

# From the “White Lily” to the “King Frog in a Puddle”: A Comparison of Confederation and Multiculturalism in Irish-Canadian Literature

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Numéro 43, 2011

Miscellaneous: International Perspectives on Canada  
En vrac : perspectives internationales sur le Canada

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1009454ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1009454ar>

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Éditeur(s)

Conseil international d'études canadiennes

ISSN

1180-3991 (imprimé)

1923-5291 (numérique)

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Citer cet article

Urschel, K. (2011). From the “White Lily” to the “King Frog in a Puddle”: A Comparison of Confederation and Multiculturalism in Irish-Canadian Literature. *International Journal of Canadian Studies / Revue internationale d'études canadiennes*, (43), 45–65. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1009454ar>

Résumé de l'article

La période de formation de la Confédération (années 1850 et 1860) et la période d'adoption du multiculturalisme officiel (années 1970), sont deux des moments de l'histoire du Canada dont on peut dire qu'ils ont été parmi les plus déterminants sur le plan idéologique. Les ouvrages produits pendant la formation de la Confédération et les premières années du multiculturalisme constituent donc un moyen précieux pour discerner ce qui est en cause lorsqu'il est question de renforcer les identités « nationales » et « ethniques » en tant que catégories normatives. Le présent document s'intéresse à la littérature canadienne écrite à cette époque par des immigrants irlandais catholiques et leurs descendants à cause du rôle conflictuel des Irlandais, en tant que colonisateurs et de colonisés, qui ajoute une dynamique politique dont l'exploration aide à illustrer les objectifs et les lacunes des idéologies nationales et multiculturelles. L'essai analyse des idées au sujet de la construction d'une nation, de l'identité ethnique, de la suprématie raciale et de la diversité culturelle dans la poésie de Thomas D'Arcy McGee et de Rosanna Leprohon ainsi que dans les romans de Harry J. Boyle et de Dennis T. Patrick Sears....

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**Abstract**

*The Confederating period of the 1850s and 1860s and the adoption of official multiculturalism in the 1970s are arguably two of the most decisive ideological moments in Canadian history. The literature produced during the Confederating period and the early years of multiculturalism therefore constitutes a valuable medium to discern what is at stake in reinforcing “national” and “ethnic” identities as normative categories. This paper focuses on Canadian literature written during these times by Irish Catholic immigrants and their descendants because the conflicting role of the Irish as both colonizers and colonized adds political dynamics, the explorations of which help to illustrate the objectives and shortcomings of national and multicultural ideologies. The essay analyses ideas about nation building, ethnic identity, racial supremacy, and cultural diversity in the poetry of Thomas D’Arcy McGee and Rosanna Leprohon, as well as novels by Harry J. Boyle and Dennis T. Patrick Sears.*

**Résumé**

*La période de formation de la Confédération (années 1850 et 1860) et la période d’adoption du multiculturalisme officiel (années 1970), sont deux des moments de l’histoire du Canada dont on peut dire qu’ils ont été parmi les plus déterminants sur le plan idéologique. Les ouvrages produits pendant la formation de la Confédération et les premières années du multiculturalisme constituent donc un moyen précieux pour discerner ce qui est en cause lorsqu’il est question de renforcer les identités « nationales » et « ethniques » en tant que catégories normatives. Le présent document s’intéresse à la littérature canadienne écrite à cette époque par des immigrants irlandais catholiques et leurs descendants à cause du rôle conflictuel des Irlandais, en tant que colonisateurs et de colonisés, qui ajoute une dynamique politique dont l’exploration aide à illustrer les objectifs et les lacunes des idéologies nationales et multiculturelles. L’essai analyse des idées au sujet de la construction d’une nation, de l’identité ethnique, de la suprématie raciale et de la diversité culturelle dans la poésie de Thomas D’Arcy McGee et de Rosanna Leprohon ainsi que dans les romans de Harry J. Boyle et de Dennis T. Patrick Sears....*

The Confederating period of the 1850s and 1860s and the adoption of official multiculturalism in the 1970s are arguably two of the most decisive ideological moments in Canadian history. The literature produced during the Confederating period and the early years of multiculturalism therefore constitutes a valuable medium to discern what is at stake in reinforcing “national” and “ethnic” identities as normative categories. This paper focuses on Canadian literature written during these times by Irish Catholic immigrants and their descendants because the conflicting role of the Irish as both colonizers and colonized adds political dynamics, the explorations of which help illustrate the objectives and shortcomings of national and multicultural ideologies. The majority of Irish settlers in Canada were of Protestant backgrounds and economically and politically fairly powerful thanks to such support networks as the Orange Order (Akenson; Wilson, *The Orange Order in Canada*). Although a significant number of Irish Catholics had already settled in British North America before the 1830s (Miller 196), the largest influx was during and just after the Great Famine of the late 1840s, which largely shaped the stereotypical image of the Irish as poor, downtrodden, “lazy, improvident and unthankful” people (Toronto Globe, 11 Feb. 1858, qtd. in McGowan 17). Precisely because of the colonial conditions with which Irish Catholics, in particular, have been associated, while they were simultaneously part of an Anglophone, Christian, and ‘white’ majority, literature by Irish Catholic Canadians constitutes a fruitful test case for the investigation of power dynamics within the ethno-national discourse of Canadian nation-building and multiculturalism.<sup>1</sup> As I will discuss, Canadian nationalism and imperialism provided Irish Catholic settlers with an opportunity to escape their status as racial inferiors and political and religious threats to the cohesion of the British Empire. At the same time, however, their strategies for overcoming colonial oppression only shifted but did not collapse the colonizer/colonized binary in Canada; it aggravated racial oppression, only with the Irish on the side of the winners. Multiculturalism later allowed, perhaps even forced them to reinscribe their national belonging with distinct ethnic features. Yet their long affinity to Canada’s ethnic majority and their central status within Canada’s national imaginary only underscored the artificiality of this ethnic reconstruction and instead shifted the focus to the individual and to intra-communal intersections of ethnicity with gender, class, and regional identities without tackling the inequalities on the larger societal level. The writers I have chosen for this investigation—Thomas D’Arcy McGee (1825–1868), Rosanna Leprohon (1829–1879), Harry J. Boyle (1915–2005), and Dennis T. Patrick Sears (1925–1976)—were extremely popular and arguably the most successful Irish-Canadian writers to represent Irish Catholic communities at the two time periods in question. McGee was not only a poet and journalist, but also a politician and one of the Fathers of Confederation. The entry on Leprohon in the *Bibliotheca Canadensis*, Canada’s first important encyclopaedia, claims that “[s]he has done more almost than any other Can[adian]

