

# EARLY CANADIAN EMIGRATION TO THE UNITED STATES

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IT seems to be the peculiar privilege of every age to believe that its own problems are unprecedented. In an inscription of 2000 B. C. the Assyrians lament, as numerous Canadians do to-day, that children *no longer* obey their parents. With a similar lack of imagination many modern problems—and of these none oftener than that of Canadian loss of population to the United States—are regarded as phenomena of the last few generations. As a matter of fact, the history of loss of population to the United States is as old as the history of Canada itself.

When the peace of 1783 opened again the tide of British emigration to North America, neither the fact that the original Thirteen Colonies had become foreign soil nor the subsequent establishment of two new British colonies, Upper Canada and New Brunswick, served to keep that tide wholly within the British empire. Officials and colonizers so well informed as Lieutenant-Governor Colonel John Graves Simcoe and Colonel Thomas Talbot early warned the Colonial Department that agents were at work “enticing artists” to the United States, and indeed both Simcoe and Talbot based their hopes for success in colonization on the possibility of redirecting this outward movement to Upper Canada from its source in the British Isles or from its first destination in the United States.<sup>1</sup>

Before immersing himself entirely in British North American affairs, Lord Selkirk too had made a thorough study of British emigration to the now independent colonies. During the exasperating delay in 1802-03, while his emigration proposals were passed about from Lord Pelham to Lord Hobart, on to Addington and back again to the laconic Hobart, Selkirk threatened since he was “engaged in the business” to settle his emigrants upon land he had purchased in the United States.<sup>2</sup> Nothing, however, came of the threat, unless it was the Government’s partial acquiescence in his schemes. Tactfully abandoning the American plan as “most

1. C. O. 42/43; C. O. 43/333, Simcoe to Hobart. Feb. 11 1803.

2. Can. Arch., Sel. Pap., Vol. 51-2.

repugnant" to his feelings, the Earl turned his boundless energies into the only field acceptable to the British cabinet. By means of the wide publicity he always seemed to command, as well as by actual assistance to groups of Scots travelling the long Mohawk valley route to Upper Canada, Selkirk made himself a leader in the directing of British emigrants from the United States to Canada.<sup>3</sup>

But the early stream of British emigration flowed to the Thirteen Colonies with the power and persistence of Canute's tide. In determining both the removal and destination of emigrants the most influential factor is usually conceded to be previous emigration. Selkirk believed that the only really effective method of shifting the current would be by moving the original nucleus in America;<sup>4</sup> for while the men of Argyll went out to their kin in the Carolinas and Inverness kept close its ties with the North, emigration was no longer exile. Johnson discerned the fundamental truth of the movement when he wrote in the Hebrides in 1773, "he that goes thus accompanied carries with him all that makes life pleasant; . . . language, . . . opinions, . . . popular songs and hereditary monuments; they change nothing but the place of their abode; and of that change they perceive the benefit."<sup>5</sup>

None of the early colonizers, not Simcoe, nor Talbot, nor Selkirk nor any other, succeeded in steaming this tide. Their failure may be taken as an illuminating indication of the half century of similar failures that were to follow.

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By 1815 neither problem nor Government policy—if policy it may be called—had changed. When the Government offered free transportation and land to a few hundred Scottish emigrants, the Ministry was asked to defend the radical measure—for so it seemed at the time. Henry Goulburn of the Colonial Department did so with the following explanation and with this alone—that "the object of Government was merely to direct those determined to emigrate and change their destination from the United States to His Majesty's possessions."<sup>6</sup>

During the next few years the outward movement increased rapidly. Again and again the British newspapers record and deplore departures for the United States.<sup>7</sup> Peel in the '20s regrets

