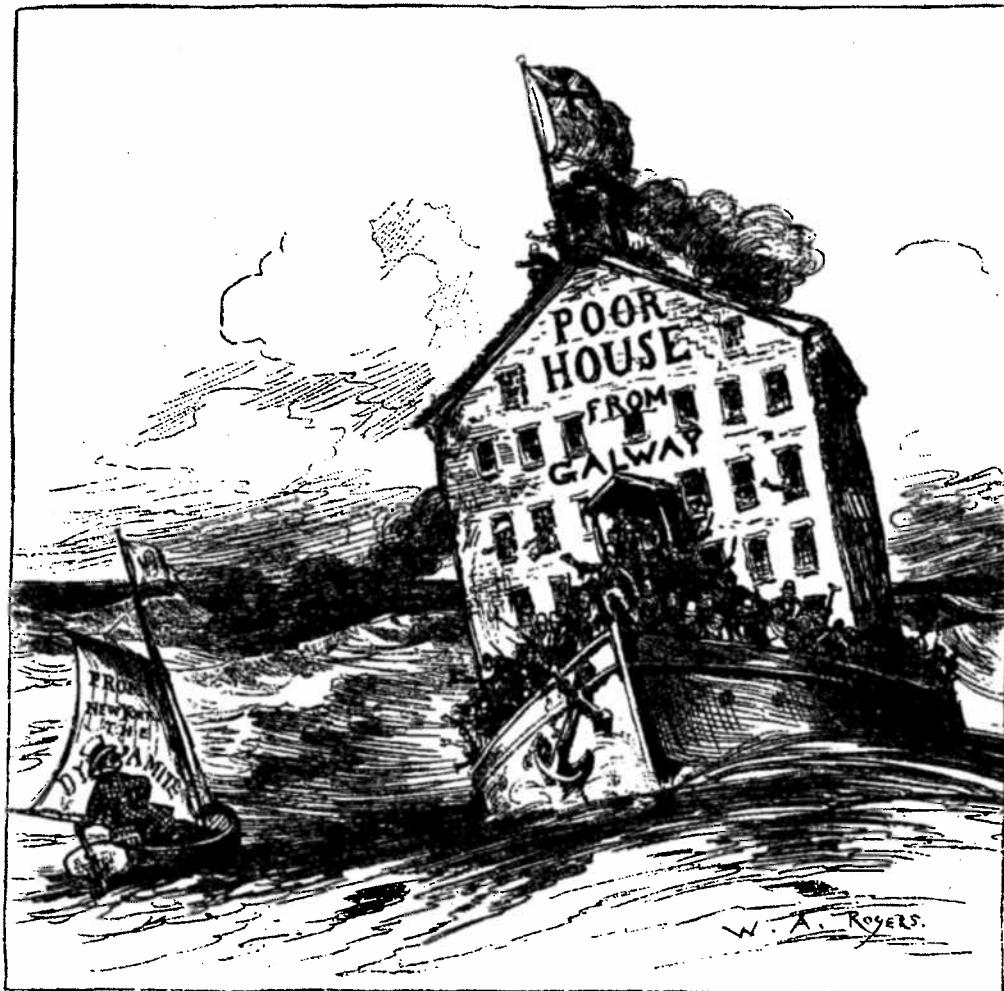


Escaping the Irish potato famine: 1845-1848



The Poor House From Galway, *Harper's Weekly*, 1848
<http://www.people.Virginia.edu/~eas5e/Irish/cartoon.html>
 Image courtesy of HarpWeek, LLC.

Between 1845 and 1848, the basic staple of the Irish diet—the potato—was destroyed by disease. The results were devastating: over 800,000 people died of starvation and, to escape hunger, a million Irish made the dangerous and difficult trip to North America. This huge influx of poor Irish Catholic immigrants occurred during an international recession and an economic crisis in British North America. Prejudices against the Irish as an inferior race, and against Roman Catholicism as an evil religion, were heightened as thousands streamed into cities and towns, further taxing economic and social resources.

