

Fr. John Corcoran – A Tipperary Priest on the Canadian Frontier

By Gerard Walsh

Introduction

Fr. John Corcoran was appointed parish priest of Teeswater Parish, Bruce County, Ontario in mid-1877. He said his first mass at Teeswater, 22 July 1877. The rather extensive parish included the outside parishes of Riversdale, Holyrood and Kincardine.¹ John Corcoran was baptised at Ballingarry, Diocese of Cashel & Emly, Co Tipperary, 20 Sept 1851. The address on his baptismal record is given as Lyruck.² However, I believe the family lived at Tinnock which may have been another name for Lyruck. He was ordained on 14 Nov 1875 at St Patrick's College Thurles by Archbishop Croke.³

John Corcoran was one of at least eight children born to John (sen) and Mary Cleary. His father was a medium sized farmer. His older brother William (b. 1836) was also ordained a priest and later served as parish priest (and Canon)

for the parish of Upperchurch & Drombane.⁴ Sadly, their father John (sen) passed away two weeks after John's ordination.⁶ Ballingarry is in the heart of the Slievardagh Hills. These hills reaching a maximum height of 1,145 ft. straddle the Tipperary-Kilkenny border from Mullinahone to Urlingford. The Corcoran family was one of the dominant old Gaelic families in these hills. There were two significant clusters of Corcorans – one at Ballingarry and the other at Killenaule.

The peak of the Famine was in 1847. Hence, John would have grown up in its immediate aftermath, when emigration continued to erode the population just like the famine itself. The main event of the short lived Young Ireland Rebellion of 1848 took place in the parish of Ballingarry about four miles from his birthplace. It is often forgotten that in the decades after the Great Famine (1845–1848) there were several incidences of economic crisis where many sectors of the population were close to starvation. This culminated in the mini-famine of 1879, two years after the departure of Fr. John.⁷



Fr Corcoran, 1870s⁵

The Land War commenced in the late 1870s and raged across the next few decades. In this case the term “war” is misleading. Apart from sporadic violence at evictions, the “war” was fought in parliament and through a series of protest events mainly under the auspices of the Land League. Fr. Corcoran’s brother, Fr. William, in his role as chairman of the executive of the mid Tipperary Branch of the Land League is quoted as saying that “he was an anti-landlord and true Leaguer before he was born”.⁸ About eight years before Fr. John departed for Canada, Fr. William was involved in an incident in the parish of Knockavilla. A Protestant policeman on his death bed, asked Fr. William to convert him to the Catholic faith. The policeman’s superior, the District Inspector, refused to allow the conversion. Fr. William appealed to his bishop and the higher police authorities. This resulted in permission being granted to proceed with the conversion. An enquiry was subsequently convened where Fr. William was vindicated and the District Inspector was removed from his position.⁹ Such were the peripheral influences for Fr. John.

Arrival in Canada

Teeswater parish is in the western part of the Catholic Diocese of Hamilton. The diocese came into being in 1856 and from the outset had a connection with Ireland. When Fr. Corcoran arrived in 1877, Bishop Peter Crinnon was in charge of the diocese. He was born in Co. Louth and his predecessor Bishop John Farrell was born in Co. Armagh. Within two months of his elevation to the episcopacy in April 1874, Bishop Crinnon travelled to Ireland for the purpose of recruiting priests. This was likely the spark that led to Fr. Corcoran coming to Canada. It would have provided a familiar backdrop for Fr. Corcoran in his new home.¹⁰

The following is a contemporary account. Fr. Corcoran was described as having a “very powerful physique” and “was of an athletic build”. They say that “as a preacher he became more and more eloquent as the years went on”. “He possessed a beautiful character and a strong winning personality. He was very, very kind and generous to a fault showering charity on the poor of the parish. And his geniality, with his proverbial Irish wit won for him many friends of every religious denomination. “His picnics too, ... were well known and were great successes.” “Large sums of money, for those days, were realised. He held picnics east of the river in Riversdale, and to these people came from great distances”.¹¹



Sacred Heart Rectory – Teeswater¹²

On 26 May 1878, he commenced the building of Teeswater Church. The corner stone was laid by Bishop Crinnon. In 1882 he purchased a lot and built a rectory adjacent to the church at Teeswater. The church at Holyrood was built prior to his arrival, but was completely renovated in 1899, when the exterior was bricked over with white stone and a tower was erected.¹³ Unfortunately this church is now long gone, with only the graveyard

remaining. The graveyard holds the remains of a Gaynor family from Tipperary. Also interred there is Henry Caesar (1839–1888) who was born in Tipperary not far from Fr. Corcoran's home place. Henry had converted to Catholicism upon his marriage.¹⁴

