

Comptes rendus — Book Reviews

DONALD HARMAN AKENSON — *The Irish in Ontario: A Study in Rural History*. Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1984. 404 pp.

Even in our modern multi cultural, supposedly enlightened Canadian society stereotypes of people and groups are found. The Italians are emotional and lackadaisical, the Greeks pugnacious. The Hindu, unable because of respect for life to kill insects, is said to keep a filthy home. The west coast "Paki" is prone to violence because that has been his experience in the host society. In fact he is most usually a Sikh, mislabelled with the terminology of another country's television media. Parallels exist in the country's past and more established, even founding groups have been subject to such typing. D.H. Akenson has sought to demythologize one group, which spoke the same language as the receiving population, had experience at home with the political system operative in Canada, experienced little discrimination and settled in the countryside. This group, the Irish, was actually the largest group in North America for most of the nineteenth century. It constituted a significant element of the population of Ontario. In 1851, as the Census reveals, the Irish were the largest single group after the Canadian-born. The inherited mythology, formed largely in the United States, is that they were predominantly Catholic, impoverished and diseased. Unable to deal with the frontier rural experience they, it is argued, became urban-oriented. History has not celebrated their achievement because they left little to celebrate; the Akenson thesis is that, on the contrary, the near invisibility of the Irish is a measure of their success in adapting to life in the New World.

The book consists of three parts. Part 1, labelled "Context" consists of a single chapter in which the author introduces the reader to the topic and to his objective of understanding, by means of a single case study of Leeds and Landsdowne Township, the process of ethnic adaptation and acculturation. By juxtaposing the results of this micro-study against an admittedly thin Ontario literature he is able to comment upon the wider Ontario scene and, though he chooses not to do so at great length, upon social and economic relationships in the Irish homeland. The method is deliberately comparative rather than inferential; Professor Akenson's philosophical position is that he is dealing with a total population rather than a sample. He thus obviates the need for statistical testing but given the comparative method, of necessity he is drawn into discussion of representativeness or "typicality". He feels that his obligation is not to work in a typical area for no area is wholly typical; rather it is to identify the peculiar combinations of social and environmental variables in the particular area and to establish where the particular case lies on the ethnic continuum for Ontario.

In substantive terms, this first chapter seeks to distinguish between ethnicity and place of birth, to establish the magnitude of the source regions of the migrants (mainly the northern half of the country) and the religious composition of the immigrants to Ontario (about two to one in favour of the Protestants). Building upon the existing literature and notably that of the geographer Cousens, as well as his own data, Akenson proceeds to show that (a) the immigrant Irishman, while broke, was not culturally broken nor technologically backward; (b) was not, as has been assumed, a landless labourer but more likely a small farmer, forced out by natural calamity rather than ineptitude; (c) was rural-oriented. As late as 1871 only 19.0 percent of Irish Catholics, the most urban-oriented, lived in anything in excess of village status. The Irish were not in Pentland's terms "left as sediment on the sea board". Akenson demonstrates the inappropriateness of this and the American model which postulates an urban Irishman to Canadian circumstances. Paddy was most likely a farmer and Protestant at that!

While chapter 1 serves to introduce the Irish, their qualities and values, chapters 2 and 3 serve to describe the social and economic organization and social values of the region that was to receive them. These first chapters (of Part 2) describe Landsdowne Township in the Loyalist era; a series

of maps are employed to describe the hierarchical arrangement of territory in Ontario and the “settlement” of the particular township. In addition, a series of sketches of the lives of prominent individuals, of the legal tangles in which individuals became embroiled, of the operation of the local civic-judicial system, of the attempts to control alcohol and suppress smuggling, is used to show that values were individualistic and free of ideology. The latter required a capacity for abstraction, a capacity that Professor Akenson believes rare in a population whose social and economic organization could be simply expressed as “each man for himself”. Yet co-operation did exist between individuals. If life was individualistic, a shared value was that of acquisitiveness in real property, especially land. Loyalist and non-loyalist are shown to have differed little with respect to the number of land transactions, the manner of acquisition or the rate with which it was disposed of.

Chapter 3, “Justification: Neither by Works nor by Faith? 1812-1814” uses the war years to confirm that, as the previous chapter has asserted, civic contracts were short-term, non-ideological and guided by self-interest. Akenson does so by tracing attitudes to military authority and practice, by documenting desertion rates which demonstrate the priority of obtaining a crop over waging war in this period, by showing that individuals on both sides did business with the enemy, and that even those who served sought personal gain, not just compensation. Many scholars would dissent from this position but all would agree that eventually a patriotic mythology emerged, which held that those who served during these years were entitled to the bounty of the Crown. The Irish or other immigrants arriving after 1815 faced an established way of doing things which not only placed them at a disadvantage but sanctioned their disadvantage (by prior arrival and service). The emerging mythology, in this view, emphasized Britishness and loyalty as justification of the privilege enjoyed by those settling before 1815. As Akenson points out, this myth was vulnerable to attack from within, from the waves of British immigrants who arrived after the war ended. Of those, none were more loyal than the Irish Protestants who were politically informed, land hungry, capable of organization and of breaking the bonds of privilege.

