

The Irish Immigrant Adjustment to Toronto : 1840-1860

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“The founders of Toronto and of the Province were ardent Loyalists. To them England was all in all; its freedom ideal, its constitution perfection.”¹ In 1812 the total population for all of Upper Canada was only 33,000. This meant that Toronto, as the hub of political activity, also tended to exercise considerable social and economic influence upon the entire Province by virtue of the concentration of important personages within its environs. As in the United States of America, the early immigrants to Canada were reasonably well-to-do, professionals, merchants or farmers. They also tended to be Protestant and pro-British.² It was into this environment the Irish immigrant arrived. Statistical studies show that during the first three decades of the 19th century the percentage of Irish immigration, out of the total arriving in both countries, was far higher in Canada than in the U.S.A. This would indicate that during the early decades of the 19th century there was a marked preference for Canada by Irish immigrants. Attempting to provide an explanation for this preference, W. F. Adams ruled out religious convictions as a possibility.³ British rule was a dominant factor in their choice of location. With their middle class background, the early Irish immigrants were, in fact, able to find employment in every trade and profession, and where recognition was due, access to every social level.⁴ Financial ability alone determined where one would locate. Prices were lower and social structure in Toronto was not nearly as rigid as in Boston.

The pre-famine Irish tended to congregate in large urban settings in the U.S.A. while in Canada they were more rural oriented. However, in the 1840's, as shift in the Irish rural orientation began to be experienced. The harsh realities of the Canadian climate made farming a less than desirable occupation for any lacking the skill to make it profitable. Many Irish farmers became discouraged and moved to

¹ Jesse Edgar MIDDLETON, *The Municipality of Toronto: A History*, (3 Vol.) (Toronto, 1923), Volume 2, p. 693.

² William F. ADAMS, *Ireland and Irish Emigration to the New World: From 1815 to the Famine* (New York, 1932), pp. 64-65 and 95.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

⁴ Kenneth DUNCAN, “Irish Famine Immigration and the Social Structure of Canada West,” in W. E. MANN, *Canada: A Sociological Profile* (Toronto, 1968), p. 1.

the city to find employment, usually as unskilled labourers. This helped increase the number destined for Toronto or other urban areas. In addition, as the flood gates of Irish immigration opened, many farmers feared the newcomers to be carriers of disease and refused to hire them.⁵ This also tended to redirect the Irish immigration stream from the country to the city. With this rural-urban shift and with the waves of Irish immigrants arriving daily through the 1840's, Toronto's population began to expand rapidly. Yet the city into which the Irish moved differed in many ways from its American counterparts. Being a relatively new centre, even shanties could be constructed on the Don Flats within walking distance of employment. Conditions never reached the tenement proportions found in Boston. The availability and accessibility of land and accommodation prevented Irish ghettos developing to the degree that was experienced in several American cities on the east coast during the same period. Concerning the location of the Irish within Toronto, from a study of the *Assessment Rolls* and *City directories* it would appear as though the Irish congregated near the core of the city, not far from the wharves. Further, the *directories* reveal very few multi-unit dwellings giving rise to the impression that, modest or not, each immigrant could reasonably aspire to ownership, or at the very least, rental of his own dwelling unit in Toronto. There were tenement-like dwellings in the King and Yonge Streets district at the height of the immigrant influx but studies of the directories a decade or two later show that they were of short existence though the centre of Irish concentration remained reasonably fixed in the southern and eastern sectors of the city.

By the 1840's, however, the calibre of immigrant changed and opportunities for social mobility became correspondingly more selective. Generally the immigrants of the 1840's and 1850's were unskilled. However, as a source of cheap labour, the Irish were displacing no ethnic group and thereby posed no threat to the existing employment status of native workers. Consequently they experienced no overt job discrimination save that posed by their own limitations. But in contrast to the usual experience, Toronto Irish women were engaged in domestic service to a notably lesser degree than seems to have been the case in the United States. Lack of demand may provide a possible explanation. The fortunate consequence was that it permitted the women to remain at home and provide the Irish family with a sense of unity not enjoyed by Irish families in the urban centres of the eastern United States.⁶ Considering both sexes, the directories reveal that

⁵ Kenneth DUNCAN, *Op. cit.*, p. 6.

