

Canada's Worst Summer Ever

By David K. McDonnell

1847 is “Black 47” in Ireland -- the worst of a short span of years in which over a million Irish died of starvation and famine-related diseases and an equal number left the island forever. Thousands of Irish were forcibly evicted from their peasant huts and small potato fields, and placed aboard ships bound for Canada. They arrived in the summer of 1847. Canada never had a worse summer.

Centuries of English efforts to subdue the Irish led to a continual cycle of Irish rebellion and defeat, and English confiscation of rebel lands. Irish were pushed onto ever smaller parcels and onto land not especially suitable for agriculture. Such small parcels had to somehow support an extended family of three, sometimes four, generations living in the same peasant hut.

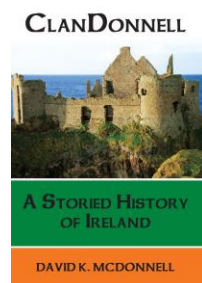
Only one crop could grow on a few acres with sufficient yield -- the potato. Potatoes are incredibly rich in calories, protein and essential nutrients. And, typically, enough potatoes could be grown in a small field to sustain a large family.

Potatoes are not native to Ireland. The plant was brought from South America by the early explorers. The plant adapted well to Europe and it became the Irish staple. But the rural Irish didn't live on potatoes because they liked them. They lived on potatoes because they didn't have income with which to buy anything else to eat, and the only food that could be grown on a few acres, at quantities coming close to feeding a family, was the potato.

The potato diet kept the Irish hovering around the subsistence level for over a hundred years. This is a polite way of saying that rural Irish starved when crops failed, and lived when the crops did not. The island saw many crop failures before, but it never what occurred in 1845 and the several years thereafter, in what some call the “Potato Famine”. In Ireland, it's An Gorta Mor – the Great Hunger.

The culprit in 1845 was a fungus-like critter called *Phytophthora infestans*. Conditions need to be right for this critter to flourish, and, if right, these critters are potato eating machines. Conditions were perfect in Ireland during the Hunger years. About one-third of Ireland's potato crop was destroyed in 1845. As bad as 1845 was, 1846 was worse. Every potato field, anywhere in Ireland, was destroyed.

The winter of 1847 was especially harsh -- one of the coldest of record. The starving Irish (or at least, those who survived that long) wore every item of clothing they had and huddled



together for warmth under a single blanket. Strangers, roaming the countryside scrounging for food, joined in to keep warm.

One creature did reasonably well in this environment – the body louse. Lice live quite nicely on dirty clothes. They freely move from person to person, and feed off human blood. Lice are bothersome, in and of themselves, but they are also vectors of other organisms. Lice pick up a microorganism by sucking the blood of an infected human, and transmit it when biting the next.

Typhus is caused by one such microorganism, but there are a few others. The Irish didn't know much about microbiology. All of these diseases were called "famine fever". Hundreds of thousands died from one famine fever or another.

On an island of over eight million people, fewer than 10,000 families owned all of the land in Ireland. Even this number is overstated -- most of Ireland was owned by several hundred wealthy families. These were the descendants of the English investors, financiers, or Cromwell-era soldiers who acquired the land confiscated from the Irish. Many of these were absentee landlords, with a mansion in England or townhouse in Dublin. A manor resident on their Irish estate served more as a vacation home or hunting lodge, visited a few weeks each year.

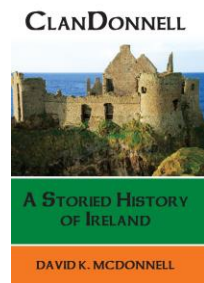
To the Irish landlords, conditions in Ireland became intolerable in 1847. It wasn't the starving, diseased Irish that distressed them so. It was that the starving, diseased Irish weren't paying rent. And it was apparent that Irish tenants never would be able to pay sufficient rent to support the landlords' lavish lifestyle.

The landlords came up with a solution. The Irish had to go. The Irish tenant and the small potato fields would be replaced with open graze land suitable for cows and sheep, or plowed over and replaced with oats, barley or wheat. These other crops continued to grow well in Ireland – the only crop affected by the blight was the potato.

What followed was massive, wholesale eviction of Irish tenants. Tenant cottages and entire villages were torn down. Cottages infected with fever were burned. Homelessness was added to the woes of the starving and diseased.

The eviction process was ruthlessly efficient, but not efficient enough for some. The landlord had to hire a crew to tear down the peasant cottage. And the homeless poor might be eligible for public relief, which the landlords as taxpayers would be obligated to support.

The solution? Induce the tenants to tear down their own cottages and to leave Ireland forever. How? Offer to pay the tenants' fare for a one way trip to North America. Landlords imposed two conditions for the trip: The entire family had to go, and the family had to "tumble" (an interesting verb meaning to tear down one's own home). About 180 landlords did this,



inducing 80,000 Irish tenants to tumble in exchange for a free Atlantic passage. The ten largest landlords accounted for 30,000 of these Irish tenants.

The landlords chose Canada as the destination, since the fare was much cheaper than to the United States. There were several reasons for this, but the most significant was lumber.