We are told that Fr. Corcoran drove a fine pair of horses, and he got a brick horse stable built for their shelter. This is notable, not for the horses, but because it eventually became the Catholic School. Kincardine, one of his outlying parishes was twenty five miles from Teeswater. To put this into a Tipperary perspective, it was equivalent to the distance from Ballingarry to Clonmel. One can imagine the difficulty for Fr. Corcoran in making this arduous journey over frontier roads. The congregation at Kincardine eventually dwindled, and the church was closed about fifteen years after Fr. Corcoran arrived at Teeswater. Riversdale church was built during the early years of his tenure. It is currently one of the last surviving old settler wood framed Catholic churches in this region.¹⁶ We will now review the world that Fr. Corcoran entered in 1877.



*Riversdale Church (2019)*¹⁵

Ontario (previously known as Upper Canada)

For the purpose of this article I will designate "Ontario" as the name of the province in which Teeswater is located. However a brief explanation of the name is required. Originally the area covered by present day Ontario and Quebec was known as the single entity Quebec. The area was divided and two new provinces were created – called Upper Canada (Ontario) and Lower Canada (modern day Quebec). The area was again united and called just Canada. In 1867 the area was again divided into Ontario and Quebec. Henceforth in this article I will only use "Ontario" for "Upper Canada".

Let's look at the history and geography of Ontario. By the mid-1700's the vast majority of the continent of North America was still an untamed wilderness. There were allegiances of varying strength going back to the home European countries of Great Britain, France and Spain. Great Britain and France vied for control of the northern area and Spain and France had done likewise in the south. Upon the conclusion of the 7 Years War, when Great Britain triumphed over France, the Treaty of Paris (1763) forced France to cede control of the northern part of North America to Great Britain. Using this as a backdrop the British introduced the Quebec Act of 1774, to affirm their control of the new territory. The "new territory" included not just Ontario and Quebec, but also other areas that were in the very early stages of exploration, ie. Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio, Wisconsin and parts of Minnesota. It did not include "the thirteen colonies" that would eventually become the United States. These colonies while still under the control of the British parliament had already developed their own "primitive" legal system. The Quebec Act had introduced several legal nuances and it was generally felt that the ultimate aim of this act was to impose more rigorous control on those colonies where it applied.

The folks in the “thirteen colonies” recognised the danger that in time the Quebec Act could be extended to cover their territory, and hence, rebelled in 1776 with the result that they severed from the control of Great Britain entirely. In the years immediately after 1776 thousands of British Loyalists fled the newly formed United States and made their way to Ontario and Quebec. The arrival of the Loyalists and the imposition of a rather crude border between the Canada and the US resulted in the distillation of Loyalism in the non-French region of Canada. This area where Loyalism was distilled and became prominent was Ontario.¹⁷

This was a period of rapid change in European and North American history. Not only did the English lose the “thirteen colonies” in 1776, but the French underwent the tumultuous revolution in 1789. As Canada developed its frontier structures it was becoming extremely difficult to legislate from London on the day to day activities in this very foreign and distant land. So in 1791, the Quebec Act was repealed and replaced with the Constitution Act which brought into effect the legal entities of the provinces of Ontario and Quebec. Autonomy was granted to these new colonies via newly convened provincial parliaments. As stated, Ontario in particular developed a strong Loyalist culture. Given the origin of the United States, the relationship between both countries was more hostile than warm in those early days. In fact the United States invaded Ontario in 1812. However, the invasion was repelled.



