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Famine in Scotland: The 'Ill Years' of the 1690s

Karen J. Cullen

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All references to currency are in pounds, shillings and pence Scots, expressed as £ s d Scots, unless otherwise stated. Original spellings have been maintained in all quotations and in references; however, modern spellings and names have been used in the text for place names, and personal names referred to in primary sources. County names have been standardised throughout and for ease of reference the geographical locations of parishes correspond to those boundaries established after 1890. Thus disjoined parishes, for example Tulliallan and Culross, both Perthshire parishes which lay within the county boundaries of Fife, have been considered to be geographically part of the county of Fife.

AL	Ardrossan Library Local History Department
AngA	Angus Archives
AyrA	Ayrshire Archives
DCA	Dundee City Archives
GROS	General Register Office for Scotland
HA	Highland Archives
KSR	Kirk Session Records
MA	Moray Archives
ML	Mitchell Library
NA	National Archives
NAS	National Archives of Scotland
NRAS	National Register of Archives Scotland
OA	Orkney Archives
OPR	Old Parish Register
PCM	Privy Council Minutes
PCRA	Privy Council Register of Acts
PKCA	Perth and Kinross Council Archive

PM	Paisley Museum
PRONI	Public Record Office of Northern Ireland
SA	Shetland Archives
SCA	Scottish Catholic Archives
SL	Signet Library
SPHRP	Scottish Population History Research Papers
StASC	St Andrews University Library Special Collections

Glossary of Terms

Bear/bere – a type of barley.

Bier – a type of common coffin, or framework upon which a body was transported to the grave.

Boll – Scots dry measure of weight equivalent to 140 lbs imperial measure.

Candlemas – 2 February, a Scottish quarter day.

Chalder – Scots dry measurement of weight equivalent to 16 bolls.

Fiar – the price of a grain legally set per year in a county.

Firlot – Scots dry measurement of weight equivalent to one-quarter of a boll.

Forestall – to prevent a commodity [i.e. grain] from being made available for sale.

Heritor – a landowner liable to contribute to the public burdens of a parish.

Lammas – 1 August, a Scottish quarter day.

Lippie – Scots dry measure of weight equivalent to one-quarter of a peck.

Martinmas – 11 November, a Scottish quarter day.

Merk – two-thirds of a pound Scots.

Michaelmas – 29 September.

Peck – Scots dry measurement of weight equivalent to one-sixteenth of a boll.

Poind – Scots legal term, to seize and sell the goods of a debtor.

Quarter – imperial dry measurement of weight. Seven quarters, seven bushels and three pecks (imperial) of wheat are equivalent to a Scots chalder of wheat.

Regrate – to hoard a commodity [i.e. grain] to sell at a future time when the price has risen.

Sorn – to exact free board and lodging by force or threats, to beg aggressively.

Testificate/testimony – a reference of residence and character provided by a minister or kirk session to a parishioner wishing to formalise residence in another parish.

Vital events – births, marriages and deaths (vital rates – per thousand of population).

Whitsunday – 15 May, a Scottish quarter day.

