

“Migration, Mobility, and Murder: The Story of the 1490 Assisted Immigrants

From the Mahon Estate, Strokestown, County Roscommon, 1847

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The series of events that played themselves out near Queenston, Niagara, in the spring and summer of 1848 read like a Stephen King novella. On May 18, while playing along the banks of the Niagara River, a groups of boys discovered the body of a man who had been bludgeoned to death. The local constabulary later identified the deceased man as Patrick O'Connor, a recent immigrant from Ireland, who, with his wife and son had gone missing from the Queenston area almost two weeks before. Ten days after the discovery of O'Connor's corpse, locals discovered the badly decomposed remains of a women, not far from where the first body had been found. Witnesses described the body as “destitute of clothing” and in “an advanced state of decomposition,” but upon closer investigation the local authorities identified the unfortunate victim as Mary O'Connor, wife of aforementioned Patrick. Based on the testimony of local Irish settlers and the discovery of a badly injured John O'Connor, six year-old son of the deceased, Toronto police arrested Thomas Brennan, another Irish immigrant who hailed from the same estate from which the O'Connors had ventured.²

The story of the trial and execution of Thomas Brennan for the murder of Patrick and Mary O'Connor is known to a few Canadian historians. In her essay “The Welcome and the Wake: Attitudes in Canada West Toward Irish Famine Migration,” published in 1974, Joy Parr used the incident as evidence of the difficulty of Irish Catholic immigrant adjustment to British North America during the period of the Famine migrations.³ In one sense Parr's case was well made. Thomas Brennan did exemplify, in an extreme way, the difficulties, both social and

psychological, faced by tired, sick, and impoverished Irish immigrants fleeing the devastation of *Gorta Mor*. With different eyes, however, the Brennan-O'Connor case speaks even more loudly about another notorious incident in the history of Famine Ireland. All of the main players in the Queenston case, murderer, victims, and witnesses, appeared to be linked by the fact that they all in all likelihood had been assisted tenants from Major Denis Mahon's Estate at Strokestown, County Roscommon. In April 1847, Mahon had made the dramatic decision to financially underwrite the passage of 1,490 of his tenants to Quebec. After having walked along the Royal Canal from Strokestown to Dublin and had been ferried to Liverpool, most of these tenants boarded four ships bound for Quebec. By the time of their arrival in the late summer, about 27% of the migrants had died at sea or in quarantine. By the autumn, however, Brennan, O'Connor, and others had managed to re-establish themselves in the Niagara region, no doubt attracted by the need for labour by the contractors building the Welland Canal. The story of the Queenston Case, is a story of immigrant adjustment and more. It reveals the agency born by famine immigrants to build a new life for themselves; it speaks of the role of organized religion, specifically the Catholic Church during the Famine, and it speaks to the mobility of the Irish Catholic migrants once they arrived in North America.

The study of the murders on the Niagara derives from a much larger research project called, "Seeking the 1490," an emulation of Bruce Elliott's pioneering work *Irish Migrants in the Canadas: A New Approach* (1988), in which he tracked 775 Protestant Irish families from Tipperary to their resettlement in central Canada.⁴ There have been few other scholarly studies that try to trace the movement of Irish famine refugees from their townlands in Ireland to their eventual landing places and settlements in Canada and the United States. Tyler Anbinder's meticulous research on Lord Lansdowne's assisted migrants from Kerry to New York is a

notable exception. Using account records from the Emigrant's Bank in New York City and parish registers from Transfiguration Roman Catholic Church, Anbinder was able to reconstruct how famine migrants from Kenmare created a settlement within the squalor of the Five Points neighbourhood in New York.⁵ Similarly, Jim Rees, has traced the assisted migrants from Lord Fitzwilliam's estates in Wicklow, between 1847 and 1856, over which time some 6,000 tenants migrated to Quebec and later to the colony of New Brunswick. After a fairly detailed account of the landlord's assisted migration scheme, Rees briefly focuses on the post 1847 the less than successful resettlement of the famine Irish in New Brunswick.⁶ Finally, perhaps the best known trans-Atlantic famine microstudy is Robert Scally's examination of the migrants of the Ballykilcline estate, adjacent to Denis Mahon's lands at Strokestown. His monograph focuses primarily on the life of the tenants on this Crown estate prior to migration, and far less attention is paid to what happens to migrants when they land in British North America.⁷

The current study picks up the migration process described in the recent work of Cairan Reilly on the Strokestown estate, and focuses primarily on Roman Catholic Irish, posing the general question of what happened to the 1,490 tenants of Pakenham-Mahon Estate at Strokestown, County Roscommon, in Connaught.⁸ As Ireland experienced the worst year of the Famine, Black '47 as it became known, landlord Major Denis Mahon, Baron Hartland, became increasingly concerned about the starvation of his own tenants and the growing insolvency of his recently inherited estate lands at Strokestown. Struggling over the advice of his cousin and agent, John Ross Mahon, to move out the paupers and clear their tenancies for animal husbandry and herding, Denis Mahon prepared a financial package that would terminate existing leases, for those who wished, and provide a subsidy for willing tenants to travel to British North America. The debate still rages after nearly 170 years as to whether Mahon's principal motivation was

profit, or relieving the suffering of his tenants, or a combination of both. Regardless of the root motivations of his initiative, 274 families, constituting approximately 1,490 people, signed on to the plan and made their way to Liverpool, where they boarded four ships bound for Quebec: *Virginus, Naomi, Erin's Queen, and John Munn*.⁹

This quest to find out what happened to the 1490 was undertaken for two reasons, one purely local and the other more generally historiographical. From the perspective of Strokestown, itself, this study has attempted to tap into the collective memory and understanding of the Famine by those living in Roscommon today. In the midst of the “Gathering” in 2013, Richard Tye, descendant of a Strokestown orphan Daniel Tighe of the original 1,490 assisted migrants, returned to the land of his ancestors, in what amounted to an emotional and memorable reunion the descendants of the departed and those who descendants of the Irish peasants left behind. The people of Strokestown were hoping that the current study might uncover genealogical links that might reveal more descendants of the “1490.” These aspirations complemented the more purely historiographical intent of the research. For social historians in Canada, the study of the 1490 has clear scholarly aims, by use of genealogical records and methodologies; for the Irish of Strokestown, County Roscommon, the 1490 study is about reconnecting the Irish story within a broad diasporic genealogy and, so doing, bringing a storied memory of loss, death, and exile, full circle. This research on Strokestown attempts to add to the existing historiography of migration and settlement, while also penetrating more effectively the lives of Famine Irish settlers who would eventually either pass through the British North American territories, or would opt to set down roots, particularly in the rural hinterlands of what is now the province of Ontario.