⁶ For a discussion of the type of prejudice experienced by the Irish domestics, see the article by John J. APPEL entitled "From Shanties to Lace Curtains: The Irish Image in Puck, 1877-1910," in *The Journal of Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Volume 13, No. 4, October 1971, pp. 365-375. Cf also an unpublished study presented to the *Duquesne History Forum*, in 1971, by Blaine MCKINLEY entitled "Ethnic Tensions in the Middle-Class American Home:

the vast majority were employees rather than self-employed and some upward occupational (and we might assume social) mobility was evidenced. But there does seem enough evidence to suggest that the Irish never remained a massive lump in the Toronto community, undigested and indigestible.

The Toronto Irish were characterized by high involvement in the *Trade Labour Movement*.⁷ Their success in labour movements and rapid penetration into employment areas like the police force, stevedoring or street-railway occupations or even seafaring indicates as much about the skills brought with them to their new homeland as it does about the types of positions available for immigrant groups within the Toronto economy. Although the famine period immigrants tended to assume occupational roles at the lowest end of the economic and social order this served one useful function: as the economy expanded they arrived to assume the jobs no one else apparently desired. Group conflict was thus kept to a minimum. On the negative side, by the late 1860's and 1870's, as the native born offspring of these immigrants began to push upward, resistance increased and this later period was characterized by increased group conflict and social disorder.

The lower economic and social status of the famine immigrants created a dichotomy even within the ranks of the Irish. The destitute, illiterate, pro-Republican, liberal, Catholic and anti-British characteristics that marked the newcomers also set them apart from their countrymen who had arrived in earlier years. These religious, political and economic differences contributed to the assimilation of the pre-famine Irish into the social structure of Toronto. It also gave the characterization of "Irishness" a new model against which those who were Irish, and those who were not, worked out their identity in new ways. In the ensuing decade, the effect of this transformation was illustrated by the subtle shift of orientation in Irish institutions such as the St. Patrick's Society and the Orange Order. The former clearly became a Catholic body dedicated to the preservation of values held by the immigrants who had arrived during the famine years. On the other hand, pre-famine Irish immigrants, desirous of maintaining their cultural heritage, found the structure and orientation of the Orange Order more compatible to their Protestant and pro-British leanings. On the other hand, the

Employees Attitudes and Irish Servants, 1850-1876."

⁷ Lloyd G. REYNOLD, *The British Immigrant: His Social and Economic Adjustment in Canada*, Toronto, 1935, p. 92; and D. C. MASTERS, *The Rise of Toronto: 1850-1890* (Toronto, 1947), p. 109. John HIGHAM, *Strangers in the Land: Patterns of American Nativism, 1860-1925*, New York, 1966, p. 49. The Police Report submitted to the City Council in 1851 reveals that all officers were English and all the constables Irish, nearly all Protestant. Two were Roman Catholic.

Boston model detailed by Handlin⁸ does not fit Toronto. In Boston, the lack of acceptance forced the Irish in upon themselves and explained the appearance of financial and commercial institutions oriented solely towards the needs of the group. Perhaps because the Irish in Toronto maintained the ascendancy as the largest single ethnic group for many years, they represented a sizeable, latent if not actual, political and economic force with which to be reckoned and experienced no threat on the scale of the Boston Irish:

*Distribution by Ethnic Group - Toronto (1848-1861)*⁹

Year	Total population	Irish	English	Scottish
1848	23,503	9,044 (39%)	3,789	1,605
1851	30,775	11,305 (37%)	4,958	2,169
1861	44,821	12,441 (27%)	7,112	1,961

Threatened by events in 1812 and 1837, Upper Canadians represented a mixture of views that occasionally flirted with republicanism but more often reflected profound pro-British or pro-Canadian attitudes. This latter attitude was well summed up *vis-à-vis* ethnic identity in an editorial which appeared in the 18 March, 1846 issue of *The Examiner*, concerning the “unusual enthusiasm” of the previous day’s procession:

We are no advocate for the perpetuation of those national distinctions which it is the design of these societies to keep alive. There is much that is unmeaning in their plan and operation. In a colony such feeling, that whether English, Irish or Scotch, we are all Canadians, and must look to Canada’s prosperity and advancement for an honourable and praiseworthy distinction.

