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# Famine, Facts and Fabrication

AN EXAMINATION OF DIARIES FROM THE IRISH FAMINE MIGRATION TO CANADA

## To do anything less than to commemorate the victims

of the English colonial misrule in the appropriate manner, that is, with the highest profile possible, commensurate with the recognition of the other aspects of Grosse Île's history, would be to become a collaborator and an accessory, after the fact, in the mass murder to which those graves testify.<sup>1</sup>

So asserted The Irish Freedom Association of Montreal in its reaction to Parks Canada's draft plans to create a national park on Grosse Île, where more than 5,000 victims of the Great Irish Famine are buried. Few Canadians would recognize Grosse Île as little other than a four kilometre-long sliver of rocks and trees sitting in the middle of the lower St. Lawrence River. Located forty kilometres northeast of Quebec City, in a small archipelago northeast of Île d'Orléans, Grosse Île, the "big island," was a popular hunting preserve until 1832, when it became eastern Canada's principal immigrant quarantine station. At the time of its closure, in 1937, the island had witnessed the passage of thousands of European immigrants, had been a place of animal quarantine for the Department of Agriculture, and, in its closing years, had been used secretly for experimentation with anthrax bacteria. For Canada's Irish immigrants and their descendants, however, Grosse Île is remembered as the resting place of thousands of casualties of the typhus epidemic which raged during the Irish Famine, from 1845 to 1849.<sup>2</sup>

In our own time, these isolated and only seasonally accessible acres of woods and deserted buildings have become a cultural battleground. In 1991, Parks Canada published a development concept for the Island, which raised the ire of several of Canada's Irish communities that believed that the Federal Government intended to transform Grosse Île into a "theme park," rather than create a unique space to memorialize a place of tragedy for Famine refugees. In the heated public consultation that ensued, many Irish Canadians drew upon the Irish nationalist rhetoric of the past, insisting that the Canadian Government designate the island as a Memorial to the Irish and implying that any lesser action was a denigration of the Irish people and their forebearers, and tantamount to covering up the 'truth' about what 'really' happened at the hands of the British during "Black '47."

The controversy over the Grosse Île development project that emerged during the public consultation that crisscrossed Canada in 1992 and 1993, coincided with international preparations to commemorate the sesquicentennial, in 1995, of the beginning of the Great Irish Famine. Historical documents were revisited; hypotheses on the causes and consequences of the Famine were reviewed, restated, and, in many cases, redefined. One

set of resources republished within this context were the so-called "famine diaries," alleged eyewitness accounts of the famine migration, filled with details both horrible and heroic. These accounts have served as dressing for scholarly monographs, pointed narratives of the suffering endured by Irish migrants, and telling testimonies of "alleged" British cruelty and misgovernment. In addition to being some of the most poignant vignettes feeding the popular collective memory of the Famine, these diaries have become effective weapons in the arsenal of Irish nationalists and their historical sympathizers.<sup>3</sup> With their pages replete with tales of corrupt British officials, cruel landlords, parsimonious ships' captains, and gormless Canadian civil servants, the diaries proved as useful to the nineteenth century Irish nationalists as to contemporary Irish Canadians fighting the initial conceptual plan for Grosse Île, many of whom were warm to any evidence of British tyranny or hints of "genocide."

As would be discovered within the maelstrom of the debate in the 1990s, some diaries would be challenged as inauthentic, acts of fantasy not fact – mere fabrications to serve ideologies that offered a charged interpretation of the events of 1847. Two of the most notable diaries, one attributed to an emigrant schoolteacher Gerald Keegan and the other to Protestant gentleman Robert Whyte, have been subject to considerable attention and scrutiny. As this paper will confirm, the former is indisputably a work of fiction based on shards of detail from the time, and the latter is both weakly substantiated by fact and historically perplexing. Regardless of their suspect authenticity, these diaries, for good or for ill, have been incorporated into the Irish nationalist narrative of the Famine, and have embedded strong images into the popular historical memory of the events that unfolded at Grosse Île. Such fabrications have provided lasting images that are not easily exorcised from either the historiography of the Famine or the popular collective memory of the Famine moment.

In order to place these diaries in their proper context, it is necessary to offer some thoughts regarding the origins of the Famine and the manner in which it has been interpreted by some of the Irish. The year 1847 certainly marked an extraordinary moment in both Irish and Canadian history. A combination of an outmoded landholding system, falling agricultural prices, a population explosion, widespread poverty, and finally the failure of the potato crop from 1845 to 1849,<sup>4</sup> created an unprecedented demographic upheaval in Ireland. The failure of the agricultural system, the indifference of small farmers and landholders to the growing poverty in their midst, and the prevailing influence of the ideology of *laissez faire* economics among local and Imperial

politicians created a disastrous situation for the Irish people. The poorest Irish died of starvation where they had lived; those of minuscule means fled across the Irish Sea to British ports; some continuing on, seeking a fresh start in British North America, the United States, or Australia. By 1861 the population of Ireland stood at 5.2 million – 3 million less than in 1841. Accounted in this loss were one million dead, and more than 2 million emigrants.<sup>5</sup> Of the 97,492 that set sail for British North America in 1847,<sup>6</sup> one fifth would not live to see the next new year, having succumbed to disease on board ships that were, in some cases, substandard for passenger travel or, upon arrival, having been afflicted by one of numerous outbreaks of typhus. Few migrants arrived in Newfoundland, PEI, or Nova Scotia, with 17,074 preferring New Brunswick and nearly 80,000 electing to sail to the central colonies of Canada West and Canada East, now the provinces of Ontario and Quebec, respectively.<sup>7</sup> Of those who sought refuge in these interior colonies, as many as 5,424 died and were buried at the quarantine station on Grosse Île, in the St. Lawrence River. Before they had reached the port of Quebec City, over 600 Irish children had been orphaned.<sup>8</sup> Within a year, the survivors, both adults and youths, had tried to join relatives among the thousands of Irish Catholics and Protestants who had already settled in British North America, since 1815, or they wandered the Canadian towns and countryside in search of work and shelter, or, as in the case of the majority, sought refuge in the United States.<sup>9</sup> Popularly dubbed “Black ’47” the sailing season of 1847 signalled the decline of mass Irish migration to Canada; in future, cheaper fares would make the United States more attractive to prospective Irish migrants.

