

French Perceptions of Irish Catholics in Nineteenth-Century Newfoundland

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DESPITE THE LONG French presence in Newfoundland, the extensive body of French commentary about the island remains relatively unexplored. Yet, for centuries, the French have been writing about the place, and their discourse has sometimes conflicted with that of their British counterparts. One example of their interest is their preoccupation with Irish settlers, who with fishermen of the West Country formed the early Newfoundland population. The following extracts from French writing illustrate what the nineteenth-century French found remarkable about Irish settlers in two distinct areas: the west coast and St. John's.

THE IRISH ON THE FRENCH SHORE

After several centuries of fishing off the coast of Newfoundland and on the Grand Banks, French fishermen were forced to stay at home during the long hiatus brought about by the Revolution and the Napoleonic Wars. Arriving back in the early nineteenth century, they were at once confronted with English-speaking settlers installed in the harbours they had vacated on the west coast of the island. But even though that population had settled there illegally, in contravention of the Treaty of Utrecht (1713), the French developed a policy of tolerance towards the new arrivals, most of them Irish.¹ Working in such close quarters, they soon formed their own ideas of the small diaspora that had taken root there, as well as certain attitudes towards the church hierarchy in St. John's. The French, who since the Revolution had created an officially lay society in which priests did not engage openly in

politics, were surprised by both the size of the Irish community and the influence of the clergy. Their impressions were often cast in the language of caricature.

Before proceeding, let us first examine the relationship between French fishermen and the permanent population. The slow growth of Irish and English settlement on the north and west coasts of Newfoundland was partly a consequence of Anglo-French differences over the extent of French authority. Even though the French had abandoned their territorial claims to the island in 1713, they retained the right to a seasonal fishery on the coast between Cape Bonavista and Pointe Riche — the so-called French Shore or Treaty Shore — which was delineated in 1783 as the section between Cape St. John and Cape Ray (effectively, White Bay and all of the west coast).

This delineation created a climate of mistrust between the two powers, a mistrust brought about by a series of disputes over the ambiguity of language governing the use of the shoreline. It also discouraged settlement by English-speaking fishermen, but not completely. That is why the French naval officer Henri Jouan, who visited Newfoundland in 1841, sounded a note of alarm. The English-speaking population, he wrote, was spreading along the coast without any visible means of support other than the fishery, and they were demanding the right to remain there. Normally, he continued, French fishermen would not object to one or two families employed as custodians during the winter, but they were not willing to tolerate communities of 1,000 to 1,500, such as those forming in the Bay of Islands or Cape St. George.² From the French perspective, these settled populations were encroachments. Newfoundland had also elected its first assembly in 1832, giving itself influence over the whole island, including the French Shore, and forcing the French into sometimes awkward and absurd contrivances to preserve their equipment during the winter. But as a practical measure, the French continued to leave their stages, boats, and other property in the hands of trustworthy settlers (*gardiens*), thereby encouraging them to stay.

One of the earliest assessments we have of the relationship between French fishermen and the *gardiens* after the Treaty of Paris (1815) came from François Leconte, a French naval officer who in 1817 served in the fisheries protection squadron known as the Station Navale de Terre-Neuve. Leconte gave this explanation of how this symbiotic relationship came about:

When our fishermen returned to Newfoundland for the first time in 1816, they found the English-speaking population, mainly Irishmen, established in nearly all the harbours. They were miserable and poor and didn't even have boats capable of going to St. John's to sell their fish. The French captains, instead of getting rid of these people, as they had every right to do, put up with them, and knowing they would come back to the same harbours the next year, allowed them to let their houses and outbuildings stand, hauled their own boats up, put them under shelter, and entrusted the lot to the Irish living in the harbour or neighbourhood, giving them in return, as a salary, lines,

hooks, etc., and since this time, whether they stayed or left, the practice has continued.³