writer to foster and promote the growth of a national Literature" (Morgan 224). Apart from poetry, she wrote short stories and nine novels, four of which were translated into French immediately after publication in English. Boyle was not only a fiction writer and print journalist, but also a successful radio and television broadcaster; he later served as vice-chair (1968–1976) and then chair (1976–1977) of the Canadian Radio and Television Commission (CRTC). And Sears was discovered by publisher Jack McClelland, who provided him with a book contract based on the popularity of his journalism for the *Kingston Whig-Standard*. The centrality of these writers in Canada's cultural domain enhances the salience of their discursive strategies for my assessment of Irish-Canadian literature.

### **The Confederating Period**

Canada's national unification process began in the 1840s as the result of increased economic development made possible by the technological advances associated with the steam engine. Rapid population growth, the rise of industrialism, and the ideology of free trade contributed to the increase in economic activity in British North America (Bumsted 145–49).

The end of the Canadian–American Reciprocity Treaty during the American Civil War put the British North American provinces under pressure to intensify trade among themselves and expand the railway system. The railway was also seen as the best way of transporting troops, which is why it was promoted as a key element in British North America's defence strategy against a potential invasion from the south. Trade and defence, together with westward expansion and the improvement of infrastructure, were the fundamental intercolonial issues that warranted a reform of administrative structures and thus led to the Confederation debates (Martin 24). Some of the ideological concerns of Canadian Confederation and nation-building were, however, intricately linked to Ireland. In 1866, the Fenians, an Irish Republican organisation that fashioned itself after a band of ancient Irish warriors, and consisted mostly of veterans of the American Civil War, invaded Canada with the intention of joining forces with Canadian Fenians and bribing England into releasing Ireland as their colony. The invaders were quickly defeated but the invasions helped turn public opinion in favour of Confederation, especially in the previously rather sceptical Maritime colonies (Burns 260; Martin 22). One of the key negotiators in this process was Thomas D'Arcy McGee. Born in Ireland in 1825, McGee fled to the United States after the failed rebellion of 1848 and then relocated to Montreal in 1857. Even though he had previously fought for republican ideals in Ireland, he had grown disillusioned with them in the United States and favoured Canada because of its bilingual nature and its disestablished church (Burns 267; Wilson, *Thomas D'Arcy McGee* 295). By appealing to the budding sense of national feeling among settlers, McGee's campaign for Confederation was simultaneously an attempt at the

amelioration of the Irish situation and the lessening of religious and racial strife. McGee negotiated, in a sense, through his politics and his writing, room for Irishness in the conception of a Canadian identity. As Canada managed to accommodate minority rights within a British imperial framework, McGee wanted the country to serve as a model for Ireland (Wilson, *Thomas D'Arcy McGee* 44). The Fenian ideology fundamentally opposed the British Empire and thus intensified divides among Irish Catholic Canadians, splitting them into two major camps: radical Irish republicanism on the one hand, and constitutional Irish-Canadian nationalism on the other. Fenian radicalism also provoked a resurgence of anti-Catholic sentiment on the part of the Orange Order, and many Irish Catholics were arrested on suspicion, even if they had nothing to do with Fenian activity—a form of prejudice that continued for several years (Neidhardt 83, 134). Because of its divisive nature, McGee saw Fenianism as a threat to Irish integration in Canada, which sparked much controversy among Irish-Canadians. In April 1868 he was assassinated by a Fenian supporter in Ottawa, which ultimately proved his point about the futility of fighting violently for the Irish cause in Europe, and helped shift the focus of Irish-Canadians away from Ireland and towards their situation in Canada.

McGee's poetry collection, *Canadian Ballads, and Occasional Verses* (1858) testifies to his ideals. McGee recognized the importance of Canada's imperial link to Britain but also knew that for a successful social interaction among people from different backgrounds it was crucial to keep ethnic hostilities at a low and foster a unified identity. His call for and contribution to a Canadian "National Literature" was ironically based on an Irish decolonizing strategy. In his youth, McGee had been a member of Young Ireland, a didactic movement influenced by German nationalist philosophy to establish a unifying national literature in Ireland that would to celebrate the glories of Irish history and remind the Irish of their cultural accomplishments and virtues (Holmgren, "Ossian Abroad"). Ballad poetry was chosen as the predominant genre because it was seen as the supreme form of the "poetry of action and passion" (Dwan 207) and therefore well suited to the Irish political cause. With his experience in forming a national narrative for Ireland through ballads, McGee set out to establish the ballad as the dominant form of Canadian literature and even dedicated his *Canadian Ballads* to his Young Ireland mentor, Charles Gavan Duffy, in "memory of Old Times." Remaining true to the Young Ireland ideology, he focused on aspects of the culture that could transcend the different heritages and traditions of the individuals, even though this fabrication of a unifying narrative implied a certain disregard for historical accuracies and a tendency to emphasize myth over reality. McGee refrained from using images of violence and concentrated instead on a defence of cultural developments and achievements.