Chapter 4 is entitled “The Local Irish Revolution, 1816-1849”. It starts with a description of how development, measured in terms of cultivated land, the changing numbers of milk cows, mature oxen and horned cattle, was commensurate with population growth. It proceeds here and in the first 39 pages of the chapter to describe the possible impediments to settlement — physiographic and edaphic — as well as the history of those lands removed from the settlement process as Crown and Clergy Reserves or by land speculators. It discusses the identification of speculators, the relationship of speculative activity to the market, the role of leasing, the rational processes for the selection of land by settlers and the “ethnic” composition of the population in 1842. In short, within this chapter is nested a section on settlement *per se*. It provides a wealth of comparative material for which students of this process will be grateful. The section is well rooted in the literature (as is the book as a whole) and admirably executed but its inclusion with the other material of this chapter is somewhat peculiar. Indeed, if it were not that the title of the chapter gives it an overall unity, one might even wonder why *most* of the section is here. Perhaps it would be better elsewhere. It seems to lie uneasily with the next section where, for 28 exciting pages, Akenson documents the conflict between the established order and the aspiring Irish represented by that ambitious Anglo-Irish gentleman, Ogle R. Gowan. This reviewer has often pondered Gowan’s career; Akenson makes sense of it by showing it as part of the wide process of advance by Gowan’s fellow countrymen. Within the space of a few years, Gowan the agitator is replaced by that pillar of the establishment, Gowan the lieutenant-colonel whose opinion in matters of patronage now takes precedence over that of the older loyalist families! As Akenson aptly puts it:

Gowan’s local career after the 1836 election stands for the metamorphosis to respectability which his Irish followers, individually and severally, underwent.

He demonstrates their rise and agrarian prowess in the final section of the chapter by comparing the Irish-born to the non-Irish-born with respect to acreage held and improved, to acreage in particular crops and to numbers of livestock. The Irish held more land and cleared more than others, were more likely to be farmers than the general population, ate no more potatoes than anyone else but produced more wheat than others. All of this, with the exception of the last statement, sounds con-

gruent with this reviewer's results from Essex County, where specialization in wheat is seen to have been a function of the North American-born rather than the immigrants. Nonetheless, it is in the possibility of such comparative work that the value of this section lies. The return to this theme while necessary and useful is, from the point of view of the structure of the whole chapter, somewhat peculiar. Perhaps there should be not one but two chapters; the point, while valid in this reviewer's opinion, is a small one relative to the contribution of the chapter and indeed the book as a whole.

The theme of agricultural difference is picked up in the fifth chapter which deals with the rural order in the period 1849 to 1871. This and the subsequent chapter use "sub-infeudation" as the central concept. Akenson describes this as alien to Canadian history but nonetheless useful to describe the "complex infilling of feudal society with people and institutions". This resolutely pre-industrial metaphor is illustrated by documenting the growth of population, of fraternal organizations such as the Masons and Oddfellows, by describing the socializing influence of the churches and of militia membership, the technology linking and integrating developments in the study area to the wider economy via a postal communication network, the Rideau canal, a marine trade and the railway, which beginning at this time heralded the end of sub-infeudation. Where the Irish fitted into the process is demonstrated by an analysis of every farmstead in Leeds Township that operated as an economic unit. On four variables, that is, average cash value of the farm, farm implements, livestock and total case value of farm enterprise, the Irish performed better than anyone else on all except the value of livestock. Indeed, the order of economic status proved to be Irish Catholic (admittedly few in number), Irish Protestant, native-born Canadian and non-Irish immigrant. Here indeed is a surprising conclusion for the book. How are these results to be explained? Akenson opts for time of arrival rather than ethnicity and for the operation of a set of economic and social filters that permitted the most able Irish to enter commercial farming and turned the "handicapped" native-born Canadian into the same sector. Presumably the latter, possessing a superior knowledge of local society and perceiving greater opportunity in the developing economy left the farm. This is certainly a convenient explanation of a perplexing problem. Moreover, it avoids more racist thinking but in Essex County in 1850 the filter worked against the Irish and in favour of the non-French native Canadian! Interestingly, measured in terms of yields on the three most important cereal crops the newly arrived Irish ran second in Essex in a field that included the French Canadians, the Americans, the Scots, the English, the Irish and the "winners" — the non-French Canadians. At this stage it seems quite impossible for any one to provide a precise description of the filter the author postulates. However, his work has brought the Irish agricultural phenomenon into closer view. Within his study area, the difference that Akenson identifies may perhaps be explained by the fact that the Irish, arriving unencumbered by debt and with cash in hand, were able to take advantage of the speculators, desire (including Sir John A's) to unload land. In comparison, it is suggested that the native Canadian was probably in debt and socially encumbered with the need to provide for his family. Moreover, the Irish settled into a community in which the social structure supported them. The Church was Irish dominated; the school system had been largely imported from Ireland. The Orange Order, Irish in origin, added to its Irish strength the support of a wide cross-section of non-Irish Protestants. Akenson believes that, as a result of Irish numbers and the strength of their institutions, the host culture actually assimilated to the imported!

