

# Success, Murder, and Memory in the Ottawa Valley

## Irish Lumber Barons and the Making of Canada

John Egan and Andrew Leamy were both born in Ireland, five years apart: John in Galway in 1811 and Andrew in Tipperary in 1816. Both became self-made lumber barons in the Ottawa Valley. They were part of a thriving Irish community of all shades. Navvies who had helped build the Rideau Canal and lumbermen in the shanties that cut and lugged the timber to the rivers. Skilled hewers who squared the logs, mill workers who sawed the timber into planks and staves, and rafters who floated their great temporary vessels in dangerous passage to Montreal and Quebec. Shop owners, soldiers, innkeepers, blacksmiths, politicians, business owners, priests and nuns, and, most numerous of all, farmers who thrived supplying the lumber industry.

Eganville and Lac Leamy record the names of John and Andrew. Historic Irish settlement echoes in copious place names in the Ottawa Valley: Killaloe, Westmeath, Naas, Navan, New Carlow, Munster and Letterkenny. These record names but do not recall histories. I know the great people in Douglas, Low and Venosta. They cherish their Irish heritage and know their genealogies. Around Eganville and Aylmer, Egan lives in local memory, most recently with a commemorative granite bench unveiled last year at his fine old home in Aylmer, incorporated when he was mayor. Michael McBane's evocative biography is an invaluable record of Egan's life and impact but it is a rare achievement. Yet very few I encountered knew of Lac Leamy's origins. Some assumed they were Quebecois.

Time to bring Andrew Leamy back into the light. Andrew's life connects us not just to the influential Egan but also to the creation of Ottawa itself. Since the Rideau Canada was a commercial failure, the lumber industry ensured fledgling Bytown had a future. Moreover, Egan and Leamy were party to a pioneering group of Irish figures who created Canada's lumber industry, its leading exporter throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Before we tell his history and that of the Irish lumber barons, it is important to acknowledge the region's Indigenous inhabitants before European settlement. The Anishinaabe ranged from the Ottawa Valley as far as the Great Lakes and south to what is now the United States. Algonquin Anishinaabe groups utilized the wild rice, fish, and rich hunting in the Ottawa Valley in the summer. They gathered at the prominent hill overlooking the confluence of the Rideau, Ottawa, and Gatineau Rivers to trade (Odawa means trader) and socialize. In winter, they hunted and fished in the extensive forests of the rugged Gatineau. At the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the territory of Chief Pinesi and his people ranged either side of Rideau Falls. Despite European assumptions at the time, no part of North America was unclaimed by some Indigenous community. The Indigenous like Pinesi were respectful custodians of the lands and waters that sustained them, curating the grasslands and forests to ensure healthy wildlife populations. Not so the European settlers who began to move into the area from New England beginning around 1800. Theirs's was an extractive economy: first beaver, then lumber.

In 1800, aided by an Algonquin guide, Philemon Wright from Massachusetts led a group to settle where the Gatineau and Ottawa rivers met, overlooking Chaudière Falls. They cleared two farms, the 'Gateno' and Columbia where Wright built a log cabin, sardonically called the Wigwam. Drawing on his capital of \$20,000, Philemon created Wright's Town, with a forge, bakery, tailor, cobbler and eventually a school. Wrights Town became Hull and is today Gatineau.

While Philemon Wright was establishing his colony, in Quebec City Henry Caldwell from Fermanagh was enjoying the rewards of being a famous soldier, distinguished at the sieges of the city in 1759 and 1775 (he had the honor of carrying news of the latter victory to the King in London). Caldwell had a successful business milling flour for the British Army. With the strategic insight common among Ireland's Protestant Ascendancy, Caldwell convinced the British Admiralty in 1804 to switch their supply of lumber from the Baltic to Canada. Caldwell rightly anticipated Napoleon's Continental Blockade of 1806. Caldwell converted his flourmills to saw mills.