The *Canadian Ballads* provide jigsaw pieces of a founding myth that highlight McGee's sociopolitical interests: to establish an early form of multiculturalism based on religious, linguistic, and ethno-cultural tolerance. Irish-Canadians are reassured of their ethnic origins and simultaneously asked to develop a new Canadian identity resulting from the commemoration and reassessment of a communal North American heritage. The latter means, of course, the combination of both the aggregation of the various European cultures and traditions brought to North America by the settlers, and the ongoing response of the settlers to their Canadian environment. Effectively, this led McGee to write three different types of poems: poems that concentrate solely on Irish themes, poems that feature Canadian history, and poems that focus on Irish-Canadian connections.

Centring his Irish ethnicity in his *Canadian Ballads*, McGee was able to convey some key ideas about Canadian nationality. He saw every Canadian as coming from a distinct ethnic background, and while these ethnicities differed in content, structurally they worked in the same way. All ethnicities present in Canada could therefore nurture Canadian literature in similar ways. Didactically speaking, the poems attached to the emigrants' birthplaces were supposed to inspire other Canadians to "find corresponding sentiments of their own" (Holmgren, *Native Muses* 188). This served to shape Canada's "mental outfit," as McGee later outlined in a speech, ensuring that it is "national in its preferences, but catholic in its sympathies" (McGee, 1825—D'Arcy McGee—1925 2).

Whereas the Young Irelanders had not been concerned with religious or denominational difference, McGee's *Canadian Ballads* exhibit a distinctly Catholic worldview. Problematically, McGee did not reduce Catholicism to a facet of ethnicity to be cherished on a sub-national level that would allow the nation to be truly "catholic" or universal "in its sympathies." Instead, he tried to form the basis for a national identity at the intersection of Christianity and Canadian history, thus replicating an imperial ideology. The historical legacy he so proudly promoted as the essential substance of ballad poetry is the legacy of the colonizer; that is, it excludes the cultural achievements of Canada's Aboriginal peoples and forecloses anything pre-colonial. His ballads begin with European explorers, and several of them celebrate the evangelizing of Aboriginal communities. McGee's poem "Jacques Cartier" (*Canadian Ballads* 12–14) first evokes sublime natural settings in order to conjure up the excitement and admiration that European explorers displayed towards the New World. A few stanzas later, it reminds the reader of the settlers' civilizing missions. Canada's indigenous peoples appear as "pour souls" who worship "every living thing," but whose lives are greatly improved upon hearing the Christian gospel (14). "Jacques Cartier and the Child" (McGee, *Canadian Ballads* 15–16) portrays Canada's indigenous peoples as "Savages" whom the protagonist feels sorry for and wants to convert to the Christian faith to

save them. Both Cartier poems are written in the medieval European ballad form of elaborate fourteen or fifteen-syllable lines (Beaton), and are narrated by a chronicler with a pedagogical agenda. “The Arctic Indian’s Faith” (McGee, *Canadian Ballads* 29–30), on the other hand, is told from the Aboriginal perspective and in a much simpler style. Oral literature is already commonly associated with the “primitive” and connected to the stereotype of the Noble Savage (Finnegan 23–24). The ballad stanza form of alternating tetrameter and trimeter employed in his poem is reminiscent of the European oral tradition as well as the musical tradition of the ballad as a “a sung narrative poem” (Finnegan 10). It is used here in an attempt at a naturalistic depiction of Native orality, and serves to present a more primitive, emotional, and repetitive form of commemoration, less developed than the elaborate and seemingly more rational epic accounts of exploration. Moreover, as Terry Goldie suggests that indigenous “languages are assessed as sound rather than as vehicles of communication” (118), the song structure of “The Arctic Indian’s Faith” can be read as an allusion to the incomprehensibility of Aboriginal languages, cultures, and religious practices. While the choice of form enhances their perceived otherness, it simultaneously makes them familiar. This appropriation process consolidates racial difference and leaves the Indigene speechless. Contrary to the individual in the title, the Aboriginals in the body of the poem appear as a collective speaker. The settler who performs the ballad can easily inhabit the Native “we” and become not only part of the heritage but claim it for himself and his own heirs—a quick route to indigenization.

Although ballad-writing, for McGee, was an anti-colonial instrument that ought to help Canadians distinguish themselves from the British and the Americans, just as it had helped the Irish before, it also represented an indigenization strategy that would ultimately efface Aboriginal culture and centre white Canadians as the new Natives. McGee’s promotion of the ballad overwrote Canada’s pre-colonial heritage not only because he began his own narration of Canadian nationhood with the arrival of white colonizers and *European* settlement; but he also imported a poetic framework intricately linked to European oral folk culture that could thus easily conceal the very process by which it superseded Aboriginal orature. In proposing a European orality to replace Canada’s Aboriginal orality as a mythological tool, he normalized Canada in European conceptions of time and space. Because of its decentring potential within the European community, the adoption of the ballad as an anti-colonial tool in the aid of Canada’s nation-building process granted the Irish a central position in the newly imagined nation. The Irish used this tool to rid themselves of their own marginal status and to shift the colonizer/colonized dichotomy so that they could be included on the imperial side. They did not use it in order to denounce colonialism in general, which ultimately helped sharpen the racial divide and increase economic and political inequalities.

Another Irish-Canadian writer who published poetry in the 1850s and 1860s is Rosanna Leprohon. Leprohon's poems are in line with McGee's guidelines for a national literature, that is, they celebrate historical events, local culture, and the inhabitants' attachment to the Canadian environment. They appeared in such periodicals as the *Literary Garland* and even the *Boston Pilot*—a paper McGee had worked for and edited during his first sojourn in the United States between 1842 and 1845—and they were published posthumously in the collection *Poetical Works* (1881), edited by the Irish-Canadian poet John Reade. Given that both writers were well established in Montreal's Anglophone society, it is very likely that McGee and Leprohon read each other's poems carefully, if not discussed their subjects with one another. Leprohon's "Jacques Cartier's First Visit to Mount Royal" (66–67) can be considered a prequel to McGee's two "Jacques Cartier" poems, filling a gap in the historical narration of the nation. Before taking up the effort to Christianize the Natives as described by McGee, Leprohon's Cartier contemplates the distinctive elements of the land itself, including the St. Lawrence river, the regional hills and mountains, the future border to the United States in the form of Vermont, and, in the distance, "the Indian wigwams dun" (66). In her fifth and final stanza, Leprohon points to a crucial step in any exploration: that of naming the land. She climactically describes how Cartier came up with "*Mont Royal*" (67) as the name for the mountain in what is today the city of Montreal. The inscription of the Canadian place in the linguistic and imperial system of the European explorers thus becomes the central motif of her eulogy.