In the summer, 1847, the names of 274 household heads and single individuals, from Mahon's estate, were recorded as the assisted migrants from the estates. Whole families made a 155 kilometer trek on foot along the Royal Canal, to Dublin Quay. From there they boarded transport ships which would take them across the Irish Sea bound for Liverpool England, where they would board four ships bound for Quebec: *Virginus*, *Naomi*, *Erin's Queen*, and *John Munn*.¹⁰ It is in the leaving of Ireland and the boarding of ships at Liverpool where the numerical paper trail becomes muddled, thereby making the historian's task more tricky than expected. The official count of each ship entered at Quebec upon arrival and listed in panels at the Strokestown Museum states that all 476 passengers on board the *Virginus* were assisted from the estate; while 350.5 of the *Naomi's* 421 passengers were from the estate, and only 100 of 493 passengers on *Erin's Queen* were from Mahon's Estate. The fourth ship chartered for the Quebec voyage was the *John Munn*, but only 55 of the 452 passengers were from Strokestown.¹¹ Simple arithmetic puts the total, according to the records, at 981.5 passengers, which is significantly short of the Strokestown database of 1490, prepared by Ciaran Reilly, based largely on the archives at Strokestown Park House. Children were often recorded as half passengers, which may account for some of the discrepancy. Further examination of the Grosse Ile records, which would have been based on the now missing ship's manifests and passenger lists, indicate that the *Virginus*, which was alleged to have been exclusively for the Strokestown migrants, contains names of the dead who were actually from other townlands in Roscommon and were not members of Mahon's assisted cohort. Thus, as reported in Scally's work on Ballykilcline,¹² there was evidently "spillage" among the Strokestown migrants, that is some households from the Mahon estates selling or trading their tickets to other migrants. Such spillage might account for the fact that one hundred sixty-one passengers from the *Virginus* and the *Naomi* who died at sea

or in quarantine, were not registered on the original Strokestown list.¹³ This is particularly problematic for the *Virginus* because all of the passengers were assumed to have been assisted by Denis Mahon.

These problems are compounded by the absence of complete data on these immigrants on both sides of the Atlantic. First, no passenger lists exist for any of the Famine ships arriving at Quebec in the 1840s, or any ships arriving before the 1860s. They were either discarded as superfluous once ships had landed in Quebec, even though the passenger lists were often carried by the ship itself and a duplicate was transported on board another ship sailing within the same time frame from the same port as the original ship in question. Without any passenger lists, one might never know, which families, from which townlands were on what ships, and how the assisted immigrants from the Mahon estates were interspersed with other passengers from their home county, but having lived outside of Mahon's estate. Worse still is that even if one had the sailing list, the master list of the 1490, hereafter referred to as the Strokestown List, only includes the name and surname of the household head, and with few exceptions, almost all women (wives and mothers) and all youth under 14 years of age are identified only by surname and being older or younger than fourteen. For the social historian, or the genealogist, this is a nightmarish start to a study of this kind.¹⁴

An examination of the available records on death of the passengers of the four ships containing Mahon's assisted migrants, both at sea and in quarantine, reveals some surprising results. First, it appears that far more passengers had survived the voyage than had been previously estimated both by contemporaries during the Famine and by historians today.¹⁵ While the figure of 27.4% (408) of the "assisted" listed as dead at sea or in quarantine¹⁶ is still appalling by any standard, historical or modern, it is a figure that pales in comparison to the fifty

or sixty per cent estimates made by historians of the Famine.¹⁷ A careful examination of the lists of the dead from the 1847, when cross referenced with the Strokestown List, reveals that deaths occurred in family clusters: if one person from a family died on the voyage or in quarantine, it was likely many more in the same family, if not the entire family died as well. On the converse, families tended to remain surprisingly intact with no loss of life at all. Speculation as to how whole families survived while others did not may range from their health prior to travel, their own food supplies available, and the fact that typhus or ship's fever spread easily from the lice shared by people in close proximity to one another. Families huddled together below decks in bunks stacked three high were a warm home for lice and a ready host for the *rickettsia* bacteria carried in louse feces. For the Strokestown families, however, death loomed for sibling and parents should one family member be struck with typhus.

Table 1: Estimates of Strokestown Passenger Deaths at Sea or in Quarantine at Grosse Ile

Ship	Estimated Passengers	Strokestown Assisted	Estimated Total Deaths	Strokestown Deaths, Verified	Strokestown Household Head Deaths
<i>Virginus</i>	476	476	267 56.1%	221 46.4%	31
<i>Naomi</i>	421	350.5	196 46.6%	126 35.9%	16
<i>Erin's Queen</i>	493	100	136 27.6%	14 14.0%	2
<i>John Munn</i>	452	55	187 12.2%	26 47.3%	7
At Sea					2
Total	1,842	981.5	786 42.7%	387 39.4%*	58 of 274 21.2%
Total if 1490		1490		387 26.0%	

Source: Strokestown List; Marianna O'Gallagher and Rose Masson Dompierre, *Eyewitness: Grosse Ile, 1847* (Ste-Foy, Quebec: Livres Carraig Books, 1995); André Charbonneau and Doris Drolet-Dubé, eds. *A Register of Deceased Persons at Sea and on Grosse Ile in 1847* (Ottawa, Canadian Heritage, Parks Canada, 1997). *If dead are calculated based on the original 1490 figure the percentage of dead is 26.0%.