3. Ibid, Vols. 76, 51-2.

4. Ibid, passim.

5. Johnson, Samuel, *Journey to the Western Islands*, p. 336.

6. Parl. Deb., 1815, vol. 31, p. 917.

7. Cam. Chron. & Hunt. Gaz. 1817, May 16-23; Times, 1817, May 14 et seq.

the exodus from Ireland mainly because it means a gain to a foreign country,<sup>8</sup> and Cobbett in spite of Birkbeck's evidence to the contrary assures the English that his sojourn in the United States has convinced him that Englishmen do well to remain at home, since from his experience they "transplant badly."<sup>9</sup> Meanwhile in the Agricultural Committee of 1822, the Irish Committees of 1923-25 and the Emigration Committees of 1826-27 the Government had been investigating the problems, apparently closely related, of distress and emigration. That emigration to America was a well established method of obtaining relief was soon proved by the testimony of numerous witnesses. It remained for the reports to suggest a remedy. In doing so the committees struck a note of imperial solidarity usually thought to be out of tune with the times. Though a committee in 1817 had recommended that "all obstacles to seeking employment wherever it can be found, even out of the realm, should be removed",<sup>10</sup> these later reports dwelt upon the possibilities for settlement that lay in colonies affording "an extent of unoccupied territory" and, in short, gave promise of the larger efforts soon to be made—by means of the emigration experiments of 1820-21, and 1823-25—to retain emigrants within the bounds of British dominions.<sup>11</sup>

In the Colonial Office where plans for South Africa, Australia and Canada were discussed simultaneously, the influence of the United States upon policy for Canada is frequently evident. It is stating a half truth only to say that the United States has been a good advertiser and so has won out in the emigrant markets of the world. The Declaration of Independence may have operated, as some one has said, like a masterpiece of publicity, but it was the economic and political and social conditions which made the Declaration possible that gave the United States a giant start in the race of development with Canada. Nor was that the only advantage. While discharged soldiers were still beginning to plant outposts in the Canadian wilderness, the United States proceeded to acquire the whole continent west to the Pacific, and into that great field of abundant resources rapidly poured the surplus population and capital of the East. Upon the consequent amazing development it has become commonplace to remark. English travellers crossing from the United States to Canada commented upon the over-development of American business, particularly banking, and with a complacency interesting to-day professed themselves glad to see

8. Parker, *Robert Peel*, vol. 1, p. 234.

9. Cobbett, *Rural Rides*, vol. 1, p. 3; *Parl. Rep.* 1863 (430) XXVIII, p. 21.

10. *Parl. Rep.* 1817 (462) VI, p. 20.

11. *Parl. Rep.* 1819 (529) II, p. 249.

that Canadian towns were not marred by a similar mushroom growth. Yet this backwardness in capitalistic, and later industrial, development more than any other factor retarded Canadian growth till well after the Rebellions of 1837. One has only to go through the Customs books of any Lake Ontario port to see how dependent were the early settlers upon the industries of the United States, while at the same time those industries helped to absorb the population essential to a broader Canadian life. Throughout the whole history of its administration of Canada, the Colonial Office was confronted with the competitive attractions which this head start made possible in the United States—its great demand for labour, its variety of occupations, its higher wages, and at times its cheaper land.

When Wilmot Horton, Under Secretary in the Colonial Office 1822-30, attempted to negotiate with the Wakefield Colonization Society in 1830, an experience of eight years in dealing with North American conditions led him to demand a preliminary agreement which would reserve the British North American colonies to himself and leave only the southern possessions to the Systematic Colonizers. Sale of land at an arbitrarily fixed price, such as Wakefield advocated, might succeed in isolated colonies; but the adoption of that policy near the cheap lands of the United States would be disastrous.<sup>12</sup> Horton and the Wakefield group soon fell out, but the fact that "Systematic Colonization" never took root in the North American as it did in the Australian colonies was not entirely due, as is often asserted, to the earlier development of Canada. No matter what the theoretical systems then in vogue, it was essential that Canadian methods should be developed to meet American competition.

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Upon the actual movement of population in British North America the influence of the United States was immediate and powerful. The route from Scotland to Nova Scotia was well-travelled, but the same stream had worn earlier channels to the Thirteen Colonies, and gradually the British Government learned that unless the emigrants' way were made pleasant to the British possessions, they would follow the line of least resistance and make their new homes under another flag.

