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Emigration to Canada in 1847

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 the Poor Laws came the great emigration of 1847.

Facing America's stiffening immigration regulations as outlined by the Passenger Act barring diseased ships from arriving into American ports, unscrupulous landlords looked toward Canada. Commissioning empty Canadian merchant timber ships returning to Canada, they loaded an emigrant ballast into hastily retrofitted hulls. These ships became known as the infamous coffin ships.

In the grim spring of 1847, with absentee landlords avowing not to support their tenants, the foreign secretary to Ireland, the landed Lord Palmerston, acting on the advice of estate agents and championing enclosure, evicted some two-thousand 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.

If there is any doubt as to Lord Palmerston's intent, a memorandum circulated among parliamentary colleagues clearly underscored official British governmental policy toward agrarian reform in Ireland.

> "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."

Similarly, Lord Lucan, seeing an opportunity to convert his holdings to sheep grazing, employed bailiffs to destroy cottages, evicting some 400 families amounting to 2,200 men, women and children from the wind-swept, bleak beauty of Ballenbrobe. The destitute eventually died in ditches.

The horror of the *Louisburgh Walk* figures as yet another story of an imperial ineptitude bordering on genocidal intent. It is difficult deciding. What is known is that some six hundred starving set out for Westport Union to see if they qualified for relief tickets. Upon arriving at the union, the starving wretches were advised that there had been a mistake and that the poor law commissioners were at Delphi Lodge, a considerable distance away. Renewing their walk, the starving arrived only to be told that they didn't meet the requirements for relief.

Inconsolably, the ragged mass moved homeward and in so doing, untold numbers perished. The desolate spectre of the Mayo wilds militates against accurate statistical records, though the House of Lords referenced the tragedy. A monument stands in bleak commemoration. So, too, on the memorial is a reference to the Choctaw Indians.

Spurred by the eerie parallel experienced by the Choctaw Indians along their own infamous trail of tears in their forced march from Mississippi to Oklahoma in 1841, the Choctaw raised $700 that they sent to help the Irish.

The journey into the freezing reaches of the Canadian north and down through the Saint Lawrence would cause the most harrowing suffering, though arrival in Canada would prove more fatal than the crossing.

The *Elizabeth & Sarah*, which left Killala in May 1847, illustrates the conditions. With a maximum passenger load of 165, the ship sailed with 276 sharing 36 berths. No food was provided. Passengers survived on what they brought onboard. Their sole provision was two pints of water a day. After 41 days the vessel arrived in Quebec. Surviving passengers were starving. The death rate was 30% on many Atlantic crossings.

Floundering off Grosse Île, an emigrant letter depicts the unfolding catastrophe:

Seventy passengers and one sailor were committed to the deep on the voyage. I cannot say when we can go to Quebec. The island is literally covered with sheds and tents. Our condition on board you can form no idea – helpless children without parents, the father buried in the deep last week, and the mother the week before – their six children under similar unfortunate circumstances. It is an awful change from the joyous hopes with which we left our unfortunate country, expecting to be able to earn that livelihood denied us at home – all changed in to bitter deep despair.

September 17, 1847 Cork Examiner

The casualties attending emigration via New York were 1 to 45. The same via Quebec were 1 to 4.

Arriving immigrants, suffering from extreme deprivation, brought with them a pestilence of typhus. They were held up at a makeshift quarantine station at Grosse Île equipped with just 150 beds. By the summer of 1847, forty vessels carrying 14,000 immigrants clogged the Saint Lawrence. Catastrophe ensued. Those with fever were summarily quarantined at Grosse Île. Families were wrest apart. For years afterward, provincial papers would carry classifieds of immigrants seeking the whereabouts of relatives.

Surviving Irish immigrants, in continuing a land journey, ventured first through the Francophone province of Quebec, then down into the Neo-English province of Ontario.

An estimated 75,000 Irish descended on Montreal, then a city of some 50,000 residents. The Francophone hubs of Quebec and Montreal met a bereft, alien-speaking population of Irish with extraordinary religious ardor. The story of the Grey Nuns, who erected fever sheds and brokered the adoption of thousands of Irish orphans throughout Quebec and Montreal, was all but lost to French texts, which, until recently, had never been translated into English.

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

For those who survived Grosse Île and Montreal, the Anglophone city of Toronto braced as a horde of 38,000 emigrants descended on a population of some 20,000 people.

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 disease containment. The heroic efforts of the hospital's lead surgeon, Dr. George Grasett, himself of Protestant-Irish lineage, and the staff who died in the service of the Irish are being recognized with the construction of Dr. George Robert Grasett Park on Toronto's waterfront. To be unveiled in 2017, the park includes a glass installation etched with ethereal billowing sheets representing fever sheds.

All told, 20,000 of the 100,000 who emigrated from Ireland to Canada in 1847 perished. 6,400 died at sea. Interred in Canadian mass graves, 5,000 souls lie at Grosse Île, 6,000 at Pointe St. Charles, Montreal, 1,400 in Kingston, and a further 1,200 in Toronto.

Canada bears the infamous distinction of being home to the greatest assemblage of mass burials of Irish immigrants in the world. Though, without the heroic efforts of countless Canadians, the figure might have been far greater.