Irish Immigration to Nineteenth-Century Canada:

ALTERNATIVE NARRATIVES

ABSTRACT

While the historiography of the Irish in Canada has begun to be mapped by historians in recent years, research in disciplines other than history can also contribute substantially to an understanding of the challenges, adjustments and sacrifices immigrants experienced. Life-writing texts – letters, diaries, memoirs, autobiographies, biographies and travel writing – capture the voice and thoughts of individuals engaged in conscious reformulations of the self in a new world.

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While a comprehensive history has yet to be written of Irish immigration to all regions of Canada, from the earliest settlements to the recent past, scholars have made significant strides in recent years in delineating the salient characteristics of this historiography. They have begun to chart the demographics of nineteenth-century immigration through detailed examination of specific immigrant groups and their settlement in Canada. This scholarship has sought to puncture popular notions of Irish immigration, both before and after confederation, that have taken on romanticized colourings from the tragic events associated with the Great Irish Famine of 1847. The extraordinary death and suffering caused by the Famine, the deplorable conditions of the voyage for those who managed to leave, the illness and death awaiting many who disembarked on Partridge Island in New Brunswick, on Grosse Île in Quebec and on the banks of the St. Lawrence in Montreal form a heartrending narrative that had readily been embraced by the Irish Canadian community. It is a perception reinforced by nineteenth-century Irish immigration to America, which transformed an Irish-American identity previously shaped by generations of Scots-Irish immigrants to pre- and post-revolutionary America. As Kerby Miller has argued in his 1985 study, *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and Irish Exodus to North America,* those who arrived during and after the Famine developed a sense of historical grievance by seeing themselves as exiles forced from Ireland by the policies of the British government. Such feelings were leavened by the predictable and understandable immigrant emotions associated with loss and remembrance, and created the cauldron from which emerged the popular images, iconic references and cultural traditions that came to redefine Irish-American identity. Historians of the Irish in Canada have had to revise pervasive notions of the archetypal Irish immigrant, derived from the Irish-American experience and reinforced by the specific associations of Irish Famine immigration to Canada. Arguing against the image of the poor Irish emigrant arriving in the Canadian colony, either to die of sickness or live in urban deprivation, became more challenging with the 1995 commemorations in the Irish diaspora marking the 150th anniversary of the Famine, and the creation by Parks Canada of Grosse Île as an historic site foregrounding its Irish immigrant associations. The eloquent new memorial powerfully represents all who died on the quarantine island. The historiography of the Irish in Canada, then, has had to strain against evocative emotional forces by contextualizing Irish Famine immigration in a larger narrative which asserts that Irish immigration was more historically extensive, geographically diverse and economically successful than popularly understood.

David Wilson's 1989 monograph, *The Irish in Canada,* summarizes this historiography by emphasizing that the majority of immigrants were Protestants, arrived in the decades before the Famine, and possessed sufficient personal and community resources to ensure successful settlement. Using statistics on residency, occupation and integration into the social and economic system, he demonstrates that the acculturation of nineteenth-century Irish immigrations was, in general, a story of extraordinary accomplishments. Yet, in claiming that the success rate of the Irish in these categories was comparable to the general population, Wilson concedes some crucial economic disparities along sectarian lines and concludes that "The reasons for these differences in Irish Protestant and Catholic occupational patterns in nineteenth-century Canada have yet to be adequately explained."[1]