As early as 1791 Lieutenant-Governor Parr of Nova Scotia, his "heart bleeding for the poor wretches", was forced to provide Indian meal and herrings for a number of Highlanders whom the "Horror of Famine" was about to compel to take "shelter in the

<sup>12.</sup> Horton, *Inquiry into the Causes and Remedies of Pauperism*, Third and Fourth Series p. 96.

United States where every possible encouragement" was given them.<sup>13</sup> Later governors were less kind-hearted possibly, but none the less practical. In the '20s Lieutenant-Governor Smith of Prince Edward Island and officials of the neighbouring colonies protested vigorously to the Colonial Department against the landing and re-shipping of destitute emigrants on their shores. It was unfair that paupers of one country should be thrown upon the charity of another, and secondly, why should the young colonies be burdened, temporarily though it might be, with emigrants eventually to settle in a foreign land?

In New Brunswick, where Sir Howard Douglas was an active student of settlement problems, this loss of population to the United States was one of the reasons for the organization of Emigrant Societies, amalgamated with Agricultural Societies, the purpose of which was to receive the new arrivals at the ship and assist them "judiciously" until they were satisfactorily established as citizens of New Brunswick.<sup>14</sup> Notwithstanding these efforts, the history of the first half of the century shows a growing movement from New Brunswick to the New England states. Though 9000 arrived in the colony in 1832 from the British Isles, 7000 passed over from Saint John and St. Andrews to "the land of promise" (across the bay).

In the colonies inland the attractions of the southern neighbour were equally powerful. At Prescott, opposite Ogdensburgh, the agents of a large land-owner of New York State, David Parish, were busy immediately after the peace of 1815. That year Major-General Sir Sidney Beckwith, Quarter Master General of the Forces and Superintendent in Charge of the first Scots whom the British Government assisted to emigrate to Canada, was forced to offer additional favours in order to keep the same Scots from accepting the Parish settlement terms on the lands across the St. Lawrence.<sup>15</sup> Apparently the recipient of Government aid felt himself under slight obligation to his benefactor; for after receiving free transportation, land and rations provided in the emigration experiment of 1823, numbers of the Irish decamped to the United States.<sup>16</sup>

Losses of this sort were the most discouraging facts revealed in balancing up the success and failure of the emigration experiments undertaken by the British Government in the first half of the century. Each emigration scheme developed was defended by a

13. C. O. 217/63.

14. C. O. 188/30, Douglas to Bathurst Oct. 21, 1824. The Agricultural and Emigrant Societies received private, provincial and British aid.

15. C. O. 42/357, Gore to Bathurst Nov. 20, 1816.

16. C. O. 42/377, enclosure in Maitland to Bathurst May 12.

characteristic combination of the new humanitarian with the old mercantile argument—each, it was said, would bring relief to those in distress at home, and at the same time strengthen the empire by retaining valuable citizens soon to become producers of both raw materials and new markets. But the whole argument fell to the ground when critics showed that in a philanthropic attempt at empire building in which the public paid for the emigrant at the rate of £22 per head, the bill actually amounted to £26 per settler<sup>17</sup>—since immediately after their arrival in Canada many, Scots and English as well as Irish, who had accepted the British bounty removed to the United States.

Upper Canada, just as New Brunswick, made particular efforts to retain the incoming population. Even after the adoption of the land sales system in 1831, Lieutenant-Governor Sir John Colborne succeeded in winning from the Colonial Office permission to assist in the settlement of indigent emigrants. In 1832 the bill for placing 423 families in Adelaide and Warwick amounted to £6000;<sup>18</sup> the outlay was repaid, Sir John Colborne maintained, by an influx of emigrants of means who took up land along the roads opened by the labour of the poorer settlers. Without such an expenditure both indigent and well-to-do might have been lost from the Canadas.