Overview of the decade: 1845-1854

Economic developments

In 1842, Britain had decided that free trade rather than protectionism was in its best interest. Without a guaranteed market at a protected price, prices of British North American timber, and then wheat, began to fall. Lower profits translated into a loss of jobs for the workers, and the economy fell into recession. Canada East and Canada West (as Lower and Upper Canada were named after the Union Act of 1840) were the hardest hit as their main export, wheat, declined the most. In Canada East conditions were particularly bad, and the downturn in trade further damaged the already-depressed rural economy. Thousands of desperate Irish immigrants fleeing from the famine in Ireland put increased pressure on the economic and social resources of British North America.



William Notman, *A Lower Canada rugged frontier farm in winter*
(National Archives of Canada, PA-124296, ID #10209)

[http://www.canadianheritage.org/
reproductions/10209.htm](http://www.canadianheritage.org/reproductions/10209.htm)

As the old economic order was failing in the 1840s, a new one was growing up in its place. Businesses turned to markets within North America, rather than Britain. Manufacturing (as well as the harvesting of raw materials like furs, fish and lumber) became increasingly attractive, providing profitable opportunities. An increase in available labour helped this transformation. Many who had been driven into the cities by the loss of employment and land in the countryside in the 1840s began to work at the new industrial jobs in factories, workshops and building projects of the 1850s. By 1854, the new immigrants and formerly unemployed labourers were providing the workforce needed to drive a new phase of industry and development in British North America.

Increased trade within North America stimulated the development of transportation systems. Canals were built in large part by hard working, hard drinking Irish workers. The shipping industry of the Maritimes continued to grow. The railroad emerged by the 1850s as an increasingly important new technology. The railroad industry immediately stimulated manufacturing, trade and commerce; as well it opened the possibility of settlement in "remote" areas such as the great Northwest.

Social developments

A wealthy elite of British landowners continued to have considerable influence in the colonies, but immigration and economic changes were nudging British North America towards a more democratic and industrial society. Nevertheless, the population remained sharply divided. Although most immigrants arriving in British North America since 1815 had been from Great Britain, recent immigrants, like the longer settled English and French Canadians, did not consider themselves a coherent group. Religious divisions persisted, particularly between Catholics and Protestants. Ethnic identities (e.g., Native, French, English, Scottish, Irish) were increasing sources of conflict during these years of economic hardship. Of all the immigrant groups, Irish Catholics probably suffered the most from the most concerted discrimination during these years. However, African Canadians, many of them ex-slaves who had come to Canada to escape slavery, found discrimination and poverty.

Rupert's Land was still populated mostly by Aboriginal peoples who were living and trading with a small number of resident Europeans and Metis. George Simpson had replaced his Metis wife with an English wife, brought with great ceremony to Red River in 1830, marking an important transition. Divisions between the poorer Metis and Aboriginal peoples on the one hand, and the wealthier and more powerful men of British descent, became more pronounced. In 1849, British Columbia had become a British Colony. By 1853 Governor James Douglas was negotiating treaties with Aboriginal populations in anticipation of European settlement. The impending transformation from a fur trading nation that benefited the resident Aboriginal population as well as European traders, to a more diverse staples economy directed by and for an immigrant population was just beginning.

Political developments

This social and economic crisis interacted with a growing political one in British North America in the late 1840s. As trade with Britain collapsed, many people in the British North American colonies began to look to the United States as the new trading partner. Discussion about free trade with that country (reciprocity, or trade with no tariffs on imports or exports) began to heat up. For some merchants in the colonies, however, it was not enough to establish closer economic ties with the Americans, and in 1849 a group of Montreal merchants launched the Annexation Movement requesting political union with the United States. The identification with the United States was reinforced when, in 1849, the Rebellion Losses Bill compensated Lower Canadians for losses of the Rebellion. Riots occurred in Montreal led by Tory merchants whose livelihood had been threatened by Irish immigrations, free trade and the economic recession, and whose political power was undermined by a more democratic government. In protest, they burned parliament buildings, attacked the Governor General, Lord Elgin, and threw Montreal into chaos.

