Initial Article Introducing Diaspora Run

Michael Collins: my marathon a day, for a month, to honour Irish emigrants
The Irish author, emigrant and ultrarunner is running in memory of the 100,000 Irish immigrants who fled to Canada in the Great Famine
Fri, May 27, 2016, 15:15

http://www.irishtimes.com/life-and-style/abroad/generation-emigration/michael-collins-my-marathon-a-day-for-a-month-to-honour-irish-emigrants-1.2663269

My name is Michael Collins. I am an Irish emigrant, writer and ultrarunner. In 2000 my novel The Keepers of Truth was shortlisted for the Booker Prize. A decade later I captained the Irish team at the 100km World Championships. Although one might not connect writing with running, I have tapped the loneliness of the long-distance runner: psychological and physical dislocation inform my writing process.

I first experienced this dislocation as a young runner, leaving under cover of dark for early Sunday-morning runs into the remote Limerick hills. In so doing I ran to an observation point from which to view my town and its people.

My running earned me an athletic scholarship to the United States. To negotiate my daily training runs, which averaged 25km, I ran beyond a bucolic campus to a ghettoised landscape of abandoned factories in the rust-belt city of South Bend, Indiana. In the act of running, in crossing boundaries, I found that a preoccupation with all things political emerged.

I abandoned running after college, earned a doctorate, and ended up working at Microsoft in Redmond, in Washington state. In my subterranean cubicle I felt a deepening loss of the physical self against an advancing virtual age. In a conscious act of moral reorienting I returned to running. During 130km weekend runs, running to and from work, programming by day and writing by night, I tapped a voice within and captured the essence of the United States' industrial past in writing The Keepers of Truth.

I became the keeper of certain truths that I accessed through running. Against the imminent loss of the physical world I read about Ernest Shackleton's heroic journey of survival in the Antarctic, then entered and won the Last Marathon in Antarctica. A year later I stood atop the world, winning the Mount Everest Marathon. Dislocation became my way of processing life.

Recognising the service of returning military veterans of the post-9/11 campaigns, I left Microsoft and took a job at a community college. There I encountered soldiers coming to terms with psychological dislocation. I created task-oriented academic exercises that demanded a combination of physical activities and classroom analytics. The prevailing metaphor was combat readiness in anticipating, meeting and succeeding in civilian life.

Yet, for the bluster of coping strategies, there was a personal loss I had never fully reckoned with: my leaving Ireland. I was of the generation that left amid the economic doldrums of the early 1980s. In the years to come I would use running and a preoccupation with hunger, exhaustion and journey to inform a personal and cultural identity that connected to the Great Famine.
While I was at a literary festival in Canada an organiser asked if I had seen Toronto's famine memorial. I hadn't. Ireland Park is tucked away on a dockland pier. It is a lost history, fittingly out of place against the Toronto skyline. The human scale of the gathered sculptures, representing Irish migrants escaping the Great Famine, reconfigured my relationship with Irish history.

In the years since then I have returned on quiet pilgrimages to correspond with that immemorial gathering of souls. Their story begs telling.

Poor Laws

The spectre of Irish emigration to Canada figured in the endgame years of the Great Famine. In 1847 the British parliament, in cutting off all famine aid, enacted the Irish Poor Laws, requiring absentee landlords to cover the cost of relief to their tenants.

With those laws came the great emigration of 1847. Facing the United States' stiffening emigration regulations – the Passenger Act barred diseased ships from arriving in American ports – unscrupulous landlords looked farther north. Commissioning timber ships that would otherwise return empty to Canada, they loaded an emigrant ballast into hastily retrofitted hulls. These were the coffin ships.

The journey into the freezing reaches of the Canadian north and down the St Lawrence river would cause the most harrowing suffering. Immigrants arrived with a pestilence of typhus at a makeshift quarantine station at Grosse Île, 50km downriver from Quebec City, that was equipped with just 150 beds. By the summer of 1847, 40 vessels, carrying 14,000 immigrants, clogged the St Lawrence. Catastrophe ensued.

Those with fever were summarily quarantined on the island. Families were wrested apart. For years afterwards provincial newspapers would carry classifieds from immigrants seeking the whereabouts of relatives. Of the 100,000 Irish who sailed to Canada in 1847, 20,000 died.

Surviving Irish immigrants, continuing their journey by land, ventured first through the francophone province of Quebec and then down into the neo-English province of Ontario.

An estimated 75,000 Irish descended on Montreal, then a city of some 50,000 people. The francophone hubs of Quebec City and Montreal met a bereft, alien-speaking population of Irish with extraordinary religious ardour.

The story of the Grey Nuns, who erected fever sheds and brokered the adoption of thousands of Irish orphans in the cities, was all but lost to French texts that, until recently, had never been translated into English.

So, too, some 6,000 Irish souls were lost to history until workers building a bridge in Montreal unearthed a mass grave. Such was the amnesia of a city so traumatised. The union whose workers had uncovered the grave erected a monument, the Black Rock. Montreal's Irish community would like to relocate the Black Rock to a permanent memorial park.

Those who survived Grosse Île and Montreal headed southwest, and the anglophone city of Toronto braced as 38,000 emigrants descended on a population of 20,000.

Ireland Park's historical committee has researched Toronto's response to 1847. In establishing an emigrant hospital, a convalescent hospital, and a widows' and orphans' refuge, Toronto's medical community set a gold standard for the containment of disease.

The heroic efforts of the hospital's lead surgeon, Dr George Grasett, who was of Protestant-Irish lineage, and the staff who died in the service of the Irish are being recognised with the

construction of Dr George Robert Grasett Park, on Toronto's waterfront. To be unveiled in 2017, it includes a glass installation etched with billowing sheets, to represent fever sheds.

Between Grosse Île and the cities of Quebec City, Montreal and Toronto lies an emptiness of almost 1,000km that I will trace one step at a time. Into that limitless horizon I will run some 65km a day, starting at Grosse Île. This is what I seek as a runner: acts of dislocation in kilometres run that facilitate a collapse of time, to vicariously access distant histories.

The run will end at the Ireland Park famine memorial in Toronto. My goal is to foster historical awareness while raising money to memorialise that fateful year: 1847.
Along the way I will meet Irish societies who have uncovered the historical records of 1847. The death toll is sobering. Interred in a mixture of mass and individual graves are 5,000 souls at Grosse Île; 6,000 at Pointe St Charles, in Montreal; 1,400 in Kingston, on the north shore of Lake Ontario; and a further 1,200 in Toronto. Canada is home to the greatest group of mass burials of Irish immigrants in the world. All died in 1847.

How to join in
People can participate in the month-long event by walking or running within their own communities. (Registration for this is at diasporarun.org.)

Individual names, with distances completed, will be displayed on the site, along with the combined distance run by all of the participants. An associated blog will facilitate a virtual cultural experience. Everyone who registers and participates will receive a commemorative medal.

In the centenary year of the Easter Rising my experience as an emigrant is less Irish than it once was, although what I have learned from the scholars I have visited in preparation for the run is how dynamic our history is.

If this project started as a personal run, it is now dedicated to highlighting the efforts of the custodians of our history who continue to uncover the voices of the past that encompass the totality of the Irish diaspora.
If I can add to that narrative it is perhaps fitting that I do so in tapping the legacy of our indomitable Irish endurance, in committing to an act of journey and distances covered. It is, after all, how we populated North America, one step at a time. I invite you to join me.

Get your gear on: what is the Irish Diaspora Run?
Scheduled to begin on June 10th and end on July 10th, it will see Michael Collins cover almost 900km.

The route begins at Grosse Île quarantine island, on the St Lawrence river, and continues through Quebec City, Montreal and Kingston before reaching Ireland Park, in Toronto.
The project will raise funds for Irish-Canadian organisations seeking to create parks and erect monuments and statues to commemorate 1847.

Others can participate by taking on runs where they live, and logging their distances on diasporarun.org, where they can also sponsor Collins.

Collins will chronicle his project in a blog, giving updates and historical background, on irishtimes.com and on diasporarun.org.

This project is supported by the Global Irish Media Fund

Week 1
Irish Diaspora Run: 'All journeys begin with a single step'
Michael Collins begins his 900km run tracing steps of Irish Famine immigrants in Canada
Thu, Jun 16, 2016, 15:00

http://www.irishtimes.com/life-and-style/abroad/generation-emigration/irish-diaspora-run-all-journeys-begin-with-a-single-step-1.2687244

Irish Diaspora Run sees Michael Collins running almost 900km between June 10th and July 10th, from Grosse Île to Toronto, tracing the steps taken by thousands of Irish immigrants who fled the Famine in 1847. This is the first of his weekly updates for The Irish Times.

The saying goes that all journeys begin with a single step, and at the start of this 900km run the stark simplicity of the saying resonates. I am an ultra-runner, so distance alone should not be daunting, but this Diaspora Run holds a deep personal and historical significance. In the past I ran for my country chasing medals. Now I am running for a greater historical context - to raise awareness of the tragic year of Black '47.

In that year, the convergence of British government policies dispossessed more Irish than in any other year of the Great Hunger. Under the directive of a newly elected prime minister, Lord Russell, the British parliament voted to end famine relief, mandating relief be carried out by absentee landlords. To shirk responsibility, landlords began a universal campaign of eviction, thus removing the obligation to feed their tenants.

Suddenly, the Irish hinterland, especially in the provinces of Munster and Connaught, swarmed with a starving army of skeletons. To make matters worse, in America, under the maritime Passenger Act, typhus stricken vessels and ships not adhering to the stricter sanitary rules were barred from entering America.

Under the growing crisis of the dispossessed, the eventual choice was to ship them to Canada, then under British control. In a cruel and desperate measure, emptied lumber-carrying ships returning to Canada were commissioned and hastily retrofitted to carry human ballasts. No regard was given to sanitary conditions or to feeding those who would make the 40-day transatlantic voyage to the eventual entry port at Grosse Île quarantine station, some 30km north of Quebec City.

I am beginning my run from this sobering quarantine station, or more specifically from a parking lot in sight of the island.

