

# Irish Identity in a Transnational Context

THE CONCEPT OF IRISH IDENTITY FORMATION AMONG specific émigré Irish communities in Canada and the USA is a complex topic that continues to generate scholarly analysis among historians and others. This is particularly true in terms of the hypothesis that Irish identity in North America represents an interplay of migration patterns, enduring cultural connections with Ireland, and New World settlement geography. A dynamic transnational geography mediated news and views emanating from the Irish homeland, creating a hybrid cultural identity that, paying homage to an Irish past, was intrinsically shaped nonetheless by the geopolitical and social realities of the New World.

Three recent monographs examine different aspects of this hypothesis: Matthew Barlow's *Griffintown: Identity and Memory in an Irish Diaspora Neighbourhood*, Patrick Mannion's *A Land of Dreams: Ethnicity, Nationalism, and the Irish in Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, and Maine, 1880-1923*, and Mark G. McGowan's *The Imperial Irish: Canada's Irish Catholics Fight the Great War, 1914-1918*.<sup>1</sup> The temporal reach employed by the authors is primarily the period 1880-1920, although Barlow extends his analysis to include 21st-century community development. In focus and periodicity they may be seen as useful adjuncts to the 2011 work of Simon Jolivet on the Irish in Quebec and William Jenkins's 2013 study of Buffalo and Toronto.<sup>2</sup> Common to all three studies are community responses to events that originated well beyond the North American experience. Europe's descent into the First World War, Ireland's prolonged engagement with Home Rule, an Irish rebellion, a War of Independence, an Anglo-Irish Treaty, and the partitioning of Ireland characterize this era of unprecedented turmoil. Decisions and outcomes determined within this period resonated throughout contemporary émigré

- 
- 1 Matthew Barlow, *Griffintown: Identity and Memory in an Irish Diaspora Neighbourhood* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2017); Patrick Mannion, *A Land of Dreams: Ethnicity, Nationalism, and the Irish in Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, and Maine, 1880-1923* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2018); Mark G. McGowan, *The Imperial Irish: Canada's Irish Catholics Fight the Great War, 1914-1918* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017).
  - 2 Simon Jolivet, *Le vert et le bleu : identité québécoise et identité irlandaise au tournant du XX siècle* (Montréal: Les Presses de l'Université de Montréal, 2011); William Jenkins, *Between Raid and Rebellion: The Irish in Buffalo and Toronto, 1867-1916* (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2013).

William J. Smyth, "Irish Identity in a Transnational Context," *Acadiensis* 48, no. 1 (Spring/printemps 2019): 143-152.

communities of Irish in America, in Britain, and in Britain's colonies that encircled the globe.

Identity, whether national or transnational in character, is a cultural construct, amenable to alteration by dynamic temporal and spatial interactions. In common with many other scholars, two of these authors (Mannion and Barlow) apply the descriptor "diaspora" to identify the communities under study, a term that resonates with undertones of famine, victimhood, and displacement. In certain circumstances it is a useful analytical tool; but when employed in a plurality of divergent contexts and experiences, its analytical value is diminished. It is not equally applicable to Irish communities established in distinct phases ranging from the late 18th to the early 20th centuries. As such, there is a strong argument for reverting to a more nuanced use of migration histories.

Equally significant in these three studies is the ascribed definition of "Irish." When the Charitable Irish Society was founded in Halifax in 1786, its first president and half of its 136 founding members were Protestant and its declared mission was to provide aid to "any of the Irish nation" who needed help. It reflected an inclusiveness that was much diminished by subsequent social and political pressures diffused from a rapidly changing Ireland. A reductionist concept of the Irish nation, privileging an interpretation that had Catholics at its core and marginalizing Protestants, a regional majority in Ulster, became increasingly prevalent as the 19th century progressed. At home and abroad the new interpretation of Irish nationalism gained currency. This trend was challenged eventually by the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, which recognized in law the layered identity of Northern Ireland residents who, irrespective of religion or settlement history, were Irish or British or both.

In Newfoundland, the vagaries of 18th- and early-19th-century transatlantic migrations created a geography of Irish settlement that was almost exclusively Catholic; a more mixed set of Irish communities existed in Halifax and Quebec, where Protestants probably constituted 15-30 per cent of the settlers. More than half of the Irish settlers in 19th-century New Brunswick and Ontario were Protestant, and they arrived primarily in the years before the famine. Protestants from the Belfast region did continue to migrate to Toronto, particularly between 1880 and 1910, but in general Irish Canadian communities were not reinvigorated by continuous streams of famine and post-famine

immigrants.<sup>3</sup> By 1900, the vast majority of these immigrants were third- and fourth-generation Canadian-born.

