

Irish Famine Stories in the Ottawa Valley

Michael McBane

They were starving. And they lived to tell it.

- Ruth Dunnigan, Mayo, Québec

The imagination of future freedom is nourished from the memory of suffering, and freedom degenerates wherever those who suffer are treated more or less as a cliché and degraded to a faceless mass.

- Johann Baptist Metz

While researching my family's history, I stumbled into oral history. I began digging into family history a few years after the death of my father and the birth of my first child. Becoming a parent awakened in me the need to pass on family traditions and stories. At the same time, many of my parent's generation were dying. So much life experience, local knowledge and collective memory were disappearing. Even the buildings were starting to disappear from the farms. I wondered what a drive down those concession roads would be like in a generation or two from now. Would the landscape become, in John Montague's words, a manuscript which we will have lost the skill to read?¹ With the vanishing of a generation that held a connection with the distant past, I was prompted to begin constructing a family history.

I knew that I came from a family whose tradition was spoken. My father was a truck driver. His parents were subsistence farmers. Their grandparents were illiterate Irish emigrants from Mayo, the poorest county in the poorest region of Europe. Like most ordinary folk, their only trace in written sources was in parish and census records. I was in search of their life stories and the story of their community in Canada. Stories are passed on orally and can disappear after only two or three generations. I would have to settle for whatever fragments I could find.

1. 'A Lost Tradition', *Selected Poems*, Dublin, 1982.

Between 1992 and 1995 I gathered stories and reminiscences from my relatives and their neighbours around the Quyon area of Pontiac County, Québec. Since my family moved from this area in 1954, the year I was born, the people I spoke with told me something about my identity. Seventy-some cassette tapes and twenty-five interviewees later, I have begun to reflect on some of the broader questions raised by the stories I heard. The content of the material was shaped in part by the kinds of questions I asked and my reactions to the responses.²

I was particularly interested in searching out the survivals of pre-emigration Irish culture among residents and former residents. In the nineteenth century, the Pontiac had the greatest concentration of Irish in the Province of Québec, forming 56.5% of the total population of the county.³ Located in the Ottawa Valley, the area was also relatively isolated both geographically and socially.⁴

The ancestors of many Quyon area residents were peasants from County Mayo, on the 'Celtic fringe' of Europe. Mayo names in the Quyon area included: Joyce, Gibbons, Stanton, Gavan, Rowan, Moyle, Mulligan, O'Mally, O'Donnell, McMahon, Madden, Dolan, Phillips, Doherty, Jordan, Costello, McHugh, O'Hara, Dowd, Doyle.

Mayo retained many attributes of a peasant society, contributing to the survival of folk ways from prehistoric and medieval times.⁵ The landscape was bog, interspersed with mountains. What distinguished County Mayo in the nineteenth century was its high rates of: Gaelic-speakers; Catholics; illiteracy; one roomed cabins with mud floors; population density; poverty; Famine deaths; evictions; and emigration.⁶ When a Mayo resident is asked where they are from, the traditional response is 'Mayo, God help us'.

-
2. Areas covered in interviews included: genealogical information, memories and stories of ancestors and local people, family routines, leisure and entertainment, farm and household work, parish and faith life. I also asked about examples of traits of the old Irish people: wit, superstitions, fighting, drinking, Irish music, dance and song, examples of Gaelic being spoken in Canada, Irish religious practices and beliefs, and Irish expressions.
 3. Robert J. Grace, *The Irish in Quebec: An Introduction to the Historiography*, Institut Québécois de recherche sur la culture, Québec, 1993, p.56.
 4. Joan Finnigan, *I come from the Valley*, Toronto, 1976, pp. 11-12.
 5. E. Estyn Evans, *Irish Folkways*, London, 1957, pp.1-12. See also T.W. Freeman, *Pre-Famine Ireland: A Study in Historical Geography*, Manchester, 1957, pp. 242-268.
 6. See T.W. Freeman, "Land and people, c.1841", in W.E. Vaughan, ed., *A New History of Ireland*, Vol V, Oxford, 1989, pp. 243-271.

Many traits of traditional peasant culture came across on the Atlantic journey and some still survive in present generations. Several examples of traditional Irish culture surfaced in the interviews. They range from language (pronunciations, grammar and expressions) to customs and beliefs (wakes, holy wells and fairy faith). Some of the old farm folk in many Ottawa Valley Irish settlements seem to have more in common with country people in Ireland than they do with people living in the City of Ottawa. Their surroundings have remained essentially Irish.

In this article, I would like to focus on the fragments of a powerful memory: stories from the survivors of the Irish Famine. Most Irish inhabitants in the nineteenth century depended on the potato for their existence. Outside of the Northeast, high rents had reduced most small farmers to an almost exclusive dependence upon a potato diet. The Irish peasantry did not regard grain as food. They grew wheat, oats and barley to pay the rent to the landlord. The potato enabled great quantities of food to be produced at a low cost from small plots of ground. But it was a dangerous crop. If it failed, nothing else could replace it.