Though not the last of the great Irish migrations in fact, the events of “Black ’47” would become etched deeply in the collective memory of both the British North American hosts, pre-famine Irish settlers, and the Irish famine migrants themselves. The sight of haggard, vermin-infested, and diseased travellers, disembarking after their harrowing trans-Atlantic voyage under sub-human conditions, left indelible images on the society that hesitatingly received them.<sup>10</sup> As Irish famine migrants moved inland from Grosse Île, Quebec, and Montreal, symptoms of typhus, unmarked in quarantine, began to show themselves, and the dreaded disease spread rapidly among the migrants and their hosts. Reminded of the cholera epidemic of 1832, many panic-stricken citizens of British North America fled the cities in the hope that isolated rural areas would spare them from disease. The Catholic weekly in Canada West, *The Mirror*, commented that ‘nine tenths of the community have been frightened, not only out of their wits – but, what is still worse, out of their humanity.’<sup>11</sup> Editors and clergy alike begged their constituents to show mercy and charity to the stricken migrants.<sup>12</sup> These Irish, though by no means the first or last to come, left a lasting impression because of the tragic circumstances of their arrival.

In time, some Irish Catholics in British North America came to identify the Famine as central to their sense of identity, and much of their collective memory of the Famine was fed by a set of powerful images generated by a nationalist historical narrative originating in Ireland and the United States. Vehicles of the Famine narrative included sermon

literature, newspaper articles, speeches generated by Irish nationalist fraternal societies, and the published writings of members and sympathizers of the Young Ireland movement, who, in 1848, failed in their attempts to overthrow English rule. In their assessment of the Famine, these nationalists blamed British authorities in Westminster and Dublin, and levelled accusations of genocide at British politicians and Protestant landlords, while their clerical allies celebrated Irish Catholic survival as a sign of God’s favour and the Deity’s intention that the Irish Catholics, in the course of their post-Famine diaspora, would convert the anglophone Protestant world.

In their attempt to assert the independence of Ireland, and in defence against the sectarian bitterness of the day, nationalists transmitted their history of the Famine through the newspapers, pulpits, and bookstores of British North America, the United States, and Ireland. In the late 1850s and early 1860s, Thomas D’Arcy McGee’s *History of the Irish Settlers in America* (1858) and John Mitchel’s *The Last Conquest of Ireland (Perhaps)* (1861) cast the Famine in a new light. Although McGee would recant his radical views, only to become anathematized by his former colleagues, Mitchel’s book, his earlier *Jail Journal* (1854), and his subsequent *History of Ireland* (1868), became the backbone of the nationalist reinterpretation of the events of the late 1840s.<sup>13</sup> For Mitchel and many of those who built upon his work – Jeremiah O’Donovan Rossa, Michael Davitt, Charles Gavan Duffy, the Sullivan brothers, and John Francis Maguire – the Famine was an atrocity committed by the British government upon the Irish people. Two points of great emotional weight were key to the nationalist interpretation of the ‘artificial famine’: first, that Ireland’s robust harvests of other crops, in 1847, were exported from Ireland while the Irish starved; and secondly, the Irish landlords, in need of cash and greedy to increase their incomes, wilfully evicted their Catholic tenants who, starving and poor, were condemned to death or emigration. These nationalist interpretations permeated Irish historiography and popular thought until the present day, to such an extent that historian James Donnelly has commented ‘so strong are popular feelings on these matters in Ireland and especially in Irish-America that a scholar who seeks to rebut or heavily qualify the nationalist charge of genocide is often capable of stirring furious controversy and runs the risk of being labelled an apologist for the British government’s horribly misguided policies during the famine.’<sup>14</sup> Similarly, historian Roy Foster, in his *The Irish Story: Telling Tales and Making it Up in Ireland*, indicates that much of this spirit of the nationalist interpretation of the Famine was passed from the historians and the popularists into the commemorations of the disaster one hundred and fifty years later, a feat that certainly attests to the staying power of arguments put forth by Young Ireland, its organ *The Nation*, and John Mitchel.<sup>15</sup>

Evidence of the currency of the nationalist rhetoric in Canada came on 15 August 1909, when the Ancient Order of Hibernians (AOH) of Quebec City unveiled a grand memorial to the Irish dead at Grosse Île.<sup>16</sup> This gathering included members of the AOH from Canadian and American branches, clergy and hierarchy from Quebec

and the United States, and politicians from every level of government. One American author in the official booklet, *The Grosse Isle Monument Commemorative Souvenir*, declared the day to be ‘A most desirable opportunity ... to visit the terrible Golgotha of the Irish race in America and to do honor to the memory of the dead.’<sup>17</sup> The souvenir booklet included references to James M. O’Leary’s sketch of the famine from the *Quebec Daily Telegraph* (11 September 1897), sections of Stephen De Vere’s report on famine conditions, an emotive lecture by Father Bernard O’Reilly comparing Grosse Île to the ‘dungeons of Naples, and the cruelties of Sicily,’<sup>18</sup> and selected passages from Robert Whyte’s diary, *The Ocean Plague* (1848).<sup>19</sup> Clearly, the most significant event of the day was the unveiling of the monument itself, a forty-six foot high (eight feet wide at the span) stone Celtic Cross, erected on Telegraph Hill, the highest point of the island. At its base, inscribed in three languages – English, French and Irish – a message commemorating the Irish who ‘to preserve the faith, suffered hunger and exile in 1847-48, and stricken with fever, ended here their sorrowful pilgrimage.’<sup>20</sup> Interestingly, the inscription in Irish Gaelic differed significantly from the other two; reminiscent of the Irish nationalism that nourished the Famine memory, it proclaimed that these ‘Children of the Gael’ died at the hands of ‘foreign tyrants and an artificial famine.’<sup>21</sup> Use of the famine diaries – in this case De Vere and Whyte – merely confirmed these opinions.

