

**Quarantining the Past: Commemorating the Great Irish Famine on Grosse-Île**

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## Abstract

### Quarantining the Past: Commemorating the Great Irish Famine on Grosse-Île

Colin McMahon

Grosse-Île, Canada's main quarantine station from 1832 to 1937, was a required stopover for immigrants on their voyage up the St. Lawrence River to the Port of Quebec. Though most passed through the inspection process with little delay, during the spring and summer of 1847, the deadliest year of the Great Famine (1845-50), 100 000, predominantly Catholic, Irish made their way to the island aboard 'coffin ships'. Their already weakened state worsened by the inhumane crossing, some succumbed to typhus en route, others while in quarantine. Despite the efforts of the island's medical staff and the ministrations of members of Quebec's Catholic and Anglican clergy, over five thousand Irish were buried that summer on Grosse-Île in mass graves. Thousands more died after leaving the island for Quebec City, Montreal, Kingston, Toronto, and Hamilton.

In commemorations organized on the island at the beginning and the end of the twentieth century, Irish-Canadians have memorialized this Irish episode in Grosse-Île's history. In 1909, eight thousand commemorators made the journey to the island to witness the unveiling of a Celtic Cross and hear an assortment of historical, political, and religious orations. Almost ninety years later, amidst controversy and debate over the extent to which the island's Irishness would be emphasized, Parks Canada renamed the national historic site, *Grosse-Île and the Irish Memorial*, and opened an exhibition marking the Famine sesquicentennial. These acts of public remembrance were multivocal orchestrations, incorporating a variety of historical perspectives. Examining Grosse-Île's commemorative discourses reveals much about the socio-political context in which they were formulated and affords the opportunity to consider how we as a society choose to approach the past in the public sphere.

## Acknowledgments

There are a number of people who, at the very least, deserve acknowledgment for helping me complete this project. Thanks to Ron Rudin, my thesis advisor, for his consistently insightful critiques and for offering me a cup of coffee when I returned to school after an extended hiatus. Rob, who continually reminds me why we must remain curious, made a determined effort at the eleventh hour to read my thesis that improved the final version considerably. Pat, editor extraordinaire, stands out for the encouragement he gave and the example he sets. His work ethic is as unflinching and inspiring as his friendship. I would also like to thank my parents for showing me Ireland when I was a kid and helping me discover ways in which the past is ever present. And, finally, Cynthia, who always looked to see me in the story.

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## Chapter One

### Introduction

As Canada's main quarantine station in the nineteenth century,<sup>1</sup> Grosse-Île received millions of European immigrants, the vast majority of whom passed through the island's quarantine process with little delay before proceeding a further fifty kilometres up-river along the St. Lawrence River to the port of Quebec. Despite its historic position as the "gateway to Canada,"<sup>2</sup> and the recent efforts of Parks Canada to develop the island into a national historic site celebrating Canadians' shared immigration experience, Grosse-Île has never been enshrined with the same national symbolic status as Ellis Island in the United States. For many Irish-Canadians, though, the island has been the locus of a much more complicated and painful past. On Grosse-Île is located the largest Famine-era gravesite outside of Ireland. During the spring and summer of 1847, the deadliest year of the Famine, 100 000, predominantly Catholic, Irish made their way to the island aboard lumber vessels, otherwise known as 'coffin ships'.<sup>3</sup> Their already weakened state worsened by the often inhumane crossing, some succumbed to typhus en route, others while in quarantine. In fact, it is estimated that over five thousand Irish are buried on Grosse-Île, and thousands more died

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<sup>1</sup>Partridge Island (also known as Canada's Emerald Isle) is located at the mouth of Saint John Harbour and served as Canada's other quarantine station in the nineteenth-century. During the summer of 1847, 15 000, emigrants, mostly Irish, landed at the island, of whom 1195 died. 600 were buried in mass graves and the rest died in Saint John. In 1974, the island was designated a national historic site for its role as a quarantine station, but it has not been developed for public tours because it is not one of the 145 national historic sites that are administered by Parks Canada, or one of the 71 that are managed through a cost-sharing agreement between Parks Canada and private companies.

<sup>2</sup>Marianna O'Gallagher, *Grosse-Île: Gateway to Canada, 1832-1937* (Quebec: Carraig Books, 1984). The number of immigrants who landed on the island remains unknown because there was no record kept of those who were not hospitalized. It is known that four million immigrants entered Canada through the Port of Québec between 1832 and 1937.

<sup>3</sup>Though historians continue to debate the number of deaths, the scale of emigration, and even the duration of the Famine, it is generally agreed that during the Famine of 1845-50 approximately one million died of starvation or fever, another one to one and a half million left Ireland between 1845-1855. Those hardest hit lived in the poorer, predominantly Catholic, districts of the west. See Cormac Ó Gráda, *Ireland, Before and After the Famine: Explorations in Economic History 1800-1930* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988, 49. Those who survived the ocean crossing, lasting anywhere from thirty-six to eighty days, were often exhausted and starving upon their arrival at ports along North America's eastern seaboard.

after leaving the island for Quebec City, Montreal, Kingston, and Toronto.<sup>4</sup> In commemorations on Grosse-Île in the first and last decades of the twentieth century, these tragic events were publicly remembered.

On 15 August 1909, Irish-Canadians, under the auspices of the Ancient Order of Hibernians (AOH), organized a commemorative event on the island attended by over eight thousand participants, there to witness the unveiling of a Celtic Cross and hear an assortment of historical, political, and religious orations remembering the Famine. A new commemoration at this national historic site was undertaken by Parks Canada in 1992 amidst widespread public controversy over the extent to which the Irishness of the island would be emphasized. The surge of interest in Grosse-Île grew steadily over the next five years, culminating in the recent commemorative events marking the sesquicentenary of the Irish Famine.<sup>5</sup>

This thesis will examine these two instances of commemoration both as historical events and as representations of the past, reading the discourses and considering the contexts in which they were produced. Though commemorations are often presented as consensual undertakings, a close analysis of these expressions of public history at Grosse-Île reveals that various conceptions of historic significance have been ascribed to the island. While disentangling the various interests that coalesced during these acts of commemoration, the evershifting dynamic between past and present, forgetfulness and memory, mourning and celebration, and nation and community will be addressed. In one sense, this thesis will simply describe a particular place at particular times where a small set of unique characters left their mark through acts of remembrance. However, Grosse-Île will also be used as a gateway into the larger issue of how the past has been manipulated to construct identities in Canada at the beginning and end of the twentieth century.

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<sup>4</sup>The estimates of the total number of Famine emigrants who died at Grosse-Île varies significantly depending on the source consulted. These various estimates will be addressed in greater detail later in the thesis.

<sup>5</sup>Two books by Parks Canada historians, André Charbonneau and André Sévigny, 1847--Grosse-Île: a Record of Daily Events (Ottawa: Parks Canada, 1997), and André Charbonneau, Doris Drolet-Dubé, with the collaboration of Robert Grace and Sylvia Tremblay, A Register of Deceased Persons at Sea and on Grosse-Île in 1847 (Ottawa: Parks Canada, 1997), were published to coincide with the flurry of sesquicentenary activities that from May to October 1997 brought 42 000 tourists to Grosse-Île.

Considering the efforts to memorialize publicly Grosse-Île's history, it might seem curious that the island's story has languished in the margins of Canadian historiography.<sup>6</sup> An overview of the dominant historiographical trends at work will help explain why, despite the close commemorative attention it has received, Grosse-Île has remained a relatively uncharted island in the work of professional historians examining Canada's public histories and in the historical literature of the Irish in Canada.

Before exploring the reasons for this ellipsis in academic historiography, it is a noteworthy point of contrast that the island's history has been tentatively mapped out in the work of two amateur historians and a sociologist, each prominent Irish-Canadians who assumed very public roles in ensuring that the Irish history of 1847 be highlighted in Parks Canada's recent commemoration. In 1984, Marianna O'Gallagher, a former member of the Sisters of Charity and the granddaughter of one of the organizers of the 1909 commemorative event, wrote Grosse-Île: Gateway to Canada 1832-1937. In this brief history of Grosse-Île, O'Gallagher describes the evolution of the quarantine station from its inauspicious opening in 1832, when government and medical authorities hastily improvised the inspection and treatment of an influx of immigrants in an attempt to prevent the spread of cholera into British North America, until its closing in 1937. While she provides an overview of the many different nationalities that passed through Grosse-Île, her primary objective is to illustrate why the suffering of the Irish "looms large in the folk memory of Quebec" by recalling the story of "les immigrants irlandais...of the famine migrations of the late 1840s."<sup>7</sup> She argues that the selfless ministrations of Catholic clergy to the Irish and the subsequent adoption of hundreds of Irish orphans into French-Canadian families accounts for the powerful bonds that were formed between Quebecers and the Irish, and the enduring historic significance of Grosse-Île.<sup>8</sup> Ten years after writing Grosse-Île: Gateway to Canada 1832-1937 O'Gallagher

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<sup>6</sup>Before the publication of Gateway to Grosse-Île in 1984, the island's history was discussed in Irish histories of the Great Famine. Cecil Woodham-Smith, The Great Hunger (London: New English Library Ltd, 1962), 213-232, and Oliver MacDonagh, "Irish Emigration to the United States of America and the British Colonies During the Famine," in The Great Famine: Studies in Irish History 1845-52, eds., R. Dudley Edwards and T. Desmond Williams (Dublin: Browne and Nolan, 1956), 370-375. Though it is important to refer to the Great Famine as such to distinguish it from other less catastrophic famines in Ireland's history, for the sake of convenience, I will subsequently refer to it simply as the Famine.

<sup>7</sup>Marianna O'Gallagher, 13.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, 53-57.



once again drew attention to this aspect of the island's history in Eyewitness Grosse Isle, 1847, a collection of letters from the chaplains of the quarantine station to their superiors written during the summer of 1847.<sup>9</sup>

Pádraic O Laighin's contribution to the historiography of Grosse-Île has gone much further in emphasizing its Irish character, straying from O'Gallagher's approach by unequivocally indicting British landlords and the British government, described as "the captains of the politics of death," for making the island "in 1847 the nadir of Ireland's holocaust."<sup>10</sup> He takes on Canadian historians for misrepresenting the Famine that occurred in "the midst of plenty,"<sup>11</sup> and purports to correct the omission of Grosse-Île's Irish story from the pages of Canadian history.<sup>12</sup> For O Laighin this neglect is even more alarming when one considers the extent to which the years 1832 and 1847 "marked Grosse-Île indelibly on the consciousness of the Irish."<sup>13</sup>

More recently, Michael Quigley adopted a similar strategy to writing the wrongs of Grosse-Île's history by focusing on the malevolent complicity of landlords and the British government in the deaths of a million Irish people during the "Great Hunger," asserting that the "island's story is irrevocably Irish because Ireland was the wellspring of the catastrophes of 1832 and 1847."<sup>14</sup> For Quigley and O Laighin, aligning historical writing about Grosse-Île

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<sup>9</sup>Rose Masson Dompierre and Marianna O'Gallagher, Eyewitness Grosse Isle, 1847 (Ste-Foy, Quebec: Carraig Books, 1995).

<sup>10</sup>Padraic O Laighin, "Grosse-Île: The Holocaust Revisited," in The Untold Story: the Irish in Canada vol.1, eds., Robert O'Driscoll and Lorna Reynolds (Toronto: Celtic Arts of Canada, 1988), 92, 75. O Laighin is a sociologist, and, at the height of the controversy over how to commemorate Grosse-Île, served as president of the St. Patrick's Society of Montréal.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 93.

<sup>12</sup>As the public debate raged over how to commemorate Grosse-Île, Padraic O Laighin, "Grosse Île: The Irish Island," in "Briefs Presented in Montreal, May 20, 1992," 1, chastised Canadian historians for examining "momentous though unpalatable events in only cursory descriptions."

<sup>13</sup>O Laighin, "Grosse-Île: The Holocaust Revisited," 78. Cecil J. Houston and William J. Smyth, Irish Emigration and Canadian Settlement: Patterns, Links, and Letters (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), 218, have also recognised that the events of 1847 "remain the clearest image in the collective memory of the Irish immigration." However, unlike O Laighin, they are suspicious of spurious images obfuscating more objective historical inquiries into the Irish experience.

with the collective memory of Irish-Canadians -- who consider the island "the most important Great Famine mass grave site in North America" -- is as necessary as integrating an interpretation of the causes of the Famine in Ireland within a Canadian historical framework.<sup>15</sup> Quigley, O Laighin, and O'Gallagher all submitted briefs to Parks Canada between 1992 and 1993 arguing that the Irish dimension of Grosse-Île's history should be the primary commemorative focus. Their interest in the Irish experience at Grosse-Île as a significant aspect of Canadian history, however, has not been reflected in the larger body of literature on the Irish in Canada.

The bulk of professional historical writing in the last twenty-five years has not focused on the Famine phase of emigration to Canada and the wave of predominantly Irish Catholics that it carried.<sup>16</sup> Led by Donald Akenson, many historians writing about the Irish in Canada have worked to revise the handful of studies written before 1975 that inaccurately transferred "the standard Irish-American story" to a Canadian context.<sup>17</sup> For Akenson, the majority of Irish-Catholics in nineteenth century Canada were not unskilled workers living in urban ghettos. The characterization of them as a distinct proletariat class that harboured an antipathy toward Great Britain is a historical misconception that Akenson considers "part of the

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<sup>14</sup>Michael Quigley, "Grosse Île: Canada's Irish Famine Memorial," Labour/Le Travail 39 (Spring 1997), 197. Quigley, whose academic background is in nineteenth century Irish history, served as historian and publicist on the executive committee of the Toronto based Action Grosse-Île. This organization, created by representatives of Irish communities in Toronto, Brampton, Hamilton and Kingston, lobbied Parks Canada to include the Irish story of 1847 as the main theme of the commemoration at the national historic site.

<sup>15</sup>Quigley, "Grosse-Île: Canada's Famine Memorial," 146.

<sup>16</sup>Based on statistics compiled by Alexander C. Buchanan, who served as the British emigration agent in Quebec City from 1838 until 1868, 98 649 emigrants embarked on transatlantic voyages for Quebec City in 1847, the vast majority of whom were Irish Catholics departing from Irish and British ports, cited in Charbonneau and Sévigny, 12.

<sup>17</sup>Akenson, Being Had: Historians, the Evidence and the Irish in North America (Port Credit, ON: P.D. Meany Publishers, 1985), 104. Gilbert Tucker, "The Famine Immigration to Canada, 1847," American Historical Review, 36 (1930-31), 535, Clare Pentland, "The Development of a Capitalistic Labour Market in Canada," Canadian Journal of Economics and Political Science 25 (November 1959), 450-61, "The Lachine Strike of 1843," Canadian Historical Review 29 (September 1948), 255-77, and Kenneth Duncan, "Irish Famine Immigration and the Social Structure of Canada West," Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology, 2 (1965), 19-40, are examples of historical literature dealing with the Catholic Irish experience in nineteenth century Canada that suggest that the experiences of the Famine Irish in Canada were representative of the patterns of settlement, employment, and acculturation of all 19th-century, Catholic Irish emigrants.

romantic, victorious and memorable tradition of Irish nationalism."<sup>18</sup> This politicized portrait of Famine Irish who congregated in U.S. cities along the eastern seaboard should not be applied to the Irish in Canada because the Famine did not visit Canada as it did the United States. The procession of coffin ships that sailed up the St. Lawrence to Grosse-Île in the summer of 1847 "heralded the end of massive Irish migration to Canada," and the beginning of the subsequent exodus of Irish emigrants to the United States.<sup>19</sup> Since the 1980s, historians, such as Akenson, have sought to discredit what they consider to be a deleterious and anachronistic appraisal of the Irish immigrant experience in Canada. Emphasizing agency and adjustment while downplaying differences, divisiveness, and difficulties experienced by the Protestant and Catholic Irish in nineteenth-century Canada, revisionism has become the dominant historiographical outlook when writing about the Irish in Canada.

This term 'revisionism' has been applied to describe a general trend of scholarly reassessment in the work of historians over the last thirty years studying the Irish diaspora in Australia, Britain, the United States, and in Canada. More notably, this term has also been applied to the work of many historians of the Irish in Ireland, where, since the 1980s, objections have been raised against histories that are hostile to the traditional nationalist understanding of the Irish past, a bias in historical writing that critics have since traced back to the 1930s. The objection to revisionism is that it has assumed a value-free approach to the writing of the Irish past in an effort to denigrate nationalism, a tradition revisionist historians view as propagandistic, polemical, and violent. The revisionist controversy becomes especially heated when it comes to writing about the Famine. Until recently, revisionists had almost completely avoided examining the Famine.<sup>20</sup> The few historians who have engaged in studies

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<sup>18</sup>Akenson, Being Had, 96.

<sup>19</sup>Donald Mackay, Flight From Famine: The Coming of the Irish to Canada (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1990), 14. Mackay's impressionistic overview of the hardships and uncertainties of life that Catholic Irish migrants struggled to overcome in Ireland and subsequently upon arrival in British North America is somewhat anomalous in the larger historiography. His work stands in stark contrast to histories employing more stringent empirical methodologies to understand the pre-Famine nineteenth century migration of predominantly Protestant Irish.

<sup>20</sup>Mary Daly, "Revisionism and Irish History," in The Making of Irish History: Revisionism and the Revisionist Controversy, eds., George Boyce and Alan O'Day (London: Routledge, 1996), 71-72, has noted that "despite popular interest, scholarly research in the Famine has been limited, and contemporary perceptions of the subject, both in Ireland and abroad, have been virtually untouched by revisionist scholarship."

of the Famine, a chapter of Irish history that, according to Mary Daly, has been most exploited by Nationalist polemicists, insist on minimizing the responsibility of the British government for the death of one million Irish.<sup>21</sup>

While revisionist historians of the Irish in Canada can remain fairly far removed from this politically charged debate about how history is written, there are striking similarities to these two revisionisms. Alan O'Day has remarked upon the similar use of chronology and methodology, but argues that, unlike some Irish revisionist writing, the history of the Irish in Canada "is not part of an anti-Nationalist project."<sup>22</sup> O'Day has decided that "the convergence cannot be explained by any agreed project or shared bias but by the universality of the development of history as a skills-based, not politically motivated, discipline."<sup>23</sup> This seems a rather flimsy distinction to make between these schools of revisionism. It is hard to imagine how historians of the Irish in Canada, or any historian, could not, in some way, be politically motivated to write within the paradigm of any 'ism'. The main point of similarity is that both forms of revisionism have used nationalist interpretations as straw men. In the process, academic readings of the Irish past at home and in Canada have increasingly diverged from popular historical conceptions, leaving the Famine and its long-term consequences largely unexamined in historical literature.

By attenuating the rather bulky corpus of Irish-Canadian historiography to its barest bones, one can identify three key interpretive issues that revisionist historians have developed in an effort to "deal with the Canadian Irish on their own, not American terms."<sup>24</sup> The first issue, so fundamental to the historical revision that it is now rarely looked upon as interpretive, is the designation of the formative period of Irish emigration as the pre-Famine period beginning in 1815, when most emigrants arrived with some means and hope to build a new, more prosperous life. Whereas the post-1847 Famine emigration shaped the historical experience of the Irish in the United States, Canadian historians have identified a dominant migratory period unique to the Irish in Canada, challenging the pervasive image of the Irish

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 72.

<sup>22</sup>O'Day, 188.

<sup>23</sup>Alan O'Day, "Revising the Diaspora," in The Making of Modern Irish History: Revisionism and the Revisionist Controversy, 210.

<sup>24</sup>Akenson, Being Had, 107.

as destitute exiles from English misrule and famine. Secondly, Canadian historians have attempted to debunk the myth of the Irish as a largely urban proletariat by employing quantitative studies to understand patterns of settlement and occupation in urban and rural areas. Finally, cultural interpretations of ethno-religious differences between Catholic and Protestant immigrants have largely been passed over in favour of socio-economic approaches that emphasize Irish immigrants' speedy and successful acculturation into a predominantly rural, Protestant society.

Cecil Houston and William Smyth argue that "the aberrant character" of Famine emigration should not draw attention away from the more prevalent historical experience of the Irish in Canada. While recognizing the "misery and degradation" it inflicted on both sides of the Atlantic, they interpret the Famine, in the context of British North America, as "an Irish event of limited long-term geographical and social consequence, submerged in the experience of those Irish who filled the colonies before its outbreak."<sup>25</sup> Scholarly sights have been focused on the larger contingent of Irish immigrants to Canada, the majority of whom were Protestant,<sup>26</sup> who began arriving and settling in significant numbers in British North America after 1815.<sup>27</sup> Moreover, when looking at the Catholic Irish in Canada, historians

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<sup>25</sup>Cecil J. Houston and William J. Smyth, Irish Emigration and Canadian Settlement: Patterns, Links, and Letters, 218. Houston, "A Personal Brief on the Subject of the Grosse Île Heritage Site," in "Briefs presented in Toronto, April 15, 1993," 4, who now serves as President of The Canadian Association of Irish Studies, espoused this view of Famine emigration during the recent debate over how to commemorate Grosse-Île. Considering that 150 years after the Famine a public discourse could generate such passion and discord is perhaps an indication that Houston has underestimated the significant long term "social consequences" that Famine emigration has had for many Canadians of Irish descent.

<sup>26</sup>Gordon Darroch and Michael D. Ornstein, "Ethnicity and Occupational Structure in Canada in 1871: The Vertical Mosaic in Historical Perspective," Canadian Historical Review, 61 (1980), 305-33, studied the 1871 census and determined that just over 60% of the Irish in Canada were Protestant. Bruce Elliot, Irish Migrants in the Canadas: A New Approach (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1988), has written an extensively researched microstudy tracing the migration of seven hundred and seventy-five Protestant Irish families to the Canadas between 1818 and 1855, the vast majority of whom arrived prior to the Famine when Irish emigration reached its peak. Catherine Anne Wilson, A New Lease on Life: Landlords, Tenants, and Immigrants in Ireland and Canada (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994), also attempts to understand the pre-Famine Irish immigrant experience, specifically the relationship between landlord and tenant, through an examination of historical circumstances on both sides of the Atlantic.

<sup>27</sup>Cecil Houston and William J. Smyth, "Irish Emigrants to Canada: Whence They Came," in The Untold Story, 30, point out that of the approximately 475 000 Irish who came to British North America in "the critical pre-Famine period 1825-1845" the vast majority settled in New

have rejected the notion "that the core of Irish-Catholic experience was that of the Famine Irish."<sup>28</sup> This has effectively relegated Grosse-Île to the margins of the standard story of Irish-Canadian immigration, an anomalous tragedy rather than a significant historical event.

Ancillary to this reassessment of the character and chronology of Irish emigration is the question of how different the experiences of Irish Protestants and their Catholic counterparts were upon settling in Canada. Extensive research has been conducted in an effort to ascertain the extent to which the Irish settled in rural and urban areas, and understand correlations between settlement location and religious affiliation. The attention of historians has largely been directed towards studying the settlement of Irish in Ontario, where the majority settled, of whom two-thirds were Protestant.<sup>29</sup>

The conception of Irish Catholic immigrants as urban and impoverished workers populating segregated ghettos in nineteenth-century Canada was first propounded in the work of historians analyzing the emergent working class. Setting the tone for subsequent interpretations of Irish Catholics in Canada by labour historians, Clare Pentland, writing in the 1940s, viewed Irish Catholics as formative members of a burgeoning proletarian class. More attentive to market forces than ethnicity, Pentland characterized the Irish as "ignorant, superstitious, fervent, belligerent, loyal, [and] sociable," and concludes that rather than engaging in farming, "the Irish peasant clung to wage work in spite of every hazard of low pay, uncertain employment, and abominable conditions."<sup>30</sup> The subsequent work of both Michael Katz and John Porter relied upon quantitative methodologies, which, although painting a more multilayered portrait of the Irish urban experience, nonetheless, substantiated Pentland's impressions of Irish Catholic emigrants as unskilled and underprivileged members of an expanding urban working class.<sup>31</sup>

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Brunswick, Quebec, and particularly Ontario. They comprised the major non-French ethnic group in Canada until the late 1880s. The flow of 19th century immigration from Ireland began to lessen following the Famine, diminishing considerably after 1855, and, finally, slowing to a mere trickle following Confederation.

<sup>28</sup>William M. Baker, "God's Unfortunate People: Historiography of Irish Catholics in Nineteenth-Century Canada," in The Untold Story, 61-2.

<sup>29</sup>Donald H. Akenson, "Data: What is Known About the Irish in North America," in The Untold Story, 18.

<sup>30</sup>Clare Pentland, "The Development of the Capitalistic Labour Market in Canada," 460.

<sup>31</sup>John Porter, The Vertical Mosaic: An Analysis of Social Class and Power in Canada (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965); Michael B. Katz, The People of Hamilton,

In his study of the Irish in Leeds and Lansdowne Township in Ontario, Akenson used a socio-economic approach to argue that, contrary to widely held academic and popular perceptions, the Irish in Canada were decidedly not urban, and quickly overcame minor obstacles to adapt to this largely Protestant, agricultural society.<sup>32</sup> The image, inspired by American historiography, of poor Irish Catholics congregating in urban slums has, according to Akenson, migrated North and settled far too comfortably into the historical understanding of the Irish in Canada.<sup>33</sup> Considering the findings based on the statistical research of Gordon Darroch and Michael D. Ornstein,<sup>34</sup> Akenson is convincing when he points out the fallacy of applying an American model to understand the situation of the Irish in Ontario;<sup>35</sup> however, as one critic has already argued, Akenson tends to suggest that the conclusions of his case study are equally applicable to the Irish in other regions of Canada.<sup>36</sup> Extrapolation based on the findings of microstudies is a precarious undertaking, especially when one considers the limited scope of writing about the Irish experience in other regions.

Peter Toner has called into question Akenson's interpretation of Darroch and Ornstein's data, arguing that in the case of the Irish in New Brunswick substantive differences exist in

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Canada West: Family and Class in a Mid-Nineteenth-Century City (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1975).

<sup>32</sup>Akenson, The Irish in Ontario: A Study in Rural History (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1984). With all the bombast of a self-proclaimed iconoclast, Akenson makes this same argument to shatter the image of the Catholic Irish as distinctly unskilled, communal, urban dwellers in the United States in Being Had.

<sup>33</sup>Akenson, Being Had, 106.

<sup>34</sup>Gordon Darroch and Michael D. Ornstein, "Ethnicity and Occupational Structure in Canada in 1871," used census records to ascertain the occupations of 10 000 heads of household, concluding that nationwide 58.3% of Protestants and 44.3% of Catholics of Irish descent were farmers. They also traced occupational transitions in south-central Ontario between 1861 and 1871 and found that although the Catholic Irish were more likely to be labourers, they were rapidly turning to farming as an occupation.

<sup>35</sup>While Akenson's interpretation is widely accepted, there is by no means an outright consensus among historians. Glenn J. Lockwood, "Success and the Doubtful Image of Irish Immigrants in Upper Canada: The Case of Montague Township, 1820-1900," in The Irish in Canada: The Untold Story, 319-341, asserts that the Irish in Montague were not consistently successful as farmers, or in "assimilating local society to their way of thinking." Unlike Akenson, Lockwood also notes that economic disparity and religious divisions among the Irish were not uncommon.

