

STEWART DONOVAN ESSAY

The epic tale of the Irish arrival and settlement in the Province of New Brunswick has, until very recently, been an unknown and an untold story—their history, in all its complexity, pain and triumph, has been largely a hidden one. Just as the Irish writer and nationalist, Daniel Corkery, once spoke and wrote of a hidden Ireland, so Canadians can read and talk of a hidden New Brunswick. And what was largely hidden for almost a century belonged in custom, memory, religion, ceremony, and ethnicity, to Ireland. There are many reasons for the existence of this forgotten record of one of the provinces founding peoples and we shall explore some of these as this journey into the Irish past of New Brunswick unfolds through this portal. Although Irish historians and biographers have included New Brunswick in some of their more prominent footnotes, most notably perhaps is the brief but adventurous sojourn of the romantic and tragic revolutionary, Lord Edward Fitzgerald. The dashing Lord Edward was stationed as a soldier in Fredericton in the eighteenth century, not long, in fact, before his heroic, but inevitably tragic, participation in the Irish Rebellion of 1798. Fitzgerald's story, though compelling and romantic, is far from typical of Irish arrival and settlement in the province. Though the Irish have been in New Brunswick since its beginnings as a colony, their story is primarily a tale of the nineteenth century, a narrative that begins with the Napoleonic Wars and the settlement that arose and was encouraged by that conflict. In the first of two virtual exhibits for this portal the story of the Irish arrival in early nineteenth century New Brunswick can be viewed through the virtual exhibit, *An Honourable Independence: Irish Settlement in New Brunswick*. This virtual exhibit is a recreation of the actual physical panels which have been seen throughout New Brunswick and Ireland and which now, through the benefit of this online portal, will be made available to a world-wide audience. *An Honourable Independence* presents and illustrates though, among other things, letters, documents, photos and artists' conceptions, the lives which Irish immigrants created and lead in what was then regarded, fundamentally, as a timber colony. New Brunswick, for almost a century, was central to the military and merchant navies of the British Empire; the British fleet was built from New Brunswick forests and it was the Irish, for the most part, both Catholic and Protestant, who were employed to harvest the trees and build the boats and ships for the imperial fleet.

Among other things, the origin and settlement patterns of the Irish are examined in this exhibit through interactive demographic maps which highlight and present the role of religion, education, and labour, as central cultural and economic forces in the formation of nineteenth and, inevitably, twentieth century New Brunswick. The second online exhibit, *In the Wake of Dark Passage: Irish Famine Migration to New Brunswick, 1845-1852*, makes manifest the cultural, political, religious and ethnic circumstances behind what many historians now regard as Western Europe's greatest natural calamity of the nineteenth century—*An Gorta Mor*, the Great Irish Famine of the 1840's. The direct result of the Famine was two-fold: first, one million people died within a matter of years from starvation and its grim and attendant diseases, mostly cholera, typhoid and dysentery; secondly, over a million people emigrated from Ireland in less than a decade:

over thirty thousand of these immigrants would enter the province of New Brunswick after a brutal crossing of the Atlantic in vessels that came to be known as “coffin ships” because so many souls died in their holds and on their decks. The ships were notorious for their cramped and crowded quarters which made the dreaded and highly communicable diseases the emigrants were heir to even more contagious. The exhibit, *In the Wake of Dark Passage*, exposes examples of the corrupt practices employed by many shipping companies and their often decadent captains. There are also, of course, tales of exceptional courage, such as the story of the *Looshstauk* and its heroic captain. Visitors interested in this story and many others like it will find its narrative details on the web portal.

Not only will the visitor get a glimpse of the lives of Irish immigrants in New Brunswick and their trials and suffering throughout the Famine years, but they can also access searchable databases for more in-depth research, to learn more about these people than the simple statistical fact of their birth, death or landed immigrant status. Indeed, one of the central aims of this entire project is to rescue, in the words of Irish historian Kevin Whelan, these lives from the enormous condescension of history. The databases associated with this site include those of the Saint John Almshouse which cared for many of the Great Famine immigrants, a selection from the Brennan's Funeral Home records, Teacher's Petitions featuring Irish immigrant applicants, letter collections, newspapers articles with Irish content, and Professor Peter Toner Sr. New Brunswick Irish Census Records from 1855 and 1861. The accessibility of these databases provides an indispensable research tool for students, teachers, genealogists, and scholars alike.

