

# The Unstrung Harp: Canada's Irish

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### The Unstrung Harp: Canada's Irish

The Irish in Canada have been a problem for historians, especially for those who deal with the latter part of the nineteenth century. The Irish were the largest ethnic group after the French, but did not possess the same homogeneity or compactness. While too numerous to ignore, they have been too difficult to incorporate neatly into broad historical patterns. Most historians have mentioned the Irish only when necessary, and only a few have attempted to deal with them directly. Such attempts have usually been limited to studies of specific issues related to the Irish experience or to biography. Analysis of specific issues has made more information available, but it seems that detailed information on the Irish is all too often contradictory, and previous generalizations which seemed clear and obvious have blurred as a result. Biographies of the Irish leadership have added to this confusion because the leaders seldom presented a united front and were generally ignored by their people. The cynic might ask if any of the Irish leaders were representative of their people, or if any of the positions taken by the Canadian Irish on specific issues were typical. It is the bold historian, then, who would venture forth to unravel the Gordian Knot that is the Irish experience in Canada. W.S. Neidhardt and W.M. Baker deserve accolades for two books which attempt to sort out part of that experience.

W.S. Neidhardt's *Fenianism in North America* (University Park, The Pennsylvania University Press, 1975) is the first scholarly survey of the Fenian Raids within the Canadian context. Previous studies have approached the raids from an American or Irish frame of reference, and have been of limited value to Canadian historians. Since no other country was affected so much by the raids as was Canada, this study is long overdue. Neidhardt's stated purpose is to correct the impression held by many modern Canadians that the Fenians were a joke, that their raids were drunken brawls, and that contemporary Canadians did not take them seriously. In this he succeeds, and he underlines the importance of the raids in the achievement of Confederation. But in other aspects Neidhardt might have done better. The title represents the book as a study of Fenianism, but there is no evidence that the author has yet reached an understanding of the phenomenon of Fenianism or of the Irishmen who supported it. The reader also could reasonably expect a better attempt to explain the reactions of the Canadian Irish to Fenianism and the raids. Omissions from the bibliography offer a partial explanation. Neidhardt has consulted neither the John O'Mahoney Papers, lodged in the Catholic University of America, nor the numerous Irish and Irish-American newspapers of the period. These sources shed much light on the nature of Fenianism and provide a certain amount of information related to the Fenians and their supporters in Canada.

A few inaccuracies and confusions might also be mentioned. Neidhardt follows William D'Arcy's *The Fenian Movement in the United States 1858-1886* (Washington, 1948) for much of his detail, apparently without sufficient cross-checking. For example, D'Arcy credits Edward O'Meagher Condon with

the introduction of Fenianism into Toronto in 1859. If this statement is true, it was an unusual accomplishment for a boy of nineteen. Neither has presented any reason to assume that Michael Murphy, the organizer of the Fenian-dominated Hibernian Benevolent Society, should not be awarded the dubious honour. Similarly, Neidhardt is uncertain of the fortunes of the O'Mahoney Wing of the Fenian Brotherhood after its disastrous raid against New Brunswick, unaware that it was the principal supporter of the 1867 Rising in Ireland. Less forgivable is the statement that Fenianism was "unmistakingly moribund" after 1871 (p. 128). While it is true that the Fenians dropped their plans for the "liberation" of Canada after the Manitoba Raid of that year, a glance through any of a dozen entries in his own bibliography, such as T.N. Brown's *Irish American Nationalism, 1870-1890* (Philadelphia and New York, 1966), should have demonstrated the inaccuracy of the statement. As a study of the Fenian Raids, Neidhardt's book is useful to the casual reader, but it offers little to the scholar who seeks to lift the veil of mystery surrounding the Irish in the North American environment.

W.M. Baker's *Timothy Warren Anglin, 1822-96, Irish, Catholic, Canadian* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1977) is a different sort of work. This is the first (and probably the last) biography of Anglin, a second-string politician best remembered for his quixotic challenge to Confederation. Anglin reveals a facet of the Irish quite different from that revealed by the Fenians. They sought to instill pride by the use of force while Anglin sought it through respectability. In this he was like his rival, Thomas D'Arcy McGee. Their brief but furious feud during the last few years of McGee's life was really a question of the price each expected the Irish to pay for acceptance into Canadian society. Whereas McGee expected the Irish to abandon everything except their romanticism, Anglin hoped that they would be able to retain everything except their belligerence. Baker exposes and examines Anglin's attitudes towards most aspects of contemporary society, especially the Irish place within the Canadian "mosaic". He also acknowledges Anglin's philosophical debt to Daniel O'Connell, but far too briefly. Anglin's attitudes towards everything from class distinction to the love-hate relationship he felt towards the British and their society can be compared with those of O'Connell. Like O'Connell, Anglin was not an average Irishman. His father was a man of some property: enough to place the son within the ranks of the small Catholic middle class of Ireland.