Born in Montreal in 1829 and married to a French Canadian physician, Leprohon was not only already a second-generation Canadian but also considerably removed from Irish immigrant circles. The Irish do appear in her poetry but they are often constructed as "other" in terms of gender and belonging. Leprohon uses the categories of gender, race, and religion to define a superior Canadian identity that appears to be an amalgamation of British Isles and French legacies but without any conscious attachment to Europe. The clear distinctions she draws between Irish immigrants and established Canadian nationals becomes clear in her poem "Monument to Irish Emigrants" (81–83), which is an appraisal of a monument built in 1859 to commemorate the Famine Irish who arrived in Canada in 1847–1848 and died from typhus. It is a rare reference to Leprohon's own ethnic kinfolk, but this relationship is nowhere expressed in the text. Through her constant usage of the second- and third-person plural Leprohon maintains an us/them binary and alienates the Irish from her own Canadian community, beginning with the title. The dead were emigrants from Ireland instead of immigrants to Canada, which underscores the fact that they have nothing to do with Canadian society. The actual poem ends with the Famine Irish silenced and reduced to a piece of stone that is supposed to tell their story. Yet the living Irish too are alienated



by the speaker, both through the use of the second person and the ascription of male gender. It is worth noting here that in Europe, the Irish and other “Celtic races” were usually portrayed as effeminate in colonial discourse, and that the ascription of masculinity to Ireland is a reverse kind of “Othering,” unconventionally conducted from a female perspective. Moreover, as Sara Ahmed pointed out, the gender construction of the nation usually roots in the distinction between “what the nation takes to be as itself (the masculine subject)” and “what it has (the feminine object)” (136). Claiming degenerate or dead male bodies for itself would significantly weaken Canada’s self-image as a virile and strong new nation. Therefore, Leprohon associates the male gender with distance and foreignness, for example, when she speaks of “Ye gallant sons of toil” and “their fatherland” (82) or the “Sons of a distant land” (83). The monument is also not for our but “*your* kindred dead” (82, added emphasis), and Irish kinship is notably linked to toil and death. Taking into account that Leprohon’s father was an immigrant from Ireland and her mother already born in Canada, it makes sense for her to use gender categories as spatial metaphors to express distance and closeness to Canadian culture. Leprohon herself has already cast off her European ethnic belonging completely and become rooted in Canada. Thus she is following the maternal link, and her Canadian homeland identity is consequently expressed with signifiers from the female sphere.

Her national, imperial, and female confidence is particularly obvious in the poem immediately following “Jacques Cartier’s First Visit to Mount Royal” in her *Poetical Works*. “The White Maiden and the Indian Girl” (68–69) is structured as a dialogue between a white, possibly Irish-Canadian girl and one from a local indigenous tribe, who compare their living conditions with each other. It first may seem that both girls are on equal terms; they have an equal number of lines in the discussion, and the white girl’s arguments are well countered by the Indigene. But always speaking second and responding to the terms the white girl has laid out, the Native is, of course, caught within the language system of the colonizer and confined in her resistance to the definitions already established. As a result, the settler/Native binary is not broken down but reaffirmed.

Leprohon uses the term “maiden” for the “white” girl in the poem’s title, certainly to evoke the idea of the settler’s innocence and the fear of miscegenation. Throughout the actual poem, however, the white girl addresses the “Indian” as “maiden” and also as “child,” which cements a phallogentric and paternal worldview. Myra Rutherdale has documented how Anglican missionaries in Northern British Columbia, the Yukon, and the Northwest Territories, in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries used maternal metaphors to describe and justify their work. Leprohon’s poetry can be interpreted as the literary equivalent if not justification for this kind of matronizing behaviour. The idea of sisterhood, on the other hand, was frequently evoked in the

nineteenth century not only to describe a common gender identity but also to express a shared public responsibility for causes such as women's rights, temperance, and evangelization. The identification as "sisters in Christ," an image common to the convent tradition, is but one example (Lasser 165). However, sisterhood cannot transcend racial boundaries. The Native girl in the poem, calling her European companion "sister" and "White Lily," tries in vain to establish a lasting natural bond. Thus the closeness, innocence, and kinship expressed in these terms mask the colonial power structure and metaphorically describe what Terry Goldie calls indigenization (13). Not only writing about the truly indigenous but establishing this familial association with them is Leprohon's way of showing that "white" people in Canada have become native.

The settler's subsequent displacement of the Native is illustrated in Leprohon's poem by the separation of the girls. The white girl realises that she "cannot tempt" the "Indian" to live in her "palace home" but has to leave her in a forest rife with "countless dangers and hardships" (69). Interestingly, the Native takes up this reference of menacing death when she asks her white counterpart, "Back to the free, fresh woods let me hie, / Amid them to live,—amid them to die" (69). Yet as she also says, she "would worry to death of this gilded cage" (69), the settler's home is not a healthy alternative. The ambivalence here lies in the fact that the image of the "gilded cage," as well as the dark and scented rooms, are subversive criticisms of Leprohon's own domestic sphere and may reflect a secret admiration and desire on the part of the speaker-poet for certain indigenous lifestyles. The female Aboriginal commonly "represents the attractions of the land but in a form which seems to request domination" (Goldie 65). As a result, the two worlds are incompatible, and the Aboriginal ultimately has to die in order for the settler to live.