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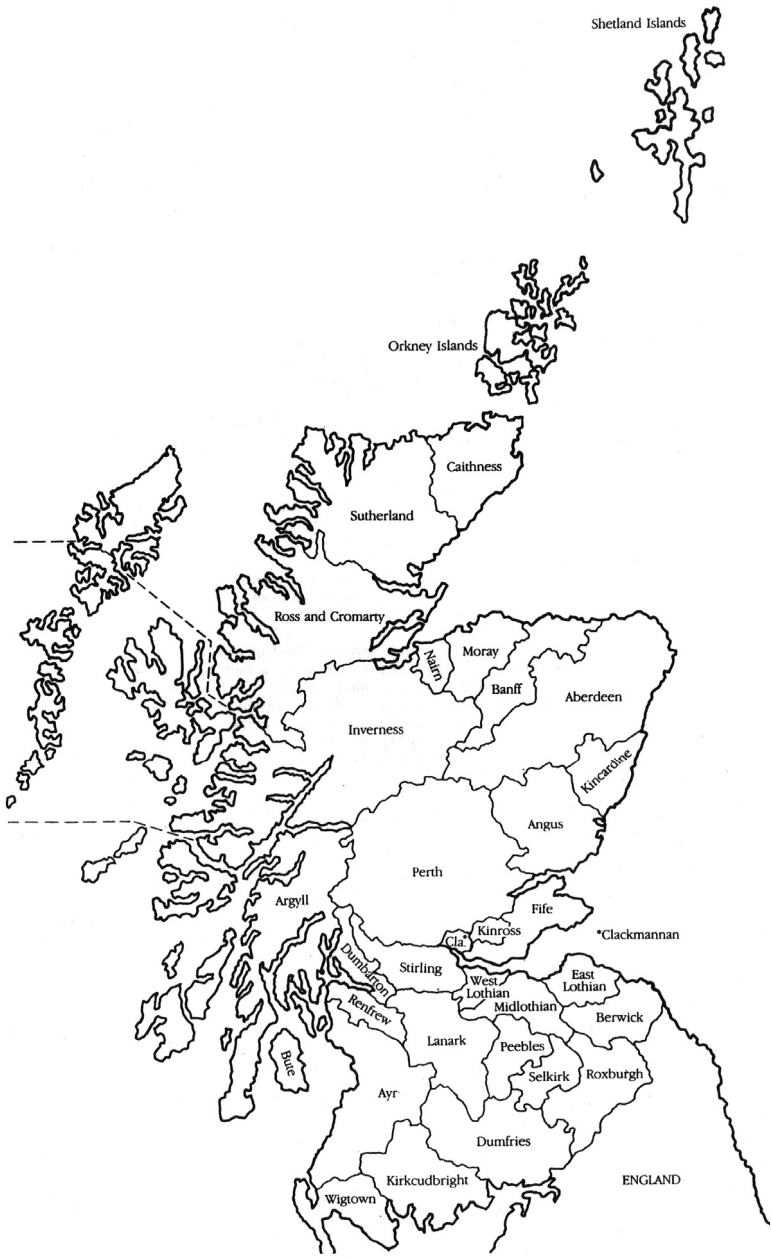
County Map of Scotland[1]



[1] Source: *The Parishes, Registers and Registrars of Scotland* (Scottish Association of Family History Societies, 1993).

Introduction

The famine of the 1690s was the last national famine to occur in Scotland. It was the final time that the majority of the Scottish population faced the threat of starvation as a result of severe food shortage. In the nadir of the Little Ice Age, colder, wetter, unseasonable and erratic weather conditions wrought havoc on the underdeveloped Scottish agricultural sector. Beginning at a national level following the deficient harvest of 1695, the country experienced multiple harvest failures, high grain prices, a reduction in pastoral flocks and herds, increased mortality, economic difficulties and social dislocation. Widespread suffering was evident across the country in the five years following this, but localised famines, dearths, grain scarcity and cattle murrains were reported in the late 1680s and throughout the early 1690s, indicating deteriorating returns for subsistence farming throughout parts of the country in the years prior to 1695. Nationally, famine was evident from the harvest of 1695 to that of 1700, as across the country diminishing crop yields and grain shortage, as well as reduced cattle stocks and meat supplies sent food prices spiralling. The grain harvest, vital to the survival of the majority of Scots, failed nationally in 1695, 1696 and again most devastatingly in 1698, forcing a reliance on imports of emergency grain supplies to feed the population. Simultaneous famines, which occurred in many countries throughout northern and western Europe between 1693 and 1700, contributed to the severity of the crisis in Scotland and further increased competition for those dwindling grain supplies. Food prices were driven up and the poor suffered dramatic falls in living standards to the extent that a significant number starved to death.