This raises the question of Anglin's ability to represent the Irish immigrants, first in New Brunswick, and later across Canada. The vast majority of the immigrants were not drawn from Anglin's class. Yet Baker feels that Anglin was a reasonable representative of the Irish. This was probably so during his New Brunswick years, when any Irishman of education and stature was liable to be thrust into a leadership role. Actually, Anglin had one quality which probably helped him to establish his leadership — the shadow of suspicion. There were rumours that he had been involved in the "Young Ireland" Rising of 1848. A

“rebel” past has often been used by Irishmen to gain support from their countrymen with D’Arcy McGee as a prime Canadian example. Anglin never flatly denied these rumours, which were probably useful in his political career. But there is no evidence that he had any connection with Young Ireland and except for a few ambiguous and sentimental statements made much later, no indication that he had any great sympathy for the movement. Later, during the Fenian period, Anglin was still willing to use nationalist sympathies. He was not a Fenian, but he had many connections with prominent Fenians. Baker mentions that “Colonel” John Warren, one of the leaders of the raid against New Brunswick, was a first cousin. He also mentions that another of Anglin’s cousins, Mary Jane Irwin, married Jeremiah O’Donovan Rossa, perhaps the most notorious Fenian of all time. But Baker neglects to mention that Mary Jane became a firebrand Fenian in her own right, and that her brother Thomas was also a convicted Fenian. He also neglects to mention that the Anglin children were later quite close to the O’Donovan children, which indicates a close family connection. All this blood might excuse a certain ambivalence on the part of Anglin towards Fenianism, but it does not account for his courtship of Fenian support during his battles with McGee. When Anglin went to the new Canadian Parliament in 1867, he was determined to displace McGee as leader of the Canadian Irish, and McGee’s inveterate enemies, the Montreal Fenians, were his most promising allies. Anglin jumped into the battle which McGee had been waging against the Fenian-dominated Montreal Saint Patrick’s Society by supporting the Fenians in Montreal and in the Commons. Either he knew these people were Fenians, or he was not as astute and intelligent as Baker would have us believe. Anglin was not stupid; he was just willing to use whatever support came to hand.

As “Irish” as Anglin could be at times, he was not a hard-core “Irish” politician. He could appeal to Irishmen, even Fenians, when he had a profitable “Irish” issue, but he deserted the Irish completely after the humiliating failure of the 1870 raid. Instead, he became a “Catholic” politician and was fortunate to have a “Catholic” issue in the form of the New Brunswick Schools Question. He became so thoroughly “Catholic” that he even made his peace with the Bishop of Chatham, James Rogers, a man he had detested since 1866. But before this issue died, Anglin became a “party” politician and Speaker of the House of Commons, the greatest mistake of his political career. Although this post was lucrative, by the time he was sacked he had lost his standing as a popular leader and his association with political causes. John Costigan had assumed the mantle of “Irish” leader, there were no pressing “Catholic” issues, and Anglin was of little use to the Liberal Party. When he lost his seat in 1882, Anglin’s political career was finished for all intents and purposes. Baker does not stress this ambivalence, nor does he recognize that Anglin’s dilemma was that he could never decide who he wanted to represent: the Irish, the Catholics, or the Liberal Party. At various points in his career Anglin attempted to represent each, and ended by representing none.

Baker has provided many insights into Anglin's New Brunswick career and the politics of the 1850s and 1860s. For example, he rejects the notion that the Catholics voted as a bloc against Confederation in 1865, and uses the intervention of Bishop Rogers to prove that this was also more or less true in 1866. This may be the case, but Baker's explanation is not satisfactory. His puzzled reference to apparent discrepancies between the proportion of Catholics in two Saint John wards and the measure of support for Anti-Confederation candidates, including Anglin, during the 1865 elections cannot be explained unless one remembers that property qualifications would have prevented many Irish from gaining the franchise. Until some detailed work is done on the ethno-religious composition of the electorate, as opposed to the population, no firm conclusions can be drawn about Irish voting patterns. There is, of course, another possibility. Perhaps Anglin was not such a great leader of the Irish of Saint John as Baker believes. Perhaps even with the support of the local Catholic bishop, he could not control the Irish vote. Baker's discussion of such problems thus is more than informative because it often opens the door for further probing of contemporary society in Saint John and in New Brunswick. But once his subject passed on to the larger arena of Canadian politics, Baker followed, and added little about the New Brunswick of the 1870s and 1880s.

Baker admits that Anglin was not a great political figure and one imagines that he must have found Anglin to be an albatross at times. How does Baker rate Anglin as an "Irish, Catholic, Canadian"? "He lived an eventful, interesting, useful life, neither unpleasant nor unfulfilling" (p. 256)). Not exactly a high score. It is difficult to decide if this should be considered typical of the Irish in Canada. If Anglin's indecision about his political role was not a character flaw, perhaps the Irish in Canada could not decide what they were, Irish, Catholic, or Canadian. Or perhaps Anglin failed the Irish as had McGee, by refusing to help them crystallize their attitudes toward themselves and their environment. If this is the case, then Baker's book is a better epitaph than Anglin deserves.

P. M. TONER

## Railways and Canadian Development

Historians and economists have long emphasized the vital role which railways have played in overcoming the barriers of geography and linking the regions of Canada in an east-west transcontinental nation.<sup>1</sup> The Canadian Pacific Railway, in particular, has been the focus of a number of recent studies. In 1968 economist J. Lorne McDougall wrote *Canadian Pacific: A Brief History* (Montreal, McGill University Press, 1968), a study sponsored by the C.P.R. Although McDougall was often too sympathetic to the company's viewpoint, he did provide a succinct general

<sup>1</sup> See Glenn Porter, "Recent Trends in Canadian Business and Economic History", in Glenn Porter and Robert Cuff, eds., *Enterprise and National Development* (Toronto, 1973), pp. 11-2.