

Oh! Emigration! thou'rt the curse . . .

Victorian Images of Emigration Themes

J.H. Burton wrote in *The Emigrant's Manual* in 1851: "Among those many projects and principles for remedying all that is socially wrong with which the ear of the public is ever filled, there is none so confidently asserted, and none so seldom denied or disputed, as an extensive systematic removal of our population to new lands and fresh sources of enterprise."¹ The panacea for overpopulation, agricultural disasters, superfluous numbers of women, the Great Famine, and other problems afflicting Victorian England was often claimed to be emigration.² The reality of this "solution" was an insistent one, for statistics support the fact that vast numbers of Britons left between 1840-1870 in order to seek a better life elsewhere. Given the general sensitivity of Victorian genre paintings to reflect the ills of modern society—the fascination with the fallen woman, for example—one might well expect that a number of artists would choose to investigate emigration topics. This was indeed the case, as the more than five dozen works of art listed in the Appendix confirm.³ Numerous scholars have in the past twenty years written excellent books and articles on Victorian emigration schemes; the discussion here is limited to the unexplored realm of images in art—and some selected literary examples—that focus on the contemporary subject of the emigrant.⁴ For it is in the stereotyping of such an issue that the prevailing English attitudes are most deeply mirrored. For this reason I shall offer only a very condensed historical survey concerning emigration, examining instead the myriad ways in which the Victorian artist approached and interpreted this subject.

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Analysis of the economic and political grievances that contributed to the great exodus from the British Isles between 1840 and 1872 is beyond the scope of this study. However, it is important to note the rising volume of emigration tallies that occurred after 1845,

peaking first in 1847 and setting subsequent high records in 1849, 1851, and 1852, and a low point in 1861 with the onset of the Civil War in America.⁵ These critical years overlapped with the period when Victorian depictions of this subject also flourished; 1845-65 was an especially fertile time for the production and exhibition of such pictures, after which there were fewer paintings (and these merely repeated existing thematic approaches) through the 1880s.

In terms of the ethnic profiles of those expatriating, the exiles from Great Britain were initially and primarily Irish or Scottish. As an article of 1850 in *The Illustrated London News* indicated: "It is calculated that at least four out of every five persons who leave the shores of the old country to try their fortunes in the new, are Irish. Since the fatal years of the potato famine and the cholera, the annual numbers of emigrants have gone on increasing, until they have become so great as to suggest the idea, and almost to justify the belief, of a gradual depopulation of Ireland."⁶ The potato crop failures, coupled with the resulting "Great Hunger" of 1845-9 and the ravages of land evictions, made the late 1840s a very bleak period for the Irish peasantry and laborers. Thousands from Ireland thus sought to escape starvation at home, but in 1847 many ironically perished aboard ships destined for the "new world" owing to the overcrowded conditions and their weakened state of health from the fever epidemic. The peak of Irish emigration took place between 1847-52, and after 1848 the majority of these exiles went to the United States over British North America, since many relatives in America had already posted funds to assist their needy families.⁷ Similarly, the grievous hardships that plagued the Highlands—mainly caused by the failure of herring fisheries and kelp industries—especially affected the Scottish crofters or tenant farmers. A potato blight in 1836 and the termination of work on the Caledonian canal were also among the events