Canada had (and still has) vast numbers of trees. Canada provided the British with nearly all of its lumber needs. But Canada was sparsely populated and had little need for British imports. Ships built for the transport of timber sailed full from Canada to Britain, and returned nearly empty. It didn't take long for entrepreneurs to rectify this. Ships were quickly refitted in Ireland or England by adding rows of bunk beds, a few privies, and a stove, and then filled with Irish passengers. It was "lumber in, Irish out".

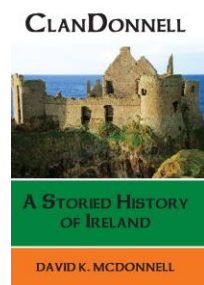
These became known as "coffin ships".



Coffin ship memorial in County Mayo, Ireland. It's a sculpture by John Behan of a sail ship with riggings of human skeletons and bones. Photographs by Linda McDonnell, © Burrowing Owl Press.

The Irish on board were crowded below deck and slept several to a bunk. Little fresh water or food was available to them for the voyage. The voyage might have been too much for any healthy, well-fed adult, but few fit this description. They were hungry and malnourished; many old and more very young. They were confined in unsanitary conditions for a voyage lasting between forty days and three months.

And they brought with them Irish lice. Those not infected with a famine fever soon became so over the Atlantic.





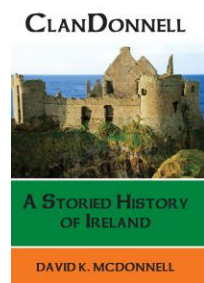
A View of the Quarantine Station at Grosse Ile, by Henri Delattre. The setting looks quite peaceful, which it probably was in 1850 when this was painted. The painting is in the Henri Delattre Collection. Image courtesy of Library and Archives Canada (AC# 1983-121-1).

Quebec City was the port of entry for most of the coffin ships. Quebec thought it was ready. It established a quarantine station on the island of Grosse Ile to deal with immigrants. The island had a well-equipped fever hospital with a capacity for 150 patients, with an overflow area for 50 more, and had housing for healthy passengers awaiting quarantine and permanent housing for staff.

Quebec built the Grosse Ile station in 1832 and it did prevent the spread of disease for over a decade. The summer of 1846 was difficult, but the Canadians maintained the quarantine, treated the fever patients, efficiently and humanely processed the healthy arrivals, and buried the dead. Grosse Ile did its job – Irish immigrants arrived with typhus but an epidemic did not hit Quebec or elsewhere in Canada. Such was not to be in 1847.

The first ship arrived in mid-May. Nine of its original 241 passengers died en route, 84 arrived with typhus, and a few dozen more developed typhus shortly after arrival. The Grosse Ile fever hospital was two-thirds capacity with the first ship in port.

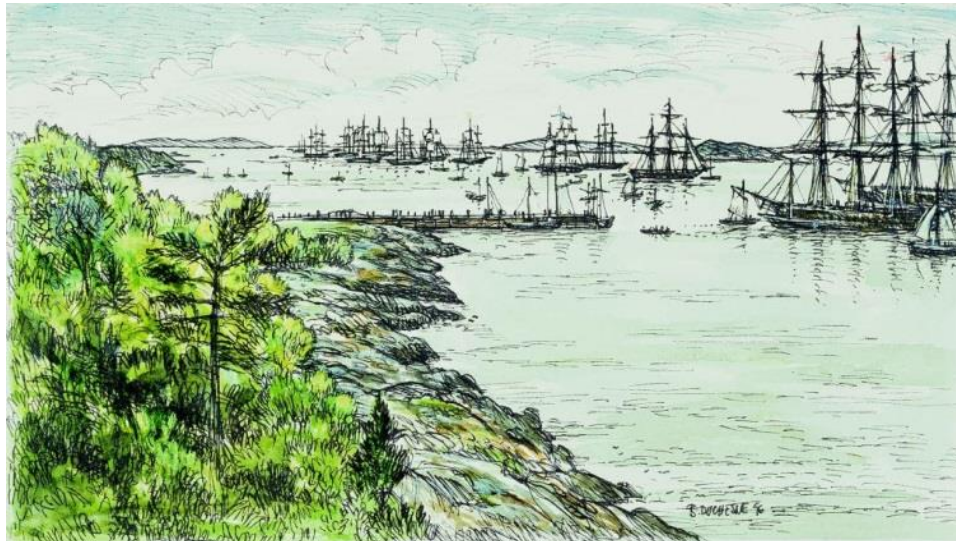
Four days later, eight more ships arrived at Grosse Ile carrying 430 fever patients. More than half of them were admitted to Grosse Ile and the others were required to stay on board. Grosse Ile had no place for these additional patients. The buildings intended as quarantine housing were immediately converted into hospitals, but this was a mere name change since the medical staff couldn't take care of additional patients. And of course, the numbers grew. Within



a few days, the “healthy” passengers on board these eight ships were as sick as those in the island’s fever hospital.

