

HOLY CROSS AS A LODESTAR

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Holy Cross Historical Trust

Thursday, Feb 20, 2014 7:00pm
Baronet Room, Delta Halifax

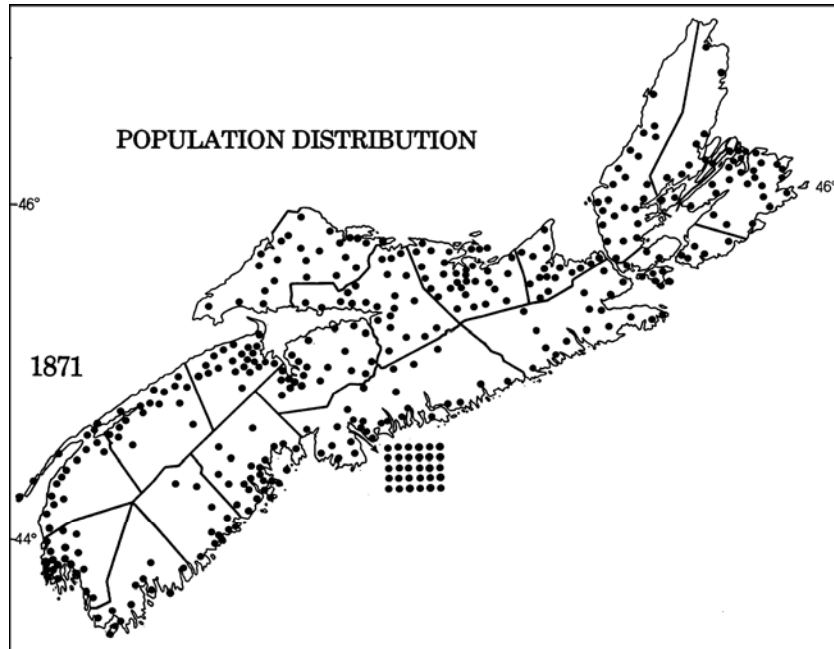
Introduction

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you tonight and tell you something about the new Holy Cross: the Holy Cross Historical Trust. My address is divided into three sections. I begin by examining the Restoration Story and the Irish, and the great work which has been accomplished during the last six years; I then talk about the Research Bridge of the Historians and how that is reshaping the initiative, and has propelled the new Historical Trust into being; and then talk about Civil Society and the Catholics. The broad theme of my talk, therefore, is that the new Holy Cross is a dream arising from the aspirations of three communities: the Irish, the Historians, and the Catholics.

The Restoration and the Irish

I expect all of you know the restoration story at Holy Cross, so I will be brief. Holy Cross Cemetery was opened in 1843, and the great majority – almost three-quarters – of the burials at Holy Cross were of persons buried in the nineteenth century. We have recently added the early nineteenth century burial records of St. Peter's Parish to our database. St. Peter's, as you will know, was the predecessor parish to St. Mary's, and its cemetery was located opposite the current public library. The records from St. Peter's span the years from 1799 to 1842, when Holy Cross was opened. Apart from a few years in the 1890s after Mount Olivet was consecrated, the burial records of these two cemeteries, some 20,000 in total, are a proxy for the Halifax Catholic community of the nineteenth century. The stories of those who were buried, therefore, is the story of a people.

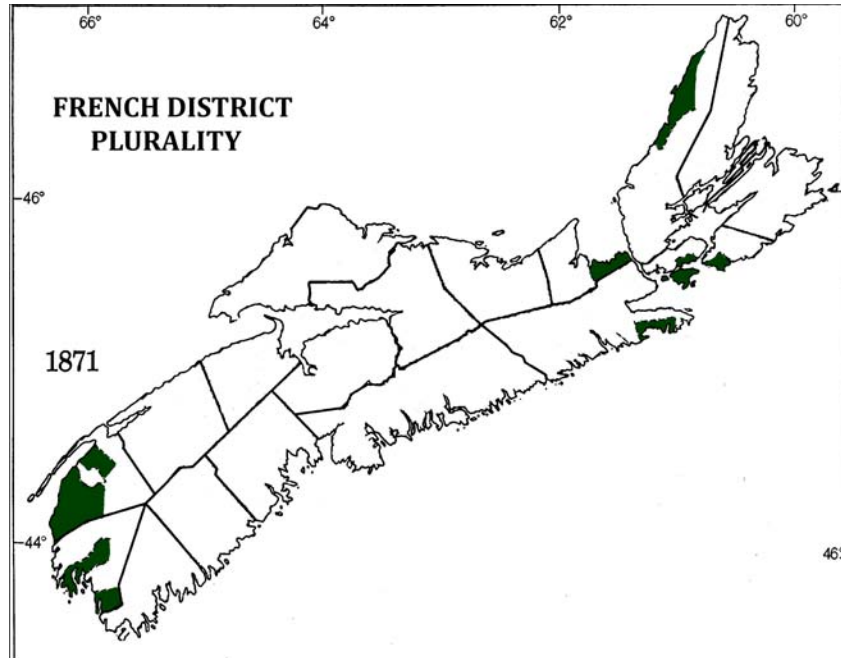
How does this story fit with the narrative of other peoples in Nova Scotia. Our statistical information is rough and skimpy before the second half of the nineteenth century, so let me focus on the census of 1871.¹ In that year, the population of the province was 388,000 people,



