

## The Irish Experience in Ontario: Rural or Urban?

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[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

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Résumé de l'article

Ce texte constitue une réaction face à plusieurs interprétations nouvelles qui, si elles sont acceptées, risquent de modifier la perception historique du rôle joué par les centres urbains dans l'adaptation des Irlandais catholiques en Ontario au 19<sup>e</sup> siècle. Donald Akenson, un historien du monde rural, estime que l'expérience canadienne des immigrants irlandais diffère de l'expérience américaine. Il prétend que la prédominance des Protestants à l'intérieur du groupe national, de même que les bases rurales de la communauté irlandaise, empêchent la formation de ghettos urbains et permettent une relative liberté d'action en terme de mobilité sociale. Par comparaison les Irlando-Américains, majoritairement catholiques, sont concentrés dans les ghettos urbains. De surcroît, les nouveaux historiens du Travail affirment que la montée des Chevaliers du Travail suscite un rapprochement entre les Orangistes et les Irlandais catholiques de Toronto qui, en dépit de leur haine ancestrale, s'attachent à former une culture ouvrière commune. Cette interprétation présuppose que la culture irlandaise catholique constitue une valeur bien faible pour être rejetée si facilement.

L'auteur estime qu'aucune de ces interprétations n'est fondée. Dans les ghettos torontois, la fusion de la culture paysanne irlandaise avec un catholicisme traditionnel, produit un nouveau courant urbain ethno-religieux — le catholicisme irlandais d'obédience tridentine. Cette culture se propage de la ville vers l'arrière-pays et, grâce aux réseaux de la métropole, d'un bout à l'autre de l'Ontario. Une société irlandaise repliée sur elle-même se constitue, résultant du « privatisme », ceux qui y naissent ne la quittent qu'à leur mort. Les Irlandais catholiques se sont effectivement impliqués dans les organisations ouvrières afin d'améliorer la condition et l'avenir de leurs familles, mais ils ne se sont jamais associés avec leurs ennemis de toujours, les Orangistes, pour développer une nouvelle culture ouvrière.

# The Irish Experience in Ontario: Rural or Urban?

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## Résumé/Abstract

*Ce texte constitue une réaction face à plusieurs interprétations nouvelles qui, si elles sont acceptées, risquent de modifier la perception historique du rôle joué par les centres urbains dans l'adaptation des Irlandais catholiques en Ontario au 19<sup>e</sup> siècle. Donald Akenson, un historien du monde rural, estime que l'expérience canadienne des immigrants irlandais diffère de l'expérience américaine. Il prétend que la prédominance des Protestants à l'intérieur du groupe national, de même que les bases rurales de la communauté irlandaise, empêchent la formation de ghettos urbains et permettent une relative liberté d'action en terme de mobilité sociale. Par comparaison les Irlando-Américains, majoritairement catholiques, sont concentrés dans les ghettos urbains. De surcroît, les nouveaux historiens du Travail affirment que la montée des Chevaliers du Travail suscite un rapprochement entre les Orangistes et les Irlandais catholiques de Toronto qui, en dépit de leur haine ancestrale, s'attachent à former une culture ouvrière commune. Cette interprétation présuppose que la culture irlandaise catholique constitue une valeur bien faible pour être rejetée si facilement.*

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*The purpose of this paper is to respond to several new theories which, if accepted, could alter the historical perception of the role played by urban centres in the adjustment of Irish Catholics in nineteenth century Ontario. Donald Akenson, a rural historian, believes that the Canadian experience of Irish immigrants is not comparable to the American one. Akenson contends that the numerical dominance of Protestants within the national group and the rural basis of the Irish community, negated the formation of urban ghettos and allowed for a relative ease in social mobility. In comparison the American Irish were dominantly Catholic urban dwelling and ghettoized. In addition the new labour historians believe that the rise of the Knights of Labor caused the Orange and Catholic Irish in Toronto to resolve their generational hatred and set about to form a common working-class culture. This theory must presume that Irish Catholic culture was of little value to be rejected with such ease.*

*The writer contends that neither theory is valid. In the ghettos of Toronto the fusion of an Irish peasant culture with traditional Catholicism produced a new, urban, ethno-religious vehicle — Irish Tridentine Catholicism. This culture, spread from the city to the hinterland and, by means of metropolitan linkage, throughout Ontario. Privatism created a closed Irish society, one they were born into and left when they died. Irish Catholics co-operated in labour organizations for the sake of their family's future, but never shared in the development of a new working-class culture with their old Orange enemies.*

Recently, the importance of the role played by urban centres in the adjustment of Irish Catholics in nineteenth

century Ontario has been questioned. Donald Akenson, the eminent rural historian, believes Ontario's Irish were rurally based and dominantly Protestant. He also suggests that the Catholic Irish were neither ghettoized, not even chiefly urbanized, nor pauperized and that upward mobility was commonplace.<sup>1</sup> The implication is that Oscar Handlin's

