Homeward Bound is based on twenty-two oral history interviews Niamh Dillon conducted with Protestants who left Ireland after the founding of the Free State in 1922 and “returnees” who left India after independence in 1947. This makes the book a welcome addition to the study of “return migration” in the twentieth century.[1] Homeward Bound also contributes to scholarship on the comparative and connected histories of India and Ireland and it will surely prompt thoughts and reflections amongst specialists in those fields.[2] Like James Hammerton and Alistair Thomson’s research on the “ten pound poms” who traveled from the UK to Australia after the Second World War, Niamh Dillon brilliantly demonstrates how oral histories can help us better understand social histories of migration.[3]

The book’s first three chapters are its strongest. They ask: How did arrivals from Ireland and India experience and conceptualize their migration to Britain? Was this a return “home”? What did “home” mean for these men and women before and after traveling to Britain? Dillon analyzes “home” as both a physical space and as a conceptual space. “Home” often meant different things in Ireland and in India. For example, many British families in India lived with domestic servants, and individuals experienced the landscape as a place to be enjoyed and traveled in, but they did not identify with it as a homeland. By contrast, those who migrated from Ireland to England identified more with land, place, and locality.

This has something to do with different social structures in India and in Ireland. For while social relations between Protestants and Catholics in Ireland were often strained, Homeward Bound describes the social segregation in the Raj as more strict than in Ireland. In India, interviewees recall that their families lived almost completely segregated lives: women and children interacted with a few Indians as employees, domestic servants, or beloved ayahs (female workers employed by members of the administration to care for children and attend British women).
In Ireland, Protestant family farms traded with Catholic neighbors and children sometimes played with friends across sectarian divides. While inter-religious relations were often tense, Protestant families tended to be connected with Catholics in extensive political and socioeconomic networks, and some of Dillon’s interviewees’ families had been embedded in these networks for many generations. This made the boycott and occupation of Protestant businesses by the Irish Republican Army during the War of Independence an especially frightening and intimate experience as provisioning, employment, and neighborly relations were cut off. Memories of pre-migration domesticity among Irish migrants were therefore very different by comparison to memories of family life among migrants from India. However, it is important to note that Dillon’s oral histories of Irish domesticity are supplemented with records from the Irish Grants Committee (a UK government body set up to pay compensation to refugees from Ireland who experienced the loss of property or financial damages). These documents all foreground stories of harassment and the breakdown of peaceful relations. Dillon consulted no equivalent sources to understand the experience of Indian returnees.

Dillon draws a further comparison between the emotive flight of Irish migrants during and after partition with her interviewees’ more “quotidian” framing of leaving India (p. 49). Here, Dillon’s sensitive approach to the history of emotions draws attention to classed, gendered, and racialized attitudes of reserve among upper-class colonial administrators and their families. More could have been said about when migration happened in the lives of her interviewees, though, and how this may have affected their memories. Did adult returnees from the Raj really feel so dispassionate or did their children mistake their parents’ projections of a reassuringly quotidian affect for the real thing?

Adult arrivals can be more satisfyingly compared. Many men who arrived in Britain from India after independence experienced shock and disappointment: not so much, apparently, about the wrench of leaving India than at a loss of social standing as they took up less lucrative and less powerful jobs. By contrast, interviewees who arrived from India as young women underscored their excitement at being able to attain more agency and to access further education, skills, and paid work.

These comparisons within and between the cohorts from India and Ireland become less satisfying as *Homeward Bound* moves chronologically into the 1950s and 1960s. Irish migrants’ experiences tend to drop out of Dillon’s analyses because her interviewees had migrated thirty to forty years prior—around and after 1922. As a result, the book’s comparative analysis suffers. In chapter 5, Dillon writes that the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II “had a deeper resonance for those from India and Ireland” (p. 145), but it is not clear whose experiences of the coronation were “shallower” by comparison and the citations are all drawn from interviews with Indian returnees. The discussion of race and identity in chapter 5 is likewise less satisfying given the lack of extensive comparative analysis. Twenty-one citations come from the Indian returnees and only three citations draw from two of Dillon’s interviewees from Ireland (the most xenophobic comments came from these two Irish migrants, which Dillon does not discuss comparatively).

These issues speak to the perils of comparative history when the cultural and social groups are so different, the sample size is so small, and the cohorts are organized around experiences decades apart: in this case 1922 and 1947. The relative strength of the interwar compared to the postwar chapters might also reflect the research process Dillon undertook while writing *Homeward Bound*. The book originated, Dillon explains, as an investigation “of the experience of southern Irish Prot-
estants in the period around the formation of the Irish Free State” (p. 180). This might help to explain why the book is most compelling in its first three chapters, as these chapters are chronologically closest to Dillon’s original research topic.

While the depth of analysis is chronologically uneven, the book is full of fascinating material that contributes to our wider understanding of imperial migration and comparative history. And even if the two final chapters lack some of the insight of the first three, the interviewees’ testimonies always stand out for their richness and detail. This is in large part due to Dillon’s considerable skill at analyzing her oral history transcripts. The appendix gives helpful biographical summaries of sixteen of the interviewees (three women from Ireland, three men; four women from India, six men). I could not work out from the endnotes and bibliography where the remaining six of the twenty-two come from. The bibliography lists that fourteen of Dillon’s interviews form part of the British Diaspora Collection at the British Library, one is drawn from the Architects’ Lives series, and one from the Pioneers of Charity and Social Welfare Collection. A clearer bibliography would have been helpful because many readers will surely wish to make use of Dillon’s interviews for their own research. I hope that they will soon be made accessible at the British Library for further study.

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Notes


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