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"No Better Home?" Reflections on the Place of Canada within the Irish Diaspora

If, in the nineteenth century, you decided to join your fellow countrymen and women who left Ireland in search of a better life, which country would have been your best bet? A key word in that question is "decided": although many Irish migrants described themselves as exiles, and although those who left during the Great Famine of 1846-51 have often been depicted as refugees, the vast majority left Ireland of their own volition.[1] They weighed up their options in relation to their means, often drawing on information provided by those who had left before them, and made their choices. Despite the many differences among them—differences in the localities from which they came, the time of their departure, their religious beliefs, their social class, their gender—their objectives were broadly the same. They wanted religious freedom, economic security, freedom from discrimination, and more opportunities for their children. For many, these goals were associated with the same goal of Mordecai Richler's Duddy Kravitz: the acquisition of land. And for most, these objectives could be best achieved in the two English-speaking empires that dominated the world: the British and the American.

Much depended on where you came from, when you left, where you arrived, and whether you were Catholic or Protestant. There were so many variations in the Irish migrant experience that generalizations obscure more than they reveal. During the peak period of emigration in the mid-nineteenth century there were intense debates among the Irish about the location of the "better home." Some, such as Toronto's Catholic Archbishop John Joseph Lynch, argued that the Irish were better off staying at home; the threat to faith, family, and morality was much greater in the various New Worlds than it was at home.[2] In Ireland itself, there were many who agreed—eagerly blaming British misrule for Irish emigration, even as they benefitted from the consolidation of holdings, the shift from tillage to pasture, the declining number of agricultural labourers and the reduction of social tensions that emigration made possible. Yet more and more Irish people voted with their feet; between 1851 and 1921, more than four and a half million people left Ireland for North America and Australasia.[3]

The vast majority—around 80 percent—went to the United States, where the employment opportunities were greatest: labour was moving towards capital. For radical nationalists, the United States had the added attraction of providing a model for an imagined Irish future—an independent democratic republic forged by revolution against Perfidious Albion. To say that the reality fell short of expectations would be a vast understatement; the degree of social alienation and political disillusionment among Irish republicans in the Empire of Liberty is nothing short of remarkable. "If I really thought that an Irish Republic would result in the degeneracy of the people to the extent that they have been generated here," wrote the Irish revolutionary Michael Doheny from New York, "I would prefer that Ireland remain as she is."[4]

Some nineteenth-century immigrants in the United States, including people who had been evicted during the Famine, succeeded in owning land that had been opened up in the west—made possible by the displacement and destruction of Indigenous peoples. Most, though, worked in the industrial sectors of the economy, and those who were trapped in the urban slums of the east coast cities experienced extreme poverty. Irish Catholics also bore the brunt of Protestant American nativism, sometimes with Irish Protestant immigrants joining the attack. Yet the extent of "No Irish Need Apply" discrimination can be exaggerated; the demand for labour overrode anti-immigrant and anti-Catholic feeling.[5] Irish Catholics, it should be noted, could dish out discrimination themselves, particularly when they were in competition with African Americans for jobs.

When it came to religious freedom, the Catholic Church expanded at an impressive rate during the nineteenth century, although Catholics did not have publicly funded separate schools. Irish Protestants—the "invisible Irish" in the United States—fitted much better into the religious mainstream, and increasingly identified themselves as "Scotch-Irish" to distinguish themselves from their Catholic compatriots. Because Irish Protestant immigration had predominated during the eighteenth century, the multiplier effect over the generations meant that there were actually more people of Irish Protestant ethnicity than Irish Catholic ethnicity in the United States. It might be concluded that for Irish Protestants, there was indeed "no better home" to live than the United States. However, when upward social mobility is factored in, the picture changes; Americans of Irish Catholic ethnicity are now generally better off than the descendants of Irish Protestant immigrants.

Among those radical Irish nationalists who became disillusioned with life in the United States was a former revolutionary and future father of Canadian Confederation, Thomas D'Arcy McGee. Appalled by the condition of immigrants in urban slums, he tried during the mid 1850s to establish an Irish Catholic colony in the American west, bringing people out of the ghettoes and into farming communities where they could practice their faith and insulate themselves from the influences of Protestantism. Having failed to accomplish this goal, he turned his sights northwards and concluded that if Irish people had to emigrate, their first choice should be Canada.

A minority of Irish emigrants had already made that decision. Most arrived before the Famine, and around 60 percent were Protestants. Not surprisingly, the Orange Order flourished in this British and Protestant environment; at its peak, about a third of Canada's Protestants were members of the Order.[6] There was no shortage of anti-Irish Catholic prejudice, particularly at the local level; Ottawa was gerrymandered to prevent Irish Catholics from controlling the municipal government, and Toronto's Orangemen had city politics sewn up for a century.[7] As Harold Troper has shown, the Orange mould was only broken in 1954, when Nathan Phillips came up

the middle and was elected as mayor.[8] At the supra–local level, though, Orangemen and French Canadians had to work together in the Conservative Party, and the alliance necessitated a degree of accommodation and compromise. John A. Macdonald was an Orangeman, but he worked closely with Catholic bishops and priests to bring out the Conservative vote and initiated significant improvements to separate school legislation in Canada.

The existence of publicly funded separate schools for Catholics in Canada—a product of the French fact—marked the country out from the United States and was a major reason why D'Arcy McGee moved northwards. Canada had other advantages for Irish Catholics. With the achievement of responsible government during the 1840s, it had a degree of legislative independence within the British Empire that Irish nationalists could only dream about at home. Just as the Protestantism and Britishness of Canada appealed to Irish Orangemen, the absence of a state religion and the existence of largely independent legislatures fitted well with the dominant Irish constitutional nationalist tradition. In much the same way that Irish republicans viewed the United States as a model, at least in theory, Irish constitutional nationalists viewed Canada as the embodiment of their aims. If Canadians had responsible government and religious freedom, why not Ireland?