"Boston Model"<sup>2</sup> cannot be applied to Canadian urban centres. Why? Because the American Irish were predominantly Catholic, ghettoized urban-dwellers, whose poverty and lack of social mobility made adjustment difficult. In addition, the new labour historians<sup>3</sup> contend that Irish Protestant and Catholic labourers in Toronto merged their identity in the late nineteenth century to form a common, working-class culture.<sup>4</sup> In the United States, Irish Catholics retained their ethno-religious culture within the framework of American unions and often dominated labour organizations.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, it is the purpose of this paper to examine the validity of these new assumptions regarding the Canadian Irish experience and to determine how they compare to more traditional concepts.

Given the expansive literature on the American Irish, it is important to ascertain whether or not the Ontario Irish experience is comparable. There appears to be a general consensus among American historians that the Irish experience in the New World diaspora is closely related to the process known as urbanization.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, there is little doubt that religion played a role in this particular process. Stephen Thernstrom has aptly stated:

Religion, ideology, cultural traditions — these affected human behaviour in the past and shaped the meaning of the demographic and economic patterns which can be neatly plotted on a map or graph.<sup>7</sup>

Because of the absolute numerical dominance of Catholics within the Irish national unit emigrating to the United States and the rapid assimilation of the Protestant sector into the general Protestant population, American historians traditionally have studied an urban-dwelling Irish peasantry within the definition of its religion — Catholicism. The studies are broad in scope, dealing with social adjustment, poverty, ghettoization and family life.<sup>8</sup> Canadian Irish immigrants were predominantly Protestant who, like their American counterparts, assimilated quickly but also gained a new identity — "Orange Irish." Yet, in Canada, it became traditional to study both Catholic and Protestant groups as an Irish unit. That approach tends to restrict any clear examination of religion as an element in ethnic formation,<sup>9</sup> and makes any attempt at comparison with American studies confusing. However, if the urban-dwelling Irish Catholics in Ontario are examined separately from the Protestant Irish, some similarities emerge with the American experience in urban adjustment, ethnic solidarity, and religious participation and focus. In that context, the "Boston Model" can be utilized as an historical tool. In J.P. Dolan's evaluation, comparative studies are valid; the border between Canada and the United States has made little difference in the overall Irish Catholic experience.<sup>10</sup>

Nevertheless, before any continental consensus for a New World Irish Catholic diaspora can be reached, the Canadian Irish historian must come to terms with the possibility of a

dominant, rural-based Irish Catholic population whose cultural influence might well be more important than the ghetto experience of an urban minority. If the historian accepts the theory of "urban as process"<sup>11</sup> wherein the urban environment is not just an incidental factor but an independent variable affecting ethnic groups, then the Irish, as the product of urban adjustment, become a reality. By incorporating the communication linkage implied in the metropolitan theory,<sup>12</sup> which unites urban centres to hinterlands, and expanding this theory to include social, cultural and religious functions<sup>13</sup> as well as those of a commercial nature, then "urban as process" has an extended role in the rural milieu. In other words, if a specific ethnic culture formed in an urban centre, it could be transferred through established communication linkages to the hinterland areas.

Encouraged by Dr. Gilbert Stelter, this author began to construct an urban model for Irish Catholics in Canada, utilizing Toronto as the example of a metropolitan centre. The model was to serve as an alternative to a growing tendency to study the urban Irish as a unit, ignoring the salient differences in culture created by religious differences.<sup>14</sup> In pursuing this task, it seemed the generally accepted assimilationist theory which evolved from Israel Zangwill's play, "The Melting Pot,"<sup>15</sup> (written in 1908) and from Robert Redford's, "Folk Urban Continuum,"<sup>16</sup> was being applied too rigidly. Consequently, this left a negligible Irish contribution to Canadian character. In formulating this model, some concepts utilized were those developed in the field of American Irish studies, particularly by Dennis Clark, Jay P. Dolan and James Sanders.<sup>17</sup> In addition, the work of Kenneth Duncan,<sup>18</sup> (who, almost two decades ago, wrote a valuable article on the Famine Irish in which he described the persistence and reinterpretation of a peasant culture in urban settings) was expanded. And cognizant of the work of John Modell and Lynn H. Lees, my research regarding the Irish urban experience led me to a conclusion similar to theirs:

The annals of American and English cities alike hardly suggest that accommodation was always easy or pleasant for the Irish. And the path of change led them from easy contact with the traditional culture of their homeland. Such distancing was felt by those who migrated, and by those who did not. That an urban Irish culture grew beyond Ireland's borders made a difference to both.<sup>19</sup>