Map of Upper Canada (Ontario) 1862¹⁸

From the early 1800's emigrants started pouring into North America. It was only natural that Canada would attract emigrants with a Loyalist streak. There were two major differences between Ontario and Quebec. Ontario was English speaking and Protestant, and Quebec was French speaking and Catholic. With the conclusion of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815, the British Isles (and also Europe) entered a period of severe economic decline. In order to strengthen their control of Canada the British actively encouraged emigration to that region. When one combines this with the economic decline after 1815, there was definitely a strong pull towards Canada.¹⁹

During this period of time Ireland was in a state of turmoil with a rapidly increasing population and a rather active Whiteboy movement.²⁰ In addition it was felt that Catholic Emancipation would soon be granted and it wasn't at all clear what the outcome would be. Hence, this created multi reasons for the Irish Protestants to look elsewhere. Given that they were generally of Loyalist stock, it is easy to see the attraction of Upper Canada. From 1818 onwards the British Government subsidised some of these emigrant groups. The emigrants arrived in droves and initially settled in eastern part of Ontario.²¹

Richard Talbot assembled one such group from the area north of Nenagh and they travelled to North America in 1818 – eventually reaching Ontario. Over the succeeding three decades many more groups came to Canada.²² In the era up to the Famine most of the emigrants were small farmers and they brought with them some means. (This is in stark contrast with the Famine emigrants, who were destitute and generally not skilled in farming). Hence, these pre-famine emigrants aspired to farming. Secondly on religion, their make-up diverged from Ireland. The religious breakdown for the Irish arrivals in Upper Canada was 2 Protestants to 1 Catholic.²³

These early settlers transformed the land from primeval forest into well managed farmland. They built the infrastructure including roads, towns, villages and hamlets. They dammed the rivers and erected mills at the dams. They built the churches and organised their communities around these churches.²⁴

They also set up Orange Lodges as community centres catering to Protestants. These Orange Lodges followed the basic principles of the Orange Order in Ireland and had similar aims. However, they had no organisational attachment to the Orange Order in Ireland. In the first part of the 1800's there no centralised organisational structure linking these scattered lodges in Ontario. This all changed with the arrival of Ogle Gowan, from Wexford in 1826. He became the father of Orangeism when he formally established the Orange Organisation of Ontario in 1831. The organisation grew rapidly thereafter and by 1861 claimed 100,000 members out of a population of about

O R A N G E I S M
STANDS FOR THE DEFENCE OF PROTESTANT
CHRISTIANITY AND THE UNITY OF
THE BRITISH EMPIRE AND COMMONWEALTH
O N E S C H O O L — O N E F L A G — O N E L A N G U A G E
"A Great Protestant Crusade"

1.5 million. There were hundreds of Orange Lodges scattered across Ontario in small hamlets and large cities.²⁵

By the mid-1830's Ontario had reached a stage where it was in the control of a group of wealthy families. It was starting to migrate to the British model, whereby a permanent ruling class controlled the affairs of state. In 1837 an erstwhile Mayor of Toronto, William Lyon Mackenzie,²⁶ led a rebellion against this "ruling class". He was interested in the US federalist model, and sought closer alignment (but not outright attachment) with the US.²⁷ The rebellion was repelled and Mackenzie fled to the United States. Prior to his departure he had sought refuge at Streetsville, just west of Toronto. Unfortunately this area was in control of a wild bunch of Orangemen, called the Town-Line Blazers. The core of this group, renowned for hard drinking and fighting, had emigrated from the Palatine Settlement at Kilcooley, Tipperary. They were not disposed to Mackenzie's views or aspirations and chased him out of Canada.²⁸ Maybe Ontario would have become a republic if these "humble" Tipperary folks had not intervened!

Settlement Patterns

The arrival of immigrants in the first half of the 19th century followed three distinct and partially overlapping patterns. (1) Organised migration, whereby a group was formed in the original home location and travelled together to a specific location in Canada. (2) Chain migration, whereby immigrants followed relatives or acquaintances already settled in Canada. (3) In many cases chain migration also occurred *within* Canada, whereby groups of settlers followed friends from one location in Canada to another location.²⁹ The majority of settlers in Bruce County followed the latter pattern.

Bruce County

There were forty two counties in Ontario. Bruce County is situated in the north west corner of the then explored area of Ontario. A considerable part of the county is a peninsula – bounded on three sides by Lake Huron. The land area for the county is 1,536 square miles – which is slightly less than the area for Tipperary – 1,662 square miles. Bruce County does not have mountains and is relatively flat. The land is of medium quality – with a large part essentially rock and uncultivable. The southern part around Teeswater is the most fertile.³⁰

The county was surveyed for settlement in 1847–1850. It was sold to prospective settlers by the Canada Company in the great land transaction of 1854. Hundreds of settler families arrived in the ten years after 1854. Table #1 gives a good breakdown of the origins of these settlers. This table uses information from the 1881 Census.³¹ As shown, 29.1% of the residents identified as Irish. Virtually none of these Irish