<sup>36</sup>Peter Toner, "Lifting the Mist: Recent Studies on the Scots and Irish," Acadiensis 18: 1 (Autumn 1988), 219.

the occupational patterns of Protestants and Catholics.<sup>37</sup> Toner notes that Irish Catholics in New Brunswick were less inclined to take up farming as an occupation, and far more likely to subsist on wages derived from irregular employment in towns and cities.

In a provocative critique of both Toner and Akenson, Gordon Darroch, the historian originally responsible for the statistical research, has taken issue with these studies "which tend powerfully to construe evidence in their favour."<sup>38</sup> The problem, according to Darroch, is that quantitative data regarding occupation have been misread to buttress competing notions of Irish ethnicity in Canada that impose "conceptual uniformities." By confining the understanding of ethnicity to economic and structural determinants, an awareness of "historical contingency" is neglected. He makes a compelling call for accounts that "correspond to the lived, socially constructed and historically variable experience that is understood as ethnic."<sup>39</sup>

With Darroch's critique in mind, finding new approaches to the study of Irish acculturation and ethno-religious identity could be especially illuminating in Quebec, where two thirds of Irish emigrants were Catholics, who, although less likely to be urban dwellers than the Irish in the United States, were urbanized at a higher rate than the Irish in Ontario.<sup>40</sup> Bypassing the pitfalls of cultural determinism for more empirical analyses of Irish acculturation, it is apparent that one of the weakest links in the historiography of the Irish in Canada has been the failure to balance economic and demographic analyses with inquiries into culture and religion as important historical factors in sustaining ethnic identity and memory.

Kerby A. Miller's Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America expansively profiles the "culture of exile" pervasive among Irish Catholics in the United States, raising some interesting interpretive issues for historians seeking to understand the Irish in Canada. Basing his conclusions on the analysis of five thousand letters and

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<sup>37</sup>Peter Toner, "Occupation and Ethnicity: The Irish in New Brunswick," Canadian Ethnic Studies 20 (1988), 155-65.

<sup>38</sup>Gordon Darroch, "Half Empty or Half Full? Images and Interpretations in the Historical Analysis of the Catholic Irish in Nineteenth-Century Canada," Canadian Ethnic Studies 25 (1993), 1-8.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>40</sup>Robert J. Grace, The Irish in Quebec: An Introduction to the Historiography (Québec: Institut Québécois de Recherche sur la Culture, 1993), 53, 56.



memoirs, Miller points out that the spectre of the Famine, forced emigration, and English misrule loomed large in the collective consciousness of the Irish in America, even though "comparatively few emigrants were compelled by force or famine to leave Ireland."<sup>41</sup> Despite great variance in "the objective experience" of Irish-America, a common cultural tradition mitigated the "fissiparous tendencies" of class, language, and gender.<sup>42</sup> At times adopting the role of psychohistorian, Miller diagnoses Irish-America with a worldview "deeply rooted in Irish history and culture" that engenders passivity, alienation, and a legacy of bitterness towards English tyranny, ensuring "the survival of Irish identity and the success of Irish-American nationalism."<sup>43</sup>

While Miller's cultural model of Irish-America does not seem to have much relevance for Canadian history, especially considering the findings of Akenson,<sup>44</sup> perhaps it is time to broaden our historical understanding of the Irish experience in Canada by paying more attention to reading the discourses of popular historical representations organized in the public sphere that do not necessarily conform to the version of the past articulated in academic histories. Just as Irish revisionist historians have been "anxious to wean the Irish public away from myths of the past,"<sup>45</sup> many Canadian historians, assuming a value-free approach, have sought to ascertain the historical reality of the Irish experience in Canada to prove the inefficacy and implausibility of a mythology borrowed from the United States.<sup>46</sup> In the process, it can be argued that Canadian historians have, in a sense, created a counter-

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<sup>41</sup>Kerby A. Miller, Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 6.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., 494-95.

<sup>43</sup>Miller, 7, 4.

<sup>44</sup>See Bruce Elliot, Irish Migrants in the Canadas: A New Approach for a similar interpretation to Akenson's.

<sup>45</sup>Peter Gray, The Irish Famine (London: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 1996), 126. Roy Foster, The Irish Times, 28 January 1997, Features section, 5, believes that "commemoration runs the risk of ironing out complexity in a surge of emotional identification and holier-than-thou attitudinising. In 1898, factions were competing over who owned 1798. Instead of all the speeches, marches and unveilings of statues--the over-politicisation of the whole thing--Lady Gregory suggested that people should plant trees. It was a very sensible idea."

<sup>46</sup>Akenson, "Data: What is Known About the Irish in North America," 24-5.

mythology that excludes Grosse-Île from consideration as an integral site in the history of the Irish in Canada.

Grosse-Île's relegation to the periphery of Canadian historiography is not just a consequence of revisionist trends in the literature on the Irish in Canada. One must also consider why the island has yet to be explored in the work of historians who study Canadian public representations of the past. This historiographic omission is especially glaring given the concern expressed in recent years by historians that history has "become removed from the public."<sup>47</sup> Commemoration, in particular, has been identified as a valuable form of "tangible historiography" worthy of scholarly attention. By studying how "various streams of the past" converge in commemoration, it has been suggested that historians will better understand the "public presentation and interpretation of a collective inheritance."<sup>48</sup> These few pushes for more historical analyses of public histories, however, have not positioned Grosse-Île into the scholarly sights of historians.

This can be attributed partly to the fact that some of the contributors to the literature on Canadian public history are in various ways associated with Canada's heritage agencies. These commentators generally object to revisiting the past "through community eyes, or through the eyes of the marginalized,"<sup>49</sup> preferring to view "commemoration as a form of nation-

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<sup>47</sup>John Gillis, "Remembering Memory: A Challenge for Public Historians in a Post-National Era," The Public Historian 14: 4 (Fall 1992), 99, asserts that history is now too "distant and analytical, highly specialized and professionalized," and has "become removed from the public" because it has "lost its power to move, to inspire, and to celebrate." Canadian historians of all stripes have in recent years studied the Canadian public's relationship with the past, drawing very different conclusions. See Michael Bliss, "Privatizing the Mind: The Sundering of Canadian History, the Sundering of Canada," Journal of Canadian Studies (October 1991), 11; Ian McKay, The Quest of the Folk: Antimodernism and Cultural Selection in Twentieth Century Nova Scotia (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1994), 277-78; and Eva Mackey, "Postmodernism and Cultural Politics in a Multicultural Nation: Contests over Truth in the *Into the Heart of Africa Controversy*," Public Culture 7 (1995), 403.

<sup>48</sup>Jean Friesen, "Introduction: Heritage futures," Prairie Forum 15: 2 (1990), 193.

<sup>49</sup>See Frits Pannekoek, "Who Matters? Public History and the Invention of the Canadian Past," Acadiensis 29:2 (Spring 2000), 208, for a critique of Christina Cameron, who, at the time of the Symposium, was Director General of National Historic Sites and author of "Commemoration: A Moving Target?" in The Place of History: Commemorating Canada's Past. Proceedings of the National Symposium Held on the Occasion of the 75th Anniversary of the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada, ed. Thomas H.B. Symons (Ottawa: The Royal Society of Canada, 1997), 28-34.

building."<sup>50</sup> In light of this, it is not surprising that initially when Parks Canada did look to Grosse-Île in the 1990s as a site to commemorate, every effort was made to downplay the Irish story of famine and quarantine, mass graves and epidemics. In his essay, "Who Matters? Public History and the Invention of the Canadian Past," John Herd Thompson's understanding of heritage accords with the approach Parks Canada first brought to Grosse-Île: commemoration is primarily an opportunity to build a Canadian consensus. While acknowledging the importance of issues related to class, ethnicity and region, he argues that professional historians, along with the social historians employed by Parks Canada (whom he considers professional), must work together to "reconsider the 'big picture' and to rededicate ourselves to portraying it."<sup>51</sup> Similarly, Thomas H.B. Symons, who, in 1994, was the Chair of the Historic Sites and Monuments Board (HSMBC), is interested mostly in examining the histories that show us "what [Canadians] have in common."<sup>52</sup> In a scathing critique of Symons, Cameron, and Thompson, Frits Pannekoek argues that their underlying assumption is that commemoration and any historical assessment of commemoration must deliver a version of the past to Canadians deemed useful by conservative public institutions such as Parks Canada and the HSMBC.<sup>53</sup>

Neither the belief that commemoration is a means of strengthening national unity, nor the critique that heritage promotes a view of the past obscured by politics and commerce has afforded much conceptual space for an analysis of Grosse-Île as an evocative example of Canadian public history. While most academic historians accept the notion that the representation of some objective reality in the past is beyond their reach, that the "sheer

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<sup>50</sup>John Herd Thompson, "Professional Historians and Heritage Commemoration," in The Place of History: Commemorating Canada's Past. Proceedings of the National Symposium Held on the Occasion of the 75th Anniversary of the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada, ed. Thomas H.B. Symons (Ottawa: The Royal Society of Canada, 1997), 61.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid.

<sup>52</sup>Thomas H.B. Symons, "Commemorating Canada's Past: From Old Crow to New Bergthal," in The Place of History: Commemorating Canada's Past. Proceedings of the National Symposium Held on the Occasion of the 75th Anniversary of the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada, ed. Thomas H.B. Symons, (Ottawa: The Royal Society of Canada, 1997), 15.

<sup>53</sup>Pannekoek, 209-210. The roles of these public institutions will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Three, which looks at the recent commemoration on Grosse-Île.

pastness of the past precludes its total reconstruction,"<sup>54</sup> many still object to heritage as expressed in commemorations, believing it gradually effaces history by "substituting an image of the past for its reality."<sup>55</sup> Others have decided that any historical undertaking through a public agency must be tainted since it is fundamentally a commercial and political venture.<sup>56</sup> While the commemorative process is shaped by political and commercial demands, nonetheless, it results in a public historical representation that merits investigation. Criticizing commemoration for debasing history is like panning a cinematic or literary representation of the past for straying too far from the facts. What some historians fail to recognize is that the commemorative form has its own unique conventions which can be conducive to an imaginative use of historical data in the creation of plausible and provocative historical interpretations.

Critiques of commemorations and other forms of public history are not exclusive to Canadian scholars. Among historians and cultural critics based in the United States and Britain, where in recent years the literature on history, heritage, and memory has become almost as prolific as commemorative events, "heritage baiting" abounds.<sup>57</sup> Many take a dim view of how heritage managers have filled the role of the public purveyors of the past. The frequent accusation levelled against "the heritage industry" -- as Robert Hewison labels it -- is that the consideration of pecuniary over pedantic interests engenders sentimental and nostalgic representations of the past. Many scholars find the "overuse, ready perversion, arrant chauvinism, and bland emptiness" of history, as it is packaged to fit heritage events designed for tourist consumption, particularly deplorable.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>54</sup>Bruce Craig, "Interpreting the Historic Scene," in Heritage Interpretation vol.1 ed., David Uzzell (London: Belhaven Press, 1989), 109.

<sup>55</sup>Robert Hewison, "Heritage: An Interpretation," in Heritage Interpretation v.1, 21.

<sup>56</sup>Jeff Keshen and Paul Voisey, "The Piper's Tune? The Scholarly Housing Boom," Acadiensis, 23:2 (Spring 1994), 189-90.

<sup>57</sup>Raphael Samuel, Theatres of Memory: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture (London and New York: Verso, 1994), 259-273, has catalogued the litany of complaints directed against heritage as it exists in Britain.

<sup>58</sup>David Lowenthal, "Identity, Heritage, and History," in Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity ed., John R. Gillis (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 43

Underlying this disdain for the producers of public history, is a fundamental distrust of the motives behind the public's interest in representations of the past.<sup>59</sup> The dynamic between heritage producer and consumer is one designed to reaffirm the status quo. Peter Fowler tries to spoil the public's hearty appetite for easily digestible, bite-sized morsels of an emaciated past by asking "would the public allow the display of death, disease and dismay rather than the pap which panders to their expectations?"<sup>60</sup> Reeling from the disappearance of "traditional sources of the self--family, religion, craft, [and] community," Ian McKay similarly suggests that the public is left searching for a quick fix of meaning in a world in which "capitalist postmodernity with profit-making as its volatile nucleus...menaces any relationship (other than casually exploitative) with the past."<sup>61</sup>

Closely linked to this critique of "the commodification of the past" is a wariness among scholars of the part that government often plays in massaging the message embedded in official commemorations to propagate a dominant ideology. One task historians have assigned themselves is to analyze commemorative forms and "expose the mechanisms and structures of the political manipulation of memory."<sup>62</sup> Expressions of national heritage co-ordinated by government agencies -- often full of sound, but little fury -- espouse versions of the past that reinforce a civic ideology. Since the escalation of nation-building in the latter part of the nineteenth century, the state has been seen as instrumental in nurturing deep attachments to nationalism among its citizenry. Studying this phenomenon in Europe between 1870 and 1914, Eric Hobsbawm has argued that the social and economic upheaval brought on by rapid industrialization and urbanization created a sense of dislocation and discontinuity between the past and the present. In an effort to tie these disparate notions together, "invented traditions...use[d] history as a legitimator of action and cement of group cohesion." The public was exposed to novel forms of "social engineering" altering their relation to the past: "the

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<sup>59</sup>Samuel, 267, has wryly critiqued the critics for their condescension: "the idea that the masses, if left to their own devices, are moronic; that their pleasures are unthinking; their tastes cheapo and nasty, is a favourite conceit of the aesthete."

<sup>60</sup>Peter Fowler, "Heritage: A Postmodern Perspective," in Heritage Interpretation v.1, 63.

<sup>61</sup>Ian McKay, "History and the Tourist Gaze: The Politics of Commemoration in Nova Scotia, 1935-1964," Acadiensis 22: 2 (Spring 1993), 103-4.

<sup>62</sup>Peter Carrier, "Historical Traces of the Present: The Uses of Commemoration," Historical Reflections/Reflexions Historiques 22: 2 (1996), 441.

history which became part of the...ideology of nation...is not what has actually been preserved in popular memory, but what has been selected, written, pictured, popularized and institutionalized by those whose function it is to do so."<sup>63</sup>

While Hobsbawm does recognize the importance of a receptive public to the invention of national traditions, other historians have stressed that, in the proliferation of public history in the twentieth century, the nation-state has been less systematically hegemonic, facilitating rather than imposing a historical framework. Throughout the twentieth century, official forms of remembrance have instilled a consensual, national historical symbology that has resonated even among ethnically heterogeneous and economically stratified populations. Modern, national, historical consciousness has been constructed to fill the void left by the erosion of traditional, spontaneous memory. With varying degrees of success, government and governed have engaged in a symbiotic historical dynamic ensuring that the "memory of the nation has continued to play a cohering role in the larger polity."<sup>64</sup> The vocabulary and imagery of historical narratives designed for public consumption, it is argued, have been designed to create a shared national conception of the past, merging a "wide variety of political and ideological constellations" in an "imagined community" of national dimensions.<sup>65</sup>

Studying the evolution of memory in France, Pierre Nora posits that as stock in "true memory" has declined, investment in the nation-state as a conduit of modern memory has increased proportionately, bridging a disconnected past and the disjunctions of the present. A plethora of exhibitions, festivals, anniversaries, monuments, and commemorations memorializing a national history have emerged as pale imitations of "real environments of memory [that] have disappeared." These sites of memory are "the ultimate embodiments of a memorial consciousness that has barely survived in an historical age that calls out for memory because it has abandoned it."<sup>66</sup> Although he considers modern memory an anemic alternative

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<sup>63</sup>Eric Hobsbawm, "Introduction: Inventing Traditions," in The Invention of Tradition, eds. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 12-13.

<sup>64</sup>Nancy Wood, "Memories Remains: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*," History and Memory 6: 1(Spring/Summer 1994), 129.

<sup>65</sup>Benedict Anderson, Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism (New York: Verso, rev. ed. 1991), 4.

<sup>66</sup>Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*," Representations 26 (Spring 1989), 12.

to "true memory," Nora suggests that the expression of a constructed national memory via sites of memory is preferable to the recent emergence of commemorations with local and particularist emphases which threaten to sunder consensual, national understandings of the past.

In Canada the inherent tension between divergent historical perspectives has also led to efforts to deconstruct and reconstitute national or master narratives.<sup>67</sup> This tension, however, also manifested itself in commemorative events staged around the turn of century. While it is essential to recognize that the public's relation to the past has changed over the course of the twentieth century, and that the message transmitted through public history is contingent on the context from which it emerged, the commemorative form is an aggregate of many components, often awkwardly fused together. Looking at commemoration as a process, rather than as a simple, static product, allows one to see a variety of historical perspectives inextricably related to the political and social dynamic of the day in more visible relief.

Examining expressions of public history around the turn of the century, the work of Ronald Rudin, H.V. Nelles, Norman Knowles, and the American historian, David Glassberg, suggests that, despite the appearance of interpretive harmony often exhibited, it is revealing to look at commemoration as a site of confluence where several historical currents, sometimes divergent or even contrary, are channeled into narrative coalescence. In his study of the proliferation of pageantry in early twentieth-century America, Glassberg points out that "struggles between competing groups over the definition of the public and its history" ensured that these civic celebrations did "not speak with a single, consistent voice."<sup>68</sup> For Glassberg, accessing "the multiplicity of submerged alternative visions"<sup>69</sup> communicated through public historical imagery necessitates tracing the process by which various groups influenced the evolution of these historical representations.

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<sup>67</sup>Daniel Francis, National Dreams: Myth, Memory, and Canadian History (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 1997), 10, 12, has argued that Canadians, dependent on the "habit of 'consensual hallucination' more than any other people," have only recently begun to reinvent the "core myths" that define them. In chapter three I will give examples of several recent historical exhibitions that have provoked debate about who decides what version of the past is represented to the public.

<sup>68</sup>David Glassberg, American Historical Pageantry (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 2.

<sup>69</sup>David Glassberg, "Public History and the Study of Memory," in The Public Historian: A Journal of Public History 18: 2 (Spring 1996), 15.

Similarly, Rudin's comparative study of the centenary of the uprising of 1798 in Ireland and the tercentenary in 1908 of Champlain's founding of Quebec considers commemoration as a contentious process. In Ireland and Quebec rival versions of a national past were propagated through commemorative events and activities, reflecting "the socio-political context from which the commemorative process emerged."<sup>70</sup> In The Art of Nation-Building: Pageantry and Spectacle at Quebec's Tercentenary, H.V. Nelles also examines the 1908 commemorative events as examples of how the re-presentation of the past has multiple meanings which "serve explicit political goals." He points out that hegemonic messages were undermined by "the tangled origins of the festival, its multiple purposes, the ability of participants to make a show of their own, and a culturally divided audience."<sup>71</sup> The Loyalist tradition that Norman Knowles describes in his study of Ontario loyalists also reveals that commemorations reflect current attitudes, and a study of them can tell us much about the society which commemorates the occasion and about changes in how that society views its own history. He describes the loyalist tradition as "not a unified, static, and independent body of inherited ideas, values and behaviours, but a product of social and cultural negotiation continually shaped and reshaped by contemporary conditions."<sup>72</sup>

Underlying these studies is this belief that commemoration, despite the efforts of some to dominate and control its message, functions "to create, criticize, assert or defend group memory."<sup>73</sup> According to David Brett, understanding the various historical perspectives that vie for standing in the commemorative forum involves the twin tasks of reading the conventions employed in its presentation and addressing the "pertinent questions about the nation, the state, the region, identity, and culture" that are raised.<sup>74</sup> Drawing on the work of Brett, Rudin, Nelles, Knowles and Glassberg, one can develop a conceptual framework that

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<sup>70</sup>Ronald Rudin, "Contested Terrain: Commemorative Celebrations and National Identity in Ireland and Quebec," in La Nation Dans Tous ses Etats: le Quebec en Comparaison, eds. Gerard Bouchard and Yvan Lamonde (Montreal: L'Harmattan, 1997), 203.

<sup>71</sup>H.V. Nelles, The Art of Nation-Building: Pageantry and Spectacle at Quebec's Tercentenary (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 154.

<sup>72</sup>Norman Knowles, Inventing the Loyalists: the Ontario Loyalist Tradition and the Creation of Usable Pasts (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 6.

<sup>73</sup>David Brett, The Construction of Heritage (Cork: Cork University Press, 1996), 4.

<sup>74</sup>*Ibid.*, 87.



allows for historical contingency in a comparative study of commemorative events on Grosse-Île at the beginning and end of the twentieth-century.

Looking at these two examples of commemoration in tandem, and investigating whose history, memory, and identity has been asserted, provides an opportunity to glimpse mutable definitions of heritage that embody "the ever-shifting balance of continuities and changes characteristic of any society."<sup>75</sup> There is, however, a common dynamic that connects the commemorative activities on Grosse-Île. In both cases, the island has served as a public stage upon which Irish-Canadians have taken a leading role in communicating nationalist interpretations of Irish history and nourishing collective memories of the Famine in an effort to foster an Irish identity in Canada.<sup>76</sup> However, within the parameters of official, state sanctioned commemorations, the telling of a politically volatile and historically contentious Irish story of "misrule" and "exile" has proven to be a precarious balancing act between a variety of often conflicting notions of nation and national history. Through their involvement in the commemorative process, Canadian government agents and agencies have sought to mediate notions of Irish nationality proffered by Irish-Canadians in an effort to make them conform to a Canadian historical perspective.

Exacerbating this fundamental tension inherent in both commemorations, however, are several fissures detectable within contending Irish and Canadian national historical perspectives. In 1909, the Catholic church, represented by members of Quebec's Irish and French-Canadian hierarchy, offered interpretations of Grosse-Île's historical significance that made the commemorative event even more of a *mélange* of meanings. More recently, the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada (HSMBC) and Parks Canada's prevaricating position regarding the thematic focus of the commemoration attest to the inherent difficulty of defining a national identity in the context of an officially multicultural Canada. Furthermore, a close look at the transcripts of the public hearings held across Canada in 1992 and 1993 reveals a variety of Irish-Canadian perspectives concerning the significance of Grosse-Île. The multiple messages expressed through commemorations on Grosse-Île offer a glimpse not only into how the Irish in Canada have sought to balance allegiances to two nationalities, but how

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<sup>75</sup>B.J. Graham, "Heritage Conservation and Revisionist Nationalism in Ireland," in Building a New Heritage, eds., G.J. Ashworth and P.J. Larkhan (London: Routledge, 1994), 135.

<sup>76</sup>The invocation of nationalist interpretations of Irish history and rival revisionist conceptions will be touched upon later in this paper when I examine the commemorative discourses in greater detail.

the Canadian government, through public history, has made gestures to accommodate an Irish identity while, ultimately, seeking to subsume it in a larger Canadian national framework.

Because commemoration distills the historical complexities that the profession attempts to comprehend and communicate, it has been seen as a site where history mingles with memory, collaborates with commerce, and often serves to bolster national or more particularist identities and ideologies in the context of contemporary realities. These characteristics are precisely what makes the commemorative event an expression of popular history worthy of historical analysis. It may seem self-evident that public representations of the past lend themselves to a highly selective use of historical facts and images, and often present "a curiously unified image, where change, conflict and clashes of interest are neutralized within a single seamless and depthless surface." However, by examining how commemorative events were organized and negotiated and listening to the historical message transmitted, historians can chip away at "the high gloss of presentation" to identify and disentangle the different, and often conflictual, interests that inform these representations, revealing much about the underlying societies.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>77</sup>Hewison, 22.

## Chapter Two

### The Signs of the Cross: The 1909 Commemoration on Grosse-Île

The object of this [memorial] is to recall...the memories of one of the darkest, saddest and most trying episodes in the histories of the long suffering Irish race and of Canada, and at the same time to enhance as much as possible the national significance and eclat of the ceremony.<sup>1</sup>

J.A. Jordan (1909)

Shortly after nine o'clock on the morning of 15 August 1909, a group of political and religious dignitaries, including the papal delegate, the archbishop of Quebec, leaders of the Canadian and American branches of the Ancient Order of Hibernians, and representatives of the federal and provincial governments were among the eight thousand excursionists who boarded seven huge river steamboats in Quebec City and embarked on a leisurely two hour journey down the St. Lawrence to Grosse-Île. They came together for a commemorative event designed to memorialize, in the words of one commentator in attendance, "the last resting place of so many thousands of the exiles and martyrs of the misrule of the unhappy Green Isle."<sup>2</sup> While each group involved in the event was united in fulfilling the ostensible commemorative function of paying tribute to those who died on the island, close analysis of the commemorative discourse will reveal that those who congregated on the island took the opportunity to espouse a range of differing interpretations of Grosse-Île's national and religious significance. These competing versions of the past were designed to legitimize and promote their respective notions of national cultural identity.

The 1909 commemoration at Grosse-Île is just one example of a variety of public historical expressions formulated at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century in Canada as a means of forging local and national identities, and fostering a sense of social continuity with what had, for many, become an increasingly foreign past. Before proceeding with a discussion of the various messages that were communicated to the public at

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<sup>1</sup>Jordan, 4.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 5. This book is an expanded version of the commemorative souvenir issued on the occasion of the unveiling of the memorial on August 15, 1909. Jordan provides a lengthy history of the island and the conditions in Ireland which led to the emigration of almost 100 000 Irish to Canada in 1847. This volume is an invaluable source as it provides a detailed account of the commemorative activities that transpired in 1909 as well as a full account of the dedicatory ceremonies, the sermon, and speeches.

Grosche, it is essential to recognize that at this time in Canada "reconstituting historical experience back into the present,"<sup>3</sup> often through the commemorative form, was a self-conscious attempt to define the contemporary, and "shape society through spectacle and public performance."<sup>4</sup>

Throughout this period of profound social and economic change many Canadians used "history in its broadest cultural sense as the medium in which tradition was expressed."<sup>5</sup> Amidst the changes brought on by rapid industrial growth, accelerated urbanization, an unprecedented influx of immigrants, and a new set of imperial demands, groups of English and French-Canadians appropriated the past to bolster competing notions of national identity. Publicly delineating the historical and cultural boundaries of a national heritage enabled them to shore up collective memories at a time when 'progress' and modernization threatened to destroy many of the traditional bonds of community and nation.

Scholars who have studied the interrelated phenomena of "collective memory," "tradition," or "heritage," share a common perception of how pre-existing relations with the past were quickly rendered anachronistic with the headlong rush of modernity in the thirty to forty years preceding the first World War. As "the social patterns for which old traditions had been designed" were weakened or destroyed,<sup>6</sup> new forms of remembrance and historical understanding were constructed to maintain consciousness of the past. According to Pierre Nora, when the transmission of "real memory" ceased, "society's need to represent what ostensibly no longer exist[ed]" ensured the "consecration of realms of memory."<sup>7</sup> Similarly, David Brett has pointed out that a population "undergoing a bout of the modernization process" will seek to realign itself with the past through the construction of heritage.<sup>8</sup> While Hobsbawm, Nora, and Brett have taken three very distinct approaches to studying how societies engage with the past, underlying their work is a common perception of the relation

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<sup>3</sup>Brett, 7.