The particularistic culture was ethno-religious in nature, a syncretic vehicle, urban-born and restricted to the Catholic segment of the national group in the world diaspora. In fact, Irish Catholics were the bearers of a peasant culture developed in the rural areas of Ireland. There is some evidence that prior to migration to Canada the Irish peasantry had already begun to adapt its culture to urban living as a transient labour force in the cities of Ireland and England.<sup>20</sup> Transiency blurred the urban or rural reality to the Irish peasant, for it was observed: "In 1834 the Royal Commission on the Poor Laws estimated that there were 2,385,000

beggars (including dependents) on the roads of Ireland at least part of the year."<sup>21</sup> There is no estimate of the inter-urban or rural-urban transiency that occurred in Irish or English cities. By the Famine, it would be difficult to ascertain what in Irish peasant culture was not affected by some form of urban process.

Despite what occurred in the Old World, peasant culture in the New World Irish diaspora was reinterpreted in urban settings and fused with traditional Catholicism to produce a new vehicle which sustained the urban survival of a distinctive ethnic group.<sup>22</sup> The new culture became standard in Canadian cities and was transferred through a series of communication linkages to the rural hinterland. In this social process, Irish Catholics blurred the borders of what was clearly urban or rural in Eastern Canada, particularly in Ontario. The Irish participated in the same culture, whether they lived in Cabbagetown, the Albion Hills or Kingston. In other words, ethnic persistence coupled with an urban-based religious institution can reinterpret a specific culture to allow for the emergence of a new, ethno-religious identity. This specific entity can appropriately be labelled "Irish Tridentine Catholicism."<sup>23</sup>

The Irish Catholics who entered Toronto and other Ontario cities during and after the Famine years of 1846-1848 were the bearers of a partially urbanized peasant culture. This peasantry was poverty-stricken, disease-ridden, uneducated, untrained, superstitious and detached from its Church. Nonetheless, it broke the Protestant consensus in Toronto and other Ontario cities. The Irish were regarded as an alien population and were restricted to the worst areas of the city, areas which remained Irish ghettos for decades. Being socially deprived and Catholic, they encountered differential treatment from the charter population in the workplace, public institutions and the courts of law. They received little financial assistance from the city and were perpetually assailed with the cry "a bowl of soup if ye'll change."<sup>24</sup> The use of soupism as a proselytizing tactic for assimilation persisted for decades.<sup>25</sup> Having relied on transiency in Ireland as a means for survival, the immigrants rapidly became a transient labour class of inter-urban, urban-rural nomads. Social mobility was slow; it took generations for any sizeable middle class to form, and when it did, it operated within the confines of a specific Irish society.

Granted, both the city and the Catholic Church, a weak institution in Toronto, were ill-prepared to deal with the social problems introduced by the sudden influx of Famine Irish immigrants in 1847. But in the face of rejection and the pressures exerted by an unsympathetic urban majority, the nominally Catholic Irish turned to what had been their central cultural focus — their Church. By 1851, the Irish Catholics formed one-quarter of Toronto's population and the Church organized quickly to meet the needs of its people. Over a short period of time, there developed a unity of purpose between the institutional church and its Irish laity. The

Irish family was the vehicle through which a religious counter-culture was transmitted. Through the establishment of a number of social institutions and agencies, the Church satisfied the basic needs of its people and gradually began to remodel the Irish community and to assist with the reinterpretation of culture. To counteract the differential treatment and proselytizing tactics the Irish were subjected to, the Church duplicated every public institution in the city, whether it was a home for the aged, poor house, hospital, refuge, training school, orphanage or children's aid society. It also introduced libraries, a savings bank and a burial society to direct the Irish towards means of self-help.<sup>26</sup> Newspapers, benevolent societies and religious organizations helped to create a self-sufficient ethnic community. The separate schools, originally staffed by members of religious orders from France, became Irish schools, perpetuating Irish identity to the extent they were the nurseries for Irish Catholic culture.<sup>27</sup>

As the areas of Irish concentration in the city increased in size and number, the church expanded similarly. Beginning with a single church in Cabbagetown and the Cathedral established before the arrival of the Famine immigrants, there were over a dozen by 1900. And it was from these parish nuclei that priests, religious orders, the St. Vincent de Paul Society and its female cognates went out to aid the poor, sick and aged. The Church stood as the arbitrator of the Irish future in the city; the steeples marked the beginning and end of the journey to work and to school, and the Irishman's last journey in this world. Surrounding the churches were rectories, schools, convents, halls, shabeens, book stores, grocery and dry goods stores — the visible signs of an Irish community. And within those enclaves, the Irish family developed a "Dearcadh," a particularistic viewpoint through which the Irish looked upon themselves, their community, and their relationship with the city and their God.<sup>28</sup>