Caldwell's nephew by marriage, George Hamilton from Dunboyne, realized his import business of Baltic timber and Madeira Wines at Liverpool was doomed. By 1806, facilitated by introductions from his well-placed uncle, George had established himself in Quebec City, importing luxury goods, from nails and wines to silks and parasols. By 1809, orders for timber from the Admiralty were worth £2,500,000 a year. Hamilton and his brother William leased land from his uncle Henry across the river and set up their commercial base at New Liverpool Cove. They soon acquired the mills at Hawkesbury from their partners Mears and Pattee, leading to a prolonged and occasionally violent feud. At the Long Sault rapids halfway between Ottawa and Montreal, the mills became a lynchpin in the supply of lumber from the Ottawa Valley to Montreal and Quebec and across the North Atlantic to Ireland and Britain. This was welcome news for Wright whose depleted capital made him look for income to the boundless forests around him. He floated the first raft of logs down the Ottawa in 1806 to the markets in Montreal. Hamilton partnered with Charles Adamson Low and by 1835 they were selling 11.5 million board feet of pine, extending operations into the Gatineau.

The ships that took Canadian lumber across the Atlantic came back with stone ballast (dumped below the citadel at Quebec and throughout the St Lawrence). Their owners were more than happy to accommodate fare-paying passengers on a route much cheaper than passage to the United States. This facilitated the first large wave of Irish emigrants to Canada, Protestant farmers. Among them arrived Nicholas Sparks (Catholic but soon an Anglican convert) who got a job working with Philemon's son Ruggles. Soon he had graduated from labouring to buying supplies in Montreal and Quebec. Having accumulated some money, in 1821 Sparks bought 200 acres for £95 across from Hull where the Rideau River entered the Ottawa. Like many, Sparks ran small lumber operations. Arch-tory Hamilton wanted big business to steady the lumber industry and he set out to crush smaller operations like those of Sparks.

Then came the Rideau Canal. One of the greatest strategists produced by the Irish Protestant Ascendancy, Arthur Wellesley (the Duke of Wellington) put into action his plan to fortify Canada against another attempted invasion by the US. Shocked by the War of 1812, Wellington wanted a canal to supply Montreal from Kingston as part of a defensive network that included Martello Towers, fortifications, militias, and arms depots. In 1826, construction of the Rideau Canal began, a mixed labour force of Scots, Irish, French, and Indigenous. British Army sappers assisted construction at challenging sections. Many Irish laborers had followed the canal's builder, Thomas McKay, from the newly completed Lachine Canal at Montreal. Dangerous work and malaria in the bug-infested shores took many lives, upwards of one thousand at a guess.

Because he owned the land at the head of the canal, Sparks found himself sitting on a fortune in real estate. As he said himself, he became landlord to a town. Daniel O'Connor, attracted by the business opportunities of the canal's construction, arrived from Ireland to become a leading business figure and politician in the fledgling Bytown, called after the British Army engineer Colonel John By. O'Connor's daughter would be the first European girl born in Bytown, Mary Ann By

O'Connor in 1826 (the first boy, John By Burrows, was also born that year but died in infancy seven months later).

The canals (Lachine at Montreal, the Rideau, and the Grenville at the Long Sault rapids at Hawkesbury) and refortifications of places like the citadel in Halifax and in Quebec City attracted the second wave of Irish emigrants, Catholics suffering from the agricultural depression in Ireland following the end of the Napoleon wars in 1815 (Wellington again). Demobilized Irish soldiers who had filled the ranks of Wellington's armies also arrived to settle and defend the frontier, just the kind of warlike and loyal settlers that Wellington wanted. There were so many Irish living near the canal that it was dubbed Corktown. Among the new arrivals was John Egan who arrived in 1830, got a job as a clerk and soon had established a dry goods store at Aylmer, near Wright's Town. It was not long before he began his lumber interest and by dint of energy and talent he became one of the largest and richest operators in the Ottawa Valley.

Chief Pinesi protested in vain against the invasion and settlement of his land, lodging some twenty petitions with the authorities. His people, devastated by disease, were too few to resist. Even though he had been a local ally of the British and fought, along with his son, in the War of 1812, the authorities ignored him. Cholera struck in 1832 and its return in 1834 killed Pinesi and his wife. None of the territories of the Ottawa or Gatineau Valleys were ever subject to a treaty and remain to this day unsundered. The Algonquin Anishinaabe still fight to rectify this and have claims to their traditional land acknowledged in a meaningful way.