<sup>4</sup>Nelles, 12.

<sup>5</sup>Carl Berger, A Sense of Power (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970), 78.

<sup>6</sup>Hobsbawm, 4.

<sup>7</sup>Nora, xii.

<sup>8</sup>Brett, 158.

between modernity and the development of historical consciousness that is a useful conceptual framework to consider when studying the commemorative impulse in Canada at the turn of the century.

The search for historical events and achievements to celebrate as the basis of a national Canadian heritage was well under way in Ontario by the 1880s. At a time when Canadian national interests were inextricably entwined with those of Great Britain and the United States, Loyalist descendants were commemorating their historical experience in an effort to resist calls for Canadian independence and to promote a British-Canadian identity.<sup>9</sup> Loyalists' use of genealogical studies as a preliminary step towards making larger pronouncements on a national heritage were representative of how in this "golden age of local history...local historical societ[ies] became the chief instrument for popularizing the past."<sup>10</sup> These societies publicly affirmed allegiance to British-Canadian traditions by building monuments, organizing lectures, and celebrating historical anniversaries.<sup>11</sup>

The centennial in 1884 of the arrival of Loyalists in Ontario was one such celebration undertaken to garner support for Canada's close economic, political, and, most importantly, ideological affiliation with the British Empire. Organized by the Imperial Federation League,<sup>12</sup> the centennial celebrations in Toronto, Adolphustown and Niagara that took place during the first week of July featured a variety of exhibitions and orations exalting the Loyalist tradition in Canada and espousing fidelity to Imperial ideals.<sup>13</sup> Involved in the

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<sup>9</sup>The imperialist sympathies of Loyalists resonated among a larger contingency of English-speaking Canadians. Ramsay Cook, Canada, Québec, and the Uses of Nationalism (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1986), 176, has argued that by the turn of the century a national consciousness had developed among English Canadians which "expressed itself in a desire for Canada to achieve a status of greater equality with Great Britain, but within a united British Empire."

<sup>10</sup>Carl Berger, The Sense of Power, 96, has noted that "between 1882 and 1896 no less than fifteen local historical organizations appeared in Ontario alone."

<sup>11</sup>Lundy's Lane Historical Society, Seventh Annual report of The Lundy's Lane Historical Society, July 25, 1894.

<sup>12</sup>Although the Loyalist centennial in 1884 was a modest undertaking representing the interests of a narrow group of professionals, politicians, and religious leaders in Ontario, Carl Berger, Imperialism and Nationalism, 1884-1914: A Conflict in Canadian Thought (Toronto: The Copp Clark Publishing Company, 1969), 2, has pointed out that the Imperial Federation League wielded considerable influence nationally. By 1899, the organization "counted one quarter of the members of the Dominion Parliament in its ranks."

organization of these events were several paragons of British Canadian patriotism. As key sponsors of the centennial commemoration and leading proponents of Canadian imperialism, George M. Grant, Colonel George T. Denison, and D'Alton McCarthy seized the opportunity provided by the centennial to proclaim the history, language, and culture of the Anglo-Saxon race in Canada as "essential criteria for [imperial] unification."<sup>14</sup>

While it is indisputable that Loyalists used commemorations to reaffirm publicly the continuance of close connections with England, it has been argued convincingly that, beyond the imperialist rhetoric of these prominent Loyalist figures, there was "little agreement about the nature of the Loyalist past or the most appropriate means of celebrating the event."<sup>15</sup> Just as we will see that the 1909 commemoration on Grosse-Île was an event that included multiple and even divergent perspectives despite the appearance of consensus, Norman Knowles describes the commemoration of Loyalist tradition as "a contested and dynamic phenomenon that has undergone continuous change."<sup>16</sup>

Nonetheless, the need to reinforce this historic connection with the Empire became more pressing for many Canadian imperialists in the 1890s. Due to the perceived threat of continentalism, "Canadian loyalty to Britain could no longer be taken for granted."<sup>17</sup> Without an imperial framework, it was feared that an autonomous Canadian nation would have no unifying economic and cultural basis to resist absorption into the United States. With Macdonald's National Policy still faltering, the Liberal party's endorsement of unrestricted reciprocity, and mounting tension between French and English Canada, there was growing uncertainty about how Canada's culturally, economically, and geographically diverse elements would work together in the future. Further spurring on Canadian imperialists was the establishment of the Continental Union Association and the publication of Goldwin Smith's Canada and the Canadian Question, which coincided with the federal election of 1891. For those convinced that Canada's place was under the imperial sun, Smith's polemics, while

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<sup>13</sup>The Centennial of the Settlement of Upper Canada by the United Empire Loyalist, 1774-1884: The Celebrations at Adolphustown, Toronto and Niagra (Toronto, 1885).

<sup>14</sup>J.R. Miller, "Unity/Diversity: The Canadian Experience From Confederation to the First World War," Dalhousie Review 55, 1 (Spring 1975), 68.

<sup>15</sup>Norman Knowles, Inventing the Loyalists, 49.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>17</sup>Berger, The Sense of Power, 82.

exhibiting a predilection for theories of Anglo-Saxon supremacy shared by many imperialists, confirmed fears that the "English-speaking population of a vast Continent [could] ...amalgamate to form a united nation."<sup>18</sup>

In an effort to invalidate what was perceived as a movement towards annexation to the United States, imperialists sought to assert their brand of Canadian nationalism by demonstrating how Canada's historical association with the British Empire had fostered unity in Canada. Commemorating Canada's partnership with England in repelling the United States in the War of 1812 provided an opportunity to arouse anti-American sentiment, lend credence to notions of imperial unity, and generate national pride by focusing on the role of indigenous militia groups in fending off American incursions.<sup>19</sup> Victories at Lundy's Lane, Chrysler's Farm, and Chateauguay were commemorated in the 1890s with government support that helped finance the erection of memorials.<sup>20</sup> While recounting the heroics of United Empire Loyalists in waging battle against the American aggressors, the commemorative discourse also made room for a celebration of French-Canadians who had historically cherished British traditions in Canada: "In this feeling of personal loyalty and devotion, the Dominion of Canada is second to no part of the Empire, nor are the inhabitants of the old fortress of Quebec at all behind the rest of their Canadian fellow citizens. The French and English speaking section are a unit in this."<sup>21</sup> This vision of Canada historically united was meant to conflate the contemporaneous national interests of French and English-speaking Canadians, and instill a sense of a shared loyalty to British institutions and ideals.

While most Quebecers at the turn of the century accepted Quebec's provincial status in a nation still inextricably linked to the affairs of Britain, imperialist rhetoric was perceived by some as an infringement on the right of French-Canadians to preserve their cultural identity. Moreover, the combined effect of industrialization, consistently high birth rates, and a shortage of agricultural land had caused Quebecers to migrate from rural settings to the

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<sup>18</sup>Goldwin Smith, Canada and the Canadian Question (Toronto, 1891), 215.

<sup>19</sup>Berger, The Sense of Power, 105.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>21</sup>Canada in Memorium. 1812-14: Her Duty in the Erection of Monuments in Memory of her Distinguished Sons and Daughters -- A paper read July 25, 1890 by Mrs Curzon, of Toronto, at the Annual Commemoration of the Battle of Lundy's Lane of 1814, before the Lundy's Lane Historical Society (Welland: Telegraph Steam Printing House, 1891), 4.

province's expanding urban centres, Ontario, and the United States.<sup>22</sup> With this exodus from rural Quebec, fears of the imminent loss of French-Canadian tradition became increasingly palpable. To ensure the primacy of Catholicism and the survival of cultural nationalism in Quebec, a variety of political and socio-economic initiatives were implemented to give direction and ideological coherence to the movement to protect French-Canadian identity in the face of widespread societal change. In 1903 the Abbé Lionel Groulx created the *Association catholique de la jeunesse canadienne-française*, and Henri Bourassa, who seven years later was the outspoken editor of *Le Devoir*, helped found the *Ligue Nationaliste*. These two organizations formulated a French-Catholic response to what they perceived as the increasing cultural and economic impositions of English Canada. Furthermore, in an attempt to offer a legitimate banking alternative for French-Canadians, a number of savings and lending co-operatives called *Caisses populaires* were established in the first decade of the twentieth century. These efforts to ensure a measure of indigenous control over the affairs of French Canadians can be seen as a response to what was perceived by some as the threat of economic and, thereby, cultural domination of English over French Canada.

The proliferation of public memorials in Quebec at the beginning of the twentieth century is further evidence of the impetus to preserve a sense of French-Canadian heritage amidst widespread societal change.<sup>23</sup> The most extravagant celebration of the past organized in this period took place in Quebec City during the summer of 1908. A variety of commemorative activities, including processions and a historical pageant on the Plains of Abraham attended by tens of thousands of people, were orchestrated with the ostensible purpose of marking the tercentenary of Samuel de Champlain's settlement of New France. However, as H.V. Nelles has noted, "there seemed to be some confusion as to who was being commemorated: was it Champlain, or Montcalm and Wolfe? Was it 1608 or 1759? Or was

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<sup>22</sup>It is estimated that 337 058 French Canadians migrated to the United States between 1870 and 1910. Danielle Juteau Lee, "The Evolution of Nationalism in Quebec," in *Two Nations, Many Cultures* ed., Jean Leonard Elliot (Scarborough: Prentice-Hall of Canada, 1979), 63, has argued that the demographic shift in Quebec during this period resulted in the formation of political cultural institutions to protect the religious and linguistic integrity of French Canada.

<sup>23</sup>Bruno Hébert, *Monuments et patrie: une réflexion philosophique sur un fait historique. La célébration commémorative au Québec de 1881 à 1929* (Joliette: Les Éditions Pleins Bords, 1980), 19, notes that whereas in 1880 only a few monuments could be found in Quebec, in the following forty years 177 had been constructed.



1908 itself the object of celebration?"<sup>24</sup> In his study of this commemoration, Ronald Rudin has also pointed out that the objectives of the tercentenary festivities were not straightforward or consensual; rather, they "provided the occasion for considerable debate over national identity."<sup>25</sup> From the perspective of the federal government, the point of organizing the commemorative events was to demonstrate "that both races [were] united in celebrating their mutual co-operation in the political development of Canada," leaving "no room in Canada for a narrow provincial spirit."<sup>26</sup> However, Quebec nationalists eager to assert a French-Catholic perspective took the opportunity to commemorate the bicentenary of the death of Bishop Laval, the first bishop of Quebec.<sup>27</sup> These events are indicative of the ways in which the past was used to lend credence to competing national identities.

The question of the degree to which Canadians of diverse cultural lineages should conform to a British-Canadian national character was a politically and socially volatile issue throughout the fifteen years (1896-1911) the Liberals were in power. As the size, distribution, and ethnic composition of Canada's population underwent a radical transformation with the arrival of almost three million immigrants between 1896 and 1914,<sup>28</sup> many English and French-speaking Canadians became increasingly apprehensive of the cultural and political implications of this massive influx of immigrants. For some British-Canadians the culturally heterogeneous composition of Canada's populace would be disastrous for the nation's unity

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<sup>24</sup>Nelles, 11.

<sup>25</sup>Ronald Rudin, "Contested Terrain: Commemorative Celebrations and National Identity in Ireland and Quebec," 203.

<sup>26</sup>Frank Carrel and Louis Feiczewicz, The Quebec Tercentenary Commemorative History (Quebec: Daily Telegraph Printing House, 1908), 7, 9.

<sup>27</sup>The archbishop of Quebec, Monseigneur Louis-Nazaire Bégin, one of the most conservative, ultramontane figures in Quebec, led the Catholic Church and the Saint-Jean-Baptiste Society in eliciting support for the commemoration of Mgr Laval. Bégin was also a central figure in the commemorative event at Grosse-Ile in 1909.

<sup>28</sup>Howard Palmer, "Reluctant Hosts: Anglo-Canadian Views of Multiculturalism in the Twentieth Century," in Immigration in Canada: Historical Perspectives, ed. Gerald Tulchinsky (Toronto: Copp Clark Longman, 1994), 301, has noted that with the arrival of immigrants from Germany, Britain, Scandinavia, Italy, Poland, the Balkans, the Ukraine, Russia, and the United States, Canada's population increased by forty-three percent in the first decade of the twentieth century, bringing the percentage of immigrants in Canada to over twenty-two percent of the country's entire population by 1911.

unless there was a concerted effort "to assimilate the 'foreigner' by inculcating in him the values of British-Canadian civilization."<sup>29</sup> The idea of forging a new British -Canadian nationality out of the growing number of immigrant nationalities in Canada did not sit well with Henri Bourassa.<sup>30</sup> He argued that Canada was a political entity designed to ensure cultural duality. According to Bourassa, the Fathers of Confederation never intended "to change a providential condition of our partly French and partly English country to make it a land of refuge for the scum of all nations."<sup>31</sup> Bourassa expressed the fear that massive immigration would give justification to English Canada to contravene what he viewed as Canada's bilingual and bicultural status.

How then were the organizers of the Grosse-Île commemoration, and Quebecers of Irish Catholic descent as a whole, affected by these contending notions of cultural nationalism vying for prominence in the early years of the twentieth century? To which national character did they subscribe? Sharing language with Anglophones and religion with French Quebecers, the Catholic Irish in Quebec occupied a unique position. Although they formed the province's largest non-French ethnic group in the nineteenth century, in the sixty years preceding the 1909 commemoration at Grosse-Île their numbers, especially those of the Catholic Irish, had dwindled considerably due to a declining rate of Irish emigration to Canada,<sup>32</sup> and the migration of thousands of Irish Quebecers to other parts of North America.<sup>33</sup> After 1871

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<sup>29</sup>Miller, 74.

<sup>30</sup>Palmer, 302, has argued that while the Canadian government, under the guiding hand of Clifford Sifton, had gone to great lengths enticing European and American immigrants with free homesteads and assisted passages, the introduction of restrictive immigration policies in 1906 and 1910, the imposition of a head tax on Chinese immigrants, and the limitations placed on the number of Japanese and Indians coming to Canada reflected a growing fear that the immigrants assigned a place at the bottom of "the ethnic pecking order" would remain inassimilable elements in Canadian society.

<sup>31</sup>Henri Bourassa, quoted in Brown and Cook, Canada, 1896-1931, 73.

<sup>32</sup>David Fitzpatrick, "Irish Emigration in the Later Nineteenth Century," Irish Historical Studies 22:86 (September 1980), 130, has pointed out that the Irish emigrants who chose to come to Canada in the years following confederation were predominantly Protestants from Northern Ireland.

<sup>33</sup>Ronald Rudin, The Forgotten Quebecers: A History of English-Speaking Quebec, 1759-1980 (Quebec: Institut québécois de recherche sur la culture, 1985), 155, has noted that while those of Irish descent comprised 51% of the 123 478 Quebecers of British origin in 1871, by 1911, the Irish made up just 39% of the 103 147 English-speakers in the province.

Irish population generally declined in all parts of Quebec except Montreal.<sup>34</sup> However, by 1901, the number of Irish in Montreal was also declining.<sup>35</sup> While the Irish Canadians who did remain in Quebec were certainly far more integrated in the Canadian socio-economic system than other ethnic groups who had more recently settled in Canada, their position as an established minority within a far more prosperous and influential community of English-speaking Quebecers did not necessarily safeguard the distinctiveness of their ethnic identity.

Consequently, a variety of societies and associations became essential to "preserving a national awareness and maintaining a separate Irish Catholic identity."<sup>36</sup> Throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century, in the face of a declining Irish population, a number of charitable, literary, sporting, and social organizations were established in Quebec City and Montreal, affording many Irish Catholics the only opportunity to keep abreast of the affairs of Ireland, and a sense of community in which the shared economic, political and cultural interests of all members were served.

One such organization was the Ancient Order of Hibernians (AOH). Tracing its lineage back to 18th century Ireland and Catholic defence associations such as the Ribbonmen,<sup>37</sup> the Order made claims to operating in secrecy under several names offering "the means of defense to the priest and shelter to the school-master."<sup>38</sup> However, this fraternal Irish-Catholic Order really began in the United States in 1836. It soon developed into a sophisticated and influential organization in North America, boasting a membership of almost 200 000 with accumulated assets totalling \$1.8 million by 1908.<sup>39</sup> With the American Order

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<sup>34</sup>After the collapse of the timber trade in the 1860s most of the Irish who did not leave the province went to Montreal. Dorothy Suzanne Cross, "The Irish in Montreal, 1867-1896" (M.A. Thesis, McGill University, 1969), 80, 267, has figured that the Irish were employed in unskilled labour at a higher proportion than their French and English counterparts. However, by the end of the century, they had also developed "their own middle class and elite."

<sup>35</sup>Ibid, 35, 36.

<sup>36</sup>Cross, 111.

<sup>37</sup>The Ribbonmen were one of several organizations which protested the Penal Laws, imposed between 1692 and 1727, restricting the religious, property and political rights of Catholics.

<sup>38</sup>John O'Dea, History of the Ancient Order of Hibernians and Ladies' Auxiliary, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Keystone, 1923), 11.

as "the real Hibernian parent organization," it flourished in Ireland, Australia, Scotland, England, and Canada.<sup>40</sup> The first Canadian chapter of the AOH was established in Montreal in 1892 and in Quebec City the following year. By 1909, almost six thousand Irish-Canadians had joined fledgling divisions in Ontario, Manitoba, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and Prince Edward Island. Together with their numerous American counterparts they were grouped under the auspices of one National head.<sup>41</sup> While the AOH was fundamentally a conservative Catholic organization with a social function to promote friendship, unity, and Christian charity, and cultivate a sense among the North American diaspora of the history and traditions of the Irish race, its political agenda was to advance the cause of Irish independence.<sup>42</sup>

Clearly the AOH was far more than a social society, but ascertaining how far the Order was willing to go to achieve independence for Ireland is very difficult. In his study of the Irish AOH, Hepburn argues that the Order played a vital role in reinvigorating the nationalist movement in Ireland between 1909 and 1914. Membership in the Irish Order expanded from ten thousand in 1905 to sixty thousand by 1909. Many Catholics turned to the AOH for employment and social opportunities, but the AOH, as much as other nationalist organizations like the United Irish League of America and the Gaelic League, was able to mobilize nationalist sentiment, manifesting itself in antagonism towards the Orange Order.<sup>43</sup> This antagonism, though, did not often translate into radical nationalism. For the most part, the Irish AOH at the beginning of the twentieth century advocated Irish independence through parliamentary reform. Led by Joseph Devlin from 1905 to 1934, most members of the Irish AOH were also members of the Board of Erin (an arm of the AOH), and threw their weight behind the Irish Parliamentary Party.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>39</sup>A.C. Hepburn, "The Ancient Order of Hibernians in Irish Politics, 1905-14," *Cithara* 10:2 (1971), 5, points out that "its wealth and sophisticated organization acted as a magnet for any group of Irish-Americans who sought access to the minds or pockets of their fellow-exiles."

<sup>40</sup>Hepburn, 6.

<sup>41</sup>O'Dea, History of the AOH, vol 3, 1379.

<sup>42</sup>As will be made evident in the analysis of the commemorative discourse, Canadian and American AOH leaders were not entirely of one mind when it came to the question of achieving Irish autonomy.

<sup>43</sup>Hepburn, 6.

<sup>44</sup>The Irish Parliamentary Party, led by Charles Parnell in the 1880s and 90s, was comprised of mostly Irish-Catholic MPs whose goal was to wield the balance of power at Westminster as

Between 1903 and 1906 and again between 1910 and 1914, the American parent body agreed with the mandate of constitutional nationalism. However, at the time of the Grosse-Île commemoration, there was discord between the Board of Erin and the American AOH. Michael Cummings, president of the AOH in the U.S. from 1906-1910, supported a far more radical approach to achieving Irish freedom, as will be evident later in this chapter when examining his involvement in the commemorative event at Grosse-Île. He encouraged AOH extremists in Ireland, some of whom aligned themselves with Sinn Fein, to form a rival movement to the Board of Erin.<sup>45</sup> Though it is difficult to pin down a particular political program that the AOH endorsed as an international organization, it is clear that the AOH was very much involved in the drive for Irish independence at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Although it has been argued that by the turn of the century the Irish in Quebec quite contentedly considered themselves "Canadian first and foremost,"<sup>46</sup> the AOH seems to have been motivated to stage the commemorative event at Grosse-Île "in an effort to remove from the Irish name the reproach of having so far forgotten the traditions of the race."<sup>47</sup> As the site of what was considered "the greatest calamity that ever befell a people sailing to Canadian shores,"<sup>48</sup> Grosse-Île was an obvious choice for those who wanted to instill publicly a stronger sense of a Catholic Irish tradition in Canada. It does, however, remain unclear where precisely the idea to commemorate the events of 1847 originated. It has been suggested that the initiative was due to the journalistic efforts of James M. O'Leary and The Quebec Telegraph, where a number of articles appeared chronicling the history of Grosse-Île.<sup>49</sup>

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a means of achieving Home Rule (the parliamentary movement to make Ireland politically responsible for its internal affairs, leaving Great Britain in control of foreign affairs and the armed forces). Despite the introduction of three Home Rule Bills in parliament (1886, 1893, and 1912), it never came to fruition. In the years between 1886 and 1910, most often the party worked to protect the interests of Catholics.

<sup>45</sup>Hepburn, 9. The nationalist party Sinn Fein was founded in 1905. It advocated that Irish MPs and citizens refrain from participating in the British political system in favour of forming a national assembly in Ireland. At the time of the commemoration Sinn Fein had not yet become a political party; however, by 1918, following the 1916 Easter Rising, it had a strong showing in the general election.

<sup>46</sup>Cross, 268.

<sup>47</sup>Jordan, 5.

<sup>48</sup>The Standard Montreal, 28 August 1909, vol. V, no. 35.

Marianna O'Gallagher claims that the pilgrimage to the island by a group of the Quebec division of the AOH in the summer of 1897 was the necessary impetus to organize the commemoration.<sup>50</sup> Regardless of how the commemorative process began, it is clear that fifty years after the Famine there was renewed interest in the history of the island. When the AOH visited Grosse-Île they came across a relatively unpopulated quarantine station,<sup>51</sup> and very few reminders of the thousands of Irish who were buried there in 1847: "the desolate and neglected aspect of the particular portion of the island allotted for the resting place of so many of [their] blood and faith seemed to have struck [them] with reproach."<sup>52</sup>

Having received approval in 1899 from the Ministry of Agriculture and Dr. G.E. Marineau, the Medical Superintendent of the quarantine station, to erect a Celtic Cross on Grosse-Île, several AOH delegates from Quebec went to national AOH conventions in the United States to secure funding for the construction of the monument. At the 1900 national convention in Boston a motion was put forth recommending the assessment of fifteen cents per capita be levied for the purpose of building a monument. However, it was not until 1908 that Father E.A. Maguire, curé of Sillery's Saint Columban Parish, and the Order's provincial chaplain, received approval from the AOH's executive at the Indianapolis convention "for a suitable monument to mark the resting place of the unfortunates of the Grosse Isle tragedy at Quebec," and a call was made for donations to defray the cost of its construction.<sup>53</sup>

In short order, a total of five thousand dollars was raised through donations, largely from AOH members in the United States. Under the direction of County President Jeremiah

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<sup>49</sup>J.A. Jordan, 8, claimed that it was the Quebec Daily Telegraph, the publisher of The Grosse-Isle Tragedy, and the journalistic efforts of James M. O'Leary, who wrote a number of articles chronicling the history of Grosse-Île, that spurred public interest in creating a memorial on the island.

<sup>50</sup>O'Gallagher, Grosse-Île: Gateway to Canada, 83

<sup>51</sup>Environment Canada Parks Service, Grosse-Île Development Concept (Canada: Minister of Supply and Services, 1992), 18. The island which had received an average of a mere forty-six patients a year between 1895 and 1900, saw this number increase tenfold (four hundred and eighty four admissions) from 1901 to 1912. During 1909-1912 alone, this annual average leapt as high as seven hundred and fifty-five.

<sup>52</sup>Jeremiah Gallagher, C.E., County President of AOH Division No. 1, Quebec to John T. Keating, AOH National President in Chicago, 20 April 1899, cited in O'Gallagher's Grosse-Île: Gateway to Canada, 84.

<sup>53</sup>O'Dea, History of the AOH, vol 3, 1402.

Gallagher, the Quebec division of the AOH put this money towards designing a forty-six foot Celtic Cross of grey Stanstead granite to stand as the centrepiece of the commemorative event. Erected at the top of Telegraph Hill, the imposing monument overlooks the St. Lawrence and its South shore, and can be seen from a distance as one approaches the island. As the most recognizable and long standing symbol of Christianity in Ireland, the Celtic Cross was an obvious choice as a memorial to the Irish emigrants who died in 1847. It was an especially fitting monument considering that historically -- they were erected most assiduously in the ninth and twelfth centuries -- Irish High Crosses had both a religious purpose in monasteries and a political function for kings who commissioned them. Whether it was inducing piety in the beholder or educating the laity through the stories etched into their interlinked panels, these crosses were embedded with narratives designed to augment the authority of king and clergy.<sup>54</sup>

Although the Celtic Cross was meant to be a unifying symbol of the fundamentally Catholic nature of the commemoration,<sup>55</sup> the various participants in the dedicatory ceremonies ascribed several partisan political and historical meanings to the stone memorial. Commentators on the memorial gathering, however, have tended to obscure the divergence of the 1909 commemorative messages by stressing the great consensus achieved through the event. Present at the scene of the unveiling of the Celtic Cross, J.A. Jordan was among "Dignitaries of the Church, high officials of State, priests and laymen, Irish and French, humble and of high degree, standing side by side beneath the open sky, or kneeling silently before the great cross with but one thought--the honor of the martyrs who had died for their faith."<sup>56</sup> Despite this picture of solemn solidarity, judging from the three inscriptions etched into the memorial stone, the various participants in the 1909 ceremonies were not entirely of one mind when it came to assigning historical significance to the events of 1847. Yet, more recently, Marianna O'Gallagher has also overlooked the fissures in the memorial's message by

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<sup>54</sup>Peter Harbison, Irish High Crosses (Drogheda: The Boyne Valley Honey Company, 1994), 12, 13.

<sup>55</sup>August 15th is the day Catholics celebrate the Feast of the Assumption. According to Church doctrine, on this day, Mary, having bypassed the process of physical decay following her death, ascends into heaven to be reunited with Jesus.

<sup>56</sup>Jordan, 76.

conflating the respective meanings of the cross's inscriptions in Gaelic, English, and French.<sup>57</sup>

Despite these attempts to imbue retrospectively the commemorative event with an underlying interpretive harmony, it is clear that the Celtic Cross was not designed to simply "tell the story of twelve thousand tragedies."<sup>58</sup> Whereas the English inscription honours the memory of "thousands of Irish emigrants, who, to preserve the faith, suffered hunger and exile in 1847-48," the Gaelic message indicates a more radical interpretation of the consequences of British rule in Ireland: "Thousands of the children of the Gael were lost on this island while fleeing from foreign tyrannical laws and an artificial famine in the years, 1847-48."<sup>59</sup> The addendum to this Gaelic inscription reads, "God Save Ireland!" Finally, the message in French, while bearing more similarities to the English inscription, has stronger religious overtones and emphasizes the role of "le Prêtre Canadien" in consoling and honouring victims of exile. These three inscriptions indicate that before any of the commemoration's participants had even arrived on the island there were a number of divergent interpretations of the significance of Grosse-Île's history.

