CHAPTER 1

The Irish Invasion

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During the mid to late 19th century, primarily between 1846 and 1850, an estimated three million Irish immigrants fled The Hunger or, as it was also known, the Great Potato Famine, a fungal infection that ravaged their native soil. Most sailed across the Atlantic in order to take up roots in North America where, they were assured, there was arable land to be tilled, sown and harvested. In addition, they were counting on ample employment in these burgeoning urban areas. For the most part, these desperate people arrived with little more than the clothes on their back, and some with a brood of malnourished children, to establish new roots in cities like New York, Boston and Montreal.

The bulk of these émigrés chose the United States as their landfall, and most were processed through Ellis Island off the southern tip of

Irish immigrant children arriving in Canada, 1924

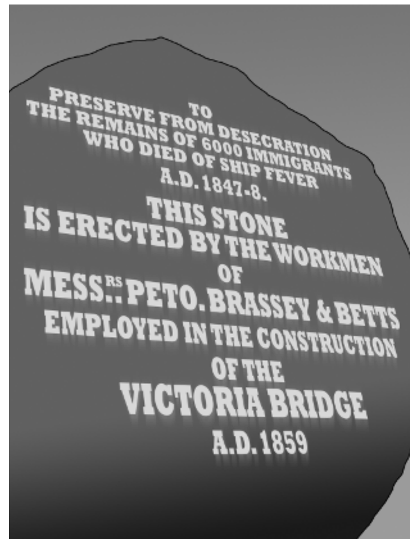
Manhattan. Once cleared, they either settled into Manhattan's Lower East and West Side, or else made their way north to Boston, south to New Orleans, or west to Chicago and Kansas City, all of which were growing urban centers of opportunity and blue-collar jobs.

Yet almost half a million of the Irish émigrés opted to make their landfall in the Dominion of Canada. After being crammed for five to six weeks in the holds of the so-called "coffin ships," in which they were essentially used as human ballast on lumber carriers returning from England, they were initially quarantined and processed at Grosse Île, a rocky windswept island on the St. Lawrence River, some 30 miles downstream from Quebec City. This precaution was taken because those hundreds who hadn't died at sea of cholera, typhus or malnutrition (and whose bodies had been summarily slipped over the side into the depths of the mid-Atlantic) were considered either contaminated or at risk. And indeed, many of them were. Today Grosse Île contains the unmarked graves of some 3,000 to 5,000 Irish men, women and children who came close to the "Promised Land," but who unfortunately never realized its promise. Those who did survive, later sailed up to Quebec City and Montreal, and some even as far upriver as Kingston, Ontario (then Upper Canada), where they planted their Diaspora Irish roots.[1]

1 My great-great-grandfather Charles John O'Connor arrived with his family from Limerick and was processed through Grosse Île in 1848, to later take up farming in the Gatineau area of Quebec.

Grosse Île Quarantine Shed

Many of the Irish who chose to settle in Montreal, which had been incorporated as a city in 1832, were still disease-ridden, and were confined to the "fever sheds" of Goose Village (originally known as Victoriatown) on the river's edge, where they were cared for by the Catholic order of Grey Nuns. Thousands succumbed to cholera or other diseases in those sheds, and were buried in a mass grave on the banks of the St. Lawrence River. Today there stands a monument, officially named The Irish Commemorative Stone, but colloquially known as "the Black Rock," honoring their demise. Rather ironically, the monolith bears the shape of a giant potato. It was dredged up from the river and erected in 1859 by Irish laborers who, while constructing the Victoria Bridge, had uncovered the bones of their Irish brethren who'd been interred there in the previous decade. The inscription on the 30-ton, 10-foot-high granite boulder that faces the entrance to



Goose Village Black Rock, Montreal

the span over the St. Lawrence River reads: "To preserve from desecration the remains of 6,000 immigrants who died of ship fever."

Those fortunate enough to survive the Atlantic crossing and the fever sheds would find housing and raise families in the impoverished working-class ghettos of Griffintown, Goose Village and Point St. Charles. There was plenty of work to be had in that southwestern part of Montreal. The eight-mile-long Lachine Canal, the Victoria Bridge and the Grand Trunk Railway yards were being built during that period, most of it with the brawn of Irish labor. Those projects in turn soon attracted breweries, brickyards, tanneries, soap factories, steel foundries and other industries. The canal, first dug in 1825 and widened twice in 1873 and 1885, provided a hydraulic power source for industries on its banks, as well as a water highway for incoming raw materials and outgoing processed goods between the St. Lawrence River and the Great Lakes. There was no shortage of jobs for those predominantly Irish settlers in Montreal during the late 19th and early 20th century, even if most of them were being paid penury wages and toiled for long hours. In 1880, for example, Grand Trunk employees were on the job 10 hours a day Monday to Friday, plus another four to five hours on Saturday. And in some of the factories along the canal, the work shift consisted of 14 hours a day, six days a week.