From the summer of 1845 until the early 1850's, the potato crop failed totally or partially. The resulting Famine killed more than a million people and precipitated an exodus of another 1.8 million people to North America.⁷

It was an unexpected discovery that descendants of the Famine Irish throughout the Ottawa Valley still have stories describing events that occurred one hundred and fifty years ago. My search focused on the Quyon area and surrounding townships (Onslow, Bristol and Fitzroy). But these stories can also be heard from Chelsea to Martindale and Low, from Quinville to Mayo, from Corkery to Mount Saint Patrick and beyond.

After I began hearing these stories, C.B.C. Radio aired a documentary entitled "The Famine Irish in Canada". I looked forward to hearing stories on the radio from other Famine Irish descendants. It was the perfect medium. But there were none. Oral sources of knowledge about the Famine Irish in Canada were neither consulted nor referred to. Instead, the program

7. According to Kerby Miller's monumental study, *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America*, New York, 1985, more people left Ireland in just eleven years (1845 to 1855), than during the preceding two and one-half centuries. Other major studies on the Irish Famine include: Cecil Woodham-Smith, *The Great Hunger: Ireland 1845-1849*, New York, 1962; Cormac Ó'Gráda, *Ireland Before and After the Famine*, Manchester, 1988; Joel Mokyr, *Why Ireland Starved: A Quantitative and Analytical History of the Irish Economy, 1800-1850*, London, 1983; Christine Kinealy, *This Great Calamity: The Irish Famine 1845-52*, Dublin, 1995; and Peter Gray, *The Irish Famine*, New York, 1995.

was dominated with a revisionist interpretation of the Famine Irish experience in Canada.⁸

Two of the Canadian historians interviewed for the documentary are well known for their revisionist work. Professors Akenson and Houston have made an important contribution to the history of the Irish in Canada.⁹ Their methodology involves the use of manipulated aggregate ethnicity and religion data from the printed census abstracts. It would appear, however, that they are an odd source to turn to for expertise on the Famine Irish in Canada.

Professors Donald Akenson and Cecil Houston spoke on the C.B.C. program about how popular understanding of the dramatic impact of the Famine on its survivors in Canada has been made into "an industry" based on myths and misconceptions. The myth of the Famine being central to Irish experience "was believed because of the laziness of Canadian historians".¹⁰

According to the demythologised version of history, the majority of the Irish who arrived in Canada were pre-famine, non-catholic and not poor. The vast majority moved to the United States and those who stayed in Canada "disappeared". Professor Houston's revisionist argument runs as follows:

The Irish migration was so successful that people paid no attention to it until recent years. I mean, the Irish disappeared in this country! ... But now you hear that the Irish came out to Canada during the famine, and we have a whole industry built around the unfortunate circumstances of the deaths of a large number of people in this part of the world, and in Ireland of course. But the story of the Irish migration is not this story...¹¹

-
8. An interpretation of the Irish Famine can be said to be revisionist if it: i) downplays the catastrophic and tragic dimensions of Ireland's historical experience; ii) avoids at all cost a critique of the 19th century laissez-faire economic ideology that turned the crop failure into famine; and iii) debunks accounts of the Famine in folklore and popular consciousness. For an introduction to the debate on historical revisionism in Ireland, see Ciaran Brady, ed., *Interpreting Irish History: The Debate on Historical Revisionism, 1938-1994*, Dublin, 1994.
 9. C.J. Houston and W.J. Smyth, 'The Irish Abroad: Better Questions Through a Better Source, the Canadian Census', *Irish Geography*, 13 (1980): 1-19; D.H. Akenson, *Being Had: Historians, Evidence, and the Irish in North America*, Port Credit, 1985. Houston and Smyth are also the authors of *The Sash Canada Wore: A Historical Geography of the Orange Order in Canada*, Toronto, 1980.
 10. Donald Akenson on C.B.C. Ideas, "The Famine Irish in Canada", 31 October 1994, C.B.C. Radio Works Transcript.
 11. Cecil Houston on C.B.C. Ideas.

The program presenter concluded: "The impact of the famine Irish in Canada turns out to be much less than it first appears".¹² This conclusion left me unconvinced. The impact and memory of the Famine varied geographically and socially. To quote Karl Marx: "The Irish famine of 1846 killed more than 1,000,000 people, but it killed poor devils only."¹³ Famine mortality rates were highest in the western, Gaelic-speaking regions of Ireland.

Victims of the 1845-1850 Famine were almost exclusively from the lower, "potato-eating" strata of society, leaving perhaps sixty percent of the population more or less unscathed.¹⁴ A more balanced interpretation of Irish historical experience would conclude that the Famine had less impact on the Anglo-Irish than on the poor Gaelic-Irish peasants and their descendants.

The traces of communal memory of the Famine Irish that I found retain a keen sense of historical grievance. This sense is systematically filtered out of the revisionist accounts of the Famine. Indeed, Professors Akenson and Houston would have the listener believe that there are no real stories or memories because the Famine Irish disappeared without trace. The particular Irish Famine survivors who settled in and around Saint John, Québec City, the Eastern Townships, Montréal, the Ottawa Valley, Kingston, Peterborough, Toronto, Hamilton, the Niagara Peninsula, and elsewhere in Canada, are generalized out of existence.