It is now common knowledge that the first Irish to arrive on the eastern shores of North America came via the rich Newfoundland fisheries. Although the iconic settlement at Port Royal is known to have included a man named Kassie who was listed as “Irlandais”, it is hardly surprising, given the nature of the Irish Diaspora to find the former inhabitants of Ireland living and working with the Acadians and the Loyalists, the two earliest European groups to establish settlements in the colony. Between the Expulsion of the Acadians and the arrival of the Loyalists after the American Revolution, Ulster Scots (known also as Scots Irish) from the North of Ireland, settled, among other places, along the shores of the Petitcodiac river as part of Alexander McNutt's immigration scheme. Included among the records of these Loyalists settlers, then, are native born Irish or individuals who are clearly of Irish descent. One John Sinnot, for instance, settled in Gagetown in June of 1783 and he is first generation Irish.

Although New Ireland was briefly (if somewhat ingenuously) suggested as a name for the new province when it first separated from Nova Scotia in 1784 and Thomas Carleton, the first Lieutenant-Governor of New Brunswick, who helped to shape the politics of the new province, was born in Ireland, these are but historical headlines and do not represent the true narrative of the Irish experience in the colony; a history, which we mentioned earlier, that begins in earnest in the nineteenth century.

Many of the Irish who arrive in the post Napoleonic War period were, naturally enough,

ex-soldiers, men and boys, from Regiments like the 98th Foot who were de-mobbed when the imperial wars ended and then, as their reward for service, given allotments of land in the new world colony. There are of course dramatic and exotic episodes associated with these early immigrants, including the story of the “Brazilians”, a contingent of Irish who landed in the port of Saint John without means of support after having been twice exiled, first from Ireland, then from their newly adopted country of Brazil, the reason for their second exile had to do with an insurrection in their new home land.

This is, perhaps, a propitious place to make a few polemical notes on the nature of Irish emigration and immigration, if not on Irish history generally as it has affected the New World. Although historians warn us not to make sweeping generalizations, the Irish poet Patrick Kavanagh once remarked that sometimes we are forced to because there is so much to be swept up. In his monumental study of the founding of Australia, the historian Robert Hughes records the plight of Irish and British subjects who were “transported” under the laws of the British Empire to New South Wales and the Penal Colony of Van Diemen’s Land, known today as Tasmania. There are some, but not many examples of people “transported” to Canada; for the most part, however, this practice, which continued until 1853, was reserved for the Antipodean world. The great English historian, E.P. Thompson, in his first major study, a life of the artist and social reformer, William Morris, wrote the following comment, “The life of Victorian England was an intolerable life and ought not have been borne by human beings. The values of industrial capitalism were vicious and beneath contempt, and made a mockery of the past history of mankind.” Stephan Collini and others have suggested, that this is an authentic expression of a “great, raw, wrong” and that it “bears witness to a sense of class grievance about the introduction of a historically unprecedented level of exploitation, but it goes beyond that to encompass the moral condemnation of a whole civilization.” I quote Thompson here to give some perspective on the nineteenth century conditions of industrial England; now, imagine the conditions of its immediate colony to the west where there were no property rights and the vast majority of the population lived under what was an essentially non- industrial indentured servitude. The legacy of the infamous Penal Laws created the conditions where a vast peasant society was forced into a state of unprecedented dependency, and that dependency was both political and agricultural. If in the post famine years the Irish came to see the failure of the potato crop as a moral failure, it was a moral failure on the part of the British Empire. This accusation bears the weight of a fierce moral indignation because it has to do with that wider sense of loss and grievance, a sense of a great wrong committed and connected, intimately, to “the moral condemnation of a whole civilization.” It is this inherited and shared apprehension of a great injustice, of what some have termed an ethnocide, a cultural genocide, the wholesale destruction of a people’s culture, which lead Prime Minister Tony Blair to apologize to the Irish people in 1997 during the 150 Commemoration of the worse year of the Great Famine, known as Black 47’. No consideration of Irish History in the New or Old World then is genuinely possible without an understanding of the narrative that lies behind the oft quoted line that Ireland remains a first world country with a third world memory.

The New Brunswick Colony of the 1820s and 30s saw single male immigrants, the majority of them ex-military, given the chance to earn a living in the vast, and as yet unexploited, timber lands of this new world colony. Not long after their arrival, they would participate in what has come to be known as “chain migration” whereby a brother or uncle or other family member would soon venture out to join the new world immigrant. Eventually, sisters, mothers and brides-to-be would also make the crossing and come to make their mark upon a bountiful but fierce land with its reputation for extreme heat and cold.