Life was not easy for the early émigrés from the Emerald Isle. There were many young men among them who sought an easier path in the New World. This was especially true in the United States, where Irish gangs sprang up within months of their arrival. These youths, driven from an impoverished land of British colonial oppression, had learned from experience that real wealth and power came not from hard work, but from intimidation and control of the neighborhood in which they lived.

So, not surprisingly, thousands of young males formed collectives of like-minded dissidents in the urban centers of America, particularly in New York City and Boston, where most of them had settled in the mid to late 1800s. They were at first a rag-tag leaderless bunch of thugs involved in petty thievery and fighting among themselves. But inevitably there arose individuals with the charisma and balls to become leaders of their group, creating organized Irish gangs that were named either after the leader himself or the urban district that the gang controlled.

The First Fighting Irish

Typical late 1800s construction sign, New York City

In the United States it was these gangs who, in the 1800s, first constituted what today would be labeled as members of "organized crime"—well before the arrival of the Sicilian or other Italian mafia families. As the low men on the immigrant totem pole, the "Paddies" were regarded as ignorant and impulsive rough-and-tumble yahoos by their American-born (and usually anti-Catholic) employers. For instance, at construction job sites they were often confronted with a posted sign warning that "Irish Need Not Apply." But many of the fighting Irish, rather than being deterred by the snub, simply chose alternative ways to make a living, albeit illegally.

These cities needed to supply the working stiffs not only with jobs, but also with entertainment, such as unlicensed after-hours saloons, brothels and gambling houses. Some of the newly arrived Irish were quick to provide those diversions, as well as loan-sharking operations that offered money to fools who were already way over their heads. Moreover, none of those enterprises could be carried out without some form of enforcement, and the Irish certainly had plenty of muscle on hand.

In Manhattan alone, particularly in the slums of Hell's Kitchen on the Lower West Side, more than a dozen Irish gangs flourished, among the earliest being the Whyos, known for their ruthlessness in dealing with opposing gang members and even with their own leaders, several of whom were purged internally during the 1880s and '90s. They were followed in the early 1900s by other Celtic mobs, often made up of members of the same family, such the Gas House Gang, the Parlor Mob, the Gophers, the Hudson Dusters, and the Westies, all of whom were

equally ruthless in staking out Manhattan's territory while running their operations and keeping competing gangs at bay. Naturally, all of this provided great fodder for the many New York City daily tabloids that eagerly sought to outdo one another with up-to-the-minute salacious details on the latest gangland killing.

In Boston, which housed North America's second largest influx of Irish émigrés, the lurid tabloid headlines read much the same. In that city, the early Irish gangs were battling one another in Somerville, South Boston and Charlestown over control of the city's three B's—broads, betting and booze. And so whorehouses, gambling houses and unlicensed saloons sprang up as quickly as the city developed. The New Englanders might have had deeper puritanical roots than their New York neighbors to the south, but it certainly didn't show in their appetite for what the Irish gangs had to offer. As well, the Bostonian gangs proved to be as rapacious and dangerous as their New York City kinsmen, and as generous in their under-the-table payoffs to local cops and elected officials who were on the take.

Then, in 1918, came the Women's Christian Temperance Union—God's gift to every criminal organization. The Volstead Act, which it spawned, lasted from 1920 to 1933. Cheap jokes aside, any move to prohibit the production, sale or consumption of alcohol was about as anti-Irish as one could get. Moreover, the law was equally despised by Protestant and Jewish alike. Inevitably, the "Noble Experiment" or "Great 13-year Failure," as it later became known, would, like nothing before, contribute to the escalation of organized crime in America. Bootlegging became the crime du jour, one that attracted everyone in the American and Canadian underworld, no matter what their nationality or gang affiliation. Billions of illicit dollars were reaped during that period, by everyone from the denizens of the Ozark Mountains of Arkansas to the Gucci-shod Sam Bronfman with his mansion in Westmount.