Some hold the view that the Irish Famine produced greater social and cultural dislocation than that of the French Revolution - more of the horror and none of the hopes.¹⁵ Professors Akenson and Houston clearly don't share that view. They see the Irish Famine as a misleading metaphor for Irish history in Canada because: "the famine may have meant 10 per cent of the Irish migration to this country, no more than 10 per cent. So where's the other ninety? Are they all famine victims?"¹⁶ No serious historian would base an analysis of the social and cultural impact of the French Revolution on census data.

12. David Wilson on C.B.C. Ideas.

13. *Ireland and the Irish Question: A Collection of Writings*, New York, 1972, p. 146.

14. L.A. Clarkson, "Famine and Irish History", in E. Margaret Crawford, ed., *Famine, The Irish Experience 900-1900: Subsistence Crises and Famines in Ireland*, Edinburgh, 1989.

15. J.F. Lalor, *Collected Writings*, Dublin, 1918, p.9, cited in Terry Eagleton's, *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger: Studies in Irish Culture*, London, 1995, p.12.

16. Cecil Houston on C.B.C. Ideas.

Famines occurred periodically in Irish history beginning in the tenth century. But the Great Famine took place in the middle of the nineteenth century at a time when Ireland was part of the richest and most industrialized country in the world. It left a political and ideological legacy that surpassed all other subsistence crises in Ireland.¹⁷ Interpreting the meaning of this legacy is a more constructive task for historians than denying its existence.

The experiences of the conquered and the dispossessed in history tend to be poorly documented by historians. Canadian historical scholarship is better at documenting the experiences of the conquerors. I am beginning to see that oral history can be more than a substitute for written history. It can also provide a corrective to the kind of history that is silent about conquered peoples. To see your own people's stories left out of the history books certainly gives you a better understanding of other oppressed peoples, especially the aboriginal and métis nations.

The English Puritans treated the native Irish much like they treated American Indians. In both cases an ideology developed to justify conquest: the native population was first declared pagan. The next logical step was to declare them barbarians. And finally:

“a barbarous country must first be broken by a war before it will be capable of good government; and when it is fully subdued and conquered if it be not well planted and governed after the conquest it will eftsoons return to the former barbarism”.¹⁸

It is true that the majority of Irish settlers in Canada were Protestants, many of whom came in pre-Famine periods. This is hardly surprising, given the political and economic advantages for the Anglo-Irish in British North America and the reluctance of the Catholic peasants to leave their ancestral lands. But it certainly does not follow that the powerful memory of Famine that still lingers throughout Irish settlements in the Ottawa Valley and elsewhere, is the result of some myth-making industry, as implied by Professors Akenson and Houston.

It was precisely because of the pre-Famine settlements that many Famine survivors headed for destinations throughout the Ottawa Valley in search

17. L. A. Clarkson.

18. Sir John Davies, 1612, cited in Nicholas P. Canny, *The Elizabethan Conquest of Ireland: A Pattern Established 1565-76*, Hassocks, Sussex, 1976, p. 135. See also the interesting article by Fintan O'Toole, “Going Native: The Irish as Blacks and Indians”, in *L'Irlande Aujourd'hui*, automne, 1994, pp. 121-132.

of friends and family. Famine survivors who settled in the Ottawa Valley included: siblings and other relations of pre-Famine settlers; people joining friends and former neighbours; and people coming in groups. Famine victims wrote for and received passage money.¹⁹

In the winter of 1846-47, the Canadian newspapers were reporting the Famine more comprehensively than the English press.²⁰ Residents throughout the Ottawa Valley read detailed and regular accounts of the horrors of the Famine in the Bytown newspaper, *The Packet*.

Relief funds were collected from lumbermen in the shantys and from parishes throughout the Valley.²¹ Public health authorities, the Grey Nuns, Oblate Fathers and other church organizations were very active in relief work in Bytown. In 1847, a large shed was built near the General Hospital to accommodate the Famine Irish with typhus. Soon the overflow had to be treated in a series of tents.²²

The Famine experience was an important part of the story of many pre-Famine Irish in Canada. Ottawa Valley Irish settlers read about the distress 'back home' and worried about the fate of family and friends. My own family history illustrates this pattern. Both of my father's grandmothers, Sally Stanton Rowan and Ann Draper McBane, were born in Canada of pre-Famine Irish immigrant parents. But what the census data can't tell you is how both their families were personally connected to the human drama of the Great Irish Famine.

Sally Stanton (1847-1923) had two older brothers living in the Partry Mountains of County Mayo when the Famine hit. They had been left with grandparents in Ireland when their parents emigrated to Fitzroy Township ca. 1840. In 1850, an aunt, Winifred Stanton, put the two young boys on a

19. See Robert Whyte, *The Ocean Plague: A Voyage to Quebec in an Irish Emigrant Vessel*, Boston, 1848: "Travelling from Prescott to Bytown, by stage, I saw a poor woman with an infant in her arms... She had lost her husband upon the voyage, and was going to Bytown to her brother, who came out the previous year, and having made some money by lumbering in the woods, remitted to her the means of joining him...", pp.108-9.