The evening before the run I was given a grand tour of Quebec by James Donovan of the Ancient Order of Hibernia, Joe Lonergan of the Irish Heritage Society of Quebec, Fergus Keyes of the Montreal Irish Monument Park Foundation, and Peggie Hopkins, Fergus's partner. Reminiscent of Irish weather, it rained cats and dogs as we shuttled from one site to another.

What I took from the tour was a history of Quebec, but perhaps more so, in quietly observing my hosts, an appreciation of the custodial mantle those associated with history bear in preserving our collective past. A beautiful Celtic cross is situated within the old walls of Quebec across from Saint Patrick's church. We gathered and had photographs taken by it. The funds for the cross were raised through the dogged determination of those accompanying me that day. James Donovan also coordinates the Saint

Patrick's Day parade and the essence of all things Irish emanates from himself and the quietly dignified Joe Lonergan.

The intersection of varying histories continued. We left the Celtic cross for a tour of the Plains of Abraham. On this site in 1759, the British claimed victory over the French in a battle that took a mere 20 minutes. Here again was the darkening influence and encroachment of British imperialism, but this time the advance of British forces on what was then New France.

I claim no extensive knowledge of the history, but what I gathered in questioning my hosts was that despite the imposition of British rule, somehow Quebec maintained its religion and language. From an Irish perspective, I thought this intriguing. I wanted to understand the political realities and rationale for how the conquest and life after continued without bloodshed.

The history has obviously been covered, but it is an anomaly I would like to further explore at some point. The short answer given was that neither the French nor the English wanted control of a region so far north, so the victory and conquest by the British was more a psychological victory than an actual conquest.

I remained dutifully attentive to what I was being shown, but simultaneously my mind was on the visit to Grosse Île but so, too, to the ill-conceived plan to actually begin the first marathon after visiting the island. Sometimes misery and ill-planning have their own merits. I felt, in quietly submitting to a day walking and then socially drinking for much of the night before leaving at the crack of dawn to visit Grosse Île, that I was behaving like an amiable soul mindful of what this committee had so carefully planned in my honour.

So, to the isle of Grosse Île. How strange it was to come upon a Celtic cross looming over the Saint Lawrence against the shimmer of the river. It grew in proportion, occupying the highest point on the island. I had anticipated it, but the starkness and grandeur of the cross harkened to an ancient Celtic spirit. This was home, but re-appropriated in a foreign land. I was mindful that, though we are modern Irish, we are descendants of a Christian and pagan Celtic past. Somehow both histories converged in this cross and I felt it better represented the nativism of a Gaelic peasant experience that was then steeped in both traditions.

When we arrived and climbed to the cross, we then followed a narrow path that served as a gateway to the mass interment of over 5,000 Irish who died of typhus and the results of starvation due to a 40-day passage aboard coffin ships between May and October of 1847.

The glass memorial wall of names figures as one of those indelible moments that brought the stark reality of political policy and systematic tyranny into a roll call of the dead. Here were the victims of whatever history will eventually decide to call the policies of the British during the famine.

Each in our party found a family name and so went the reach of our heart across a span of years to those who were our forebears. If there was reproach and anger in my heart at the catalog of injustices perpetrated on those unfortunates, in standing on Grosse Île, the anger left me. After all the historical research done, nothing prepared me for the actual witnessing of the memorial and the acreage of land that held 5,000 Irish. At that moment, I felt a prayer to the departed was the most dignified and necessary of acts.

Our guide told us that there were no crosses set on the graves until the late 20th century. The history was not forgotten, but lost. Grosse Île is not simply an Irish memorial site, but was the quarantine station and

point of entry for all emigrants to Canada. The municipal authorities were mandated to simply care for the sick and the dying, not to memorialize them.

Again, in walking with the associated members of the Irish party accompanying me, I realised how the Celtic Cross and graveyard crosses were erected through the dogged persistence of so many Irish who would not allow their history to go undocumented.

I also saw in observing my hosts, that they shared a psychological point of origin, and perhaps this is what differentiates the diaspora from those who stayed at home. They are more sentimental and fierce in remembering the history of how they ended up in Canada. They cannot recall the past, without contextualizing a history that, again, may seem too far removed for a modern Irish person.

What I can vouch for is their sincerity and perseverance in maintaining their history, not out of a collective anger, but in recognition that this history preceded them and defines their remove from Ireland. They are more exiles than immigrants. This is the tragic sadness and legacy of the Irish immigrant experience. Who can blame them, really? Not I.

We ended our tour of the island at the lazaretto fever sheds where so many of those who had survived the initial passage died from typhus. At the height of emigration in 1947, some 40 ships, carrying over 300 people in each, overwhelmed the medical resources at Grosse Île. The British were aware of the advancing disaster and despite the appeal of administrators on the Canadian side to stave the tide of approaching disease which threatened Quebec and Montreal, the ships kept sailing.

Stark and unpainted, the sheds seemed to capture an 18th century primitivism. One asks - how did anybody survive the Atlantic Crossing, or even these lazaretto fever sheds?
We happened to be shadowing a group of Canadian school children throughout the day on the island, either arriving before or after them at various points of historical interest. They were not Irish. The trip was more related to the history of Grosse Île as a quarantine that processed all immigrants for close to a century.

At the end of the trip we converged with the children. The guide was speaking in French and I approached to listen. The children's attention was given to a single historical artifact that seemed to capture the tragic loss of life. It was the small shoe of a four-year-old child. The child almost certainly perished, and in scavenging to survive, all clothes on a dead person were taken and worn by survivors. Such was the extremity of poverty and necessity.

The guide conveyed that experts had examined the shoe and determined that it had been re-cobbled and worn by at least three generations of children.
It is strange how a single artifact can somehow endow a greater understanding of a life and time. In the riot of noise that accompanied the Canadian school children, there was a sudden and deferential silence and I understood that our history had been channelled and preserved.
Not long after, I laced up my own running shoes and left unceremoniously from a parking lot in sight of the island. I had the gift of new friends to see me off, and so began the run under threat of advancing rain and gathering clouds. It was how I envisioned it. It was an Irish leave-taking with the urgency of miles ahead and the quiet trepidation of what the journey would hold!

This project is supported by the Global Irish Media Fund

Week 2
Why are 6,000 Irish buried under a Montreal traffic island?
Michael Collins finds an unusual Famine memorial during his 900km run
Thu, Jun 23, 2016, 17:00

http://www.irishtimes.com/life-and-style/abroad/generation-emigration/why-are-6-000-irish-buried-under-a-montreal-traffic-island-1.2696681

The most striking fact that emerged from the research I conducted on the passage of some 100,000 who left Ireland aboard the infamous coffin ships in the spring of 1847 was how the municipal authorities, in tandem with the religious orders of Montreal, marshaled their collective resources to care and minister to the sick and dying Irish.

Simply put, the question was: What affinity did the native Québecois have toward this advance of typhus-stricken Irish?

The facts are sobering. Disease and death loomed with the advance of the Irish along the Saint Lawrence. By early June, a month after the official seasonal opening of the quarantine station at Grosse Île, forty ships, each carrying over 300 passengers, were lined back along the Saint Lawrence. The quarantine island medical facilities, which had been built to accommodate just 200 sick, was simply overrun. No true medical assessment of individual cases could be adequately determined.

Only the obviously dying were taken to the fever sheds. In effect, the île would become less a quarantine station and more a graveyard. In that season of death, upward of 5,000 souls would be hastily interred in trenched mass graves.

And so it went - as an apocalyptic, zombie-like advance of 75,000, typhus stricken Irish headed toward Montreal, then a city of 50,000. The heroics of those who met the advance of sickness bears testimony to one of the most harrowing stories of the Great Hunger.

Again, in assessing the massive influx of immigrants, one is left asking, what was the resolve of Montreal to bear and minister to such an alien-speaking flotsam of Irish?

In a slow advance toward Montreal, much that is asked in that question is becoming apparent. I chose Route 2 for the run, given that it languidly follows the meandering Saint Lawrence, but, in now running alongside this less-traveled road, I come upon religious shrines that harken to a penitent spectre of a more ancient, religious life. This is an ancient road of agrarian toil, a trail worn by a dutiful and faithful peasantry. Within two days of leaving Quebec City, I had run in the domain of a forgotten Catholicism in a rural foothold of former peasant lands.

The religious shrines are eerily reminiscent of those that still exist along the coastal crag of the West of Ireland; weathered figures of Christ's passion on a cross facing the eternal scour of the Atlantic gales. You expect this of Ireland, but to come upon these roadside shrines in the rainy cold is a revelation.

The agony of the cross proves to be the most enduring and arresting subjects out on the peninsula beyond Quebec City. Though peculiar to the French Canadians, the statuettes bear the mediaeval flourish of a golden painted adornment with the azure blue of Mary's robes.

On the evening of the fifth day of the run - my fifth consecutive marathon - while fighting advancing dark, I came across a small acreage of a farm with a roadside glass enclosure of Joseph holding the infant Jesus. It might as well have been an apparition. We are so given to movement and flash, to the blare of

sound, that coming upon this serenity, locking eyes on the paternal vigil of father and son, reawakened a religious supplication that I had not felt since being a boarder at Saint Munchin's school in Limerick. Here was the quiet communion and intercession of a deep-felt religiosity made incarnate.

In the solitary pilgrimage of miles, I was connected with the beatitude of those saintly figures who heard God or Mary speak to them on hillsides. Nature and solitude are together a powerful elixir. In our apparent smallness, in apprehending the glory of the seasons, we instinctively submit to honouring a higher power.

By a crude calculation of observation, I established that most of the shrines were some ten miles apart, and thus I had landed upon a measure of time and distance that was linked to an older mode of travel - walking. Here were shrines established at a natural respite between distances, shrines appointed along the protective bend in the river, altars recessed at an angle in a conjuring so they might refract light and divine some moment of revelation for the weary traveller.

Power of salvation

I ran over 300km in the first six days after leaving Grosse Île, and, in so doing, in taking this less traveled passage along the Saint Lawrence, I began to answer the question regarding why so many of Montreal's secular and religious community felt the compunction to risk their lives to save the Irish.

