

Social Studies 10

The Northwest to 1870

The Irish in Canada and the Loyal Order of Orange

The Irish

While it has been argued (with little supporting evidence) that Irish explorers such as Brendan the Bold preceded the Norse to Canada, such wishful thinking is not necessary to establish the significance of the Irish contribution to Canada. Since the 17th century, because of political and military links between France and southern Ireland, the Irish have lived in what is now Canada. The Irish may have constituted as much as 5% of the population of New France. Indeed, some "French-Canadian" and "Acadian" surnames derive from a corruption of Irish names, eg, Riel (from Reilly) and Caissie (from Casey).

There have also been Irish in NEWFOUNDLAND since the early 18th century, if not before. "Bristol" fishing vessels habitually stopped at Wexford and Waterford to take on provisions and an Irish crew and labourers for the Newfoundland fishery. There is some indication from New France and Newfoundland that among the Irish at this time there existed a measure of group consciousness, especially in Newfoundland where the Irish population continued to increase until the middle of the 19th century. During the 18th century, smaller groups of Irish began to arrive in the new British colonies. During the 1760s a group of Ulster Presbyterians settled at TRURO, NS, and an undetermined number of Irish were part of the LOYALIST migration.

All of the above were precursors of the main waves of Irish immigrants that arrived during the first half of the 19th century. By the 1850s, over 500 000 Irish had immigrated to British North America, although many of them had moved on to the US (in NY and Boston there were 4 million Irish out of a total population of 24 million) or elsewhere. Today the descendants of these Irish immigrants comprise almost 14% of the Canadian population (4 354 155 single and multiple response, 2006 census) and have helped define the meaning of "Canadian." Because they spoke English, the Irish could participate more directly in Canadian society than many non-English-speaking immigrants, and they brought to bear on Canadian life many values that were Irish in origin.

In particular, education, law and politics have felt the impact of the Irish mind. Well-known Irish in Canada have included Edward BLAKE, Edmund Burke, Sir Guy CARLETON, Benjamin CRONYN, John Joseph Lynch, D'Alton MCCARTHY, John O'Conner, Eugene O'KEEFE, Michael Sullivan, Timothy Sullivan, Thomas D'Arcy MCGEE and Brian MULRONEY.

Migration and Settlement

The migrations of the 17th and 18th centuries had little permanent impact on Canada, except in Newfoundland where many Irish worked as fishermen and lived in the kind of dire poverty they had hoped to escape by migration to the New World. Newfoundland had acquired a name in the Irish language - *Talamh an Eisc* - a singular distinction in the New World. In the 19th century, the growing population and deteriorating economy

of Ireland forced a growing stream of Irish to emigrate, particularly after 1815. Simultaneously the economy of the mainland colonies of British North America expanded, offering better opportunities for immigrants. However, because they were relatively poor immigrants with little money for moving across Canada, the Irish tended to settle in the Maritimes.

By the 1830s, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, PEI and Upper and Lower Canada had significant Irish populations. Some immigrants spread throughout the countryside, partly because land from recent timber operations was cheap, but generally because the Irish tended, unlike the SCOTS or ENGLISH, to remain in the ports, such as Halifax and Saint John, where they provided cheap IMMIGRANT LABOUR. Even in rural districts, many Irish preferred to seek employment instead of, or in addition to, setting up farms. By the 1830s, Cumberland County in Nova Scotia; Kings, Queens, Carleton and Northumberland counties in New Brunswick; Queens in PEI; and virtually the whole of Upper Canada east of Toronto and north of the older Loyalist settlements were notably Irish in character.

The Great Famine of the late 1840s drove 1.5 to 2 million destitute Irish out of Ireland, and hundreds of thousands came to British North America. This wave was so dramatic that most Canadians erroneously think of 1847 as the time "when the Irish came." The famine immigrants tended to remain in the towns and cities, and by 1871 the Irish were the largest ethnic group in every large town and city of Canada, with the exceptions of Montréal and Québec City.

The "Famine Irish," who supplied a mass of cheap labour that helped fuel the economic expansion of the 1850s and 1860s, were not well received. They were poor and the dominant society resented them for the urban and rural squalor in which they were forced to live. But the Famine Irish had another characteristic: the propensity to immigrate to the US. Thousands had left for the US by the 1860s, establishing a tradition that remained unbroken well into the 20th century. As a result, in Canada today "Irish" districts and communities are generally those that were established before the famine. For example, in the Maritimes, only Saint John has a significant Famine Irish element. Today, Ontario has the largest population of Irish outside the Atlantic provinces. By the 20th century, there was a significant Irish community in Winnipeg and in a few rural districts of Manitoba, but the impact of the Irish in the West has not been as important as in the East.

Social and Cultural Life

The most important single feature of the Irish, both in Ireland and in Canada, is that they have been divided into 2 different and mutually hostile groups. This division is so fundamental that the Irish might be considered 2 ethnic groups. Although it is common practice to refer to Irish people as either Catholic or Protestant, religion itself has never been much more than the easiest determinant of a group affiliation that consists of many factors. The Catholics perceive themselves to be the representatives of the original inhabitants of Ireland, while the Protestants represent the Scots and English colonists who arrived in Ireland when it was under British rule. Because the Catholics were socially and politically disadvantaged in Ireland, they arrived in Canada with few advantages other than a familiarity with the English language and British institutions.

