Irish Soccer Migrants: A Social and Cultural History


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Irish Soccer Migrants: a Social and Cultural History stems from author Conor Curran successfully obtaining a FIFA Havelange Research Scholarship, awarded by the Centre International d’Étude du Sport (CIES) and the Fédération Internationale de Football Association (FIFA). The aim of the book is to undertake a comprehensive analysis of the history, geography, recruitment, experiences and achievement levels of Irish migrant players entering the professional football industry in Britain, Europe and North America from 1945 onwards. Curran uses two main data sources: interviews with twenty-four ex-professional players from Northern Ireland (NI) and the Republic of Ireland (ROI); and secondary databases. The inclusion of both primary and secondary data ensures that this book is empirically rich and gives a detailed, player-centred account of the migration of Irish footballers. As such, it is a welcome addition to the shift in the sports migration literature away from the macro-level to a more migrant athlete focused analysis.

At the outset, Curran offers a justification for his research by arguing that the academic literature on sports, and particularly football, migration has generally neglected the experiences of Irish athletes. With the exception Magee and Sugden (1998); McGovern (2000); Bourke (2002, 2003); Kelly (2014); Elliot (2014); Curran’s previous single authored work (2015a, 2015b, 2016), and his co-authored research with Kelly (2018), the examination of Irish player migration within academic discourse has been relatively scarce.

In seeking to fill this gap, Curran argues that the migration of Irish-born football players should be located within the wider context of the Irish diaspora in Britain and further afield. As part of his justification for making sense of Irish football migration with recourse to the wider study of migration, Curran argues that “mainstream academics” “have generally not concerned themselves with accounting for how the migration patterns of professional footballers, and other athletes, have fitted into the more general study of migration” (p. 12). In seeking to redress this, his insightful historiography of Irish football migration draws on work from Delaney (2002) to describe how non-football migratory trends historically favoured individuals from rural Ireland, as opposed to those living in larger cities such as Dublin and Belfast. However, as Curran shows, Irish football migration has disproportionately featured players living in these larger cities where scouting networks were stronger. Where his analysis of migrating Irish footballers connects with Delaney’s work is on the rationale for choosing Britain as a destination. For general Irish migrants, economic reward was a primary incentive and Curran argues that the same is true for Irish football migrants. In making this point, he contrasts the push and pull factors that have underpinned this process. For example, he discusses how various societal constraints negatively impacted the governance and infrastructure of Irish football. In particular, he picks out issues such as the tense political situation in Ireland from the 1920s; the Gaelic Athletic Association’s banning of its members from playing “foreign” games; lack of PE in schools; and the slow tendency for both Nationalist and Unionist schools to introduce soccer as having a detrimental effect on the development of the game in Ireland. Curran suggests that these factors stunted football’s growth and prevented its professionalization, and in the process have created significant push factors away from the Irish game. In contrast, the growth and professionalization of football in Britain created appealing conditions for Irish players. Indeed, Curran draws on Elliot’s (2014) analysis of how a range of pull factors such as professional contracts, large salaries, professional coaching, high match attendances and media exposure combined to make the British football industry so attractive as a destination for talented Irish footballers.

While Curran does locate Irish football migration within wider Irish migratory trends and processes, he could have better positioned the contribution of his book to the field of sports migration had he elaborated on his point that “mainstream” academics have not concerned themselves with how analyses of sport/football migrants connect to the wider study of migration. Even a cursory overview of current sports labour migration (SLM) literature across various social scientific disciplines would have demonstrated that many do in fact connect sport to the wider migration studies field. Whilst space does not permit the detail here, it’s important to acknowledge that at least some of the literature on sports migration, and specifically on football is broadly informed by neo-classical perspectives of migration and places sports migrants within wider geographical migratory flows. More recent work has also engaged with the migration studies literature to examine the motivations and meanings athletes attach to their mobility, or at least their aspiration to become sports migrants. While Curran’s point applies to the majority of the research on Irish football migration, he seems to overlook McGovern’s engagement with the neo-Marxist informed analysis of migration through his employment of World Systems Theory and the dependency lens to explain how English football clubs exploit the Irish game by using their power and resources to attract Ireland’s most talented footballing labour. While Curran is absolutely correct in his assertion that Irish football migration should be located within the context of broader migratory motivations and patterns, it is not clear how he engages with theoretical debate or conceptual frameworks located in the field of migration studies.