Another challenge to the research process was that potentially helpful routinely generated Canadian records were deficient in several ways, therefore making the search for the 1490 that much more difficult: no complete passenger sailing lists exist for British North America until

1865; the Canadian census of 1851-52, when legible, is missing for key centres of immigrant reception, principally Toronto, most of Montreal, and major rural areas of previous Irish settlement. Moreover census data may list country of birth, in this case Ireland, but never county of origin, which is critical when trying to determine the origins of Irish families with names such as Green, Kelly, Smith, Duffy, or O'Hara. Thirdly, there are few surviving documents recording the immigrant deaths by name, after their departure for the interior, and there are no surviving immigration records, to track the migration of the "assisted" into the United States.¹⁸ Finally, there was a four year gap between the arrival of the Strokestown "assisted" and the possibility of being recorded on the Canadian census, which was undertaken once in 1851, and a second time in 1852, when entire sections of the original account were lost. Finally, research was restricted by the fact that only male household heads and widowed heads of households were recorded with both given name and surname, which meant the only usable record was the list of 274 assisted households, which are now recorded for posterity on the commemorative glass panel outside of the Strokestown Park Museum. Tracking only the 216 male and widowed heads of household who survived the voyage (77.8%) became a major limitation in all phases of the research project.

Having survived their horrendous voyage and experience at Grosse Ile, the trail of the Roscommon 1490 begins to run from cool to cold. Most famine migrants, the remnants of the 1490 included, would have proceeded through Quebec City, up the St. Lawrence to Montreal. Few records of these immediate survivors of the coffin ships survive. None are recorded on the Allison list, a ledger of some Irish migrants kept by James Allison, and immigration official in Montreal.¹⁹ Of the over 5,000 Irish migrants who suffered and died of typhus and other diseases in the fever sheds at Point At-Charles at Montreal, there is no known record listing the names of

those buried in the mass graves there. Similarly, there are no known surviving death records for the Irish migrants who proceeded up river from Montreal and landed at Kingston, Canada West. At this former Canadian capital, several thousand more died in the hastily erected sheds there. They were buried in the large Catholic cemetery on the outskirts of town, near the Kingston General Hospital, and in several other burial places. To date, Kingston has at least five monuments to the great Irish Famine or Irish canal workers, but none offer a list of names that might assist our study. Finally, at Toronto, researchers have identified 664 of the Famine dead out of the 1,124 who died in the Queen's city in 1847.²⁰ None of the names extent matches any of Mahon's Roscommon survivors.

Acknowledging the gaps in available data after the arrival of the 1490, the next best recourse is the Canadian census of 1851-52. It was the second government initiated head count in the British North American colonies of New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Canada East, and Canada West. The census was not without its problems. The maritime colonies conducted their censuses in 1851, while the United Province of Canada delayed until January 1852. The human count was also accompanied by an agricultural census which enumerated the land cleared, crops under cultivation, degree of animal husbandry, housing, among other things. While the presence of the agricultural census is a great aid in determining the level of economic activity of settlers and their relative wealth and status, not all of the agricultural census sections have been preserved, making data retrieval and comparison difficult. Moreover whole sections of the two provinces were enumerated and the records have been lost, including areas of potential Irish settlement in the Ottawa Valley, the Montreal region, and the city of Toronto, arguably one of the most important commercial centres in the Canadas. In 1847, alone, over 38,000 immigrants, most of whom were refugees from the Irish famine, landed in Toronto. To make matters even worse the

census copy, now digitized and machine readable is an exercise in frustration. As eminent Canadian historical demographer David Gagan explains: “Phonetic spelling which reduces surnames to gibberish, terrible penmanship, and sloth which most frequently manifested itself in a too heavy dependence on the “Ditto” all conspired in the hands of some enumerators, to render the entries for entire households and whole districts at best unreliable, at worse undecipherable.”²¹ As an extra difficulty, the Canadian census did not report the date of immigration on the census form until 1901, forcing any researcher of the 1851 census to exercise considerable creativity in determining the actual date of migration.

Despite the paucity of records and the potential flaws and shortcomings of the records that did exist, attempts were made to match the surviving household heads on the Strokestown list by the use of a eight variable formula including matching surname (or its phonetic equivalent), given name, Irish birth, approximate family size, approximate age, famine migration time (based on the age of Irish and Canadian born offspring), county and township of settlement, and proximity to other surnames hailing from Roscommon. A close correspondence of at least six of these variables, with names, arrival time, birthplace, and geographic “landing place” being mandatory, would constitute a “working match” and would be parked for further examination. After careful analysis of all the routinely generated records available, the research teams established ninety-one “working matches” and forty-one orphans to the Strokestown List.

Table 2: Surviving Strokestown Household Heads By Townland & Destination (N=274)

Townland	Total	British North America	United States	Died at Sea or Grosse Ile	Did Not Find Presumed Dead
Aughadangan	10	3	0	4	3
Ballyhubert	4	1	0	0	3
Castle of Leitrim	3	0	2	0	1
Cloonhain	14	1	3	3	7
Cregga Feehily Quarter	6	2	0	2	2
Cregga House Division	9	1	1	1	6
Cregga Plunkett Quarter	6	0	0	0	6
Culleen Park	10	0	3	0	7
Culliagh	19	4	2	9	4
Curdrummin	2	0	2	0	0
Curhouna	16	6	1	6	3
Curnashina	9	5	3	0	1
Curries	3	1	0	0	2
Dooherty	8	5	1	0	2
Farnbeg	1	0	0	1	0
Goortoose Holmes	8	2	1	3	2
Goortoose McGuire	10	2	0	4	4
Goortoose Murray	8	2	0	1	5
Graffogue	4	0	0	1	3
Kilgraffy	14	1	2	4	7
Killinlosset	5	1	0	1	3
Killinordamore	5	2	1	0	2
Killmackenny	47	14	7	8	18
Lacken	1	0	0	0	1
Laughboy	3	1	0	0	2
Lower Culliagh	8	3	0	2	3
Mullivetron	9	5	0	2	2
North Yard	3	2	0	0	1
Pasture	1	0	0	0	1
Scramogue	5	1	0	2	2
Tooreen	13	5	0	2	6
Tully	10	1	0	2	7
Total	274	71 29.5%	29 10.6%	58 21.2%	116 42.3%