They lacked the means to establish themselves securely within the economy and had little impact on the business community. The Catholic Church, an important institution for the Catholic Irish in Ireland, was shared by the Irish in Canada with the Highland Scots and the French, and helped the Irish in the difficult process of integration into Canadian society.

The Protestant Irish, in contrast, generally had more money and found it significantly easier to re-establish themselves as farmers. They became one of the most agrarian of groups in 19th-century Canada. Because their religion made them more acceptable to the dominant society, they were able to move much more freely in Canadian society.

Both groups were rich in cultural traditions, but with significant differences. The Catholic Irish tended to keep alive traditions of being Irish whereas the Protestants tended to glory in their contributions to British civilization. Neither group has preserved much lore about the actual migrations, even the trauma of the famine, but both groups tend to be aware of the more recent experiences in Canada.

Group Maintenance

The Protestant Irish tended to stress the importance of the British connection in order to distance themselves from their Catholic compatriots. The ORANGE ORDER, the original purpose of which in Ireland was to preserve British rule (at least in Ulster), was essential in Canada as a vehicle by which the Protestant Irish could gain acceptance from their Scots and English neighbours. Individual Orange Order lodges existed in New Brunswick and in Upper Canada from the early part of the 19th century, and the order was consolidated in 1830 as the Grand Lodge of British North America. Whenever British institutions in Canada seemed to be in peril, Orangemen were fond of bringing up the Protestant victory over the Catholics at the River Boyne in 1690, and the anniversary of that battle (July 12) remains the great Orange celebration. During the latter half of the 19th century, the lodge became increasingly nativist, and today it is difficult to detect a specific Protestant Irish tradition that is distinct from a broad British tradition.

Over the past 150 years, the term "Irish" has acquired a Catholic connotation. The Catholic Church, the institutional bedrock of the Catholic Irish community in Canada, laboured to gain acceptance for its people, which meant that Irish priests and bishops were often opposed to any manifestations of sympathy for nationalism in Ireland. For the Irish in the US, there was no such problem, because there it was possible to be a good Irishman, a good Catholic and a good American. But in Canada, where citizenship remained British for so long, it was extremely difficult to be Irish politically and a good citizen as well.

It was also difficult at times to be Irish and a good Catholic. For example, the Fenian Brotherhood, whose aim was to free Ireland by force of arms, was very popular among the Irish in the US, but in Canada the Fenians (though few in number) were considered seditious by the government, were considered dangerous by the Protestants, and were viewed as an embarrassment by the Catholic Church and by respectable Catholic Irish. FENIAN RAIDS from the US against British North America inspired hostility towards the Catholic Irish and provoked attestments of loyalty from the church and from respectable Catholic Irish. The later and more benign Ancient Order of Hibernians was also

dedicated, if less violently, to the cause of Irish nationalism, but it too fell afoul of the Catholic Church.

As English-speaking Catholics, the Catholic Irish in Canada found themselves at odds with French-speaking Catholics as well as with the Protestant majority. Because of the sense of isolation among the Catholic Irish, a sense of identity was stronger among them than among the Protestant Irish.

The Protestant Irish have sustained a powerful belief in institutional strength and have clung to structures tenaciously. Stability is seen to be their greatest virtue. By contrast, the Catholic Irish define power in personal terms to a degree that may seem anarchistic, but which represents a survival of the patron-client relationship, the basis of politics in rural Ireland. The talent of the Catholic Irish in Canada and elsewhere has been that they could translate this personal approach to politics and to power brokerage in the modern setting.

Orange Order

Orange Order was a Protestant fraternal society, founded in 1795 in Ireland to commemorate the victory of William of Orange at the Battle of the Boyne in 1690. During the Irish insurrection of 1798 it became the principal link between the British government and the Protestants in Ireland, with Orangemen filling the ranks of the volunteer militia and gaining control of most of the civil service. Although it remains powerful in Ulster, the order lost much of its influence in Ireland after passage of the Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829. The lodges adopted a Masonic-type ritual and organization, providing for mutual aid and organizing social events. Orangemen who migrated to Britain and the colonies found the lodges useful in their adjustment to new environments.

The Grand Lodge of British North America was founded 1 January 1830 in Brockville, UC, by Ogle R. Gowan. He sought to use the lodges as a base for a political career, bringing Catholics and Orangemen together in 1836 to support the conservative cause. By 1844 the power of the Orange vote induced John A. [MACDONALD](#) to become an Orangeman. There was a schism in 1853 over the Conservatives' alliance with the French Canadian Bleus. This was healed in 1856, but henceforth the Orange vote was divided. Orangemen have been accused of bringing old world quarrels to the new, but anti-Catholicism arrived in America with the Pilgrims. In Canada during the early 1860s, George Brown's liberal *Globe* accused Orange Grand Master Ogle Gowan of selling out the Protestant cause. Indeed, the Orange Grand Lodge acted as a brake on the ultraprotestant [EQUAL RIGHTS ASSOCIATIONS](#) of the 1880s and the American-based Protestant Protective Associations of the 1890s.

On both sides of the Atlantic, Orangemen have kept alive Irish Protestant folklore. The anniversary of the Battle of the Boyne is the Irish Protestant counterpart of St Patrick's Day. Its celebration is still an occasion for tension in Ulster, but in Canada it is merely one of many annual celebrations. The lodges reached the peak of their importance in Canada, both politically and socially, in the last quarter of the 19th century. They remained a force until the 1950s, and still retain some influence in rural communities.