Another commentator was Auguste Bachelot de La Pylaie (1786-1856), a naturalist and archaeologist aboard the frigate *La Cybèle* in 1816 while it made a tour of inspection for three months, and he returned again in 1819. Bachelot de La Pylaie first described the Irish community that had taken up residence on the Port au Port Peninsula:

An Irish family has established itself towards the point of the plateaux. They inhabit ten wooden houses consisting of one storey. Here they marry early, and the children quickly abound: one century can produce five or six generations. The width of the hearths and their openings on top of the roof are the only things noticeable in their construction. Besides the main houses, they have others scattered in the woods for which they have taken care not to clear footpaths — it's there that they hide all their valuables during wartime. Being without any means of defence, this little village is exposed to anyone who would want to wreck it: the smallest naval craft would destroy it in an instant.⁴

An unratified convention of 1857 proposed by the British politician Henry Labouchere would have given official recognition to the *gardiens*, indicating that the British had indulged the practice all along, but this convention was turned aside by the Newfoundland legislature in one of its first autonomous acts.⁵ Henceforth, colonial customs officers occasionally made seizures of French property, but French fishermen furtively prolonged the practice of supplying settlers.

C.-J.-A. Carpon, a surgeon of the merchant marine in 1847, confirmed that the presence of English-speaking settlers was something to be tolerated, even though the French had the right to expel them. He also acknowledged that despite the conditions of the treaties, mutual self-interest generally took precedence over differences of international diplomacy. In fact, he noted that in their tolerance, the French were furnishing English-speaking settlers with the means of making a living: in exchange for their services they were left tools for the care of French property. Once a worthy settler had been found, Carpon observed, he was left with not only these implements but butter, fat, flour, biscuit, cider, wine, spirits, lines, and nets. This, in effect, was indirect provisioning, and together with the hunt it enabled resident fishermen to pass the winter more comfortably.⁶

For a more extensive comment on the status of the *gardien*, let us turn to *Voyage à Terre-Neuve* (1861), by Arthur de Gobineau (1816-82), the philosopher and diplomat who spent time in Newfoundland in 1859 as part of an Anglo-French commission inquiring into French fishing rights. In this volume, Gobineau, like Carpon, spoke of the English-speaking residents as trustees and beneficiaries of French largesse rather than competitors. Every settlement had a *gardien*, he notes — sometimes several — and for the French captains, it was a matter of pride to

number how many they kept under their control, especially when they could refer to them as *mes Anglais*. According to Gobineau, in some harbours social relationships inevitably developed between the ships' captains and their counterparts, for on a given evening a captain might go ashore to visit the house of his *anglais*, more comfortable than his ship's quarters, and share in family life. Gobineau even speculated, on the basis of gossip, that feelings of other kinds (*sentiments de toutes natures*) created attachments, for the French also had the opportunity to meet settlers' wives and daughters.⁷

By the time Édouard du Hailly's book, *Six Mois à Terre-Neuve*, was published in 1868, Newfoundland had refused the opportunity to join the Canadian Confederation and had begun to acquire a sense of its own identity. Hailly, a naval officer stationed on the French Shore and writing under a *nom de plume*, took great care to comment on the politics of Newfoundland. As part of his purpose, he studied the customs of the inhabitants looking after French equipment and confirmed the proprietorial attitude of the French captains.⁸ What had brought them here, he asked? Certainly not the desire for riches or an attachment to the soil, since they moved from place to place like nomads. Rather, it was what he called an instinct for independence that they themselves could not fathom, one that had pushed the flood of lost children of the Anglo-Saxon race (*enfants perdus de la race anglo-saxonne*) throughout the world. They were Irish Catholics for the most part, he noted, and since local clergy visited infrequently, they depended on the clergy of the French fleet for their spiritual needs, so that in the spring an unfortunate naval chaplain returning for the summer fishery might find himself suddenly overwhelmed with a huge backlog of conjugal relationships and recent births awaiting his blessing. The local populace could also hear mass as long as there was a French vessel in harbour throughout the fishing season, and for such occasions, women would turn out in their finery — even crinolines — though they were remote from the shops of St. John's. Where had they acquired such garments? The French captains seemed to have made it a practice to bring back patterns for them to copy, and they probably presented other apparel as gifts.⁹