By 1832, the Rideau Canal was finished and the unemployed Irish looked to muscle in on the French control of the lumber industry. Legendary strongman and lumberjack Joseph Montferrand led the French. The Irish earned the moniker the Shiners, a rowdy gang led by the charismatic and cunning Peter Aylen, born in Liverpool of Irish parents. The Shiners' War was a prolonged period of criminal chaos that terrorized Bytown throughout most of the 1830s. Fatalities have been estimated at around forty. When it was over, Aylen settled across the river and became a respectable member of society with extensive business interests, including lumber.

The Irish-French clashes were not the only tensions. Catholic settlers arrived with the first Robinson migration in 1823 in Lanark and Carleton counties. Established Protestants were unhappy, leading to rioting between the new arrivals and the local militia, the Ballygiblin riots. A much larger group arrived in 1825 and settled in the Peterborough area. The riots presaged decades of tensions as more Catholics arrived, expressed in confrontations that peaked under the green of the Irish Catholics and the orange of the Irish Protestants around St Patrick's Day and the Twelfth of July.

Tensions between the Irish and French eased through their cooperation when upwards of 4000 Irish Famine refugees arrived in Bytown in 1847. The local population was not much bigger. The refugees were looking for their people already settled in the Valley. They were in an appalling state, many suffering from typhus whose cause was unknown. They died at the fever sheds near the canal, on parliament hill, and the streets of downtown. Sister Elisabeth Bruyère, assisted by young Irish and Quebecois Gray Nuns, ran a temporary hospital, saving many. Oblate Fathers, doctors, and lay people risked their lives helping the influx. Thanks to McBane's research and his book on episode, *Bytown 1847*, we know that some 300 died and were buried in the newly opened graveyard on Sandy Hill. They lie there still, somewhere under the manicured grounds of Macdonald Gardens Park.

Throughout this period, Egan was building his mighty lumber operation, one of the largest run by a single man. By 1844, his rafts were transporting 2.5 million feet to Quebec, some forty rafts a

season. A friend to all, eloquent and charming, like Sparks a convert to Anglicanism, Egan's political career rose steadily from Mayor of Aylmer to Member of Parliament, representing first Ottawa and then Pontiac. In 1849, Egan presented a petition on behalf of the Algonquin, granting them the reserve of Kitigan Zibi. At the same time, he was a leader in the settlement of the region, advertising for Irish immigrants in the ports of Donegal, New Ross, and Wexford. Much of the widespread Irish settlement of the Pontiac can be traced to Egan's efforts. In 1853, he entertained Governor General Lord Elgin as part of a campaign to make Bytown the capital.

Andrew Leamy's family arrived from Tipperary while he and his siblings were still children. Andrew had clearly adapted well to the rougher life in frontier Canada, earning a reputation for physical strength in a region of hard men. In at least one incident he disrupted a meeting in Bytown as part of the Shiners' War. He could use his fists when needed, tragically killing a young Scotsman, though it was judged self-defense. Despite this, Leamy became an enormously popular figure, known for his generosity and compassion. He got his first job rafting Ayleen's lumber to Quebec, a very dangerous occupation, and then settled down to work for Philemon Wright.

Nicholas Sparks had developed close relations with the Wrights and adopted Philemon Jr's daughter when he died in a carriage accident a year after her birth. Leamy married Erexima; they were aged 19 and 15 respectively. They would have ten children. He eventually bought 160 hectares of the Wright farm that he had worked, along with its pond and reputedly the famous Wigwam. With money to be made in lumber, Leamy decided to build a mill there, along with a canal connecting Leamy Lake to the Gatineau River.

The young carpenter building Leamy's mill was J.R. Booth, son of Irish emigrants. Fascinated since boyhood with the mills and slides of the lumber industry all around him, Booth methodically learned the business. Having leased the mills at Chaudière Falls in 1857, two years later Booth won the contract to supply Thomas McGreevey, another son of Irish immigrants, who in turn had won the contract to build the new parliament. With this money, Booth bought the rights to the pines of the Madawaska River, owned by John Egan's company. Egan himself had died of cholera in Quebec in 1857, aged only 47. Descendants of his many children still live today in the Ottawa region, including one who has his dueling pistols and other memorabilia.