20. Terry Coleman, *Passage to America: A History of Emigrants from Great Britain and Ireland to America in the Mid-Nineteenth Century*, London, 1972, p. 128.

21. *The Packet* of May 8th, 1847 reported that Fr. McNulty of Mount St. Patrick collected relief funds from "the hard working Raftsmen on the Ottawa; which amounts have been transmitted to the Archbishop of Tuam for distribution among the starving Irish..."

22. F.X. Laderoute, "The Church in the Ottawa Valley", *The Canadian Catholic Historical Association, Report*, 1944-45, pp. 67-8.

boat for Québec to escape the hunger and join the family in Canada. A grandson of one of the boys tells this account of their flight from Famine:

You see, when his parents came out from Ireland, in the time of the Potata Famine, they weren't able to bring all the children. They brought, I think, 3 or 4 of the oldest ones.

But then, my grandfather, Watt, and Martin, they were left with the grandparents, over there. And they came 3 or 4 years later. (...)

This Mr. Dolan that I'm tellin you about, he told me that his grandmother put my grandfather, Watt, and his brother, Martin, on the boat over there in Ireland, to come here to Fitzroy Harbour.

And they were that long in comin across. They were darn near across when the wind changed. And it blew them as damn near as far back, before the wind changed again. And they were lost.

The parents thought that it was all over, because there was lots of them that started out that never made it, eh.

And Grandma Stanton always told me that.

And they finally landed at Québec. Well then someway, they got to Ottawa. And they were given direction - I think he was 12 and his brother was a year or two older. (...)

And when they landed in to his father's place, there was a whole crew there to put up another shed or an addition to the house or something.

They say that everything quit. He landed in at 8 or 9 o'clock in the morning. Drove all night. They were sleepin in the bottom of the wagon. So the party was on. The day he arrived.

Now you can imagine what celebration, when ya think your people was lost at sea. And then all at once they appear, eh.

This account is unique in that it incorporates memories from three sources: the departure in Ireland (the aunt); those who made the journey (the two boys); and the arrival in Canada (parents and neighbours). The Stanton family in Canada has maintained a link with their Irish cousins that spans four and five generations. Their visits to Ireland in recent years included a tour of the Tourmakeady townland by a grandson of Winifred Stanton, the aunt who put the two boys on the boat for Canada.

My father's other grandmother, Ann Draper (1838-1920), also came from a pre-Famine Irish family that was directly affected by the Irish Famine. Ann Draper's parents emigrated from County Longford in 1828. Like the Stanton's, they left at least one of their children behind in Ireland when they emigrated. Ann's father, Thomas Draper (1798-1886), worked as a labourer on the Rideau Canal. Seven of their surviving children were

born in Bytown before the family moved up the Ottawa to the village of Pontiac around 1850.

In 1848, Ann's oldest brother, Michael Draper (1826-1890), came out from County Longford to join his family in Canada. On the 1861 Canada Census for Onslow Township, he is listed as a single labourer living in a boarding house. The Census doesn't say that he fled the Famine, but family history does.

No stories survive from Michael Draper. But the following story from his second wife, Helen Houlihan (c.1840-c.1924) was told to her grandson, now in his nineties:

My Grandmother Draper used to tell me stories about when she was young, you know. She came out from Ireland about 1846 or 47, I think. I went to live with her when my mother died. (...)

She came out from Ireland when she was six years old. And she said she had a sister who was about five. And a brother. And they were up around Arnprior, somewhere there. Her dad died on the boat, on the way over.

He was supposed to come over and arrange things and bring his family over later. They had the famous pestilence. And a queer thing - the mother died in Ireland the same week.

The children were orphans. The relatives up around Arnprior got them to come out. The boy was 12 years old, and was working one day. He had a horse and a kind of a two-wheeled cart. And had a load of wood. The load of wood overturned on top of him. And he died.

She lost her brother at the age of 12. Her sister, Ann, I think, I don't know anything about her at all.

When she told me all those things, I was just a little fella.

Helen Houlihan's step-grandchildren weren't aware of the fact that she was orphaned during the Famine. But they tell anecdotes that take on new meaning in light of her tragic life experience:

Our father used to take us every second Sunday or so, on the streetcar, up to visit Grandma Draper, who was his step-mother.

A very crotchety old lady [laughter] I must say. She was nearly blind. And she used to lock up the milk. And then the bread and stuff in the cupboard, after each meal. That's how they grew up. I think she was always terrified of not having enough food.

Another anecdote from a grand-niece recalls the time Helen was out working in her vegetable garden when a wild rabbit appeared:

She just picked up a stone and killed the rabbit. The niece couldn't believe it:

"Boy, I behaved myself very well around her!"

