

**IRISH CANADIAN CONFLICT
AND THE STRUGGLE FOR
IRISH INDEPENDENCE,
1912-1925**

ROBERT McLAUGHLIN

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IRISH CANADIAN CONFLICT AND THE STRUGGLE
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Introduction

On Sunday evening, 5 April 1998, just four days before the 9 April deadline of the ongoing Northern Ireland peace process, the independent chairman of the peace talks (and former United States senator from Maine) George Mitchell, and his colleagues faced yet another dilemma regarding the proposed agreement. British and Irish officials had just delivered the first draft of the crucially important but highly controversial Strand Two portion of the negotiations dealing with North/South joint governing councils. Mitchell and his colleagues – the former Finnish prime minister Harri Holkeri and General John de Chastelain of Canada – quickly examined the document and realized immediately that the extensive number of proposed North/South governing bodies would be utterly unacceptable to the Ulster Unionist Party, the largest Protestant political party in Northern Ireland.¹ Exacerbating this immediate problem, the British and Irish governments insisted that this Strand Two draft be included without change in the overall agreement document as if it were the product of Mitchell and his colleagues, not that of British and Irish negotiators.

According to Mitchell, General de Chastelain quickly assessed 'the circumstances and suggested we had essentially three options: we could accede to their demand; we could include their Strand Two within our comprehensive draft but identify it as theirs, not ours; or we could rewrite it and then include it as ours, as it would then be.'² Option three was quickly ruled out, and Mitchell and his colleagues eventually decided to accede to the wishes of the two governments and include the Strand Two document without changes. Not surprisingly, the Ulster Unionists rejected it outright. After furious negotiations and the acquiescence of the Irish government on the number and scope

of the North/South governing councils, the Northern Ireland Peace Agreement was accepted on Good Friday, 10 April 1998. It brought peace and, for the first time, an equitable power-sharing form of self-government to that troubled statelet. Although numerous roadblocks have since been placed in the path of this exercise in self-government, history was made on that Good Friday, and it continues to be made in Northern Ireland.

The acceptance of the Good Friday Peace Agreement brought about a political settlement to issues and demands that had previously been contested with violence. Although the peace settlement obligated participants to completely decommission weapons, the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA) disarmed at a slower pace than anticipated. Nevertheless, the settlement fostered a political climate that enabled the IRA to decommission large stocks of weapons in October 2001, in April 2002, and again in November 2003. Prior to the commencement of the Good Friday negotiations, General de Chastelain had been appointed Chairman of the Independent International Commission on Decommissioning (IICD), and in that role, he verified each of these instances of IRA weapons destruction. Most recently, following the IRA stand-down and announced cessation of all military operations in July 2005, Jean de Chastelain verified that IRA weapons had been put beyond use. He and his colleagues on the IICD, along with witnesses Harold Good, the former president of the Methodist Church of Ireland, and the Redemptorist priest Father Alec Reid, spent a week examining the weapons that had been rendered inoperative. At the press conference to announce the IRA's weapons destruction, General de Chastelain stated: 'We are satisfied that the arms decommissioning represents the totality of the IRA's arsenal.'³ Although his role in the Northern Ireland peace process was less prominent than that of George Mitchell, it was – and it continues to be – no less significant. General de Chastelain has played a pivotal role in the Northern Ireland peace process; and though most North Americans do not realize it, he has not been the lone Canadian involved in Northern Ireland's political affairs.

In late 1999, Tony Blair's Labour government announced a new investigation into the events surrounding the shootings of thirteen unarmed civilians by British elite paratroopers on 30 January 1972 during a civil rights protest in Derry. A three-person legal commission was appointed to investigate whether the British Army was culpable in those deaths, commonly referred to in the years since as Bloody Sunday. The Saville Commission, chaired by English Law Lord Mark Saville, included Sir

Edward Somers of New Zealand as well as William Hoyt, retired Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of New Brunswick.⁴ The commission expected to interview witnesses for only two years; instead it took four, taking testimony from its 919th and final witness in February 2004.⁵ The commission's final report has still not been published; the point here is that yet another Canadian judge has been tasked with investigating the possibility of political murder in Northern Ireland.