Equally important were the economic prospects facing Irish immigrants to Canada. The United States remained the magnet for Irish immigrants. Of the 100,000 Famine migrants who landed in Canada in 1847, around 90 percent moved straight through to the American heartland. But the immigrant cohort who settled in Canada between 1815 and the mid 1850s, after which most of the good land in Ontario, Quebec, and the Maritimes had been taken up, did reasonably well. If we take the standard indices of acculturation—residence, occupation, and occupational success—the Irish were close to overall Canadian norms; indeed, there were so many of them that they helped to define those norms. A large–sample analysis of the 1871 census—the first census in Canada to match ethnicity with religion—indicates that three-quarters of the Irish as an ethnic group lived in the countryside, and that their single largest occupation was farming. In Canada, 53.8 percent of the overall population made their living as farmers; among those of Irish Protestant ethnicity, the figure was 58.3 percent, and for Irish Catholics it was 44.3 percent. If Irish Catholics were under–represented as farmers, they were over–represented as semi–skilled workers and labourers. Nevertheless, American–style images of the Catholic Irish as an impoverished urban people are misleading when transferred to Canada—as D'Arcy McGee well understood. Not only did most Irish Catholics live in rural areas; in common with Irish Protestants, they also matched the general population in occupations held by merchants, manufacturers, white collar workers and artisans.[9]

The argument can be taken further. As the largest English-speaking ethnic group in Canada from the 1830s to the late 1880s, the Irish helped to establish the larger society to which later immigrant groups would have to adapt. The political culture of English-speaking Canada, its policing system, its religious character, and its educational structure—even its school textbooks—were deeply influenced by Irish immigration and Irish models. In this sense, the experiences of the Irish in Canada were qualitatively different from those of the immigrant groups who came after them.

It must also be recognized that the Irish were as capable as other white ethnic groups in Canada of racial prejudice and of attempting to keep non-white groups such as the Sikhs, Chinese, and Japanese out of the country. This kind of prejudice could and did include attitudes to Jews, such as the antisemitism of the Orangeman Leslie Saunders in his mayoralty campaign against Nathan Phillips, or the 1935 praise of Hitler's "warfare on the Jews" by an Irish Catholic doctor from Montreal, Emmet Mullally.[10]

Broadly similar observations can be made about Irish experiences in New Zealand and Australia: settlement patterns and occupational profiles matched those of the populations as a whole, and the Irish can be viewed as a "charter group" whose early arrival helped to shape the contours of the society to which they belonged.[11] Ultimately, however, the question of which destination constituted the "better home" remains impossible to answer. There were so many variations in individual experiences, expectations, tastes, values, and opportunities, and so many differences among the micro-cultures of the New Worlds, that one person's better home could be another's nightmare. An Irish Catholic from County Louth who moved to, say, Toronto in the early twentieth century might find it an insufferably boring place where they chained up the gumball machines and swings on a Saturday night to ensure that the Sabbath remained a day of rest.[12] Meanwhile, an Irish Protestant from County Antrim might find the city a safe and stable place to find work, make friends and raise a family. But to the extent that quantitative data can shed light on qualitative experiences, the general picture suggests that Irish migrants to Canada had a reasonably good chance of finding a better life. Perhaps the verdict is a quintessentially Canadian one: Not bad, eh?

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The classic work on this subject is Kerby A. Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

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Gerald J. Stortz, "Archbishop Lynch and New Ireland: An Unfulfilled Dream for Canada's Northwest," *The Catholic Historical Review* 68, no. 4 (October 1982): 614-5.

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David A. Wilson, *The Irish in Canada* (Ottawa: Canadian Historical Association, 1989).

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Doheny to William Smith O'Brien, 20 August 1858, William Smith O'Brien Papers, National Library of Ireland, MS 446, 3058.

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On this question, see Richard Jensen, "'No Irish Need Apply': A Myth of Urban Victimization," *Journal of Social History* 36 (2002): 405-29.

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See Cecil J. Houston and William J. Smyth, *The Sash Canada Wore: A Historical Geography of the Orange Order in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980).

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On gerrymandering in Ottawa and political discrimination against Irish Canadian Catholics in general, see John Lawrence Power O'Hanly, *The Political Standing of Irish Catholics in Canada: A Critical Analysis of its Causes, with Suggestions for its Amelioration* (Ottawa, n.p., 1872); on the Orange Order in Toronto, see William J. Smyth, *Toronto, the Belfast of Canada: The Orange Order and the Shaping of Municipal Culture* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2015).

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Harold Troper, "Nathan Phillips: The Election of Toronto's First Jewish Mayor," in ed., David S. Koffman, *No Better Home? Jews, Canada, and the Sense of Belonging* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2021), 147-60.

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Gordon A. Darroch and Michael D. Ornstein, "Ethnicity and Occupational Structure in Canada in 1871: The Vertical Mosaic in Historical Perspective," *Canadian Historical Review* 61, no. 3 (1980), 305-33; Donald Harman Akenson, *Being Had: Historians, Evidence, and the Irish in North America* (Port Credit, Ontario: P.D. Meany, 1985), 41-2.

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Troper, "Nathan Phillips," 154-7; Emmet Mullally to Charles Murphy, 26 September 1933, Charles Murphy Papers, Library and Archives Canada, MG27-III-B8, 9347-50.

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Donald Harman Akenson, *The Irish Diaspora: A Primer* (Port Credit, Ontario: P.D. Meany, 1993), 59-122.

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A good example can be found in Patrick Rankin, Document No. W.S. 163, Bureau of Military History, Ireland.