Gerald Keegan’s diary was not included in the souvenir literature in 1909, because it was probably unknown to any of the participants in the Grosse Île commemoration, although it had appeared as a series of stories in *The Huntingdon Gleaner*, in 1895. As a published monograph, the entire diary first appeared, in 1982, as *The Voyage of the Naparima: A Story of Canada’s Island Graveyard*, a fictionalized account of a real diary supposed to have been found in a typescript ‘photostat’ form and creatively edited by Brother James J. Mangan, a native of Admaston, Ontario. The book outlined the day-to-day ordeals of Irish school teacher Gerald Keegan and his wife Aileen, who boarded the *Naparima*, in 1847, and ventured with other famine refugees to British North America. In vivid detail, the highly literate Keegan, itemized every detail of the journey, including the onboard atrocities committed by the ship’s crew, which he blamed for the suffering and death of many of the ship’s passengers. As a reward for his beating of a mate who was attempting to flog a youthful deck hand, Keegan and his bride were left stranded on Grosse Île, although both had been healthy. Aileen eventually displayed symptoms of the ship’s fever (typhus) and died, while Keegan, forlorn and heartbroken, lived on and told of the horror of Grosse Île’s inmates and the appalling conditions in the island’s lazarettos, while editorialising on British responsibility for all that was unfolding on board the coffin ships and on the island of death. He died, and the diary was completed by friends and relatives who, Brother Mangan said, passed it, in a ‘little black book’ from generation to generation in order to keep Imperial authorities from covering up their misdeeds.<sup>22</sup>

This professed work of fiction, based on a source that Mangan could not reproduce lived beyond its initial

publication. Six years later, Keegan’s diary was published again amidst much fanfare in the *Untold Story: The Irish in Canada*, as the centrepiece of the ‘Hidden Holocaust’ section of volume one, in the two-volume set. This imprint of Keegan’s diary was touted as the first North American printing of a work that had been deliberately suppressed by authorities because of its damning implications of British misrule in Ireland and the incompetence of colonial officials in Canada. ‘Keegan’s *Journal*,’ wrote editor Robert O’Driscoll, ‘has, in a way, been a secret book, passed on surreptitiously from one person to another, in a society that thinks of itself as free. Brother Mangan was given a microfilm of the Library of Congress copy by somebody he met at Laval, and Mangan’s copy was channelled, through at least one intermediary to me.’<sup>23</sup> This cloak-and-dagger history of the diary gave Keegan’s narrative additional credence as a living testimony to the tragedy of ‘Black ‘47.’ Within three years, in 1991, a second version of the diary was edited by Mangan under the title *Famine Diary: Journey to a New World*, and was billed as the authentic account of Gerald Keegan’s harrowing voyage on the *Naparima* and eventual death at Grosse Île. It was virtually unchanged from the fictional *Naparima*, that had appeared a decade earlier. Published in Ireland in advance of the 150th anniversary of the beginning of the Famine, *Famine Diary* became a national bestseller.<sup>24</sup>

Within months of the Irish publication, the diary was the centre of controversy between Mangan’s supporters who regarded the diary as a truthful depiction of British atrocities during the Famine, and those scholars who remained unconvinced. Philologists analysed the Irish idioms used in the diary, while historians questioned various details and demanded to see the original document upon which the Keegan diary had been extracted. By 1992, it became clear to its detractors that the Keegan diary was a fraud, essentially a work of fiction written in 1895 by Robert Sellar, an anglophone Quebecker, foe of the Catholic hierarchy, and the editor of the *Huntingdon Gleaner*, who published the diary in serialized form under the title ‘The Summer of Sorrow.’<sup>25</sup> In fairness to Mangan and O’Driscoll, both had acknowledged their awareness of Sellar’s work, but both assumed that Sellar had copied a real diary and simply reprinted his own version. However, copies of the drafts of the original manuscript, complete with corrections and revisions, are available in Sellar’s papers in Library and Archives Canada, in Ottawa.<sup>26</sup> In his own hand, Sellar changes the sequences of action, scribbles out three dead and rewrites ‘seven,’ or he replaces neutral words like ‘the passengers’ by the more emotive language such as ‘my people.’<sup>27</sup>

Sellar’s work of fiction, however, may itself have been derived from previous sources, none of which bore the name of Keegan. It is likely that Robert Sellar was inspired to write ‘Summer of Sorrow’ after having read snippets of the testimony of Stephen De Vere, a scion of an Irish landlord family, who converted to Catholicism and made the ocean voyage, in 1847, later reporting his experience to the House of Lords. In April 1892, *The Catholic Record*, of London, Ontario, published a four-week retrospective by James M. O’Leary on Grosse Île, including letters and journal notes from De Vere and others.<sup>28</sup> Clippings from these issues of the *Record* have been found appended to Sellar’s own notes.



Clearly, Sellar's fictionalized version was intended to sell papers and thus, is saturated with pathos, highly emotive language, and a nationalist rhetoric, all of which betrays the intent of the landlord De Vere, who was not anti-British and much "more favourably disposed towards emigration." In an essay based on his master's thesis, Irish-Canadian scholar Jason King has argued persuasively that Keegan may be a character whom Sellar based loosely on De Vere, although the two had pointedly different views on Irish migration as a policy, and De Vere, himself the nephew of Lord Mounteagle held no antipathy towards his class.<sup>29</sup> Although the Catholics who gathered at Grosse Île, in 1909, were familiar with De Vere's writing through O'Leary's reprinted articles, they had no sense of Keegan, since his was a work of fiction, immortalized fourteen years earlier by a notorious anti-cleric, whom Quebec Catholics had been forbidden to read.