Similarly, retired Canadian Supreme Court Justice Peter Cory was appointed by the Irish and British governments 'to examine six of Northern Ireland's most controversial murders and make a recommendation as to whether or not a full judicial inquiry should be held into the cases.'⁶ In late 2003, Justice Cory submitted his report to the British government, recommending that full judicial inquiries be held in the four most controversial murders. The report has yet to be released to the public. While this recent succession of Canadian involvement in Irish political affairs is significant, it is no sudden phenomenon, and in fact continues a tradition dating back to the late nineteenth century.

In 1892, the leader of Canada's Liberal Party, Edward Blake, gave up his position to represent South Longford for the Irish Parliamentary Party at Westminster, a seat he retained until he retired in 1907. Blake's membership in the IPP proved fortuitous for that party in the years following the scandal over Charles Stewart Parnell's adulterous behaviour. Blake raised thousands of dollars in Canada for the IPP, almost single-handedly saving it from financial ruin during two particularly critical years: 1893–4 and 1897–8.⁷ Blake also had the political foresight – seemingly when no British politician did – to realize that if 'home rule were not granted Ireland's discontent would increase perhaps to the point where nothing short of complete separation would satisfy her.'⁸

Likewise, in November 1911, Irish politics, more specifically, Ulster Unionism, gained a tremendous sponsor when Andrew Bonar Law replaced Arthur Balfour as leader of Britain's Conservative Party. Andrew Bonar Law was born in New Brunswick, but his father, a Presbyterian minister, moved the family back to Ulster when Bonar Law was a young boy. The family eventually settled in Scotland, where years later the son made his mark as a Glasgow ironmaster and metal broker. Although he lived in Scotland, he always nurtured a deeply felt sense of fealty to his Ulster roots. Historian Patrick Buckland once described him as a 'Scots-Canadian Presbyterian of Ulster descent who claimed to care about only two things in politics – tariff reform and Ulster.'⁹ As Conservative leader, Bonar Law dedicated himself to Ulster and to the

Unionists' efforts to prevent Irish Home Rule, even if that meant armed revolt.

There is also Sir Hamar Greenwood, a Canadian, who served as a British Liberal MP beginning in 1906 and who was named Chief Secretary of Ireland in April 1920.¹⁰ Conservative MP and media mogul Maxwell Aiken, Lord Beaverbrook, a New Brunswicker, was a close personal friend of Andrew Bonar Law as well as a supporter of the Unionist cause. And in 1924, when the British government formed a Boundary Commission to examine possible alterations to the boundary between Northern Ireland and the Irish Free State, as was specified in the 1921 Anglo-Irish Treaty, former Canadian prime minister Robert Borden was asked to chair the commission.¹¹

Given the number of prominent Canadians involved in Irish political affairs at the beginning of the twentieth century, and given – more important – that political autonomy seemed so close at hand for Ireland, questions arise: To what extent were Canadians of Irish descent interested in political events in Ireland? Was there an Irish nationalist movement in Canada in the 1910s and 1920s, as there had been the late 1880s and to a lesser extent in the early 1890s? Did Irish Canadians retain an interest in seeing their ancestral homeland attain political independence? Did they maintain a distinct ethnic awareness in the New World? To what extent did this ethnic awareness and identity inform their perceptions of the homeland? And if Irish Canadians were interested in events in Ireland, was there a divergence of opinion along religious lines with respect to independence for Ireland?