Among the ninety working matches of Mahon settlers in Canada and the United States, research uncovered a variety of occupations ranging from farming, farm labour, general labourer and some tradespeople. The Toronto-Montreal lacunae notwithstanding, such findings challenged longstanding assumptions that famine migrants clustered in the cities. In fact, the working matches indicated a high number of rural sojourners in Western Ontario, particularly townships in Huron, Perth, Middlesex, and Grey Counties, owned by the Canada Company. In 1842, the Canada Company opened up new township properties, in 100 acre lots, by means of a payment system that could even satisfy the needs of famine immigrants. If the prospective farmers could not pay the sum of £50 as a lump sum for freehold tenure, they could opt for a lease-to-own option in which they would make annual payments 10 shillings and contract to develop the land for a period of ten years or more.²² In this way, a hypothetical Strokestown refugee could sojourn in a city like Toronto for several years, secure enough money to make a down payment and begin anew in the rapidly expanding Huron tract.²³ Some new landholders might then be enumerated on the 1852 or the 1861 census.

Other Strokestown assisted migrants began to cluster in the Niagara region, where work on the Welland Canal was available, and where Munster and Connaught migrants were already well established digging and widening the navigation route around Niagara Falls, and linking Lakes Erie and Ontario for shipping.²⁴ This may have been the magnet of opportunity that drew the Brennans, Hopkins, O'Connors, Daltons, Kellys, and Kennedys to the area. Coincidentally, the five orphaned children of James Sheridan, a native the Curhouna Townland who had died on the *Naomi*, had settled nearby in Lockport, Niagara County, New York. Despite the harsh circumstances of their assistance off the Mahon estate, and their harrowing journey to North

America, the Strokestown survivors appear to have demonstrated remarkable agency in selecting potential settlement in areas where their agricultural skills and experience in manual labour could be put to good use.²⁵ A wage of 2 shillings, 6 pence per day on the canal works, would have, over time, provided a tidy nest egg to lease land to own elsewhere in western BNA.²⁶

Clusters of the Strokestown survivors also found new homes in the cities. The case of the Diffily family is one case in point. The surname is not common in Canada and therefore was more easily distinguished among the hundreds of Kellys, Ryans, and Smiths. In 1856, the baptismal register reveals that Margaret, daughter of John Diffily and Catherine Monahan, of the Kilmackenny townland, was baptized in the presence of witnesses named Donnoghue and Reynolds.²⁷ The convergence of these four Roscommon surnames, all included in the original Strokestown List, appears more than just a coincidence. It can be hypothesized, with some additional census evidence, that some of the Strokestown survivors re-founded community together but in the urban villages that made up the wards of Montreal. Their settlement in Montreal made perfect sense. It was one of the first major urban centres of contact that an immigrant would make; it provided employment and housing, albeit often in filthy neighbourhoods, and for the Irish, it was for the most part a Catholic city, where the Faith had a prominent public presence, entrenched in law.

A second and more comprehensive phase of the research was designed to track down the 122 household heads that did not constitute a match or at least a “working match” in phase one of the research. The aims of this phase were clear. First, all of the data from phase one had to be rechecked so that the new phase could be undertaken with the confidence that no available “rocks had been left unturned.” This rechecking yielded negative results as nineteen “working matches” in the British North American data set were dropped for a variety of reasons. This

increased the numbers of household heads that would then have to be reassessed in the census and other social records generated in the United States. Here the object was two-fold: first track as many as the 122 missing household heads as best as could be expected in the American census, and then establish if any of the surviving “working matches” appeared in the ready-made family trees housed on the Ancestry.com site. Families found in the US Census of 1850 would then be linked, if possible, through as many of the succeeding censuses as possible. Finally, the British North American data set would be tested by running all of the names through the American census, just to ascertain greater confidence that their actual place of sojourning in the first generation was indeed Canada.

The search of the American census of 1850 was not without its own set of challenges. The advantages of the American census—its capturing of the population one to two years before the similar exercise in Canada, and the generally superior penmanship of the enumerators, was quickly offset by the sheer size of the source. The population of the United States in 1850 was 23.2 million,²⁸ nearly ten times that of the United Province of Canada, which meant that much more work would have to be undertaken to sort out these Strokestown names across thirty states and additional territories. At times the task seemed too daunting: the census recorded at least 371 Irish-born Patrick Smiths in 1850 and at least 70 Irish-born James Greens. Some unusual surnames from the Strokestown List, such as Diffily or Igo, yielded few results in their original spelling and no helpful leads at all. Similar to the Canadian Census the Americans recorded age, full name, place of birth, and occupation. However, with the consciousness of the formal separation of Church and State embedded in the US Constitution, the American census did not request its respondents to include their religious denomination, which became a clear disadvantage to researchers attempting to pinpoint the location of a mostly Irish and Catholic set

of migrants. In the end, “strong matches” were discovered for thirty-six households, which when compensating for the nineteen families dropped during the revisions, the Strokestown survivor list increased to 107 households, or close to 39% of those originally dispatched from the Mahon Estate.