Local and national authorities from kirk sessions to the privy council were overwhelmed by the social, economic and demographic problems that resulted from the crisis. The poorest and weakest members of society were hardest hit, but the famine's effects were felt by different ranks of society well into the early 1700s. Contemporary commentators, including the political pamphlet author Andrew Fletcher of Saltoun, and the geographer and physician Sir Robert Sibbald, reported with alarm the pitiful condition of the poor roaming across the countryside, desperately seeking food and charity; those who failed succumbed to starvation and epidemic disease, expiring where they fell, unburied bodies littering roads and fields.[1] As crop

[1] Sir R. Sibbald, *Provision for the Poor in Time of Dearth and Scarcity* (Edinburgh, 1709); 'The Second Discourse concerning the Affairs of Scotland written in the year 1698', in D.

yields plummeted, land lay waste as tenants and subtenants died or fled to other estates, or migrated in their thousands to famine-free Ulster. Others consumed their seed corn to stave off immediate starvation, or refused to plant a crop which might produce lower yields than even the initial investment. The harvests of 1697 and 1699, although not actual failures, were reduced substantially as a consequence of these factors and the country was unable to produce sufficient grain to maintain its reduced population even in the best two years of the crisis. Rent arrears built up and landlords were forced to either evict burdensome, indebted tenants or offer concessions, rent abatements and even seed corn and subsidised food supplies to the destitute that they chose to retain on their land. When the crisis finally came to an end in 1700, the Scottish population was reduced by somewhere between 5 and 15 per cent through a combination of an increased death rate, a reduction in births and a migratory exodus to Ulster.[2] The population of the worst-affected regions, particularly the Highlands and upland areas, was decimated with losses in excess of 20 per cent.

These basic outlines of the famine are well established and references to the 'Scottish famine' of the 1690s are frequently made by historians writing about the other better-known famine crises in Europe of that decade and later. Yet, in spite of this, scholarly accounts of the famine are so limited in their scope that there is no single volume devoted to an examination of this momentous event. Current published knowledge about the causes, extent and impact of the famine in Scotland is limited and many conclusions have been speculative in the absence of detailed research. This is true of all Scottish famines, with the exception of the Highland famine of the 1840s, which has attracted significantly more scholarly attention and is the most extensively written about of all Scottish famine crises. Yet Tom Devine, in *The Great Highland Famine*, was also able to contrast the relatively little research carried out on that crisis in the Highlands in comparison with the more famous contemporaneous famine in Ireland.[3] A purely regional phenomenon, the label of 'famine' is certainly debatable for the former,[4] but its connection with Highland emigration and clearance has

Daiches (ed.), *Andrew Fletcher of Saltoun, Selected Political Writings and Speeches* (Edinburgh, 1979), 46–7.

[2] M. W. Flinn et al., *Scottish Population History from the Seventeenth Century to the 1930s* (Cambridge, 1977), 161, 181.

[3] T. M. Devine, *The Great Highland Famine* (Edinburgh, 1988), v. In comparison with study undertaken of famine crises in other European countries, for example the Irish famine of the 1840s, this is still not comparatively extensive. Cormac Ó Gráda even discussed the difficulty in finding a unique name for his book due to the 'outpouring' of literature on the subject, *Black '47 and beyond: The Great Irish Famine in History, Economy and Memory* (Princeton, 1999), 3.

[4] T. M. Devine, 'Why the Highlands did not starve: Ireland and Highland Scotland during the potato famine', in S. J. Connolly, R. Houston and R. J. Morris (eds), *Conflict, Identity and Economic Development* (Preston, 1995); E. Richards, *The Highland Clearances* (Edinburgh, 2000), 199, 324. Nevertheless, it is possible to have famine without excess mortality; see

secured a greater degree of interest for the last crisis of its kind to occur in Scotland, rather than the last national famine, or any of those before it.[5] Nevertheless, the legacy of the 1690s crisis also has significant longer-term resonance; on the politics of Union and the economic depression of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, as well as the slow rate of population recovery and growth in the first half of the eighteenth century in which the famine may have acted as a Malthusian check to spare Scotland from the serious subsistence crises which plagued Europe in 1709 and 1739–41. More than this, the absence of serious national famine after the 1690s marks this crisis out as significant. Why did the Scots starve in the 1690s, but not thereafter?