Contrary to the assertions of Canadian historians devoted to the subject, this work argues the Irish in Canada most definitely maintained an interest in events in Ireland between 1912 and 1925. Indeed, many participated actively in those events, testifying to their intense interest in and dedication to the issue. There was, as well, a sharp divergence of opinion along religious lines regarding Ireland's future political status: those of Irish-Catholic descent supported Ireland's demands for self-government, while those of Irish-Protestant descent believed that Ireland should remain united with Britain. These conflicting visions of Ireland, which mirrored the ongoing struggle between Catholics and Protestants in Ireland, represented yet another flare-up between Irish Catholics and Irish Protestants in Canada, which had been ongoing since the early nineteenth century.

The Irish first arrived in what is now Canada in the late sixteenth century, establishing seasonal camps on the Avalon Peninsula of New-

foundland to facilitate fishing on the Grand Banks. More permanent Irish settlements developed in eastern Nova Scotia in the 1760s, but consistent Irish immigration began in earnest only after the Napoleonic Wars in 1815, when Irish emigrants found favourable rates on empty timber ships returning to Canada. Historical geographers Cecil Houston and William Smyth note that 'Irish settlement occurred first in parts of the Maritime colonies in the 1760s, but after 1815, when the mass movements began, it took place on several fronts – eastern Nova Scotia, the Gulf of St Lawrence region and Saint John Valley of New Brunswick, the St Lawrence and Ottawa valleys of Lower Canada, and the southern peninsular Upper Canada [Ontario].'¹² Houston and Smyth found that in the heaviest wave of Irish immigration after 1815, Irish Protestants predominated: 'Protestants were more prominent and Ulster ports combined with Cork as the main source of emigrants.'¹³ Tragically, in 1845, and most especially in 1847, much of Ireland faced starvation as a result of the potato blight. The Great Famine that resulted set off a near tidal wave of emigration, with well over one million Irish emigrating. Most of them were Catholics from the south and west of Ireland, and many of them made landfall at Canadian ports like Quebec City and Saint John – more specifically, at those ports' respective quarantine stations at Grosse Isle and Partridge Island.

By 1871, the year of Canada's first census, roughly 850,000 people of Irish heritage lived in Canada, with over 60 per cent of them being Irish Protestants.¹⁴ Over 80 per cent of those of Irish heritage lived in Ontario or New Brunswick. Ontario was 'home to two-thirds of the Irish in Canada, and three-quarters of Canadian Irish Protestants.'¹⁵ By the dawn of the twentieth century, the Irish and those of Irish descent had settled in every province and in every major city; most of them, however, were in Ontario and New Brunswick, and most were of Irish-Protestant background. Murray Nicolson's examination of the 1901 Canadian census found that of the 988,721 who declared themselves to be of Irish heritage, those of Irish-Catholic descent made up only '37.9 per cent of the Irish national group.'¹⁶ Well into the twentieth century, those of Irish-Protestant descent outnumbered those of Irish-Catholic descent by a ratio of almost two to one.

As evidenced in the work of Bruce Elliott, whose amazingly detailed research traced the migration of 775 Irish Protestant families from North Tipperary to London, Ontario, and the Ottawa Valley between 1818 to 1855, much of the Canadian scholarship tends to differentiate between research on Irish Protestants and that on Irish Catholics.¹⁷ Donald Ak-

enson, for example, asserts that the Irish Protestants of Leeds County, Ontario, developed a sense of ethnic awareness in the 1830s and 1840s. As Irish Protestants came to Canada in large numbers after 1815, they acquired the vacant upland spaces not already occupied by Yankee Loyalist families in eastern and central Upper Canada (present-day Ontario). During the 1834 provincial parliamentary election, Akenson continues, the Irish Protestants of Leeds County developed a collective ethnic consciousness, which coalesced around an effort to elect one of their own to the vacant provincial seat. Ogle R. Gowan, the father of the Canadian Orange Order, won the election with the support of his Irish-Protestant shillelagh-wielding poll workers in what Akenson describes as a 'violent exercise in representative government.'¹⁸ Akenson maintains that this election episode helped these Irish-Protestant immigrants develop an ethnic consciousness.