In the United States, by contrast, the vast majority of Irish arrived during and after the famine. They were predominantly, but not exclusively, Catholic. Throughout the past 150 years hundreds of thousands of Irishmen and Irishwomen have flocked across the Atlantic, creating a cyclical demographic and cultural renewal in cities where Irish migration history spanning a period of more than a century and a half of ongoing migration inflow now routinely extends to seven or more generations. Consequently, the Catholic Irish Canadian communities selected by Barlow, Mannion, and McGowan have a cultural ecology that differs greatly from that of urban America. In 1920 St. John's there were only about 100 Irish-born members among a total Irish ethnic population of 37,000: Halifax had 500 Irish natives in an Irish ethnic community of 60,000. By contrast, as Mannion's data suggest, probably a quarter of Portland, Maine's 10,000 Irish had been born in Ireland.

Mannion is very conscious of this demographic reality. His analysis also pays attention to the relative strength of the Irish in his three study locations. St. John's was pre-eminently Irish, constituting at least half of the urban population throughout the period under study. By way of contrast, his selected comparative cities, Halifax and Portland, contained Irish communities that were no more than 25 per cent and 15 per cent of their respective total populations. Additionally, the three selected cities were located within different geopolitical units – Newfoundland, Canada, and the United States – and, in combination with their different demographic characteristics and varying degrees of geographical isolation, the three locations are excellent comparative laboratories for testing reaction to the pulsating crises of contemporary Ireland.

Mannion ably demonstrates that place does matter. All three cities were located within political entities that provided a degree of representative government, but St. John's and Halifax were also firmly located within the orbit of British imperial power. The Home Rule model proposed for Ireland represented a familiar form of governance. It would, in effect, have conferred upon Ireland a Dominion status akin to that enjoyed by contemporary Canada and Newfoundland. Furthermore, Home Rule was accepted by local community leaders as a means of maintaining the integrity of the imperial

---

3 Cecil J. Houston and William J. Smyth, *Irish Emigration and Canadian Settlement: Patterns, Links & Letters* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990); Johanne Devlin Trew, *Leaving The North: Migration and Memory, Northern Ireland 1921-2011* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013).

metropolitan core of Great Britain and Ireland. Accordingly, most Catholic Irish Canadians were willing to accept the guidance of their episcopal leaders and eschew revolutionary violence in favour of gradualist constitutional reform. Notwithstanding the more radical exhortations of bodies such as the Self-Determination League and the populist American Ancient Order of Hibernians, an innate conservatism appeared to permeate the Halifax and St. John's communities and, although shaken by the War of Independence, this attitude endured.

By contrast, the Portland Irish took a more radical approach to Irish politics. Bishop Louis Sebastian Walsh was an open supporter of an Irish Republic, and lay organizations such as the Ancient Order of Hibernians, the American Association for the Recognition of the Irish Republic, and the local longshoremen's union offered considerable support for Sinn Féin ideals. Significantly, the community's leaders and spokesmen were beyond the writ of British imperial power and sentiment and were much more comfortable with a republican form of government than their neighbours to the north. The recent arrival of many immigrants, their ongoing personal contacts with family in Ireland, and their projection as a Catholic working class minority in a Yankee city also exerted contributory influences. In addition, the national and regional geography of Portland was of fundamental importance. The main propaganda effort of the self-established government in Dublin was concentrated in the United States. Éamon de Valera, the sole surviving member of the leaders of the 1916 Rebellion, spent most of the War of Independence in the United States where, in a controversial tour of major cities from New York to Los Angeles, he brought the drama and details of the Irish struggle for independence to an audience of hundreds of thousands. Although he did not visit the city, Portland was within the sphere of influence of his tour and the local Irish leadership was influenced accordingly. With the possible exception of Montreal, his efforts lost impact when encountering the Canadian border. Mannion's research methodology is well suited to exploring this geopolitical reality. He presents, in some detail, comparative information on the ethnic and social background of the officers and membership of the most influential organizations involved in political debate and activism in his three study areas. Moreover, he carefully evaluates the speeches and writings of the episcopal leaders in his pursuit of a convincing transnational analysis.