The most arresting early reading I did on the passage to Canada in 1847 centered on the role of the Grey Nuns, who ministered to the newly arrived immigrants. By the hand of providence - and I do believe that some projects are guided by divine intervention - I uncovered that the first-of-its-kind exhibition of the Grey Nuns was about to end its run at Quinnipiac University in Connecticut.

The exhibition was curated by one of Ireland's great Irish Famine historians, Dr Christine Kinealy. After making contact with Dr Kinealy, she graciously agreed to keep the exhibition up for an extra day so I could come visit.

On a last-minute plane to Connecticut, I had read the annals of the Grey Nuns, collated by the esteemed scholar, Dr Jason King. The work is nothing short of genius, and, though I can't attest to the power of the French text, the translation by Philip O'Gorman is one of those revelatory academic works that bridges facts with a tonal acuity that captures the essential psyche of the order.

Through the act of reading, I understood the motivation and sacrifice of the order of Grey Nuns. I was immediately and shamefully reminded of my own fallen state, of how I had a great-aunt, who, in the cloister of over 75 years as a nun, had served the poor and indigent as a member of the order of The Little Sisters of the Poor.

On the eve of St Patrick's Day, and with the exodus of the student body for Spring Break, I arrived onto an eerily depopulated, bucolic campus. The encounter with Dr Kinealy figures as one of those deeply affecting preordained moments - firstly for the graciousness of Dr Kinealy in agreeing to host me, but also for the religious aura she captured in curating the exhibition. In a contained, single room, she brought the events of 1847 into a singular, spiritual experience. This was scholarship wedded to a deeply affecting understanding of the spirituality of the order of Grey Nuns.

The Grey Nuns, those so-called Martyrs of Charity, were the first to the hastily erected fever sheds on the outskirts of Montreal's harbor at Pointe St Charles. In the translated texts there is a spirituality communicated that reveals, dare I say it, an ancient, seductive power of a sort of spiritual ecstasy that pits the temporality of earthly life against an eternal reward with Christ.

In arriving at Quinnipiac University and then eventually standing outside the Grey Nuns' Convent in Montreal, I better understood the redeeming power of salvation and the charged humanity of earthly acts performed while one's heart is directed heavenward. This was the greater reality of life in the pre-enlightenment - harsh brutish and short.

There are descriptions of sickness and effluence referenced in the fever sheds that sickened veteran doctors, and yet the chronicles of the annals report that the Martyrs of Charity actively sought out the most distressing cases of disease. A seasoned doctor, a Protestant who worked in the fever sheds, reportedly converted to Catholicism on his deathbed, requesting that the sisters tend to him.

In reading the annals, what is transmitted is an authenticity of reportage that is so deeply affecting that one feels as though one is bearing witness to a faith that was first eclipsed by an Enlightenment age of reason and science, which eventually gave way to jaded cynicism.

Arriving at the Black Rock

The first week is done now - the total distance is 300 kilometres, but, more significantly than the kilometres run, I have come across signaling markers and points of introspection that are leading me to a greater context of the relationship of the self to God.

The week ended with my arrival at the Black Rock, a memorial stone that sits in the middle of a traffic island in Montreal. Over 6,000 Irish are interred in a mass grave. All died in the fever sheds. The burial site was uncovered during construction in 1859 of the Victoria Bridge. The historical moment of the fever sheds and the associated burial of so many was almost lost. Stubbornly, the workers who unearthed the entombed erected, at their own cost, the stone that now commemorates those almost forgotten dead.

The Black Rock was my first point of historical significance after leaving Grosse Île. I took the memory of 6,000 souls with me. I linked their memory with those who eventually died further along the Saint Lawrence in the fever sheds at Montreal. This is our Celtic Trail of Tears.

As an Irish expatriate, I am removed from the day-to-day life of a modern Ireland, and yet at times it takes the voice of the pining diaspora to reckon with history. If we can be charged with an arrested sense of history, then so be it. What I can report to you is that in standing at the memorial service held on the occasion of my arrival into Montreal, I was cognizant that this was the end for so many Irish, but also the beginning of the Irish diaspora experience in Canada.

On the day of my arrival, we gathered to honour the dead, but also to celebrate the Canadian Irish experience. On hand were local and national media, as the distinguished parliamentarian Marc Miller, who graciously attended the ceremony, added his support to a plan to move the Black Rock to a proposed famine memorial park.

The memorial park is too long in the waiting. There are the cynics who will say to let the dead lie where they will. It is, of course, the easier of choices, but what I have experienced on this run is a cadre of historically minded, hard-headed citizens who believe remembrance is not connected with advancing animosities, but simply preserving the historical reality of a year so many would prefer to forget.

I cannot end without acknowledging the head of the Ancient Order of Hibernia, Victor Boyle, along with Donovan King, brother of Dr Jason King. Their eloquence and commitment to our history is exemplary. Last but not least, I would like to thank Fergus Keyes and Peggie Hopkins for first greeting me in Quebec City, accompanying me out to Grosse Île and then coordinating the event at the Black Rock.

What I have come to understand is that the preservation of our history does not simply happen. For every monument and statue we casually pass by, there's a Fergus Keyes who has tirelessly advocated for its place in the competing histories of each city and nation.

This proje*ct is supported by the Global Irish Media Fund*

Week 3
In Famine's footsteps: trail of death leads to Skeleton Park
Week 3 of Michael Collins' 900km Diaspora Run in search of the lost stories of Canada's Irish Famine migrants sees him cross from Catholic Quebec into loyalist Ontario

Thu, June 30, 2016, 17:40

http://www.irishtimes.com/life-and-style/abroad/generation-emigration/in-famine-s-footsteps-trail-of-death-leads-to-skeleton-park-1.2705744

In my most successful novels, there is, early on, if not the absolute awareness of the totality of what the novel will encompass, then at least the narrative arc of a beginning and an endpoint. The yeoman's work of each day is then measured in scenes and chapters toward that distant endpoint.

My ultra-running life parallels the same structural arc. The difference being that, instead of moving through scenes and chapters, I psychologically compartmentalise a 100-mile race into manageable stages, 20-mile stages, further broken down into five-mile stages.

As with all successes, on the page or on the road, the absolute alignment of varying elements is essential. I begin my novels with the onset of falling temperatures, in an advance on a literal and figurative darkness, psychological exploration and narrative indeterminacy aligned with the meteorological outlook of a day or a week. I write against anticipated storms and the barometric pressure of the frontal lobe. This psychological alignment with the actual forecast is doubly reinforced, given that I use ultra-running as a sort of psychological clearing-house to better process and understand my characters.

That my high-mileage runs take place in the freeze of a Midwest American winter directly influences the essential urgency and desperation of my characters. For me, the measure of success on the page always correlates to a heightened psychological anxiety induced through a physical exhaustion of miles run.

I say all this, since it is no different on this journey. When I first read of the passage of 100,000 dispossessed Irish, evicted and forced into exile aboard the infamous coffin ships, I locked on the narrative arc of an encapsulated history that began with the arrival of ships in the Saint Lawrence in early May of 1847 and ended with the icing of the Saint Lawrence in late October. So, too, the singularity of the route, the distance travelled, some 900 kilometers along the Saint Lawrence from Grosse Île quarantine station down through Montreal, Cornwall, Kingston, and Toronto, fell into the domain of what I felt I could manage in a month-long run.

Over halfway through the journey now, and in allowing momentary reflection, in the survey of that initial history of 1847, I can only describe the feeling as the appointed hand of providence. How often is one compelled to bear witness vicariously to the most tragic and damnable episode of Irish subjugation - a forced emigration that would spawn the second greatest loss of life in the Victorian era and eventuate in the death of some 20,000 souls flung into the Atlantic or interred in mass graves all along the Saint Lawrence?

I've written in previous weeks of the sullen and cruel facts of 1847, most notably prime minister Russell's decision to end British famine relief, while shifting the feeding of the Irish to an insipid class of absentee landlords, who, in summarily pushing through the infamous Gregory Act, shirked responsibility for providing relief by simply evicting their tenants.
No doubt, it is along this fault line of direct parliamentary acts that the charge of genocide has been leveled against the British. So, too, historians can point to the sinister policies of the British, who, after America passed a series of Passenger Acts forestalling the sailing of disease-ridden ships, landed upon the

grim idea of retrofitting empty lumber mercantile ships returning to British North America to carry a human ballast across the ocean to an unwitting and ill-prepared population.

If one is in doubt as to the absolute collusion of British officialdom with the absentee class of landlords, one only has to view the public record of the foreign secretary to Ireland, the landed Lord Palmerston, who, acting on the advice of estate agents and championing enclosure, evicted some 2,000 of his tenants and then shipped them to Canada aboard ships that one Canadian official compared to conditions aboard vessels used in the slave trade.

In a memorandum circulated among parliamentary colleagues, Palmerston clearly underscored official British governmental policy toward agrarian reform in Ireland, writing:

"It is useless to disguise the truth that any great improvement in the social system of Ireland must be founded upon an extensive change in the present state of agrarian occupation, and that this change necessarily implies a long continued and systematic ejectment of Small holders and of Squatting Cottiers."

For me, the retracing of 1847 has all been about compartmentalisation - the totality of the experience first envisioned with a starting point at Grosse Île quarantine station and an endpoint at Ireland Park, Toronto.

The harrowing details and particulars of that passage along the Saint Lawrence suggested early on a natural narrative divide - the reception of the Irish into Québec by the religious community and then the further passage of the remaining Irish into the sectarian waters of Ontario.

How could one not divide it otherwise? With just a cursory overview of the map, Ontario declares its British-leaning sensibilities with towns named Kingston and Loyalist. In Brockville, I came across an infamous Protestant Irish transplant and native of Wexford, Ogle Robert Gowan, who established the Grand Orange Lodge of British North America in 1830. Before his emigration to British North America, Gowan had led a Protestant militia called the "Black Mob", which had been accused of committing atrocities against Catholics before and after the Wexford Rebellion. His leaving Ireland was motivated by the passage of the Catholic Emancipation Act.