Given, however, the religious and national interests that the participants did have in common, it would be misleading to suggest that the commemorative ceremonies were by any means entirely fraught with conflict. Nonetheless, the sermons preached at the requiem mass and the orations delivered during the dedicatory ceremony at the unveiling of the Cross produced a range of differing messages. To disentangle the contemporary interests and historical perspectives that informed the commemorative discourse it is essential to identify the four basically distinct groups that came together at Grosse-Île: representatives of the Canadian government, the French-Canadian Catholic hierarchy, the Canadian contingent of the Ancient Order of Hibernians, and their counterparts from the United States.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>57</sup>O'Gallagher, Grosse-Île: Gateway to Canada, 86.

<sup>58</sup>Jordan, 76.

<sup>59</sup>This notion that the Famine was artificial, an historical perspective that levelled blame directly at the English, was one important aspect of Irish nationalist thinking.

<sup>60</sup>It is curious that there is no record of any Irish from Ireland attending the commemorative event. The fact that commemorating the Famine was generally more important to Irish-Catholics living abroad than it was to those at home might, in part, account for the absence of a representative from Ireland.



While the commemoration was a state sponsored event insofar as official permission was granted in 1899 to the AOH for the use of the quarantine station, and two government steamboats, the *C.G.S. Alice* and *C.G.S. Druid*, were volunteered for the conveyance of the most esteemed visitors, the role of the Canadian government in the event was, for the most part, nominal. Those politicians who did decide to participate in the commemorative activities were almost all of Irish descent, and they did so of their own volition rather than as part of any directive from Ottawa. Along with Sir Charles Pelletier, the Lieutenant-Governor of the province of Quebec, and a number of prominent provincial politicians from Quebec,<sup>61</sup> the most influential federal political dignitaries present included Charles Murphy, Secretary of State for Canada, and Charles Fitzpatrick, Chief Justice of Canada.<sup>62</sup> Although these participants were indeed influential in political circles, it is worth noting that the premier of Quebec, Lomer Gouin, and Prime Minister Sir Wilfrid Laurier both declined invitations to the commemoration.

In the case of the tercentenary commemoration in 1908, it was only after much apprehension that Laurier had reluctantly agreed to fund and participate in such a potentially divisive undertaking. As H.V. Nelles has pointed out, in the years leading up to the events, Laurier had his concerns about how national a celebration the tercentenary would be when so many different factions had such diverse notions of how Champlain's "memory could be harnessed to present economic and political purposes."<sup>63</sup> One year later, pledging substantive support for a commemoration that was sure to arouse bitter memories of the Famine, foment accusations of English complicity in the calamity, and result in condemnation of Imperial policy in general, was a politically untenable option for Laurier.

It is important to recognize that Laurier's decision in 1899 to dispatch a volunteer force of one thousand men to fight in the Boer War had deepened the rift between those in English

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<sup>61</sup>Joseph Turcotte, M.P. for Quebec county; Charles R. Devlin, Minister of Colonization and Mines in the Provincial Cabinet; M.P. Theodore Beland, Agent of Marine and Fisheries for Quebec (and representative of the St. Jean Baptiste Society); John C. Kaine, Irish Catholic Representative in the Provincial Cabinet; M.P.P. M.J. Walsh; and Charles J. Doherty, member of parliament for the riding of Saint-Anne in Montreal (by 1912 he was Minister of Justice in the Borden Cabinet) were among the excursionists to Grosse-Ile.

<sup>62</sup>Representatives of the government played no substantive role in the requiem mass; however, during the requiem mass these three politicians were among the religious dignitaries who stood near the temporary altar erected specially constructed for the occasion.

<sup>63</sup>Nelles, 63.

Canada advocating closer ties with the British Empire, and those, predominantly from Quebec, who viewed Canadian involvement in imperial wars as incompatible with the interests of French Canada.<sup>64</sup> It is quite possible that Quebec "identified more closely with the Boers than with the British."<sup>65</sup> Moreover, the racial, religious, and regional animosities that simmered in Canadian society had heated up in the months leading up to the commemorative event when Canada was asked at a special Imperial Defence Conference to contribute a navy to be used in various parts of the Empire. While Conservatives (outside of Quebec) sympathetic to British imperialism pressured Laurier to offer generous and unqualified support for any military endeavour involving Britain, many Quebecers questioned the very need for a navy and adamantly opposed Canadian involvement in wars waged in defence of imperial rather than national interests.<sup>66</sup>

In light of these circumstances, Laurier was perfectly willing to permit the construction of a memorial at Grosse-Île, but in no way was he going to risk inciting the majority of Canadians espousing allegiance to the Empire by taking a more active role in commemorating the tragic consequences of Famine migration. His tendency to avoid conflict was at play in his decision to decline an invitation to attend the 1909 event.<sup>67</sup> The likelihood of political fallout (particularly from the Orange Order in Ontario) from delivering a speech to a crowd of Irish nationalists in front of a Famine memorial would have kept Laurier from making the trip to Grosse-Île. The fact that the momentum behind the movement for Irish Home Rule -- that had prompted federal governments to pass four resolutions between 1882 and 1903 calling for a measure of Irish autonomy -- had by 1909 diminished considerably would have made it even easier for Laurier to opt out of joining the event. These resolutions had not only elicited angry responses from the Imperial government, Canadian opposition to Home Rule, led by the

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<sup>64</sup>By 1902, 8 374 Canadian soldiers had fought with the British in the Boer War.

<sup>65</sup>Nelles, 229.

<sup>66</sup>Laurier had held on to power so long because of his popularity in Quebec (in 1900 he held 57 of 65 seats in Quebec); however, his dominance in the province was less secure by the time of the Grosse-Île commemoration. By 1908 he had a reduced majority of seats in Quebec due to the growing perception that he was unwilling to protect French in the rest of Canada.

<sup>67</sup>One other reason for the Prime Minister's absence from the 1909 event was the disdain that Archbishop Bégin and Laurier had for each other. Laurier knew Bégin was going to be on Grosse-Île for the commemoration and would have wanted to avoid such a meeting.

predominantly Protestant and Conservative party and the influential Orange Order,<sup>68</sup> had become increasingly vociferous and had gathered significant momentum in the decade preceding the commemorative event at Grosse-Île.

In his oration to the audience assembled before the Celtic Cross, the Secretary of State, Charles Murphy, reflected the precariousness of the government's position. After paying tribute to "those Irishmen and Irish women whose ashes are commingled with the dust of [the] island,"<sup>69</sup> Murphy chose to make only fleeting reference to the Famine, limiting himself to lamentations on the scope of the tragedy and intimations that the British government was at fault for failing to alleviate Irish distress.<sup>70</sup> Having dispensed with this fractious subject, Murphy chose to stress "the enduring bond between the French and Irish in Canada."<sup>71</sup>

In developing this motif of solidarity, he included all Canadians in his vision of a united nation by predicting that the Celtic Cross at Grosse-Île would become an even more potent symbol for immigrants to Canada than the Statue of Liberty on Ellis Island was for newcomers to the United States.

As the incoming stranger sails up the St. Lawrence river, his gaze will rest on this monument, and no sooner will he hear its story than his mind will receive an indelible impression that this is not only a land of freedom, but that it is a land of brotherly love--a land where the races live in harmony where each vies with the other in promoting the great work of national unity.<sup>72</sup>

Invoking the notion of brotherly love and drawing comparisons to Ellis Island, Murphy was playing to the significant number of Irish-Americans in attendance. He was also, perhaps, referring to an idea proposed by Governor General, Earl Grey that was aborted two years earlier during the planning stages of the tercentennial celebrations. Grey had had a vision to

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<sup>68</sup>Normand Laplante, "Canadian and British Policy on Ireland, 1882-1914," *Archivist* 16, 5 (1989), 14, has pointed out that by 1912, Sam Hughes, Minister of Militia and Defence; Thomas Sproule, Speaker of the House of Commons; and Edward Kemp, Minister without portfolio, were influential members of Borden's government who participated in Orange demonstrations against Home Rule.

<sup>69</sup>Cited in Jordan, *The Grosse-Isle Tragedy*, 93.

<sup>70</sup>The excuse Murphy provided for the brevity of his remarks on this subject was that "the committee in charge of to-day's programme assigned to other gentlemen the task of dealing with the details of the great Irish famine."

<sup>71</sup>Cited in Jordan, *The Grosse-Isle Tragedy*, 94.

<sup>72</sup>*Ibid.*, 95.

build a colossal statue of the Angel of Peace on the Plains of Abraham where it would be visible to all incoming immigrants as a symbol of Canadian nationality.<sup>73</sup> Whether or not Murphy envisioned the Celtic Cross as serving this function, he certainly viewed the memorial as an auspicious symbol of Canadian unity in diversity. Choosing not to involve himself, and, by association, the government he represented, in drawing potentially divisive lessons from the history of the Famine, or making pronouncements on the current position of Ireland as a colony within the Empire, the Secretary of State opted instead to celebrate the pivotal role that Irish-Canadians had played in fostering an inclusive Canadian nationality.

After Murphy's address, Chief Justice, Charles Fitzpatrick took the stage and delivered the shortest speech of the day. Considering that ten years before the commemoration, when he was Solicitor General, Fitzpatrick had been one of the most prominent fundraisers for the cause of Irish Home Rule and a close associate of Edward Blake (the one time leader of the Liberal party and, since 1892, a member of the Irish Parliamentary Party),<sup>74</sup> his words to the crowd assembled at Grosse-Île were surprisingly devoid of politically nationalist sentiment. Focusing more on the affairs of the Irish in Canada than on those of the Irish at home, Fitzpatrick chose not to use the memorial cross as a platform from which to trumpet the cause of Irish Home Rule; instead, he concluded that "Ireland had not been persecuted in vain, for in the wake of her sufferings the cross rose with renewed brilliancy and was carried into distant lands."<sup>75</sup>

Joseph Turcotte, Liberal M.P. for Quebec County, the only speaker of the day to address the audience in French, did not stray from his colleagues' example by sidestepping the potential pitfalls of speculating on the causes of the Famine. He used the occasion, instead, to emphasize the unity of purpose that the Church and State demonstrated in paying homage to "nos frères d'Irlande et leur lamentable exode de 1847." Lauding the presence of both the Archbishop of Quebec and "le Roi lui-même, dans la personne du Lieutenant-Gouverneur de la Province de Québec,"<sup>76</sup> Turcotte saw the commemoration as symbol of political and

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<sup>73</sup>Nelles, 86.

<sup>74</sup>D.C. Lyne, "Irish-Canadian Financial Contributions to the Home Rule Movement in the 1890s," *Studia Hibernica* 7 (1967), 200.

<sup>75</sup>Cited in Jordan, *The Grosse-Isle Tragedy*, 96.

<sup>76</sup>Cited in Jordan, *The Grosse-Isle Tragedy*, 96.

religious rapprochement. Although he brought his brief speech to a close by celebrating the resiliency of the Irish race throughout its tragic history, memorializing the Irish experience at Grosse-Île was Turcotte's secondary concern. The commemorative event served as a vehicle by which he could convey his underlying message that the political and denominational differences between French and English Canadians had been transcended "sur cette libre terre du Canada."<sup>77</sup>

The French-Canadian clergy, represented by the then Archbishop of Quebec (and later Cardinal) Louis-Nazaire Bégin, also used the memorial gathering, and the history of the Irish at Grosse-Île, to make larger statements about the role of religion and nationality in Canadian society at the beginning of the twentieth century. Unlike the government representatives, however, Bégin's exhortation at the close of the requiem mass sought to edify the congregation by recalling the importance of the "Holy Catholic Church" in bringing together Irish and French Quebecers. Much of his sermon eulogized the role of the forty-two French-Canadian priests at Grosse-Île who cared for the sick and dying, and celebrated "the heroic charity" of French-Canadian families that adopted six hundred Irish orphans in the aftermath of 1847. He described these events in light of the long-standing historic alliance between what he called "the glorious Catholic nation of Ireland" and France, "the most Christian nation." Bégin was calling for unity among Catholics, imploring those in attendance to look upon the Celtic Cross as "the symbol of that union that should ever bind together those who are of one baptism of faith."<sup>78</sup>

The Archbishop's speech must be considered in terms of the context of Irish and French-Canadian relations at the beginning of the century. Since the mid-nineteenth century, Irish and French Quebecers had not consistently enjoyed friendly relations. While intermarriage between the two communities was not uncommon,<sup>79</sup> on an institutional level, the Irish and French were often divided. Not only had labour disputes generated discord between the two communities, Irish and French Canadians in Quebec, at the behest of their respective leaders in the Catholic hierarchy, had long been isolated from each other in their

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<sup>77</sup>Ibid., 96.

<sup>78</sup>Cited in Jordan, The Grosse-Isle Tragedy, 83.

<sup>79</sup>Ronald Rudin, The Forgotten Quebecers: A History of English-Speaking Quebec, 1759-1980, 110, has pointed out that when the statistical information became available in 1931, "15% of all Quebecers of Irish origin had French as their mother tongue."

own ethnic parishes.<sup>80</sup> Moreover, the Irish and French in Quebec were also, by their own design, kept apart in separate school systems.<sup>81</sup>

At the time of the commemoration, though, the most divisive issue between French and Irish Catholics in Canada was the bilingual schools problem, which has been described as "first and foremost a struggle within Roman Catholicism."<sup>82</sup> With the creation of the provinces of Alberta and Saskatchewan in 1905, French-Catholics were denied unqualified, equal access to public money for the establishment of separate schools. In the public debate that ensued, Catholic Irish-Canadians were caught somewhere in the middle between English-speaking Canadians insisting on standardized, government controlled public education in English and French-Canadians demanding public grants for church-run French Catholic schools. At the same time in Ottawa, Irish and French-Canadian Bishops were facing off over the division of the Archdioceses and the nature of the separate school board. When it came to supporting the rights of Franco-Ontarians to have a French-Catholic education or siding with the majority of Anglo-Protestants in Ontario who wanted English-only education,<sup>83</sup> the Irish-Catholic hierarchy, led by Bishop Fallon, threw its lot in with their co-linguists, believing this was the best way of ensuring the survival of separate schools in Ontario.<sup>84</sup>

Considering the increasing vulnerability of French cultural rights outside of Quebec in the years leading up to 1909, and the perceived betrayal of the Irish-Catholic hierarchy, Bégin's commemorative speech comes across as a pointed reminder of the debts owed by the Irish to French-Canadians. Describing the Irish and French-Canadians as kindred not only in

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<sup>80</sup>Jerome H. Black and David Hager, "Québec Immigration Politics and Policy: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives," in *Quebec: State and Society* ed. Alain G. Gagnon (Quebec: Nelson Canada, 1993), 284, have offered the explanation that "fears for the purity of the French-Canadian 'nation' led religious authorities to take measures limiting contact between immigrants and French Canadians."

<sup>81</sup>This situation, according to Ronald Rudin, "English-Speaking Québec: The Emergence of a Disillusioned Minority," 342, "was found agreeable for both the Irish, who sought an English education to permit subsequent mobility, and for the French-Catholic hierarchy, which believed that the survival of the French-Catholic population was linked to its isolation from outsiders."

<sup>82</sup>Choquette, 65.

<sup>83</sup>With extensive migration of French Catholics from Quebec to Ontario, came intensified Anglo-Protestant nativism.

<sup>84</sup>Choquette, 88. Bishop Fallon served as the AOH's provincial chaplain for Ontario.

"Christian fortitude" but also in a shared history of "hardship and privation" was a reminder of how these two minorities should stand together to avoid assimilation. According to the archbishop, the French and Irish had absorbed the lessons of their "heroic ancestry" and affirmed allegiance to their inextricably linked national identities. He was calling on the Irish to stand by French Canada in defense of the ideals of Catholicism.

In an eloquent and lengthy address delivered to the AOH in Hamilton, Ontario, on St. Patrick's Day five years after the commemoration at Grosse-Île, Henri Bourassa summed up the importance of the Irish Catholics being on side with their French counterparts in the struggle to ensure public funding for Catholic education:

Let the Irish Catholics be under no delusion: the enemies of the French language are the enemies of separate schools and Catholicism in all its forms. The Irish who help in the crusade for the oppression of the French language, or even those who stand aloof in this struggle for right against might, are, knowingly or unknowingly, the fast allies of the bitterest enemies not only of Catholicism but of true Canadianism as well.<sup>85</sup>

Bourassa's entreaty reveals the increasing political clout enjoyed by the Irish in Canada, and the reluctance of the Irish to promote the idea that the language of Catholicism was anything other than English. They did not want to associate themselves with the fight for French language rights for fear that it would do damage to their bid to receive public grants for Catholic education in English. Bourassa's prescription for a united Catholic front also indicates the extent to which French-Canadian leaders felt they had already been let down by their Irish counterparts. He was, nonetheless, determined that Irish-Catholics could still be useful allies in the fight against the assimilative policies of English-Canada.

In his commemorative speech, Bégin was making a very similar political statement to that of Bourassa, outlining how Irish Catholics should fit into his vision of Canada. In contrast to the perception of Joseph Turcotte and Charles Murphy that the commemoration at Grosse-Île was an evocative harbinger in the harmonious evolution of a Canadian nationalism, Bégin used the event to promote the ideals of French-Canadian nationalism. Omitting any mention of Canada in his sermon and celebrating the heroism of Jacques Cartier, the inherent sacredness of "the soil of French Canada," and "the shores of this French-speaking province,"<sup>86</sup> Archbishop Bégin echoed the concerns of many religious and political leaders in the Quebec

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<sup>85</sup>Henri Bourassa, Ireland and Canada (Montreal: Le Devoir, 1914), 14.

<sup>86</sup>Cited in Jordan, The Grosse-Isle Tragedy, 82.

world of the 1900s who considered the rampant materialism of the age and the exodus from rural Quebec as portentous of the disappearance of a distinctly Catholic, traditional French-Canadian culture. In an effort to ensure the survival of this distinct identity, the French-Canadian Catholic hierarchy took an active role in instilling Quebecers with pride in their history, language, and religion. By honouring the memory of Irish Catholics, and reconstituting the historical experience of their consoling French confrères at Grosse-Île, Bégoin was afforded the opportunity to extol the traditions integral to the preservation of a vibrant French-Canadian nationalism within Canada.

While readily acknowledging both the tremendous sacrifices made by French-Canadians at Grosse-Île in 1847 and the shared devotion between those of Irish and French descent at "the Altar of God and the Altar of the Nation,"<sup>87</sup> the Irish-Canadian members of the AOH had their own agenda in organizing the commemorative event. This public show of remembrance can be seen as an attempt by Irish-Canadians to construct and maintain an ethnic identity that they felt was at risk of being subsumed by British and French-Canadian culture into which generations of Irish-Canadians had, to varying degrees, assimilated.

The formation of the AOH in Montreal and Quebec had attracted members from a growing Catholic Irish-Canadian middle class. Having been integrated long enough into the Canadian socio-economic system to achieve a modicum of economic and political standing within society, these Irish-Canadians were, on the one hand, exhorters of the standards of behaviour and belief stereotypically associated with exponents of the Protestant work ethic, and, on the other, the most active in maintaining an ethnic consciousness distinct from the dominant culture. This position revealed itself in the speech delivered by the national director of the AOH, Charles J. Foy, when he promised his fellow Irish Canadians that

In sobriety, in industry, in manly self-respect, in honest pride of everything that an honest man ought to be proud of--in all these and in respect for the laws of our country lies the secret of your honor and mine and of our national existence.<sup>88</sup>

The commemoration at Grosse-Île provided the AOH with a forum to disclose publicly its secret of Irish-Canadian national existence. Straddling identities with one foot in an Irish past and one planted firmly in a Canadian present, the AOH sought to legitimize their increasingly prosperous position in Canadian society, and to preserve a sense of their Irish heritage.

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<sup>87</sup>Speech of Charles Foy (AOH Chairman), cited in Jordan, The Grosse-Isle Tragedy, 85.

<sup>88</sup>Ibid., 87.



I believe that if [Daniel O'Connell's] joys in heaven can be brightened, they will be when he knows and sees the increased wealth, the increased numbers, the power and influence of those same Irish and their descendants as they exist to-day in Canada.<sup>89</sup>

Like a child come of age, finally emancipated after having received parental approval, the AOH in 1909 felt confident to assert publicly a distinctly Catholic Irish-Canadian identity.

Central to this identity was a moderately nationalist memory of the Famine. In his sermon at the end of the requiem mass, Father E.A. Maguire, Canada's AOH chaplain, spoke of "Ireland's sad history under foreign rule," and of "the legislation and tariff regulations made to benefit England's commercial enterprises... [that] so discouraged Irish trade and industry...[leaving] the potato as the only food of the Irish peasantry."<sup>90</sup> While drawing attention to what he perceived as the British government's misguided policies before and during the Famine, the AOH chaplain significantly avoided making any connections between mass starvation and genocidal intent on the part of the British, instead choosing to emphasize the pain of Irish exile.

Interpreting the Famine was indeed a contentious undertaking amidst the politically charged atmosphere surrounding the ongoing issue of Irish Home Rule at the beginning of the twentieth century. While the AOH's Canadian Director dreamed of one day seeing "a glorious, free and an unfettered Ireland,"<sup>91</sup> it is revealing that he held up Daniel O'Connell, the emancipator of middle class Catholic Ireland, as the exemplary Irish leader.<sup>92</sup> By doing so, he indicated a preference for the gradual achievement of Irish autonomy through lawful, parliamentary channels rather than independence by any means necessary. Foy's privileging of incremental political reform in Ireland reflected the views of many Catholic Irish-Canadians

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<sup>89</sup>Ibid., 86.

<sup>90</sup>Ibid., 80.

<sup>91</sup>Ibid., 87.

<sup>92</sup>A picture of the O'Connell Monument in Dublin is included in the text of J.A. Jordan's The Grosse-Isle Tragedy. There are also a number of pictures and paintings of rural Ireland. Images of a blind Irish piper sitting upon a bluff in Kerry overlooking the ocean, an old farmer with a pipe (the kind you smoke) standing in front of a deserted Irish cabin, and a panoramic vista of the Irish coast, indicate that just as the French-Catholic hierarchy looked back to a simpler rural existence, the commemoration provided the opportunity for Irish-Canadians to romanticize the traditions of bucolic Ireland.

concerning the situation in Ireland. However, given the rather equivocal and unsuccessful efforts of Irish-Canadians to wield influence over the political situation in Ireland in the thirty years preceding the 1909 commemoration, their commitment to achieving a measure of Irish independence had its limits. In response to the solicitations of Charles Fitzpatrick to address a fundraising meeting for the Grosse-Île memorial, Edward Blake reluctantly agreed but expressed his feeling that Quebec had done nothing for Home Rule.<sup>93</sup> While funds had been raised in support of Home Rule by a variety of Catholic Irish-Canadian organizations, Irish-Canadian interest in the political affairs of Ireland was usually a response to the prodding of persuasive individuals like Edward Blake, and never really acquired a strong momentum of its own.<sup>94</sup>

At the beginning of the century in the United States the AOH was representative of a far more aggressive and relatively influential movement for Irish nationalism. As respectable, law-abiding advocates of social order, the middle-class members of the AOH professed equal allegiance to the United States and Ireland. In the Order, Catholic Irish-Americans had found an effective vehicle to exert financial and ideological influence on the situation in Ireland, while also promoting their integration into American society.<sup>95</sup> Although much of the work of the organization was directed towards benevolent causes, many AOH members still harboured feelings of "animosity for British and Protestant supremacy in Ireland."<sup>96</sup> These longstanding grievances found expression in anti-Imperial AOH policies. In 1899, the American Order had raised funds and sent a brigade to fight against the British in the Boer War; ten years later, the AOH had agreed "to work together as one invincible body" with the German American Alliance -- a powerful organization in its own right -- to lobby the American government to take an active stance against British imperialism.<sup>97</sup> Considering the

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<sup>93</sup>Lyne, 201.

<sup>94</sup>Lyne, 204, has tallied the amount of money raised in Canada on behalf of Irish Home Rule. In the last twenty years of the nineteenth century a total of \$66 635 was accumulated through various fundraising activities most often led by Edward Blake. In the years leading up to the 1909 commemoration, money raising efforts had, for the most part, dried up.

<sup>95</sup>Thomas J. Rowland, "Irish-American Catholics and the Quest for Respectability in the Coming of the Great War, 1900-1917," Journal of American Ethnic History 15, 2 (Winter 1996), 3.

<sup>96</sup>*Ibid.*, 3.

antithetical policies of the AOH and the Canadian government regarding the Boer War and British imperialism in general, it becomes clear that the commemoration at Grosse-Île made strange bedfellows.

Nonetheless, since the American AOH had brought delegates from as far away as Colorado and was the primary financial backer of the commemoration, they were given the final word at the dedicatory ceremony. Standing on the base of the Celtic Cross, AOH national president Matthew Cummings, a man known for professing open sympathy with those contending for absolute independence for Ireland, denounced the "Government-made famine."<sup>98</sup> Invoking a notion that was well ensconced in the memory of the Famine among Irish-Americans,<sup>99</sup> Cummings pressed his audience to consider that "two millions of your kindred died of starvation with sufficient food in the fields to feed five times the population." Moreover, the AOH president, having "heard the story from [his] mother's lips,"<sup>100</sup> passionately indicted, what one historian has called, the "gallery of well-known rogues."<sup>101</sup> Accusing the English government and its accomplices, British soldiers and landlords, of standing "between the Irish people and the products of their land," and sweeping "the people from the land to die on the roadside,"<sup>102</sup> Cummings was making sure that the thousands who died of fever at Grosse-Île were remembered among the victims of what he perceived as the English government's malevolent conduct during the Famine.

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<sup>97</sup>O'Dea, 1388.

<sup>98</sup>*Ibid.*, 1409. The 1908 election of Cummings to the position of National President brought out some of the ideological fissures in this monolithic organization. In a closely fought contest, Cummings defeated ex-National President James E. Dolan, an advocate of the parliamentary policy of the United Irish League.

<sup>99</sup>Perhaps the most influential nationalist writing after the Famine was John Mitchel. In his address at Grosse-Île, Cummings even surpassed many of the assertions made by Mitchel in his Jail Journal (Dublin: Oifig Dfolta Foillseachain Rialtais, 1936) and The Last Conquest of Ireland (Perhaps) (New York: Lynch, Cole & Meehan, 1873). Mitchel was sure that there was ample food in Ireland during the Famine to feed twice the population.

<sup>100</sup>Cited in Jordan, The Grosse-Isle Tragedy, 88.

<sup>101</sup>James S. Donnelly, Jr., "The Construction of the Memory of the Famine in Ireland and the Irish Diaspora," Éire-Ireland: a Journal of Irish Studies 31, 1 (Spring 1996), 60.

<sup>102</sup>Cited in Jordan, The Grosse-Isle Tragedy, 89.