Chris Smout was the first historian to outline a chronology of the crisis in his 1963 study, *Scottish Trade on the Eve of the Union, 1660–1707*. In the same volume he declared that 'the famine deserves more detailed consideration, because no historian has yet given a coherent account of what happened during this almost legendary disaster, though most have recognised it as an event of importance'.[6] It was only from the late 1970s that significant steps were taken to rectify this. A major, and still the most important, national demographic study of the famine was undertaken as part of *Scottish Population History from the Seventeenth Century to the 1930s*, edited by Michael Flinn. It devoted a section to the famine, analysing mortality and some fertility trends from parishes across the country and concluded that the severity of the famine varied greatly at regional and local levels, with evidence from some parishes indicating that certain areas did not experience a crisis at all.[7] Yet a coherent account was still missing. Ian Whyte, writing after the publication of *Scottish Population History*, bemoaned that a clear understanding of the severity of the famine was still not possible: 'Until a systematic study is made, it is difficult to bridge the gap between sweeping generalisations about overall mortality at a national level and individual, possibly unrepresentative, instances of hardship'.[8] Other historians following in Flinn and his colleagues' footsteps continued to chip away at the mysteries of the topic, shedding light on a number of themes. Various aspects of the famine crisis were subsequently studied, including disruption to agriculture and the grain trade by Whyte and the effectiveness of the Poor Law in alleviating suffering by Rosalind Mitchison.[9] These were followed by three

H. O'Neill and J. Taye, 'Introduction', in H. O'Neill and J. Taye (eds), *A World without Famine? New Approaches to Aid and Development* (Basingstoke, 1998), 3.

[5] Flinn, *Scottish Population History*, 164.

[6] T. C. Smout, *Scottish Trade on the Eve of the Union 1660–1707* (Edinburgh, 1963), 245.

[7] Flinn, *Scottish Population History*, 179.

[8] I. D. Whyte, *Agriculture and Society in Seventeenth Century Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1979), 247.

[9] See, for example, I. D. Whyte, 'Human response to short- and long-term climatic fluctuations: the example of early Scotland', in C. D. Smith and M. Parry (eds), *Consequences of Climatic Change* (Nottingham, 1981); R. Mitchison, *The Old Poor Law in Scotland* (Edinburgh, 2000).

detailed regional studies of Aberdeenshire and Angus counties and the Tayside region which identified the localised extent of suffering. Robert Tyson demonstrated in 'Famine in Aberdeenshire, 1695–1699' that the county experienced the worst demographic crisis outside the Highlands with a drop in population estimated to be as much as 21 per cent.[10] Angus, previously presumed to have largely escaped the crisis,[11] was shown to indeed have experienced famine; despite the absence of the 'exceptional' scale of mortality experienced in Aberdeenshire,[12] the former region's agricultural strengths did not prove sufficient to avert a disaster.[13] Further examination of these themes continued in a study of the impact of the famine on the Tayside region, shedding new light on the difference in experience between the Highlands and Lowlands.[14] These studies have highlighted the need for further detailed research by portraying not only the vast difference in local and regional experience of the famine, but also by raising the question of whether the severity of the famine at national level has been underestimated. This issue has been picked up most recently by Chris Whatley, who described the famine as 'probably the most severe mortality crisis in the nation's history', and Michael Fry, who suggested that it 'went beyond anything known or remembered. The whole nation seemed to fall back to a lower stage of development'.[15]

Despite all of this work, more than forty years after Smout's outline chronology, a coherent account remains elusive. This book sets out to fill that gap. Building and expanding on these previous studies, this book will provide the first major scholarly account of the famine. As such it is intended to serve as a means to open the debate on this topic further than its heretofore limited arena. The absence of a single study of the crisis has not entirely dampened scholarly debate of the topic. Historians disagree about even the most basic outline details: the timing of the crisis, whether it was one single event, or indeed two or more separate famines, and most debate has settled around its severity.

The primary aim of this book, therefore, is to produce a broader analysis of the famine at a national level, to challenge the debate about the timing and severity of the crisis and to provide a fuller account of the famine than is currently available. The chronology of the crisis will be mapped out

[10] R. E. Tyson, 'Famine in Aberdeenshire, 1695–1699: Anatomy of a Crisis', in D. Stevenson (ed.), *From Lairds to Louns: Country and Burgh Life in Aberdeenshire 1600–1800* (Aberdeen, 1986).