These few details underscored a subconscious parsing of histories, providing a natural demarcation of a journey - Lower and Upper Canada, Québec and Ontario. And so it was that the narrative arc and the division of miles were thus established early on.

Since beginning this journey I've thus watched for omens of alignment that correspond to that narrative divide of Lower and Upper Canada. The anomaly of a cold, wet weather front that settled with my arrival at Grosse Île aligned with a cosmic sympathy. I began my run into a quintessential wet, wind-blown Irish day. If I was in search of a deep alignment with hardship, it was granted me in the push toward Montreal. Misery held! The fourth straight marathon commenced against a headwind and a downpour of lashing rain. Temperatures fell below 10 Celsius. Draped in sheets of rain, the sweeping Saint Lawrence might as well have been the Shannon, facilitating a surreal conjuring and correspondence with untold dead.

So went those early days into a deadening solitude of miles run along the languid sweep of the Saint Lawrence out along Chaudière-Appalaches, where so many orphaned Irish were adopted by the French-speaking Québécois, simply because of a sympathetic alignment that both the French and Irish were Catholic. The passage of the Irish in 1847 was a providential test of faith that emptied the cloister of so many religious orders that provided salvation and succor in a sublimated religious war waged over the salvation of Catholic souls. Into the dreamscape isolation of rural farms along the Saint Lawrence I eventually found myself struck by roadside religious shrines that harkened to an older Irish-Catholicism.

The narrative here was the merciful intersession of the religious throughout the province of Québec. Martyrdom encapsulated the religious edict to minister to the poor. Again, it was the annals of the Grey Nuns that offered insight into an almost medieval religious psyche that firmly established the temporality of our earthly life, and how deeds alone in this world were how one would be redeemed in the afterlife. What I confronted in reading about the passage of pestilence through Québec was a testament to one of the last great religion-inspired acts that would so soon be eclipsed by a modernist paradigm shift toward clinical epidemiology as a frontline defense against disease.

All the accounts I read prior to beginning the run extended beyond mere reportage and broached a polemic condemnation of what had so recently unfolded at the time. From the Montreal Immigrant Society Bulletin 1848, the description is damningly direct, and yet hauntingly poetic, in eulogising the passing of so many souls.

From Grosse Ile, the great charnel house of victimised humanity, up to Port Sarnia and all along the St. Lawrence and the Great Lakes, where ever the tide of immigration extended, are to be found the final resting places of the sons and daughters of Erin--one unbroken chain of graves where rests fathers and mothers, sisters and brothers, without a stone to mark their spot. I do not know that the history of our times has a parallel for this Irish exodus. It was the forced expulsion and panic rush of a stricken people, attended by frightful scenes of suffering and death.

This account of suffering echoes a familiar, plaintive, and damning tone expressed in reports from Ireland by observers that were read before the British parliament during the early spread of the potato blight in as early as 1845. All such reports fell on willfully deaf ears, the reflexive parliamentary response being that all accounts of the Irish situation were prone to exaggeration.

I reached the Québec/Ontario border in the early hours of morning, after a night of electrical storms and driving rain. Psychologically and physiologically, this was the point of natural divide. The first major town along the Saint Lawrence on the Ontario side, Cornwall, declared itself as quintessentially British. The death of some 5,000 at Grosse Île quarantine station and the further interment of over 6,000 Irish in a mass grave in Montreal, along with the concerted effort of the religious community to place over 3,000 orphans within Quebec's Catholic communities, meant the flotsam of Irish who survived had been afforded a measure of care and might survive the rest of the passage to Toronto.

Frankly, from a narrative standpoint, I was at a loss in entering Ontario. It was not so much that I had neglected studying the history of Ontario's reception and treatment of the Irish, as it was that there was less compelling and historical evidence readily accessible. My plan was to push through the summer heat of Ontario in a tally of mounting miles.

This plan would change. Given my use of social media to highlight my run, and specifically a dedicated Facebook page titled Irish Diaspora Run 2016, not long after crossing into Ontario, I was contacted by a host of Celtic heritage organisations who had begun ad hoc historical and genealogical projects that coalesced around informal websites of aggregated genealogies and historical links that described waves of Irish immigration to British North America. Less sensational, shocking, and compelling than the encapsulated immigrant flight of 1847 through Québec, these ad hoc amateurs had begun to describe a complex settlement of British North America that included the transplantation of Irish from Protestant estates as early as the 1820s.

Indeed, in first entering into dialog with these groups, I was directed to recently sourced material that provided a foundational history of the active transplantation of returning soldiers of the Napoleonic Wars, who, as ardent loyalists, had been lured to British North America with land grants. Their presence was

two-fold, to populate the country, but also to bolster a frontline militia against American territorial claims. With the soldiers came a grunt labor of Irish to support the backbreaking construction of an infrastructure of roads and canals.

Many of the groups who contacted me traced their ancestral roots to the Protestant Ascendancy in Ireland, while others guardedly revealed that their ancestors, under the persistent pressure of sectarianism, had converted to Protestantism. What I would determine in meeting with groups along the way from Cornwall to Kingston was that there was a recuperative effort underway to firmly establish the role of the Catholic Irish in settling Ontario. The passage of the immigrants of 1847 was, in some respects, the least impactful immigration of the Irish in Ontario, since many of the 1847 immigrants were set on reaching America.

What I have learned, and what is being further explored online, is a more entrenched and impactful wave of immigrant Irish who have their own fateful history. In the building of the Rideau Canal, an indentured Irish class succumbed to malaria at extraordinary rates, while their British counterparts had access to quinine. Such was the surfeit of Irish labor and disregard for Irish lives.

Among the sprawl of emerging histories is genealogist Annette Code's project detailing the assisted emigration from Lord Fitzwilliam's Estate that began in the 1820s and ensured sufficient labor to build the Rideau Canal. Attendant to this assisted emigration was the discovery of what has been dubbed the McCabe list, named after genealogist John McCabe. Signed by roughly 673 Irish canal workers, the petition begged government intercession to secure assistance for their relatives to make the passage to British North America.

At a festival at the aptly named Skeleton Park, I was invited to speak about my drive to raise awareness regarding the 1847 passage of the Irish. The park, a former graveyard, is the resting place of some 1,400 Irish who died in 1847, along with Irish who numbered among the 1000 Irish who had died building the Rideau Canal decades earlier. A Celtic cross had been erected by a small band of tenacious ecumenical historians committed to preserving the historical realities of Irish immigration in 1847. Less than a mile away, another Celtic cross had been placed alongside the Rideau Canal.

Further back along the route, in Cornwall, I had met with members of the Cornwall Irish Memorial Committee, who, after receiving public records dating to 1847, realised that Cornwall had been the site of a fever hospital to some 250 fever-ravaged Irish. The names of the medical doctors and nurses who attended to the Irish are duly remembered. In honor of the dead, the names of the 52 people who died are now engraved on a newly erected Celtic cross.

The Cornwall memorial is testament to the emerging influence of local historical societies who now have access to digital records. They are piecing together a lesser-known history, but one that better explains the totality of the Irish experience in what was then British North America.

In Brockville, I was invited to meet with a contingent of Canadian-Irish at Block Island, a former cholera quarantine island that the committee quietly suggested must have served as a quarantine facility during the summer of 1847. Steeped in the heart of Orange territory, the historical record is silent, but a passionate Nattanya Hewitt of the Brockville Irish Cultural Society wanted to show me a photocopy of a birth certificate of an ancestral Robert Hewitt, who was born in the County of Armagh in 1841. She determined that Robert must have made the journey along the Saint Lawrence with his family, before settling at Orangeville. Hewitt said she had only recently began researching her family background, and that her Irish background had been overshadowed by her grander, English roots. She was determined to set the record straight and assert her Irish heritage.

In the memorial crosses erected across Ontario to the memory of 1847, there is a recognition of the untold suffering the Irish endured, but so, too the equal recognition of the grace and merciful deliverance of medical assistance by a predominant class of Protestant doctors who looked beyond creed and race and acted in good conscience.

I have run now as far as Kingston, and the narrative arc of the passage of the 1847 immigrants has opened into the brackish waters of convergent tides of Irish immigration that predate the infamous events of 1847. Indeed, 1847 is one chapter of the grander story of the Irish experience in what was then British North America.

This project is supported by the Global Irish Media Fund

Week 4
Famine emigrant descendants have hunger to commemorate

Democratising power of social media allows them to contribute to interpretation of their ancestors' history, Michael Collins finds on his Diaspora Run in Canada

Thu, Jul 7, 2016, 15:00

http://www.irishtimes.com/life-and-style/abroad/generation-emigration/famine-emigrant-descendants-have-hunger-to-commemorate-1.2713718

Having passed the five hundred mile (805km) mark in the last week of my run retracing the route the Irish immigrants of 1847 took along the Saint Lawrence from Grosse Île to Toronto, my understanding of the story of Irish migration to Canada both pre and post 1847 continues to reveal the deep correspondence and influence of numerous immigration waves of Irish to Canada.

Much of this emigration throughout the 1800s was spurred by the yearly spectre of continual deprivation and near starvation that stalked the tenant class, especially between the time the potato crop ran out and the harvest of a new crop. Food scarcity was further exacerbated when, between 1800 and 1847, the population of Ireland doubled from four million to just over eight million. The population explosion was most notable in the rural footholds of Munster and Connaught, to which preceding generations had been banished during Cromwell's reign of terror.

By all accounts, catastrophe was inevitable.

Tragically, the potato blight of 1845 would prove a tipping point, grimly auguring the unsustainability of a land system controlled by an absentee landlord class, while further highlighting the ineffectuality of British policy that broached a fated providentialism in believing that the hand of God was behind the potato blight.

Indeed, more than a century before this characterisation of the Irish situation, the Anglo-Irish satirist and cleric Jonathan Swift, in addressing Ireland's sprawling overpopulation, began his 1729 Modest Proposal:

> "I am assured... that a young healthy child, well nursed, is, at a year old, a most delicious, nourishing, and wholesome food; whether stewed, roasted, baked or boiled..."

One detects even then a perverse providentialism and unnerving psychopathology behind the satire of raising and selling Irish babies at market, but such was the sprawling poverty of an overcrowded Dublin in the early 18th century.

