Discuss the population change in Ireland from the 1800s onwards.

Patterns of population change have varied widely within Ireland over both space and time.

In 1841, the population of Ireland was 6.53 million. However, from 1845-1849, Ireland experienced the Great Famine. As a result, more than one million people died and a further one million people fled from Ireland to escape hunger, disease and poverty. People emigrated to the United States, Britain, Canada and Australia. This emigration was age selective (mainly young adults) and sex selective (mostly female). This caused a distorted population balance and reduced marriage and birth rates. When the famine ended, the high rate of emigration remained causing a steady decline in population by counterbalancing the natural increase.

During the period 1951-1961, a deep economic recession led to a further population decline of 4.8%. By 1961, the population of the republic of Ireland (the state) fell to 2.82 million from a peak of 6.53 million in 1841. Unemployment was a major push factor encouraging roughly 408,000 people to emigrate during the 1950s.

The pattern of continuous decline was soon reversed due to the 1960s Industrial Revolution. The new economic policies of Sean Lemass created huge economic growth. Tax incentives and grants were put in place to encourage multinational corporations (MNCs) to locate in Ireland. Thousands of jobs were created in the manufacturing and service sectors. The migration balance changed as immigrants outnumbered emigrants. Population began to grow for the first time in 120 years. Between 1971 and 1981, a population increase of 465,157 (15.6%) took place due to the combination of a high natural increase (361,268) and a positive migration balance (103,889).

Ireland’s joining of the European Economic Community (EEC) in 1973 also helped increase the countries economic growth and population. Now, European markets were opened up to Irish products. People no longer had to leave Ireland in search of work. The availability of jobs became a pull factor in Ireland, increasing the rate of immigration and therefore increasing the population.

A severe economic recession during the 1980s caused unemployment rates to rise and emigration to return (renewed emigration). In fact, more than 200,000 young people left Ireland during this decade in search of work. As economic refugees, many of these Irish people became illegal immigrants in the United States. While emigration was increasing, the Irish birth rate was declining dramatically from 19.7 in 1981 to 16.3 in 1996. This led to further population decline.

During the 1990s, Ireland entered an economic boom period called the ‘Celtic Tiger’. The Irish economy underwent rapid economic growth and had a massive labour shortage. The demand for skilled and unskilled labour in construction, healthcare and IT led to the immigration of workers to Ireland. Most of these immigrants were from Eastern European countries such a Poland. Ireland’s average annual net migration rate increased until it was the second highest in the EU between 1995 and 1999. The number of people employed (labour force) in Ireland grew by more than 40 % leading to a population increase to almost 3.92 million by 2002. The majority of population growth during this era was absorbed by urban areas, where most of the industrial and service jobs were concentrated. The largest increase was in Leinster, especially in Dublin and it’s commuter belt of
Louth, Meath, Kildare and Wicklow which had a 40% rise in population (the national average being 8.1%). The smallest proportion of this increase was felt in Connacht and the counties of Cavan, Donegal and Monaghan.

In more recent years, the country has entered a period of economic recession again, with emigration rates rising once more. Only time will tell what effects this will have on Ireland’s population. Our population is now 4.58 million and is expected to reach 5 million by 2015, even with the emigration caused by the recession.