This conclusion carries an obvious Christian reference, a connotation that is present in many of Leprohon's poems. The eponymous "Huron Chief's Daughter" (86–87), for example, is about to be burnt on a pyre by Iroquois warriors. A Jesus-like figure, she is portrayed as a noble queen, proudly enduring her cruel fate, and praying for a death in strength and courage to "be fit to reign, oh God! with Thee" (87). While "The Huron Chief's Daughter" illustrates the "savagery" of the Iroquois, "The White Canoe: A Legend of Niagara Falls" (36–49) focuses on the morbidity of Seneca spirituality as it depicts a tribal girl who, chosen as a sacrifice to the Spirit of Niagara, paddles into death, and is joined by her father, the tribe's widowed chief, who wants to sacrifice himself next to her. In several poems, Aboriginal girls are sacrificed and the Catholic faith simultaneously promoted.

Displacing the Native Canadian and stripping the Irish-Canadian of his or her ethnic affiliation, Leprohon envisions Canada as a nation of devout white Christians and civilizers. Her texts represent a move towards the adop-

tion of an “ethnicity-free” identity that is today often termed “Anglo-Celtic” (Fee 274). On top of that deliberate move, McGee’s assassination at the hand of a Fenian only emphasised the benefit of turning away from ethnic baggage and towards the construction of a centralized Canadian identity. Many post-Confederation Irish-Canadian poets such as John Reade, Isabella Valancy Crawford, or Nicholas Flood Davin took this attitude for granted and cemented this ideology in their poetry. Moreover, all of these poets have been canonized early on through their inclusion in popular Canadian anthologies. Both McGee’s “The Arctic Indian’s Faith” and “Jacques Cartier” were included in Dewart’s famous *Selections from Canadian Poets* (1864) as well as Lighthall’s three anthologies (1889; 1892; 1894). Leprohon also saw five of her poems included in Dewart’s *Selections*; “A Canadian Summer Evening” was included in Lighthall’s anthologies; and “The Huron Chief’s Daughter” was anthologized in Rand’s *A Treasury of Canadian Verse* (1900). As the focus on the “ethnic” had subsequently been replaced by the “national” and the “regional,” the literary representation of Irish ethnic identity gradually disappeared, and the Irish became almost invisible members of Canada’s ethnic majority. The linguistic, historical, mythological, literary, religious, and other commonalities that were envisioned in this move towards invisibility cemented the illusion of national homogeneity (Kymlicka 62).

### **The Early Years of Multiculturalism**

In 1963, when a surge of Quebecois nationalism had been posing a number of questions about the relationship between the “two founding nations,” the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism was established to enquire into the cultural contributions and practices of Canada’s population. While the resulting establishment of official bilingualism was more readily accepted, the suggestion to frame Canada in bicultural terms was met with harsh criticism, especially from Ukrainian Canadians, soon followed by Jewish Canadians, who requested an acknowledgement of Canada’s multicultural diversity (McRoberts 122). In 1971, multiculturalism was introduced to eradicate racial and ethnic prejudice and discrimination in the national debate, to adapt Canada’s previous bicultural self-conception to the societal realities, and officially to recognise “ethno-cultural particularities ... as legitimate expressions of the larger Canadian culture” (Troper 1002). The irony was that many of the “ethno-cultural particularities” of Canada’s ethnic majorities had already become mainstream features of Canadian culture so that they were left virtually “ethnicity-free,” while the “otherness” of ethnic minorities was highlighted. Multiculturalism is effectively only one of three branches of “group-differentiated minority rights” in Canada: Indigenous peoples have been negotiating land claims and treaty rights; the descendants of the historic French settlers obtained “bilingualism and provincial autonomy (for the Québécois)”; and “multicultural” rights and accommodations were finally arranged for ethnic groups that were neither part of an indigenous commun-

ity nor of the "two solitudes" (Kymlicka 78, 91). The Irish as an "historic substate 'nation'" of the British (Kymlicka 78) were naturally included on the English side of the two solitudes, and beyond that Irish Catholics were allied religiously with the French. This inclusion, however, put the Irish in an awkward position. While it acknowledged their contribution to Canada's national and imperial outlook with its implied inequalities vis-à-vis linguistic and racial minorities, it occluded the fact that much of the Irish migration to Canada had been caused by a similar imperial ideology except with the Irish at the receiving end. Because the identification with the Irish language, Fenianism, and Famine victimhood, for example, would mark the Irish as different, marginal and inferior, and certainly irreconcilable with the cultural identities of the other Anglophone settlers in Canada—representatives of the same English and Scottish imperial elites that also governed Ireland—they had to be assimilated or replaced to fit into the national imagination. The Irish were therefore both included in and at odds with the English solitude.

As Will Kymlicka has argued, multiculturalism is not merely about "recognition" and "identities" but also about "redistribution" and "interests"; that is, it is about power and resources (80–83). Yet the Canadian Irish already had positions of power during the Confederating period; to name but one example, Thomas D'Arcy McGee became a member of the Legislative Assembly soon after his arrival in Canada, and he was Minister of Agriculture, Immigration, and Statistics (1864–1867) while negotiating Confederation with other political leaders. How do the Irish then fit into Canada's multicultural imagination? Were the Irish—who in terms of language, religion, and settlement history can be located close to both English and French Canadians—so much assimilated that they had very little to produce by the time they were allowed to step outside the bicultural framework and perform Irishness as an intrinsic element of their Canadian identity again? Did they place particular emphases on "identities" or "interests" and manipulate the ideology for special gains? How much of a role did ethnicity play in Irish-Canadian literature when the performance of distinct ethnic identities became a marker of being Canadian and an instrument of empowerment, although the Irish had been empowered a century earlier precisely because they stopped performing such distinct ethnic identities?