Other Quyon area families who came out during the Famine years and joined relatives already living there include : O'Reilly's, McColgan's, Gibbons', Mulligan's, and Kilroy's. This is hardly a scientific sample. However, it is well known in the oral tradition of the area that potato famine Irish Catholics came in significant numbers to Irish settlements throughout the Ottawa Valley.

Many of the Famine Irish that settled in the Ottawa Valley were given land that nobody before them would accept. Around Quyon, the Famine Irish settled swamp land in South Onslow and in the rugged Gatineau Hills of North Onslow. According to oral history from the Gavan family, a settlement from the Bangor area of County Mayo emigrated together. Famine survivors from the same 'village' settled in the hills along the Settler Road in North Onslow:

The whole village was gathered up. And most of them were related, one way or another. And they put them on a boat to Canada. And they took them up the Ottawa River and dumped them. And they all got a land grant. 180 acres, from the Canadian government. But the 180 acres was mostly rock and trees.

They went up into the foothills of the Laurentians. In North Onslow, they had this stream running through their place. And each family had five acres of tillable land, where the stream bed was.

And they could raise their potatoes and their crops. And they always say, 'An Irishman could raise a family of ten on five acres of land'. Which they did. (...)

When the priest would come to North Onslow, the first place he'd stop would be at Gavan's well. And he'd take the water from the well and bless it. And then he would perform his baptisms and marriage and stuff. He'd only go there maybe once a month or so.

But they all lived along this road. All these people along the road were related to one another. The Quinns, the McMahons, the McBanes. And they all came from the same community in Ireland. The Gavan's were the first family. Next to them were the McMahan's. They were separated by their land, but they were all neighbours.

This story uses language to describe Famine emigration that stirs the imagination: 'the whole village was gathered up... they put them on a boat

for Canada... took them up the Ottawa and dumped them'. The term 'village' probably refers to a cluster of 20 to 30 families living in a 'townland' averaging 300 acres. They were communities of related families bound together in 'friendship'. The word 'friend' means a blood-relation in Ireland. One or two surnames predominated in each cluster or 'village'. This helps explain the prevalence of nicknames in rural Ireland.²³

The townland is the smallest and most important spacial division in Ireland. It was the home of perhaps three-quarters of the Irish population just before the Famine. The peasants living on the remote townlands in Mayo held onto their family and community systems, language, traditions and religious practices in spite of conquest, confiscations and Penal Laws. The fact that it took the force of a prolonged famine to pry them loose attests to the value they placed on the life the townlands contained.²⁴ It may also explain why some of the old Irish townland patterns of settlement, kinship, and traditions were reproduced in Irish settlements in the Ottawa Valley.

The Crown and landlords were the ones who did the 'gathering up'. They offered free passage to the New World if peasants surrendered their cabins and holdings. The expense of transporting each individual was less than the cost of one year's support in a workhouse. This practice was referred to as 'shovelling out the paupers'. In 1848, the Mayor of Toronto wrote the Governor General, Lord Elgin saying:

...the throwing of a half-clad and penniless emigrant on the shores of the St. Lawrence may be the means of ridding an estate of a burdensome tenant; but it is an almost hopeless method of providing for a fellow-Christian.²⁵

This contradicts Professor Akenson's assertion that "Canada did not get the real starving Irish" because they had no money for a boat passage.²⁶ Townland peasants from Mayo had to make calculations about the past and the future that few ever made before. Involuntary displacement from these ancestral settlements was experienced as a form of exile. For the peasants who were suddenly 'gathered up' and loaded onto 'coffin-ships', their

23. E. Estyn Evans, *Irish Heritage: The Landscape, the People and Their Work*, Dundalk, 1942, p. 48.

24. Robert James Scally, *The End of Hidden Ireland: Rebellion, Famine, and Emigration*, Oxford, 1995, pp. 14-5.

25. Cited in Coleman, *Passage to America*, p. 153.

26. Akenson, on C.B.C. Ideas.

backward glance from the stern of the boat was not only their last sight of Ireland but the first sight of themselves.²⁷

Northrope Frye used the following image to describe the nineteenth century experience of entering Canada:

The traveller from Europe edges into it like a tiny Jonah entering an inconceivably large whale, slipping past the Straits of Belle Isle into the Gulf of St. Lawrence, where five Canadian provinces surround him, for the most part invisible. Then he goes up the St. Lawrence and the inhabited country comes into view, mainly a French-speaking country, with its own cultural traditions. To enter the United States is a matter of crossing an ocean; to enter Canada is a matter of being swallowed by an alien continent.²⁸

If, as Frye suggests, the average experience of entering Canada was unforgettable and intimidating, the journey of the Famine Irish was that much more unforgettable. A passenger on one of the crossings in 1847 was recorded as saying:

Ah! Sir, we thought we couldn't be worse off than we war; but now to our sorrow we know the differ; for sure supposin we were dyin of starvation, or if the sickness overtuk us. We had a chance of a doctor, and if he could do no good for our bodies, sure the priest could for our souls; and then we'd be buried along wid our own people, in the ould church-yard, with the green sod over us; instead of dying like rotten sheep thrown into a pit, and the minit the breath is out of our bodies, flung into the sea to be eaten up by horrid sharks.²⁹

The lucky survivors had to make it through the quarantine station at Grosse Ile and the fever sheds in Montréal before heading 140 miles up the Ottawa River by steamboat. From the Quyon wharf, they walked the twelve miles to their bush farms in North Onslow. They were not only 'dumped' into the New World - they had just been 'dumped' into the nineteenth century. Their stories and communal experience would become part of the imagination in Irish settlements throughout the Ottawa Valley.