Unlike the problematic journal of Gerald Keegan, the memorialists of 1909 and their successors in the 1990s had no questions regarding the authenticity of Robert Whyte's oft-cited *The Ocean Plague*. Originally published by Coolidge and Wiley, of Boston, in 1848, and formally attributed to "A Cabin Passenger" identified in the pamphlet's publication information as Robert Whyte, *The Ocean Plague*, has been cited in all media for the past century and a half. In the same year of its original publication, a second edition appeared in London, England, although its prose was considerably more fluid, several sections underwent altered sentence structure, and certain passages, including one describing Catholic ritual, were omitted.<sup>30</sup> The diary was excerpted in 1909, by the editors of the *Grosse Ile Memorial Souvenir*, and, in 1990, huge sections of the London edition were included in Donald MacKay's best-selling popular historical narrative, *Flight From Famine*. In 1994, having seized the opportunity to promote another Famine diary in anticipation of the Famine Sesquicentennial, Brother James J. Mangan produced his own edition titled, *Robert Whyte's 1847 Famine Ship Diary: The Journey of an Irish Coffin Ship*. Mangan was clear that Whyte's work helped to validate the now discredited Keegan diary:

This diary is important for two reasons. First of all, like Gerald Keegan's diary described in *The Voyage of the Naparima* ... it tells us at first-hand what the Irish emigrant passengers endured. And secondly, in spite of the differences in the two diaries, Whyte's confirms Keegan's in the similarities of experiences met by the passengers in the coffin ships. This confirmation is important in view of the attacks that have recently been made on the authenticity of Keegan's diary ... Some of us are already wondering what the enemies of Gerald Keegan's diary will do about this book.<sup>31</sup>

True to form, Mangan turns Whyte's nationalistic prologue into the epilogue and ignores the statistical appendices altogether, although he includes appendices of his own choosing, all of which oppose the Canadian Government's development plan for Grosse Île or promote the case for a distinctive Irish historic site there.

Whyte's diary has also received much publicity in Canada. Ironically, in 1997, Parks Canada published a day-to-day account of events at Grosse Île during "Black '47." In the book's sections describing early August, 1847, the editors quote large sections of Whyte's testimony in order to add life to the statistical accounts of ships quarantined, passengers hospitalised, and inmates deceased. Even the

CBC has drawn from the diary in order to provide a backdrop for an Ideas program titled "The Famine Migration," during which an actor with a gentle Irish accent reads from the diary, between commentaries by Irish and Canadian historians. Most recently Robert Whyte, once again depicted by an actor, became the centre piece in a segment in *The Great Enterprise*, or episode eight of Mark Starowicz's acclaimed *Canada: A People's History*. During the brief vignette on the Irish, viewers are carried aloft by the haunting drone of fiddle and harp to Grosse Île, which is used as the setting to discuss the migration of the Famine Irish, who are described as 'peasants' who face misery, famine, "ruthless landlords," "coffin ships," and "the island of pestilence." Passenger Robert Whyte tells of his odyssey amidst the filth and disease of an immigrant ship. In a soft brogue he slowly describes the decay of a young woman fresh, lively, pretty upon departure from Ireland, only to become stricken with fever, destined to bloat and die just as the ship reaches Canada. At a moment of climax, Whyte tells of how her husband, stricken at the grave, vows, "By that cross, Mary, I swear to revenge your death; as soon as I earn the price of my passage home, I'll go back, and shoot the man that murdered you, and that's the landlord."<sup>32</sup> Whyte's testimony is gripping; Grosse Île is an Irish graveyard and survivors who avoided it face further hardship, poverty, and discrimination.

The Whyte diary itself contains very attractive prose. The author traces, day-by-day, his journey beginning with his departure from Dublin, on 30 May 1847, to his arrival at Quebec City, on 3 August the same year. He is a cabin passenger and from the many hints he drops, he is likely a Protestant in the very least, an individual with some facility with the Bible who tends to view Catholics and their rituals from an outsider's perspective. He spends much of his time in his so-called "state-room"<sup>33</sup> and reads a limited supply of books and magazines throughout much of the voyage. His descriptions of places and events are richly detailed, as are his numerous insertions of historical or scientific background to events, as the need arises. Readers learn about fishing, navigation, the history of New France, and, his appendices detail the Famine and subsequent migrations of the Irish. Readers can be drawn into Whyte's world at Grosse Île by such passages as:

this scene of natural beauty was sadly deformed by the dismal display of human suffering that it presented – helpless creatures being carried by sailors over the rocks, on their way to the hospital – boats arriving with patients, some of whom died in their transmission from their ships. Another and still more awful sight, was a continuous line of boats, each carrying its freight of dead to the burial-ground, and forming an endless funeral procession. Some had several corpses, so tied up in canvass that the stiff, sharp outline of death was easily traceable; others had rude coffins, constructed by the sailors, from the boards of their berths, or I should rather say, cribs. In a few, a solitary mourner attended the remains; but the majority contained no living beings save the rowers. I could not remove my eyes until boat after boat was hid by the projecting point of the island ... I ventured to count the number of boats that passed, but had to give up the sickening task.<sup>34</sup>

His diary is not without traces of the nationalist rhetoric, and given the time of its first printing, in 1848, in the midst of the simmering radicalism of Young Ireland and the sombre news of pestilence and death of "Black '47," this

is not surprising. Whyte casts blame on the landlords and British policy makers for the conditions that would allow half starved and ill migrants to board converted timber ships and brigs for a six-to-eight week voyage across the North Atlantic. Unlike De Vere he is not ill disposed to his ship's captain, whom he thinks did the best that could be done under such harrowing circumstances. Nevertheless, he captures the pathos of the dead and dying aboard ship, the grief of their surviving loved ones, and, in the process, does nothing to change the impression that Grosse Île is a colonial charnel house.