One of the first observations made over the course of this phase of the research confirmed the hypothesis of colonial historians David Gagan and Michael Katz, that mid-century migrants to “America” were constantly on the move. Gagan’s microscopic examination of Peel County, west of Toronto, and Katz’s groundbreaking study of Hamilton, Canada West, concluded that migrants to Canada were constantly on the move, moving through the well-established social structures in urban areas, and, in Gagan’s case, seeking new agricultural opportunities in the western Canadian frontier and in the United States.²⁹ Why would anyone suspect that our Roscommon migrants would be any different? Three cases offer variations on the theme of mobility. While none of the following three household heads survived “the cut” in this study, they are illustrative of the mobility issue with which a researcher must contend when analyzing demographic patterns of Irish migrants in the nineteenth century. Although not as mobile as Ulster Protestant migrant Wilson Benson, who was immortalized by Michael Katz and Cecil Houston, James S. Green deserves an honourable mention. One of 70 Irish born James Greens in the USA, an Episcopalian minister (so definitely not our man) ventured with his Irish-born wife and son, to Lower Canada in the early 1830s, where his first daughter was born, within a year the Greens are in Kentucky, where another child is born, and shortly thereafter in Mississippi, where two more children are born. In 1850, the Greens are catching their breath in Marianna, Jackson County, Florida.³⁰ Slightly different is one of the 151 listed John Kellys, who in this instance, within the space of time between 1844 and 1851, migrated from Ireland, sojourned in Canada

East, moved to the United States, and then ventured back to Canada West. Once back in Canada, they settled in Lincoln County, near Niagara Falls and the Welland Canal works, where likely John would pursue employment as a manual labourer.³¹ Perhaps the most unusual case is that of Patrick Monaghan, who was born in Roscommon in 1787, married in County Monaghan, and migrated to North America in a year undetermined. His children are native to both Roscommon and the United States and by 1861 he is living in Prince Edward Island, which seems incredulous given the easterly location of the colony and its distance from Patrick's previous haunts. He is recorded to have died in Rock Rim, Illinois, a year later, and buried back in PEI.³² Perhaps, the only logical explanation for this Rossie's odd travels is the fact that PEI was the home of the largest cluster of County Monaghan settlers, and perhaps Patrick was tied by marriage to this group.

The "strong matches" were also dispersed widely in at least twelve states east of the Mississippi River, and two matches in Missouri. Over one third of the 33 American "strong matches" were found in the state of New York, which is reasonable since the access routes to the Empire State, from Canada were numerous. Irish migrants frequently crossed the international boundaries at towns along the St. Lawrence River, west of Montreal, or from Wolfe Island near Kingston, or by ferry from the British side of Lake Ontario to Rochester and Oswego, and across the Niagara frontier to Lewiston, Niagara Falls, NY, and Buffalo. Also within this Canada-USA migration corridor were the states of Pennsylvania, which had had three matches, Ohio with four, and Illinois with two. The opening agricultural frontier and new cities in each of these states would have made them natural magnets to Irish migrants. Outliers like St. Louis, Missouri and New Orleans, Louisiana, already had large Irish communities that would have attracted the Strokestown migrants. In fact, St. Patrick's Roman Catholic Church, just off Canal Street in New

Orleans, was served by Father Patrick Plunkett, himself a native of Roscommon.³³ As was the case in the British colonies to the north, Irish migrants found themselves employed in industrial cities as labourers and as farm workers on the frontier. Fourteen heads were listed as labourers, nine did not have employment, and three worked at other unskilled jobs. With three quarters of this American data set listed among the lowest of those in the occupational spectrum, the Strokestown “matches” appear to confirm stereotypes of the Irish navy in American labour history.³⁴

Fewer of the Strokestown migrants in the United States appear to have ended up in rural areas than their counterparts who remained in Canada. In this light, an examination of the Land Registers of the Canada Company, and the Land Patents Office, located at the Archives of Ontario, yielded little usable information on the Strokestown assisted migrants.³⁵ Several of the strong matches were confirmed as having acquired these lands by patent between 1847 and 1852, which provides slender, but not conclusive evidence that Irish famine migrants were attuned to the fact that if they could save money that they earned in labouring jobs in cities like Toronto, Hamilton, Bytown, Montreal, and London, they might have an opportunity to attempt farming their own land on a lease to own basis. Preliminary analysis of census records for Admaston Township, in Renfrew County in the Upper Ottawa Valley, and for Hibbert Township in the Canada Company holdings in Perth County, confirm large numbers of famine migrants holding farms within four years of their escape from Ireland.³⁶

As for the Niagara-bound migrants, Thomas Brennan and his wife Bridget and their two children came from the Kilmackenny townland. After her arrival in August 1847, Bridget, at the age of 37, died at Grosse Ile and the rest of the family moved further inland.³⁷ By 1848, it appears that only Brennan and his teenage daughter were still alive and living near Queenston,

where they have met up with fellow migrants from the Mahon estate. While there is no Patrick O'Connor listed on the original household head ledger of 274 names, there are many Connors and it is entirely possible that he, Mary, and five-year old John traveled in tandem with another groups of Connor's, perhaps Brian Connor of Kilmackenny or John Connor of Aughadangan. Nevertheless, the O'Connors and Brennans were known to each other having travelled together on the *Virginus* and likely survived quarantine in the fever sheds of Point St. Charles, at Montreal, and the sheds built at Kingston. When they arrived at Toronto by Durham boat, they would have inspected by local doctors, and triaged by Emigration Agent, Edward MacElderry, who would have given them free passage on a coach headed inland or tickets to journey by boat headed for Hamilton or Niagara. It appears Brennan and O'Connor opted to take the lake passage, settling near Queenston, where they could be employed with hundreds of other Irish workers on the Welland Canal.³⁸