Yet the proliferation of Irish cultural societies was not manifested in Toronto to the same degree as in Boston. Stimulus for such development was clearly lacking. In 1850, Toronto boasted five papers of which two, *The Patriot* and *The Mirror* were owned by Irishmen, Col. O’Brien and C. C. Donlevy respectively.¹⁰ Through these organs, Irish attitudes were aired freely. With increased waves of English, German and Scottish immigration during the last half of the century, and the influx of diverse groups of European immigrants at the beginning of the 20th century, Irish identity began to lose its force and *raison d’être*. This occurred, not only because of sheer numbers, but also because the Irish, as part of the older

⁸ Oscar HANDLIN, *Boston’s Immigrants*, Cambridge (Mass.), 1959.

⁹ Census figures.

¹⁰ D. C. MASTERS, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

establishment, were now fully integrated and accepted and were experiencing the tug of upward mobility.

Where political parties were involved, the Toronto Irish were split along religious lines. D. C. Masters tries to explain this split:

The general principles of Canadian Toryism are fairly well-known: a fervent advocacy of the Empire and particularly of the monarchy, and equally fervent dislike of Americans and of the Church of Rome, a belief in the maintenance of the propertied classes and of the political and economic status quo. Of great value in understanding Toryism is the powerful Irish element in the population of Toronto and among its best people. Orangeism and Toronto Toryism of course go hand in hand.¹¹

With certain reservations about this definition it does at least illustrate the reason why the Irish vote could seldom be mustered in any comprehensive fashion in provincial or federal elections. Sir John A. Macdonald's decision to take Thomas D'Arcy McGee into the cabinet, though it never materialized, was no doubt prompted by a determination to capture Irish votes for the Tories.¹² But due to the equal numerical size of the Protestant and Roman Catholic groups, each tended to neutralize the vote of the other.

The Protestant Irish possessed a powerful social and political organization in the form of the Orange Order. This fraternal order dominated virtually every aspect of Toronto life in the 19th century, even the militia. It commanded tremendous political weight even though its orientation tended to centre increasingly around religious issues.¹³ The Separate School issue of the early 1850's, which tore the Order in two, was merely one case of a political and religious issue that engaged the full strength of the membership against the "Popish threat."¹⁴ On the other hand the Irish Catholics utilized their faith and clerics as focal points for their political counter-balance to the Orange Order. In general terms it seems apparent that, with several startling exceptions, federal and provincial politics were of greater interest to the pre-famine immigrants than to the later arrivals. They obviously felt part of the system and they carried this interest even into the civic arena. Probably the best chronicle of the conflicts is contained

¹¹ D. C. MASTERS, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

¹² Norman MACDONALD, *Canada: Immigration and Colonisation: 1841-1903* (Toronto, 1966), p. 138. This reference gives additional evidence of Irish political power.

¹³ J.E. MIDDLETON, *Op. cit.*, p. 788. See also W. J. S. MOOD, *The Orange Order in Canadian Politics: 1841-1867* (unpublished M. A. thesis, U. of T., 1950), p. 17, p. 167.

¹⁴ G. P. de T. GLAZEBROOK, *The Story of Toronto* (Toronto, 1971), p. 96.

in a thesis written by B. D. Dyster¹⁵ and need not be retold. But the picture that emerges is one of classic confrontations between the “Orange and the Green.” But in actual fact the Protestant Irish always seemed to have the edge. In their respective studies of the Irish in New York and Boston, Moynihan and Handlin make only passing reference to the Orange Order. This tends to substantiate their view that during the 19th century, Protestant Irish lost their identity with the group and merged rapidly with the older, Protestant, established society. Therefore the existence of Orange Lodges in the United States was rare.¹⁶ In Canada exactly the opposite was the case.