Table #1 (1881 Census)		
Bruce County - Nationality Breakdown		
Country	Birth	Origin
Scotland	9.70%	36.0%
Ireland	5.20%	29.1%
England	3.80%	16.3%
Germany	2.70%	13.9%
France	0.1%	2.1%
United States	0.80%	0.4%
Canada	77.00%	1.2%
Other	0.30%	1.0%

residents came to Bruce County directly from Ireland. Most of these “Irish settlers” had come to Ontario in decades prior to the famine. They initially settled elsewhere for about half a generation prior to coming to Bruce County. Bruce County offered larger tracts of land at cheaper rates and in some cases of better quality.

The religious breakdown as shown in Table #2 provides a picture of the social and community mix. There was a significant German Catholic population in the south east of the county. This group contributed the vast majority of the Catholics. In fact Irish Catholics made up just 2.4% of the population of the county.

The religious breakdown of the Irish population (Table #3) brings up a surprising result – whereby Methodists were by far the largest group. This does not align with the religious adherence of the Irish population in Ireland. Per the 1901 Irish Census, Methodists contributed just 1.3% of the Irish population. If you exclude the Catholic population the misalignment between Ireland and Bruce County is even more striking. In that scenario Methodists account for 43% of the Protestant Irish in Bruce and just 6% of the protestant Irish in Ireland. The misalignment could have been the result of extremely selective emigration favoring Methodists. In that case one would expect a strong link between Bruce and central Ulster (ie Fermanagh) which doesn’t show up. However, based on interaction with the people here, I understand it may have been due to the fact that the Methodist Church was quicker to organise in the tiny rural hamlets than the Church of England. There is also the possibility that the Church of Ireland adherents were more comfortable switching to Methodism than to the Church of England. Bruce County had quite an active Orange Organisation and it was the home to over seventy orange lodges at one time or other.³²

Teeswater Village³³

Teeswater was formally incorporated as a “village” in 1875. This meant that it had the power to elect its own municipal council. Just six weeks prior to its incorporation the railway had come to Teeswater. The existence of a railway would have been quite an important transportation and communication device for Fr. Corcoran when he arrived in this frontier community. The land around Teeswater was quite flat relative to Ballingarry.

The population of the village in 1881 was 861, of which just 38 (including Fr. Corcoran) were of Irish birth. Also, 229 people identified themselves as of Irish race, which was just over a quarter of the population. Ref. Table #4.

Table #2 (1881 Census)	
Religious Breakdown	
Bruce County - All	
Presbyterian	38.4%
Methodist	24.1%
Church of England	11.1%
Catholic	10.8%
Baptist	5.3%
Lutheran	2.7%
Mennonite	0.6%

Table #3 (1881 Census)	
Religious Breakdown	
Bruce County - Irish	
Presbyterian	22.6%
Methodist	39.0%
Church of England	26.5%
Catholic	8.3%
Baptist	1.3%
Other	2.3%

Table #4		
Teeswater - Nationality Breakdown		
Country	Birth	Origin
Scotland	9.4%	43.6%
Ireland	4.4%	26.6%
England	5.8%	24.3%
Germany	0.8%	5.2%
United States	0.9%	
Canada	75.3%	
Other	3.4%	0.3%

Table #5	
Religious Breakdown	
Teeswater	
Presbyterian	48.7%
Methodist	27.1%
Church of England	11.6%
Catholic	5.5%
Baptist	3.5%
Lutheran	0.8%
Other	2.8%

The religious breakdown (Table #5) shows that the village was overwhelmingly Protestant, with Catholics contributing just 5.5%. The 5.5% was 49 Catholics of which 17 identified as Irish Catholics. I expect it would have been quite difficult in these circumstances to establish a viable Catholic Church. However, the Catholic numbers for the hinterland around Teeswater were quite a deal better with 1,407 people identifying as Catholics.

Tipperary Settlement at Purple Grove³⁴

Fr. Corcoran would have been aware of a Tipperary settlement that formed about 15 miles west of Teeswater. It was within the broad confines of his extended Catholic parish. The settlement formed around the families of Stanley's, Collins, Morgan's, Walls, Culberts, Hodgins and Blackwell's. Most of these protestant families had originally come from Tipperary – and more specifically the civil parish of Modreeny, just north of Nenagh. The Hodgins came from Templemore. The first generation settler families produced large families and there was significant inter marriage between them in the successive generations. Later they were joined by the Bradley's, another family connected to Tipperary. This gave the area strong Tipperary roots which the families acknowledge up to the present time.