As the Church became the central focus in Irish family life, the developing system of parishes, social institutions and societies attached to it united the Irish in the city into a cohesive unit. From the constant interaction between the Irish family and the Church, a distinctive culture emerged. Born in Cabbagetown, the water front, Claretown, Irish town and the Junction, it blossomed. And under the ecclesiastical shadow of Toronto, similar parish structures were organized and a communication linkage developed. A common Irish culture was transmitted through the Church's metropolitan system which integrated urban and rural parishes into a common network.<sup>29</sup>

The growth and spread of this particular culture was assisted by the various religious orders of women who established convents in the city and branch houses in rural areas. Postulants for the orders were drawn from both rural and urban areas. The nuns taught in the city's separate schools and founded convent schools which attracted the daughters of the more successful rural dwellers. Many of their students

became teachers in the countryside. There was a constant interaction between the laity and members of the religious orders when the sisters travelled into the hinterland to beg for food and supplies to meet the needs of the occupants of their agencies. Similarly, the priests and brothers ran schools in the city to educate teachers and leaders for both rural and urban areas. Country youths came to the city to be trained for the priesthood and returned as pastors of rural churches. Mission, a period of intense religious reflection, was a yearly occurrence in all parishes, and these were under the guidance of specifically trained priests from the city.<sup>30</sup>

There were other important components in the transmission of that culture. The Irish newspapers, printed in the city, were circulated to rural areas and passed from hand-to-hand, with the literate reading to the illiterate. Irish libraries were set up in the city and books were dispersed throughout the hinterland areas. The St. Vincent de Paul Society, whose primary purpose was to serve the poor, established councils in rural parishes which reported to the central council in Toronto. Through its membership, placement was found in Toronto's Catholic social institutions for the orphaned, aged, sick or destitute in the diocese. A whole interlocking set of kinship patterns developed, with relatives in both urban and rural areas. Families and friends gathered together for social events like the important rites of passage, picnics, bazaars and excursions.<sup>31</sup> Within a generation, the urban-born culture was identical in both urban and rural settings and it became an Irish fact in Ontario's history.

Irish Catholic families were alienated in Victorian Toronto's society because of their ethnicity and religion. Therefore it seems plausible to consider ethnicity, religion and family life as variables in any urban society. The new labour history professes to be cultural, but its concept of culture appears narrow and restrictive, and of an empirical Marxist nature. It tends to exclude the value of religion, ethnicity or family as constituting factors in the study of working-class history. Its authors seem to look upon those components as epiphenomenons of underlying class conflicts to be excluded from the study of workers.<sup>32</sup> Why? Could it be that their inclusion might fragment the concept of a unified working-class culture, leaving the dialectic without much substance?

Gregory Kealey and Bryan Palmer suggest that, with the rise of the Knights of Labor, the Orange and Catholic Irish in Toronto resolved their intense religious hatred and set about to formulate a common working-class culture.<sup>33</sup> That assumption implies that Irish Catholics abandoned their peculiar culture, developed in Toronto's ghettos in preference for a new cultural vehicle. At the turn of the century, Abraham Cahon observed that the socialist intellectuals "have underestimated the value of religion to the workers,"<sup>34</sup> a trend which seems current among new labour historians. In John Bodnar's evaluation, "the threat to families and enclaves of abject poverty provided the impetus for

mass labor organizations,"<sup>35</sup> and Tamara Hareven concluded that the family role was active and ongoing in the adaptation to industrial society.<sup>36</sup> Yet the new labour historians apparently fail to notice the importance of family in the workers' lives. Considering the poverty and lack of job opportunities among Toronto's Irish Catholics, it seems the responsibility for family protection and survival was a major reason for their entry into the Knights of Labor. Most certainly, they were not in quest of a new culture.

The Orange and Catholic Irish had been antagonists for at least sixty-years in Toronto (and other areas of Ontario). The antagonism culminated in the Jubilee Riots of 1875 when eight thousand of them fought a pitched battle in the city's streets, and was followed by another riot in 1878 when the Irish nationalist, O'Donovan Rossa, came to Toronto on a speaking engagement. Yet Kealey suggests that shortly thereafter peace descended upon "Toronto the Good" through the Knights of Labor wherein "the old sectarian quarrels were gone."<sup>37</sup> It is difficult to believe that, in the early 1880s, Irish Catholics would "Kiss the Orange Sash" to unite with those who had been instrumental in locking them out of jobs, preferment or politics in the city.<sup>38</sup> If there was a common philosophy among working men, why did a mixed audience of workers in the 1890s enthusiastically receive an address by Daniel O'Donoghue, the Irish Catholic father of the Canadian labour movement, until it was discovered his philosophy was based on the Papal Encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*, and the Orange element turned away in disgust? And if there was unity in the labour force between the Orange and Catholic Irish in Toronto, why had it not occurred in Ireland where the Orange Order divided the work force, excluding Catholics, and sought temporary accommodation when it suited their own purposes?<sup>39</sup>