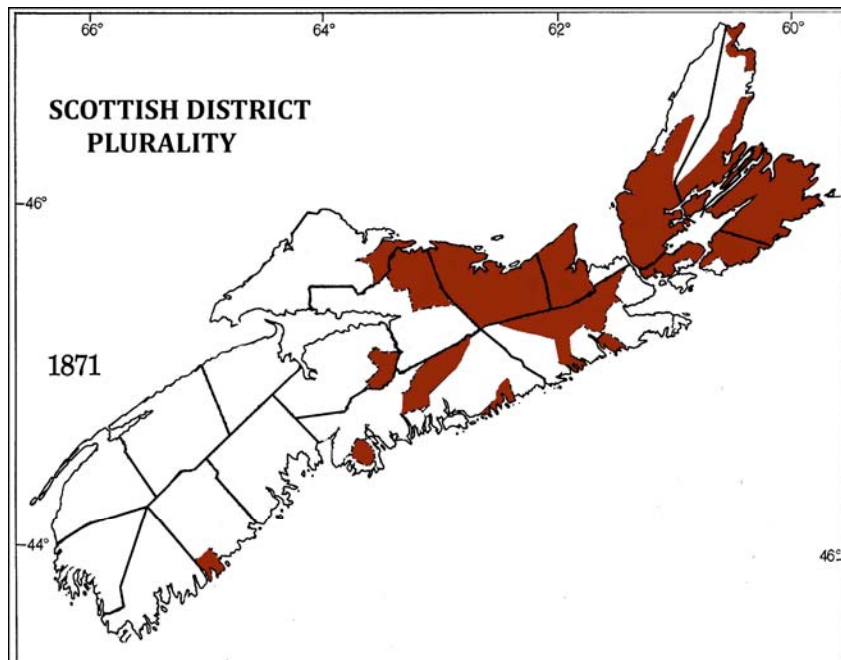
and the non-aboriginal population was made up of five major ethnic peoples: the English, the Dutch-Germans, the French, the Scots, and the Irish. Given the destinations flowing out of chain migration, the language and cultural barriers between ethnicities, and the limited geographic mobility of the time, it is not a surprise to see the distribution of ethnic affiliations occupying the geographical spaces which we all know so well. In the following three maps, we can see those districts with dominant ethnic populations in 1871: first, for the

¹ These maps are drawn from Andrew Clark's valuable study: Clark, Andrew. (1960). "Old World Origins and Religious Adherence in Nova Scotia." *Geographical Review*: Vol. 50, No. 3, 317-344.