27. Scally, *The End of Hidden Ireland*, p. 236. Peasants on the Irish townlands became much more conscious of their communal identity through the experience of being 'gathered up' and 'dumped' into the New World.

28. *The Bush Garden: Essays on the Canadian Imagination*, Toronto, 1971, p.217.

29. Robert Whyte, *The Ocean Plague*, p.12.

Most of the farms that were settled by Famine Irish in North Onslow were abandoned after one generation.³⁰ Peter and Nora Gavan's family left the farm, moving in from the hills to the village of Quyon, in the 1890's. In visiting the land today, it's hard to believe that anyone could have farmed amidst the steep hills, rock and swamp.

After finding fragments of Famine memories around Quyon, I started looking in other areas of the Ottawa Valley. The most detailed Famine stories I found were told by Ruth Dunnigan, a 94-year-old from Mayo, Québec. When she told the stories passed on to her from her mother, they were still told with deep emotion, one hundred and fifty years after the events described:

My grandfather, Tom Burke, came to Canada in 1847, with his parents. He come with the family. He was only fourteen. My mother used to tell me stories about him. She told me that her father and mother came over on the boat with hundreds of others.

And she had two boys, and I think she had three girls. And one girl was sick before she left Ireland. A three year old. And she left her to a relative over there. She never saw her afterwards. She grew up and came out to the States, and married there. And her younger son was a year old.

And she took it with her, naturally. And it died within a day of arriving at Québec City. So she held it a secret. You know how they used to turn their skirts up over their shoulders. The old ladies had long skirts and long underskirt.

If they'd get cold, they turned the skirt over the shoulder. She kept the baby there - the dead baby there - a while. Because she didn't want it to be buried at sea. It was buried in Quebec someplace. Maybe at Grosse Ile, for all I know.

That was my great-grandmother did that. Her name was Rogers. Catherine Rogers. Took them six weeks. And they were all sick with the boat sickness. Everything taken from them. (...)

Death and suffering in the steerage was greatest in the Famine years. Ship owners profited from the crisis to pack hundreds of passengers into the holds. Mortality from fever and dysentery was highest among young children and the elderly. The voyage in a 'coffin-ship' has been described

30. The Gavan's, Quinn's, McMahon's, O'Mally's and McBane's all had siblings who moved from North Onslow to Ludington, Michigan in 1877. 'Bound together in friendship', these children of Famine survivors lived and worked together in the same neighbourhood and are buried together in Ludington's Pere Marquette Cemetery.

as the centre panel of the Famine triptych. The scenes on either side would be from Skibbereen³¹ and Grosse Isle. Robert Scally captures the symbolic meaning of the passage in the 'coffin ship' for the survivors and their descendants:

In its own smaller scale, the memory of the emigrant steerage has long been held, like the slaves' 'middle passage' and the trains of the Holocaust, as an icon of Ireland's oppression.³²

Herman Melville witnessed these desperate steerage conditions and described them in a novel published in 1850. He noted that:

...the only account you obtain of such events, is generally contained in a newspaper, under the shipping-head. There is the obituary of the destitute dead, who die on the sea. They die, like the billows that break on the shore, and no more are heard or seen. ... what a world of life and death, what a world of humanity and its woes, lies shrunk into a three-worded sentence.³³

31. A small town in County Cork that came to be associated with every horror of the Irish Famine through eye-witness accounts published in newspapers, including the *Bytown Packet*. See, for example, the edition of April 17, 1847.

32. *The End of Hidden Ireland*, p. 218. Scally's study is critical of macro-explanations of Irish emigration that ignore subjectivity: how the emigrants experienced and understood the history in which they were caught up. Miller's study, *Emigrants and Exiles*, has examined the Irish emigrant culture of involuntary exile. To gain insight into the interaction of mind and circumstance, Miller consulted some 5000 emigrant letters. Professor Akenson considers Miller's study a "pseudo-psychological explanation" based on "a systematic denial of the most central facts of the historical record" contained in the census records. He adds that "no one has checked Miller's quotations for accuracy and representativeness". - D.H. Akenson, "The Historiography of the Irish in the United States of America", in *The Irish World Wide*, Vol. 2, History, Heritage, Identity, ed. Patrick O'Sullivan, 1992, p. 99 and 118.

I don't expect revisionist historians to adjust their views on the Famine Irish experience in Canada on the basis of a few stories from the Ottawa Valley. However, historians using aggregate census data could benefit from Paul Ricoeur's caution: "As soon as the idea of a debt to the dead, to people of flesh and blood to whom something really happened in the past, stops giving documentary research its highest end, history loses its meaning." ("Between Lived Time and Universal Time: Historical Time", in *Time and Narrative*, Vol. 3, 1988, p. 118.)