An element that strengthens Curran’s study though is his player-centred analyses of players’ career trajectories: firstly, on their initial moves from Ireland to Britain; secondly, on their experiences within the professional football industry; and thirdly, on how they encountered and dealt with retirement. Drawing on interviews, Curran raises important problems with the current process of football migration from Ireland to Britain. He critiques the Football Association of Ireland (FAI), who govern the game in the Irish Republic and their counterparts north of the border,
the Irish Football Association (IFA) for being slow acting and passive regarding the welfare of Irish players. Again, Curran situates this point within the wider context of Irish emigration, and specifically the Irish Free State’s lack of support for and reticence over emigration, a stance that was clearly evident to Irish migrants living in Britain and that left many of these migrants feeling isolated and homesick, an issue that Curran highlights as being a longstanding problem for many Irish migrant players. However, echoing the points raised in his (2015b) paper, he highlights how the hyper masculine culture of professional football exacerbates the difficulties that players may have. In an industry characterized by uncertainty and precarious contracts, players’ main concerns are usually focused around trying to obtain a new contract. Showing signs of weakness to team-mates or coaching staff regarding off-field problems are perceived by players as problematic and as potentially hindering their chance of obtaining a new contract. Curran’s analysis here is heavily influenced by Roderick’s seminal work on football as labour (2006).

Curran’s examination of the post-career experiences of Irish footballers deserves praise. With the exception of two of his previous papers (Curran, 2015a; Curran and Kelly, 2018), the post-career experiences of Irish players have been neglected. He focuses on retirement issues amongst players who have had relatively successful careers in professional football. Whilst it would have painted a larger picture of return migration had Curran widened his focus to include “deselected” players, he provided a rationale for not doing so. He states;

“It was decided not to include trial players or apprentices who migrated to England but did not sign professionally as the volume would have been too great and there is no comprehensive record of each player on trial or apprentice who did not play league football in Britain” (p. 16).

However, by overlooking the experiences of migrants who have been deselected from professional football, Curran missed an opportunity to add to a currently neglected issue within the wider sport migration literature. Despite the shift in analyses of SLM from the macro-level to micro-level, studies on athletic immobility and failures to produce migration are rare. Thus, there have been calls to examine the notion of post-migration amongst early return migrants (Agergaard and Ryba, 2014). Nonetheless, Curran’s analysis of retired footballers offers novel insights and may be the first stepping stone towards addressing the gap in research on early career termination within the Irish context. For example, while he argues that the majority of players decide to return to Ireland following the end of their professional career in Britain, there are frequently complications upon returning home. He suggests that the neglect of education amongst players often hinders career possibilities post-football and whilst professional clubs have taken measures to ensure academy players receive education, the ‘laddish’ culture of the professional industry prevents most players from taking a serious interest in non-footballing qualifications. Curran, citing Kelly (2014), suggests that the dressing room culture marginalises players who are interested in undertaking qualifications. This perspective is shared by Platts and Smith (2018) who suggest that academic ambitions amongst the majority of players are side-lined in favor of the aspiration of their footballing dream.

The lack of education post-football for many drives players to rely on informal networks and relationships they have made within the game to help their career opportunities. Roderick notes that many players will attempt to delay their inevitable retirement by turning to “networks of people” within the game to obtain a new contract at a different club. This point favours those who have had fairly “successful” careers in the game and may not benefit all players, especially those who weren’t in the game long enough to develop their own “networks of people.” For Irish players who exit full-time professional football and return to the part-time Irish League (NI) or League of Ireland (ROI), many assume this transition will be straightforward. However as Curran highlighted, the decrease in playing standard, coaching, and training levels, combined with the need to find part-time employment makes the return home more difficult than expected.

To conclude, whilst this book is essentially a study located in sports history, it does raise important sociological debate, particularly on the individual experiences of Irish football players before, during and after their migratory transition. Curran’s brave critique of the IFA and FAI problematizes the current organisation of Irish football migration and challenges the status-quo. For those interested in football on the island of Ireland and migratory processes in sport, the book offers unique insights into Irish players’ journeys through professional football in Britain. Written in a language that appeals to both academic and non-academic audiences, this book deserves widespread readership in Ireland and further afield.

References