The Whyte diary, however, is almost too good, and there are several problems that arise once it is placed under close scrutiny. First, we know very little, if anything at all, about the origins and life of its alleged author, Robert Whyte. After this voyage Whyte slips into anonymity among the mass of Irish immigrants in America – or does he? It may be possible to identify Whyte as the physician, Doctor Robert White of Boston, who possessed considerable literary skill, at least equal to the *Ocean Plague's* Whyte; he lived in Boston at the same time, claimed Irish ethnicity, and bore a streak of Irish nationalism that was evident in his submissions to the press. In 1846, White made an impassioned plea to the editor of the *Boston Pilot* for relief of Ireland, citing British misrule.<sup>35</sup> This same White resurfaced in the *Pilot* in 1848, in support of “Young Ireland.”<sup>36</sup> Unfortunately while the surname, location of residence, and disposition of the Irish question are similar between the two men, White the physician is far more impassioned and prone to rhetorical flourishes in his writing than the Whyte of *Ocean Plague*. Moreover, the timing is wrong. White was in Boston in 1846, while Whyte was leaving “dear old Ireland” in 1847. Although it might be posited that White decided to visit the Famine ravaged land of his birth and return to America by enduring the voyage of his starved compatriots, the evidence for this is merely circumstantial and the probabilities just a little too fantastic. It might be hypothesized that if the two Whites were the same, the diary may have been adapted by White, who drew inspiration from another source. Aside from such conjectures, what is clear is that the identity of the author, sometimes simply described as a “cabin passenger” is unclear.

A lack of clarity is endemic throughout the *Ocean Plague*. Whyte never makes mention of the name of the “brig” upon which he is sailing, nor the full names of the captain, crew or any of the passengers – they are simply identified by either Christian names, or by nicknames. Given the praise he heaps upon the captain and his wife, this anonymity is rather troubling. He claims that there are approximately 110 passengers on board, many of whom are from County Meath and are assisted in their emigration by their landlord, who led them to believe that the voyage would only be three weeks in duration.<sup>37</sup> In his edition of the diary, James Mangan identifies the ship as the *Ajax*, which sailed from Dublin, May 20, 1847, and arrived in Quebec six weeks later.<sup>38</sup> This identification makes neither historical sense nor relates well to Whyte's own diary, which indicates that his unnamed ship left Dublin, ten days later on May 30. Moreover, shipping records indicate that the *Ajax* that arrived at Quebec, did so

on 23 June 1847, having sailed from Liverpool and having on-board 359 passengers (over three times that of Whyte's ship), of whom eighty-seven died either at sea or in quarantine, and none of whom were assisted by their landlord.<sup>39</sup> In addition, the ship had been twenty-seven days in quarantine at Grosse Île, suggesting that had it left Dublin on May 20, as Mangan suggested, it would have made its Atlantic crossing in little more than a week, a feat not accomplished until the advent of steamships. Thus, if one were to accept Mangan's identification of the ship as the *Ajax*, one would have to discount the authenticity of Whyte's journal.

Mangan's suggestion, however, ought to be rejected in favour of a scan of the shipping records in search of Whyte's mystery brig, the *Ocean Plague*, for want of a better name. Such a search, unfortunately, does not help much in reassuring those who have regarded Whyte's diary as the tale of an “undisputed eyewitness.”<sup>40</sup> Whyte's *Ocean Plague* does not correspond exactly to any vessel landing at Quebec, in the week indicated by Whyte. Only one ship, the *George*, could pass for Whyte's, based on its size, passengers, port of departure, and time of arrival, but even here there are problems: Whyte's ship arrived on 2 August, the *George* on 3 August; Whyte's had 110 passengers, eight deaths at sea, and two deaths at Grosse Île for its five days in quarantine, while the *George* had 107 passengers, seven deaths at sea and four in hospital, spending only one day in quarantine.<sup>41</sup> While these minor problems could be overlooked as clerical or memory errors on the part of Whyte and his contemporaries, there are more serious problems between the two vessels. The *George*, for example, lists no assisted immigrants nor any cabin passengers.<sup>42</sup> Whyte, on the other hand, is unequivocal that the Meath passengers were assisted. Moreover, if the *George* is Whyte's ship, the port authorities did not include Whyte as a cabin passenger, a rather curious fact, since Whyte himself writes that he handled the official port documents and assisted the captain, W. Sheridan,<sup>43</sup> with their completion. These serious inconsistencies place the authenticity of Whyte's diary in some doubt, at least in terms of the actual ship, its crew, the nature and conditions of the passengers, and Whyte's own identity.

These perplexing inconsistencies offered by the historical record and the manner in which the events of the diary are recorded, undermine the authenticity of Whyte's journal. The work is filled with details of Canadian history as the ship passes by notable landmarks west of the Gulf of St. Lawrence. Whyte offers details of fishing methods off the Grand Banks, geographical sketches of the Gaspé, Anticosti and other Gulf Islands, reflections on aboriginal peoples, and even the exact height of Mount Camille, 2036 feet, that sits as a landmark beyond the south shore of the St. Lawrence.<sup>44</sup> Such detail suggests that either Whyte had an encyclopaedic knowledge of the minutiae of Canadian history and geography, gleaned while in Ireland (remember he notes that there are few books in his cabin) or that the diary was embellished richly after the fact. He indicates that he has seen the Captain's charts,<sup>45</sup> and at least for a few days at sea, he lists the appropriate longitude and latitudes, although he drops the practice once the brig has passed into the Gulf of St. Lawrence. At times there are passing references to ships that Whyte sighted at Grosse Île, or in the

St. Lawrence, although such details could have been acquired after the fact, given that anyone reading the shipping news in the Quebec papers, or published government reports, could identify ships nearby Quebec in July and August 1847. Suspicion that this might have been the case is aroused by Whyte's description, on 1 August, of a German vessel from Bremerhaven anchored at the quarantine station with 500 passengers on board; there were German ships and vessels from German ports anchored at that time, but none came close to having that number of passengers.<sup>46</sup> Given the amount of this "padding" throughout the diary, and the inclusion of appendices of statistical material and personal political commentary (much of which dates from August 1847 to June 1848), one may conclude that a large portion of the text was added after the alleged dates of the voyage, and just prior to the diary's publication, in July 1848, as a pamphlet.