Following the lead of Cummings, AOH national director Major E.T. McCrystal, the only one to address his audience in Gaelic, made a clear connection between "the tyrannical laws" enforced during the Famine and the situation in Ireland in 1909.

The land of our heritage is still being kept down and our race is under oppression.  
But I say to you, and listen to me, as sure as we are here, as sure as the monument  
is above our poor oppressed dead, our memory of what the English did to the  
Gael will not be let go and the day will come with God's grace and on that day  
hence, some of us will be ready to strike a blow for Ireland in their cause.<sup>103</sup>

And on this militantly nationalist note, the commemorative event drew to a close.

The commemorative process produced a variety of disparate messages which offer both a glimpse into Canadian society at the turn of the century and a window of understanding upon how the Irish in North America sought to forge national identities that reconciled a sense of the past with the exigencies of the present. Formulated as a "sepulchral lament" to the long-standing suffering of the Irish, the 1909 commemoration was at its foundation a communal expression of sorrow upon which several quite distinct layers of historical meaning settled.<sup>104</sup> The legacy of degradation and oppression that Grosse-Île symbolized first compelled all the participating groups to memorialize, then allowed the disparate interests to cluster together and create the appearance of a common commemorative perspective, and conclusively marked Grosse-Île as an island sacrosanct for many Irish-Canadians. While recognizing that the participants put forth a variety of differing readings of the island's historic significance, the 1909 commemoration ensured the island's potency as a symbol of Irish suffering during the Famine, a popular historical association that would survive the twentieth century and prove instrumental in shaping the recent commemorative activities organized by the Canadian government.

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<sup>103</sup>Ibid., 97. Translated by Eugene McMahan.

<sup>104</sup>Jordan, 5.

## Chapter Three

### Cross Currents: Commemoration on Grosse-Île in the 1990s

As part of a recent fundraising campaign undertaken to establish a Centre for Canadian Irish Studies at Concordia University prospective patrons were sent glossy packages explaining that "the history of the Irish -- Protestant and Catholic -- working together and with their English and French compatriots as nation builders, is a story of extraordinary cooperation, goodwill and vision." As part of an effort to reduce "the growing alienation among communities in Canada," would-be philanthropists were encouraged to contribute to a programme designed "to publicize how Irish-Canadians have nurtured cooperation between the nation's various linguistic, religious, and cultural traditions."<sup>1</sup> Although this highly politicized and immodest characterization of the historic role of Irish-Canadians must be considered as part of a pitch to attract individual, corporate, and government donations,<sup>2</sup> it also reveals an attempt to accommodate competing notions of how to construct historical narratives in Canada. By casting the Irish as significant players on the national stage who have historically acted in the interest of Canadian unity, the organizers of this fledgling Irish Studies Programme were seeking to justify their focus on the particular experiences of one ethnic group. This Canadian quandary of how to negotiate between national and particular perspectives was similarly at the heart of the recent debate about how to commemorate Grosse-Île.<sup>3</sup> Parks Canada, the agency of the Canadian government responsible for interpreting the island's national historic significance, had to decide what space to give to the

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<sup>1</sup>Michael Kenneally, "Fundamentals: Canadian Irish Studies Foundation, a Newsletter for Friends of Irish Studies, August 1997. Kenneally is a central figure in the Irish-Canadian community in Montreal and in Canada. He is past-president of both the Canadian Association for Irish Studies and the St. Patrick's Society of Montreal. Currently he serves as the editor for The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies and as the interim director of Concordia University's Centre for Canadian Irish Studies.

<sup>2</sup>The newsletter includes a photograph of Paul Martin, Minister of Finance, with his arm around Brian Gallery, an honorary patron of the Irish Studies Programme. Martin, who "traces his Irish roots to County Roscommon, is very proud of his Irish ancestry." Above the photo, the caption reads: "Minister of Finance is Delighted with Good News."

<sup>3</sup>Michael Kenneally was an advocate of including the Irish history of Grosse-Île in the recent commemoration. Recently, the Centre for Canadian Irish Studies received the promise of the maquettes of the new Irish memorial on Grosse-Île.

experiences and collective memories of the Irish in Canada within the narrative framework of a national public history. This chapter examines the controversy that arose over the commemoration at Grosse-Île, analyzing the Canadian and Irish historical perspectives expressed in support of a variety of commemorative strategies.

Initially, Parks Canada was not prepared to focus exclusively on the experience of the Irish at Grosse-Île (or any other particular group of Canadians) in the telling of Canada's national history. The agency's Development Concept, published in 1992, clearly situated and even subsumed the story of the Irish within a more inclusive Canadian history. Privileging the broad and celebratory theme of nineteenth century European immigration to Canada, Parks Canada advised that "there should not be too much emphasis on the tragic aspects of the history of Grosse-Île."<sup>4</sup> This attempt to accentuate the positive at the expense of the Irish story drew harsh criticism from hundreds of Canadians of Irish descent. These lobbyists argued that the island was the most significant site in the history of Irish migration to Canada and issued a steady stream of demands that the Irish dimension of Grosse-Île's history be given full and conspicuous commemorative treatment. With the island awash in a rising wave of public interest, Parks Canada offered Canadians an opportunity to participate in nationwide public hearings in 1992 and 1993 before any commemorative themes were finally chosen.

While the absence of the story of the Irish at Grosse-Île in 1832 and 1847 from the purview of Parks Canada's exhibition plans may support the argument that "commemoration runs the risk of ironing out complexity,"<sup>5</sup> the public debate described below suggests otherwise. Indeed, the various conceptions of how to delineate the history of the island articulated during the hearings, in the media, through petitions, and in historiographic responses indicate that commemoration can be an "eminently political act...susceptible to contestation."<sup>6</sup> Just as Parks Canada's original idea for the commemoration was a history fashioned to fit a political agenda, the different historical perspectives proposed for commemorating Grosse-Île, mostly by Canadians of Irish Catholic descent, were informed by an array of political and social interests relevant to their contemporary position in Canadian

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<sup>4</sup>Environment Canada Parks Service, "Grosse-Île Development Concept," 69.

<sup>5</sup>Roy Foster, "Who Fears to Speak of 98," The Irish Times, 28 January 1997, Features section.

<sup>6</sup>Allen Feldman, "Gaelic Gotham: Decontextualizing the Diaspora," Eire-Ireland: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Irish Studies. (spring/summer 1996), 189.

society. This debate over how to commemorate the island offers a glimpse into how emotionally charged and politically divisive it can be for Canada, a nation comprised of many nationalities, to remember its past collectively.

The contention over how to commemorate Grosse-Île is just one example of several at the end of the twentieth century in which groups of Canadians were asserting historical perspectives in the public sphere. Those who are responsible for the planning and design of cultural and historical representations have been forced to reconsider how and what they choose to appropriate from the past. For instance, *The Spirit Sings: Artistic Traditions of Canada's First Peoples*, an exhibition presented at the Glenbow Museum in Calgary in 1988 as part of the Winter Olympics, drew criticism from Natives and other commentators for entrenching the concept of "Us collecting and defining Them."<sup>7</sup> The Lubicon Cree called for a boycott of the exhibition partially because Shell Canada, a corporation with whom the Lubicon were involved in a land claims dispute, had provided \$1.1 million towards the cost of mounting the exhibition. One year later *Into the Heart of Africa* opened at the Royal Ontario Museum. In this instance, the curator had set out to deconstruct subtly the mentality of Anglo-Canadians during the colonial period. However, The Coalition for the Truth about Africa argued that African-Canadians were excluded from the exhibition's planning process and "implicitly from the position of the ideal viewer."<sup>8</sup> These demands for control over public representations of the past have not only come from traditionally marginalized groups of Canadians. Canada's war veterans have been engaged in a number of skirmishes over how their experiences during the second World War have been recounted. The broadcast in 1992 of a three part CBC documentary, *The Valour and the Horror*, triggered responses from veterans who felt that the film-makers had misrepresented their historical experience by focusing too much on the questionable conduct of Canada's political and military leadership.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Marjorie Halpin, "The Spirit Sings: Artistic Traditions of Canada's First Peoples," Culture 8:1 (1988), 90.

<sup>8</sup>Mackey, 413. For a discussion of other examples of Canadian public history controversies see Michael Ames, "Museums in the Age of Deconstruction," chapter in Cannibal Tours and Glass Boxes: the Anthropology of Museums (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1992), 151-168.

<sup>9</sup>Ernest J. Dick, "The Valour and the Horror' Continued: Do We Still Want Our History on Television?" Archivaria 35 (Spring 1993), 253, has voiced concern that even public controversies involving the past do not sustain the interest of the public in a prolonged or substantive way.

These examples, like the commotion over commemoration at Grosse-Île, indicate that Canadians are increasingly inclined to "pound on the door of the representational stage, demanding not just images of themselves but representations which are controlled and produced by representatives of the community."<sup>10</sup>

The influence that particular groups of Canadians can wield in determining how public histories are rendered is likely discouraging to historians who believe that Canadians need a coherent, linear, national historical narrative. Such traditionalists argue that the fracturing of national history into a multiplicity of micro-histories, addressing issues of ethnicity, gender, region, and class, has contributed to the demise of a Canadian historical consciousness, and, in turn, national unity. Rather than viewing the involvement of interest groups in shaping public history as evidence of widespread interest in the past, some historians see this as reinforcing the work of many of their colleagues which has contributed to the fragility of the nation.<sup>11</sup> Based on the bloated assumption that the historical profession is indispensable to Canadians' understanding of the past, several prominent historians have criticized their colleagues for concentrating on "limited identities" which "threaten to take over and settle the matter of a Canadian national identity by ending it outright."<sup>12</sup> The profession's apparent attentiveness to traditionally marginalized groups in Canadian society and its emphasis on historical injustices has led Michael Bliss to lament that "the sundering of a sense of Canadian history [has become] part and parcel of the sundering of Canadians' consciousness of themselves as a people."<sup>13</sup>

Historians at whom this criticism has been directed have shown a similar interest in becoming "custodians of our collective memory,"<sup>14</sup> According to these scholars, history written and taught predominantly by "male, white, and almost exclusively political and intellectual historians" does not reflect the "diverse experiences and histories" of Canadians.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Mackey, 403.

<sup>11</sup>This viewpoint has most recently been articulated by historian and ubiquitous media phenom Jack Granatstein, Who Killed Canadian History? (Toronto: Harper Collins Publishers Ltd, 1998), 77, 148. He contends that "the nation is fragile indeed, and one reason for this lamentable state of affairs might well be the lack of a history that binds Canadians together."

<sup>12</sup>J.M.S. Careless, "Limited Identities--Ten Years Later," Manitoba History, 3.

<sup>13</sup>Michael Bliss, 14.

<sup>14</sup>Veronica Strong-Boag, 4.



Rather than contributing to the disintegration of the nation, they contend that studying regional, ethnic, Native, and women's histories better reflects the reality of "our current constitutional and political debates," and allows Canadians to "appreciate the sense of community, the experiences of oppression, and the desire for political redress of other Canadian groups."<sup>16</sup>

Many of these issues of historical interpretation that professional historians are continually debating are also being addressed outside academia, particularly when historic sites are commemorated in Canada. It is an endeavour that sometimes engenders vigorous debate about who gets to decide how a select set of historical facts is interpreted, and how this version of the past may serve a contemporary political agenda. This was certainly the case when some Irish-Canadians realized that Parks Canada's intention was to turn Grosse-Île into an immigration theme park.<sup>17</sup> Not surprisingly, the prospect of the Federal government creating an exuberant exhibit designed to imbue tourists with an uncomplicated pride in their nation on a site where thousands of Irish are buried garnered negative reactions from Irish-Canadians that were immediate and voluble. What emerged from this initial outcry was not only a public debate about historical facts, but also a variety of divergent conceptions of how to construct a national public history. As Christopher Moore noted, "far from being a simple matter of recognizing history where it has occurred," the process of commemorating Grosse-Île "turned acutely political, reminding us how much history is made -- and remade -- in the present."<sup>18</sup>

Despite assuming an unbiased position when developing national historic sites, the Historic Sites and Monument Board of Canada (HSMBC) and Parks Canada are indeed politically motivated. In a recent overview of the historiography of Canadian public history, Frits Pannekoek concludes that "possibly the most conservative history in Canada is that sustained by the cautious intellectual bureaucracy employed by Parks Canada's National

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<sup>15</sup>Linda Kealey, Ruth Pierson, Joan Sangster, and Veronica Strong-Boag, "Teaching Canadian History in the 1990s: Whose 'National' History Are We Lamenting?" 27:2 Journal of Canadian Studies, 129, 130.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>17</sup>This attempt by the federal government to cast Grosse-Île as a Canadian Ellis Island was also made in the 1909 commemoration. See p. 18.

<sup>18</sup>Christopher Moore, "A Small Piece of Ireland," Beaver (June-July 1993), 53.

Historic Sites."<sup>19</sup> The HSMBC, "with impartial and expert advice on matters relating to historical commemoration," decides on "those aspects of Canadian history that it considers worthy of a designation of national historic significance."<sup>20</sup> By working closely with the HSMBC, Parks Canada assists in "identifying, evaluating, selecting and commemorating sites of national historic significance."<sup>21</sup> Although its inclination is to communicate Canadian history to the public in a fun, celebratory, and accessible way, there is an aspect of its mandate that is undeniably political: "National historic sites provide tangible and irreplaceable links to what defines us as a nation and a people, and along with other national institutions and symbols, especially those of historic value, are integral to 'our sense of country'."<sup>22</sup> Considering the widespread ethnic, linguistic, and regional diversity of Canada, instilling this 'sense' and deciding what is nationally significant is a perplexing task that could dizzy even the most diligent bureaucrat or ardent nationalist.

Parks Canada outlines the criteria for the enormously challenging task of designating national significance by asserting that "uniqueness or rarity are not, in themselves, evidence of national historic significance." Similarly, the HSMBC "will not recommend that religious and ethnic groups per se be specifically commemorated except where their contributions are...of national historic significance."<sup>23</sup> There is a disjuncture between Parks Canada's insistence on representing commonalities and not differences and the rationale that in a liberal, democratic, multicultural state all citizens are to be treated as equals, regardless of particular ethnic, religious, racial or sexual identities.<sup>24</sup> Once a group's historical experience falls outside what was most common to Canadians, its history is no longer going to receive equal representation. In other words, Parks Canada's public histories, which are designed to instill national unity,

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<sup>19</sup>Frits Pannekoek, 207.

<sup>20</sup>Parks Canada, Guiding Principles and Operational Policies, (Canada: Minister of Supply and Services Canada, 1994), 72.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 73-74.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 71. Is it possible that Michael Bliss is working on the sly writing policy for Parks Canada?

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 74.

<sup>24</sup>Charles Taylor, Multiculturalism and "The Politics of Recognition" (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 4-5.

can have the undesirable effect of alienating communities of Canadians when official history does not jibe with their own understanding of the past. As was made evident in Parks Canada's proposed commemorative plan for Grosse-Île, an impartial and celebratory rendering of the past can mute or even excise the unique and tragic aspects of a history.

Ironically, Parks Canada's decision to downplay the history of the Irish on the island had the unintended effect of exhuming interest in Grosse-Île's history after decades in which the story of the Irish at Grosse-Île remained, for the most part, buried. Apart from the AOH's annual Irish pilgrimage to the site during the interwar period, relatively little attention was paid to the history of the Irish at Grosse-Île between the 1909 commemorative event and the more recent commemoration.<sup>25</sup> Although the island continued to operate officially as a quarantine station until 1937, the period following the First World War was one of relative inactivity. During World War II Grosse-Île was used by the Canadian government as a biochemical weapons testing site, and later it became a quarantine station for animals.

It was not until May 1974 -- by which time the Canadian government's historic sites program had grown enough to develop bigger projects and oversee "large heritage properties completely under the [heritage] department's control" -- that Grosse-Île was seen as a site with heritage potential.<sup>26</sup> The Historic Sites and Monument Board of Canada's (HSMBC) recognized the "national historic significance of Grosse-Île" and recommended the installation of a commemorative plaque, initiating the process of establishing the island as an historic site. Six years later, another memorial was unveiled. The plaque bears an inscription that, without specifically mentioning the Irish or any other nationality, describes the quarantine station and some of the efforts made to prevent the spread of cholera and typhus. In June 1984, the Board reiterated its earlier interest in the island and recommended that, "in light of the number and quality of the in situ resources on Grosse-Île related to the theme of Immigration, the Minister should consider... developing a national historic park."<sup>27</sup> The HSMBC also stressed that Parks Canada's "interpretation, while telling their story in some detail, should not focus solely on

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<sup>25</sup>O'Gallagher, Grosse Ile: Gateway to Canada, 1832-1937, 107.

<sup>26</sup>C.J. Taylor, Negotiating the Past: The Making of Canada's National Historic Parks and Sites. (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990), 169.

<sup>27</sup>"Excerpts from the Minutes of the HSMBC," June 1984, 23. These minutes have not been published, but upon request were sent to me by the HSMBC. Some of the recommendations made by the HSMBC were included by Parks Canada in its Grosse-Île Development Concept, 5.

the experience of the Irish on the island."<sup>28</sup> This proposal was accepted, and the island officially became a national historic site when the Ministry of Agriculture, responsible for Grosse-Île, transferred ownership of buildings and land to the Canadian Parks Service on 4 August 1988.

The original eighty-seven page proposal to develop Grosse-Île reminded Canadians of their national collective inheritance. Following the recommendations of the HSMBC, Parks Canada suggested that the following aspects of immigration to Canada via Quebec City (1800-1939) were to be considered and included: causes of immigration, government immigration policy, logistics and perils of the Atlantic crossing, a portrait of immigrants arriving in Quebec City, and an account of immigrants' contribution to Canadian society.<sup>29</sup> Celebrating the role played by nineteenth and early twentieth century European immigrants in "building the country by bringing to it their courage, hard work, and culture," the historic site was designated, "*Canada: Land of Welcome and Hope*."<sup>30</sup>

Given the right spin, immigration is a relatively benign historic theme that lends itself nicely to the nation-building mandate of Parks Canada. The interpretation of Grosse-Île as an important immigration site allowed the government to recognize nominally that Canadians have a wide variety of distinct cultural and historical identities; but more importantly, immigration could be celebrated as the common historical experience to all Canadians that signifies membership in a national community. However, the unique histories of particular individuals or communities of immigrants do not always fit easily into the larger commemorative concept of the national immigrant experience. For instance, it was a European immigrant experience that was proposed to be highlighted at Grosse Île as the historically significant experience with which all Canadians, including non-Europeans, were expected to identify. Of course such a celebration of immigration would give no indication that prior to the 1960s Canada tried to keep out groups seen as incapable of assimilation. As one writer puts it, "not so long ago, it was un-Canadian if immigrants were too visibly

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<sup>28</sup>Ibid., 24.

<sup>29</sup>Environment Canada Parks Service, Grosse Île Development Concept, 47.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid., 45. This was perceived by many Irish-Canadians as akin to creating a Canadian caricature of Ellis Island. See Katherine Wilton, "Grosse-Île Theme Park Shelved," The Gazette 7 August 1988, A1.

ethnic."<sup>31</sup> Such an interpretation also excludes any mention of the history of Native peoples on Grosse-Île: one group of Canadians which would most certainly have objections to being included in a national celebration of Canadian immigration. Not until August 1995, when the government appointed an advisory panel to comment on the island's development as an historic site, was any mention made of Native peoples' claim to be included in the story of Grosse-Île and its significance as part of Canada's national history.<sup>32</sup> One anonymous recommendation that "the cemeteries of the First Nations should be found and identified" was perfunctorily acknowledged by the panel, but was never included as part of the commemorative plans. Parks Canada felt justified in avoiding digging up all the layers of history on the island that would have most likely revealed stories of displacement and death because these were not the experiences of the majority of European immigrants who passed through the quarantine station.

Parks Canada was not about to let the spectre of unhappy historical realities interfere with the opportunity to celebrate European immigration as an historically significant theme in a part of Canada that has been most resistant to federalism. The rise of Quebec separatism since the early 1960s has been the largest challenge to the federal government's vision of national unity, and creating a high profile historical exhibit in Quebec, heralding the successes of immigration in building a strong and multicultural Canada, can be seen as part of an effort to offset claims made by Quebec for special status inside the federal framework. Parks Canada's mandate is very much in keeping with Canada's official policy of multiculturalism, inaugurated in 1971 to complement the existing policy of bilingualism. Designed to guarantee that "every ethnic group has the right to preserve and develop its own culture and values within the Canadian context," multiculturalism is also meant to ensure that "no particular culture is more official than another."<sup>33</sup> Not surprisingly, the policy has been received least favourably among French-Canadians living in Quebec.<sup>34</sup> A survey assessing attitudes toward

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<sup>31</sup>Will Kymlicka, "An Ethnic Stitch in Time." The Globe and Mail, 12 December 2000, A15.

<sup>32</sup>Parks Canada, Grosse-Île National Historic Site: Report of the Advisory Panel (Canada: Heritage Canada, August 1995), 15.

<sup>33</sup>Cited by John W. Friesen, When Cultures Clash: Case Studies in Multiculturalism (Calgary: Detselig Enterprises Limited, 1985), 1.

multiculturalism found that Quebecers, and French-Canadians in particular, were most wary of the consequences of immigration and were more likely to hold discriminatory attitudes towards immigrants.<sup>35</sup> It seems reasonable to suggest that Parks Canada was well aware that Grosse-Île was a platform from which the glories of immigration and its attendant legacy of multiculturalism could be trumpeted. And drawing particular attention to the history of one group of Canadians, the Irish, in its commemoration would run counter to the theme of inclusivity designed to gird against the forces of disunity in Quebec.

This dilemma was not acknowledged by Parks Canada in its initial proposal; instead, its intention was to allow the island to "tell its own story." As objective facilitators of commemoration, Parks Canada go so far as to assert that "Grosse-Île is indeed a genuine open-air history book."<sup>36</sup> At last, a history book with no footnotes, a straightforward narrative in which the facts speak for themselves, plenty of photos, and, to boot, a happy ending. The island was destined to be a bestseller because the editors (Parks Canada) were intent on emphasizing the successes of immigration in building our nation and burying the more unpleasant theme of disease, quarantine, and death.

Although the "particular significance that Grosse-Île holds for the descendants of those thousands of unfortunates...who met with suffering and death on the island" is recognized in the document, it is an issue that, according to Parks Canada, has only "particular significance," and was, consequently, included only superficially as part of the secondary theme: Grosse-Île quarantine station.<sup>37</sup> Nowhere in the otherwise comprehensive Development Concept is any reference made to the several mass graves, or how they would be integrated into the site. The reluctance of Parks Canada to unearth and exhume the more disturbing legacies of the island can partially be explained by the demands of tourism and an inclination to celebrate Canada's

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<sup>34</sup>Raymond Herbert, "Francophone Perspectives on Multiculturalism," in Twenty Years of Multiculturalism: Successes & Failures, ed., Stella Hryniuk (Winnipeg: St. John's College Press, 1992), 65.

<sup>35</sup>These results are cited by Raymond Herbert, "Francophone Perspectives on Multiculturalism," 65. The survey consisted of one-hour interviews with over 2 600 Canadians, including 488 in Quebec.

<sup>36</sup>Environment Canada Parks Service, Grosse-Île Development Concept, 69.

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*, 69. In 1988, when the island was declared a national historic site, the Environment Minister Tom McMillan commented that "Grosse Île will not be a sombre place to commemorate death and disease, but rather a welcoming place for the celebration of the human spirit." Cited in The Globe and Mail 10 November 1990.

past. However, the rationale that was offered to explain the decision not to include the less palatable aspects of the island's history raises larger questions about what historical perspective influenced the proposal for commemoration. The comment that "the painful events of 1832 and 1847, which have often been overemphasized in the past, need to be put back into perspective, without robbing them of their importance"<sup>38</sup> indicates that despite Parks Canada's pretensions of neutrality, its role was clearly an interpretative one.

According to an historian at Parks Canada, when organizing an exhibit at a national historic site it is a regular practice "to rely on the historiography and to look at the work of specialists because [they] do not have the means to become specialists in Irish history, Ukrainian history, German history etc..."<sup>39</sup> Although the authors of the Development Concept consulted the historiography on the Famine, and therefore must have become somewhat familiar with debates between revisionist and nationalist historians of Ireland, it is still difficult to ascertain the extent to which this influenced their formulation of the commemorative exhibit at Grosse-Île. Nonetheless, both the rationale to minimize the effects of the Famine and the language used in the Development Concept indicate that there are some significant parallels between Irish revisionism and the interpretation offered by Parks Canada.

The traditional nationalist interpretation of the Famine as "cataclysmic" has been challenged by revisionist historian R. F. Foster, among others, who argue that it can no longer be viewed as a "watershed in Irish history."<sup>40</sup> He downplays nationalist readings of the Famine that make direct causal links between the policies of the British government and "large-scale emigration." According to Foster, the consequences of such nationalist perspectives lead to "institutionalized Anglophobia among the Irish at home and abroad."<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup>Environment Canada Parks Service, Grosse-Île Development Concept, 62.

<sup>39</sup>CBC, "Witness," 17 January 1994, "Hunger's Children," dir. Michael Maclear.

<sup>40</sup>R. F. Foster, Modern Ireland, 1600-1972 (London: Penguin Books, 1988), 318, synthesizes revisionist historiography. James S. Donnelly, Jr points out in "The Great Famine: its Interpreters, Old and New," History Ireland (Autumn 1993), 27, how historians have confronted the history of the Famine in a variety of ways. Not all nationalist historians have unequivocally argued that "the British government was responsible for mass death and mass emigration because of the policies which it did or did not pursue." Cecil Woodham-Smith's The Great Hunger (1962) offers no definitive answer to the basic question of British responsibility. Although Woodham-Smith was critical of British policies and their implementation, John Mitchel in The Last Conquest (Perhaps) was far more unequivocal in lambasting the British government for its genocidal intent.

This perspective on the Famine diminishes the sensation and emotion with which it has traditionally been remembered by diffusing the issue of the British government's responsibility for mass emigration and the death of one million Irish.

This very debate about culpability for the Famine, which is central to understanding Irish historiography, was one with which Parks Canada did not want to involve itself. Once it became apparent, however, that Parks Canada's intention was to exclude any consideration of this chapter of Ireland's history, the dispute over the extent of English accountability for the tragedy quickly made the transatlantic journey to Grosse-Île. Most vigorous and vocal in the defense of the nationalist interpretation was Action Grosse-Île president, Michael Quigley, who asserted that the Famine was "a man made famine because Ireland exported more food between 1846 and 1848 than would have fed the entire population of the country." Taking the revisionist stance on what she views as the most popular misconception of how the Famine is remembered, historian Mary Daly pointed out that "the food that left Ireland was less than one tenth in 1846/1847 of the food equivalent of all the potatoes that had been destroyed."<sup>42</sup> Having to choose between these two readings, it seems reasonable to suggest that Mary Daly's historical outlook would better suit Parks Canada's objectives in creating a celebratory Canadian commemoration at Grosse-Île.