In chapter 6, using the concept of "sub-infeudation" Akenson describes the process by which Gananoque moved towards becoming an industrial village of skilled workers and small firms, a Canadian Birmingham. He does so by using contrasting data for 1848 and 1871, by which date the village had 49 firms and 420 workers. The village was at the point of becoming a class segmented society but had not done so yet; there was no significant difference in occupation between the native-born and the foreign-born (including the French Canadian as a culturally different group within the latter). In this "urban" word the Irish were differentiated along religious lines. The Protestant occupational profile was equal to that of the Scots and Irish who preceded native born Canadians, Irish Roman Catholics and French Canadians from Quebec. In the rural sector Irish Catholics constituted an elite.

In the last chapter of this volume, Akenson seeks to bring together his substantive conclusions and to speculate on the meaning of his study for Canadian social history, for the study of the Irish

diaspora and the history of Ireland. The study is, of course, a study of a particular part of Ontario and how a group of people came to establish themselves in a particular part of the province. As such, he argues, it can be used to gain insights into Irish settlement in Ontario and the New World. The Irish are shown to have been farmers and in Leeds and Landsdowne Township more successful than others, but comparison with the data of Professor MacInnis for all of Ontario reveals that the Irish were neither more nor less (in terms of a number of farming indicators) better off than the general population. This is itself a worthwhile insight giving the lie to the concept of the Irish as a group unable to survive on the agrarian frontier and therefore destined to congregate in cities. In Ontario, the Irish Catholic and Protestant did live on isolated farms, did accumulate funds to become farmers and did not practise an inefficient agriculture. Akenson argues that if Canada and the United States did not receive two different species then it would seem that the contrast reflects differences in the receiving countries. Alternatively, the original hypotheses are incorrect and disproven by the Canadian case. New World historiography of the Irish is in drastic need of revision to include within it recognition not only of the Irish Catholic but greater awareness of the Scots-Irish Presbyterian and the Anglo-Irish Anglican. So too the Old World historiography which has emphasized the cultural difference between Irish Catholic and Protestant must be revised. In the Canadian crucible, freed of the weights of the Irish homeland, Protestant and Catholic showed no significant difference. This leads Akenson to the suggestion that economic class rather than culture (for which religion has been considered the prime surrogate) is the more meaningful variable and that historians of Ireland have overlooked this. The suggestion may well become a working hypothesis; the class dimension certainly rings true in contemporary Ireland.

Akenson has produced a well designed, researched and written tome. The work is a skillful combination of traditional historical narrative and quantitative analysis. Although one wonders occasionally about the arrangement of sections this is a small fault, if one at all. No two authors could be expected to agree. The Social Science and Humanities Research Council and the Multiculturalism Directorate of the Secretary of State should be pleased with the results of the expenditure of their funds. Here is the perfect justification of Canadian Studies: a work in which Canadians learn of themselves and which teaches Irish and American historians a thing or two.

The author shows himself to be the master of a breadth of historical sources described in detail in a series of appendices. Indeed, footnoting is so rich that the reader can add hours to reading time; the maps are well conceived and executed. From the perspective of Canadian studies of the Irish, his work joins that of recent workers such as Brunger, Lockwood and Manion, complementing and augmenting their work. Yet there is obviously room for even more work on the Irish; indeed that is part of Akenson's accomplishment — to stimulate the field. From the perspective of Ontario historiography his work joins that of Gagan and Katz as important recent contributions. Akenson has helped destroy pre-conceptions and prejudices about the Irish and social historians should be grateful to him. He has left us with the suggestion of economic class as a meaningful form of analysis. In arguing for this he has sought to place in perspective the role of culture in explaining differences between Roman Catholics and Protestants.

...culture is endemic to Irish historical writing: that is, culture (and its Irish subcomponents, Irish-Catholic culture and the two Protestant variants, Anglo-Irish culture and Ulster-Scots culture) is treated as something that has a life of its own, which is a direct cause of events, and which is itself mysteriously independent of the other aspects of life. It is very easy to fall into this trap, especially concerning a country in which a theological sensibility has been important, in which dogma has been omnipresent, and in which most inhabitants (now and then) view the visible world as a mere crystallization of a greater invisible reality.

Whatever the fate of the class hypothesis I am grateful for this insight. To those of us born in Ireland it has the ring of truth and Akenson has the gift of sight.

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