Much of the evidence to sustain the authenticity of Whyte's account is historically weak, conjectural, or circumstantial. Nevertheless, the authenticity of some early documents, upon which Whyte or some other author based the work, may rest upon a baby and a dead sailor. While ship's records, government reports, and daily tallies of Grosse Île's inmates, both sick and dead, could be easily acquired by a writer working in Boston, in 1848, birth records and death registers were private and nearly impossible to research. There are two details that help to salvage the air of authenticity to Whyte's journal: the birth of a baby girl at sea, on 15 July, and the subsequent baptism of this girl "Ellen" by French Canadian priests on-board ship at Grosse Île, on 29 July; and the hospitalization of a mate Whyte called "Jack" who had been left to recover from "sickness" on Grosse Île.<sup>47</sup> Registers from the Catholic mission of St.-Luc-de-Grosse Île reveal that Father Joseph Bailey (a French Canadian priest from Champlain), baptized a girl, "Helene Ledy," 30 July, some fifteen days after her birth. While only one day off Whyte's account and bearing the frenchified version of Ellen, "Helene," the coincidence is far too strong to overlook.<sup>48</sup> Secondly, the Grosse Île registers indicate that seaman John Eelbeck, of the *George*, died in hospital, although no date is offered. It is entirely possible this is the infamous Jack, of whom Whyte speaks, assuming the *George* is really the stage upon which the drama of the *Ocean Plague* unfolded.<sup>49</sup>

Given all of the conflicting evidence what is one to make of the authenticity of this oft-cited eyewitness account of the so-called coffin ship? One could take the diary at face value and accept it as the Gospel truth. There is too much evidence, however, that mitigates against such trusting acceptance. On the other hand, one could dismiss the *Ocean Plague* as little more than nationalistic propaganda, an elaborately well-crafted hoax to advance the cause of Young Ireland and to hold the British accountable for the Famine disaster. If this position is held, one wonders if such a firebrand author, posing as Whyte could not have done much better. The brig in the *Ocean Plague* is small, has a compassionate captain, has a relatively short stay at Grosse Île, and has comparatively few lives lost, when compared to other ships like the *Naparima*, *Virginus*, *Naomi*, or the *Larch*. Whyte's ship had fewer deaths than the average recorded on

all ships departing from Dublin. Had this journal been purely designed to rouse nationalistic fervour and public outrage, there were far more imaginative ways to do so and far more notorious ships upon which to base the tale.<sup>50</sup>

This diary fits neither of these extreme positions. The numerous contradictions between Whyte's record and the routinely generated records of his era, the circumstantial evidence that suggests his ship may have been the *George*, the author's perspicacity in providing rich historical, statistical, and geographic details within his prose, and the questions of authorship, collectively identify this journal as bearing a complexity that defies simple explanation. What seems plausible is that the author, perhaps Robert White the physician, used fragments of a diary not his own, but from a passenger on the *George*, as the heart of a pamphlet designed to expose the horrors of the Famine migration of "Black '47." His inclusion of quotations from De Vere in the diary's appendix, indicates that the author was familiar with the Anglo-Irish landlord who had made a similar voyage in the spring.<sup>51</sup> The shipboard details offered by Whyte and De Vere are similar, though Whyte's captain and crew are models of hospitality when compared to those men experienced by De Vere. Moreover, De Vere, the landlord, does not mete out the invective against his own class to the degree that Whyte does. Whyte, however, appears to agree with De Vere that Parliament ought to regulate migration, the ships carrying immigrants, and prevent the dumping of the poor by Anglo-Irish landlords. The intent of his "delayed" publication, in Whyte's words, might "prevent the repetition this season, of the tragic scenes of the last."<sup>52</sup> Fragments of a journey, De Vere's experience, government reports, published ship's records, the Irish "rising" of 1848, and a compassionate heart, were ingredients in what would become a Famine Diary, based loosely on a real voyage.

The complexity of the *Ocean Plague* may hold keys to understanding the importance of the Famine diary to both the historical explorations of the Famine and the collective popular Famine memory, which has been nourished and developed along side, while at times intersecting with, the historical record for the past century and a half. The account of the eyewitness had the power and potential to make vividly "real" a series of events in a way that a mere reporting of the facts could not. The emotive words of one who experienced the horror might rouse others into fighting those responsible for the pestilence and death. In 1848, writings like that of Whyte's journal were inspired by a vision that sought to end colonial rule in Ireland, or in the very least overhaul an economic and social system that was detrimental to the life and health of Ireland's poorest classes. Such diaries, whether authentic or not, were expressions of the deepest aspirations of a people seeking redress of their grievances and therein the prevention of further tragedy. Such words from the eyewitnesses, entered the canon of texts and ideas that placed the Famine experience and the lessons learned from it at the centre of Irish hopes for deliverance from British imperialism. Similarly, those who imbibed the Keegan diary, in the 1980s, had embraced a nationalist school of thought and proclaimed Sellar's fabrication as further evidence that Mitchel and Young Ireland were correct, and the current



school of revisionist historians were dead wrong, Keegan's journal touched a nerve within those who feared cover-up of the Famine Memory in the proposed Parks Canada development of Grosse Île. In the end their intervention in the planning stage forced the Government of Canada to specify the Irish tragedy as integral to the Historic Site and National Park.

As for the Whyte diary, it still has such descriptive allure and paints such vivid pictures of the human tragedy of the Famine migration, that film makers, journalists, historians, and writers are drawn into its pages. The diary is still cited and dramatized, because it brings to a contemporary audience a heart rending and compelling testimony of the Famine migration from an alleged eyewitness. His words speak with a force that, in the realm of popular culture, is unmatched by statistics, tables, and academic interpretations about the Famine. Whether fact or fabrication, the Whyte journal has become an important bridge over 150 years, linking the famine moment and contemporary generations in search of their history. While it is clear that one should be cautious in its use, one cannot deny its iconic status in the reading of the Famine moment in Canada. Thus, it comes as no surprise that, in March 2009, Robert Whyte will once again stroll upon the decks of his un-named brig and describe the horror that befell some its passengers, in the Canada-Ireland co-production, *Death or Canada*.

#### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Brief, Irish Freedom Association, in *Report on the Public Consultation Program: Grosse Île National Historic Site* (Ottawa: Canadian Heritage and Parks Canada, March, 1994), 34.

<sup>2</sup> André Charbonneau and André Sévigny, 1847 *Grosse Île: A Record of Daily Events* (Ottawa: Canadian Heritage and Parks Canada, 1997), 16.