1845-48: Escape from the Irish potato famine

The famine

By the 19th century Ireland had come to rely on the potato, originally imported from North America, as the basic food source among farmers. The population of Ireland doubled from four to eight million between 1789 and 1840, partly because this new crop gave people improved health, longer lives and more children. As environmental historians now know, growing only one crop over a vast area increases its susceptibility to disease. Between 1817 and 1840, the potato was subject to numerous blights and diseases that threw the population into repeated famine. In these years, almost half a million Irish landed in British North America, with about one third moving on to the United States. Between 1845 and 1848 a new strain of potato disease destroyed the Irish crop, resulting in the worst famine—and the worst disaster—in Irish history.

By 1848, over 800,000 people had died of starvation and related illnesses, and a further million had left Ireland. Approximately 230,000 of these arrived in North America between 1845 and 1849. Most were women, many of whom were widowed. Although immigrant ships had long been unsanitary, crowded and disease-ridden, conditions worsened considerably as the numbers of poor, malnourished and ill passengers increased. Most arrived in Quebec City in terrible health without money or land and with few options. They moved into cities where racial prejudice and poor economic opportunities worsened their difficulties.

Emigrants arriving on the quay at Cork, ready for their departure, *The Illustrated London News*, May 10, 1851
(National Archives of Canada, C3904; ID #20092)

<http://www.canadianheritage.org/reproductions/20092.htm>



Effects of the famine in British North America

In the new world, the lives of Irish immigrants continued to be influenced by the same deep ethnic and religious divisions that had affected their lives for centuries. Many Irish had a sustained hatred of the English and Scots, whom they blamed driving them into poverty in Ireland. The English and Scots, for their part, declared that the Irish were poor because they were lazy and drunken. Much of the intolerance had been imported with immigrants coming to British North America. The Grand Orange Lodge of British North America, a massive anti-Catholic organization that united under a banner of

loyalty to the English crown was founded in the early 1830s. In 1833, the Order had 10,000 members; by 1860, it had 100,000 members. This organization denounced Catholics as disloyal trouble makers, and encouraged its members to support only Protestants for employment and political office.

The economic recession that accompanied the immigration of Irish from the famine erupted into a series of violent episodes directed at Irish Catholics, particularly in St. John, New Brunswick in 1847 and in St. John and Portland in 1849. Members of the Orange Order fanned the flames of racial discord, arguing that the legislation giving Catholics the right to vote and hold public office should be repealed. They began to spread rumours that the Catholics were involved in a papal conspiracy to get rid of Protestants. Twelve people were killed in the rioting, but no Protestants were convicted in the trial that followed, only Catholics. After 1848, the number of Irish Catholic immigrants coming to British North America dropped, decreasing pressure on the volatile racial situation that nevertheless continued to characterize Canadian society well into the twentieth century.

Although the conditions for the recent Irish immigrants were terrible, this particular group of immigrants helped to fuel an important change in Canadian history. One of the most important changes was the population increase that their arrival created. The immigration of over 300,000 immigrants in the colonies whose total population was only about three million made an important impact. This population was responsible in turn for continued immigration of friends and family over the next generations through the process that has been called chain migration. The Irish who poured into British North America fleeing from famine did so at just the time when workshops and factories were being built in the colonies. Many of the Irish arriving as a result of the great famine, therefore, constituted the working classes needed to fuel the growth of the cities, factories and workshops that characterized the newly emerging industrial economy. Most of the Irish arrived in Quebec City, bringing poverty and an English-speaking workforce to Canada East. The French Canadian population bore the brunt of the famine immigrants, and the increased poverty that accompanied them. Many French Canadians felt that they were being overwhelmed by a foreign population that drew on the few social resources for the sick and destitute, while the healthy threatened to take away their jobs.

The increased poverty that swelled the ranks of Canadian cities would have had affected the Aboriginal peoples who, like rural people throughout the country, had begun to move into the cities to find work. There was less work available, and wages had been driven even lower by the large numbers of people seeking employment. With few sanitary conveniences, no public lighting, no building codes, bad roads, and little support for the destitute, life in the cities of mid-nineteenth century Canada was difficult at best. While many Irish, like other immigrants, eventually moved to the more secure and healthy livelihoods offered by rural land ownership, they contributed to the early urbanization and industrialization of Canada.