Finally, let us consider the short account by Lieutenant Louis Koenig of the frigate *Clorinde*, who spent the summers of 1885 and 1886 in Newfoundland waters with the Division Navale de Terre-Neuve. In an article published in the journal *Tour du Monde*, his purpose was to describe the activities of his crew in support of the fishery, but when he entered Croc Harbour he also became interested in the Newfoundlander of Irish origin who had been looking after French equipment for some considerable time. In winter, he observed, the French establishment was cared for by *notre gardien attitré* (our customary caretaker), Patrick Kearney, who was permitted to fish there with his offspring in return for his devotion to French interests. If the rights of the French continued to be challenged, Koenig wrote, they would certainly not be challenged by Kearney because he derived such considerable advantage from what he called *ses fonctions quasi-officielles*.¹⁰

Koenig characterized the Irish settlers as having a firm faith, a conviction pushed often to intolerance, and he illustrated this with the following anecdote. Arriving in Croc, the French had reported a recent disaster at sea, and as they were recounting the circumstances in which the mariners had died, a young woman asked with some anxiety, "Were they Catholics?" After receiving a negative reply, says Koenig, the listener no longer seemed to take any interest in these unfortunates.¹¹ The missionaries, he noted, having their principal residence in the inhabited parts of the island, visited these northern communities rarely, three or four times a year at the most. But when one of them arrived, a festival atmosphere prevailed: the happy news spread far and wide, and people hastened from everywhere, by land and sea, to hear mass, which was said in the house of the most worthy inhabitant.¹² These northern fishermen, he continued, cared so much about formal worship that they kept their dead packed in ice all winter long and in salt all summer until the arrival of a priest, in order to have them buried according to the Catholic rite.

For Gobineau, Bay St. George was what he called an Irish utopia. "Nearly the whole population of St. George's, being Irish and thus Catholic," he said, "are zealously religious." He continued:

A little wooden church has been built in the middle of the village and is ministered to by a priest released by the Bishop of St. John's. Most certainly, religion is largely responsible for the good attitude of these people, in the steadiness of their moral standards and good health; but what contributes more so is the habit of hard work without cash payment. At St. George's and on the whole coast of Newfoundland, the Irish population lack nothing, except for a coin in their pocket, and thus the tavern is an unknown institution.¹³

For this reason, Gobineau called the area *une petite Arcadie*, one without flocks, bellflowers, shepherds, and reed-pipes but with simple habits and a kind of quiet happiness. He then continued with an extended caricature of expatriate Irishmen: their fathers, and sometimes they themselves, came from Ireland at a time of distress, he noted, when destitution was so great it was no longer possible to carry on without ending up dead. He wrote:

The memory that they have held onto of this past is terrible, and the more time passes the more tradition exaggerates it and makes it gloomier. Ireland seems to them to be the most unfortunate country in the world, a martyr to its faith, a martyr to the hatred that England unjustly bears towards the race that inhabits it. The fisherman preserves stories of acts of violence and dreadful despoilment that are probably not historically based but which support his ill will against the British nation. He passes them on to his children with a kind of striking and descriptive eloquence common to the Irish imagination, and there is no doubt that these children, when they tell them in their turn, will add to fact that has become legend more than one feature no one has thought about.¹⁴