This electoral expression of Irish-Protestant ethnic solidarity contrasts dramatically with historian Donald Mackay's assertion that 'the majority who settled in Canada took up farming[. T]here were, for example, few Irish ghettos and the raw Irish politics of cities like Boston and New York were foreign to the Canadian experience.'¹⁹ Through their collective assertiveness, the Irish Protestants of Leeds County had been able to rest local control from the Yankee family elites in a traditional demonstration of Irish power politics. Even so, by the late nineteenth century an exclusively Irish-Protestant identity was no longer discernible; most probably, it had merged with a broader British-Protestant identity that concerned itself with parochial matters but also with imperial matters. The institution most obviously associated with and emblematic of this transformation was the Protestant fraternal society known as the Loyal Orange Order.

Founded in 1795 in Loughall, County Armagh, Ireland, the Orange Order came of age in the late eighteenth century when intense agrarian violence cut across much of Ireland. Various secret oath-bound societies such as the Whiteboys, the Ribbonmen, Thrashers, the Defenders, and the Peep o' Day Boys exacted revenge against landlords, tax collectors, and anyone careless enough to harass one of their members.²⁰ Although most of these secret societies 'were motivated by agrarian grievances, some, especially from the north of Ireland, had a distinct sectarian tinge.'²¹ The Orange Order sprang from the Peep o' Day Boys and evolved into a more formal fraternal organization by adopting many Masonic rituals and traditions, notably the hierarchical series of degrees through which a member passed to remain in good standing.

The Orange Order lodges that were established across Ulster and Ireland served as a network of defensive garrisons to protect Protestant ascendancy and interests. The Orange Order served a similar role once it arrived in Canada.

In 1799, four years after the Order was founded in Ireland, Orange Order members serving as British soldiers met in Halifax in the first known meeting in British North America.²² The following year, in 1800, Orange members of the British regulars convened in Montreal. Within a few years – and especially after 1815, when hundreds of thousands of Irish Protestants began arriving in Canada – the Orange Order had gained a tenacious hold in Canada. The ritual regalia and Masonic traditions were transferred to North America, where they replicated themselves easily in the devoutly Protestant areas ‘along the north shore of Lake Ontario and the Fundy coast of New Brunswick.’²³ The most obvious Orange tradition that made its way to North America was unquestionably the celebration of King William of Orange’s victory over Catholic King James II at the Battle of the Boyne in Ireland on 12 July 1690. According to the Orangemen, this victory had preserved the Protestant faith for Britain. The annual 12 July marches throughout the British Empire served as yearly reminders of Catholic defeat and as an annual source of contention in areas where Orange Protestants lived in proximity to Irish Catholics.

Most scholars point to the Orange Order’s transformation and adaptation to the British North American setting as an indication of its evolution into a uniquely Canadian institution. They view the ethnically varied membership of the Canadian Orange Order as an indication of its adaptation and transformation to the North American setting. Beginning in the 1830s, and certainly by the 1840s with the massive influx of Famine Irish, the original Irish-Protestant institution had begun accepting members of various ethnicities – Scots, English, Welsh, Germans, and descendants of the American Congregationalist Loyalists. The only criterion for membership was being a dedicated Protestant.²⁴ It is interesting that as an institution demanding unquestioning devotion to the Crown, the Orange Order did not declare itself to be the sole proprietors of loyalty, as their own official rule book stated: ‘The Orange Society, lays no claim to exclusive loyalty or exclusive Protestantism, but it admits no man within its pale whose principles are not loyal, and whose creed is not Protestant.’²⁵ This does not suggest that the Irish influence in the Canadian Orange Order was completely jettisoned after the mid-nineteenth century ethnic expansion. Scott See

insists that while 'Canadian Orangeism created a style of its own, it kept the two most important Irish values intact,' those of loyalty to the Crown and a near fanatical anti-Catholicism.²⁶ Houston and Smyth also argue that those of Irish descent were not too far removed from Orange membership, stating that the 'ethnic backgrounds of the Orangemen were more representative of the wider protestant community than an Irish immigrant minority. But the wide dispersal of the Irish meant that they would be found in most lodges to one degree or another.'²⁷ The greatest demonstration of the Orange Order's shift toward an indigenously Canadian identity came in the form of its political and social orientation.