What is clear from the transcript of the records of the Court of Assizes and the useful pieces of information draw from the 1851-2 census is that Brennan and O'Connor were not alone on the Niagara peninsula. They were entering a community already established by Irish Catholics who were also served by two Catholic parishes, St. John's in St-Catharine's, where Father William Patrick McDonough, an Irish-born priest from the Archdiocese of Tuam, served as pastor and missionary for the region, and St. Vincent de Paul Church in Niagara-on-the-Lake, served by Father John Carroll, a handpicked close associate of Bishop Michael Power.³⁹ The Irish in the region were mostly from the provinces of Munster and Connaught, many of whom left Ireland before the Famine. The canal works were noted for the violent behaviour of canal workers and not necessarily those divided along sectarian lines. More prevalent was the rivalry between Irish Catholic from Connaught and Munster who resented any advantage taken by their

countrymen on the canal works.⁴⁰ In fact, it was not until 1848, and a riots between Irish Catholic canal workers and local Orangemen, that one might say that the violence in the region had its origins in Ireland's traditional Protestant-Catholic tensions. The Niagara region was also host to the Royal Canadian Rifles, which contained many Irish men with Roscommon surnames, most of whom made appearances at Father Carroll's Church for baptisms, marriages, and the burial of family members.⁴¹ What emerges from the records is that Brennan and O'Connor carved out a new life among fellow Rossies, including perhaps Thady Kennedy, from Gortoose McGuire townland, the widow of Michael Hopkins and her family from Culliagh, and Patrick Dalton from the Mullivetron townland. Also living in the area were the Glancy Family, likely migrants from Roscommon who left prior to the Famine.⁴² During the trial all emerged as witnesses testifying to the unusual behaviour of Thomas Brennan with regards to the O'Connors, particularly Mary O'Connor.

According to witnesses Thomas Brennan and Mary O'Connor had often been seen in the company of one another. They were noted for their drinking and quarrelling while witnesses observed, in contrast, that Patrick O'Connor was a "character of industriousness and [a] quiet person."⁴³ Brennan's sixteen year-old daughter reported to have been travelling with her father and Mrs. O'Connor from Queenston to Chippewa on the morning of May 4, 1848, but the daughter departed from them when she stopped into a roadside tavern for a drink. What happened next is a matter of great dispute but the scenario may have developed as follows. The daughter returned to Queenston in the evening to the O'Connor's rented house, near the old Church, where the Brennan's had lodged. In the morning she awakened and all the residents were gone. If the Solicitor-General's account is correct, Brennan strangled Mary to death that night and returned to Queenston, whereupon he dragged Patrick out of bed by the hair, pulled

him outside and bludgeoned him with his hammer. He then returned for the boy, John, whom he tossed over the embankment overlooking the Niagara River. Brennan was later arrested in Toronto carrying \$18 or \$19 dollars cash and trying to hawk Mary O'Connor's plaid dress. In court he testified to his innocence and that he and Mary were travelling to Mr Kennedy's, perhaps Roscommon native Thady Kennedy, and that she, in fact, had murdered her own husband, who had amassed close to \$20 in savings to be used as remittances to secure the passage of several of his daughters left behind with his brother William in Ireland.⁴⁴ Why the O'Connor daughters would not have been assisted by Mahon when the O'Connor's travelled initially remains a mystery.

What is even more curious about this case is that aside from Brennan himself, who spoke in his own defence at the trial in September 1848, and his daughter who remains nameless within the trial transcript, all of the witnesses are potentially from the Mahon estate. Young John O'Connor, described as being "in great distress of mind," survived the fall and hobbled bruised and with broken arm to the house of Margaret Hopkins, herself, potentially a native of the Mahon estate. When Brennan's daughter arrived to collect the boy he refused to leave, terrified of her, and dismissing the alibi that the O'Connors had gone to Lockport, New York, coincidentally another point of settlement for some of Mahon's migrants.⁴⁵ Later while on the stand, Patrick Dalton, another Roscommon native, was lured into a heated exchange with Brennan. In the midst of the verbal melee Dalton alluded to the murder of Brennan's mother back in Ireland, an act perpetrated by Brennan's own brother and sister. With evidence mounting, including sightings of Brennan overlooking the precipice where the bodies were found, the remnants of blood found on his hammer, and the strange circumstances of his arrest, Brennan was found guilty in a matter of minutes by the jury and was sentenced to be hanged in

October 1848. Later he confessed to the murder of Mary, stuck by his story that she had murdered her husband and he had never harmed the boy.

The role of the local Church is also brought into question by the curious Queenston case. The registers of St. Vincent de Paul Church note the frenzied pace kept up by pastors Patrick McDonough and John Carroll during the 1840s. They are detailed in their records, as had been prescribed by their recently deceased bishop, Michael Power, and recorded are the name of many Irish, including families from Roscommon. Missing from the 1847-1848 records are the O'Connor's who appear to have been buried in unconsecrated ground somewhere in Niagara. One suspects that like many pre-famine Irish the O'Connors may have been at best, tepid Church goers. The Court of Assizes did not hear the testimony from John O'Connor on account of his age and because "it appeared he knew nothing of prayer or of the nature of an oath."⁴⁶ In fact, the Court did not even turn over care of the orphan to a Catholic family. The Judge awarded care of John O'Connor to a local Mennonite farmer, John Fritz, and by 1851 young John O'Connor, now nine years old was listed as being a Quaker.⁴⁷ On the other hand, Thomas Brennan, once having been executed on October 4, 1848, was buried by Father John Carroll, in the Niagara Cemetery under the auspices of St. Vincent de Paul Parish.⁴⁸ Perhaps Brennan, with the weight of murder upon him, reconciled himself to his faith before facing the executioner's rope. There is little hard evidence to suggest why he is buried in a Catholic cemetery, and his victims are not. The episode does tend to confirm what Bishop Michael Power had observed earlier about Irish Catholic migrants in his frontier, that they were poorly formed in the faith, lax in their practice, and ignorant of the canons of the Church.⁴⁹ One senses from the circumstantial evidence provided that marital infidelity, alcoholism, and the struggle to provide for oneself life's necessities were all factors affecting the behaviour of the players in this case.