Stanley Family³⁵ Back Row: Richard, William, Thomas Jr,
Middle Row: Lisa, Ann Snr, Thomas Snr, Harry
Front Row: Ann Jr, Becky.

The photo shows the family of Thomas Stanley (1788–1871) and Ann Owen (1809–1892) both born in Tipperary. Thomas and Ann emigrated to Canada shortly after their marriage in 1824. These families trace their ancestry back to Cromwellian soldiers.³⁶ There is some disagreement on this assertion.³⁷ However, they identify strongly as Irish and in particular with Tipperary.

The community derived its name as a combination of “purple” which is a degree in the Orange

Order, and a “grove” of beech trees which was located in the heart of the group of farms. This was formalised when “Purple Grove” was submitted to the Postmaster General as the name of the post office.³⁹ Not surprisingly there was also an Orange Lodge at Purple Grove, where the warrant was issued in 1879, to a William Collins.⁴⁰ As a side note, it is interesting that a John Phelan who lived in a neighbouring hamlet (but originally came from Ballyragget, Kilkenny), submitted the name “Emmett” for the post office in his hamlet in honour of Robert Emmet. In this latter case the name was rejected, and in response the Postmaster General named that hamlet, “Chepstow”, in honour of Strongbow!! Not surprisingly, this was not a popular choice with the local Irish community.⁴¹ Under the watchful guidance of these “Tipperary people”, Purple Grove originally prospered, with a Methodist Church, school, post office and blacksmith shop. However it eventually petered out and now all that remains of this proud Tipperary hamlet is the Purple Grove Community Centre (which was originally the school).



*Purple Grove Community Centre*³⁸

Courtney Family⁴²

I make a special mention of a Courtney family that lived in the southern part of Bruce County not far from Teeswater. James Courtney was born at Bawnlea, Tipperary in 1818. This was about four miles north of Fr. Corcoran's home place at Ballingarry. It is likely that James Courtney would have known Fr. Corcoran's father.



*James Courtney, Eliza Smeltzer*⁴³

After James's father died, James came to Canada with his mother, stepfather, Joseph Caesar and brother. James married twice, firstly to Anna Mae Carey and secondly to Eliza Smeltzer who he had known in Ireland. The Courtneys were Church of Ireland, and I suspect that Eliza may have had Palatine origins. After the death of his first wife James moved to Bruce County. There are numerous descendants of James in Bruce County.

Other Tipperary Settlements in Neighbouring Counties

Not far south of Teeswater, but situated in the neighbouring county of Huron, there was a well-documented Tipperary settlement just east of the town of Goderich. The settlement

consisted of a group of farms along a five miles stretch of road – which still bears the name “Tipperary Line”. This settlement was mainly populated by Palatines, originally from Kilcooley.⁴⁴ The families included many with the unusual German names from Kilcooley – Switzer, Sparling, Smeltzer, Steep, Miller, Baker. In addition there were others from that area of Tipperary including Cooks, Coles, Cantelons, Colcloughs, and Colburns. There were also Churchills, and several Holmes families who came from the Tipperary-Kilkenny border area just south of Urlingford. The church on the Tipperary Line was endearingly known as the “Tipperary Church”. This Methodist church suffered dwindling attendance and was closed in 1882. There was also a school called Tipperary school.^{45,46}

Most of these families had settled elsewhere in Upper Canada prior to relocating to Huron County when it was opened for settlement in the 1840’s. Some of these Palatines had previously lived at Streetsville, where they encountered William Lyon MacKenzie (of the 1837 Rebellion). Their descendants say that they appear to have calmed down when they relocated to Huron County!