It should be noted here that Gobineau, as a philosopher, subscribed to the idea of Aryan supremacy and innate racial characteristics, expressed most fully in his book *Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines* (1853-55). The Irish emigrant, he wrote, had left Ireland shaking the dust from his feet. He had boarded a ship where space, air, water, and food were given out so grudgingly that many of his companions did not make it to the end of the voyage. The emigrant therefore did not miss an opportunity to accuse the English of such cruel speculation and had forgotten or ignored that most of the time he had been treated this way by his own compatriots, who had become rich outfitters. He did not know, or he had forgotten, and in every case he had qualms about admitting that the British government had intervened for several years to bring this speculation to an end and wished that white emigrants not be exposed by traffickers to a fate no less hard and deadly than that of the slaves of Guinea packed into slave ships. A law had been brought by Parliament, observed Gobineau, to order that henceforth every ship transporting emigrants must provide each one with so many cubic feet of air, so many square feet of space, for the emigrant and his baggage, and would be obliged to make sufficient provision so that human cargo was not apt to die en route. But still, he maintained, the Irish fisherman ignored all that and did not want to believe it, so much was he afraid of liking the English.¹⁵

Having arrived at the end of his voyage, continued Gobineau, the immigrant found himself thrown on the street of some town where the need to work in order to survive was shown clearly to him. Whether he found the pay insufficient or his deep-rooted habits made his efforts unbearable, he did not take long to find himself just as miserable on American soil as he was in his own country. He heard of the fishery in Bay St. George. He packed his bags, which weren't heavy, and came, and by an unbelievable good fortune, he at last found his true vocation: a kind of toil that spoke to the imagination, nothing that called for a mechanical regularity, and above all the absence of alcoholic temptations he did not know how to resist.

To finish his caricature of the Irish immigrant, Gobineau added that in the absence of government on the west coast, the only authority he knew was the local priest, to whom he gave his alms in fish. Someone once took on the role of magistrate, he continued, but no one needed him, no one obeyed him, and he did not ask obedience of anyone, for everybody knew he could not produce a piece of paper to show his authority. The reason was simple: the town of St. George's was situated on the French Shore, and the presence of a colonial magistrate was illegal. As far as the Catholics were concerned, by habit and instinct they were born with an accepted leader whose authority was never in question. That leader was their Bishop, and the priests were the natural lieutenants of this supreme judge of all interests, temporal and spiritual. In other countries of Christendom, the most Catholic countries of Europe, the most fervent souls reserved a certain part of their free will for the conduct of their worldly affairs, Gobineau observed. But the Irish in the New World, taken together, reserved none. The Bishop and his priests were their masters. They sub-

mitted everything to their clergy's sacred decision, from domestic quarrels to electoral schemes, and the poorer the Catholic population the more this habit of mind was absolute, for it was fortified by this one conclusive fact: they lived, to a great extent, upon the alms distributed by the Bishop and thronged around him as they would around a foster father. However, the Bishop did not receive any support from the state or the colony. Everything he had he held as a gift from the same flock who, for the most part, held their hands out to him in the course of the year.¹⁶

THE ROMAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS IN ST. JOHN'S

Gobineau was also the first French observer to write extensively about the Catholic community in St. John's. The Bishop of St. John's, he said, could pass for a rich prelate of the Catholic Church: his income was considerable, yet it was based almost exclusively on the sale of fish. The contributions of the faithful came in this form, and the poorest fisherman would have preferred to take from the portion destined to feed his own family rather than what, in his soul and conscience, he believed he should keep for his pastor. "He brings his tribute in kind," he wrote, "and the Bishop has it sold, and since he finds himself annually in possession of considerable stock, it follows that indirectly he represents the strongest trading house in the colony."¹⁷ But if he had a large income, he observed, it was said that he also had heavy burdens. His flock relied so heavily on his alms that, in more than one case, they did not feel the need to work. The Bishop was there to provide, and they repaid him with such complete and blind devotion that it would have been unwise for any authority to pit himself against such a popular and revered leader so sure of being servilely obeyed.