Thomas Malthus, another speculative moralist Protestant cleric, in his An Essay on the Principle of Population, likewise predicted the inevitable culling of millions through vectors of disease and starvation if population growth remained unchecked. To offset such natural disasters, Malthus argued for moral restraint. Yet, despairing that the poor could ever be so swayed, he sardonically advocated against assisting the poor, advocating that:

> "…we should make the streets narrower, crowd more people into the houses, and court the return of the plague. In the country, we should build our villages near stagnant pools, and particularly encourage settlements in all marshy and unwholesome situations.

> But above all, we should reprobate specific remedies for ravaging diseases."

To be sure, the bombastic hyperbole owes much to a stylized Protestant-inspired rhetoric. Yet the underlying appeal for moral restraint tied directly to tenets of the Protestant Reformation, namely, the direct mediation of the self with God, an idea which would eventually dovetail with the secularist Enlightenment ideas of self-determination and individual rights. This hybridisation of spiritual determinism with secularised enlightenment would further influence economic theory as Adam Smith, in his Wealth of Nations, penned a proto-Protestant inspired manifesto that argued for unregulated free markets and laissez-faire capitalism based on rational self-interest and competition.

Without invoking the metaphysical, Smith's theory aligned with Martin Luther's assertion that all Christians served God in their occupations. To quote Luther, "God is milking the cows through the vocation of the milkmaid". In so ordaining work in the temporal world as essentially vocational, Luther ended Catholicism's disjunctive split between the clergy and the laity. In the Catholic Church, vocation was tied exclusively to acts beyond common human living and marked by chastity. Deconstructing the monastic life, Luther pointedly warned:

> "If you find yourself in a work by which you accomplish something good for God, or the holy, or yourself, but not for your neighbor alone, then you should know that that work is not a good work."

Arguably, the rise of the Industrial Age, and with it, a new economy of self-interest-inspired capitalism, was facilitated by a radical conceptual shift in the understanding of vocation under the Protestant Reformation. If God commanded the mysteries of the universe, so be it, but there were concerns within the domain of man, namely how he survived and prospered in the temporal world. Smith put it thus, in his The Theory of Moral Sentiments:

> "The administration of the great system of the universe ... the care of the universal happiness of all rational and sensible beings, is the business of God and not of man. To man is allotted a much humbler department, but one much more suitable to the weakness of his powers, and to the narrowness of his comprehension: the care of his own happiness, of that of his family, his friends, his country...."

In anticipating a shift from the essentialism of Catholic emphasis on the transcendent and acts directed to God alone toward Protestant self-actualisation in the temporal world, Smith extended Luther's argument for vocations, so that the agency of exchange between men could align with principles of self-interest while simultaneously serving a moral function in promoting compassion and advancing happiness. In essence, a true Christian could not isolate his relationship with God, speaking only of faith while overlooking his relationship with his neighbour.

Tragically, Ireland was worlds away from this emergent neo-Protestant capitalism spreading across Europe. While the creep of Enclosure Acts elsewhere ended a medieval serfdom of tenant farming, reorganising commerce around industrial cities, Ireland was going in the opposite direction. To the casual observer, the country exemplified the antithesis of moral restraint, or it was more politically convenient to conflagrate unremitting birth with Catholicism and Irish ignorance than to seek a deeper understanding of the Irish situation. In effect, the Irish dilemma - for the English parliament - became less about underlying economics and more representative of a sectarian attitudinal divide, as Protestant self-determinism met the miasma of a wretched Catholic helplessness.

Indeed, Charles Trevelyan, in commenting on his governmental role as overseer of famine relief, echoed Swift and Malthus's providential theme, writing,

> "I think I see a bright light shining in the distance to the dark cloud which at present hangs over Ireland. A remedy has been already applied… and I hope I am not guilty of irreverence in thinking that this being altogether beyond the power of man, the cure has been applied by the direct stroke of an all-wise Providence… God grant that we may rightly perform our part and not turn into a curse what was intended as a blessing."

Greater understanding

I have provided the above historical preamble as my own interpretation of the circumstances that led to the marginalisation of the Irish in the decades preceding the potato blight. I undertook the study of the historical influences surrounding the Irish situation for my own understanding of the socio-political history leading up to the failure of the potato in 1845, though, subsequently, with the advent of the run, I offered my own interpretation of historical influences as a point of discussion.

I am not a historian, and I understand the pitfalls of advancing theories without extensive research, yet the spirit of the diaspora run has sought to initiate dialogue and draw either support or corrective criticism or encourage competing theories to find voice. Yes, social media can accommodate and promote work of dubious academic rigor, but the general emphasis in embarking on the run and hosting the Irish Diaspora Run Facebook page was to facilitate discussion with the assertion that opinions and oral histories of the descendants of those who left Ireland matter, and that the received history of a people bears on how history is commemorated.

In doing research for the run, in speaking with historians, a quiet murmur arose suggesting that, due to political tensions, commemoration of the sesquicentenary anniversary of the Great Famine was perhaps tempered, as the Good Friday Agreement was not yet signed.

Indeed, in 1996, while in Australia, Fine Gael minister Avril Doyle, during a speech marking the Great Famine, cautioned that "Irish people needed to develop a mature relationship with their past, to view the famine as a moment in history which defined a sense of vulnerability and not as a weapon for modern political conflict".

Further entanglement ensued during a Manhattan luncheon in 1996, when the then governor of New York, George Pataki, who had recently signed a law mandating that state schools provide a course on "mass starvation in Ireland from 1845 to 1850", linked with studies on "the inhumanity of genocide, slavery and the Holocaust", declared:

> "History teaches us the Great Irish Hunger was not the result of a massive failure of the Irish potato crop but rather was the result of a deliberate campaign by the British to deny the Irish people the food they needed to survive."

It was, again, minister Avril Doyle who would interject and state that in speaking as "a member of the Government... I don't call the Famine genocide... historians have disproved that". Rather, she characterised the Famine as exacerbated by "an appallingly inadequate response by the British administration."

As late as 2013, the eminent historian Tim Pat Coogan, in his The Famine Plot, caused a furore in academic circles by arguing that the famine was genocide perpetrated by the British. Challenging

Coogan's scholarship in a particularly vitriolic exchange, Liam Kennedy, emeritus professor of Economic History at Queen's University Belfast, accused Coogan of "providing junk food for the wilder reaches of Irish America".

Hunger to commemorate

What I can say so far, in hosting the Irish Diaspora Run 2016 Facebook page, is that the hunger to commemorate the immigration of so many Irish to Canada and America lives not as a point of maudlin sentimentality, but as a point of literal and spiritual departure from one's origins. The why behind that leaving-taking seemingly matters more to those descendants of that history than it does for those who remained in Ireland. For the Irish diaspora, the leave-taking raises existential and political questions.

Indeed, the management of the Diaspora Run page has become a fundamental part of the run. In the three weeks since it inception, with the help of various immigrant groups and selective paid posts to target groups, the page has handled over 100,000 visitors. What has become apparent is that descendants of emigrants, along with a cadre of indigenous Irish, are engaged in an active process of recovering and debating history, facilitated through the democratising role of social media in broadening discourse beyond academic circles.

Of course, there are those cautionary voices who will argue that uninformed commentary is potentially harmful, but, in the main, the aggregate of stories and the recovery of lost historical archives by local historical and genealogy societies has facilitated the retracing of the literal migratory path and settlement of immigrants' waves. In many respects, it is the composite of individual stories, of received history, passed from generation to generation, that best identifies and accommodates our understanding of ourselves as immigrants.

So far, in my month-long run, I've attracted the attention of communities along the Saint Lawrence that hold isolated historical records documenting the plight and path of immigrants. In many instances, the recent recovery of such records has prompted the formation of memorial committees who have independently erected commemorative monuments to this recovered history. This visual testament to a receding history is key to establishing a further awareness and discussion of the socio-political realities that often attend the upheaval of entire peoples.

In speaking at Kingston's Skeleton Park, site of a graveyard to some 10,000 Irish, where the Irish are commemorated with a Celtic Cross, I was made pointedly aware of Kingston's continued commitment to refugees. The city webpage has a tab - "Refugees" - devoted to helping Kingston's citizens sponsor Syrian refugees.

Of course, in the broadening of dialogue regarding culpability for the death of one million souls and the emigration of another million, I've had to negotiate the landmine of historical interpretations. There are those who declare Britain's inaction as tantamount to genocide, and I've been challenged on more than one occasion for steering clear of political controversy. In truth, the sharpness of the exchanges and the pointed criticism is welcome, since part of the process of understanding involves the clash of varying and competing histories.

In this receiving and passing of histories, there is always loss and gain. I am mindful of a story I was told in Cornwell, Ontario. The story concerned an infant Irish child, who, in mortal sickness during the horror of 1847, was passed by her father to a lockmaster on the banks of the Saint Lawrence. The father's simple entreat was that the child receive a decent burial. The boat passed, and so went the family. The lockmaster took the child as instructed, though, miraculously, under the care of his wife, the child survived and was adopted into the family.

Years passed until eventually a letter arrived and circulated in Cornwall from the Irish family, who were then settled in Niagara. Theirs was a simple request - they were seeking information regarding the location of the burial plot of their infant child. The letter went unheeded, the lockmaster and his wife afraid to correspond, the course of the girl's fate then tied to another history.

One can only imagine the tragic void that lived in the heart of that Irish family, and why, for them and their descendants, the matter of leave-taking and the circumstances surrounding their emigration so occupies the diaspora conscience.

How to join the Irish Diaspora Run
The route begins at Grosse Île quarantine island, on the St Lawrence river, and continues through Quebec City, Montreal and Kingston before reaching Ireland Park, in Toronto.

The project is raising funds for Irish-Canadian organisations seeking to create parks and erect monuments and statues to commemorate 1847.

Others can participate by taking on runs where they live, and logging their distances on diasporarun.org, where they can also sponsor Collins.

