

Charting the Future of Irish Studies

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It would be a gross understatement to say that the historiography of Irish migration and settlement in Canada has flourished since the publication in 1984 of Donald Akenson's *The Irish in Ontario: A Study in Rural*. Considered one of the 20 most influential Canadian history books published in the past half century, Akenson's work has encouraged a host of historians, geographers, genealogists, and ethnographers to explore the little-told story of the Irish in this country. What have resulted are excellent studies of 19th-century immigration and settlement, the creation of Irish communities and subcultures in Canadian cities, and superb regional studies. Nevertheless, there is still much work to be done.

We have seen plenty of studies of British North American cities in the 19th century. Scholars have done a credible job in probing Irish social, political, religious, and economic life in St. John's, Halifax, Saint John, Québec, Montreal, Kingston, Ottawa, Toronto, and Hamilton. What Canadians often forget is that most of their 19th-century forebears lived in rural areas. Here, routinely generated records could help us better understand the life of a majority of Canada's Irish, their successes and their failures. With the recent opening of the 1901 and 1911 censuses, scholars can now link data sets across nearly 60 years and undertake sophisticated comparative studies between townships in many Canadian provinces. Given the availability of these new records, there are now few excuses not to add the study of Irish settlement in the Canadian West to the already partially researched Irish rural areas of eastern Canada.

While the 19th century has been studied in great detail, Irish migration and settlement in the 20th century have barely been touched. Few scholars have ventured beyond the Great War in their analysis of the activities of successive generations of Irish men and women. Included in this oversight are such issues as Irish-Canadian relations and attitudes toward Ireland, Irish participation in and domination of Canadian churches, the decline of distinctive Irish associational life, and the manner in which the ethnic brokerage in all levels of politics changed for Irish Canadians.

Both a pioneering examination of Irish Canadians in the 20th century and a revised exploration of the 19th century must include questions of gender, in particular the evolving role of women in communities of Irish immigrants and their descendants. There are far too few serious studies of the role of Irish women in community formation, the evolution of Irish families, or the creation of Irish male sub-cultures in their distinctive associations and clubs. We still await, for example, a scholarly exploration of the Ladies Orange Benevolent Association and its role in Irish Protestant communities.

Finally, attention must be paid to the competing narratives of Irish Canadian history. How do popular memories interface with new developments in historiography? How have competing narrative streams -- collective memory and historiography -- contributed to, or even confused, public commemoration of the Irish in Canada? How have the

media, film, literature, or nationalism contributed to the creation of “popular memory” of the Irish? As new records are released, new questions will be posed and new studies undertaken. The future of Irish Canadian studies looks promising indeed.