Booze and Corruption

As a result of Prohibition, the Irish gangs attained an even stronger foothold in American society, partly due to the fact that, unlike other European immigrants, they spoke English and had the persuasive

"gift of the gab." By the early 1900s they'd already insinuated themselves into civil servant roles such as firemen and police officers in major cities like New York, Boston and Chicago. And they now had a following among fellow European émigrés, nationality notwithstanding. So it was not surprising that many Irishmen, who had already risen to become political ward bosses, were eventually able to manipulate those in elected positions, such as city aldermen and mayors, whereby, through graft and patronage, these Irish puppeteers eventually controlled many American towns and cities. The biggest example, perhaps, was New York City's Tammany Hall, which first rose to power under ward czar William "Boss" Tweed in the mid-1800s and which managed to yield influence until 1932 when its last ward-supported mayor, Jimmy Walker (dubbed Beau James), was ousted from office.

In South Boston during Prohibition, no two groups of Irishmen were more feared than the members of the Kileen and Mullin gangs. Killings over turf and the sale of illicit booze were an ongoing occurrence between the two clans. Following the end of the Second World War, other Boston Irish gangs sprang up, viciously competing with one another for control of the city's three B's.

Then along came James "Whitey" Bulger, born on September 3, 1929, one of six children in an Irish Catholic family. After serving nine years in various prisons between 1965 and 1969 for armed bank robbery, he went on to become head of the notorious Winter Hill Gang (named after a neighborhood just north of Boston proper), which he led with an iron fist from 1970 until 1994. The gang allegedly had ties to Montreal's West End Gang, and was a known money and arms supplier for the Irish Republican Army back on the Auld Sod. Police investigations revealed that Bulger controlled most of the narcotics, extortion, loan sharking and bookmaking rackets, not just in Boston, but throughout most of New England. He is known to have either personally killed, or to have ordered killed, at least 90 persons during his 25-year bloody reign, usually employing his psychopathic lieutenant Stephen "the Rifleman" Flemmi.

However, Bulger led a double life, operating as an informant about his gang's dealings with Boston's Italian mafia with John Connolly,

a corrupt agent in the city's FBI organized crime squad. The FBI used this information to bust many prominent members of Boston's Cosa Nostra families during the 1980s. This reciprocal arrangement managed to keep Bulger out of jail for many years as he continued his criminal activities.

But that came to an end in April 1994 when a joint task force made up of the Drug Enforcement Administration, the Massachusetts State Police, and the Boston Police Department launched a probe into his operations. The FBI was purposely not informed, and a federal case was built against Bulger under the 1970 federal RICO (Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations) Act. The following December, Bulger was tipped off by his compromised FBI agent John Connolly that sealed indictments had been filed by the U.S. Department of Justice, and that the agency would soon be making major arrests.

None too soon, Bulger fled Boston on December 23, 1994, and he has been on the lam ever since, reportedly with his mistress Catherine Elizabeth Greig. Today he ranks second after Osama Bin Laden (who rates a $25-million bounty) on the FBI Ten Most Wanted Fugitives list, with a $2-million price on his head. The "Bulger Task Force" (consisting of seven investigators from the FBI, the Massachusetts State Police, and the Massachusetts Department of Correction) are still on his trail, running down numerous "spotting" tips in Florida, London, Ireland, Latin America and Montreal. Even though he would have turned 81 on September 3, 2010, there are many who believe that Bulger, whom the FBI say stashed millions of dollars in offshore bank accounts and in safety deposit boxes in Ireland, England, Quebec and Ontario shortly before his escape, is still alive and hiding out somewhere under various disguises and aliases.

In Canada, meanwhile, the Irish Diaspora was far smaller in number and strength, and had almost no political influence. Nevertheless, the Irish had gripes and ambitions that were similar to those of their American cousins. And they also shared their poverty and clannishness.

Perhaps the closest Canadian comparison to New York City's Hell's Kitchen or Boston's South Side would be Montreal's Griffintown and its adjacent Goose Village, which together comprised a few dozen

square blocks that harbored the majority of Canada's urban Irish immigrant families at the turn of the 20th century. And immediately to the south, across the Lachine Canal, lay the sprawling ghetto and rail yards of Point St. Charles, where only slightly better-off Irish tenants could find larger flats and even a green park or two. It was these neighborhoods that would become the spawning grounds for many of the West End Gang.