*The Lark in the Clear Air* (1974) by Dennis T. Patrick Sears and *The Luck of the Irish: A Canadian Fable* (1975) by Harry J. Boyle are *Bildungsromane* both set on Irish farms in rural Ontario during the Depression. The main plots of both novels explore family ties, community relations, and romance over the course of about one year as seen through the eyes of an orphaned adolescent. However, each novel is also clearly anchored in the early 1970s through its narrative perspective, which opens a window of about forty years that gives the reader a sense of how ethnic affiliations and societal structures have changed throughout the decades.

Sears's text is predicated on the assumption that Irish-Canadians do not identify themselves as Irish beyond the first generation, but that Irishness is a label that can easily be supplied from the outside—by a different person or by the narrator who looks back at his past from a future standpoint—especially to mark a lack of education or civility.<sup>2</sup> Boyle's text, on the other hand, treats Irishness as something more organic and continuously present, except that the ethnographer would find a different representation of it depending on the generation he or she looks at and the year of inquiry. Although both novels conform to the multiculturalist urge to diversify, they expose both the socially constructed nature of ethnicity and the intrinsic diversity of an ethnic community. Considering the relative attention they received—with *The Luck of the Irish* winning the Stephen Leacock Memorial Medal for Humour in 1976, and *The Lark in the Clear Air* being canonized with its adoption into the New Canadian Library series in 1985—the novels are symptomatic of the way multiculturalism encouraged representations of the “Celtic fringes”—Margaret Laurence's *The Diviners* (1974) is another good example—but they are also symptomatic of the ongoing misrepresentation and exclusion of other voices from Canadian literature. Put differently, they accorded privilege to the fringes of an already privileged group.

In their generic conception, these ethnographic social realist novels<sup>3</sup> are, much like the ballad and the historiographic poem in the nineteenth century, aspiring to a national or universal level. In addition to their focus on various distinct representations of identity—ethnicity, gender, religion, generation, region, and so on—their realism indulges, to quote Georg Lukács, the type:

a peculiar synthesis which organically binds together the general and the particular both in characters and situations. What makes a type a type is not its average quality, not its mere individual being, however profoundly conceived; what makes it a type is that in it all the humanly and socially essential determinants are present on their highest level of development, ... rendering concrete the peaks and limits of men and epochs. (6)

This universal aspect of the realist character is very important. Both Boyle and Sears have made it clear that they do see their work as simultaneously autobiographically specific and representative of the universal.<sup>4</sup> That is, their characters can be read as synecdoches for the nation (Ryder 16). They extend the self symbolically into the social and transform personal experience into a larger political narrative (Patten 51). While the novels flesh out local Irish heritage, their use of the orphan motif and the *Bildungsroman* structure are emblematic of a renunciation of the local community and a simultaneous embrace of a national Canadian identity. Tom Macrae, the protagonist of *The Luck of the Irish*, appears instantly symbolical: he is born on the twelfth of July, Orangeman's day, baptised Catholic at once, and dies at the age of fifty-two on the first of July, Canada Day. Losing his parents at a young age, Tom

is raised by his sister Carrie, a bossy, ignorant, but religious woman. Tom's symbolic trajectory of transformation is also a result of his ethnic, even racial origins. The narrator provides a long list of success stories in Celtic myth and Irish history that Tom appears connected to through blood and genes, "mysterious hereditary strains bubbling away in him" (133). Growing up, he had been a passive consumer of these stories; however, when the Macraes' barn is destroyed in an instance of spontaneous combustion, and the siblings set off on a pilgrimage to change their economic fortunes, Tom begins to change and to rearrange actively the grid of Irishness that concerns his life.

The pilgrimage to the Martyrs' Shrine near Midland, north of Toronto, is explicitly likened to the Atlantic crossings of Jacques Cartier (34) and of the Irish emigrants during the famine (40), both of which also led to redefinitions of identities and vast economic changes. This identifies the pilgrimage, on the one hand, as a metaphor for the transformative experience of migration in general. On the other hand, the central event of the pilgrimage, the miracle, is very much a symbol for the transition of the Irish as a poor settler community to being very successful Canadian individuals. It works as a catharsis for the community and leads to a softening of sectarian differences, a decline of religious fervour, and a substitution of psychology for religion to emphasize individual identities over community values.

This pluralisation is also expressed in the narrative perspective. The novel contains a lot of dialogue as well as direct "quotations" from various characters as if they were being interviewed. The parts of the main plot told from the point of view of Tom Macrae contain both sections in free indirect speech and longer interior monologues set apart and indented. This heteroglossia allows for a rich picture of a community in transition, and makes a point about identity already on the structural level of the book: ethnic communities are composed by individuals who represent a variety of opinions, values, and manners of speaking.

The heterogeneous group of characters that the reader meets at the beginning and end of the novel highlights the changes in the Irish-Canadian community between the late 1920s—the setting of the main plot with the pilgrimage—and the late 1960s—the setting of the frame narrative that focuses on Tom's funeral. While the mourners do not represent racial or linguistic diversity, they nonetheless signify cultural diversity as they are ranked according to the relative importance of their various markers of identity. The fact that the Irish Americans are introduced as the first mourners underscores the centrality of ethnicity. Both Boyle's and Sears's novels repeatedly draw attention to the many family connections between the Irish in Ontario and those in the area around Detroit, Michigan.<sup>5</sup> The people from the immediate local surroundings are listed as the second group of guests. They are mostly business relations of the deceased and are from a variety of ethnic

backgrounds, which appear to be representative of the demographics of the region. It is with regard to the Catholic community, only the third one to be introduced, that the biggest changes are pointed out, which is probably an indicator of its relative decline in importance. Not only has the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) had its bearings, but also the ethnic mix within Catholic communities has changed, furnishing the Macraes' parish, for example, with a Polish priest. The narrator makes the interesting remark that the Irish American visitors find this a lot less odd than the Irish-Canadian parishioners who have a hard time reconciling the priest's ethnic heritage with the fact that their church's "stained glass windows had all been donated by Redmonds, Brophys, O'Briens, Callaghans, and so on" (2). This observation places an additional emphasis on the first category, Irish ethnicity, which seems to increase its importance in the perception of subjectivity the more Catholicism disappears from within the Irish ethnic self-conception, and the more Catholicism overlaps with other ethnicities in Canada. In that sense, the novel presents the Irish community at a critical moment when the dynamics of homogeneity and diversity with regard to both ethnicity and religion are slowly being altered and the related powers shifted.