That is not all. Gobineau recounted that the Bishop of St. John's had used his income to build an estate. On the highest point in the city, he told the reader, stood a huge stone cathedral of questionable taste but imposing bulk, decorated inside with a profusion of ornamentation that acquired magnificence, if not beauty. He had built beside it an episcopal palace where he resided with his priests, and the grounds also included two convents and a college. This ecclesiastical estate, which seemed to look disdainfully over the mercantile city and even the forts built below it, was like an emblem of the undeniable supremacy the Bishop of St. John's exercised over the whole region.¹⁸

But Gobineau was not content to present his caricature solely in religious colours. The Bishop's supremacy, he observed, was based quite openly on the idea of Irish nationality, placed in opposition to the Anglo-Saxon race. Projecting from the walls of the convent, sculptures showed in effigy the ancient kings of Ireland. On what he called the "episcopal flag," the cross was green, the colour of old Erin, and it was joined to the harp, the symbol of the country of St. Patrick. He continued, "Frequent, constant and impassioned allusions to the past keep alive a patriotism al-

ready deeply rooted in the hearts of a race that has neither the power of forgetting anything or of correcting any of its faults, the source of its misfortunes. Everywhere, in the colonies of North America, as in Australia, as in the United States, it has that carefree gaiety that makes it a bit like the Lazzaroni of Naples ...”¹⁹ The Lazzaroni were the indigent population who cluttered the Italian streets, sleeping or sunning themselves and living by performing odd jobs or begging. But they were also a formidable group who did not lack patriotism and who knew how to turn their energies to the defence of national independence. Like these, said Gobineau, the careless bravery of the Irish, their lack of foresight, their complete lack of serious principles, their total devotion, their spirit of adventure and love of all enjoyments — all these traits of an attractive nature, often unworthy of respect, had made them the complete opposite of the English character.

When election time came around, the Bishop decided the candidates to be elected to the House of Assembly, and when the house was sitting, he did not conceal either his approval or disapproval of the actions of Catholics and the march of events. When an important matter was before the public, he used the newspapers to make his feelings known, and whether it was a question of a duty, of a road to be built, or of any other such matter, once he had spoken, whoever was Catholic knew what he was to believe or say. To find any parallel to this situation in Europe, reflected Gobineau, one would have to go back at least to the twelfth century.²⁰

For Gobineau, John Thomas Mullock (1807-69), an Irishman who had become Bishop of St. John’s in 1850, was a prelate worthy of the power he exercised:

A ready and enterprising mind, bold and moderate, but above all capable of carrying to the end the most extreme resolutions, a lively imagination, a solid erudition brought from Italy, where he studied, place him, no less than his high rank, at the head of his nation. Completely simple in his habits, employing all his income for great projects or charities, he is no doubt feared but no less revered by the Protestants themselves.²¹

Gobineau found Mullock’s works prodigious, for he was able to manage the construction of his buildings, the administration of his convents and his college, and the spiritual affairs of his diocese, as well as keep a daily interest in the affairs of the colony, carrying out pastoral visits and writing numerous texts. He continued:

The respect that surrounds him and the manifestations of this respect are no less than what sovereigns might claim, and the prelate has something of their majesty. Deep in theological knowledge, I am told, he brings to the discussion of ideas dealing with political economy and the future of the Americas a factual knowledge, a discerning mind, a constancy in his views which belongs to an intelligence of the first order. I have seen more than one ringleader of the Catholic party, uncertain whether he would be met with blame or approval, approach him with visible fear. These are quite remarkable novelties for a European observer.²²

One other such French observer was Henri de La Chaume (1861-1949), son of the French vice-consul at St. John's from 1882 to 1883. De La Chaume has given us a rare glimpse of Mullock's successor, Thomas Joseph Power (1830-93), another Irishman made Bishop in 1870, at the age of 40, whom he described as charming, young, active, and intelligent. "More than half the inhabitants of St. John's are his faithful subjects," he observed. "He is a real a prince of the Church; he holds sway as a father and rules as a king among his subjects."²³ But far from abusing his authority, he made use of it with only the most scrupulous moderation, and never in his private interest. "He welcomes you with a contentment that lights up his face," wrote de La Chaume. "He will show you his stables, his poultry, his orchard, his vegetable garden, not to pride himself on it but because he finds himself happy about it all, and he thinks he is giving you pleasure." Bishop Power's one drawback was what de La Chaume called a disgraceful nervousness. "He has you sit down thirty-six times," he wrote. "The fear — I mean the terror — of not receiving you in a worthy manner puts him in a feverish state. He never stops talking and asks you a thousand questions without waiting for a response. In short, he doesn't know which way to turn in order to be amiable, without suspecting that so much effort makes him tiring as much as it tires him."²⁴