The timber industry, and its attendant jobs, shipbuilding and housing, remained the main stay of employment for Irish immigrants until 1830, when the nature of the immigration changed. After 1830 Irish families arrived in hope of owning their own land, a possibility even after Catholic emancipation in 1829, that was still denied to the vast majority of those that remained at home. It is these men and women who arrived throughout the 1830s, that eventually establish the hundreds of Irish settlement that today make up the myriad of place names of so much of the province: places such as Melrose, Londonderry and New Bandon in what was then the province's sweeping wilderness. It is from these mostly landless tenet farmers, struggling in the frozen or fly-infested forests which the vast majority of Irish New Brunswickers must look to for their legitimate ancestry. The many letters that have survived are records of the hard but dignified lives these pioneers led in what was then the outback of a still nascent timber colony. It is interesting to note that the vast majority of these letters are not sent back to the mother country, but rather to their own families, friends and acquaintances who now share the new world with them.

Demographics clearly show that the two most significant areas in Ireland from which New Brunswick immigrants came during this period were West Ulster in the north, and County Cork in the south. One of the driving forces behind this emigration was from Ireland was the advent of the industrial revolution in the only part of Ireland which ever was industrialized—the north. The technological changes in the linen industry, dreaded and resisted by the English Luddites, eventually put hundreds of weavers out of work and forced them to seek new livelihoods in the new world. In spite of this industrial disenfranchisement much of the Irish emigration to New Brunswick in this pre famine period tended to be reasonably well planned, with many family groups establishing themselves on small holdings that would eventually, after much hard labour, become farms. This relatively gentle upheaval and removal would be in stark contrast to the later Irish emigrant experience during the Great Famine. Although much of the immigration to New Brunswick during the Famine still derived from Western Ulster and Cork, greater and greater numbers began to come from Ireland as a whole. As with the majority of immigrants to the new world, the Irish, when they arrived in New Brunswick were naturally inclined to settle near their own countrymen; this, of course, was done for many reasons: comfort, and protection from long established bigotries against new immigrants, not least among them.

The 1830s was the most important decade of Irish immigration and settlement in New Brunswick, and yet, as we have seen, the era that has received the most attention, for

understandable reasons, has been that of An Gorta Mór, the Great Famine. Although 30,000 immigrants eventually arrive on the shores of New Brunswick during the Famine years, the vast majority of them pass through the British colony to the Boston States and the great towns of the eastern seaboard that will soon become known almost exclusively as Irish American cities. It is a status that Saint John had achieved by the mid-nineteenth century, but for reasons of cultural hegemony it would go unrecognized until well into the twentieth century.

By the mid nineteenth century Darwin, Marx and, finally, Mathew Arnold had all left their mark and comments, directly and indirectly, upon the state of religion in European life and in contemporary English life in particular. But if, in Arnold's poetic phrase, the sea of faith was retreating down the vast edges and naked shingles of the world, it was not doing so in the colonized world, in Ireland or, for that matter, in any other of the British Empire's colonies. Religion in Ireland was political and deeply connected with identity politics whether Catholic or Protestant. It must be remembered, too, that less than a generation before the act of emancipation in 1829, Catholic priests were still being hunted down because there was a bounty on their lives or, rather, literally, on their heads. Irish Presbyterians came with their identity politics too, invoking, among other things, the siege of Londonderry and the exploits of the Apprentice Boys at local Orange Order Lodge meetings. The vast majority of Catholics came to regard the Orange Order and its attendant parades as little more than legitimized bigotry supported by a Protestant state. At its worst, confrontations in the form of riots between Irish Catholics and Irish Protestants in mid-nineteenth century Woodstock and Saint John resulted in several deaths, many injuries and damage to property. Eventually, Irish Catholics and Protestants would come to live and work together under Canadian law and in a more or less tolerant acceptance of each other. It would be wrong, however, to suggest that there was amity between the two religious groups because this, simply, was not the case; their divisions and suspicions would last as long as the old religious paradigm persisted.

Religion, like immigration itself, has been subject to a fair amount of myth and legend over the years. There are truisms, of course, Irish immigrants to New Brunswick came from various Christian backgrounds, but research has shown that a higher proportion of Irish Protestants settled in the pre-Famine period. The belief that only Irish Roman Catholics were victims of the Famine is not true, hundreds if not thousands of Protestants found their way on board the coffin ships. This myth of Catholic exclusivity, of course, is not solely the prerogative of the Famine Irish and their descendants; one need only remember Eli Wiesel's attack on William Styron's *Sophie's Choice* because it cast a non-Jewish victim in the central role. It is easy to sympathize with Wiesel, but the thousands of gypsies, homosexuals and other victims who died in the camps need remembering too, as do those Protestant Irish in the cramped holds of the coffin ships.