This project is supported by the Global Irish Media Fund

Final Article Week 5:
What I learned tracing the steps of Irish Famine migrants
Michael Collins reaches the end of his 885km Irish Diaspora Run in Canada
Tue, Jul 19, 2016, 17:00

http://www.irishtimes.com/life-and-style/abroad/generation-emigration/what-i-learned-tracing-the-steps-of-irish-famine-migrants-1.2727399

On July 10th, I ended my month-long solo 550-mile (885km) run from the Grosse Île quarantine station to the Famine Memorial at Ireland Park, Toronto. In so doing, I passed through the provinces of Quebec and Ontario, hugging the Saint Lawrence in a solitary pilgrimage, retracing the fated journey of some 100,000 Irish who, when faced with eviction and starvation, boarded what would become the infamous coffin ships of the 1847 passage to Canada.

Of those who left, one-fifth - some 20,000 - died. Thousands found a watery grave in the stormy Atlantic, whilst the aggregate death toll on Canadian soil would rise as piles of corpses were buried in mass graves along the Saint Lawrence. Over 5,000 souls perished at the quarantine station of Grosse Île, while about 75,000 immigrants who survived quarantine eventually advanced on Montréal, with a then population of 50,000. In the fever sheds at Pointe Saint Charles, another 6,000 died and were interred in a mass grave that went unmarked until workers uncovered the site in 1859 during construction of the Victoria Bridge and erected at their own cost The Black Rock to memorialise those who died there.

After covering over 310km the first week, I stopped at The Black Rock where I was greeted by the Montreal Irish Memorial Park Foundation and Canadian parliamentarian, Marc Miller. Both the foundation and Miller are committed to advancing the Foundation's proposed memorial park which will include a museum, monument, and GAA pitch.

Indeed, the heroism of both secular and religious groups who tended to the sick in the hastily erected fever sheds bears testimony to one of the most harrowing stories of The Great Hunger. Undoubtedly, the most vulnerable surviving victims were the orphans of those who had perished. Numbering in the thousands, these unfortunates would eventually swarm the fever sheds from Québec City, through Montréal and Kingston, and down into Toronto.

In the province of Québec alone, over 3,000 Irish orphans were cared for by charitable organisations, including the Grey Nuns. Priests who ministered to the sick and witnessed firsthand the tragedy of so many dispossessed orphans delivered powerful sermons, beseeching their congregations to adopt these orphans. Exemplary of a Catholic rhetoric of compassion and religious injunction to charity, stories survive anecdotally of church doors being bolted until those less inclined to adopt an orphan were eventually persuaded. Such were the times - and the need so great - that the dutiful obeyed.

The subsequent decision by the French-speaking Québécois to allow the orphans to keep their Irish surnames would become an integral part of the Canadian immigration narrative, exemplifying what historian Jason King describes as a narrative "of accommodation rather than assimilation…" which would come to define "the process by which immigrants and cultural minorities become integrated into Canadian society".
Throughout my journey in the province of Québec, this notion of accommodation over assimilation best characterises the province's history. The survival of the French language, French culture, and Catholicism, post the British conquest at the Plains of Abraham in 1759 are prime examples of accommodation over assimilation.

As a general observation, the French Québécois response to the plight of the Irish was borne of a religious commonality, and, though orphans were adopted in unprecedented numbers and allowed to preserve their heritage, most Irish who passed through Montréal were intent on eventually reaching America, via Toronto.

The lasting effect of Irish immigration into Canada is more evident in Ontario. Through the 1820s and 30s, in what was then called Upper Canada, waves of immigrant Irish were transported from Protestant-held estates in Ireland, in a conscious attempt at instituting a sort of act of enclosure aimed at depopulating the Irish countryside to advance large-scale agriculture. In the economic doldrums of the post-Napoleonic Wars era and following the Act of Union, Protestant agents such as the inimitable Peter Robinson were commissioned to transport the Irish to settle and cultivate the Ottawa Valley in what would become a frontline force against the incursion and creeping influence of the French Québécois in Ontario.

So, too, Irish workers were transported to construct the Rideau Canal in Ontario. Built during 1826-1832, the 202 km-long canal was carved out of virgin forest and built using nitroglycerine and primitive hand-held tools. The estimated death toll along the mosquito-infested marshlands between Ottawa and Kingston was over 1,000 Irish. Tragically, most who died did so needlessly. Quinine would have cured them, but the sectarian split between the Irish Catholic workers and their Protestant overseers - Royal Sappers (i.e. British army engineers) - meant Catholics' wages were kept unduly low.

This historical legacy of sectarianism in Ontario would again rear during the passage of the immigrant Irish of 1847. In Protestant stronghold towns like Cornwall, Prescott, Brockville, Kingston, and Cobourg, the influence of the Orange Order meant that the passage of immigrant barges through the summer heat of 1847 was not well-documented. The spectre of a mass grave at Cornwall was only recently discovered in archival records. Throughout my journey, I met with and interviewed local historians and commemorative memorial committees that have recently erected Celtic crosses to mark that fateful year.

Exile

For many, the rediscovery of a historical event some 150 years past has opened deep psychological scars. In an associated Facebook page I set up for the run, over 100,000 visitors, many availing of online genealogical resources, have added to the collective story of the passage and eventual settlement of those immigrants who crossed in 1847. The fated story of families separated through quarantine is a recurring motif. For a decade after the passage of 1847, notices appeared throughout Ontario with relatives inquiring after their loved ones.

Indeed, for many of the diaspora Irish I met along the run, the ancestral passage to Canada and America, especially during the Hunger years, is still perceived as a form of exile connected to draconian British rule. In total, the Great Hunger accounted for the emigration of over a million and the death of another million. Even contemporary descendants far removed from the tragic departure of the Hunger years, when asked to reflect on their ancestors' arrival to Canada, were more apt to characterise it as an exile rather than an opportunity.

This theme of exile over opportunity accounts for a fierceness of national pride and an attendant encyclopedic knowledge of Irish history in those vested in preserving the legacy of that perceived exile. Over pints in snug Irish bars, I was versed on more occasions about a litany of Irish dates, from the 1691 flight of the Wild Geese to France following the end of the Williamite War, to the influence of the French Enlightenment on Wolfe Tone's 1798 Rebellion. It was, more often than not, a dirge history of heroic struggle, defeat, and eventual exile.

In these oft spellbinding oratory accounts of our collective history, time seemed arrested, and the historical grievances, yet again enlivened with a dramatic immediacy and flashpoint sectarian hostilities. The question surfaced with each encounter - what to do with such a history?

What I can say of so many I met along the way on the run was that, for them, their Irishness was connected with an existential sense of self. Psychologically, their life in Canada directly relates to a traumatic ancestral leave-taking that many of them believe constitutes genocide. I was corrected repeatedly for using the word famine, and to deny them their right to tell that story as they see it would be to shamefully and consciously suppress their perceived historical reality.

I felt at a quiet remove from this theme of exile, or I thought it constituted an older generational motif, but this recurrent theme would again be poignantly highlighted with my arrival at Ireland Park. My 12-year-old son Eoin wanted to sing to celebrate my arrival. Without prompt, he chose the haunting emigrant ballad, 'The Parting Glass' from his repertoire of Irish songs.

Somehow, the notion of exile had registered at a subconscious level within him. What I heard in his voice was an eerie, plaintive ancestral lament for all that was lost or would soon be lost in a parting. It was as though the dead were speaking through him. He had a lilting tonal quality, which he must have heard voiced in the late great Irish singer Tomás Mac Eoin, whose rendition of 'The Stolen Child' was a staple song played in our house.

Leave-taking and loss

After the ceremony, I quietly talked with Eoin. He could not articulate why he chose 'The Parting Glass'. What I eventually gathered was that, for him, the story of Irish migration was not about arrival, but about leave-taking. He was caught reflexively looking back without having the insight or full measure of Irish history. Loss was the central motif of his Irishness. He talked about the sculptures at Ireland Park, interpreting the outreach of hands as reaching back toward Ireland, when they might have been equally interpreted as a beseeching, forward-looking gesture toward a welcoming Toronto.

Where did this sense of loss emanate from? My son is no scholar of Irish history, and yet the undercurrent of great loss registered, not through a received history of the dates of rebellions and uprisings, but in the plaintive strain of a narrative carried on the warble of a tin whistle or the uilleann pipes.

I realised just then that Irish history is mediated first and foremost through our music, through haunting airs of loss, and that, perhaps uniquely in this, our history is tied to a meta-narrative of loss that is transmitted pre-language. I had channeled this history of leave-taking as wake in my subconscious choice of an Irish soundtrack of ballads that played in our home. The subtle motif of loss was the essential theme conveyed.

In the days since the end of the run, I looked further into the codifying loss and fell upon the aisling or vision poem. A uniquely Irish poetic invention, the aisling personified Ireland as either a maiden of immense beauty, or an old woman lamenting the loss of her children. That the aisling arose in the 17th century powerfully reinforced the Irish experience as a history associated with defeat and subsequent emigration, defined not as opportunity, but as exile and banishment.

Engagement

Indeed, even in the initial planning of the trip, I understood that a fundamental dilemma associated with retracing the path of the immigrants of 1847 would be balancing the commemorative emphasis of honouring the dead, while not reopening historical wounds. In reaching out to Irish diaspora groups via social media, I knew I was engaging in a sort of selective bias, and that, undoubtedly, the audience, in

celebrating their ancestral Irishness, would most probably equally view their ancestors leave-taking as exile.

The Facebook site associated with the run - Irish Diaspora Run 2016 - preserves the oft-heated responses of followers to historical articles I posted of what were then contemporary accounts and observations that reached back as far as the Reformation and the sectarian split between Ireland and England. In the course of a month, through posts and dialogue, I believe that those who most fully engaged with the historical evidence arrived at a greater understanding of the historical, sociological, and psychological, paradigm shifts in Economic Theory and Religion that tragically isolated and marginalised Ireland.

In planning the trip in February, I had visited with Toronto-based Irish immigrant, Robert Kearns. With a degree in Archaeology and Greek and Roman civilization, Kearns has the authoritative grace and charm of a post-modern denizen committed to inclusion and multiculturalism. His Irishness encompassed Irish history, but he also offered a way forward beyond sectarianism and an arrested sense of an aggrieved and bloody history.

