, that is the behaviour of the shipping companies and the nature of the passage, as vital

to understanding the condition of the refugees when they arrived in Britain. Finally, he has two clear objectives: to employ statistical evidence to establish 'the parameters of sensible discussion' and to evaluate the nature of individual experiences. The resulting analysis never loses sight of the individual yet offers a clear explanation of public policy and its consequences.

The book is also carefully structured. After an introductory review of recent work on the Famine, eight chapters take us through the nature of Irish settlement in urban Britain before the famine, the escape from Ireland, the arrival in Britain, the Irish fever (the typhus epidemic of 1847) - this is examined in separate chapters on Liverpool, and Glasgow and South Wales - survival and dispersal, removal, and the cost of famine immigration. Well before the influx of famine refugees, living conditions for the immigrant Irish were extraordinarily bad. At the bottom of the housing market with low incomes and intermittent employment, the Irish endured a wretched lifestyle and their presence was increasingly subject to unfavourable press comment. Yet at the same time their importance to the regional economy was recognised, not least because they were more mobile than English labourers subject to the laws of settlement. Whilst the volume of immigration swelled with the Famine, Neal argues convincingly that the ordinary workings of the labour market continued throughout 1845 to 1851. A perceptive analysis of the economics of shipping explains why. Human cargoes had always taken second place to goods and livestock, but as food exports from Ireland fell, competition between shipping companies intensified and fares were varied to suit whatever level the traffic would bear. The destitute found the fare either by selling their remaining assets or by assistance from ratepayers and landlords. In an unregulated market, terrible conditions were tolerated because 'Irish paupers had no friends in high places' and, unlike livestock, had no market value. On arrival the Irish had no legal claim to long term

poor relief and were subject to the laws of removal. On the other hand, the poor law unions had a legal obligation to ensure that nobody died of starvation, malnutrition, or 'the want of the necessities of life.' It is the resolution of this essential paradox which forms Neal's core theme and he displays great skill in interpreting it at several different levels: ratepayers, Boards of Guardians, clergy, medical officials, and individual paupers. He also makes the first attempt to estimate the cost of famine immigration: for Liverpool in 1847 this amounted to #33,159 on a tax base of #929,645; for England and Wales as a whole perhaps #155,000 or 2% of all expenditure on the poor. Whilst coping with famine refugees did exert pressure on ratepayers, in what was a disastrous year for the economy, it was not a disaster for wealthier or business ratepayers, nor did the working class finance the payment of poor relief to the Irish. The extra rates burden amounted to 9s7d, roughly the equivalent of half a week's wages for a labourer. However, as so often with refugees, it was perceptions rather than facts that counted; the belief that the Irish were diverting funds from Britain's own poor damaged inter-communal relations.

Despite the harrowing nature of individual testimonies, Neal's overall judgement of the performance of the poor law authorities during 1847 is that they fulfilled their responsibilities to the welfare of Irish famine refugees. They increased spending in proportion to the numbers seeking relief, they kept deaths from starvation to low levels (a maximum of 22 in Liverpool in 1847), they acted swiftly to deal with the much more serious problem of famine related diseases and, by doing so, averted a much greater crisis. Above all, they shouldered a burden whose ultimate duration was unknown - in Liverpool it was not till 1854 that Irish immigration dropped dramatically - and which ought properly to have been borne by national government rather than local ratepayers. Generous they were not, but the poor law was not generous to the British poor. Neal's conclusion is

that social class rather than ethnicity determined the response to the crisis.

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