Matthew Barlow's *Griffintown* bears some resemblance to Patrick Mannion's study in that it focuses on the interaction of an established Irish

community with the ideas and culture of an Ireland that, for part of his period, was in political turmoil. Debates about Irish politics abounded. The Ancient Order of Hibernians, and the Catholic Church with its priests, nuns, and brothers, bestrode the community, interacting with local lay leaders and guiding responses to political events in their Irish homeland. Unlike Mannion's study, which focused primarily upon leaders, opinion formers, and middle class associations such as the Benevolent Irish Society (BIS) in St. John's and its equivalent the Charitable Irish Society (CIS) in Halifax, Barlow incorporates the concept of grassroots community responses and development into his analysis of the distinctive Montreal suburb.

Griffintown has long been regarded as the quintessential Irish-Montreal neighbourhood. It evolved as a working class enclave close to the Lachine Canal and the city's port and network of railway lines, and was home to famine arrivals and the immediate following generation. It was never exclusively Irish in composition, and even at their peak of numerical dominance in 1870 the Irish were fewer than half of the population. Throughout the subsequent 30 years the Irish, French Canadians, and Anglo Protestants each totalled about one-third of the neighbourhood. Yet the predominant and lasting image of Griffintown is that of an Irish enclave "steeped in the long memory of Ireland and its diaspora" (27). It represents an image-branding exercise that Barlow attributes to performative memory work orchestrated by the clergy of St. Ann's Parish and given effect by the working class community of the neighbourhood. His is an energetic postmodern analysis of an evolving identity that pivots upon an emotional attachment to Ireland, powerfully transcending the immigrant generation to inspire descendants as far removed as the fourth generation. The memory work that defined and sustained the community over the years was transnational: imported Irish culture was conditioned by the reality of a tough working class inner-city district where the Irish Catholics found themselves to be a minority within a diocese that was predominantly francophone. Griffintown was a repository not of Irish culture but of Irish-Montreal culture.

Emerging as a working class enclave in the mid-19th century, Griffintown experienced a century and a half of challenging social and economic fortunes. By 1945 it was clearly in decline, and by the end of the century it had become a largely derelict neighbourhood dissected by expressways and the scene of site clearance and condo development. The Griffintown Commemorative Project was initiated in 1991 as an attempt to resurrect and preserve the memoryscape of the once vibrant area. As Barlow notes, "Nostalgia was the driving force

behind the memory work.” A handful of community activists, some of whom had been born in Griffintown, along with the local parish priest, enlisted external assistance from Concordia University Television and also from communication students enrolled at the university. Together they developed a local history based on selective memory recall and inspired by a desire to achieve a “re-Irishification” of the neighbourhood. The impetus to re-imagine Griffintown as an Irish enclave also derived momentum from a coincidental drive by city officials to redevelop the area as a centre for multimedia and technology industries as well as condominium construction. In so doing, the city planners sought to inject into the economic project a curated romantic image of a past that might have utility value as a tourist commodity in an image-conscious city. Each interest group sought to link the history of the neighbourhood with its present condition and future potential, but in the eyes of the community activists theirs was the authentic memoryscape.

In Barlow’s view, history, defined by the performance of memory work, is a tool of empowerment – a means for defending an imagined past against other competing images. The defence of memory is thereby akin to the defence of territory at the interface of gangland boundaries in much earlier decades. Within this constructed memoryscape, facts such as endemic social problems, drunkenness, grinding poverty, and authoritarian religious leadership are compressed, simplified, and purposefully reassigned as supporting blocks of an emerging narrative. In that reconstructed narrative the Irish were always the dominant ethnic population and French Canadians and others never more than tiny minorities. Priests, patrolling the streets and houses of parishioners, were affable tea-drinking community guardians, and Christian Brothers were teachers and supportive teammates in ice hockey tournaments where muscular Christianity and robust play intersected. Alcohol abuse was a forgivable social foible and protection of abused families was ensured by extended networks of brothers and cousins. Conviviality, loyalty to the Roman Catholic Church and its values, and an image of Old Ireland underpinned this engineering of memory that sought to construct a future on the basis of an imagined past.

