



Uncovering a mystery migration

Vanessa Collingridge of Radio 4's *Making History* traces an unusual route to long-lost Scottish heritage and a people with the propensity to prosper

ONE OF the pleasures of family history research is when a simple line of enquiry explodes into a much bigger, forgotten or surprising history. This is what happened with listener Annie Winiacki from Bournemouth. Annie had been at a Burns Supper when she'd joked that she was probably the only person there with any Scots blood – according to her father, her family originally came not from Poland as she'd always believed but from Scotland! The occasion set her thinking: could her distant ancestry really be Scottish or had her Polish father made a mistake?



Scottish Centre of Diaspora Studies, and it seems that Annie's father could well be right.

Professor Devine explained, "From as far back as the 13th but typically in the 17th century, there have been migrations, from the eastern strip of Scotland to Orkney and Shetland, across the North Sea to Europe. In those days especially, the sea united people where mountainous land divided them. Some of those migrations really were large: the entire population of 17th-century Scotland was around one million but in the middle 20 years of that century, around 70,000 to 100,000 Scots permanently emigrated to Ulster and Poland alone!"

The reasons for this emigration seem to boil down to a greater religious tolerance in Eastern European countries like Poland, which allowed freedom of expression for Catholics, Calvinists and Episcopalians, and offered opportunities for cash-strapped Scots to find employment

as merchants, peddlers and mercenaries.

"We know that the impact of this exodus of young men was significant because you can see that it affected marriage rates in Scotland. These men were often going off to join continental armies where disease was a bigger killer than fighting so there was little chance of them ever coming home," said Professor Devine.

The Scots were far from popular in their adoptive countries

However, it is the Scottish talent for business that really made its mark overseas. "We can see from contemporary letters from Eastern European town guilds and merchants to the authorities that the Scots were far from popular in their adoptive countries, with complaints that 'Scots cream off the milk of the country, usurping the whole trade!' and that nothing could happen, even in your own house, without a Scot knowing about it and 'being there even at the point of death, offering to supply his goods!'. Scots were indeed the bogeymen of Eastern Europe – parents would tell their children, 'Wait till the Scot comes!' to frighten them into behaving."

The Scottish immigrants swept through what are now the Baltic states, Scandinavia and Eastern Europe, dealing directly with the peasantry as peddlers, or undercutting the local merchants to build up their

own businesses and fortunes. With too much at stake to return back home, they stayed in their adoptive homelands, passing down Scots bloods through successive generations. The techniques learned in Eastern Europe would later be used to dominate trade with North America and the Caribbean, especially in the tobacco trade of the 18th century.

But why did these merchants, peddlers and mercenaries have such an impact? Professor Devine argued it was largely a matter of education. "Because of the influence of John Knox arguing that ordinary people should be able to read the word of God, most people in Scotland from this period onwards were relatively well-educated. That's why these emigrants have left their mark on things like politics and education – especially the universities – in countries like America, Canada, Australia and New Zealand; we can still see the evidence of this today."

Annie can now set to work on her family tree in full knowledge that her family was part of the wider Scottish Diaspora – and the product of a little-known but important history. ■

Vanessa Collingridge is the BBC presenter of Radio 4's *Making History*

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LEFT: Annie Winiacki's Polish grandfather; ABOVE: her Polish aunts on the family farm