In explaining the rapid growth of Orangeism and anti-Catholicism, Duncan claims that it was the result of an attempt by the Protestant Irish to make differences between themselves and the famine migrants clear.¹⁷ Cooper generally accepts this view and places the period of most intense conflict in the 1850’s at the conclusion of which he claims “the Irish were at peace with themselves – and with their neighbours.”¹⁸ Duncan places the period of struggle up to the 1880’s at which time, he writes, “physical conflict was becoming infrequent.”¹⁹ The tension created by the Fenian Movement and the bitterness of the Jubilee Riots leads one to accept Duncan’s view as better substantiated and more realistic. Not all religious, political and social struggle attendant upon Irish urban adjustment and eventual assimilation was dissipated within fifteen years of the great Famine. Furthermore, the strength of the Orange Order did not begin any serious decline until the late 1920’s or early 1930’s and as long as it remained a potent force, or apparently potent, conflict could be assured in one form or another. However, Orangeism cannot be seen as a purely Protestant Irish institution from the 1860’s onwards. During that period, while it maintained its militant Protestant stance, it began increasingly to recruit people to its ranks who lacked any Irish ancestry whatsoever.²⁰ This final point gives additional credence to A. R. M. Lower’s view²¹ that religious conflict was one of the more important dynamics during the formative years of Upper Canada, and in fact tended to replace class conflict as an important facet of provincial development. With only rare exception, religious

¹⁵ D. B. DYSTER, *Toronto 1840-1860 – Making it in a British Protestant Town*. (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, U. of T., 1970).

¹⁶ John HIGHAM, *op. cit.*, p. 61. The Orange Order was not transplanted to the United States of America until the 1870’s.

¹⁷ Kenneth DUNCAN, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

¹⁸ John Irwin COOPER, “Irish Immigration and the Canadian Church Before the Middle of the 19th Century,” *The Journal of the Canadian Church Historical Society* (Volume 2, No. 3, 1955), p. 4.

¹⁹ Kenneth DUNCAN, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

²⁰ DUNCAN, *loc. cit.*

²¹ A. R. M. LOWER, *Canadians in the Making*, Toronto, 1958, p. 202.

conflict in the 1840's and 1850's was more vitriolic in Toronto than in Boston. In fact, intense and wide-spread anti-Catholic movements in the United States did not begin to appear until the late 1870's and the 1880's when it merged with the emotional phenomenon of nativism which was sweeping the country.

Perhaps out of sheer necessity for their own safety, the Roman Catholic newspaper, *The Irish Canadian*, reported Fenian activities sympathetically and in great detail – revealing the true feelings of many of the famine and post-famine Irish Catholics. But it was forced to conclude, in respect to prevailing public opinion, that such attacks upon Canadian soil would be of no help to the Irish cause.²² They were also forced to adopt the anti-American sentiment of Toryism by claiming Fenian movements to be the product of deliberate United States government policy.²³ There is little doubt that the Fenian Movement created great discomfort for the Irish Canadians living in Toronto.

The Irish had considerable impact upon the religious life of Toronto, not only within Roman Catholicism, and as a counter-balance to that faith, but also as a tempering agent for Anglo-Catholic tendencies within the Anglican Diocese of Toronto. Irishmen were also the leavening agents for Methodism for many of the same reasons. In this regard the Irish Protestants related religion more to the evangelistic tone of the Methodists and, to a lesser degree, the Presbyterians. By so doing, they provided a powerful religious cast to Toronto which was to remain a feature of the city's life until the post-World War II era.