The closest hamlet was Holmesville which was about one mile from the Tipperary Line. Needless to say it was named for a member of the Holmes family, mentioned previously. There was another family from north Kilkenny settled at Holmesville, which eventually made its mark in America – the Disney’s. The grandfather of the famous Walt Disney, Kepple Disney, was born at Holmesville. Walt’s dad, Elias was born on a farm about half ways between Teeswater and Holmesville.⁴⁷



*Nenagh Post Office, c. 1910*⁴⁹

In another county, Grey, adjacent to Bruce, there was a tiny hamlet of Nenagh. The hamlet included a post office, school and a blacksmith forge. A Martin Ryan (born in Ireland) and his family lived right beside the post office. I speculate that this Ryan may have had some involvement in the naming of the post office.⁴⁸ The area around Nenagh was settled by “shanty” Irish Catholics, who had come to this location as part of a road building crew. They received some very poor quality land as compensation

for their road building efforts.⁵⁰ Grey country was the home to one of the most fervent Orange organisations in Upper Canada, boasting over fifty lodges at one time or other.⁵¹ Currently the county is one of the last remaining places where they run an Orange Parade on 12 July.⁵²

The Forgotten Irish⁵³

The Irish people, among whom Fr. Corcoran lived, could be described as the “forgotten Irish”. Professor Donald Akenson, in his book “The Irish in Ontario” states that if the birth places identified in all the Canadian censuses up to 1881 are tallied, the most common birth place for immigrants to Upper Canada up to that time is Ireland. The conclusion to

be drawn is that the Irish formed the largest ethnic group in the entire province up 1881. The religious breakdown for the Irish was 2:1 Protestant to Catholic.

Up until the 1980's there was a lack of published historical literature on the Irish in Ontario either in Ireland or in Canada - especially when compared to the Irish in the US. Akenson speculates that this may have been the result of the strong loyalist Protestant influence in Ontario, which may have not suited the brand of nationalism and identity in Ireland in the first half of the 20th century. I believe that this has now been overhauled.

Agriculture Production – Bruce⁵⁴ v. Tipperary⁵⁵

When the pioneer settlers arrived in Bruce County in the 1850's the two highest priorities (by far) would have been, year round food sustainability and year round shelter. In 1858 Bruce County experienced a "year of starvation" which was caused by an adverse weather situation.⁵⁶ It was too early for these settlers to have built up the required margins in food production. One must remember that the vast majority of Bruce County was still virgin forest. It must have been a terrifying experience for the Irish settlers who would have been quite sensitive to the food issue, given that the Irish famine had taken place within the previous decade.

Crop	Tipperary (1888)		Bruce (1890)	
	Acres	Per Capita	Acres	Per Capita
Wheat	13,572	0.07	50,804	0.78
Barley	28,395	0.14	14,226	0.22
Oats	77,705	0.39	80,926	1.24
Potatoes	53,337	0.27	5,496	0.08
Turnips	32,228	0.16	5,705	0.09
Total	205,238	1.03	157,157	2.41

In order to gain an understanding of the level of progress achieved by these pioneer settlers, it is useful to compare the agriculture production for Bruce County with that of Tipperary. Table #6 shows that Tipperary had about 30% more area under crop than Bruce County. Relatively speaking Tipperary was still heavily reliant on root crops such as potatoes and turnips. However if one switches to per capita agricultural production, Bruce County had more than doubled Tipperary. This was an extraordinary achievement by the pioneers in Bruce County. These people were from a similar background to their fellow farmers in Tipperary. In one generation they transformed virgin forest into manageable farmland and out produced their colleague in the old country, by more than a factor of two. The system of land ownership in Bruce was quite different to that in Tipperary. One wonders if that accounts for the dramatic difference in production. I am aware that there had been a deliberate move away from grain crops in Ireland since the famine.

The Fenian Scare

"Deep in Canadian Woods we've met, From one bright island flown, Great is the land we thread, but yet, Our hearts are with our own, And ere we leave this shanty small, While fades the autumn day, We'll toast old Ireland, Dear old Ireland. Ireland! Boys, Hurrah."⁵⁷

This is the first verse of the poem "Song for the Backwoods". It was written by T.D. Sullivan who lived in Dublin but originally came from Bantry, Co Cork. The poem was written in 1857 ie. about ten years after the darkest year of the famine. It was also one year before

the founding of the Fenians. The poem became widely popular in both Ireland and among the Irish in North America. I believe it may also have been used as a regimental song during the American Civil War. There was always a sense of paranoia in Upper Canada with respect to American intentions. The paranoia was reciprocated. In the early days of the American Civil War the Union side was quite suspicious with respect to the Canadian position. In fact, Canada even mobilised a militia to guard against any rogue incursion by the Union Army. On the conclusion of the Civil War in April 1865, the fears abated, somewhat. This all changed in early June 1866, when a bunch of demobilised Union soldiers invaded Upper Canada at Fort Erie, not under the American flag, but under the Irish Fenian flag. Having won the first battle, the “Union Irish” were then repelled. However, this was not the end of the story.