While historians grapple with such nuances and acknowledge the need to address larger patterns of Irish settlement in such areas as Quebec and the West, research in disciplines other than history can also contribute substantially to an understanding of the varying experiences of individual immigrants

or specific groups, and how they reacted to the challenges, adjustments and sacrifices involved in immigration. Beneath the radar of demographics and statistics, such responses were frequently inscribed in life-writing texts – letters, diaries, memoirs, autobiographies, biographies and travel writing – that calibrated layers of subjectivity and delineated nodes of reference of immigrant identities. Such texts catch the voice and render the psyche of individuals engaged in conscious reformulations of the self in a new spatiotemporal world. Precisely because such textualizations of experience are subjective, shaped by imagination, influenced by the vagaries of memory, and crucially dependent on the individual's ability to wrestle with the possibilities and unreliabilities of language, they constitute rich and complex material that complements and deepens our appreciation of immigrant lives. They disclose palimpsests of emotions which speak past the realm of the personal to register the excitement, challenges and vicissitudes of emigration, capture the psychic dislocations of leaving the place that has shaped one's sensibilities, and annotate the wonder and anxiety of encountering the specific features – geographical, social, cultural, economic and political – of an alien place in which the self must continually re-orient itself. Most powerfully of all, perhaps, such inscriptions tap into and orchestrate the soundings of memory emanating from the imaginative wavelength that connects the writing self to aspects of identities shaped by past time and former geography. Life-writing texts encapsulate an alternate approach to gaining insight about the past, one that is neither superior nor inferior to what might be considered historical truth.

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Such processes are evident in the letters of William Hutton, for example, who was born into an Anglo-Irish Dublin family in 1801, arrived in Canada in 1834 and, until his death in 1861, corresponded regularly with his mother in Ireland. Settling near Belleville, Ontario, he became a scientific farmer, a warden of the Victoria District, a superintendent of schools, and the first administrative secretary of the Canadian Bureau of Agriculture and Statistics. As with the writings of his friend, Susanna Moodie, Hutton's letters provide invaluable concrete information about life in Upper Canada. But in chronicling the challenges and travails of pioneer life in the Canadian backwoods, the letters also become telling instruments of autobiographical revelation which reflect his unique identity as an immigrant. As a member of Ireland's Protestant landed class, Hutton views his migration to Canada in predictable terms: it was motivated by the desire for good land and economic security. Emigration was not perceived as forced exile but rather a strategic movement within the carapace of the British Empire from one colony to another, where hard work, entrepreneurship and commitment to family, religion and class would be appropriately rewarded. However, more nuanced iterations of subjectivity are embedded beyond the denotative textual markers. For example, writing in 1848, Hutton discusses the current troubles in Ireland (the Famine, agitations which would lead to the abortive 1848 Rebellion):

> "I hope your Irish troubles will, after all, not amount to much blood shed; but I cannot help thinking Repeal [of the 1801 Act of Union which integrated Ireland politically within Britain] must be granted… I think if Ireland cannot be put entirely, really and truly on a par with England, there is nothing else for it but Repeal. I would rather become part and parcel of England, *if possible;* but as at present Ireland can never be anything but England's dirty suburbs. It may be her want of morality and cleanliness; but bring back her absentees [Irish landlords living in England] by making it fashion to live in Ireland, and you bring back the wealthy classes, the mainspring of morality and cleanliness. A two or three month's residence of the Queen would make it the fashion…"[2]

This multivalent passage reveals various manifestations of identity, some overt, others implied. Hutton's Anglo-Irish class affiliations are readily manifest in his perception of Ireland as an English colony; his belief that a properly functioning aristocracy will cure Irish political unrest is predictable. His desire for Ireland to be integrated as "part and parcel of England" indicates the degree to which his Anglo-Irish identity is fluid and negotiable, a characteristic that makes him an ideal immigrant to the Canadian colony. Indeed, the social and political ethos required to redeem what he perceives as the dysfunctional Irish colony is understood as equally desirable for Upper Canada: the economic prosperity and social harmony of both colonies are dependent on the successful adoption of the values of the imperial centre.

The Irish troubles Hutton refers to was the agitation by Irish legislators (mostly Anglo-Irish landlords) for additional constitutional rights. He makes no acknowledgement that the increasing demands of Irish Catholics tenants (following Catholic Emancipation in 1829) for land reform were at the heart of the disturbances. To him, apparently, landlordism was the force against which Irish

Catholics needed to adjust. His very silence on the existence of Catholics, (more than 80 per cent of the population), their unnamed presence, powerfully situates them as the unspeakable threat to the Anglo-Irish world, just as in Canada his attitudes to the First Nations, to the land itself and indeed to other settlers, stem from a class-conscious and colonial mentality.