Barlow’s exposition of the intersection of history and memory work is informed by his personal commitment and involvement in the “re-Irishification” project. Ultimately, his portrayal of memoryscape is a demonstration of a community’s approach to history where facts are selectively manipulated into attractive sequence, unconstrained by demand for authenticated sources. As an exploration of community development,

it is evocative and fits well within a cadre of work that was pioneered two generations ago by the renowned urbanist Jane Jacobs.<sup>4</sup> As an exercise in history, it may fail to meet the strictures of the disciplinary canons; but in its presentation it does suggest valid questions about the authenticity frequently presumed in diasporic analysis.

Mark McGowan's study, *The Imperial Irish*, is more specific in temporal spread than those of Mannion and Barlow. Its geographical focus is resolutely national. The engagement of Irish Catholics resident in Canada with the First World War is emphatically not an account of life in the trenches of Flanders Fields; instead, it is a detailed analysis of their national response to the call for military enlistment. In some detail McGowan presents the nature and effect of the directive advice provided by the Catholic Church to its congregations. Who were these recruits and why did they enlist so readily? They were Catholic in religion, but they were not simply Irish. With few exceptions they were the second- and third-generation descendants of immigrants from Ireland who had arrived before and during the famine and more accurately fit the descriptor of Irish Canadians who happened to be Catholic. For more than half a century they had lived, worked, and sought unqualified acceptance in a Canada that had accorded them minority status. Within Catholic Quebec they were a linguistic minority, frequently accommodated within their own separate parishes. Elsewhere they were a religious minority amid a predominantly Protestant anglo Canada. Ministered to by priests and bishops who originally came from Ireland, they were part of a universal Catholic Church that was fractured by a national power struggle between its Irish and French episcopal leaders. Ultimately, the tensions within the Catholic church reflected cultural and linguistic differences that differentiated the more-recently-arrived Irish from the previously established francophone settlers. But there was also a geopolitical dimension as the Irish element in the church sought to establish its own power structures within territories and dioceses beyond the remit of the archdiocese of Quebec. This contextual background informed the Catholic Irish Canadian community at the outbreak of war and, in McGowan's opinion, the balance of power within that context was altered fundamentally by the war effort.

French Canadian men and their episcopal leaders were reserved in their support of what they perceived as a war designed to serve the requirements of the British Empire. Catholic Irish Canadians enlisted in numbers proportionate

---

4 Jane Jacobs, *The Life and Death of Great American Cities* (New York: Vintage Books, 1961).

to fellow Canadians of English and Scottish origin. Encouraged by their bishops and priests to fulfil their duty to Canada, the recruits were, McGowan argues, motivated also by events in contemporary Ireland. Defence of the empire and success in the war would, they believed, facilitate implementation of the deferred 1914 Home Rule Act – a strategy that was very much in agreement with the stance taken by John Redmond and Irish nationalists in Westminster. In Redmond's view, winning the war would facilitate the implementation of Home Rule when the United Kingdom returned to peacetime politics.

A parallel but contradictory stance towards enlistment was adopted by Protestant Irish Canadians. In their view the very integrity of the empire was threatened by disintegration of the United Kingdom should Home Rule for Ireland be realized. For them, imperial success in the war and afterwards was of paramount importance; but, unlike their Catholic counterparts, they hoped such success would be followed by the elimination of the threat of Home Rule. Upwards of 60,000 Orangemen, about 10 percent of all recruits, joined the Canadian Expeditionary Force. Orange Halls were utilised as recruitment venues for communities across anglophone Canada and the war effort was initially led by General Sam Hughes, himself a prominent Orangeman. He was replaced in 1916 as minister for Militia and Defence by Edward Kemp, another leading Orangeman who remained in office for the duration of the war. Divisions that were tearing contemporary Ireland apart were replicated in Irish transnational culture in Canada and represent an opportunity for additional research on the response of the Irish in Canada to the imperial war effort. Taking Irish Canadians in their totality and not defining them solely in terms of their Catholicism reveals a complex response to the war effort.

Ultimately, however, it is impossible to fully discern motives for enlistment. There were probably as many motivating factors as there were individual recruits. Personal, political, social, and religious factors all played a part, and McGowan makes a strong argument for interpreting the response of Catholic Irish Canadians as indicative of a group proclamation of their loyalty to Canada and their entitlement to be accepted as equals and devoid of any lingering sense of "otherness." However, not all of those eligible rushed to enlist. Matthew Barlow, for example, describes how, in Montreal, the St. Patrick's Day annual parade was curtailed after the introduction of conscription. It was restricted to Griffintown because the young men in that tough ghetto believed themselves beyond the predatory reach of conscription agents. Additionally, records indicate that some other disadvantaged groups in contemporary Canada also



recorded an enlistment rate as strong as that of Catholic Irish Canadians. The annual reports of the Department of Indian Affairs, for example, confirm that enlistment rates among Indigenous men equalled and often exceeded the response of British and Irish cohorts. Plurality of motives defy collective assessment.