The Fenian invasion caused absolute consternation throughout Upper Canada. It was felt that the Fort Erie battle was just a prelude to a much more comprehensive invasion. Rumours fanned flames all across Upper Canada especially those areas which bordered the US. Bruce County was one such area because it had a lake border with Michigan. Stories to the effect that Fenians were amassing in Chicago in preparation for a maritime invasion of the east coast of Lake Huron were rife.⁵⁸ I have reviewed the list of one hundred and forty Bruce County militia recruits.⁵⁹ It is generally composed of English and Scots settlers, but it does include several Irish. One example was Hamilton O'Connor who was the Irish born postmaster of Teeswater during the early years of Fr. Corcoran. O'Connor was of Church of England religious persuasion. Throughout the summer of 1866, the militia recruits drilled in every village and town. They finally had a mass assembly at Goderich close to the other Tipperary settlement. During the course of this assembly they almost blew a boat containing none other than US Union General Sherman out of the waters of Lake Huron! General Sherman had been taking a leisurely jaunt on the Great Lakes after his Civil War victory, and his boat was initially mistaken as a Fenian boat.⁶⁰

This was always going to be a phantom war. I expect the Fenians never had any intention of invading Canada across the Great Lakes. As a propaganda exercise it suited the Canada administration to stoke the flames. The Orange Order claimed that 50% of the militia was composed of its members.⁶¹ On the downside it generated distrust of the Irish Catholic population, which lasted for at least a generation. The Fenian scare was resurrected sporadically from time to time again. It really only subsided around 1890, about twelve years after Fr. Corcoran arrived at Teeswater. In Bruce County this episode is still remembered as a “great victory”... in a war that never happened!!

Fr. Corcoran Takes a Trip to Ireland

In the summer of 1906 Fr. Corcoran returned home to Ireland for a holiday. It was probably his first trip back home in almost thirty years. I expect it would have been a big occasion at Ballingarry. While the trip would have been celebrated as a joyous occasion, it would no doubt have been bittersweet for Fr. Corcoran. During the intervening years his mother had passed away in 1888⁶² and his older brother Richard, was found dead on a boreen in late Jan 1890 where the cause of death was listed as exposure as a result being intoxicated.⁶³ His younger brother Timothy had taken over the farm at Tinnock. Timothy married Nora Cormack in 1891, and by 1906 they had nine children.⁶⁴

Upon returning to Teeswater, his congregation celebrated his return in style. I hereby provide the complete welcome message.⁶⁵

'The congregation of the Sacred Heart extended to Fr. Corcoran a hearty welcome home on Sunday last. The reverend clergyman by his genial disposition, and manly, unassuming character during his long incumbency here, has won hosts of friends, not only among his own people, but all denominations in the County of Bruce... We your faithful friends and parishioners of Teeswater, gladly avail ourselves of the opportunity to greet you back with a hearty Cead Mille Failithe (sic) to your Canadian home from the lands across the sea. We had not an opportunity of bidding you farewell and wishing you bon voyage but our thoughts and prayers accompanied you across the billows and our constant supplication was to bring you back in renewed vigour to labor in your chosen field. Is it any wonder that we should on this occasion express to you the deep sentiments of love and reverence we entertain for you as our priest? You have devoted the best part of your life, now almost thirty years to our interests, both spiritual and temporal. In storm and sunshine you were found at your post. In trouble and affliction you proved a father and friend.

You came to us when our parish was disorganized, in fact when we had no church and when consequently we were inadequately supplied, (owing to outstanding position and distances from other parishes) with spiritual comforts of our Holy Church. We know very well how you have labored in building the church and parochial residence. We are not unmindful of your herculean labours, not only at Teeswater, but also at Riversdale and Holyrood. The very satisfactory manner in which you have regulated and disposed of church funds entrusted to your care meets with our warm approval. Your attention to our church which you have lately decorated in so artistic a manner in such exquisite taste endears you to all who loves Gods house and the place where His glory dwelleth". The aspirations of your heart would be to see that your people advance in comfort and Happiness, your wishes would be for their social, moral and intellectual improvement. As an earnest priest and warm hearted friend of benevolent disposition you have endeared yourself to rich and poor alike.