As this phase, likely the final one for this particular project draws to a close (for financial reasons), perhaps a few comments and conclusions are in order. First, the departure and demise of Major Denis Mahon's assisted immigrants of 1847 was indeed a tragedy, although not to the same scale as thought previously. At least seven in ten migrants, including two thirds of the household heads, survived the voyage and quarantine station and were able to continue that journey into the interior of Canada and into the United States. We may never know what happened to about ninety families who just simply disappear from the record keepers. Death in the sheds of Montreal, Kingston, Bytown, or along the famine trail to the interior of the continent may have claimed some; the constant mobility of the migrant populations of the day may have made it possible to allude being recorded. Name changes, marriage, and death in the American Civil War, may also account for the Strokestown "lost." While the study of the found has not yielded any new possible home-comers, like Richard Tye, the study of the Strokestown list has enhanced our understanding of Famine migration, mobility and settlement, particularly in British North America. Even though many of these migrants were evicted from their homes and assisted out of their homeland, they still appeared to bear a sense of their own agency once freed from the old life. They sought out their own people and recreated some of their old lives in a new space, be it in Montreal, western Ontario, or on the Niagara Peninsula. Thus the Brennan story is not just that of a murder, it is potentially a confirmation of chain migration and cultural transition from Ireland to Canada.

Finally, the genealogical aspects of the study appear backwards in the standard methodologies employed by those who undertake family history. With some exceptions in the case of those tracing the movements of those migrants who landed at Plymouth, Massachusetts, on the Mayflower, in 1620, or those tracing what happened to the United Empire Loyalists as

they fled revolutionary America for the northern British colonies, genealogy usually works in the opposite fashion. Searchers begin upstream at the present and then move downstream into the past, carefully uncovering the links between generation and generation. The search for the 1490 knows no such luxury. With few exceptions it is difficult to find points of departure from upstream; instead, in the case of the 1490, the historian can only piece together available fragments, hoping that the plausible outcome might offer new stories to emerge, and more descendants to be found.

¹ This paper has been the product of two years of intensive research by two senior undergraduate teams at the University of Toronto, under my direction. Without diligent and exhausting work of students Jessica Bush, Chiara Fallone, Pamela Smofsky, Julia Maher, Elizabeth McDermott, and Kiera O’Sullivan, it would have been very difficult to mine the thousands of entries in the routinely generated records to arrive at the working data sets which comprise the foundation for this study. I acknowledge the financial support of the Faculty of Arts & Science, University of Toronto; the Centre for International Experience, University of Toronto; and Domenico Pietropaolo, Principal of St. Michael’s College (2011-2016) for his office’s generous and enthusiastic financial support for undergraduate research.

² *Globe* (Toronto), 27 September 1848.

³ Joy Parr, “The Welcome and the Wake: Attitudes in Canada West Toward Irish Famine Migration,” *Ontario History* 66 (1974), 102.

⁴ Bruce S Elliott, *Irish Migrants in the Canadas: A New Approach* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1988).

⁵ Tyler Anbinder, “From Famine to Five Points: Lord Lansdowne’s Tenants Encounter North America’s Most Notorious Slum,” *American Historical Review* 107, No. 2 (April 2002): 351-87.

⁶ Jim Rees, *Surplus People: From Wicklow to Canada* (Cork: The Collins Press, 2000).

⁷ Robert James Scally, *The End of Hidden Ireland: Rebellion, Famine & Emigration* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

⁸ Ciaran Reilly, *Strokestown and the Great Irish Famine* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2014).

⁹ *Freeman’s Journal*, 29 April 1848.

¹⁰ Peter Duffy, *The Killing of Major Denis Mahon: A Mystery of Old Ireland* (New York: Harper Collins, 2007), 11-122; Reilly, *Strokestown*, 65-77; Stephen J Campbell, *The Great Irish Famine: Words and Images from the Famine Museum Strokestown Park, County Roscommon* (Strokestown: Famine Museum, 1995), 41.

¹¹ Marianna O’Gallagher and Rose Masson Dompierre, *Eyewitness: Grosse Ile, 1847* (Ste-Foy, Quebec: Livres Carraig Books, 1995), 349 and 352-3.

¹² Scally, *The End of Hidden Ireland*, 221.

¹³ André Charbonneau and Doris Drolet-Dubé, eds. *A Register of Deceased Persons at Sea and on Grosse Ile in 1847* (Ottawa: Canadian Heritage, Parks Canada, 1997).

¹⁴ The master list was compiled by Dr. Cairan Reilly of Maynooth University, who combed through the archives of Strokestown House, largely of the landlord Pakenham-Mahon Family, while the archives were being preserved and organized at Castleton House, near Maynooth University. The archives have since been returned to Strokestown Park House.

¹⁵ O’Gallagher & Dompierre, *Eyewitness*, 349 and 352-3.

¹⁶ O’Gallagher and Dompierre, *Eyewitness*, 349 and 352-3. André Charbonneau and Doris Drolet-Dubé, eds. *A Register of Deceased Persons at Sea and on Grosse Ile in 1847* (Ottawa: Canadian Heritage, Parks Canada, 1997). I am particularly grateful to one of my research teach, Julia Maher, for uncovering these anomalies.

¹⁷ The official lists from the Quebec shipping season are not without other problems. For instance despite the worn image of famine migrants being primarily subsidized by landlords, the shipping records at Quebec indicate that less than 8% of passengers were assisted. There is some reason to doubt the presentation of the data here since only passengers on the *Virginus* were listed as being assisted and none of the three remaining ships carrying the rest of the 1490 were listed as having had assisted passengers aboard, which is clearly an error or oversight. The high death counts are repeated in Reilly, 73.

¹⁸ *Names of Emigrants From the 1845-1847 Records of James Allison, Emigration Agent at Montreal* (Ottawa: Ottawa Branch, Ontario Genealogical Society, Publication 94-2, 1994).

¹⁹ *Names of Emigrants From the 1845-1847 Records of James Allison, Emigration Agent at Montreal* (Ottawa: Ottawa Branch, Ontario Genealogical Society, Publication 94-2, 1994).