[11] Whyte, *Agriculture and Society*, 248.

[12] Tyson, 'Famine in Aberdeenshire', 32.

[13] K. J. Cullen, 'King William's Ill Years: the Social, Economic and Demographic Effects of Famine in Angus, 1695–1700', unpublished MA Hons dissertation (University of Dundee, 2001).

[14] K. J. Cullen, C. A. Whatley and M. Young, 'King William's Ill Years: new evidence on the impact of scarcity and harvest failure during the crisis of the 1690s on Tayside', *Scottish Historical Review*, 85, 2: 220 (Oct. 2006).

[15] C. A. Whatley, *The Scots and the Union* (Edinburgh, 2006), 142; M. Fry, *The Union: England, Scotland and the Treaty of 1707* (Edinburgh, 2006), 17.

through a series of themes to establish the meteorological, agricultural, economic and demographic boundaries of the famine. Themes touched on in the regional studies will be expanded and the demographic effects of the crisis will be examined in greater detail and for a larger number of parishes than in *Scottish Population History*. Most studies of the famine have only covered the years 1695 to 1699, beginning with the harvest of 1695, and have focused on the events between this date and the relatively good harvest of the latter year.[16] However, this study will argue that the origins of the crisis are to be found in the years before 1695. The famine then extended across much of the country until the harvest of 1700, partly due to continued high grain prices following the harvest of 1699 which caused problems both at local and national level, and the social problems which continued to attract comment from local authorities and individual observers. The extent to which most historians have underestimated the duration, extent and severity of the famine will therefore be central questions.

A secondary aim is to provide a comparative context in which to understand the Scottish experience of famine in the 1690s. Despite recognising the existence of mortality crises and famine in other European countries during the 1690s, Scottish historians have so far done little to place the famine that occurred in Scotland within a European pattern of harvest failure and famine. By examining the extent of the crisis and the resultant effects upon the population, the famine's impact in Scotland will be assessed within some of the themes of European famine in the 1690s and wider early modern and modern famine literature. Although acknowledgement has been made of the differing extent of mortality in Scotland and other European countries,[17] no real comparison has been made of the figures. Neither has consideration been given to the impact that simultaneous harvest failure across many European countries had on Scotland and, in particular, on its ability to obtain famine relief in the form of foreign grain supplies. The common causes of the famines stemmed from colder than average temperatures during the climax of the Little Ice Age. This

[16] With the notable exception of Flinn, *Scottish Population History*, and Tyson, 'Famine in Aberdeenshire', who both discussed the situation up to the harvest of 1700, and Cullen, Whatley and Young, 'King William's Ill Years', and Whatley, *The Scots and the Union*, Chapter 4, who both discussed seven ill years, analysis of the famine has been focused on the four-year period up to the harvest of 1699. See Whyte, *Agriculture and Society*; Smout, *Scottish Trade*; A. J. Gibson and T. C. Smout, *Prices, Food and Wages in Scotland 1550–1780* (Cambridge, 1995) and R. Mitchison, 'The Movements of Scottish Corn Prices in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries', *Economic History Review*, 18 (1965).

[17] Flinn and Tyson both referred, for example, to the drop in population of Finland in 1697, estimated to be as much as a third, although the nature of the mortality crises in Scotland and Finland, or any of the other European countries to experience famine in the 1690s, were not examined further; Flinn, *Scottish Population History*, 7; Tyson, 'Famine in Aberdeenshire', 50. Whyte acknowledged the difficulties experienced in England during the period as well as the famines in France and Finland that coincided with the Scottish famine, but did not pursue the comparison either, *Agriculture and Society*, 251.

resulted in bad weather conditions which had a detrimental impact on the vital grain crops of northern and western Europe. A series of harvest failures seriously reduced crop yields in many countries which led to grain shortages and, ultimately, famine. This experience and the measures taken to remedy it will be analysed within the theories of famine in subsistence and post-subsistence societies.