Booth's purchase of the Madawaska pines became the source of his fortune. Booth's focus was the booming US market since Britain had removed the tariff protection on Canadian lumber. With lumber storage facilities at Rouses Point NY, a lumber operation in Burlington VT, a sales office in Boston, and a network of railways, lumber slides and canals, Booth's business made J.R., as he was known, the richest man in Canada, and the largest private railway owner in the world. At this stage, the Hamilton brothers Robert and John, sons of George, were producing 700,000 feet of lumber per day and employing 1000 men at the Hawkesbury mills, halfway to Montreal.

The lumber operations changed the landscape, converting it from forest to farms. The Irish dug out the roots of the great felled pines along with rocks to make the Gatineau farmable. The roads around Brennan's Hill record the surnames of the Irish farming families. Logs and sawdust choked the life out the Ottawa River. When steam-powered mills were established, the air was thick with smoke. Much to the chagrin of the locals, Oscar Wilde's wit deserted him on his visit to Ottawa in 1882 as he complained bitterly about the pollution. "No one has a right to pollute the air and water, which are the common inheritance of all," Wilde insisted over the audience's disapproval. "We should leave them to our children as we have received them."

McGreevey, Booth, and the Hamilton brothers were great examples of the success of the first generation of Irish Canadians. Another was Tom Ahearn, whose blacksmith father John and mother Nora had arrived from Ireland in the rough and tumble Bytown. Tom was born in 1855 when Bytown became Ottawa. A precocious inventor, Ahearn became the Edison of Canada, bringing electricity to his hometown (before Washington managed it), creating the electric tram system that defined the city's residential development, and inventing the electric oven. One of the leading figures in Bytown-Ottawa from the 1840s to the 1860s was journalist, alderman and three-time Mayor Henry J. Friel, son of Irish parents from Montreal. Like their fathers, the work ethic and business acumen of first-generation Canadians defied the stereotype of the Irish as ill-disciplined and alcoholic.

Leamy's lumber operations made him a rich and well-known figure in the area. He became fast friends with Canada's most famous Irishman, Thomas D'Arcy McGee, one of the Confederation's architects. Both friends had much with which to be satisfied by 1867. D'Arcy McGee saw his dreams of a Canadian nation realized, supported by the Irish Governor General Charles Monck who had visited Ottawa and picked Rideau Hall to be the official residence. While three of Leamy's children had died, seven had survived to adulthood. He had invested heavily in the development of Hull and was instrumental in the creation of the Independent School Board the previous year

Both D'Arcy McGee and Leamy lived and moved amidst a dense Irish community, with the Irish language heard in the valleys of the Ottawa and Gatineau rivers and in the streets of Ottawa. From Byward Market to the hamlet of Douglas, from the towns of Almonte, Renfrew and Smiths Falls to the farms of the Gatineau Valley and the communities of the Pontiac, these were thriving Irish communities proud of their success and of their heritage.

Yet just a year later, both Leamy and D'Arcy McGee were murdered. On 13 April 1868, a Fenian gunman shot D'Arcy McGee in the back of his head as he entered his lodgings. Eight days later, Leamy was found in the morning barely alive at the side of the road near his home, suffering from a bad head injury and bruising to his ribs. Evidently attacked the previous night on his return from Ottawa, his gold watch and chain were missing. He never regained consciousness and died later that day. He was buried in the cemetery in Hull, on land he had donated to the Oblate Fathers. Enquiries came to nothing and the authorities at Aylmer entered an open verdict. Ten years later, a disgruntled employee was arrested for his murder, the revelation emerging from a marital dispute.

What does the role of the Irish in the lumber industry tell us? The first observation is that the Irish of both the Ottawa and Gatineau valleys were adept, strong, and talented as pioneers, innovators, entrepreneurs, lumbermen, farmers and community leaders. The Irish, whether Protestant or Catholic, played critical early roles in the region's economic development given the commercial failure of the Rideau Canal. To be a leading business figure inevitably meant joining the militia and often becoming a politician, just as Hamilton and Egan had done. Both had played key political roles, albeit from very different ideological positions. In a very real way, the Irish were the founders of Ottawa.