As a leading figure in the Irish-Canadian business community, in the early 1980s, Kearns served on the volunteer committee of the Ireland Fund of Canada, which actively sought to raise money to promote peace and reconciliation in Ireland. Then, in 1997, Kearns turned his focus to the historical tides of the immigrant waves that had arrived in Canada. In establishing the charitable non-profit Ireland Park Foundation, he began lobbying Toronto for a quayside park which would eventually contain replicas of Rowan Gillespie's famine sculptures on Dublin's Custom House Quay Docklands. Kearns' goal was to complete symbolically the voyage of coffin-ship migrants.

Indeed, Ireland Park had been inspiration for my own Diaspora Run, and it was why I had asked to meet with Kearns. A decade earlier, while on a book tour in Toronto, I had been taken late at night to the park. The indelible image of the sculptures and their remote placement in the small parcel of Ireland Park suggested an accommodation of history within the bustle of urban sprawl. Without descriptive plaques detailing the history of Ireland, the sculptures simultaneously encompass and transcend Irish history. The sculptures speak to the universality of an immigrant experience that defines the settlement of the New World.

In meeting with Robert on a snowy February day, I had felt that, perhaps, in his cosmopolitan vision, he was anticipating and engendering a reconfiguration of a national history, not as a source of differentiation, but as a source of shared experience.

A day after the run, in revisiting the park with my son, the theme of exile was again on my mind. I had unduly influenced or seeded historical animosities within him. I sought to make amends, or reorient him. Prophetically, Kearns' forward-thinking vision of history was on my mind.

I explained that Ireland Park Foundation, in its logical extension of a broadening of history and commitment to encompassing a universality of shared values, was creating another park - Dr George Robert Grasett Park. To be unveiled in 2017, the park celebrates the Canadian response to the mass migration of Irish migrants in 1847, and specifically its medical profession. In addition to Dr Grasett, significantly the roster of those memorialised includes another male triage officer, Mr Edward McElderry, but also two women, head nurse Susan Bailey and nurse Sarah Duggan. All played an important role in the medical history of the city and furthered the foundation of the modern Canadian healthcare system.

In thus explaining the new park, I think my son caught the essential and subtle re-orientating genius of a universalist like Kearns, who is advancing the totality of our collective experience, seeking to steel our resolve to rise in defense of justice, promoting tolerance and universal acceptance.

In the strangest of coincidences, hours after revisiting Ireland Park, I got a Facebook message of congratulatory thanks for sharing the Irish plight of 1847 from a First Nations' clan leader of the Hotinoshonni Confederacy Council of the Iroquois Nation. The clan's point of connection was tied to their fellow Choctaw, who had suffered their own near-genocide in 1831, when over 21,000 of their people were made trek 500 miles to Oklahoma on what became known as the infamous Trail of Tears. In 1847, the Choctaw, upon hearing of The Great Hunger, raised and sent funds to Ireland. Ironically, the man who had forced them off their lands was Andrew Jackson, the son of Irish immigrants.

Of course, my son was enthralled that the Iroquois Nation had thought to contact me. He wanted to know about the Trail of Tears, and, in the subtle connection of one kindness bestowed on one people so long ago, an emerging history opened to him.

In researching the connection, I came upon a plaque on Dublin's Mansion House honouring the Choctaw contribution. It reads:

> "Their humanity calls us to remember the millions of human beings throughout our world today who die of hunger and hunger-related illness in a world of plenty."

A recognition and preservation of national histories is important, but equally so is our willingness to use our histories as a point of reconciliation, as we collectively advance a greater universality of understanding and compassion. In so doing, we find accommodation and assimilation, losing nothing, while gaining everything.

In the week since ending the run, I have felt the quieting distancing of all those who followed me for the month. I miss all of you. The run was first envisioned as a solitary act of pilgrimage, but in having the support of The Irish Times and a grant from the Irish Government, along with the reach of social media, some 100,000 of us connected, and we are the better for it.

For those who didn't join us, the legacy of what was said is still preserved on Facebook at Irish Diaspora Run 2016. My intention is to continue updating the site. I'm currently in discussion to run the length of Ireland and possibly continuing with a Diaspora Run in Australia. In so doing I would visit historical sites associated with Irish migration, while collating a digital repository of historical documents and continuing to invite followers to share their family stories.

If anybody is so inclined, donations are still being accepted for the two non-profits I designated to help - The Montreal Irish Memorial Park Foundation and Ireland Park Foundation. Both are independent, non-affiliated organisations.

Donations can be made at diasporarun.org. I would ask people to consider sponsoring a symbolic 47 dollars in commemoration of 1847.

Until we meet again, thank you for all your support.

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Final Article – Remembering 20,000 Famine refugees who died in 1847
Writer and ultrarunner Michael Collins traces a forgotten part of Irish history

Sat, Nov 26, 2016

http://www.irishtimes.com/life-and-style/people/remembering-20-000-famine-refugees-who-died-in-1847-1.2870773

Within the Famine memorial fundraising community, there's a phenomenon quietly referred to as "famine fatigue", which tacitly acknowledges that, in the receding century and a half since the events of those terrible famine years, there's a limit to the emotional empathy that can be wrought from a people, no matter the numbers – one million starved and another two million were forced to emigrate.

Time moves on and yet, when I first heard the term, it rattled me that my month-long Irish Diaspora Run – a marathon-a-day for 30 days, motivated to bring awareness and raise funds to memorialise 20,000 Irish who died during the 1847 passage of 100,000 famine-stricken emigrants to Canada – might be viewed as just another far-cast mournful act of an emigrant dwelling on ancient history.

The term "famine fatigue" was the first reality check I would experience in what has become an evolving and contentious coming to terms with the actual cause, circumstance and culpability regarding the Famine years of 1845-49.

My first point of contact was with the highly regarded Irish Famine historian Dr Christine Kinealy, at Quinnipiac University in Connecticut who has gathered a stirring collection of Famine-inspired sculptures housed in the university's library.

Typhus-stricken
She was then curating a Famine-related exhibit on the Montreal order of Grey Nuns, who had not only ministered to the typhus-stricken Irish in 1847, but also undertook the care and eventual adoption of over 6,000 Irish orphans into a French-speaking Quebecois community.

At the time of my arrival, Kinealy was involved in an ongoing challenge to Tim Pat Coogan's claim in his book The Famine Plot that the Famine had been a conscious act of genocide perpetrated by the English. Long on the particulars of what constitutes genocide as defined by the United Nations, Kinealy, unerring in her scholarship, echoed the sentiment of a chorus of academics decrying Coogan's book as "junk food for the wilder reaches of Irish America".

I suppose I should have expected this factionalism.

In my own youth, the Famine was not discussed, partly out of a reflexive sense of shame that we had been so subjugated under British rule, but also in our pragmatic rush throughout the early 1980s toward a new Ireland of so-called young Europeans.

In the instinct to outrun history, there was an underlying economic indeterminacy tied to the protracted Troubles and with it, a spike in emigration.

So, too, a nationalist movement, in calculatedly drawing upon the famine, had stoked an impassioned Irish-American community further complicated our self-determinism. We were at once a people united and divided by our own history – by those who remained and the descendants of those who had left.

Upon emigrating to America, I wrote my first collection of short stories, The Meat Eaters, an ode to country inspired by loss and displacement.

Soon after, swayed by legions of emigrant descendants who configured their history around the historical displacement of the Famine, I began a Famine novel.

I would spend a year researching the historical record and in the end wither from the burden of inhabiting the psyche of either the Irish peasantry or the landed aristocracy.
It lives as a singular literary failure that has dogged me, given I would eventually transfer a sociological acuity to all things American, specifically the collapse of American industrialism, as captured in my Booker shortlisted novel, The Keepers of Truth.

The question plagued me – how could I stand as outsider, impartial witness, and documentarian to another history whilst my own eluded me?

Deconstruction of the American Dream
In the intervening years, as an ultrarunner, I would captain the Irish 100K Senior Team. In so doing, I vicariously drew upon the Famine, inhabiting the underlying perseverance of a repressed and starved people in the sublimation of distances covered.

In so admitting it, in drawing on this historical past, I feel, even now, a reflexive cringe at this ignoble servicing of so many dead for the concentrated efforts of trying to win a race.

Years would pass. My writing life turned solely to the deconstruction of the American Dream. Even the tenuous connection to a Famine-inspired endurance receded as I retired from competitive ultra-running. In the interval of years, there was, too, the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, and of course 9/11, and, with it, the end of funds funnelled home given how terrorism was forever re-defined and prosecuted under The Patriot Act.

By the latter part of the first decade of the 21st century, I was furthest from my Irishness and deep into a new novel examining the effects of the financial collapse of 2008 on an American family.

Likewise, a post-financial crash Ireland, caught in the entanglement of what it meant to be European and in the midst of its austerity measures, was turned from nationalist preoccupations that had figured so centrally just decades earlier.

It was not until the fall of 2015, while taking a month-long French language course in Quebec City, that I came across the fated 1847 ocean passage to Canada of 100,000 famine-stricken Irish who had been evicted from some of the most remote estates in a great evacuation of the last enclaves of Gaelic culture.

Much of what I read was in French, or parlayed through a halting bilingual exchange with local historians. It was a story twice told: first a story of the Irish, but also a story of the French-speaking Québécois who became unwitting participants in the greatest loss of life in the Victorian period, surpassed only by the Great Famine itself and the Crimean War.

In the narrative arc of that singular season of death, there was the providential coincidence that those who had survived the ocean crossing eventually continued along the Saint Lawrence river for some 600 miles, to Toronto – a tally of miles I registered as a distance I could run in a single month, amounting to a marathon a day.

I made a promise to return to Canada to complete a solitary pilgrimage along a forgotten route.

Barred disease-ridden ships

My month within the walled city of Quebec was thus spent immersing myself in a history long passed. What emerged was a damning, contained history of an imperial power bent on expediently transporting a famished people onto a colonial outpost.