In the pulpit, according to de La Chaume, Power's voice was vibrant, his movements expansive, his words profound. But in the world, with all his obvious exuberance, he knew how to keep quiet and sound out others without getting involved. That is why, as de La Chaume explained, people liked him: they revered him and had confidence in him. "The faithful are his children," he observed. "Poor, for the most part, they always have money when he asks it of them for his convents, his colleges, his churches." Moreover, he thought that Power, like Mullock, could easily have become head of a political party. "All of Ireland in Newfoundland would obey at his sign," he noted. "But he knew to resist this temptation of arrogance. He understood that all his influence had to be kept for the cause of religion and that he would prostitute it if he put it to the service of party ambitions."²⁵

The observations of the French, some of which have been noted here, reveal among other things a sense of Irish community in Newfoundland based on both religious and political influence. Long before Newfoundland had acquired a sense of its own identity, this was the way some Newfoundlanders identified themselves: through a common ancestry, shared historical memories and culture, and solidarity. Based on these attributes, the early Irish settlers in Newfoundland were considered by the French to have created a distinct alternative to the British imperial presence.

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Notes

¹See Ronald Rompkey, "Without Visible Means: The Newfoundland *Gardiens* on the French Shore," *Annales du Patrimoine de Fécamp* No. 10 (2003): 67-71.

²H. Jouan, "Terre-Neuve," *Bulletin de la Société linnéenne* 3me série, 4 (1881): 415-16. All translations have been made by the author.

³F. Leconte, *Mémoires pittoresques d'un officier de marine*, 2 vols. (Brest: Le Pontois; Paris: Le Doyen et Giret, 1851), 1, 190-91.

⁴A.-J.-M. Bachelot de La Pylaie, "Notice sur l'île de Terre-Neuve et quelques îles voisines," *Mémoires de la Société linnéenne* 2 (1825): 485.

⁵*Journal of the House of Assembly of Newfoundland* (St. John's: E.D. Shea, 1857), 45-53.

⁶C.-J.-A. Carpon, *Voyage à Terre-Neuve: Observations et notions curieuses propres à intéresser toutes les personnes qui veulent avoir une idée juste de l'un des plus importants travaux des marins français et étrangers* (Caen: Eugène Poisson; Paris: Éditions Dutot, 1852), 122.

⁷Arthur de Gobineau, *Voyage à Terre-Neuve* (Paris: Hachette, 1861), 231.

⁸Édouard du Hailly, "Six mois à Terre-Neuve," *Revue des Deux Mondes* 76 (1868): 955.

⁹*Ibid.*, 954.

¹⁰L. Koenig, "Le 'French Shore' (souvenirs de campagne à Terre-Neuve)," *Tour du Monde* 60 (1890): 386. See also "List of Inhabitants on the French Shore, Newfoundland," in Appendix to *Journal of the House of Assembly* (St. John's: E.D. Shea, 1873), 750-78.

¹¹Koenig, "Le 'French Shore'," 386.

¹²*Ibid.*, 386.

¹³Gobineau, *Voyage à Terre-Neuve*, 163.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 165-66.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 166-67. Also see his larger, philosophical work: Joseph Arthur de Gobineau, *Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines*, 4 vols. (Paris: Firmin-Didot Frères, 1853-55).

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 243-44.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 245.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 245-46.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 246.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 247.

²¹*Ibid.*, 247-48.

²²*Ibid.*, 248.

²³Henri de La Chaume, *Terre-Neuve et les Terre-Neuviennes* (Paris: Librairie Plon, 1886), 52-53.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 53.

²⁵*Ibid.*, 54-55.