We were delighted when we learned that you had decided to take a trip abroad to recuperate and visit dear old Ireland, the land which notwithstanding her many trials and troubles has not only clung to the faith with constancy and devotion that has been admiration to the world, but has also given to our holy Mother the church, many of our distinguished priests and most eminent divines. Nor did you forget us in your absence. We are thankful that you provided us with such a holy, pious and learned priest as Fr. O'Gorman S.J. who watched over his flock with the greatest care and vigilance. As a mark of gratitude we took occasion of your absence to contribute in a small way to your comfort by painting the interior of your residence and furnishing it with suitable furniture. We earnestly pray that God who has guided you through the perils of the sea, and brought you safely home, may continue to protect you, and that you may be spared to live long amongst us. Wishing you happiness in your pilgrimage through life, and eternal happiness hereafter as a reward for your labours is the sincere wish of your loving flock.

Fr. Corcoran responded by effusively thanking the congregation. However, it is mentioned that "Fr. Corcoran referred in feeling terms to Ireland as the land of his heart, the scene of his boyhood days, and entertained strong hopes of its future prosperity". One suspects that after all those years, he still pined for the Slievardagh Hills.

Letter of Resignation and return to Tipperary

Just over three years after his return from his holiday in Ireland, in a letter dated 1s Jan 1910, Fr. Corcoran abruptly tendered his resignation to Bishop Thomas Dowling.⁶⁶ The letter began: "After serious consideration, I beg leave to resign the parish of Teeswater into the hands of your Lordship". He goes on to state that it was his desire that the resignation should take effect after the 4th Sunday of January. There doesn't appear to be any lead in correspondence to this "abrupt resignation". In addition, he states that after writing the letter, but prior to posting it, he received word from home that his brother Timothy, had died unexpectedly, leaving a young family behind. By this stage Timothy's family had swelled to ten children.⁶⁷

Bishop Dowling was born at Shanagolden, Co Limerick, but grew up in Canada.⁶⁸ He was unwell at that time and his Vicar General responded by refusing to accept the resignation. Undaunted, Fr. Corcoran again pleaded his case, this time also stating that his brother Canon Corcoran was suffering from "acute nervousness at times" and needed help with his parish work in Tipperary.⁶⁹ Apparently Fr. William suffered a stroke and had become quite debilitated.⁷⁰ One needs to stand back and think about Fr. Corcoran's predicament. He was now fifty eight years old. He had spent almost thirty three years ministering in a solitary backwoods community. It would have been an extraordinary lonely ministry. He had built solid foundations for his parish. It's puzzling that he wasn't given an opportunity to move elsewhere in the diocese – possibly to a city parish (or larger town) where he could have interacted more easily with fellow priests in neighbouring parishes.

In due course Bishop Dowling relented, and Fr. Corcoran left Teeswater in Feb 1910. Before leaving Teeswater he was presented with a gold chalice and watch by his parishioners. Also, in an unusual act of cross denominational spirit and as a mark of respect, the *Protestant* community presented him "with an ebony cane ornamented with a beautiful gold head" inscribed as follows "To Rev J.J. Corcoran P.P. from his Protestant Friends at Teeswater".⁷¹ More than anything else this likely provides evidence that he displayed an open-minded disposition combined with astute interactional skills, in what could otherwise have been a difficult and hostile environment. Shortly after Fr. Corcoran returned to Ireland, the family had more sad news. His younger brother James, who was mentally challenged and lived at home, passed away in May 1910. Fr. Corcoran joined his brother, Canon William in the parish of Upperchurch and Drombane. However, his tenure was tragically cut short when he died 9 Nov 1915, as a result of falling down a stairs.⁷² Interestingly, in Canada his cause of death was given as a fall from a horse. He was buried at Drombane. His brother, Canon William passed away at Upperchurch, 31 Dec 1918.⁷³

Corollary

As stated above, the town of Kincardine ceased to have Catholic services during Fr. Corcoran's tenure, due to a lack of congregation. As the years passed by, the town of Kincardine prospered. Catholic services returned, first sporadically but eventually on a more permanent basis. However, it wasn't until 1974, that a resident priest was appointed. It is fitting that the first resident priest was another Tipperary man – Fr. Matthew Grogan, from Bansha. Fr. Grogan was a Holy Ghost father. He is still fondly remembered by the older generation in this area.⁷⁴ He died at Toronto in 5 April 2015.

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