The proponents of a unified working class culture are vague when describing the nature of that new, social vehicle, admitting:

We know next to nothing about their religious sentiments, about the songs they sang, the pubs they drank in, the popular theatre they attended, or the books they read.<sup>40</sup>

Yet, through research, this writer knows that Catholic workers were guided by religious principles, what songs they sang, the shabeens in which they drank, the concerts, picnics, excursions and soirees they attended, the books and papers they read, and the sports they played. Irish Catholic workers participated in their own culture and ethno-religious privatisation excluded others. One did not join Irish Catholic society — one was born into it; and abandonment of religion meant denial of ethnicity. It is difficult to imagine that Irish Catholics, with such a strong sense of cultural identity, formed part of a unified working-class in Victorian Toronto.

In commenting on Donald Akenson's work, entitled "Ontario: Whatever Happened to the Irish?" Bryan Palmer stated: "The history of the Irish will never look the same after the devastating assaults mounted in this article."<sup>41</sup> In Akenson's opinion, the Irish in Ontario were rurally based and dominantly Protestant. However, what Akenson implies about the urban-dwelling Irish Catholics is open to question. He denies any urban ghetto existence or oral tradition, and stipulates that the Irish were not poverty-stricken and had adjusted easily to urban living with an accompanying social mobility.<sup>42</sup> Akenson's approach places limitations on the value of urban existence as a factor in cultural retention and reform.

The historian can have little quarrel with the statement that there were more Protestant Irish than Catholic in Ontario. A. Gordon Darroch and Michael Ornstein gave a figure of 38% Catholic to 62% Protestant in an article written for the *Canadian Historical Review* in 1980.<sup>43</sup> In 1976, this author had determined that the Irish Catholics had declined from 48% of the national group to 38% between 1880 and 1900 in the city of Toronto alone.<sup>44</sup> But the belief that the Irish were domiciled in rural rather than urban centres is less certain. The Catholic Irish were the ghettoized element in the general Irish population and, therefore, it is interesting to examine their urban-rural ratio. Darroch and Ornstein stated that, in Ontario, 48.1% of Irish Catholics were farmers in 1871,<sup>45</sup> while Akenson gives a figure of 66.3% for rural-dwelling Irish Catholics.<sup>46</sup> One might conclude that the 18.2% difference is made up on non-farming, rural-dwellers in villages. However, were the village-dwellers a rural proletariat or did they represent urban commercial interests in the countryside, tied economically or socially to a central place through various forms of metropolitan linkage?

Quite clearly, a number of questions will have to be answered concerning the Irish Catholic population. What proportion of the farming population was farm owners, renters or labourers? What was the duration of Irish Catholic rural occupancy and what proportion of the farm labourers supported families in urban centres by remittances? Considering the poverty and transiency of Irish labourers, were those counted as rural-dwellers in one year gone with the fairies the next? Even in well established, old Irish Catholic farming settlements, in families of twelve children, ten had departed for Canadian or American cities in two decades.<sup>47</sup> Furthermore, where did the Irish immigrants after 1848 find available land? Leo Johnson proposed that in the Home District most of it had been taken up by 1850.<sup>48</sup> As well, David Gagnon and Herbert Mays have intimated that Irish rural occupancy was declining in Peel County, and most likely all over Ontario, by the 1870s.<sup>49</sup> What about the structure of rural villages? Were they rural foci or metropolitan adjuncts for the transfer of goods, ideas and urban culture to the countryside?

Bryan Palmer notices that, by 1870, four out of ten city dwellers in Ontario were of Irish descent.<sup>50</sup> And J.L. Little observed:

Akenson himself demonstrates that in 1851 and 1861 an Irishman was twice as likely as any other Upper Canadian to find himself in the city . . . he provides no evidence for his suggestion that there was a steady progression from urban to rural place.<sup>51</sup>

Obviously there is a controversy over Irish urban-rural residential dominance that will have to be dealt with. It is most likely that the majority of Famine emigrants to Canada entered the cities where about forty per cent remained. A number of them had left for American centres and the rest sought work as spalpeens in rural areas. When this group of migratory workers is included with the established pre-Famine Irish population, it is possible a larger, but temporary, rural occupancy was realized. But considering that this transient population did not have the funds to purchase farms and, furthermore, was not acquainted with farming on the scale needed to be economically feasible in Ontario, most gradually returned to the cities to find work. Over a period of several decades, therefore, the urban-rural ratio was reversed.