The second observation is the absence of prominent women, unless married to leading men, like Sally Olmstead. Denied education, careers, and opportunities, women's roles were greatly restricted, their lives defined by marital status. Marriage determined their income and their focus, having children, raising them, and running a household that had little in the way of technological support. Childbirth was a dangerous business, domestic duties hard work without hired help. Without marriage, women faced grim prospects: domestic service, teaching, the religious life, and prostitution. Those who managed some economic agency and whose names survive in public memory, like Mother McGinty's tavern and Mother Barnes near Brockton, remain rare exceptions.

The third observation is that the vast majority of male immigrants used their brawn not their brains. Living in shanties and working to fell trees, hew them square, maneuver them to rivers, and raft them to saw mills, made for a challenging and dangerous life. In the 1844 season alone, fifty men working the rafts and logs down the river drowned. The following spring another eighty or so shared the same fate. The Valley could simply be a dangerous environment: Hamilton lost three of his young children when their canoe capsized on his way to Montreal in 1823. Leamy lost his eldest son, Louis Napoleon, when his steam powered mill at the lake exploded. Those who did not die, become seriously injured, or end up in poverty and alcoholism, were able to buy a farm, typically one hundred acres. Tough work too but a route to prosperity, marriage, family, and security.

The fourth observation is that those who succeeded were immensely talented. Chief among these were Egan, Leamy, and J.R. Booth, followed by Sparks and O'Connor, all very much self-made men. Like Henry Caldwell, George Hamilton had the advantage of social status, connections, and education but he made his own fortune and established his considerable political influence through his talents, drive, and acumen. His sons inherited much but they took the mills at Hawkesbury forward to pre-eminence in the lumber business. The lumber business was logistically and financially complex: managing and supplying large workforces living in shanties, selecting prime pines, cutting and hewing them, milling and transporting them on rivers, canals and then across to North Atlantic to Britain and Ireland. Brutally cold Canadian winters and short, tempestuous sailing seasons added to the difficulties. The global lumber market was subject to wild price fluctuations from one season to the next, making finance a delicate and high-risk calculation.

My final observation concerns an absence. Irish communities may recall their roots with passion and I found many deeply knowledgeable local historians, but there is an absence from public memory of much if not most of the Ottawa's Irish heritage. Colonel By looms large, his statue gazing at the Parliament across the triumphant final series of canal locks. True, a Celtic cross below him remembers all those who died in the canal's construction. Yet forgotten is the story of the Irish who played such a vital role in Ottawa's foundation. As I learned fragments of it here and there, used online dictionaries of biography to draw connections together, and sleuthed out academic sources where I could, this absence was surprising and haunting.

I would hazard three causes in what was a complicated social and intellectual process. In contrast to the United States, where being Irish was a cause of celebration and being a republican went with the grain, in Canada being Irish went against it, as historian David Wilson, has eloquently framed it. To integrate, to get ahead in loyal, imperial, monarchical, and Protestant Canada, was facilitated by concealing Irish and certainly Catholic heritage. We forget today the depth of anti-Catholic bias, not just in the UK and the British Empire but it should be said in the United States. Slipping into Anglicanism as John Egan and Nicholas Sparks had done, dropping the Mc or the O, allowing others to think the family came from Scotland, were all part of the armory of survival and success for many Irish. Canada's most famous soldier, Arthur Currie was born Curry but his father was born Corrigan. Professor Mark McGowan of St Michael's College at the University of Toronto has recounted this process of stealthy influence and eventual integration in his deeply researched and eloquent works *The Waning of the Green* and *The Imperial Irish*.

Secondly, had Britain returned Ireland's parliament and granted it Dominion status like Canada, the Irish influence in Canada might have been a cause for celebration, with Canada acting as Ireland's constitutional model. Canada and Ireland would have been natural partners, united within a common sovereign sphere. As it was, Ireland had to win its freedom through rebellion in 1916 and war 1919-1921, sundering its constitutional relationship not just with Britain but the

Commonwealth. Ireland aligned with the United States and Irish America, not Canada and its variation of Irishness. It is only in recent years with the salving impact of the Northern Ireland peace process on Anglo-Irish relations that we have found a new comfort with Canada. If we could celebrate Queen Elizabeth II coming to Ireland as we did in 2011, what grounds were there for hesitancy about the First Dominion. The arrival over the last two decades of new Irish immigrants to Canada has helped this process as well as infusing new energy into the rich Irish foundations established over centuries.