Scott See contends that the Orange Order made itself uniquely Canadian by engaging in local political issues and by altering its social orientation: 'Canadian Orangemen charted a course that addressed local issues and attempted to correct indigenous problems.' After noting a number of those issues, See adds that 'Orangemen supported the government in the abortive Rebellions of 1837, and they zealously opposed the Rebellions Loses Act which they believed favoured Catholics. They campaigned against the separate schools issue and the Jesuit Estates Act, and played an active role in crushing the Northwest Rebellions and the Fenian threats. Although they were motivated by the ubiquitous Orange tenets of loyalty and anti-Catholicism, British North American Orangemen steered a political course that was uniquely Canadian.'²⁸

Hereward Senior, who primarily examined Canadian Orangeism from the perspective of its political adroitness and proclivities, observed that Canadian Orange lodges were more than mere political conduits and often provided 'a religious service with the reading of scripture, and acted as a guardian of morality as well as a means of organizing social life in frontier communities.'²⁹ In this vein, See notes that without the imminent threat of harassment at the hands of militant Catholic agrarian groups, as had been so pervasive in Ireland – Canadian Orangemen developed social justifications for their organization's existence. As the siege mentality waned among Irish Protestants, many lodges declared themselves temperance and benefit lodges, offering rudimentary insurance and death benefits for widows.³⁰

Houston and Smyth also examine the Canadian Orange Order from the grassroots level. In so doing, Houston and Smyth maintain that the Orange Order's brand of 'ultra-loyalism and ultra-protestantism' was a 'philosophy differing in degree, not in kind, from that of the mass of

Canadian protestants.³¹ Houston and Smyth expressly state; 'it is our intent to broaden the interpretation of Canadian Orangeism through a study of its geography and its role as a bond for protestant communities in a developing nation.'³² Moreover, they suggest that 'the primary function of the order in Canada was expressed at the local level through the social activities and ritual glamour of individual lodges. Anything from convivial forum for local affairs to service as a surrogate church could be provided within a lodge.'³³ Houston and Smyth emphasize that the Orange Order was not merely a source of social division and an instigator of violent clashes in Canadian society, but was a well-accepted fraternal society with a mainstream membership: 'It was not, as is often portrayed today, an anachronism, an unwanted extreme, solely a source of anti-catholicism and social divisiveness. It was rather a bulwark of colonial protestantism.'³⁴ There must have been some degree of acceptance of its principles, they argue, because by the end of the nineteenth century perhaps one adult Protestant male in three was a member.³⁵ In this regard, the Orange Order, through its contacts with wives, brothers, friends, and relatives, had tremendous influence on Canadian political culture.

Houston and Smyth argue compellingly that the Orange Order was no more discriminatory than much of mainstream English-Protestant Canadian society and that it did have broad appeal. But simply acknowledging that the Orange Order may not have been an anachronism and was far more accepted than many may wish to admit today does not erase the fact that the Orange Order was a profoundly divisive and racist institution. Houston and Smyth's approach seems to indicate a reluctance to address the overtly sectarian nature of the Orange Order; moreover, none of the scholars mentioned earlier address the extent to which the Canadian Orange Order maintained an interest in and connections with events in the north of Ireland. More recent research, though, has addressed many of these issues head-on.

A recent compilation of impressive scholarship edited by David A. Wilson, *The Orange Order in Canada*, presents a more thorough picture of the Orange Order.³⁶ In examining the associationalism of the Order diaspora, Donald MacRaild acknowledges that although 'there is no denying the centrality of prejudice to explanations of Orangeism ... Canadian scholars are almost alone in noting the importance of Orangeism in the making of modern civic society, regularly acknowledging the different layers of meaning and action which shaped a more