<sup>3</sup> See Mark G. McGowan, *Creating Canadian Historical Memory – The Case of the Famine Migration of 1847* (Ottawa: Canadian Historical Association, Ethnic Groups Series, No. 30, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> The crop did not experience failure in 1847, but the yield was ineffective in bringing the great hunger to and end.

<sup>5</sup> See Colm Tóibín, "The Irish Famine," *London Review of Books*, 30 July 1998; as Tóibín and Dairmaid Ferriter, *The Irish Famine: A Documentary* (London: Profile Books, 2001); Christine Kinealy, *This Great Calamity: The Irish Famine 1845-52* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1994); Peter Gray, *The Irish Famine* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1995); Cathal Póirtéir, *The Great Irish Famine. The Thomas Davis Lecture Series* (Dublin: Mercier Press, 1995); Mary Daly, "The Great Famine and Irish Society," in Cecil J. Houston and Joseph Leydon, eds., *Ireland: The Haunted Ark* (Toronto: Celtic Arts of Canada, 1996): 3-20; Cormac Ó'Gráda, *Ireland Before and After the Famine* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993) and his *Black '47 and Beyond: The Great Irish Famine in History, Economy and Memory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

<sup>6</sup> Library and Archives Canada, Colonial Office Records, C.O.384/82, *Eighth General Report of the Colonial Land and Emigration Commissioners*, June, 1848, (London: William Clowes and Sons, 1848), reel 1746, 15-17 [microfilm frames 166-7]. The total for 1847 was 106,812 although commissioners reported that 6/7 of the 89,738 Quebec-bound immigrants were of Irish origin. To arrive at 97,492, the Quebec Irish figure was added to the totals (reported as almost entirely Irish) for New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island and Newfoundland.

<sup>7</sup> Colonial Office Records, CO 384/82, Colonial Land and Emigration Office, Eighth General Report, Colonial Land and Emigration Commissioners, (London: William Clowes and Sons, June 1848), 13 (mcfm, 166).

<sup>8</sup> *Mirror*, 19 November 1847. Marianna O'Gallagher, *Grosse Île: Gateway to Canada, 1832-1937* (Ste-Foy: Carraig Books, 1984), 56-7. André Charbonneau and Doris Drolet-Dubé, *A Register of Deceased Persons at Sea and on Grosse Île in 1847* (Ottawa: Canadian Heritage and Parks Canada, 1997), 3 and 10.

<sup>9</sup> Gilbert Tucker, "The Famine Immigration to Canada, 1847," *American Historical Review* 36, no. 3 (April, 1931): 533-549.

<sup>10</sup> Joy Parr, "The Welcome and the Wake: Attitudes in Canada West to the Irish Famine Migration," *Ontario History* 66 (1974): 101-113; William Spray, "The Reception of the Irish in New Brunswick," in P.M. Toner, ed. *New Ireland Remembered*, 9-26; Scott See, "The Orange Order in Mid-Nineteenth Century Saint John," in Toner, ed. *New Ireland Remembered*, 71-89; Glen Lockwood, "Eastern Upper Canadian Perceptions," 16-23; A.J.B. Johnston, "Nativism in Nova Scotia: Anti-Irish Ideology in a Mid-Nineteenth Century British Colony," in Thomas Power, ed. *The Irish in Atlantic Canada, 1780-1900* (Fredericton: New Ireland Press, 1991): 23-9.

<sup>11</sup> *Mirror*, 20 August 1847.

<sup>12</sup> Ignace Bourget, "Lettre Pastorale en faveur de la malheureuse Irlande, (24 juin 1847)," as found in *Lettres Pastorales, Circulaires, et autres Documents publiés dans le diocèse de Montréal, son érection jusqu'à l'année 1869* (Montreal: J. Chapleau & Fils, 1887), I: 370-89, and Bourget's "Au sujet de l'épidémie de 1847," (13 Aout 1847), 399-407. See also Joseph Signay, "Mandement: Pour des prières publiques en faveur de l'Irlande affligée par la famine et par le typhus," (14 Juin 1847) as found in *Mandements, Lettres Pastorales et Circulaires des Evêques de Québec*, (Quebec: Imprimerie Générale A Coté et Cie., 1888), III:512-4. *Mirror*, 5 August 1847; *The Pilot and Journal of Commerce* (Montreal), 16 September 1847.

<sup>13</sup> John Mitchel, *The Last Conquest of Ireland (Perhaps)*, (1861) and *The History of Ireland* (Glasgow: Cameron and Ferguson, 1869), 212-33.

<sup>14</sup> James S. Donnelly, Jr. *The Great Irish Potato Famine* (Phoenix Mill, UK: Sutton Publishing, 2001), 209.

<sup>15</sup> R.F. Foster, *The Irish Story: Telling Tales and Making It Up in Ireland* (London: Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 2001), 30-1.

<sup>16</sup> Marianna O'Gallagher, *Grosse Île: Gateway to Canada, 1832-1937* (Ste-Foy: Carraig Books, 1984), 83.

<sup>17</sup> *The Grosse Isle Monument Commemorative Souvenir*, page 1, column 2. Discovered in the Archives of Ontario, J. George Hodgins Papers, MU 1379, Envelope: Monuments, Grosse Isle.