There are other myths, too, associated with religion, and one of the most fascinating of recent discoveries is connected to the Irish language or Gaelic. In the past few years the Canadian- Irish historian Professor Peter Toner Sr. unearthed documents which prove that the Irish language was in fact spoken in New Brunswick well in to the

twentieth century, something no one had previously thought possible. What is more surprising is the fact that this language was preserved not by Gaelic speaking Irish Catholics (the major victims of the famine) but by protestant Irish. This conflating of Irish protestants with the English language is not restricted to Irish history, perhaps the most famous example of the myth is on Cape Breton Island where a majority of Scots Presbyterians spoke and kept alive Scots Gaelic when legend and myth purported that it was primarily a catholic phenomenon.

There is still an ongoing if muted debate in Irish academic circles about the influence of Bishop Cornelius Jansen on the nature of Irish Catholicism. Jansenism, like its protestant counterpart, Calvinism, was, among other things, a puritanical movement born of the counter-reformation. For a long time, at least in the popular imagination, Jansenism was seen to have had a strong influence on the church and people of Ireland. This was mostly attributed to the fact that young Irishmen who wished to become priests had been forced into exile in France where they supposedly came under the influence of the puritan doctrine, or heresy as some would have it. In recent years contemporary scholars such as Thomas O' Connor suggest that "Neither as a theology nor as a political attitude did Jansenism recommend itself to the Irish Catholic community, either at home or abroad. The frequent claim that Irish Catholicism was Jansenist-influenced springs from the tendency to confuse Jansenism with mere moral rigorism." Other historians, such as Kevin Whelan, have argued that the puritan strain, the moral rigor if you will, did not come into Irish Catholicism until after the famine. The religion of the Irish Gaelic speaking clachans in particular was to be seen as having more in common, or at least a stronger connection, with the old pagan world of the traditional Gaels, than that of the "Roman Church" that came to dominate post-famine and urban Irish Catholicism, a Catholicism that was seen to have strong middle-class aspirations. The debate continues, but it is interesting to speculate on the nature of the Irish Catholicism that arrived in New Brunswick both before and during the famine. Did it have of necessity that defensive, conservative, and parish-centred, character or was it freer in attitudes towards the pioneer world it found itself thrust into? Certainly the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Irish Church was no different than its Acadian, Scottish or Quebecois counterparts—they were all churches of Rome, conservative, parish-centered, middle-class and with a "moral rigorism" we have come to call Jansenist or puritan.

Before concluding this introduction to our Irish Web Portal a few paragraphs on nineteenth century British and American politics and twentieth century Canadian cultural identity are in order. Though there is no single event in the history of the Irish in New Brunswick that so dramatically and tragically connects the colony/province with the old and new world Irish as the Great Famine, the Fenian raids on Canada that took place between 1866 and 1871 helped to define symbolically, if not in fact, New Brunswick's eventual relationship with three countries and just as many ideologies. Though many historians have traditionally tended to treat the raids (and some still do) as quixotic, an Irish farce in the face of the power of the British Empire, this view is now fading and the raids are being given the historical attention they deserve. In New Brunswick, at Deer Island to be specific, it was not so much that the raids were small skirmishes but rather

that the vast majority of the resident Irish population had no desire to embrace this Fenian plan for emancipation of the old country. The reasons they chose not to do so do not make them any less patriotic or caring as Irish immigrants or descendants, but it does speak to how long these immigrants were in the province and also how many of them came from religious affiliations that were not sympathetic to the Republican cause espoused by the Fenian movement. Over time of course New Brunswick and Canadian identity and life despite the participation in two world wars, has come to be seen and lived as relatively non-violent, especially in comparison with the Empire we left and the new one that grew up beside us. How Irish Canadians—and Irish New Brunswickers in particular—for instance responded to the Irish Rebellion of 1916 and Irish neutrality of the Second War remains something of a hidden story. Such a question of course begs another and larger one about New Brunswick Irish identity in the twentieth century: what happened to it? Where did it go? What did it become? Our Web portal is here to answer these and raise many other questions in the complex and yet to be explored history of the Irish in our province, region and country as a whole.