33. Redburn: His First Voyage, p. 365.

Scally's description of the Famine Irish crossing descends into the world of subjective experience, using an effective tool of social science, the historical imagination.³⁴

The steerage was a form of captivity, of absolute powerlessness, that even the poorest had not known before and that reduced many who once thought themselves strong to the level of their children. If seen as a separate, temporary nation afloat, it might be said that the inmates of the emigrant steerage were suffering a second famine, one that was quite blind to the name or history of its victims. The anonymity they had nurtured in the townlands as their protection was made nearly absolute in the darkness below decks, replaced by the universal face of famine, stricken, mute, and alien to onlookers.³⁵

The Famine survivors joined Mayo county people that had settled in Lochaber Township in the 1830's:

And my grandparents were the last ones to come. The first ones come out in the 1830's, got the best land. A lot of the people in Mayo were here in the 1830's. And the ones that came in '47 didn't get such good land. They came to Thurso.

And they walked the nine miles from Thurso. And they all cleared their farms. And my grandfather took that farm, another one took this one. They were all living together in a circle. And they built a log house for each one.

Five would get together and build a log house. Then they sent for the women. And the women and children came. Two years after. And the men met them at the Thurso wharf - walkin, the day they got off the boat with the children. And she said they walked from Thurso. And she carried the three-year-old with her. And her husband was with her, and he carried a bag of flour on his shoulder, from Thurso. Walkin. And its nine miles to Thurso. And they walked back to their homes.

Each man had a log home built. And they had no stoves at that time. They left the hole open in the roof of the house. And they'd make an open fire. That was better than Ireland, they say.

They were starving. And they lived to tell it. And he lived to be seventy-eight. (...)

34. R.C. Collingwood, "The Historical Imagination", in *The Idea of History*, 1946 (1968), pp. 231-248.

35. Scally, *The End of Hidden Ireland*, p. 220.

Our grandmother on the other side, she came in '47. '47 was, I think, the last bunch that came. They were out of there before the Famine. It just happened as they were leaving. And they were out of there. And she said their relatives died. And that's why they shipped a lot of them out.

And the Famine lasted three years. And she said they left the cellar full of potatoes. Of course, that's all they were living on, you see. That's all they lived on. (...)

And my grandmother said four or five neighbours came. And the Famine started that fall. A million died. And a million left to the United States and Canada. And there was only a million left. So they came up from the million. There's four million there now.

And only for France and Germany and United States, they'd a died too. But they sent in food. And the English watched the borders for any boat that would come in. They'd sneak them in at night. Any boat got caught, they sold the food.

A lot of them died. A lot of them died. Of starvation. And it's a funny thing about them. They had that in their mind all their life.

My mother and her sisters, anything that they ever got, if it was old or no good, they held on to it. And her father - he lived about five miles from us, with his son. And I remember her saying to him, 'Take off your overalls, and I'll wash them while you're here'.

And she washed his overalls. And in his pocket he had a piece of bread, rolled in his handkerchief. This was the dread of hunger. He was only fourteen when he came here. But that dread was in them. (...)

Mother found a piece of bread wrapped in his handkerchief. Imagine, he was so much afraid of getting hungry, he carried it in his pocket. She thought he was doting. It wasn't doting. They had that fear. They heard so much about the starvation.

Mrs. Dunnigan's childhood memories puts us in touch with the Irish Famine in a way that census records and statistics cannot. An abstraction is given a human face. The effects of the Famine experience on a member of the family is an image that has been carried in Mrs. Dunnigan's mind for nearly ninety years. Her grandfather, Thomas Burke, was fourteen years old when he emigrated with his parents. He was likely a valuable help to his parents on the journey. His parents were Irish speakers and he no doubt

spoke better English and was possibly able to read. Gaelic was spoken in Mayo, Québec into the 1920's:³⁶

My mother's family and my father's family, they lived close together. And the two old ladies used to come and spend the afternoon at our place. And they would always talk in Gaelic. And we got that we could understand every word they said.

All the young ones, they couldn't talk it. But we understood everything they said. And they talked Gaelic to my mother when they wanted to say something the younger ones wouldn't know. They'd tell it to her in Gaelic. They spoke very little English, them old ladies.

Mrs. Dunnigan weaves into her family narrative an Irish historical consciousness that while the potato blight was the work of nature, the Famine was not.³⁷

You see, the English conquered Ireland, and took it. They owned it. And everything they had, they took everything - produce - off the island. That's why they starved. Just left them enough to exist. And that's what brought them over here. When the potato failed, there was Famine in Ireland. They lived on potatoes. (...)

A million died - starved to death. And then England thought: 'We'll get a bad name', you see. So they got a boat and paid their passage. And sent them to Canada. Of course they owned Canada. (...)

That's when they sent them over, during the Famine. They came through Grosse Isle. And they all died there. They died from malnutrition. They all got sick on the boat. It took them six weeks coming out. Imagine.