Regardless of urban-rural ratios, Akenson contends that, unlike the American Irish, Irish Catholics in Canada did not go through the ghetto experience. That conclusion seems to have been based on an article by D.S. Shea.<sup>52</sup> Irish ghettos were common in most Canadian cities. George de Zwaan located an Irish Town or Paddy Town in Newmarket between 1850 and 1880,<sup>53</sup> while it was still a village. Peter Pineo noticed one in Hamilton in the same period.<sup>54</sup> In 1834, the municipal officials in York lamented about "the growing Shanty Town, consisting of the meanest sort of buildings."<sup>55</sup> Yet, when the pre-Famine Irish were pushed out of that area, they just recreated their ghettos on the Don Flats and eventually re-entered the city. H. Perkins Bull mentioned a number of Irish towns in the Humber Valley, on the other side of the city, quite similar to those in the Don Flats.<sup>56</sup> In his study of Toronto between 1850 and 1900, Peter Goheen shows persistent Irish ghettoization. He noticed that in 1870 there was "a fairly rigorous segregation at least of Roman Catholics within the city." He added: "Religious exclusion operated in the selective way we now attribute to ethnic exclusiveness in the city."<sup>57</sup> Goheen identified the existence of three major clusters of Irish concentration by 1899 — west of the mouth of the Don River or the old Cabbage Town area, the Bathurst and King Street area or Claretown, and the Toronto Junction area in the west end. In addition, the lightly inhabited eastern section of the city was predominantly Irish.<sup>58</sup>

Through research, this writer was able to locate at least a dozen minor areas of Irish concentration in Toronto. The areas of concentration began in the 1830s and were ghettos

by the 1850s. As time progressed, they became ethnically mixed, working Irish ghettos in America, Jo Ellen Vinyard observed:

Where work and housing necessitated that these families settle far from the church, schools or stores that served their nationality, new ones were built. By reaching out to the similar pocket on the next block and then the next, each group webbed its own together, breaking off when of sufficient size to be self sustaining.<sup>62</sup>

And similarly in Toronto, in a dozen concentrations or in numerous isolated family units, a culture formed and was retained and transmitted. The parish church was central to all activities and ruled in the social, political and economic realm of each unit.

In addition to stating there was little ghettoization, Akenson implies that the Irish Catholics were not poverty-stricken. In his opinion, Irish peasants "were well above the poverty line."<sup>63</sup> That illusionary belief might be dissipated if one refers to the Irish or secular newspapers of the era. The record books of the St. Vincent de Paul Society, the House of Providence and other social agencies, Catholic, Protestant and secular, show how severe the poverty was and that it became almost generational. Terry Crowley suggested that perhaps more of the Irish poor came to Canada than to the United States because passage was obtained on lumber ships that might otherwise have returned empty.<sup>64</sup>

Since Akenson believes the Irish Catholics were not pauperized, it follows logically that he would also believe they had an easy verticle mobility and adapted quickly to life in the city. That premise is difficult to accept when one learns that, generally, the population of Toronto looked upon the Irish as vermin or, at best, an obsolete people.<sup>65</sup> Confronted with that attitude, the Irish saw the city beyond their own community as a hollow town,<sup>66</sup> because they were locked out. As late as 1897, out of 656 municipal positions, Irish Catholics held 41; in a police force of 271 there were 16 Irish Catholics — and none in the law courts.<sup>67</sup> Michael Katz found that fifty-nine per cent of the Irish were labourers and twenty per cent were in the skilled trades,<sup>68</sup> which made them predominantly working class. In Katz's opinion the term "nigger" could be applied to the urban Irish in Canada<sup>69</sup> and he concluded that "being an Irish Catholic more than limited opportunity, it meant near pauperization."<sup>70</sup> Similarly, from documentary evidence, Harvey B. Graff believed that being Irish, particularly Catholic, in Toronto meant receiving differential treatment in both the work place and court of law.<sup>71</sup> The persistent vilification of the Irish by George Brown, Egerton Ryerson and the Orange Lodge culminated in the fact that those who bore Irish names or lived on a particular street in an Irish neighbourhood were almost automatically charged and convicted in the urban justice system. By the 1890s, during the reign of the Protestant Protective Association in Ontario, Irish Catholics were last

hired, first fired, and were not even waited on in some Toronto stores. William Baker has cited Timothy Anglin who observed that Irish Catholics were never accepted socially in Toronto — even if successful they were ostracized in the Protestant city.<sup>72</sup>

In an apparent attempt to isolate the history of the Canadian Irish from the American experience, Akenson embellishes his work with an unproven assumption that the Canadian Irish Catholics had no oral memory of the Irish Famine or British oppression.<sup>73</sup> In urban centres, the Church, the schools, Irish societies and press kept the memory of the famine alive. An examination of Toronto's Irish newspapers' articles, the Bishops' letters and circulars, or the surviving student essays, as well as interviews with octogenarian descendants of Famine Irish immigrants, will verify there was little deficiency in Irish memory,<sup>74</sup> a memory which perpetuated a hatred towards Britain that is still expressed in our own age. Paul Blanchard, hardly a lover of the Irish or the Catholic Church, stated:

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries English Protestants taught Irish Catholics to hate and to fear because they used Protestantism as an auxilliary weapon of oppression.<sup>75</sup>

That hatred was carried to the New World. The *souperism*<sup>76</sup> employed by Protestants on the wharves in Quebec, Montreal, Kingston and Toronto did little to allay it. Those memories were entrenched in the Irish psyche and, as John F. Stock observed, "an Irish sub culture channelled ethnic hostilities through a number of code words"<sup>77</sup> — like Protestant, Orange and English.