In early 1847, the British parliament, in voting to end famine relief in Ireland, transferred the burden of tenant relief onto absentee landlords who simply shirked this responsibility through a universal campaign of eviction.

America, anticipating the effects of this impending emigrant crisis, amended maritime Passenger Acts, imposing stricter regulations that barred the arrival of disease-ridden ships and prevented Irish emigration to America.

It was against this countermove that the British government colluded with the absentee landlords, allowing the retrofitting of commercial lumber ships to carry a ballast of human souls across the Atlantic to Canada at a pittance of the traditional passage's regular cost.

These infamous so-called coffin ships, likened to slave galleys, averaged 300 persons, three times that allowed under the American Passenger Acts. Mortality rates often approached 30-40 per cent.

A telling memorandum circulated among parliamentarians by the foreign secretary to Ireland, Lord Palmerston, who evicted 2,000 of his Irish tenants and shipped them to Canada, tacitly underscored British policy toward agrarian reform in Ireland:

> " . . . any great improvement in the social system of Ireland must be founded upon an extensive change in the present state of agrarian occupation [through] a long continued and systematic ejectment of Small holders and of Squatting Cottiers."

What I took from this remark was an assessment of British policy that aligned with the fated providentialism of Thomas Malthus, who, in anticipating a dramatic population explosion, ardently advocated against helping the poor:

> " . . . in the country, we should build our villages near stagnant pools, and particularly encourage settlements in all marshy and unwholesome situations. But above all, we should reprobate specific remedies for ravaging diseases."

There is little comfort Malthus was speaking not specifically of the Irish situation, but launching a more generalised attack on the poor. Such was the menacing rise of a 19th-century Wealth of Nations capitalism that favoured individual rights and freedoms over collectivism.

Arguably, British parliamentarians – under the sway of these influences and assessing the opportunity afforded by the famine – took to executing long-standing plans to impose an enclosure-like policy on Ireland.

It might not have been genocide in name but, given the million who died, maybe another term needs to enter the lexicon to adequately capture what was perpetrated.

Irish mass graves
The fault lines of the complex academic, political and sectarian divide, which appear everywhere in the historical record of the famine, did not surface as I arrived at Grosse Île quarantine island along the Saint Lawrence river.

In the great oddment of the contained history of 1847, in approaching the island, nothing suggests the province holds the ignominious distinction of containing the largest number of Irish mass graves in the world.

Grosse Île is a site of Irish pilgrimage – though, to Canadians, it is a heritage site dedicated to preserving the island's historical significance as a quarantine processing facility from 1832 to 1932.

The Irish Famine is but one story within Grosse Île's long history, and yet the facts are stark. From June to November of 1847, of the 100,000 who emigrated, 7,000 died during the 40 to 50-day Atlantic crossing while, on Grosse Île, a further 5,000 succumbed to typhus and were buried in trenched graves.
As early as May 1847, Dr Douglas, chief medical officer at Grosse Île, wrote letters imploring assistance to offset impending disaster. The British government wilfully disregarded such requests. The coffin ships kept sailing.

By mid-June, due to the throng of the infirm in the fever sheds and a lack of medical staff, passengers languished for upwards of two weeks aboard an armada of 40 ships backed up two miles along the Saint Lawrence.

Without adequate water and food, infection spread.

The diarist and coffin ship passenger Robert Whyte recorded seeing "hundreds . . . literally flung on the beach, left amid the mud and stones to crawl on the dry land as they could".

Of the 427 passengers who arrived aboard The Agnes, only 150 survived Grosse Île.

In my journey to the island, amidst a riot of children on a school excursion, there would be little regard for solemnity. On the cusp of beginning my month-long run, I felt the reflexive need to rationalise why I was compelled to make this pilgrimage in the name of so many nameless dead. There was no immediate answer.

In a quiet disengagement from the school children, I walked first to a Celtic cross that had been erected atop the island in 1909, some 60 years after the fateful events of 1847, then eventually wound my way to a commemorative glass memorial inaugurated in 1998.

Fronting a series of unmarked trenched graves amounting to 5,000 souls, an etched glass sail bears a roll call of the dead. In finding the name Collins, the historical context of why this happened and who was to blame was suddenly less important than simply bearing witness to the place where so many had died.

Trauma
Early on, I'd understood that this run would be the salvage of a near lost history in the far-flung, French-speaking province of Quebec. What passed represented a single season of death.

Of those 6,000 emigrant orphans sent into the countryside, there has never been a great appeal among them to reconnect with their Irish roots. Perhaps the trauma was too great, or the succour of those who came to their aid did not bear compromise. There was the language barrier, too, and a spirited Francophile resistance to English rule.
The most striking fact that emerged in reading the transcribed documents from the time was how the municipal authorities, in tandem with the religious orders of Montreal, had marshalled their collective resources to care and minister to the sick and dying Irish.

Simply put, the question early on was: What affinity did the native Québécois have toward this advance of typhus-stricken Irish?

In a slow advance toward Montreal, much asked in that question became apparent.

I chose Route 132, given its languid course along the Saint Lawrence. In running this less-travelled road, I came upon religious shrines that harkened to a penitent spectre of a more ancient, religious life, shrines eerily reminiscent of those that still exist along the coastal crag of the West of Ireland; weathered figures of Christ's passion on a cross facing the eternal scour of the Atlantic gales.

This is expected of Ireland, but to come upon these roadside shrines in the rainy cold of Canada was a revelation.

1847 figured as a proxy war between Catholics and proselytizing ministers for the salvation of souls.

Through the recent work of historian Jason King, the historical record of the Grey Nuns has been recovered and translated. The diary entries capture the miasma of catastrophic sickness.

Apocalyptic
In a Dante-esque apocalyptic vision, 75,000 emigrants descended on Montreal, which then had a population of 50,000. There are descriptions of sickness and effluence in the fever sheds that sickened veteran doctors, and yet the so-called Martyrs of Charity actively sought out the most distressing cases of disease.

What is transmitted is a faith eclipsed by an Enlightenment age of reason and science and, eventually, a jaded modernist cynicism.

In the breadth of some 600 miles, my run would eventually follow the ragged migration of survivors through a divided country: first the Francophile province of Quebec, then the Neo-English province of Ontario.

Their journey reveals a history of how the disparate Canadian populations dealt with the refugee crisis, and yet my initial sweep into the remote, uninhabited lands of Quebec proved the most physically and spiritually challenging. Here lay a lost history and the greatest loss of life.

Collective amnesia
Early in planning the run, there was a singular destination I'd settled on that I felt defined our unsatisfactory collective response to the tragic events of 1847 – Montreal's Black Rock.

Set in a road median in downtown Montreal, the rock commemorates 6,000 Irish interred in a mass grave. The burial site had been all but forgotten until it was uncovered during construction in 1859 of the Victoria Bridge. Such was the collective amnesia of a traumatized city. The workers who unearthed the entombed erected, at their own expense, the stone that now commemorates those almost forgotten dead.

In so reading about the Black Rock, I discovered that, at some point, it will most probably be removed given the sprawl of the city. I contacted the Montreal Irish Monument Park Foundation, a non-profit preemptively seeking to avert the eventual unceremonious mass exhumation of corpses with a proposed famine memorial park across from a derelict parking lot in an industrial wasteland under federal management.

The director, Fergus Keyes, was frank in his general assessment of the dim prospects of negotiating the provincial and federal bureaucratic red tape to acquire the land.

Yet, his organization has persisted with an annual commemorative gathering that includes the absurd spectacle of having to dart across a major thoroughfare to an island median memorial to honour 6,000 famine victims.

In viewing an online video, in witnessing the ragged assembly of the faithful, I took it as a smouldering indictment of our slowness in demanding recognition of the undisputable horrors which befell our ancestors.

On a Facebook page Irish Diaspora Run 2016, set up to provide historical information regarding the famine and to chart my progress, a sub-group quickly spawned around the Irish housing crash. Members likened the modern spate of foreclosure evictions to what happened during the famine.

There was the sense that the famine was relevant and yet distantly remote from the pressures facing people in the collapse of the housing market.

I sympathised with the understated indictment in dwelling on a remote past, and yet there are times when it takes the voice of the pining diaspora to reckon with history.

If we are to be charged with an arrested sense of history, then so be it.

I was cognizant that Canada was the end for so many Irish, but also the beginning of the Canadian Irish diaspora experience.

Psychological reckoning

In the first week I ran over 300km and arrived, shivering, into the Montreal suburbs late at night. Faltering during the afternoon run, I had all but collapsed. This was the beginning of the summer scorch and drenching humidity. In ultra-running, the body succumbs and recovers in a realignment of metabolic adjustment.

It was partly that, but perhaps more so a psychological reckoning in anticipating my arrival at the Black Rock the following day.

My hotel room that night was 90 miles behind. Eschewing backtracking, myself, my daughter and driver waited out the coming dawn sequestered in an industrial parking lot, the grotto of the car light intermittently lit in our exit and return. This was our small vigil in the greater throng of Montreal. We were penitents and refugees for a night.

The next day, I resumed the run toward the Black Rock with a keener sense of purpose. On hand were local and national media. Also present was Canadian parliamentarian Marc Miller who added his support to creating a famine memorial park.

I heard, too, that President Michael D Higgins had agreed to open the Saving the Famine Irish: The Grey Nuns and the Great Hunger exhibit at Glasnevin Cemetery, thus bringing to light the untold story of Montreal's valorous efforts that averted even greater loss of life in that fateful year of 1847.
The Montreal memorial park is too long in the waiting. This is not solely a French-Canadian burden, nor should it be. Our descendants died under the most appalling circumstances. There are the cynics who will say, "Let the dead lie where they will."

Such sentiments encapsulate the spectre of "famine fatigue". It is, of course, the easier choice. Yet, at the Black Rock, and then onward into Cornwall, Ontario, where I met a lone school teacher, who erected a Celtic cross in the honour of over 52 famine victims, to my talk on the Syrian refugee crisis at Skeleton Park's famine cemetery in Kingston, Ontario, I came across a cadre of historically minded citizens who believe remembrance is not connected with advancing animosities, but simply preserving the historical reality of a year so many would prefer to forget.

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