And what did they live on? And they came with the children. And God must have been with them. you know - that they didn't all die.

36. According to a petition sent to the Bishop of Bytown in 1855 from parishioners of St. Malachy in Mayo, Québec, the majority of the 85 families spoke only Gaelic. (Alexis De Barbezieux, *Histoire de la province ecclésiastique d'Ottawa*, 1897, p. 468).

37. George Bernard Shaw provides a good example of popular Irish consciousness of the Famine in his play, *Man and Superman*, written in 1903:

'Me father died of starvation in the black '47. Maybe you've heard of it?'

'The famine?'

'No, the starvation. When a country is full of food and exporting it, there can be no famine. Me father was starved dead and I was starved out to America in me mother's arms.'

This Famine story ends with a simple but profound expression of faith: '*God must have been with them*'. This is the language of "people who had an unselfconscious acceptance of the harshness of human life of which they made sense only in the context of Christian hope".³⁸ This expression of faith refers back to the oldest theme in Biblical literature, God's promise to the Hebrew slaves liberated from oppression: '...by my dwelling among them they will know that I am the Lord their God who brought them out of Egypt.' (Exodus 29:46). The Irish Famine experience clearly has spiritual as well as secular meaning for the keeper of these stories.

The Irish Famine left a lasting mark on the attitudes, beliefs and identity of the Irish people throughout the world. Its impacts were felt in more Canadian households than we will ever know from analysing census data. The methodologies employed by many historians ignore important sources of knowledge about the Famine Irish.

Oral sources on the Famine Irish in Canada still exist.³⁹ These oral sources provide a useful corrective to the kind of written history that silences the voice of conquered people. The Famine stories provide insights into poorly documented experiences. They offer the perspective of people who were starved out of Ireland, survived the quarantine station at Grosse Ile, and settled in the backwoods of Canada. These dramatic human experiences left a profound impact on the survivors for the rest of their lives. The stories reveal the meaning of the Famine for its survivors and their descendants. They also reflect a dominant theme in Canadian literature:

The theme of survival - not just physical survival, but the preservation of some human dignity and in the end some human warmth and ability to reach out and touch others...⁴⁰

38. Gerard Rice, "The Kavanagh Years", in Peter Kavanagh, ed., *Patrick Kavanagh: Man and Poet*, Orono, Maine, 1986, p.75.

39. The keepers of the Famine stories that I met all had one thing in common: as young children they spent extended periods of time with grandparents who came out to Canada during the Famine years. It is unfortunate that Famine stories in Canada weren't collected fifty years ago, like they were in Ireland. The Irish Folklore Commission collected material in the 1930's, 1940's, and 1950's on traditional customs and beliefs and on historical events such as the Great Famine.

40. Margaret Laurence, 'A Place to Stand On', in *Heart of a Stranger*, 1976, p.17

Alessandro Portelli points out that oral history not only permits but also requires special attention to subjectivity. By that he means the cultural form and processes by which individuals express their sense of themselves in history. "Thus defined, subjectivity has its own 'objective' laws, structures and maps (what Hawthorne called 'the truth of the human heart')." ⁴¹ Oral historians have people as sources. They tend to be disposed to interdisciplinary work because human beings are not one dimensional. ⁴²

The Famine stories in the Ottawa Valley are "generated by memory and imagination in an effort to make sense of crucial events and of history in general". ⁴³ What common people believe about their history can be at least as important as what 'professional' historians believe.

There are a few traces of the Famine story in artifacts like the inscription in Gaelic and English on the memorial in Martindale cemetery: "They will be remembered as long as love and music last."; and the inscription at Knock Shrine in Mayo, Quebec: "This altar is sacred to the memory of Erin's exiles of County Mayo".

But the detailed record of the Famine experience in the Ottawa Valley is an oral one. It's in the stories. Taking these stories to heart and telling them to our children is the best homage that one can pay to the victims and survivors of the Irish Famine.

Acknowledgements

Special thanks to Jack Draper, Michael Draper, Margaret Draper Grace, Ruth Burke Dunnigan, Bob Gavan, Fran Hughes, Gervase O'Reilly, and W.J. Stanton, for sharing their stories and their humanity. I would also like to thank Joanne Kellerman and Joan Fairweather for their editorial suggestions; Cormac Ó'Gráda for his words of encouragement and for a copy of his paper "The Great Famine in Folk Memory and in Song" (unpublished MS); and Jean-Guy Goulet for his many helpful comments and suggestions on an earlier draft of this paper.

41. Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories*, New York, 1991, p. ix.

42. For a rich example of interdisciplinary work, see Henry Glassie's *Passing the Time in Ballymenone: Culture and History of an Ulster Community*, Indiana, 1995. Another study that challenges positivist bias in social science is Jean-Guy Goulet's "Dreams and Visions in Other Lifeworlds", in David E. Young and Jean-Guy Goulet, eds., *Being Changed: The Anthropology of Extraordinary Experience*, Peterborough, 1994, pp. 16-38.

43. Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli*, p. 26.