Quebec faced a problem the urgency of which demanded a more immediate solution. Every week during the sailing season there disembarked on its docks from 100 to 3000 steerage passengers, bewildered and sea-worn. One is safe in estimating that fifty per cent of those who landed adjusted themselves to new circumstances at once and disappeared “up the river” with a rapidity astonishing even to-day. Of the other fifty per cent, there were always some who were ill, others who had lost their money, their papers of recommendation, their friends or even their minds. Calls for charity were innumerable. All who were physically fit needed work, and they were in just the right state of dejection to take up with any designing agent. The older development of New York State—the comparative wealth of its landowners, the building of its canals and roads, and the rapid growth of the salt and other industries—all these created a demand for labour much greater than could be expected in the young British colonies. By 1818 Kingston and Montreal in attempting to solve problems much like that of Quebec had appointed committees the object of which was to find employment for British emigrants and so “prevent their departure to the United States.” Subscriptions for such societies were at first public,

17. Parl. Rep. 1825 (200) VII; C. O. 384/12; Robinson to Horton Jan. 1, 1825.

18. C. O. 42/415, enclosure in Colborne to Stanley Sept. 14, 1832.

but the larger Emigrant Society at Quebec soon urged its needs upon the Home Government, and received a yearly allowance to be used in assisting the mother country's indigent in adapting themselves to life in the colonies.

So willing, indeed, was the Home Government to answer appeals in which this patriotic motive was emphasized that funds for practically the same purpose were allotted to the British Consul in the largest port of the United States. James Buchanan, Consul in New York after the War of 1812, was one of the most intelligent and active advocates for the redirection of British emigrants to Canada. He was finally authorized by the Colonial Department to spend ten dollars a head in sending on newly arrived British subjects to Upper Canada, and between the years 1817 and 1819 he forwarded at least 3000.<sup>19</sup> After the opening of the Erie Canal made the route to Upper Canada less tedious and expensive, the Consul's office was often crowded with British emigrants applying for conveyance. In one month in 1834 over 1200 were sent on to Upper Canada. Nevertheless the same year Buchanan had occasion to report his fears that the Americans were winning over the whole British shipping trade, and consequently the British subjects whom they carried.<sup>20</sup>

To what extent the St. Lawrence was used intentionally as a route from the British Isles to the United States it would be difficult, if not impossible, to determine. Certainly departures across the St. Lawrence and the lower lakes were numerous and continuous. Nothing could be more misleading than the early habit of taking Quebec landings as an indication of the population of the colonies. It is possible that as large a proportion as one quarter or one third of those who disembarked at Quebec before 1832 made their way to the United States; during the next few years the proportion increased.<sup>21</sup>

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The theory that such emigrants were confirmed wanderers cannot be satisfactorily established. A survey of the border counties of New York State would lead one to believe that the majority found work on land near the coast; in travelling through the counties one comes across a surprising number of citizens whose "people came from Canada", perhaps last year, fifty or one hundred years ago. Investigation of the manuscript sources available for the earlier period bears out the truth of this verbal evidence. A detailed census taken in 1855 shows many Canadian born.<sup>22</sup> But more

19. C. O. 43/24, Bathurst to Sherbrooke Jan. 10, 1817; C. O. 42/357, Buchanan to Gore July 8, 1816; Gore to Buchanan July 31.

20. C. O. 385/35, Buchanan to Stanley June 14, 1834.

21. See yearly reports of A. C. Buchanan, Emigrant Agent at Quebec.

22. The original manuscript of the census with details of birth, years of residence etc., is available in most of the border counties, Oswego, Jefferson, St. Lawrence etc., and also in many of the inland counties, as Onondaga.

interesting than these are the families, and they are numerous, of which the parents were British born, the eldest child British born, the second child Canadian born, and the third and all others American born. Upon the significance of the single Canadian born child it is unnecessary to enlarge.