Paradoxically, in its eagerness to restrict its commemoration to the story of the Canadian historical context of immigration, and to avoid stirring up the contentious history of the Famine, Parks Canada created a controversy by opting to include only a few brief remarks in its Development Concept which subscribed more to a revisionist than to a nationalist reading of the Famine.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup>R. F. Foster, 318. In his review, "Revisionist Milestone," of Foster's seminal Modern Ireland: 1600-1792, Kevin O'Neil insists that Foster's "attitude towards the Irish abroad is paranoid," and notes that Foster finds "the Irish identity of emigrant communities 'anachronistic' and 'fiercely unrealistically obsessive'."

<sup>42</sup>"Hunger's Children."

<sup>43</sup>In 1992, revisionism would have been an easy school for Parks Canada to endorse considering, what James S. Donnelly Jr, 27, called, its "triumphal march" in Ireland. It has been widely viewed by scholars to be an empirically sound and dispassionate historical perspective. In recent years, however, many Irish historians have found the schools of revisionism and nationalism too limiting. Post-revisionism, an attempt to reassess aspects of nationalist thought while maintaining the professional standards of Irish historical writing that revisionism espoused, is gaining momentum.



Both revisionist historians in Ireland and Parks Canada assumed a dispassionate and "objective" approach to the emotionally charged history of the Famine and emigration. The "value-free history" revisionism aspires toward has, according to historian Brendan Bradshaw, opened in Ireland a "credibility gap which is now acknowledged by all sides to exist between the new professional history and the general public."<sup>44</sup> The Irish public's historical consciousness has been informed not by "the determined re-education campaign conducted by the revisionists," but by a public history "moulded within the ambience of the nationalist movement."<sup>45</sup> Although no substantial comparisons can be made between Parks Canada and revisionist historians in terms of a common critical methodology, the objective highground has been taken by both, and, in the process, many Irish and Irish-Canadians felt alienated from the representation of the past that has been offered them. If Bradshaw is correct in saying that "the Irish have clung tenaciously to their nationalist heritage" despite developments in new professional history, this is perhaps even more true of communities of Irish emigrants.

This was evident in the overwhelmingly unfavourable response by Irish-Canadians to Parks Canada's plans to commemorate Grosse-Île. In all, two hundred and twenty-eight briefs were submitted either in person or by mail during the two rounds of public hearings. The first round, beginning in April 1992, consisted of public hearings held in Montmagny, Quebec; Quebec City; and, a month later, in Montreal.<sup>46</sup> With little time to organize the many Irish organizations in Quebec, Irish-Canadians demanded that the public consultation process

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<sup>44</sup>Brendan Bradshaw, "Nationalism and historical scholarship in modern Ireland," Irish Historical Studies 26:104 (November 1989), 348. Economic historian Cormac Ó Gráda, Ireland, Before and After the Famine (Manchester, 1988), 79, one historian whose approach can be described as post-revisionist, has also criticized revisionists for their "anti-populist" interpretation of the Famine. Although he views the Great Famine as a watershed in the history of Ireland, and does apportion some blame to the British government, he pulls back from a traditional nationalist interpretation by rejecting any suggestion of a conspiratorial genocide.

<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*, 347. The Great Famine was a period of suffering that has left an especially indelible mark on the consciousness of the Irish. James S. Donnelly, Jr, "The Great Famine: Its Interpreters, Old and New," 33, has noted that "by far the dominant popular interpretation among Irish Catholics at home and abroad" of the Great Famine is still the one put forth by John Mitchel.

<sup>46</sup>Situated on the south shore of the St. Lawrence, Montmagny is one of several points of departure for island tours.

continue with hearings the following year across the country.<sup>47</sup> The second round of hearings began in Vancouver on 22 March 1993. By this time many Irish-Canadian organizations had coordinated their responses and recommendations to Parks Canada under the auspices of a group calling itself Action Grosse-Île.<sup>48</sup> Hearings in Vancouver were followed by meetings in Fredericton and Charlottetown at the end of March 1993. Finally, the process of public consultation came to a close in Toronto after briefs were presented for three days in April 1993. At the meetings in Vancouver and Toronto, two petitions, signed by a total of 5011 people, were submitted by Action Grosse-Île, along with a third petition presented by the group Petition Grosse-Île which included 18 844 signatures collected from across Canada, the United States and Ireland. Moreover, during the consultation process over one thousand letters were sent to Parks Canada between April 1992 and June 1993, and a Grosse-Île toll-free telephone number also recorded the comments of concerned Canadians.<sup>49</sup>

In 1994, when reviewing the recommendations made at the hearings, Parks Canada, assuming the role of dispassionate chronicler, was correct in remarking that "heightened emotions underlie and propel numerous contributions." However, what the authors of the report did not acknowledge was that many of the briefs presented by Irish-Canadian lobbyists included detailed historical accounts of 19th century Ireland and emigration. These briefs, for all their emotiveness, invoked "historical facts," albeit an entirely different set of facts than that assembled in the Development Concept.<sup>50</sup>

For most of the participants in the hearings, the issue of how the Famine is historically perceived was inextricably linked to the question of how to commemorate Grosse-Île. While it would be reductive to suggest that all of those who voiced objection to Parks Canada's commemorative concept relied on the same historical facts to protest Parks Canada's

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<sup>47</sup>Action Grosse-Île, "Brief regarding proposed development concept for Grosse Île, national historic site," in "Briefs Presented in Montreal, May 20, 1992," 7. The Montreal meeting was to have been the conclusion of the public consultation process; however, the 200 members of the Irish-Canadian community in attendance demanded that hearings also be held outside Quebec.

<sup>48</sup>Interview with Michael Quigley, Hamilton, 20 March 1997. Denis J. Leyne, founded this organization. After Leyne's death later in 1992, John Masterson became chair.

<sup>49</sup>Parks Canada, Grosse-Île National Historic Site: Report on the Public Consultation Program (Canada: Minister of Supply and Services, March 1994), 9-11.

<sup>50</sup>*Ibid.*, 11.

"historical misrepresentation," the influence of Nationalist Irish historiography is pervasive in many of the briefs presented during the first round of hearings. Action Grosse-Île, the Comité Québec-Irlande and the St. Patrick's Society went so far as to attach bibliographies of Irish history. These included Cecil Woodham-Smith's widely read The Great Hunger, "Grosse Île: the Holocaust Revisited" by Padraic O'Laighin and John Mitchel's seminal nationalist interpretation of the Famine, The Last Conquest (Perhaps). These texts were used to stress the importance of Grosse-Île as a reminder of what Don Mullan, a representative of AFri (Action From Ireland), considered the "watershed which the Great 'Famine' was in Irish, and indeed Canadian history."<sup>51</sup>

The personal and political were closely linked in Mullan's brief to Parks Canada. He made a point of relating a story about a friend in County Derry, Richard Moore, who "twenty years ago this very month, was blinded by a rubber bullet, fired at point-blank range into his ten year old eyes." His politically charged brief is unequivocal in its indictment of the British and their "unjust policies."<sup>52</sup> In his brief to Parks Canada, O Laighin delivered a lecture on the politics of language. Arguing that Parks Canada's description of the historical context of the Famine betrayed its interpretative biases, he took issue with "a number of terminological inexactitudes" that appeared in The Development Concept. Using the word 'British' to describe Irish people, alluding to the Great Famine as the Great Potato Famine, referring to Britain as 'the mother country' of immigrants prior to 1867, and using the term 'Londonderry' without noting that many call it the city of Doire (in Irish) or Derry were, according to O Laighan, important examples of Parks Canada's interpretative disposition.<sup>53</sup>

To ensure that Grosse-Île be recognized as a site of Canadian and Irish historic significance, and persuade Parks Canada that the tragic aspects of the island's history should not be ignored in the commemoration, many Irish-Canadians used the first round of public hearings to challenge the agency's potted history of the Famine: "Vast numbers of Irish had left their country since the 1820s to escape over-population, repeated food shortages and the

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<sup>51</sup>Don Mullan, "The importance of Grosse-Île to the Irish Worldwide," in "Briefs Presented in Montreal, May 20, 1992," 6.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., 51.

<sup>53</sup>In his brief to Parks Canada, O Laighan, "Grosse-Île: The Irish Island," in "Briefs Presented in Montreal, May 20, 1992," 5.

reallocation of land by landlords and, from 1845, the Great Potato Famine."<sup>54</sup> By focusing on impersonal economic and demographic forces rather than "the deliberate policy choices of the British colonial power and its implanted Ascendancy agents in Ireland," it was perceived that Parks Canada was distorting the historical record. The "entirely man-made starvation" and the complicity of some English political leaders who, according to the Irish Freedom Association, "gloated with unbecoming and inhuman enthusiasm," were being ignored by Parks Canada.<sup>55</sup>

While many of the Irish-Canadian organizations participating in the hearings combated the revisionism of Parks Canada with rhetoric borrowed from the pages of Irish nationalist history, criticisms were also directed at the way Canadian history has been written. John O'Shea of the Tara Golf Association, frustrated with the lack of historical awareness in Canada of the Irish at Grosse-Île, asked with rhetorical flourish: "Are their deeds and recorded exploits not worthy of more honourable acclaim than the fictitious exploits attributed to some of our 'heroes' of stature in some of our history books?"<sup>56</sup> The failure to acknowledge the "Irish dimension" of the island led Pádraig Ó Laighin to indict Canadian historians for examining "momentous though unpalatable events in only cursory descriptions," especially in the case of history textbooks used in schools.<sup>57</sup> He argued that Canadians of Chinese, Japanese, and Jewish origins have their own powerful examples of being excluded from Canada's national history. J. M. S. Careless's Canada: A Story of Challenge is cited as one example of historians' dismissal of the particular Irish experience in Canada. Careless dedicates just two sentences to a consideration of the tragedy of the Irish at Grosse Île with vague references to "hundreds" of Irish dying in "emigrant sheds" upon arrival in Canada.<sup>58</sup> While Ó Laighin's critique does have some validity, he conveniently omits any reference to

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<sup>54</sup>Environment Canada Parks Service, Grosse-Île Development Concept, 9.

<sup>55</sup>Irish Freedom Association, "Brief presented to the Parks Service of Environment Canada," in "Briefs Presented in Montréal, May 20, 1992," 1.

<sup>56</sup>John O'Shea of the Tara Golf Association, "Brief to the Environment Canada Parks Service Commission on the Grosse Île Development Project," in "Briefs Presented in Montreal, May 20, 1992," 6.

<sup>57</sup>Pádraig Breandan Ó Laighin, "Grosse Île: The Irish Island," in Briefs Presented in Montréal, May 20, 1992," 1.

<sup>58</sup>J. M. S. Careless, Canada: A Story of Challenge (Toronto: MacMillan of Canada, 1970), 147.

historiographical literature since 1970 that has attempted to draw attention to previously neglected histories and perspectives of minorities in Canada.

A brief look at some more recent Canadian history textbooks indicates that historians writing in the last twenty-five years cannot be categorically accused of ignoring immigrant experiences. In History of the Canadian Peoples--Beginning to 1867 the experiences of "over 300 000 Irish refugees" at Grosse Île and Partridge Island are briefly examined. Without going into great detail, perhaps an unrealistic expectation for any general history textbook, the authors note the "resentment, discrimination, and exploitation" endured by many Irish immigrants, and the "virulent strain of fever that decimated both their own numbers and the people they came in contact with."<sup>59</sup> Although little indication is given of the number of Irish "who perished in Lower Canada," the authors of Origins: Canadian History to Confederation do explain the role of Grosse Île as a quarantine station that received many Irish who were forced to emigrate.<sup>60</sup> While not all Canadian history textbooks have explored the experiences of immigrants satisfactorily, there has been a concerted effort among many historians to approach history as a "contested terrain," where "events must be analyzed from a variety of perspectives."<sup>61</sup> This contentious issue that has preoccupied many Canadian historians of how to incorporate "limited identities" into a national history made its way to the centre of the public debate over how to commemorate Grosse Île.

In response to the reactions of Irish-Canadian organizations and individuals in Quebec, Parks Canada published a supplement to its original proposal, acknowledging that it "did not fulfill [the] mission of informing the public." The admission was made that there was a

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<sup>59</sup>Margaret Conrad, et al, History of the Canadian Peoples--Beginning to 1867 (Toronto: Copp Clark Pitman Ltd, 1993), 327.

<sup>60</sup>Douglas Francis, et al., Origins: Canadian History to Confederation 2nd ed. (Toronto: Holt, Rinehart, Winston, and Smith Limited, 1992), 251-2, 327, avoid any mention of the grim details of how many died on the island. In fact, instead of discussing conditions on Grosse Île, they note that the island was possibly the final resting place for the wife of an Irish farmer named John Ford, who happened to be the grandfather of car manufacturer Henry Ford. Perhaps O Laighin's critique of Canadian history texts is not yet entirely outdated. Professor of Education, Donald Power, "Negative Images of the Irish in Canadian Curriculum Materials," Canadian Social Studies 26 (3: Spring 1992), 115-118, argues that references to the Irish in Canadian history are still scant, and "not only is there bias by omission regarding the Irish, but a negative picture of them emerges based on decades of misunderstanding" and stereotyped images.

<sup>61</sup>Margaret Conrad, et al, xiii.

vagueness on certain points, "particularly those of specific concern to the Irish community."<sup>62</sup> Unlike the Development Concept, in which the words "Ireland" or "Irish" appear just seven times, this brief document was designed to highlight the "Irish experience." The point was made of recognizing the "importance of the island as a shrine for the Irish people," and Parks Canada promised that the burial grounds and monuments would receive scrupulous care.<sup>63</sup> The Supplement to the Development Concept also withdrew the theme of "Canada: Land of Welcome & Hope," referring to it as "inappropriate" in light of "the tragic dimensions of events on the island."<sup>64</sup> The comment that "the painful events of 1832 and 1847...have often been overemphasized in the past," was also retracted. While recognizing that some Irish-Canadians found this comment to be unsettling, Parks Canada's explanation of the causes of Irish immigration was not withdrawn.

Although Parks Canada's attempted to quell the protests of Irish-Canadians by exhibiting a heightened awareness of the Irish dimension of the island's history, the changes to the development plan for commemoration introduced in the Supplement were, for the most part, cosmetic. The original commemorative theme of immigration and the secondary story of the quarantine station were reaffirmed. The sensitive question of what caused the Irish to emigrate is one that Parks Canada clearly wished to avoid. Although the original proposal promised that the "national and international context surrounding the arrival of immigrants would be examined," the Supplement made it clear that "the focus is on immigration...not from the perspective of the history of each country whose emigrants Canada welcomed, but from the perspective of Canadian history."<sup>65</sup> These efforts to restrict the focus of the commemoration to a strictly Canadian perspective (whatever that may be) were meant to sidestep any of the interpretive pitfalls Parks Canada had encountered during the first round of public hearings. The final sentence of the Supplement illustrates Parks Canada's intent:

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<sup>62</sup>Environment Canada Parks Service, Grosse-Île National Historic Site: Supplement to the Development Concept, (Canada: Minister of Supply and Services, November 1992), 3. This document was published after the hearings in Montmagny, Quebec City, and Montreal had been conducted.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid., 6.

<sup>64</sup>Ibid., 23.

<sup>65</sup>Environment Canada Parks Service, Grosse-Île Development Concept, 47, Supplement to the Development Concept, 20.

"The story told, and the theme, is immigration, simply that."<sup>66</sup> Grosse Île's history was to be presented to the public in an uncomplicated manner that would generate a uniquely uncomplicated and unified Canadian response. This precarious balancing act of placating the boisterous Irish-Canadian complainants while making no fundamental alterations to the original plan to commemorate Grosse-Île attracted the attention of even more Canadians, who felt compelled in the second round of hearings to contribute their own historical perspectives.

For most participants in the public meetings the Supplement did little to allay fears that "the mass graves on Grosse Île and the story behind the people buried there would be swept under the historical carpet;" instead, all that was found in the second document was "a change in terminology, not philosophy."<sup>67</sup> The participants in this public consultation also generally criticized Parks Canada's reaffirmation of immigration as the theme of the historic site: "Let it be remembered that Grosse-Île was not an immigration entry point to Canada, it was a quarantine station."<sup>68</sup> The concern expressed by many Irish-Canadians was that Parks Canada was still ignoring the story of the Irish fleeing "imposed starvation;" in other words, they were to be "commemorated only as immigrants, and not as emigrants."<sup>69</sup>

Most of the briefs submitted in 1993 make it clear that Parks Canada's promise to give "due weight" to the story of the Irish on the island was unsatisfactory. According to Action Grosse-Île and almost every other Irish-Canadian organization involved, too many "historical misrepresentations" and omissions existed in the commemorative plans to warrant much faith in Parks Canada's interpretive role.<sup>70</sup> These lobbyists believed that despite Grosse-Île's status as a Canadian national historic site, its story is inextricably tied up in the history of nineteenth century Ireland. Putting succinctly what many had been stressing throughout the public consultation process, Harold T. Kenny argued that "the Great Hunger is a fundamental part of

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<sup>66</sup>Ibid., 23.

<sup>67</sup>Club Ireland F. C., "Brief on Development of Grosse Île," in "Briefs Presented in Vancouver, March 22 and 23, 1993," 3.

<sup>68</sup>County Roscommon Association, "Brief to Canadian Park Services on the Proposed Development Concept for Grosse Île," in "Briefs Presented in Toronto, April 14, 1993," 4.

<sup>69</sup>Kilkenny Association of Toronto, "Grosse Île National Historic Site Development Concept," in "Briefs Presented in Toronto, April 15, 1993," 1.

<sup>70</sup>Michael Quigley, "Presentation on behalf of Action Grosse Île," in "Briefs Presented in Toronto, April 13, 1993," 17.

Canadian history which may not be ignored if the proposed development is to be a success." Kenny went on to suggest that if Parks Canada presented the history of Grosse-Île without providing an explanation of the context of the Famine, it would be analagous to the "Government of Canada erecting a monument at Vimy Ridge without recognizing the larger historical context of the First World War." "Imagine," he asked, "the reaction if it were proposed that the inscription were to read: 'At this site 3 600 Canadians died in 1917 from overcrowding, exposure to the elements and gun shot wounds.'"71

Not only did many participants in the hearings insist on extending the historical sight-lines of the commemoration back to nineteenth century Ireland, but many also wanted the island to serve as a reminder of the present day plight of the underprivileged throughout the world. Horrified by the thought that their ancestors may have died completely in vain, three families who collectively submitted a brief in Toronto asked "do we learn anything from history?" They suggested that the commemoration could be formulated so that "people would be stimulated to make connections between the anguish and death of immigrants only one hundred years ago and the conflicts that are a reality for so many of the world's people today."<sup>72</sup> Similarly, Jim Peterson, Liberal member of parliament for Willowdale, took the opportunity to draw analogies between the Famine that brought the Irish to Grosse-Île and "the crimes against humanity such as those in Croatia, Somalia and Cambodia." He insisted that "Grosse-Île must stand as a reminder to us and succeeding generations of Canadians that our fight against discrimination, misery and inhumanity is a battle we have not yet won."<sup>73</sup> While many historians may cringe at the idea of drawing comparisons too freely between past and present famines and strife, for some who participated in the hearings, commemorating Grosse-Île was as much an opportunity to learn about the history of the Famine as a call to action to bring an end to modern famines and global inequity.

The most prominent advocate of this commemorative approach was Irish President. Mary Robinson. In the summer of 1994 Robinson came to Canada and made Grosse-Île her

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<sup>71</sup>Harold T. Kenny, "A Plea for Canadian History," in "Briefs Presented in Toronto, April 14, 1993," 1.

<sup>72</sup>O'Neil, Griffin and Hennessy Families, "Grosse-Île -- An Irish Brief," in "Briefs Presented in Toronto, April 14, 1993," 2.

<sup>73</sup>Jim Peterson, "Environment Canada Parks Service Grosse Ile Public Consultation," in Briefs Presented in Toronto, April 14, 1993, 2.



first stop. Accompanied by four hundred and fifty Irish-Canadians, she went to the island to see the mass graves of the Irish and endorse publicly the idea that Grosse-Île is the most significant Famine site outside of Ireland.<sup>74</sup> In her address to those gathered in front of the 1909 memorial Robinson pleaded that "the tragedy of Grosse-Île should serve as a reminder that famine and disease continue in the world today...particularly in Africa, which needs our urgent attention."<sup>75</sup> A few months earlier, Robinson had opened what has since become the most prominent Famine memorial in Ireland, the Famine Museum at Strokestown, County Roscommon, a section of which focuses on the problem of malnutrition and famine in the Third World. In her preface to Stephen Campbell's book on Strokestown, Robinson suggests that the best way to commemorate the Famine is "by taking our folk-memory of this catastrophe into the present world with us, and allowing it to strengthen and deepen our identity with those who are still suffering."<sup>76</sup>

While the notion of formulating the commemoration at Grosse-Île to inspire philanthropic initiatives was a popular recommendation at the public hearings, the most frequent complaint issued by Irish-Canadians was that Park's Canada was misrepresenting the history of the island by using the commemoration to celebrate the history of immigration to Canada. According to Club Ireland F.C. Parks Canada's attempt to "capture part of Canada's history...had distorted the history of the people who lie buried at Grosse Île."<sup>77</sup> Michael Quigley, in his seventeen page diatribe, insisted that the island cannot be commemorated as a nationally significant site of immigration because it never existed as such: "We believe that the attempt to merge these two quite distinct histories under one theoretical or practical roof persists in doing a disservice to the history of Irish suffering in 1832 and 1847, and to the

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<sup>74</sup>Mary Robinson's visit generated quite a bit of media interest. See, Don MacDonald, "Irish Leader Heads to Site of Mass Graves," The Gazette, 19 August 1994, A4; "Irish President Visits Memorial for Compatriots," The Vancouver Sun, 22 August 1994, B4; D'arcy Jenish, "An Island of Death and Memory," Maclean's, 5 September 1994, 42; Boris Weintraub, "Canada Commemorates Immigrants' Struggle," National Geographic, January 1995, vi. Throughout the Grosse-Île controversy, newspaper reports were generally sympathetic to the interests of Irish-Canadian organizations.

<sup>75</sup>Mary Robinson, quoted in The Vancouver Sun, 22 August 1994, B4.

<sup>76</sup>Stephen J. Campbell, The Great Irish Famine: Words and Images from the Famine Museum Strokestown Park, County Roscommon (Strokestown: The Famine Museum, 1994), 7.

<sup>77</sup>Club Ireland F.C., 3.

heroism of the Canadians who struggled to comfort and care for them."<sup>78</sup> Immigration was acknowledged as an important part of Canadian history, but Grosse-Île is not the place to tell that story. If, according to the Irish-Canadian participants, the historical truth was to be preserved, the secondary theme of the quarantine station, rather than the general story of immigration via the St. Lawrence, should have taken precedence in the commemorative plan.<sup>79</sup>

Although, in many ways, the briefs presented to Parks Canada express similar concerns of Irish communities across Canada, some fissures in this unified front can be detected. The ideological underpinnings of some of the briefs are blatant, especially those submitted by Irish-Canadian organizations which had an axe to grind with the politically volatile situation in "the occupied six counties of North-East Ireland, presently under British military occupation."<sup>80</sup> The repeated use of words such as "genocide," "holocaust," "Irish refugees," and "ethnic cleansing,"<sup>81</sup> as well as a general disdain for the British indicate that, for some of the lobbyists, Grosse-Île was a potent symbol of the suffering of the Irish both past and present at the hands of the British government. On the other hand, some participants in the hearings, especially those who presented orally, made few explicit references to perpetrators or victims, and, instead, stressed their concern that the island should be remembered for its "Irish face."<sup>82</sup> Despite Michael Quigley's assurance that there was a "unanimity of opinion and purpose" among Irish-Canadians, a close look at the transcripts of the hearings reveals a

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<sup>78</sup>*Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>79</sup>Dermot Ryan, "Statement to Canadian Parks Service," in "Briefs Presented in Toronto, April 14, 1993," 4.

<sup>80</sup>Saoirse Eireann Radio Show, "Submission to Canadian Parks Service," in "Briefs Presented in Vancouver, March 22 and 23, 1993," 1, goes so far as to accuse the Canadian government both past and present of acting "as an agent of the British government with regards to Ireland and her people."

<sup>81</sup>Patrick Joseph McKee, "A Personal letter to The Parks Service of Environment Canada," in "Briefs Presented in Toronto, April 13, 1993," 5.

<sup>82</sup>Marianna O'Gallagher, "Briefs Presented Orally in Toronto, April 15, 1993," recited a long speech that is representative of many of the other oral presentations because of its personal reminiscences.

variety of nationalist interests, ranging from the politically militant to sentimental yearnings for the old country.<sup>83</sup>

While Quigley was in Toronto making references to nationalist histories of the Famine in an attempt to establish the "inescapable indictment of British responsibility for suffering, disease, starvation, and deaths," the Irish Solidarity Committee was in Vancouver prefacing its presentation to Parks Canada with an explanation of how it "support[s] the aims and objectives of the Irish Republican Movement."<sup>84</sup> According to the research of this latter organization, the Canadian public has deliberately been kept ignorant of what happened to Irish people living under British government. It suggested that "the situation has only modified slightly since 1847."<sup>85</sup> Quigley and Denis Leyne, the two founders of Action Grosse-Île, were also quite candid about the implications of what Leyne called "the cover-up and whitewash of the Development Concept."<sup>86</sup> Quigley went so far as to speculate "that there is a sense among the mandarins in Ottawa that we don't want to open this can worms and talk about the Irish Famine because that might tread on British toes."<sup>87</sup> Although these conspiratorial musings came from a minority of politically radical elements among Irish-Canadian lobbyists, they expressed the concern common to most of the briefs that Irish communities in Canada had to

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<sup>83</sup>Michael Quigley, Personal Interview, (March 20, 1997).

<sup>84</sup>Michael Quigley (on behalf of Action Grosse Île), "Presentation to Canadian Parks Service," in "Briefs Presented in Toronto, April 13, 1993," 5-8; Irish Solidarity Committee, "Submission to Canadian Parks Service," in "Briefs Presented in Vancouver, March 22 and 23, 1993," 1. The commemorative events at Grosse-Île did draw the attention of the splinter republican group Republican Sinn Fein, whose party opposes the current IRA ceasefire. On July 18, 1997 its leader Mr. Ruairí Ó Brádaigh was denied permission by the Canadian High Commissioner in London to board a flight to Toronto at Shannon Airport. Mr. O Brádaigh was on his way to attend the 150th anniversary commemoration of the Irish Famine at Grosse Île.

<sup>85</sup>Irish Solidarity Committee, "Submission to Canadian Parks Service," "Briefs Presented in Vancouver, March 22 and 23, 1993," 3.

<sup>86</sup>Action Grosse Île, "Briefs Presented in Montreal, May 20, 1992," 24. At the height of the Grosse-Île protests, Denis Leyne was arrested in New York and charged with helping to smuggle bomb-detonators used by the IRA in Northern Ireland. Michael Quigley has denied any direct affiliation of Action Grosse Île with Sinn Fein, and maintains Leyne's innocence. He commented that Leyne would not be the first Irish nationalist jailed on false evidence.