This uprooting of Catholic sternness, however, does not represent a challenge to the overall celebration of Canada's Christian heritage. Catholicism is still presented as the trigger for the pilgrimage, and the shrine is a cultural relic from the time of Canada's colonization and therefore an imperial manifestation and affirmation of the consolidated power of Christianity. The shrine commemorates the Jesuits' mission to Aboriginal communities as well as their tragic death on such pyres as Leprohon described in her poems. Its history is introduced by a preacher from London whose speech at mass is purposely sensationalist to entertain the congregation and encourage the pilgrimage. Moreover, the character of Sylvester Toogood, the seller of fake relics, takes any seriousness out of colonial history. He exploits Native Canadians as a commercial commodity to boost sales, reproducing the stereotype of the Native shaman who has natural healing powers but died out in the course of imperial expansion. Any frightening aspects of Native culture are removed by presenting the relic-providing Chief as a Christian and part-white, that is, assimilated and de-indigenized (Goldie 132–33), and by situating his life in the past. It has become a cliché that "whites of an Irish or Scottish heritage" have "an unusual ability to comprehend indigene mysticism and thus are unusually apt candidates for indigenization" (Goldie 137). By presenting the Aboriginal as a void, Boyle depicts a natural progression from McGee's and Leprohon's "imaginary Indian" (Francis) to the fake Aboriginal product for consumption: the Celtic settler does not need to assert his superiority anymore; he has replaced the Native completely. Even within the narrow Catholic framework, Poles and Italians are depicted as tragic outsiders and not yet belonging to

the community, which reinforces the picture of an "Anglo-Celtic" core in Ontario to which the Irish naturally belong.

Though not quite as intent on using symbolic dates as Boyle, Dennis Sears, in *The Lark in the Clear Air*, still points out that his character Mick is born in the year before Confederation (126); he was born in Ireland and arrived in Canada two years later. Of mixed Irish background, Mick unites a cultural dichotomy that continuously affirms and subverts traditional Irish stereotypes: bourgeois and farmer, Anglo-Irish landowner and Catholic stable-boy, arts education and a love of nature, good manners and a disposition to violence. His ward and great-nephew Danny describes him as "a kind of King Frog in a puddle big enough for him to operate in and small enough to rule out any possible competitors" (88). Through such a hybrid and individualized form of ethnicity, the practice of categorizing people as representatives of distinct communal identities is ridiculed. At the same time, however, the novel exposes the regulating power of the "civilized" ruling circles that limit Mick's options—as a member of the School Board, for instance—and seem to trigger his conscious rejections of civility and his embraces of alcoholism, prostitutes, and fist fights.

Mick prefers to escape into music whenever he has the chance. Whereas Danny was bored by the songs as a teenager, the grown-up narrator develops a folkloric interest: "I wish now, looking back, I'd written the words down or studied harder at catching the tunes" (74). Relating back to Thomas D'Arcy McGee's insistence on the importance of ballads for the creation of national (and ethnic) identities, this metafictional statement is another way of drawing attention to the potential of song and literature as prime preservers of heritage. Furthermore, it highlights the disappearance of distinct ethnic markers between the first and the third generation, between the arrival from Ireland and the adoption of an "ethnicity-free" Canadianness, and between Confederation and multiculturalism.

While ethnicity seems to have great meaning for Mick, it is already an empty category and a mere label for Danny. As the adult narrator, he speaks about his youth from an ironic distance and adds the label "Irish" to past situations predominantly for comic relief. "Irishness," however, is also closely connected to aspects of education, that is, ethnic identity is depicted as a way of performing that can and should be altered by certain amounts and kinds of learning. Danny's love interest, the school teacher Elaine, resembles the nineteenth-century cartoon figure of Britannia, the strong English female who rescues the Irishman from anarchy by civilizing him. She too supplies Irishness from the outside as a label of otherness, identifying certain actions and features of Danny's and Mick's as "Irish." She teaches Danny correct English grammar and poetry and wants him to go to university to escape Mick's fate. The novel ultimately presents a clash of desires and a mix of messages, of



which some celebrate the diversifying objectives of multiculturalism, and some undermine them by idolizing the civilized, highly educated, and successful white Canadian who has overcome animal urges and ethnic curiosities.

Through intertextuality and mythopoeia, the novel is coloured in a particular shade of Canadianness that is simultaneously Irish and Canadian. *The Lark in the Clear Air* is not only named after a poem by Samuel Ferguson, an Irish poet who was praised by Gavan Duffy, the Young Ireland mastermind and mentor of McGee, for his “appeal to the imagination and passions, not to the intellect” (qtd. in Dwan 207), but the novel can be read as an actual adaptation of this Irish text. This highlights the novel’s groundedness in both the Irish and the Irish-Canadian literary tradition, while also demonstrating the impact of the natural environment on the composition of culture. This strategy disguises the fact that the pastoral incorporation of Canada’s natural environment into a European narrative framework is in itself a strategy that was developed by Irish and other explorers of, visitors to, and settlers in Canada, such as McGee and Leprohon, making the novel only an updated version of the kind of homogeneity-inducing cultural product Irish-Canadian settlers had been developing long before. The style underscores the centrality of the European explorer in Canada’s founding myth and the subsequently assumed universality of Anglo-Celtic constructions of Canadianness.