²⁰ Mark G. McGowan, *Death or Canada: The Irish Famine Migration to Toronto, 1847* (Toronto: Novalis, 2009), Appendices.

²¹ David Gagan, “Enumerator’s Instructions for the Census of Canada 1852 and 1861” *Social History—Histoire sociale* 7, no. 14 (November 1974), 355.

²² Robert C. Lee, *The Canada Company and the Huron Tract* (2004), 172. Elliott, 140-1.

²³ Archives of Ontario, RG 8 1-3-B-40, Index to Land Patents by Name, Vol 3 Province of Canada 1841-1850, MS-1 Reel8; Volume 4, Province of Canada, 1850-1856, MS-1, Reel 8; Canada Land Company, MS 729, Reels 1-8. This time consuming process did uncover the land patents for Patrick Bohan, originally from Mahon’s Estate, but then in McGillivray Township.

²⁴ Paul Hutchison & Michael Power, *Goaded to Madness: The Battle of Slabtown* (St. Catharine’s: Slabtown Press, 1999).

²⁵ *Census of 1851-52*, District 2, Welland, Sub-district Bertie, John Fritz, p. 89.

²⁶ Ruth Bleasdale, “Class Conflict on the Canals of Upper Canada in the 1840s,” *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 7 (Spring 1981), 16.

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- ²⁷ Family Search, Quebec Catholic Parish Registers, *Baptêmes, Mariage, sépultres*, (Baptismal, Marriage & Burial Register) of Notre Dame Cathedral, Montreal, 1856.
- ²⁸ Sarah Janssen, ed., *The World Almanac and Book of Facts, 2014* (New York: The World Almanac, 2014), 610.
- ²⁹ Michael Katz, *The People of Hamilton, Canada West: Family and Class in a Mid-Nineteenth Century City* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975); David Gagan, *Hopeful Travellers: Families, Land and Social Change in Mid-Victorian Peel County, Canada West* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981).
- ³⁰ <http://interactive.ancestry.ca/8054/4193083-00625?pid=18456900&b>, Census of the United States of America, 1850, Marianna, Jackson County, Florida, James S Green.
- ³¹ *Census of Canada, 1851-1852*, Enumeration District No. 8, Lincoln County, Canada West, Caistor Township, Page 14d, 15a, line 44, John Kelly. Cross referenced Library and Archives Canada and automatedgenealogy.com.
- ³² Colonel Doyle Family Tree, Ancestry.ca.
- ³³ *Melanges Religiueux*, 7 August 1846. P.404. Note the spread of migrants in Ciaran Reilly's volume.
- ³⁴ Malcolm Campbell, *Ireland's New Worlds: Immigrants Politics and Society in the United States and Australia, 1815-1922* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008), 37-42 and 50-6.
- ³⁵ Archives of Ontario, (AO), MS 729, Canada Company Fonds, , Reel 3, Canada Company, Lease Registers, 1844-1848, vol. 26, p.101-vol. 30 p.70; Reel 4, vol. 30,p. 71-vol. 32, p.270. The records reveal that the price for the standard 100 acres allocation could be as high as £78 2s 6p, with an annual rent of £3 15s per year (vol.30, p.164). Land Patents can be searched in RG 8, 1-3-B-40 Index to Land Patents by Name, vol. 3, Province of Canada 1841-1850, MS-1, Reel 8; Vol. 4, Province of Canada, 1850-1856, MS-1, Reel 8.
- ³⁶ Kathleen McGowan, "Building Admaston: A Look At How Irish Famine Immigrants Affected the Demography of Admaston Township, 1851" (Unpublished Senior Undergraduate Paper, University of Toronto, SMC444H1S, April, 2012); Derek Nile Tucker, "Successful Pioneers: Irish Catholic Settlers in The Township of Hibbert, Ontario, 1845-1887," (Unpublished MA Thesis, McMaster University, 2001).
- ³⁷ André Charbonneau and Doris Drôlet-Dubé, *A Register of Deceased Persons at Sea and on Grosse Ile in 1847* (Ottawa: Ministry of Heritage, Parks Canada, 1991), 66.
- ³⁸ Paul Hutchison & Michael Power, *Goaded to Madness: The Battle of Slabtown* (St. Catharine's: Slabtown Press, 1999), 11-16.
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*, 17. Edward Jackman, op, *A Brief History of the Roman Catholic Diocese of St. Catharines* (NP: Diocese of St. Catharines, nd), 13-14.
- ⁴⁰ Bleasdale, "Class Conflict," 19-21.
- ⁴¹ Ontario Roman Catholic Church Records, 1760-1923, images, Family Search (<https://familysearch.org/palMM9.3.1/TH-1951-24494-13796-40?cc=1927566>: accessed 6 May 2016). Lincoln, Niagara-on-the-Lake, St. Vincent de Paul, Baptisms, marriages, burials, 1827-1849.
- ⁴² All derived from *Census of Canada*, Canada West, Lincoln, Niagara, 1851-1852.
- ⁴³ *Globe*, 27 September 1848.
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid*; and "Irish Relatives and Friends (reprint of USA origin dated February 11, 1871)
- ⁴⁵ *Globe*, 27 September 1848.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*

⁴⁷ *Census of Canada, 1851-52*, Bertie Township, Welland County, John Fritz, Farmer, aged 50, “Memonist.”

⁴⁸ Ontario Roman Catholic Church Records, 1760-1923, images, Family Search (<https://familysearch.org/palMM9.3.1/TH-1951-24494-13796-40?cc=1927566>; accessed 6 May 2016). Lincoln, Niagara-on-the-Lake, St. Vincent de Paul, Baptisms, marriages, burials, 1827-1849. Thomas Brennan, 4 October 1848.

⁴⁹ Mark G. McGowan, *Michael Power: The Struggle to Build the Catholic Church on the Canadian Frontier* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2005), 136-98.