The often coded idiom of Hutton's letters – for example, "dirty suburbs," "want of morality and cleanliness" – speaks of a shared family ideology and cryptically confirms the invisible presence of a subaltern population bereft of agency to affect change. Writing fourteen years after his arrival in Canada, Hutton reveals that his immigrant experiences have done little to transform his binary conceptualizations of self and the Irish Catholic "other". At the core of Hutton's immigrant identity, then, and requiring no overt manifestation, is his Protestant religion which underscores all other defining elements of identity in a reinforcing nexus of confirmation.

Not all immigrants were as privileged as Hutton who, with his farming experience and family support, was well-positioned to become a successful settler in Upper Canada. Nevertheless, Hutton did experience the emotional pain of separation from aging parents, and the recognition that his children faced a life of physical labour in a milieu that offered little of the comforts associated with genteel society in Ireland. Accounts of personal anguishes, misgivings and regrets are woven through the letters, and achieve particular poignancy at moments of economic setback and personal tragedy, disclosing unmediated psychological insight to the immigrant self. Hutton's letters, then, serve as testaments to his own experiences as well as to a range of emotional responses that characterized Irish immigrants of a similar social, religious and economic milieu immigrating to Upper Canada in this period.

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Just how distinctly the Irish immigrant experience was influenced by such factors as religion and social class, the historical moment of departure, and the chosen destination can be understood in accounts of Irish Catholic emigrants to Montreal after the Famine. For example, a Rev. Buckley of Cork visited Montreal in 1870 and wrote his perceptions of the Irish community in his *Diary of a Tour in America.* Buckley's impressions are both revealing and suggestive:

> "To some I spoke the Irish language and their delight was inconceivable. I may here remark that wherever I go I find the love of Ireland amongst the Irish to be the most intense feeling of their souls – an all-absorbing passion, running like a silver thread through all their thoughts and emotions. They think forever of the old land, and sigh to behold it once more before they die. One man who drove us one day for an hour refused to take any payment. He was from Ireland and we were two Irish priests, and that was enough for him! 'What part of Ireland do you come from?' I asked. 'From Wicklow, sir; I am 32 years in the country.' 'And do you ever think of the old country?' 'Think,' he exclaimed, 'Oh! yes, sir, I do think of the old country, not so much by day as by night. In my dreams at night I see as distinctly as ever the lanes and alleys where I played when a boy. I fancy I am at home once more, but I wake and find that I am in Montreal, and am likely never to see my native land again.' This dreaming of Ireland I found to be quite common; many people would give all they have in the world to get back again and live in Ireland steeped in poverty, rather than flourish wealthy in this strange land."[3]

This passage speaks powerfully of the emotional pull that home can have for emigrants, the magnetic effect of place on psychic orientation, and the consequent conflicted identities of those who cannot overcome the challenges of finding coherence between lives lived in two distinct mental geographies.

The historiography of the Irish in Canada being mapped by historians can be contextually and richly complemented by the inscriptions of immigrant sensibilities found in life-writing texts. How their reactions are textualized, the precise manner in which they are linguistically configured, the unique means by which they transcend the formulaic features of a given genre to present the fundamental issues inherent in transplanting identity can offer instructive and poignant perspectives on Irish immigration to Canada.

Notes

1 Wilson, David. 1989. *The Irish in Canada.* Ottawa: Canadian Historical Association, p. 13.

2 Boyce, Gerald E. ed. *Hutton of Hastings: The Life and Letters of Willliam Hutton, 1801-1861.* Belleville: Hastings County Council, 1972, p. 155.

3 Buckley, Rev. M. B. *Diary of a Tour in America.* Dublin: Sealy, Bryers &Walker, 1886, p. 50-51.