Both Boyle and Sears present their own ethnic communities as microcosms to serve as examples for Canada overall, suggesting that social cohesion in Canada only works by recognizing the essentially human characteristics of every person, and by negotiating happiness and success on individualistic terms. While they relativize the Irish experience in a larger Canadian context, presenting Irish settlers in a particular frame of space and time, they simultaneously underscore their centrality in the construction of Canada as an essentially white, Anglo-Celtic, Christian country. Their play with stereotypes and their formal choices promote a settlement into coded norms rather than a challenge to the problematic nature of colonial history; they reaffirm the values of the Confederating period but do not question the ideologies that led to assimilation. Since multiculturalism introduced a shift of power away from the established cultural majorities, the assertion of minority identities *within* the majority appears a strategy of reclaiming privilege under changed conditions.

## Conclusion

Assessing Irish settler colonialism at the time of Confederation and the early years of official multiculturalism, one can conclude that in trying to escape British colonial domination Irish-Canadian writers have successfully converted anti-colonial strategies into national programs that helped them move from the cultural margins into a self-created centre. To use my titular metaphors, borrowed from Leprohon and Sears, they have, first, asserted their racial superiority and indigenized themselves, becoming "white lilies"—innocent, natural Canadians. The later position as "king frog in a puddle" indicates an amphibious nature that allows the Irish to move easily between "ethnic specificity" and "ethnicity-free mainstream," underscoring in a sense the instability of identities. At the same time, however, the king frog is also a (European) myth that conceals a position of power. In such a framework where ethnicity is presented as something that can be overcome, the pattern of "ethnicity-as-choice" and "race-as-determination" (Anagnostou 107) is consolidated, and multiculturalism becomes a void that only increases the inequalities on the level of the larger society. As Kymlicka reminds us, nation-building and multiculturalism are not contradictory; in fact, multiculturalism must be seen as a transformation of rather than an opposition to the nation-state (83). The Irish have historically shown the validity of this statement in the way they integrated themselves into Canada's early oligo-ethnic national vision, securing a space for the shamrock on the English side of the bicultural framework. Yet over time they have become part of the problem, not the solution. The potential for change lies in the concept of collective remembering and forgetting that is an essential principle of any nation-building, whether imperial or multicultural (Renan). That Irishness and its relation to the Canadian nation was not remembered all that differently in the early years of official multiculturalism compared to the way it was ideologically understood around the time of Confederation shows how strongly the Irish contributed to the homogenizing of Canadian identity, and how slowly national self-conceptions develop over time. This does not mean, however, that the Irish have not moved on from there. In fact, the challenges to the national forgetting of various forms of racism, exclusion, injustice and oppression, that have been brought forward by those who were empowered by official multiculturalism, have had their impact on subsequent accounts of Irish-Canadian remembering and forgetting. That is, an assessment of contemporary Irish-Canadian literature promises different conclusions than those reached here, but to go into detail would exceed the focus of this paper. Suffice it to say that the more recent transnational explorations of Irish-Canadian identity that specifically contemplate the ironies inherent in the Irish colonizer/colonized binary have been much more sceptical about cultural nationalism and multicultural harmony in Canada (Urschel).

If multiculturalism, as an ideology that is supposed to guarantee social justice and equality, “is not just about ‘retention’ of an identity but its development within a larger social context” (Kostash 95)—and the “nation” provides such a context—it is mandatory to analyse this context in terms of its inclusionary and exclusionary practices. As Laura Moss has argued, “[i]f context contains memory, then it is also vital to consider social, political, and historically specific contexts to remember what is, or has been, done in the name of the nation” (Moss 11). This essay has tried to do just that with respect to Irish Catholic Canadians. Moving forward, however, it is also worth considering the conceptual instability of the nation as the site of these kinds of negotiations precisely because of its associations with the history of racism. Whereas Donna Palmateer Pennee has celebrated the process of “national literary studies” as the enabler of “a kind of literary citizenship” that can counter forms of exclusion (81–82), Lily Cho, in a direct critique of Pennee’s work, has problematized the nation as the “natural site of citizenship” (95), suggesting instead to foreground “diasporic citizenship.” For her, “dwelling in this dissonance between diaspora and citizenship” has the potential “to enable memory to tear away at the coherence of national forgettings” (109). As Irish-Canadian literature has done much to define the terms of reference in Canada’s debates about the “national” and the “ethnic,” a move away from these categories towards the “citizen” and the “diasporic” might produce the space where the previously marginalized are able to redefine the centre, and a dialogue of equals can emerge.

## Notes

1. I use scare quotes to describe the Irish as ‘white’, because of their not uncontested hold on whiteness. See David Wilson’s “Comment: Whiteness and Irish Experience in North America” for a thorough discussion of the relevant historiography.
2. For a critical definition of civility, especially in the Canadian context, see Daniel Coleman’s *White Civility* (2006). He refers to civility as combining “the temporal notion of civilization as progress that was central to the idea of modernity and the colonial mission with the moral-ethical concept of a (relatively) peaceful order—that is to say, the orderly regulation between individual liberty and collective equality that has been fundamental to the politics of the modern nation state” (10; original emphasis).
3. I classify them as “social realist,” as opposed to plainly “realist,” because of their anti-Romantic depiction of social struggles, a setting in neglected areas, and ordinary language.
4. Boyle had this tendency to use the local to comment on the national already in his work as a radio and TV broadcaster (McCreath); also see his essay collections. As for Sears, regarding his first novel, he writes, “It may be argued, with cause, that any novel is, after a fashion, autobiographical. In that sense the episodic nature of *The Lark in the Clear Air* reflects slices of life as I knew it from that part of my boyhood spent growing up in Ontario” (11); however, he also uses the term “mythical” to characterize his invented Brulé setting, which

- serves as a universal stand-in for “all back-country Ontario farm and townlands that have, or had, a marginally agricultural tenure” (10).
5. This cross-border connection is a persistent motif in Irish-Canadian literature. Such recent novels as Emma Donoghue’s *Landing* (2007) and Jane Urquhart’s *Sanctuary Line* (2010) also stress family links among the Canadian Irish in Ontario and the American Irish around Detroit.

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