Though less reliable than the census, the early county histories tell the same story. In Monroe county opposite Cobourg there was in the middle of the century a fair percentage of British born who had entered via Canada and also a smaller number of Canadian born.<sup>23</sup> Niagara and Oswego counties stood next to Jefferson and St. Lawrence with a relatively high proportion of citizens whose native homes were across the boundary line.<sup>24</sup> Again, take illustrations from histories not of counties but of peoples, such as that of the "Pioneer Irish of Onondaga" written mainly from personal interviews with early settlers. In spite of the general tradition that the Irish left Ireland eagerly when seeking American rather than British territory, the family histories given here provide proof that very many Irish used the St. Lawrence route and tried their fortune in Canada before forsaking British soil. This is all the more remarkable in the case of Onondaga because, as it is an inland county and more easily accessible from New York city than the border counties, the commonly accepted theory has been that the entire Irish population, exclusive of course of pre-Revolutionary stock, came in from the Atlantic coast at the time of the building of the canals. Bannan, however, gives the story of numerous Irish labourers who worked on the St. Lawrence river, in the Maritime Provinces, on the Welland Canal and even in Newfoundland before answering the advertisements which later drew them to New York State. Men of some means, like the Driscolls of the same county, invested as much as £1000 in hotels and shops in Canada, only to fail in business and finally follow the lure of the same American El Dorado.<sup>25</sup>

To trace emigrants moderately rich or moderately poor, and these form the bulk of every movement, is always difficult. The annals of the mediocre are short. But the trail left by the very poor is usually well marked and more or less easy to follow; from it may be discovered the attitude taken towards this inland British immigration by the early American communities. One is not surprised that this should be an anticipation of the action so much discussed recently, and that the early as well as the later should have

23. Peck, William F., *Landmarks of Monroe County, New York*. Boston 1895.

24. Pool, William, *Landmarks of Niagara County, New York*, edited by William Pool. Hough, Franklin, *History of St. Lawrence and Franklin Counties; History of Jefferson County*, Albany, 1854.

5. Bannan, Theresa, M.D., *Pioneer Irish of Onondaga*. (About 1776-1847). Putnam, 1911

been adopted as a practical expedient in order to solve a pressing economic problem.

In spite of their reputed prosperity, American pioneer communities were short of funds for the care of their needy. Between 1818 and 1843 the village of Oswego voted annually for "the Support of the Poor" sums varying from \$100 to \$2000. By 1843 the Justices of the Peace and Supervisors of the Poor found themselves overwhelmed with a "foreign" danger—"whereas. . .the proximity of the said Port to Canada and the great facilities given to foreigners to emigrate and locate themselves in this country who are poor, or owing to the dispensations of Providence otherwise helpless and become frequently a charge upon the Community—have greatly and unequally increased the public Burthens." Though similar conditions existed in other parts of the state, general action was not taken, and Oswego went about the solution of the local problem unaided. No new offices were created, no additional expense incurred; the Overseers of the Poor were simply ordered "to examine all Steam Boats, Canal Boats and other Craft entering. . .the Port to Prevent the landing of Paupers."<sup>26</sup>

Such action indicated the adoption by the inland port of the policy followed on the Atlantic coast where, after the peace of 1815, the "foreign" danger was immeasurably greater than on the lakes. American and British shipowners, looking with a business eye on the poverty and distress then prevailing in Europe and the British Isles, had gone into the "emigrant trade" as slave dealers had gone into the slave trade, and with almost as little regard for their human cargo. Before the Revolution the colonies had placed some restrictions upon indiscriminate immigration.<sup>27</sup> Now, in 1819, New York and other Atlantic ports began to insist on shipmasters giving bond that their emigrants once landed would not become paupers. But the attempt at control was only partially effective; soon certain harbours, notably Amboy, New Jersey, gained the reputation of being "easy ports", and importation of the forbidden emigrant continued.

On the inland frontier the same irregularity prevailed; some districts, as Oswego, provided the machinery to exclude paupers; others left such regulation to chance. Whichever the system, population usually moved freely across the boundary, adjusting itself, without artificial restraint, to economic conditions the laws governing which are still a matter of some little controversy.

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Thus early in the history of American problems are the lines of future development first roughly drawn.

26. Minutes of the meetings of the village council of Oswego, (in manuscript, bound) in the possession of Mr. Rounds of Oswego.

27. Proper, Emberson Edward, A.M., *Colonial Immigration Laws. A study of the regulation of immigration by the English colonies in America.* 1900.