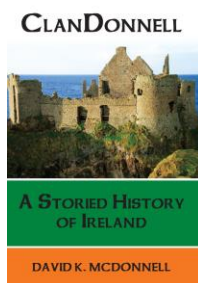
Five days later, thirty more ships arrived with ten thousand Irish. The wharfs at Grosse Ile were already full and the ships were ordered to anchor in the river and wait their turn. Within a week, ten more ships arrived with several thousand more Irish emigrants. It was now the end of May, and forty ships were in the St. Lawrence River, each anchored, awaiting their turn to dock at Grosse Ile. The line of ships extended two miles down the river.

Medical personnel from Grosse Ile found typhus or other highly infectious diseases on every one of the waiting ships. The Grosse Ile staff received an update on news from Ireland and what they learned frightened them to their very core -- many more ships were on their way to Quebec, carrying with them another fifty thousand Irish. Within a few weeks, there were eighty-eight ships anchored in the St. Lawrence, cued for their turn at Grosse Ile.



1996 illustration by Bernard Duchesne, showing ships in cue at Grosse Ile. Illustration © Parks Canada, with permission.

Officials and the citizens of Quebec scrambled to make do in an impossible situation. New buildings were constructed on Grosse Ile almost overnight. They included “Lazarettos” or quarantine stations (which were immediately converted into hospitals), kitchens, residences for cooks and nurses, washhouses, laundries, latrines, various outbuildings, and even a police station. The facilities still were not enough, and patients were housed in tents or exposed outside.



Grosse Ile did not have nearly enough staff. Nurses were particularly in short supply as was medicine of any kind. Most of the care was provided by volunteers from Quebec. Almost no medical care was provided, since there were so few medical personnel available for so many patients. Care consisted of keeping patients as comfortable as possible and was provided wherever patients could be placed.

As chaotic and difficult as it was on Grosse Ile, it was worse for those on board ship, waiting in line on the St. Lawrence. The healthy got sick and the sick got sicker. An untold number died on these ships. They were merely tossed overboard. “Burial at sea” became “burial at river,” and the infected bodies soon drifted to shore.

Ships ran out of drinkable water, some before they reached the Canadian coast. The water in the St. Lawrence is normally fresh and drinkable, but foul in the summer of 1847. Ships waiting in line had already cleaned their holds. Filthy straw from bedding, barrels of vile matter, tattered clothes and rags, and everything else wretched, had been thrown overboard. This does not even include the dead bodies. The ships waiting weeks in line could not even dip buckets into the St. Lawrence for fresh water.

By mid-summer, Quebec gave up on the quarantine. It couldn’t keep up with any meaningful triage, and those on board the ships in cue merely became sicker. One by one, ships were allowed to pass Grosse Ile and continue up river.

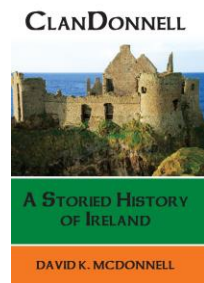
This did not, of course, solve the problem. It simply passed the problem further up river. Montreal, Bytown (Ottawa), Kingston, and Toronto quickly set up their own fever hospitals, staffed them the best they could, and cared for those afflicted.

But these cities could not establish anything close to quarantine. Those Irish in the up-river communities who could walk away did so, infecting Canadians as they did. Thousands in Montreal contracted typhus that summer. The city’s mayor contracted the disease and died. The highest fatality rate was among priests, nuns, ministers, volunteers, nurses and doctors – those who did their best to care for those in fever.

The Irish dead were buried in mass graves – on the island of Grosse Ile, near Kingston’s fever hospital, and at Windmill Point in Montreal. Toronto, being furthest from Quebec, was the best prepared for the onslaught. Over a thousand Irish died in Toronto, buried in graveyards provided by local churches.

British officials estimated that nearly 105,000 Irish left for Canada in 1847. Over six thousand died at sea, over 11,000 died in Canada, and 30,000 were hospitalized in Canada. These last three sets of numbers are probably low.

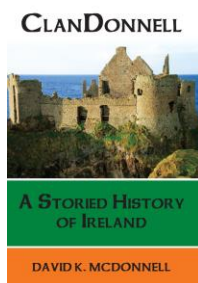
Estimates vary on the number of Canadians who died in 1847 from famine fevers contracted from the Irish. The absolute numbers may not be astronomically high, but the



percentage atrocious. This is simply because Canada was far from urban in the 1840s and the population of its cities relatively small. Quebec's population at the time was about thirty-two thousand; Montreal about twenty-five thousand; Kingston ten thousand; and Toronto about fifteen thousand. There were as many Irish aboard the coffin ships on the St. Lawrence River in 1847 as there in all of the Canadian cities along the river's shores!

Some Irish survivors left Canada, merely by walking across border to the United States. Many who stayed were those who couldn't leave: the old, the young, the sick, the widows, the orphans. They and their descendants ultimately became Canadians. As many as 4.5 million Canadians today are of full or partial Irish descent. Many are descendants of those Irish who arrived, and survived, 1847-- Canada's worst summer ever.

This article is a much abridged segment of *ClanDonnell: A Storied History of Ireland*, by David K. McDonnell, © Burrowing Owl Press. Information about the author and the book, including sample stories and book reviews is at www.clandonnell.net. ClanDonnell is available many retail outlets and online sources and at www.clandonnell.net.



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