The book has been divided into six chapters which examine the causes of the famine and its impact. The first chapter addresses the debate surrounding the famine as it currently stands amongst Scottish historians and its context as one of four 'disasters' to befall Scotland in this decade. Since a comparative approach is a key theme of the book, the famine will also be analysed within the context of the many European subsistence crises of the 1690s.

The second chapter examines the origins of the famine crisis by exploring the climatic, and more particularly, meteorological reasons for harvest failure in both Scotland and many other northern European countries in the 1690s. This permits a more detailed chronology to be developed which maps the impact of these changing conditions upon Scottish agriculture. Tom Devine defined the famine as 'an aberration, a reflection of an especially severe but short-lived spell of climatic deterioration'.[18] This chapter, however, will examine the extent to which the famine only occurred nationally following at least a decade of unfavourable and worsening climatic conditions which had a detrimental impact on agriculture, particularly in the Borders region and the Northern Isles. In the case of Orkney and Shetland, climatic conditions led to famine in the late 1680s and early 1690s. Examination of the adverse weather conditions which were responsible for the harvest failures and an outline chronology of the crisis will be mapped out in this chapter which will question whether the famine can fairly be described as Scotland's 'Seven Ill Years'.

The focus of the third chapter is the way in which those adverse weather conditions impacted upon the supply and price of grain. The famine was described by Smout as 'a terrible instance of the vulnerability of a primitive economy to bad weather',[19] and some of the ways in which the economy, and particularly the grain market, responded to these adverse conditions and grain shortage are explored. Louise Tilly has observed that 'capitalist markets moved food not necessarily to those who were hungry, but to those with money to buy'.[20] Thus people could starve in a region which produced and exported large quantities of grain because the local population did not possess the purchasing power of the market in places such as Edinburgh. In such cases famine in that region was man-made and only intervention

[18] T. M. Devine, 'The Union of 1707 and Scottish Development', *Scottish Economic and Social History*, 5 (1985), 25.

[19] T. C. Smout, *A History of the Scottish People 1560–1830* (London, 1987), 225.

[20] L. A. Tilly, 'Food Entitlement, Famine and Conflict', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 14, 2 (Autumn 1983), 349.

in the grain market by the authorities could avert the suffering of the local population. Central government's ability to implement adequate famine-relief measures, particularly during this period of economic difficulty, is a further determinant of the severity of the famine. The wider impact of the other 'disasters' of the 1690s clearly not only limited the government's ability to provide financial relief, but also town councils, kirk sessions and some landowners may have found their income reduced due to the convergence of a number of economic crises which further limited the amount of specie circulating in the country. Consideration will also be given to some of the influences of foreign markets upon the Scottish economy. Although the economy was underdeveloped at the end of the seventeenth century, it was far from closed to the influences of foreign markets and trade. The extent to which the whole of northern Europe was affected by the weather conditions meant that sources of relief were limited.

The last three chapters focus on the social and demographic effects of the crisis and outline the impact high grain prices and scarcity had on the population, examining how effective the authorities' famine-relief measures were in relieving suffering. Since those primarily affected by price rises were the poor, the greatest impact of the famine must have been upon the poorer sections of society. The extent and increase of poverty and the nature, enforcement and success of the poor relief system form the basis, therefore, of Chapter four. Rosalind Mitchison's work on *The Old Poor Law in Scotland*, in which she revealed the 1690s to be a key decade in the formation of an enforced system of poor relief paid for by kirk sessions and local landowners, is drawn on in this chapter. The extent to which parishes actually fulfilled their legal obligations and provided an adequate level of support to the poorest and most vulnerable sections of society during the crisis was limited, but arguably not quite as limited as Mitchison concluded. The nature and extent of poor relief across the famine period has been analysed to determine how effective the various systems employed by kirk sessions and town councils actually were. Ultimately, one of the key failings was the vast differences between these systems and, as a result, people moved out of their parishes and homes either because adequate poor relief and charity were not available there, or because they were aware that better provisions were being made for the poor elsewhere. Fear of starvation forced the poor out onto the roads and into the Lowland towns and market centres, but when food supplies, or the necessary money to purchase them, could not be secured, the desperate resorted to their own measures to obtain it.