The most important contribution arising from McGowan's analysis is unquestionably his exploration of the reciprocity between the war and the Catholic Church. Church leaders played a central role in the recruitment of their parishioners and, in the process, they elevated the status of the Church in Canadian political discourse. Bishops in anglophone Canada were primarily of Irish origin and for the most part they were ardent imperialists. In that respect they were not unlike their episcopal brethren in Ireland. Excepting their French Canadian brethren, a unified public front was presented by the Canadian hierarchy and its most vociferous spokesman, Father O'Gorman of Ottawa, was messianic in his exhortations. In imitation of Christ, the blood sacrifice of the battlefield was applauded and Catholic Irish Canadians were urged to consider their double duty, to their native land, Canada, and their fatherland, Ireland. In an incisive and well-documented analysis McGowan explores the growing tensions between the French and Irish members of the Canadian episcopacy and illuminates the clerical power struggle that yielded supremacy to Irish Canadian bishops in Canada outside of Quebec. Such a division of power was probably inevitable, but he makes a strong case for regarding the war as an accelerant. The war also hastened the recognition of Catholic chaplains within the armed forces, and, although there remained niggling disputes over the allocation of times for mass and administration of the sacraments, official acceptance of the Catholic chaplains would never be rescinded.

Whether or not the bishops espoused the war as a means of enhancing the social perception of their parishioners by the majority population is not clear. Catholic chaplains in the armed forces, serving at home and abroad, may have enjoyed an enhanced image of respectability, but their sacrifices were not rewarded by their Church leaders after the war. McGowan notes that none of them were subsequently elevated to bishoprics. The Holy Spirit, the Vatican, and the Canadian hierarchy did not allow military service to alter established qualifying requirements. Further research may be required to conclusively prove whether or not their lay parishioners did benefit from an accelerated trajectory of rising social prestige in the aftermath of war or whether there was a reversion to a pattern of gradualism propelled by a wide array of demographic

forces and a rapidly changing economic environment. It is difficult to discern a linear relationship between enlistment, loyalty, and subsequent social acceptance.

Mannion, Barlow, and McGowan have contributed uniquely and constructively to a growing corpus of research on the Irish abroad. Enabled by improving communication technologies and facilitated by a growing ease of transatlantic travel, the Irish in late-19th- and early-20th-century North America were drawn into informed and dynamic debates over the rapidly evolving political landscape of their Irish homeland. Home Rule, World War One, the Irish War of Independence inter alia created and developed passionate responses within communities among whom few members had visited or lived in Ireland. Heritage and memory, nurtured among North American-born descendants of immigrants, were not only personal but also institutional in their sources of inspiration. Religious institutions and a diverse range of associational bodies helped communicate and interpret information emanating from the homeland and, in so doing, they helped shape responses from their audiences. Place, circumstances, and time were active ingredients in a process that was responsible for a hybrid Irishness. Catholic Irish communities, whether located in Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, Maine, Griffintown, or, nationally, in Canada, presented complex cultural ecologies that defy conflation under the auspices of the collective noun “diasporic Irish.” The place-specific nature of the analyses presented in the three studies under review do much to elucidate that complexity, and they should do much to encourage further studies to probe the subtleties of Irish identity abroad.

WILLIAM J. SMYTH

**WILLIAM J. SMYTH**, un géographe historien, est président émérite de l'Université Maynooth, en Irlande. Parmi ses récentes publications figurent *Toronto, the Belfast of Canada: The Orange Order and the Shaping of Municipal Culture* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2015) et, en collaboration avec Cecil J. Houston, *From Ulster to Canada: The Life and Times of Wilson Benson, 1821-1911* (Belfast, Ulster Historical Foundation, 2015).

**WILLIAM J. SMYTH**, a historical geographer, is president emeritus of Maynooth University in Ireland. His recent publications include *Toronto, the Belfast of Canada: The Orange Order and the Shaping of Municipal Culture* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2015) and, with Cecil J. Houston, *From Ulster to Canada: The Life and Times of Wilson Benson, 1821-1911* (Belfast: Ulster Historical Foundation, 2015).