<sup>87</sup>"Hunger's Children."

become involved in the writing of their own history to ensure that the historical experiences of their predecessors would not recede further into an irretrievable past.

There were, however, several participants in the hearings who criticized the efforts of Action Grosse-Île and its cohorts to divert Parks Canada from its proposed commemorative course. Cecil Houston, author of Irish Emigration and Canadian Settlement and a professor at the University of Toronto, submitted a brief that was unique in that it criticized the participants rather than the conveners of the public consultation.<sup>88</sup> He thought it "preposterous" to expect Parks Canada to serve as a vehicle to run down the English tyrant and redress the injustices of the past: "the most pernicious idea expressed here and the one that throws into question the political motivation at work has been the insistence that the Famine constitutes a Holocaust or the consequence of genocide."<sup>89</sup> Rather than using the commemoration at Grosse-Île to "right some wrong that was done or perceived to have been done in another part of the world," Houston encouraged Parks Canada to remain true to its original plan to concentrate on the Canadian story. He wanted the Canadian government to seize the opportunity to use the historic site as "a way of promoting and encouraging notions of multiculturalism--emphasizing the commonality between people, the tragedy of European existences, and the significance of the migration experience."<sup>90</sup> Believing that an Irish emphasis would draw attention away from the many nationalities that came into contact with Grosse-Île throughout the nineteenth-century, Houston pleaded that "we must not be party to

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<sup>88</sup>Cecil J. Houston and William J. Smyth, Irish Emigration and Canadian Settlement: Patterns, Links, and Letters (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990) can be counted among revisionist scholars. Popular imagination has made the Great Famine the "primary image symbolizing the Irish emigration." They point out, however, that the "vast majority of Canada's Irish arrived before the Famine and not as exiles." This perspective was supported by Bruce S. Elliot, Assistant Professor of History at Carlton University, "The Place of Grosse Île in the Story of Immigration," in "Briefs Presented in Toronto, April 15, 1993." He not only stressed the historical complexities of Irish immigration, but also noted the diverse experiences of English, Welsh, German, and Italian immigrants. By pointing out the chain migration and clustered settlement of immigrants, he suggested that the immigration experience as it has been "narrowly understood" is misleading. One assumes that this was a reference to the emphasis given by Irish-Canadian organizations at the public hearings to the cruelties endured by Irish emigrants.

<sup>89</sup>Cecil Houston, "A personal brief on the subject of the Grosse Île heritage site, in "Briefs Presented in Toronto, April 15, 1993," 4.

<sup>90</sup>CBC, "Hunger's Children." Towards the end of this documentary Michael Quigley and Cecil Houston were the talking heads representing of the two sides of the controversy surrounding Grosse-Île's commemoration.

the state's dissemination of a history that denies diversity, suffocates learning, and freezes the future."<sup>91</sup>

Houston also took issue with what he considered to be the attempts by some participants in the consultation process "to misinform and utilize the most questionable sources that purport to tell the truth."<sup>92</sup> References made to a document variously called The Journal of Gerald Keegan, The Summer of Sorrow, The Voyage of Naparima or The Famine Diary: Journey to a New World particularly enraged Houston.<sup>93</sup> These are fictional adaptations of a supposedly authentic diary written in 1847 by a young Irish school-teacher, Gerald Keegan, who died on Grosse-Île. In 1991, Mangan edited The Famine Diary: Journey to a New World, which was published by Wolfhound Press of Dublin as part of 'The Great Famine Project' meant to raise consciousness among the Irish public about the Famine. Its publication, according to Robert Hill, was met with "a chorus of...acclaim, hailing it as a sort of Irish equivalent to "The Diary of Anne Frank". However, Hill insists, as does Houston, that this non-fiction bestseller was in fact the fictional work of a Scottish-born journalist, Robert Sellar of Huntingdon, Quebec. The copyright to the Sellars's Summer of Sorrow expired in 1969, seventy-four years after it was published in the weekly newspaper, The Canadian Gleaner.<sup>94</sup> In the acknowledgments to The Voyage of Naparima, James Mangan explains that he had a mysterious meeting with a student at Laval University in 1972 "who had in his possession a photostat copy of a journal written by a passenger on one of the vessels that landed at Grosse-Île." Mangan still maintains that it is Keegan's genuine diary.

The tale of Gerald Keegan's horrific demise is, according to Houston, a "fake that has been trotted out to depict the real Famine emigration and to support a sense of Canadian connivance in English perfidiousness."<sup>95</sup> Two days prior to Houston's dismissal of the diary as a legitimate historical source, the editor himself, Brother James Mangan, submitted a

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<sup>91</sup>Ibid., 5.

<sup>92</sup>Ibid., 3.

<sup>93</sup>Written by Brother James J. Mangan, The Voyage of the Naparima: A Story of Canada's Island Graveyard (Quebec: Carraig books, 1982).

<sup>94</sup>Robert Hill, "From Famine to Fraud: The Truth About Ireland's Best-Selling Famine Diary," Matrix 38 (Fall 1992), 4-12.

<sup>95</sup>Houston, 4.

presentation to Parks Canada that made reference to The Voyage of the Naparima: A Story of Canada's Island Graveyard as evidence of the terrible suffering caused by the "artificial famine."<sup>96</sup> These contradictory claims to historical accuracy and objectivity made by participants at the public hearings illustrate that the controversy over how to commemorate Grosse Île was not simply a showdown between a single, unified Irish interpretation and a Canadian perspective peddled by a government agency. Rather, a number of competing historical perspectives among Irish-Canadian individuals and organizations became increasingly evident as the public consultation process drew to a close.

After the final public hearing in Toronto on 15 April 1993, Parks Canada began a process of synthesizing all the comments and recommendations it had received since the publication of the original Development Concept. Two years after the controversy began, the Report on the Public Consultation Program was published. With, what Michael Quigley calls, "a statistical sleight of hand," Parks Canada processed and analyzed the briefs, letters, petitions, and telephone calls they had received and came to the conclusion that "the historical importance of Grosse Île arises precisely from the significance that the site has for different people."<sup>97</sup> By stressing the myriad of different interests among the public, Parks Canada was discreetly reinforcing the legitimacy of the general theme of immigration. Although it was noted that the vast majority of contributions came from members of the Irish community, it was imperative that none of the "different ideas" among the Irish be favoured at the expense of others.<sup>98</sup>

Before making any final decision, Parks Canada asked the HSMBC to make recommendations upon consideration of the various issues raised throughout the public consultation. At a meeting on 10 March 1994 the Quebec Regional office of Parks Canada provided a summary of what had transpired at public meetings in 1993, and asked the Board to "re-examine the thematic orientation which had been recommended for the site."<sup>99</sup> They

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<sup>96</sup>Brother James Mangan, "Canada's Island Graveyard," in "Briefs Presented in Toronto, April 13, 1993," 1-3.

<sup>97</sup>Michael Quigley, (Personal Interview, 20 March 1997); Parks Canada, Report on the Public Consultation Program, 11. The different interests of the public cited by Environment Canada Parks Service were historical, patriotic, symbolic, heritage-based, sentimental, economic, touristic and even ecological.

<sup>98</sup>Parks Canada, Report on the Public Consultation Program, 11.

offered the Board two options: the first was to use Quebec City as an alternative historic site to commemorate immigration, allowing the commemorative focus at Grosse Île to be on the quarantine theme and the Irish story; and the second option was to give greater emphasis to the Irish dimension under the rubric of the commemorative theme of immigration. The HSMBC ultimately decided to endorse this second option, which was in many ways a reaffirmation of the commemorative proposal put forth in the Supplement to the Development Concept in 1992.

Although they acknowledged that "Grosse Île was never a Port of Entry for immigrants," it was, they maintained, "a part of the Port of Québec immigrant reception services."<sup>100</sup> According to the HSMBC, Grosse-Île was an especially important site because of the "lack of in situ resources related to the theme of immigration at Québec."<sup>101</sup> Clearly, commemorating the historic theme of immigration in Quebec was the priority for the HSMBC, and Grosse-Île was the only site in the province with satisfactory "cultural resources" that fit the bill. Consequently, the Board recommended that the primary commemorative intent of Grosse-Île "should be to tell the full story of the Canadian immigrant experience through the 19th century to the closure of the quarantine station, with particular emphasis on the period to the First World War." The Irish experience on the island was to become a "particular focus of the commemoration of the general theme of immigration."<sup>102</sup>

After reviewing the advice of the HSMBC, the Heritage Minister, Michel Dupuy, announced his acceptance of its commemorative recommendations. Dupuy also decided to appoint a special panel of "prominent Canadians" to "assist Parks Canada in the implementation of his decision about Grosse Île."<sup>103</sup> It is significant that this announcement came ten days before the arrival of Irish President Mary Robinson to Canada. Although the

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<sup>99</sup>Excerpts From the Minutes of the HSMBC," 10 March 1994, 24. Several of the recommendations made by the HSMBC are included in Appendix 2 in Parks Canada's, Report of the Advisory Panel.

<sup>100</sup>Ibid., 24.

<sup>101</sup>Ibid.

<sup>102</sup>Ibid.

<sup>103</sup>Canadian Heritage, "News Release/Communiqué," (Ottawa: August 10, 1994), 2, cited in Report of the Advisory Panel, appendix 2.

advisory panel had nothing to do with affecting Dupuy's decision to highlight the larger immigration theme, these scholarly advisers were appointed to lend a degree of legitimacy to Parks Canada's mandate, and perhaps diffuse the protests against the proposed commemorative theme. This panel consisted of Dr. Larkin Kerwin, an atomic physicist, former rector of Laval University, and ex-president of the National Research Council of Canada; Jean Hamelin, historian and Director of research at Laval University; Marianna O'Gallagher, historian of the Irish in Quebec; and Jean Burnet, sociologist at York University. Not surprisingly, in August 1995, the advisory panel submitted its report to Michel Dupuy reaffirming the HSMBC's plan to make immigration the main theme, and the Irish experience the particular focus.

As well as lending credibility to Parks Canada's decision, the advisors can also be seen as conciliators between the Irish-Canadian community and the government. One suggestion in their report was that the "relative historiographic ponderations" concerning the causes of emigration and the Famine should be presented without drawing conclusions, "so as to permit the visitor, in possession of the facts, to draw his own."<sup>104</sup> This recommendation was obviously an attempt to ensure Parks Canada's role as facilitator rather than interpreter of the past.

It was hoped that the "various facts, theses and interpretations (nationalist, revisionist, etc.)" that were wielded by Irish-Canadian groups and Parks Canada in 1992 and 1993 could be presented to the island's visitors objectively and dispassionately, thus subduing the controversy surrounding Grosse-Île's commemoration.<sup>105</sup> It must be noted that although the Irish experience was to be the particular focus rather than the primary one, the panel made it clear that the Irish graves and memorials were to be cherished and become "central

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<sup>104</sup>Parks Canada, Report of the Advisory Panel, 3. Two years after the panel submitted its report one of its authors, Jean Burnet, "The Irish Famine: Ethnic Groups as Victims," Lectures and Papers in Ethnicity: no.23 (Toronto: The Robert F. Harney Professorship and Program in Ethnic, Immigration and Pluralism Studies, University of Toronto, 1997), 11, argued that "the language of victimization" used by Action Grosse-Île created the controversy: "Since Parks Canada had never had in mind a Disneyland on the St. Lawrence, there might have been little problem in reassuring the public, including the Irish, except for a militant organization." She refutes the interpretation of the Great Famine put forth by this organization, and points out that the British government never had a plan of genocide nor did it engage in any form of ethnic cleansing. According to Burnet, these militant lobbyists were more interested in using history to make a political point than fostering understanding of Grosse-Île.

<sup>105</sup>*Ibid.*, 3.



attractions" of the commemoration. In its role as peacemakers, the advisory panel also suggested that "a partnership be developed between Parks Canada and the Irish community." This new bond was to be sealed with Canada and the Republic of Ireland working together to issue a commemorative stamp "to mark the 150th anniversary of the tragedy of the Irish immigrants."<sup>106</sup>

Eight months later, on St. Patrick's Day, 17 March 1996, the accommodations made to Irish interest groups in Canada became more than just conciliatory gestures when the Minister of Canadian Heritage, Sheila Copps,<sup>107</sup> announced that all plans to commemorate Grosse-Île with the theme of immigration had been shelved. Instead, the island was renamed *Grosse-Île and the Irish Memorial*. The government spent about \$11 million over the next few years to restore several dilapidated buildings on the island, including the sheds that were used as the island's main hospital. Also, a visitors' reception centre was opened in 1997 and the Irish cemetery was made presentable. Accounting for this sudden decision to shift the commemorative intent of the island is not simple. Without access to the backroom dealings that must have taken place between Parks Canada and members of the Federal government, it is difficult to explain with any precision how the decision was made.

The most straightforward explanation is that the four years of considerable resistance of Irish-Canadians to the commemorative development proposals had persuaded Parks Canada that the historical omission of the Irish from the commemoration was misguided. This, however, is not a sufficient explanation. It is possible that Parks Canada realized that focusing on the island's Irish history would generate a lot of tourism. The controversy surrounding the national historic site had inadvertently proven to be a highly effective marketing strategy, putting a hitherto little known island on the map as an important Canadian and Irish touchstone. It must have occurred to Parks Canada that the benefits of a shift in commemorative emphasis would not only be a potential heritage windfall, but also send the message that the government responds to the needs of its citizens.

There were other instances of national heritage celebrations being organized at the time of Copps' announcement that must have also factored into the decision to feature the Irish history of Grosse-Île in the commemoration. Plans were underway to have *The SS Mathew*, a

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<sup>106</sup>*Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>107</sup>Heritage officially became a Ministry unto itself in January 1996 when Sheila Copps, then deputy Prime Minister, was appointed the new Minister.

recreation of Cabot's vessel, sail from Bristol to Bonavista, Newfoundland during the summer of 1997. Although efforts were being made to turn the affair into a multicultural celebration, with the Queen expected to attend, the celebrations would clearly draw attention to Canada's British heritage. By allowing Irish-Canadians the commemoration they wanted at Grosse-Île, perhaps the Federal government was attempting to avoid any more politically volatile controversies about how the nation remembers. It is also apparent that at this time Parks Canada was shifting its attention away from Grosse-Île as the site from which to celebrate immigration and looking more favourably at Pier 21 in Halifax. Designated a national historic site in 1996, Pier 21 was Canada's key port of entry for immigrants between 1928 and 1971.<sup>108</sup> During the summer of 1999, Sheila Copps joined Prime Minister Chrétien at Pier 21 to unveil a plaque commemorating Canada's immigration experience.

Although these developments in Canadian politics and heritage (two worlds that often collide) were significant factors that led to Parks Canada's about face, international pressure to reformulate the commemorative theme was intense. Copps' announcement in 1996 regarding Grosse-Île must be considered in the context of "the feast of events and activities" that was being undertaken in Ireland, England, and the United States to commemorate the sesquicentenary of the Famine.<sup>109</sup> As instrumental as Mary Robinson had been in Canada, highlighting the Irish experience at Grosse-Île, she had spent much of her tenure as President travelling around the world meeting with Irish emigrant communities drawing attention to the largest Famine-era gravesite outside of Ireland, declaring it "a special...hallowed place."<sup>110</sup> The sesquicentenary of the Famine was gaining an international momentum. It was strong enough to prompt Tony Blair to go to lengths John Major's Conservative party had previously refused to go, expressing regret for the role of the British government during the Famine.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>108</sup>Pier 21 is one of Canada's 71 national historic sites that are not administered directly by Parks Canada, but receives partial funding from Ottawa, in this case 4 million dollars. That amount has been matched by the provincial government in Nova Scotia. Another \$500 000 has been contributed by Halifax and the rest (4.5 million) has been raised in the private sector.

<sup>109</sup>Christine Kinealy, "The Great Irish Famine -- A Dangerous Memory?" in The Great Famine and the Irish Diaspora in America ed. Arthur Gribben (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), 239. According to Kinealy, the various members of committees and heritage consultants working to publicly remember the Famine have been dubbed 'faminists.'

<sup>110</sup>Mary Robinson, cited by Michael Quigley, "Grosse-Île: Canada's Famine Memorial," 151.

Ignoring the demands of Irish-Canadians to commemorate the sesquicentenary at the largest Famine gravesite outside of Ireland would have been politically unsound. The Canadian government had had enough of the domestic controversy over the commemoration at Grosse-Île, and was not hungry for any bad press from 'faminists' internationally.

Six years after Parks Canada had omitted the Irish story from its commemorative plans, the Canadian and Irish governments agreed to twin Strokestown and Grosse-Île, the points of departure and arrival for thousands of Irish emigrants during the Famine. This was due in large part to the work Mary Robinson had done mapping out the international scope of Famine commemoration. Robinson brought a global perspective to Famine commemoration, and, in a sense, if Parks Canada was going to be pressured to include the Irish history as one of its commemorative themes, this perspective would be relatively palatable. She believed that "the tragedy must be seen as human and not historic, and that to think of it in national terms alone [would] obscure that fact."<sup>112</sup> This perspective on the Irish history of Grosse-Île would allow Parks Canada to sidestep the thorny issue of how this event fits into Canadian history. By adopting this moral and global perspective on the Famine, including the history of the Irish in the commemoration at Grosse-Île would no longer have to be a case of fracturing a national historical narrative.

Throughout the sesquicentenary summer there were a number of special commemorative attractions for those interested in the Irish aspect of the island's history. Every second day, visitors could hear the *Sounds of Ireland*, a celebration of Ireland's musical heritage. They could also take advantage of the Gaelic meal, Irish inspired menus which were offered daily at the third class hotel. These attractions may be just as superficial in promoting an historical understanding of the Irish emigrant experience as actors dressed in period costume, but they did serve to draw attention to the Irish elements of Grosse-Île's history. Those who wanted a more substantive commentary could attend *Bound for Haven*, a seminar discussing the ports that were the piers for Irish immigration to Canada, or participate in the annual grand pilgrimage of Irish Associations. Another event which drew attention to the sesquicentenary was the arrival to Grosse-Île of *The Jeanie Johnston*, a refurbished nineteenth century tall ship which transported Irish emigrants to Canada and the United States from

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<sup>111</sup>This apology came in June 1997.

<sup>112</sup>Mary Robinson, "Address to Joint Sitting of the Houses of the Oireachtas, 2 February, 1995." Cited by Michael Quigley, "Grosse-Île: Canada's Famine Memorial," 152.

County Kerry, West Limerick, and North Cork during the Famine. In the spring of 1997 the ship, with costumed actors assuming the roles of ship's passengers and crew, left Cork to visit ports along the eastern seaboard of the United States. By August the vessel had arrived at Grosse-Île.<sup>113</sup> Other features of the exhibit that have been developed at the national historic site will be discussed in further detail in the concluding chapter.

The controversy over how to commemorate Grosse Île illustrates the way different historical perspectives in the public sphere can be set in opposition in the making of a national historic site. The conceptual issues raised are of great importance to Canadian historians who have expressed an interest in shaping and reflecting a national historical consciousness. Although relatively few professional historians were involved directly in this commemorative dispute, it is interesting to note how frequently historical scholarship in the name of objectivity was invoked to bolster the agendas of various interest groups. For the sake of "historical accuracy", many Irish-Canadian individuals and organizations that participated in the public consultation process made use of Irish nationalist histories to support their demands for the Irish experience on the island to be highlighted as the primary theme of the commemoration. However, what raised the ire of most participants was not necessarily the challenge to their understanding of the past derived from history books, but that their memory of the Famine and emigration was being challenged and even ignored. That is not to say, however, that theirs is simply an inherited impressionistic understanding of the past; certainly, the memories of Irish-Canadians have been informed and transmitted through the writing of history as well. Nonetheless, their perspectives constitute a value-laden conception of the past that has been collectively accepted as meaningful.

Likewise, from the beginning of the development of Grosse-Île as an historic site, Parks Canada presented itself as an objective public institution which had the straightforward task of simply recognizing where history had occurred and commemorating it accordingly. With confidence that the totality of the Canadian historical experience on Grosse-Île could be expressed in the commemoration, Parks Canada sought to jog the collective memory of all Canadians about immigration. Consequently, the particular significance of the island for Irish-

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<sup>113</sup>*The Jeanie Johnston* was built in 1847 by Quebec shipbuilder John Munn. It is worth noting that, unlike most emigrant vessels, this ship never lost one life to disease or to the sea in its sixteen voyages. This rather anomalous artefact of the Famine has been refurbished to draw attention to the resilience and vitality of Irish emigrant communities, and also as a point of contrast to highlight the tragic consequences of this chapter of Irish history.

Canadians was challenged. Throughout the controversy, the national historical consciousness that Parks Canada had hoped to nurture was set in opposition to the collective memories of Irish-Canadians.

Moreover, several differing conceptions of how to construct a national history, that also vie for predominance within the historical profession, were in competition in the public arena during the Grosse-Île dispute. The HSMBC and Parks Canada had hoped that the island would become a historical touchstone for all Canadians who required a sense of the nation. One of the problems faced by Parks Canada, however, was the difficulty delineating when and where the lives and experiences of immigrants who came in contact with Grosse-Île became of national historic significance. In this case, Irish-Canadians made it impossible for Parks Canada to dump overboard into the St. Lawrence the cultural baggage immigrants brought with them. They demanded a national history that went beyond Canadian borders and was representative of the particular experience of the Irish as emigrants and immigrants. Grosse-Île was, as Parks Canada quickly discovered, a site that was important for all Irish-Canadian lobbyists because of the mass graves, but also significant for a number of different reasons. The historical complexities that Parks Canada had attempted to leach out of its commemoration would not go away.

The Grosse-Île controversy also illustrates the acutely political nature of these opposing notions of nation. Establishing an historic site (or a symbolic bastion of historical multiculturalism) in Quebec was clearly of great interest to the HSMBC and Parks Canada. The site provided an opportunity to acknowledge Canada's cultural diversity while fulfilling the nation-building mandate of encouraging a common historical consciousness among all Canadians. On the other hand, the island is one of the most evocative sites and poignant reminders for Irish-Canadians of the Famine. For some of the participants in the public hearings, Grosse-Île was a tangible link between the suffering endured by Irish refugees in the past and the contemporary political malaise in the North of Ireland. It was essential that commemoration unequivocally confront and redress the injustices of the past.

Commemorations of national historic sites cannot easily accommodate multiple interpretations of the past, conflicting historical evidence, or the complex of cultural identities in contemporary Canadian society. Not only does the commemorative form lend itself to a visceral, crystallized, and often celebratory representation of the past, but as a state-sponsored enterprise, its final product must also conform to political factors and commercial standards. Moreover, the Canadian public has to be consulted on the viability of commemoration before

it is formally approved. Clearly, mediating all these interests is a precarious task. What lessons, then, can be learned from the Grosse Île controversy? While acknowledging that it is unrealistic to expect that the critical standards of historical scholarship can be met in commemoration, perhaps Brendan Bradshaw's call for an "imaginative and sympathetic approach" to history can be applied to the making of a national historic site.<sup>114</sup> The difficult task for the HSMBC and Parks Canada was to attempt to incorporate historical scholarship into commemoration while also communicating the collective memories relevant to the site in question. Although this inevitably involves the privileging of some interpretations of the past over others, Canada's diverse cultural makeup leaves no other choice. As the example of Grosse-Île indicates, the particular historic significance that a site evokes should not necessarily be sacrificed entirely for a purportedly inclusive national interpretation that attempts to reflect the experiences and interests of all Canadians. Ironically, Parks Canada's attempt at commemorative inclusivity proved to be quite exclusionary, marginalizing the collective memories of a group of very vocal Irish-Canadians. The controversy over how to commemorate Grosse-Île should offer professional historians some reassurance that there is "a sense of living history" in the public sphere,<sup>115</sup> and, if indeed historians are set on being the "custodians of collective memory," they may do well by contributing to the discourse on diversity and historical memory that the commemoration of national historic sites requires.

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<sup>114</sup>Bradshaw, 349.

<sup>115</sup>Jan McKay, The Quest of the Folk: Antimodernism and Cultural Selection in Twentieth-Century Nova Scotia, 278, notes the "waning of any effective sense of living history" in modern Halifax.

## Chapter Four

### Conclusion: What Time is This Place?

[Commemoration] is a complex iterative process in which place spurs debate, debate leads to interpretation and interpretation reshapes place over and over again.<sup>1</sup>

Kenneth E. Foote, Shadowed Ground: America's Landscape of Violence

Looking at how the exhibition at Grosse-Île has evolved since it opened to the public during the summer of the Famine sesquicentennial, this concluding chapter considers the process of historical reinterpretation set in motion by the 1909 commemoration that continues to reshape the island today. Contrary to "heritage baiters" who view commemoration as a static recreation of an idealized past for the amusement of "passive consumers,"<sup>2</sup> Grosse-Île proves that commemoration is an evershifting discourse about what happened in the past and how we choose to remember it in the present. Beginning with a personal account of my visit to Grosse-Île in August 1997 and a description of the considerable developments that have reshaped the site in the years since, this chapter looks at how the commemorative themes agreed upon after the process of public consultation were incorporated into Parks Canada's exhibition. A discussion follows about how the legacy of 1909 is communicated to visitors today. In other words, how has the 1909 event been commemorated, and how does the Celtic Cross stand in relation to the new Irish memorial, constructed almost ninety years later? These questions lie at the heart of understanding how this site has changed over the course of the twentieth century. Finally, the thesis closes with some general comments and recommendations about strategies that might better incorporate the various historical and political perspectives which contribute to the formation of heritage exhibitions.

When I visited Grosse-Île to see for myself what strategy had been implemented by Parks Canada, my expectations of the exhibition had, admittedly, become somewhat inflated. Though I recognized that any historical exhibition is a selective enterprise, subjectively

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<sup>1</sup>Kenneth E. Foote, Shadowed Ground: America's Landscape of Violence (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1997), 6.

<sup>2</sup>For an overview of the various criticisms levelled against heritage expressions, see Raphael Samuel, "Heritage-baiting," chapter in Theatres of Memory, 259-273.

constructed, that Parks Canada is a conservative institution disinclined to take representational risks, and that this tendency would be especially evident following the adverse public reaction to its original proposal, I had hoped the consultation process might have resulted in a sophisticated commemoration of the island's many pasts. I eagerly anticipated this sort of exhibition because it would conform neatly to the thesis that was emerging from my research into the 1909 event and the public debate preceding the recent commemoration. This research suggested that public historical discourses, such as the ones organized at Grosse-Île, are complex, multivocal orchestrations which, upon close scrutiny, reveal a range of historical and political overtures, and I hoped that my visit to the island's permanent exhibition would reaffirm the conclusions I had already drawn. Considering that Parks Canada had agreed to reconfigure its original conception to highlight the history of the Irish as one of its two main commemorative themes, going so far as to rename the historic site *Grosse-Île and The Irish Memorial*, I expected that the organized tour of the island would engage the visitor with at least some of the numerous, and often dissonant, voices registered during the public hearings.