- <sup>18</sup> *Monument Commemorative*, chapter 13.
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, Appendix.
- <sup>20</sup> O’Gallagher, *Grosse Île*, 85-6.
- <sup>21</sup> Pádraic Ó Laighin, “Grosse-Île: The Holocaust Revisited,” Robert O’Driscoll and Lorna Reynolds, eds., *The Untold Story: The Irish in Canada* (Toronto: Celtic Arts of Canada, 1988), I:81.
- <sup>22</sup> Robert Hill, “From Famine to Fraud: The Truth About Ireland’s Best-Selling Famine Diary,” *Matrix*, no. 38 (1992), 8.
- <sup>23</sup> Robert O’Driscoll, “Epilogue,” in Robert O’Driscoll and Lorna Reynolds eds., *The Untold Story: The Irish in Canada* (Toronto: Celtic Arts of Canada, 1988), I: 152.
- <sup>24</sup> Jim Jackson, “Famine Diary: the Making of a Best Seller,” *The Irish Review* 11 (Winter 1991/1992), 1-8.
- <sup>25</sup> Hill, 5-8.
- <sup>26</sup> Library and Archives Canada, [hereafter LAC], Robert Sellar Papers, MG 30 D314, Volume 10, “Gleaner Tales-Summer of Sorrow,” File 16.
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, File 16.
- <sup>28</sup> *Catholic Record*, 9, 16, 23, 30 April 1892.
- <sup>29</sup> Jason King, “The Colonist Made Exile: Stephen De Vere, Famine Diary, and Representations of the Irish Famine in Canada,” unpublished paper, University College Cork (<http://migration.ucc.ie/conferencetable.htm>)
- <sup>30</sup> Robert Whyte, *The Ocean Plague, or, A Voyage to Quebec in an Irish Emigrant Vessel* (Boston: Coolidge and Wiley, 1848), 30-33. These sections sharply contrast the same sections cited in the London version used in Donald MacKay, *Flight from Famine: The Coming of the Irish to Canada* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1990), 274-9.
- <sup>31</sup> James J. Mangan, ed. *Robert Whyte’s 1847 Famine Ship Diary: The Journey of an Irish Coffin Ship* (Cork: Mercier Press, 1994), 9-11.
- <sup>32</sup> *Canada: A People’s History*, Episode 8: “The Great Enterprise,” based upon Robert Whyte, *The Ocean Plague, or, A Voyage to Quebec in an Irish Emigrant Vessel* (Boston: Coolidge and Wiley, 1848), 86.
- <sup>33</sup> Whyte, *Ocean Plague*, ‘May 30,’ 21.
- <sup>34</sup> Whyte, 80-81.
- <sup>35</sup> *Boston Pilot*, 7 March 1846.
- <sup>36</sup> *Boston Pilot*, 28 October 1848.
- <sup>37</sup> Whyte, *Ocean Plague*, “June 1,” 25 and “June 4,” 29.
- <sup>38</sup> Mangan, *Robert Whyte’s 1847 Famine Diary*, 9.
- <sup>39</sup> Marianna O’Gallagher, *Eyewitness Grosse Isle 1847* (Ste-Foy: Livres Carraig Books, 1995), 345. Charbonneau and Sévigny, *Grosse Île: A Record of Daily Events*, 104.
- <sup>40</sup> Mangan, *Robert Whyte’s 1847 Famine Diary*, 10.
- <sup>41</sup> Marianna O’Gallagher, *Eyewitness Grosse Isle 1847* (Ste-Foy: Livres Carraig Books, 1995), Table 8, Return of Passenger Ships Arrived at the Port of Quebec, 350-1. *Quebec Morning Chronicle*, 3 August 1847. British parliamentary papers, “Papers Relative to Emigration to the British Provinces in North America, Return of Passenger Ships Arrived at the Port of Quebec in the Season of 1847,” 29 [microfiche, 407]. Charbonneau and Sévigny, *Grosse Île: a Record of Daily Events*, 167.
- <sup>42</sup> O’Gallagher, 350-1. *Quebec Morning Chronicle*, 3 August 1847. British parliamentary papers, “Papers Relative to Emigration to the British Provinces in North America, Return of Passenger Ships Arrived at the Port of Quebec in the Season of 1847,” 29 [microfiche, 407].
- <sup>43</sup> Charbonneau and Sévigny, 167.
- <sup>44</sup> Whyte, *Ocean Plague*, “July 19,” 60.
- <sup>45</sup> Whyte, 30.
- <sup>46</sup> Charbonneau and Sévigny, 160-86. The largest of these was the Cumberland, with 365 passengers from Bremen, but it stayed at Grosse Île only a few hours, because there had been neither deaths nor sickness on board.
- <sup>47</sup> Whyte, 56, 67, 79, and 98.
- <sup>48</sup> O’Gallagher, “Register of the Catholic Church of Saint-Luc-de-Grosse-Ile, July 1847,” in *Eyewitness*, 223.
- <sup>49</sup> André Charbonneau and Doris Drolet-Dubé, *A Register of Deceased Persons at Sea and on Grosse Île in 1847* (Ottawa: Canadian Heritage and Parks Canada, 1997), 62. Eelbeck is listed as being a seaman on the *George* that sailed from Liverpool and arrived in June. Thus there were two ships called the *George* that landed in Quebec, in 1847: the first from Liverpool under Captain J. Simpson, arrived at Grosse Île on May 21, having made its crossing in 39 days with 397 passengers in steerage and no cabin passengers. It recorded 40 deaths during the crossing and had 180 sick upon arrival (Charbonneau and Sévigny, 49). The second arrived at Grosse Île from Dublin, under Captain W. Sheridan, after having made a voyage of 60 days with 104 passengers, two of whom arrived sick and seven of whom died at sea (*Ibid.*, 167). The Parks Canada Registers of the Dead and Buried at Grosse Île do not distinguish between the two ships, so more work is needed with the original registers. Nevertheless Eelbeck’s is listed as a crew member of the Liverpool ship, although the dates of sailing are not included, perhaps a sign of a flawed data base and that Eelbeck was a crew member of the *George* from Dublin. Comparing the passengers (without name) who died on board the *Ocean Plague* with those in the registers proves frustrating given the confusion of the two ships named *George*. Even though Whyte offers no names of the dead, the fact that three brothers died at sea would be a helpful clue to linking Whyte with the Dublin *George*. Should the names of three deceased brothers appear in the register for the Dublin *George*, one can speculate a match between Whyte’s ship and the *George*.
- <sup>50</sup> Charbonneau and Drolet-Dubé, “Average Mortality Rate per Ship During the Voyage and at the Quarantine Station,” 9 and “List of Ships that Arrived at Grosse Île and Québec City,” 101-108.
- <sup>51</sup> Whyte, 124-6; Letter from Stephen De Vere to T. F. Elliot, Chairman of the Colonization Commission, 30 November 1847 (London, Canada West).
- <sup>52</sup> Whyte, 126.