A study of the religious census reveals the following trends. In 1851 the Roman Catholics were to be found in the following wards in equal or above representative proportion to their total percentage of the population; St. David, St. James and St. Lawrence. By 1861 the following shifts had taken place; St. Andrews (up to 3% to average), St. David (down 2% but still 7% over represented), St. George (from a - 4% to a + 3% position), St. James (decline of 6% to - 3%), St. Lawrence (increase of 4% to +8%), St. Patrick (an increase of 11% from - 7% to + 4%) and in the newly created ward of St. John the Roman Catholics were dramatically under-represented by 15%.

The composite picture that emerges for the period 1851-1861 reveals that in St. Andrew's ward, the Irish Roman Catholics displaced the English and Anglican residents. The reverse was experienced in St. David's ward. In St. George, both English (C. of E.) and Irish (R.C.) moved in as the ward was developed and only the Methodists moved out in slight numbers. At this point my research is not refined enough to explain this shift though I would suggest that the Irish Catholics that were moving into St. George were representatives of the pre-famine immigration period and better able to afford the cost of more expensive housing. In St. James the Irish (R.C.) were displaced by the English (C. of E.) while in the newly created ward of St. John the Irish (R.C.) were conspicuously absent

²² *Irish Canadian*, June 6, 1866.

²³ *Ibid.*, June 13, 1866.

and the English (Methodists) had a high degree of visibility. St. Lawrence ward reflects a dramatic intensification of Irish (R.C.) and a correspondingly noticeable decrease of English (C. of E.). The availability of housing at modest rent, left by the more established members of the business community as they moved to new and more spacious accommodations further from the Central Business District (a feature of transformation from a preindustrial to an industrial city), probably explains this “ghettoization.” In St. Patrick’s the Irish (R.C.) once again displaced the English (C. of E.) and Methodists. Residential areas, even in 1861, still reflected a marked degree of social and economic and even religious mix. But a separating trend had been set in motion by the beginning of the 1860’s.

Concerning social adjustment, Handlin points out that the mortality, disease and illiteracy rates were far higher amongst the Irish than amongst native Bostonians. Furthermore, insanity and prostitution plagued the Irish more than any other ethnic group, as did increased frequency of arrests for common drunkenness.²⁴ In spite of the many differences this paper has outlined between the Irish settlement in Boston and Toronto, the foregoing observations of the Boston Irish apply to the Famine and post-famine Toronto Irish. Not only did they feel alien and depressed by their position at the bottom of the social structure but they were unable to clearly articulate their frustration since many were totally illiterate in any language.²⁵ Duncan writes: the Irish moved into the cities “and consolidated themselves as an urban proletariat. The Slabtowns, Corktowns, Shantytowns, and Cabbagetowns quickly became notorious. Violence and riot, disease, crime, drunkenness and prostitution were rife.”²⁶ The various Police Reports contained in the *Minutes of the Proceedings of the Council of the Corporation of the City of Toronto* for the period under study, reveal the propensity of the Irish for excessive drink and fighting (disorderly conduct). But though the Police Reports indicate that two-thirds of all men and four-fifths of all women charged between the years 1850-1860 were Irish, it must be kept in mind that the majority of these arrests were for drunk and disorderly charges rather than for crimes of a more serious nature. From a study of the same Reports it is equally clear that Duncan overstates his case. The degree of Irish involvement in anti-social activity could hardly be stretched to a degree experienced in Boston. And by the 1880’s native Canadians and Scots had replaced the Irish as major offenders. Environment rather than heredity was the crucial factor. And with the Canadians and Scots displacing the Irish as major offenders, perhaps the figures reflected the ultimate success of the Irish adjustment to Toronto and the easing of social tension as their assimilation into the total social fabric took place.

²⁴ Oscar HANDLIN, *Op. Cit.*, p. 122, p. 125.

²⁵ W. F. ADAMS, *op. cit.*, pp. 22, 218.

²⁶ Kenneth DUNCAN, *op. cit.*, p. 5. Cf. *The Globe*, March 8, 1870, July 28, 1873, August 2, 1873.