Upon arriving at the western wharf of Grosse-Île I joined a group of twenty buoyant tourists,<sup>3</sup> where we were introduced to a guide employed by the Corporation pour la mise en valeur de Grosse-Île Inc, a local company based in the town of Montmagny that has been sub-contracted by the Canadian government to conduct tours on the island.<sup>4</sup> Given little time to take in our new surroundings, we were led directly to the Disinfection building, constructed in 1892 at the north end of the wharf. Here, we were shown the disinfection trolleys which ran along three railway tracks and passed through the steam bath area, and various artefacts of the disinfection process: boilers, steam engines, dynamo-electric machines, and showers. Although it was easy to imagine how disconcerting such a disinfection procedure would have been for immigrants after an exhausting transatlantic voyage, it became immediately evident that our young guide commanded little knowledge of the island's history and could only clumsily handle some of the straightforward questions asked by members of our tour. Of course, the inexperience of one guide is not necessarily indicative of how well Parks Canada

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<sup>3</sup>Having undergone over three million dollars worth of renovations, the Western Wharf was inaugurated in the summer of 2000 in the presence of the Secretary of State, Gilbert Normand.

<sup>4</sup>Open to the public from 1 May to 31 October, the island is accessible only by designated carriers. The \$30 that local carriers charge includes admission to the national historic site. Ferries from Quebec City charge double that amount.



prepares its staff, especially considering that at the time of my visit the historic site had been open to the public for just three months. However, this experience was a reminder that, just as the process of organizing commemorations fuses together multiple perspectives, exhibiting a site is a collective undertaking.

In an effort to offer supplementary information about the history of the building, we were quickly led to the basement where we viewed a shoddily produced video that spliced together stills of drawings and photos from the turn of the century with interviews of several surviving immigrants recalling their childhood experience at Grosse-Île. In 1999, Parks Canada introduced a more sophisticated multi-media display to augment the guided tour of the Disinfection Building. However, my exposure to a series of black and white images without any accompanying text or commentary left me wondering if this sequestration of restless tourists on a splendid summer's day was an attempt to dramatically re-enact the historical experience of quarantine.

Discharged from the Disinfection building, still no mention had been made of the arrival of the Irish on the island during the Famine years. This soon changed, however, as the walking tour of the western section of the island began and the focus of the tour shifted rather abruptly from turn of the century European immigration to 1847, when the island was flooded with Irish emigrants, many of whom were diseased and distraught. Our first stop was in front of the mass graves of the Irish cemetery. Famine-era Irish died from the typhus epidemic at such a rate that rows of long trenches were dug and bodies were transported from the East section of the island to be buried en masse. The cemetery is marked by unadorned white crosses and grassy mounds. Quite suddenly, the stillness and seriousness of the scene was broken by the sobbing of a young actor costumed in the tattered rags of a forlorn Irish waif. As she wandered through the cemetery in search of the grave of her dead family, she was greeted, consoled, and seemingly wooed by another budding thespian assuming the role of Dr. George Douglas, the quarantine station's medical superintendent in 1847. This stilted five minute performance ended in an embrace that finally put the waif and the rest of us out of our collective misery.

The curator of the Ireland's Strokestown Famine Museum, Luke Dodd, has expressed his displeasure with this strategy of resurrecting the past "where very white, well-fed, late twentieth-century, mud-daubed bodies are dressed up as Famine victims and buried in makeshift graves." After witnessing such a performance, I tend to agree with Dodd's conviction that "this does little more than reduce the Famine to the level of a spectacle by

packaging it in an acceptable manner for a contemporary audience."<sup>5</sup> In fact, the performance relegated the setting of the mass graveyard to that of a mere backdrop. Rather than transporting the visitor back in time, the actors served as an unwelcome reminder that we were tourists, very much in what seemed a moment seized in an eternal present, being entertained (rather unintentionally) by the story of the Famine. While the usefulness of actors who dress up as animators and interpreters of the past cannot be dismissed outright, when standing before mass graves they do have the effect of "robbing the past of its terrors."<sup>6</sup>

The walking tour proceeded to the top of Telegraph hill, located just south of the cemetery overlooking the St. Lawrence and its south shore, to see the Celtic Cross. Instead of drawing attention to the French, English, and Gaelic inscriptions etched in this imposing granite memorial, and perhaps discussing the rival historical conceptions of Grosse-Île's significance, our guide, who seemed rather at a loss what to say, made little effort to explain how and why the island has, for many Canadians, been such an evocative symbol of Famine-era Irish emigration. It was not long before our group, still bewildered by the performance they had witnessed minutes earlier and left to its own devices to glean whatever meaning it could from the Celtic Cross, turned away from the memorial to take in the impressive view of the river and the Îles-aux-Grues archipelago, a popular bird sanctuary.

Shortly thereafter we were taken on brief tours of the first, second, and third class hotels. Built in 1893, the second-class hotel, originally designated as first-class, was conferred with the lower status in 1912, when the new first-class hotel was built to house wealthy immigrants who were required to stay on the island for medical observation. The third-class hotel, constructed in 1914, is the largest and the most recent of the hotels. This building now serves as the cafeteria. Here, this section of our tour ended for a one hour lunch break. This time provided an opportunity to return to the cemetery and back up to where the Celtic Cross stands. Without the distractions of a guide going through the motions and actors stumbling through a script, Parks Canada's claim that "you can feel the spirit with which the place is imbued" seemed to be more than just a marketing ploy.<sup>7</sup> This short time away from the tour

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<sup>5</sup>Luke Dodd, interviewed by Tom Hayden, ed., Irish Hunger: Personal Reflections on the Legacy of the Famine (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1997), 51.

<sup>6</sup>Raphael Samuel, Theatres of Memory, 265.

<sup>7</sup>Parks Canada's website for Grosse-Île ([www.parcscanada.gc.ca/parks/quebec/grosseile](http://www.parcscanada.gc.ca/parks/quebec/grosseile)) has grown each year since 1997. It now includes pictures and descriptions of each of the island's

allowed me to look closely at the three inscriptions on the Cross and to imagine how the crowd looked and sounded as it congregated around the imposing memorial on that hot day in August almost ninety years earlier.

Finished with our food and the Famine, we boarded a tractor-pulled trolley for the tour of the centre and east section of the island, leaving the Irish part of the tour behind. As we moved through the centre section, few connections were made between the story of the village (constructed towards the end of the nineteenth century, long after the disastrous year of Irish emigration), and the history of the quarantine station. While visits to the Catholic and Anglican chapels, the school, the bakery, and the residences of sailors, nurses, doctors, and the electrician were of some interest, the tour was geared more towards providing information about the various renovations that had taken place on these buildings than conveying a sense of what life might have been like as a caregiver or permanent resident on the quarantine station.

When we reached the most eastern point of Grosse-Île, where, in 1847, eleven pre-fabricated lazarettos had been brought from Quebec City to shelter those emigrants stricken with typhus, the tour came to a rather abrupt end. The one lazaretto still standing is the only building on Grosse-Île from 1847 which remains. First designed to house healthy immigrants and then used to treat those afflicted with smallpox, by 1847 the lazarettos were crowded with Irish dying from typhus. It was restored to its original form and opened to tourism in 1998. After settling for a quick peak through the windows, our group was ushered back on to the trolley. We passed by the East cemetery that is located next to the lazaretto and returned back to the western wharf where our ferry was waiting.

The exhibition that Parks Canada had developed by the summer of 1997 took few risks in communicating the varied conceptions of historic significance that Canadians attribute to the island. Though it was to be expected that no mention was made during the tour of the passionate and divisive debate that had taken place in the years preceding the site's opening, this absence of self-reflexivity about the process of rendering the island's history was disheartening. One was left with the impression that Parks Canada had decided to draw due attention to the Irish dimension of the island's history without really engaging the visitor with any of the contentious issues of historical interpretation that came to light during the public

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monuments and buildings. Detailed histories of the quarantine process and the epidemics that visited the island are included along with a lengthy account of the events of 1847, written by Parks Canada historian André Charbonneau. One can also access extensive statistics regarding immigration and the quarantine process. The growth of this impressive website indicates how historic sites can become more sophisticated over time.

hearings. Instead of finding a space in the tour to articulate the "heightened emotions which underlied and propelled numerous contributions" during these hearings,<sup>8</sup> Parks Canada, for the most part, decided to let the artefacts speak for themselves.

In 1995, following the consultation process, Parks Canada published and endorsed the Report of the Advisory Council which recommended that "the various facts, theses and interpretations, frequently controversial, which address the causes of this emigration as well as the causes of the Great Famine be presented as objectively as possible, taking into account their relative historiographic ponderations and without drawing final conclusions, so as to permit the visitor, in possession of the facts, to draw his own."<sup>9</sup> Based on my tour of the island, Parks Canada did not do very well in fulfilling its stated role as dispassionate arbiter of the past. The visitors with me that day in 1997 could not draw their own conclusions about the causes of emigration or the Famine because they had not been privy to any "historiographic ponderations."

Admittedly, a sunny day in August full of "historiographic ponderations" (a rather regrettable turn of phrase) is not an experience most tourists would relish; however, Parks Canada's bland rendering of Grosse-Île's history was in need of some pondering. Although it had made the concessions to rename the site *Grosse-Île and the Irish Memorial* and to include the Irish dimension of the island's history as one of its two main commemorative themes, by 1997 Parks Canada had not come up with a satisfactory strategy to engage the visitor with some of the contending historical interpretations of Grosse-Île and the Famine. Nor had it found a way of imaginatively integrating the particular story of Irish emigration to Canada during the Famine and the general history of Canadian immigration through the island's quarantine station. This is, of course, a tall order: blending two distinct historical themes, two different approaches to writing about the past: the very dilemma that marked this commemorative undertaking from its inception. However, the amended commemorative plan that Parks Canada had chosen was not realized when the site was initially opened. Neither of the two main commemorative themes received thoughtful treatment during the guided tour. Grosse-Île, at this point in its evolution, was "a tourist space, constructed by the selective

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<sup>8</sup>Report on the Public Consultation Process, 11.

<sup>9</sup>Report of the Advisory Panel, 3.

quotation of images of many different pasts."<sup>10</sup> Little effort had been made to make sense of the numerous existing artefacts or to locate them in relation to each other.

In fairness to Parks Canada, the commemoration of Grosse-Île's history cannot be critiqued based solely on a guided tour conducted in the inaugural season of the site, just one year after its commemorative themes were decided upon. Commemoration is a process of continual renegotiation. Though in the years since my visit to the island little has been done to resolve the bifurcated gaze of the exhibition, a variety of activities, memorials, and scholarly publications have been organized under the auspices of the national historic site. And much of the work that the commemoration has inspired communicates various aspects of the island's history, providing information and interpretations which supplement the limited purview of the guided tour.

The activities and events now offered to tourists focus on various aspects of Grosse-Île's history. Every year, for instance there are special activities on the island: archeologists interpret the island's material history; doctors describe how cholera and typhus claimed the lives of so many immigrants in 1832 and 1847 and the treatments that were subsequently developed; specialists visit the island to discuss its natural environment and its architecture; tourists can hear a symphony of bells, attend dinner conferences, and participate in, what Parks Canada calls, "family oriented events," celebrating Canada's multiculturalism, featuring music and food from around the world.

In addition to the numerous events that took place to commemorate the sesquicentennial of the Famine,<sup>11</sup> more concrete memorial expressions have been constructed on the historic site, attempting to highlight both the Irish emigrant experience and the general history of Canadian immigration. In 1998 there was the unveiling of a bilingual plaque recognizing that Quebec was Canada's chief port of entry, receiving over four million immigrants between the beginning of the nineteenth century and the First World War. There has also been the installation of a large memorial next to the Irish cemetery. Designed by Lucienne Cornet and the Émile Gilbert et associés architectural firm, the memorial consists of a circle of stones measuring thirty feet in diameter, bisected by a cross pathway. On this pathway are a series of

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<sup>10</sup>Kevin Walsh, The Representation of the Past: Museums and Heritage in the Post-Modern World (London: Routledge, 1992), 4.

<sup>11</sup>These events and activities were held on designated days throughout the summer and took place separately from the regular guided tour of the island.

rusted iron sculptures in the shape of ship sails. Around the perimeter of the circle are twelve interlinked glass panels standing at a height of ten feet. The names of those who are known to have died on the island from 1832 onwards can be read on the upper two thirds of each panel. Below, images of 1500 ships have been etched in the glass, each representing an unnamed person buried at Grosse-Île. This new memorial is an example of how art can remind tourists of the dire consequences of the Famine more imaginatively and provocatively than a dramatic re-enactment. While reading the names in the glass, visitors are in a position where they look through the representation to catch a glimpse of the 'real' artefact, the Irish cemetery. With great subtlety, Cornet and the Émile Gilbert et associés architects have designed a memorial that conveys the magnitude of the tragedy while drawing attention to the fact that we see the past through the lens that we construct in the present.

It is perhaps useful to consider this evocative memorial in relation to two books published by Parks Canada "to shed light on the tragedy that took place at Grosse-Île in 1847."<sup>12</sup> A Register of Deceased Persons at Sea and on Grosse Île in 1847 lists the names of 5424 emigrants who were buried on Grosse Île in 1847, as well as emigrants who died at sea during the crossing of the North Atlantic or aboard ships in quarantine. André Charbonneau and André Sévigny's 1847, Grosse Île: A Record of Daily Events is a well-researched day-to-day account of what took place in 1847 on the island and serves as a useful companion piece to the Register, demonstrating that commemoration can inspire valuable historical inquiries. However, the memorial and these publications, though designed to put names and context to those who died in 1847, take different approaches to communicating a sense of the past to the public. Charbonneau and Sévigny are intent on constructing historical accounts that claim to objectively organize the available evidence. The authors explain (perhaps with James Mangan's The Voyage of Naparima and some of the more subjective readings of Grosse-Île's history that came to light during the public hearings in mind) that "the human chaos of that deadly summer has given rise to so many legends, clichés and contradictory opinions that it is very difficult to determine the facts." They have taken it upon themselves to uncover "the true story" through "documentary research as well as critical analysis and comparison of the data collected."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>André Charbonneau and André Sévigny, Grosse-Île: a Record of Daily Events, 2.

<sup>13</sup>Charbonneau and Sévigny, 2.

While the creation of the new Irish memorial also involved attention to historical data, it is a representation designed to elicit a sense of the past and not a dispassionate mastery of its details. In October 1998, Irish President Mary McAleese, successor to Mary Robinson, arrived at Grosse-Île after visiting Prince Edward Island, where eleven of her great grandmother's siblings emigrated. McAleese was moved to see a child's name identical to her own etched on one of the memorial's glass panels: "I cannot help wondering if this little girl might not have been a relative of my own children."<sup>14</sup> Mary McAleese was a four year old girl who died on board *The Tanarch*, departing from Liverpool on 26 May 1847. Six weeks later she was buried at Grosse-Île. Standing before a public memorial to those who died after fleeing the Famine tends to lend itself to a more immediate and emotional understanding of the past than the private experience of reading a list of names in a book. On the other hand, a memorial does not provide the attention to detail and accuracy that a written historical narrative can. At its best, and, indeed, these are examples of Grosse-Île at its best, commemoration inspires a number of different approaches to reveal to the visitor Grosse-Île's "true story."

The activities, events, memorials, and scholarly publications that the commemoration has inspired since 1997 makes me revisit my initial reaction to the national historic site. Whereas the guided tour that I joined in 1997 mediated Grosse-Île's history into "a single, isolated and completed event,"<sup>15</sup> flattening out the unique and varied historical terrain of the island, the additional information and interpretations of the island's past now available to visitors have made the historical topography of the island more visible. Despite the fact remains that Parks Canada has created an historic site that shifts focus between two competing historical themes, having rather crudely grafted the Irish story onto its original commemorative plan, Grosse-Île has developed into a more sophisticated historic site.

It can be argued that the duality commemoration results in two superficial historical accounts rather than a focused and more comprehensive narrative: one half a contemplation of the history of Irish Famine-era emigration; the other, a celebration of Canadian immigration through Grosse-Île. However, I have come to view the schizophrenic nature of the exhibition as an encouraging sign. Whether Parks Canada really wanted to draw attention to the

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<sup>14</sup>The Irish Times, 12 October 1998, Ireland Section.

<sup>15</sup>Walsh, 177.

interpretive contention that marked the experience of organizing the commemoration (and clearly it is in no hurry to do so), its divided gaze cannot be ignored and has prevented the site from promoting a single hegemonic, jingoistic, or uncomplicated version of Grosse-Île's history. The process of organizing the commemoration has irrevocably marked the site. It has also meant that Parks Canada has agreed to share its role of purveyor of the island's history with representatives of the Irish community and experts in a wide variety of fields who interpret the island's artefacts. While, again, this has perhaps been an obstacle to formulating a unified and concise way of exhibiting the island's history, it has led to a variety of methods of communicating a number of different pasts.

As part of a recent series of articles published by the Globe & Mail discussing Canadian heritage, Peter Seixas, the Chair of research into Canadian historical consciousness at the University of British Columbia, outlined the limitations of heritage as compared to history. According to Seixas, heritage stories cannot communicate "multiple causes, conflicting belief systems and historical actors' differing perspectives." He goes on to argue that "in a rapidly changing, fractured, mobile, multicultural, globalizing society" Canadians need more than heritage, which he defines as "one coherent story about 'what happened' in the past." It is hard to refute his belief that "knowing what happened and what it means for us is more complex and more multi-layered than the paradigms of heritage can sustain." Indeed, heritage stories do take a form that limits detailed and expansive consideration of historiographical issues. However, by insisting that heritage promotes an antiquated notion of nationalism through outdated mythic narratives, Seixas ignores the possibility that heritage can respond in its own ways to the needs of "pluralistic society's intensified concerns with the past."<sup>16</sup> The recent commemoration at Grosse-Île is one example of how public representations of the past can be more complicated and multi-dimensional than some critics imagine. While Parks Canada's original conception for the commemoration confirms Seixas's view of heritage, after public consultation the national historic site was conceived quite differently. Parks Canada will most likely never "place the interpretive filter in the foreground of the account to convey something of the conditions in which knowledge is formulated and represented," but the very existence of the dual historical themes makes the question, "Which story should we tell?", integral to the historic site's narrative.<sup>17</sup> The historical message sent from Grosse-Île is

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<sup>16</sup>Peter Seixas, "History's Fractured Mirror," The Globe and Mail (Tuesday, December 26, 2000), A19.



irrevocably fractured; it is one site where two histories have been constructed to co-exist and, unavoidably, to contend.

Not only does the commemoration divide its attention between two distinct sets of historical circumstances, its presentation of the island's Irish history also raises the question of which story is being told. The 1909 commemorative event has become a central feature of Grosse-Île's present-day commemoration.<sup>18</sup> As well as remembering the Famine, the island has become a site that commemorates the commemoration which it followed. When, after several years of consultation and deliberation, Parks Canada decided to reconfigure its commemoration to highlight the history of Irish Famine-era emigration and to rename the site, *Grosse-Île and the Irish Memorial National Historic Site*, Irish-Canadian individuals and organizations who had lobbied for the prominent inclusion of the island's Irish story generally considered it a significant victory. With this rather cumbersome name, the island had been branded, at least in part, Irish, which Parks Canada had initially chosen to overlook in its Development Proposal. However, the addition of *the Irish Memorial* to the site's official name raises questions about how the 1909 event has been used in the present-day exhibition, and, in turn, how the site has changed over the course of the twentieth century as a locus of an Irish past in Canada.

As I have argued throughout much of this thesis, the historical meaning that is ascribed to a place can only be understood in terms of the context in which it was formulated. In other words, "a place has different meanings for different groups in society at different times, and the identity of a place is not fixed, but is composed of layers of different interpretations between people, their actions, the environment and social structure."<sup>19</sup> How, then, has the memorial erected by the AOH in 1909 become part of today's national historic site? In other words, for what reasons and to what various ends has the 1909 commemoration been commemorated?

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<sup>17</sup>Richard A. Wilson, "Representing Human Rights Violations: Social Contexts and Subjectivities," in Human Rights, Culture and Context: Anthropological Perspectives ed. Richard A. Wilson (London: Pluto Press, 1997), 152-53.

<sup>18</sup>The covers of several of Parks Canada's brochures advertising the commemoration features the Celtic Cross looming high atop Telegraph Hill.

<sup>19</sup>Moya Kneafsey, "A Landscape of Memories: Heritage and Tourism in Mayo," 135, in Landscape, Heritage and Identity: Case Studies in Ethnography ed., Ullrich Kockel (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1995), 134-153.

Without this private stewardship of the island by the AOH, and, in particular, the erection of a large Celtic Cross in 1909, Parks Canada's would have had a far easier time gaining approval for its original plan to use Grosse-Île to celebrate the history of nineteenth and twentieth century immigration. Even more than the site of the mass graves, it was the existence of this Canadian artefact that added weight to the arguments of Irish-Canadians lobbyists. While the granite cross is a looming physical reminder of the historical events of 1847, Parks Canada primarily views it as a monument constructed by Canadians deeming the island historically significant. And a monument is decidedly harder to ignore than a history. During the public consultation process many Irish individuals and organizations effectively employed the argument that Grosse-Île had already been designated historically significant, as evidenced by the Celtic Cross, a concrete and irrefutable manifestation of Canadian public history.

Recognizing that it had little choice but to concede and include the Irish history in the site plan, it is noteworthy that Parks Canada chose to name the historic site *Grosse-Île and the Irish Memorial* rather than, say, *Grosse-Île and the Irish Memorials*, distinguishing between commemorative expressions at the bookends of the twentieth century; or even *Grosse-Île and the Irish Cemetery*, a more immediate symbol of Irish emigration during the Famine. By drawing attention to the 1909 memorial Parks Canada appeased Irish-Canadian lobbyists without engaging wholeheartedly in a discussion of the contentious history of the Famine. Its decision to commemorate the commemoration had the effect of somewhat neutralizing the political and emotional potency of remembering 1847, evident throughout the public hearings. This mediation of the original mediated historical message created an appropriate and comfortable distance between the national historic site and the Famine.

Despite Parks Canada's intention to make the island's Irish history as Canadian as possible under the circumstances by focusing on the 1909 memorial, the response from Irish-Canadians to this decision has been generally favourable. In part, this is due to their recognition that however Parks Canada may choose to present the Irish character of Grosse-Île, the national historic site has been branded Irish, an irreducible affirmation of their efforts to draw attention to this aspect of the island's history. The connection between the island and the Irish who are buried there has been made through, what one critic of heritage calls, "the reliance on the aura of the object".<sup>20</sup> The Celtic Cross has, almost a century after its

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<sup>20</sup>Walsh, 177.

construction, become the mnemonic aid for those Irish-Canadians who, generations removed from any living memory of the Famine, require a touchstone to access a sense of the past.

The durability of the memorial as a focus for commemoration does not, however, necessarily mean that it has the same meaning as it did for those who participated in the 1909 event. Just as "memory adjusts recall to current needs," the Irish-Canadians who today look to the monument as emblematic and significant are doing so in a variety of ways that are unique to their position in Canadian society.<sup>21</sup> Almost a decade ago, when many Irish-Canadians expressed their opposition to Parks Canada's Development Proposal, the identity politics of race, ethnicity, gender, and language had migrated from university campuses to mainstream Canadian society, and demands for representation, or control over that representation, from various groups of Canadians were on the rise.<sup>22</sup> As one of these groups, the Irish in Canada are not easily distinguishable from other Euro-Caucasian-Canadians; indeed, Irishness in Canadians often seems far more like a remote quality than an identity. This, in part, explains why so many Irish-Canadian lobbyists opposed Parks Canada's commemorative plans with such vehemence and persistence. Though their readings of the island's history were by no means homogeneous, the debate over how to represent publicly Grosse-Île's past presented an opportunity for Canadians of Irish-Catholic descent to assert themselves as an identifiable group with a history that spans both sides of the Atlantic.

Accessible only by boat, foreign to the mundane affairs of everyday life, Grosse-Île has, in many ways, been designated an island of Ireland: a small-scale simulation of the desolation native to Ireland during the Famine. For some Irish-Canadians the island has come to represent Ireland itself, a Canadian site where the Irish past is made palpable. A similar, but far more ominous, conception of heritage has been concocted by novelist Julian Barnes. In England, England, Barnes transforms the Isle of Wight into the site of a massive heritage

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<sup>21</sup>David Lowenthal, "Past Time, Present Place: Landscape and Memory," Geographical Review 65 (1975), 31.

<sup>22</sup>Naomi Klein, No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2000), 108. Klein's description of how corporations in the early 1990s recognized the profitability of branding themselves with the images and language of identity politics is reminiscent of Parks Canada's original proposal to turn Grosse-Île into a site from which to celebrate the successes of immigration. One can easily imagine Parks Canada as a corporation and heritage as its product, transforming expressions of public history into a brand-extension exercise. Airbrush out the death, disease and troubling politics and brand this public space as a symbol of diversity; outsource the business of operating the site, and reap the political rewards of the brand of history they are peddling.

centre where the quintessence of all that is considered truly English is recreated. Drawn to this selective and reassuring version of the past that is fixed in the present, tourists flood the island to experience a world more real than the one it attempts to depict. The novel's narrator explains that "now there is the representation -- let me fracture that word, the re-presentation of the world."<sup>23</sup> Barnes' dire, post-modern vision of heritage, which, like much good fiction, is at once fantastical and eerily plausible, highlights how the process of describing the past is a way of addressing the present, and the extent to which historic sites can become powerfully emblematic as the locus of an imagined past. In an exaggerated sense, this rendering of this fictional heritage site is reminiscent of how Grosse-Île has been assigned such historic significance by Irish-Canadians over the course of the twentieth century.

The differences, however, between Barnes's Isle of Wight and Grosse-Île are far more pronounced than their similarities. While Barnes's fictional site illustrates how heritage can be conducive to the formulation of emblematic representations of the past, often warped by the contemporaneous interests and biases of its participants, the commemorations at Grosse-Île were more complex orchestrations that "accrued multiple resonances."<sup>24</sup> Unlike the Isle of Wight, where a past was frozen in time (a common critique of heritage expressions), commemorations at Grosse-Île have taken a far more fluid form, responding to the various demands that the present makes on the past. Just as the Celtic Cross was once a representation of the island's past and is now considered one of the island's keystones, the new Irish memorial will eventually become part of the historied landscape of the island. This commemorative process means that each reading of the past is assimilated into the next.

To sustain this process, however, Parks Canada will need a greater willingness to introduce various strategies to communicate the island's histories, otherwise the exhibition will never reflect fully the range of voices that contributed to orchestrating and arranging the commemoration. Its messages must be reconfigured continually to include a sophisticated discourse about what happened in the past and how we choose to read that past. Art, literature, and even commerce (if handled responsibly) can be used to revisit the site and contemplate the points at which the angles of our present political and social interests intersects with the telling of the past. Though I have argued that the very existence of two historical themes coexisting

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<sup>23</sup>Julian Barnes, England, England (London: Jonathan Cape, 1998), 55

<sup>24</sup>David Lowenthal, Possessed by the Past: The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History (New York: The Free Press, 1996), 141.

on a single historic site is a useful problematic, I would like to see more attention drawn to the two foci of the national historic site, and, in turn, references made to the process by which the commemorative themes were decided upon, giving tourists an opportunity to consider how we as a society choose to approach the past in the public sphere.

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