Because Thomas Gallagher, in his book, *Paddy's Lament*,<sup>78</sup> described the vitality of those memories among the Irish in the United States, Akenson, in reviewing the work, labelled it as evil in the context that the book perpetuated hatred. Nonetheless, Gallagher presents an accurate account of the origins of Irish hatred for the British. But Gallagher is not the only author attacked. Kenneth Duncan, H. Clare Pentland and Michael Cross have been called subconsciously racist for their descriptions of the conditions of the famine immigrants.<sup>79</sup> Duncan has empathetically and analytically recorded the process underlying the Irish peasants' attempts to save their culture and other elements from a peasant past. Irish residential distinctiveness, violence, transiency, drunkenness and superstition were historical traits. Some were of peasant origin, others were defence mechanisms against the brutal methods of an alien English conqueror. An examination of primary sources shows Irish ghetto existence in Toronto was actually far worse than what Duncan described. One begins to wonder what Akenson considers acceptable regarding Irish adjustment. Would he consider William Shannon and Andrew Greeley erroneous for stating that puritanism was an element in Irish culture? In Shannon's view, Irish puritanism exalted purity, dis-

trusted natural human instincts, but “kept peasant values internalized in the home and family, sacrificing individuality for conformity.”<sup>80</sup> Greeley implied that puritanism tended to make the Irish sexually naive.<sup>81</sup>

Among the Famine Irish immigrants, the love of dancing, singing and fighting, keeping livestock in their homes, and distaste for laws or a legal process to which they could not avail themselves are fact. That their peasant religion showed little distinction between natural or supernatural, living or dead, which produced wake customs that shocked the charter population, is historical. Andrew Greeley observed: “If one lives very close to the forces of life and death, maybe laughing at them is one way to survive.”<sup>82</sup> Certainly drinking poteen in shabeens was almost endemic, and drunkenness, with its accompanying social malaise, a consequence. Greeley, an Irish American, in a humorous fashion admitted: “The Irish are only half sober when they start drinking.”<sup>83</sup> A ‘drop of the creature’ was just one of many Irish defence methods or mechanisms to nullify to effects of an harsh environment or to serve as an escape from a brutal life bequeathed by the English. However, it was the reinterpretation of peasant cultural elements with the Catholicism of the age that created a viable vehicle to sustain the Irish in the ghettos of Toronto and other Canadian cities.

Within Akenson’s writing there seems to be a veiled anti-Catholic and pro-British bias, a bias that is partially reflected in his, as yet, not fully formed model of a Protestant, rural Ontario Irishman. John Boyle noticed this British bias when he reviewed Akenson’s work on education in Ireland. Akenson wrote: “the schools now inculcate Irish patriotism instead of British History.”<sup>84</sup> In Boyle’s opinion, the extinction of Irish history in Northern Ireland has resulted in “no addition to the public good.”<sup>85</sup> Why does Akenson think that a free Ireland should study the history of an oppressor rather than that of its own people? Astonishingly, Akenson believes the causes of the Famine lay with the Irish peasants for adopting a monoculture and for procreating themselves to death. Actually, Britain relegated the Irish Catholic peasants to the most infertile lands which caused the adoption of the potato as a staple. The peasants grew other crops, but were expected to use them for rent payment to the English landlords. Akenson’s statement of Irish peasant fecundity shows a lack of understanding of peasant populations generally. The Irish birth rate was no higher than most peasant societies of that period. At any rate, the amount of food that Britain shipped out of Ireland during the Famine years was more than sufficient to have aborted the clamity.<sup>86</sup>

One principal problem that Akenson must face in his search for a rural Irish Protestant model is a definition of the Orange, Ulster Protestant. The Ulster Irish were drawn from Scotland and England and brought their own peculiar culture with them to Ireland. They did not assimilate; they remained Scots or English. Akenson disclaims Orangism as

the Canadian identity of Ulster immigrants,<sup>87</sup> — but beyond that identity there is little else to set them apart. They dispersed among Methodist, Anglican and Presbyterian Churches and assimilated rapidly into the general Protestant population as they did in the United States. The difference in Ontario was the fact that their culture became a central element within Protestant culture. William Baker offers an explanation:

... Orangism grew and spread because its tenets were shared by the bulk of the Protestant population. Might it be, however, that non-Irish Protestants became increasingly Orange Irish in perspective and outlook?<sup>88</sup>

Actually, Irish Protestant identity was born in the urban lodges of Ontario, and through the expanding Orange network a new Irish Protestant culture was transferred to the hinterland.<sup>89</sup> In Toronto, the Protestant Irish had a single ethnic press, *The Irish Protestant*, that lasted for one year only,<sup>90</sup> whereas the Catholic Irish had a half dozen papers over a seventy year period. The Orange *Sentinel* served them adequately. As a group, Irish Protestants refused association with Irish Catholics. In the 1870s they developed a benevolent society through which they provided aid only to Protestant immigrants.<sup>91</sup> In view of the negative Irish stereotype that prevailed, the Protestant Irish abandoned the designation “Irish” and bequeathed their culture to Protestant Ontario. Therefore, it seems accurate to conclude that the Irish, regardless of religious background or rural-urban ratios, developed urban cultures and transferred them to the countryside of eastern Canada.

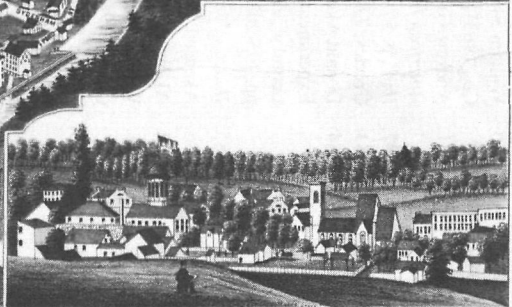
#### NOTES

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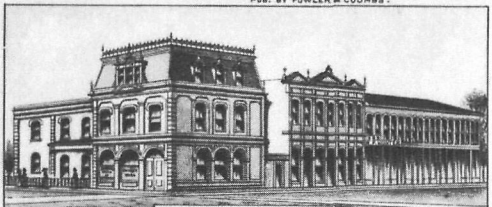


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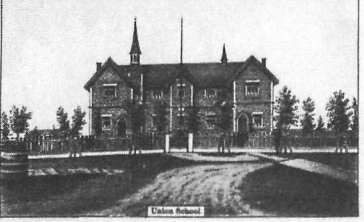
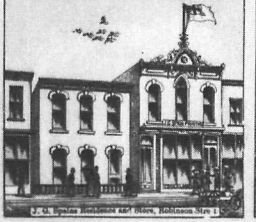


# SIMCOE, ONT. 1881.

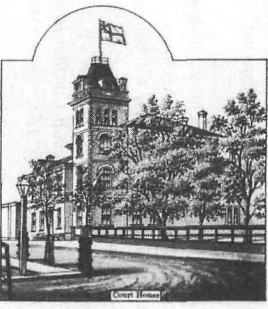


Comprising: Doctor Wilson's Book, Herald and Fuel Store, Barber's Music Store, Killmaster & Wells, Law Office, Moran & Galt, Masonic Hall, Post Office, Dr. Wilson's Medical Hall, Gallagher's Boot and Shoe Store, Island Revenue and Customs Office, Western Dry Goods Store, Hastings Jewelry Store, Barber's Law Office, Thistle Livingston, Robb & Jackson Law Office.

Hotel by Howe, John Egan, Proprietor, Corner Market and Robinson Streets. W. C. PARKER'S WOODWORK, HANDWORK, POT EBERS, TINS & CARPENTRY.



1. Public School Building.
2. Court House and County Gaol.
3. Market House.
4. Drill Shed and Armory 6th Batt.
5. Agricultural Buildings and grounds.
6. Northern House.
7. R. Hesterly House, J. Dixon, Proprietor.
8. Deane's Hotel, James Deane, do.
9. C. M. Church.
10. Baptist do.
11. Presbyterian Church.
12. English do.
13. R. Cushman do.
14. Simcoe Flooring Mills, N. C. Ford, Proprietor.
15. Simcoe Distillery, N. C. Ford, do.
16. Simcoe Brewery, H. D. Pinsky, do.
17. Steam Planing Mill and Cooperage.
18. Simcoe Carriage Factory, Hinton & Rochester, do.
19. Jackson Furniture Factory (Cutting & Crump, Prop's).
20. Washburn Mill.
21. Cabinet Shop, Bray & Hodgson, Prop's.
22. G. W. H. Station.
23. P. D. & L. H. R. Station.
24. Bank of Commerce.
25. Packet Dock.
26. Carriage Works, J. E. Costa.



Bird's-eye view of Simcoe, Ontario, 1881.

Vue à vol d'oiseau de Simcoe, Ontario, 1881.

SOURCE: Archives of Ontario, Toronto.

SOURCE: Archives of Ontario, Toronto.