The third factor was the decisive shift in Canada's 20<sup>th</sup> century identity. Canada reinvented itself, debuting at its centennial in 1967. This was on show at the famous Montreal Expo that same year, widely regarded as the greatest of its kind. The chosen theme was *Man and his World*, suitably generic for a Canada now determined to declare its universal values, its modernity and a home for everyone. This rendered secondary, even inconvenient, the history of colonialism, competing identities, contending historical narratives, and clashing values cultural or otherwise. Yet that heady mix is the very stuff of the Irish story in Canada, indeed of how societies operate and evolve. There is considerable irony therefore in the fact that the director of Expo's exhibition commission and of the team that designed Canada's new flag was Paddy Reid from Belfast.

There is however more to this than history. A few weeks ago I was due to present a history of the Irish of the Ottawa and Gatineau Valleys at the Irish community centre in Venosta, organized by the Gatineau Historical Society. Its President Gilbert Whiteduck contacted me beforehand to set up a video conference. An Algonquin Anishinaabe Elder from Kitigan Zibi, Gilbert was curious about the approach I would take in my talk. Suspecting a celebratory account, he wanted to convey an important corrective point. The Indian Agents of the Gatineau had been dishonest and corrupt in their treatment of the local Indigenous. I assured him that this I understood, that we had to embrace all facets of the Irish in Canada, from reprehensible characters to those who contributed directly to colonization, including figures like Nicholas Flood Davin who had promoted the expansion of Indian residential schools.

We cannot rewrite history or gloss it as if it were a PR campaign. History and its remembrance should be complicated. Gilbert and I chatted for a good hour about this and the broader narrative of colonialism in both Ireland and Canada. Our exchange continued when Gilbert presided at the meeting of the Society. (My talk is available online but at an hour and a half requires true devotion and fortitude!) The point is that an honest appraisal of history creates opportunities for engagement and mutual understanding. Moreover, accurate remembering is essential to ethical remembering, the inclusion of the consequences of all of developments that we sometimes too easily celebrate as triumphs without consequences.

The Anishinaabe connection to the Great Irish Famine 1845-1851 is a case in point. Professor McGowan was raised in the Valley though born in western Ontario, on Huron Tract Lands settled by the Irish, the traditional hunting grounds of the Anishinaabe-Saugeen. As well as the leading historian of the Irish in Canada, he is my essential guide and adviser. Along with Carolin Callery, a director of the National Famine Museum in Ireland, we have created the Global Irish Famine Way. It is an act of ethical remembrance, both a physical and a digital record of the Famine Irish as they spread out around the world: to Britain, Canada, the US, South Africa and Australia. The physical marker is a bronze cast of 19<sup>th</sup> century shoes, found bound together in the thatched roof of an Irish cottage. We plan to put one at Macdonald Gardens Park at the site of the Famine common grave, once the City of Ottawa agrees.

We also plan to put one in the garden at our official Residence to remember a related story of the Irish Famine. Mark's research has revealed that the local Algonquin along with other Anishinaabe, Haudenosaunee, and Wendat nations collected money from their meagre resources in 1847 to contribute to relief for the Famine Irish. This was an act of compassion as well as agency, as Mark relates in his compelling and moving essay, *Kindred Spirits*, a political act of solidarity by the Anishinaabe and other groups to an ally in need. Despite their own privations, when even their own potatoes had failed them, the Anishinaabe, Haudenosaunee, and Wendat only regretted that they had not more to give to relieve the suffering of the Irish. It was a gesture that defied their own historical experience of expropriation and betrayal by settlers.

Recently we held a Gratitude ceremony at the Residence where we planted a copse of native River Birch, accompanied by Anishinaabe drums and Uilleann pipes. Anishinaabe Elder Claudette Commanda, and the first Indigenous Chancellor of the University of Ottawa, offered the land acknowledgement. She spoke movingly about the import of this remembrance of Indigenous aid, of the universality of humanity, of the connectedness of all things. We plan to bring the Global Irish Famine Way to the Residence, to place the Bronze Shoes on a granite plinth within the copse of River Birch. There the Birch will mark the changing seasons but the monument will stand testament to a moment when compassion trumped history. That is a story worth remembering.

Eamonn McKee

Ottawa

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