Chapter five analyses the demographic consequences of the famine through its impact on the Scottish population. This chapter continues the departure from *Scottish Population History*'s conclusion that the famine had short-term demographic consequences.[21] In particular, study of the age

[21] See, for example, Tyson, 'Famine in Aberdeenshire'; M. W. Flinn, *The European Demographic System 1500–1820* (Brighton, 1981), 21.

structure of mortality suggests that high adult mortality inhibited quick recovery of the population. Studying the impact of the famine upon the rates of all three vital events and across a wider geographical area than has previously been attempted, contributes to a greater understanding of what the famine's demographic impact was, particularly in those regions for which only very limited information has been previously examined. Over the country as a whole, the famine's effect on nuptiality, for example, has not been examined by any previous studies. The use of marriage registers poses methodological challenges, but is introduced in this study to more fully explain how the population reacted to the crisis, since marriage is the one demographic factor that can be most easily controlled. This chapter stresses the importance of the role of marriage in population recovery in the immediate post-famine period and as a factor in slow longer-term growth.

The famine's impact upon the population has been recognised by historians as varied at regional, county and even local parish level. By identifying and examining local and regional differences in the way in which the population experienced the famine to determine the factors which led to suffering at a local level, contrasts are drawn between rural and urban parishes, upland and lowland, and regions of arable and pastoral farming. An analysis of the roles played by epidemic disease and starvation in famine-related deaths is achieved partly through a comparison of adult-to-child burial ratios and partly through study of a range of non-quantitative sources to supplement limited demographic data in some key regions. The numbers of migrants or 'strangers' who died in large numbers in Lowland parishes, particularly in some parishes which experienced comparatively low death rates amongst residents, has been identified in an examination of local conditions. Normally excluded from burial registers, but occasionally recorded in kirk session records, such occurrences have been formerly underestimated by historians and previous estimates of population losses have therefore not included this significantly vulnerable section of the population.

Chapter six focuses further on the elements of social dislocation identified in Chapters four and five and is divided into two main parts: internal movement and migration within Scotland, and emigration. Town council records and more particularly kirk session minutes have been used to identify the movement of large numbers of people across the country seeking food and charity, and establish how this impacted on various parishes and regions. A subsection of this chapter is devoted to Scottish emigration to Ulster, England and continental Europe in the 1690s, focusing on the way in which people were forced to leave their homes and parishes to seek a means of survival from the worst effects of the famine. Identification of the types of areas which people were leaving and those where they sought famine relief further helps to examine the regional and local impact of the famine crisis. However, consideration has also been given to the pull

factors, as well as the push factors, which encouraged population movement. Within Scotland increased population movement was a feature of better opportunities becoming available in some regions. This was particularly the case with emigration as improved prospects were available in Ulster during the mid 1690s which encouraged Scots to emigrate and settle there. The most recent research by Patrick Fitzgerald has suggested that of the approximately 50,000 people that emigrated during this decade, a significant proportion did so in response to the famine crisis in Scotland.[22] Much of the research so far, including that carried out by Fitzgerald, has focused on the Irish aspect of this migratory movement and has relied predominantly on Irish sources. This book's examination of the topic uses mainly Scottish sources to contribute to this historiography and expand some key aspects of this topic to identify not only the type of people involved in this migration, but also the timing of the movement and the ways in which famine conditions in Scotland influenced these factors.

The discussion of these themes will therefore build upon the existing historiography in the areas of migration, demography and poverty, and examine some previously little studied topics of the famine crisis, particularly the climatic causes of the harvest failures and the resultant impact upon the grain market. By identifying the causes and consequences of famine in Scotland during this decade, a clearer understanding of how severe the crisis was, what its impact was and how these factors differed regionally and locally will be achieved.

[22] P. D. Fitzgerald, '"Black '97": Reconsidering Scottish Migration to Ireland in the Seventeenth Century and the Scotch Irish in America', in W. Kelly and J. R. Young (eds), *Ulster and Scotland, 1600–2000: History, Language and Identity* (Dublin, 2004), 79.