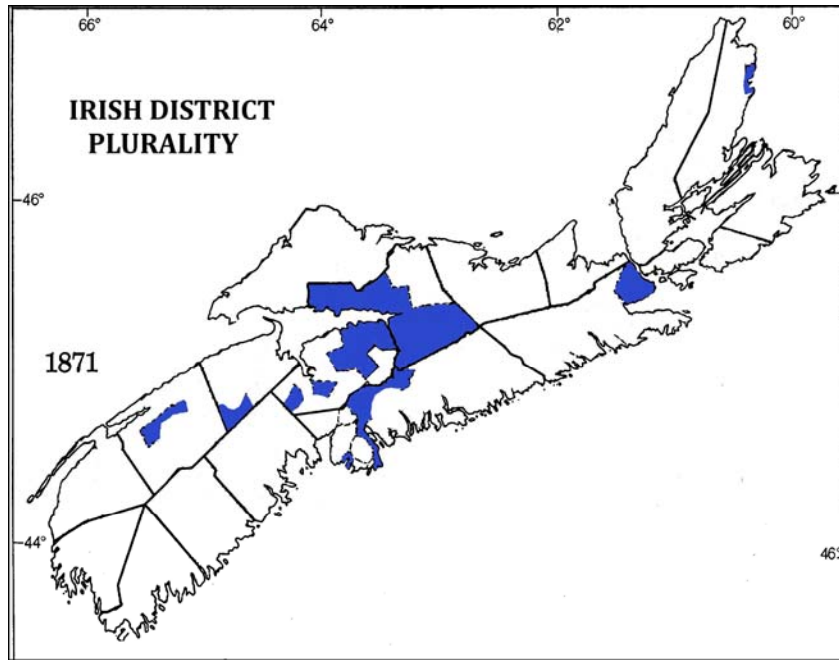
French,



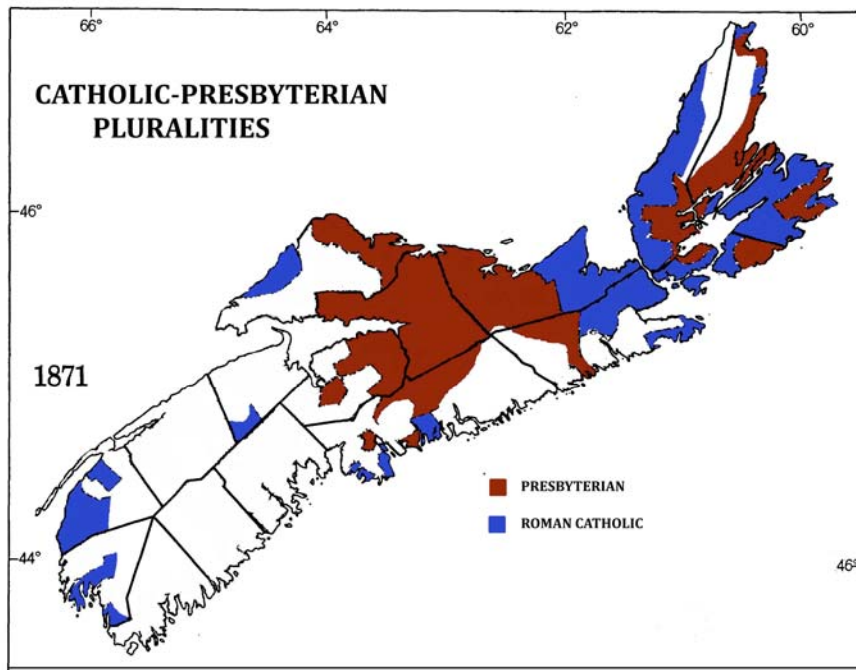
second, for the Scots,



and third, for the Irish in Nova Scotia.



This next map identifies religious affiliations. It plots the districts where Catholicism and Presbyterianism were dominant in Nova Scotia in 1871.



If we then recall the areas of Irish dominance which we saw a minute ago, we realize that the Irish Catholic stronghold was Halifax. It is no accident that Halifax is the seat of the Archbishop, the Metropolitan for the region. Holy Cross is, therefore, not just one more Irish Catholic cemetery in nineteenth century Nova Scotia, but is the bleeding heart of Irish Catholic life in the province.

Of course, this is all well-known to this audience. And it is this connection which propelled much of the physical restoration work at Holy Cross Cemetery in the past six years. Indeed, many of the past and present officers of this historic Society have been in the forefront of the physical restoration during the last six years – a restoration which has consumed some 20,000 hours of volunteer labour, a quarter million dollars in cash, and innumerable bottles of water.

The restoration story is beautifully recounted in a video interview with Brian O'Brien.

Video of Brian O'Brien

The Research Bridge of the Historians

As the restoration work progressed, it attracted not just the Irish, though, but also the historians – that is, academics, genealogists, and the descendants of those buried - who were inspired by the rejuvenation of this important nineteenth century site.

Playing a critical role in this historical turn was the magnificent effort by two Holy Cross volunteers: Trueman Tufts who almost single-handedly digitized the burial database; and Lorraine Lafferty who Saturday after Saturday worked and reworked the cemetery stone database. These databases constitute a huge potential. You may have heard recently about the interest in “big data”: Dalhousie opened an “Institute for Big Data Analytics” this past summer, and an IBM-supported cloud-computing consortium was established with Dalhousie, the N.S. Community College, Acadia, St. F.X., and Saint Mary’s. Part of the big data movement, though, is big historical data, so

this work by Trueman and Lorraine is timely and important.

There was another inspiration, though, which developed from the stories that were identified, and assimilated, and developed on Saturday mornings in the cemetery. There was a gradual realization that these stories were not just about individuals who were buried at Holy Cross, but were the stories of a community who bore children, started businesses, laughed, loved, and wept. There was a recognition that these stories of a people who made a difference could be rendered in interpretation panels and digital dramatizations at Holy Cross. These stories might be about the Religious of the Sacred Heart, or the Richness of Irish Song, or the Art of Our Lady of Dolours Chapel, or the Founding of the Royal Bank of Canada, or the Saladin Mutineers, or the Gourley Shanty Riot.

So, these twin inspirations – big data genealogy and the interpretative story of a people - became the impetus for setting up the new Historical Trust with broader aims than the former Cemetery Trust. As its first job, this new institution then became the lead organizer of a large international research project. We developed a partnership with Saint Mary's University and the Canadian Catholic Historical Association, recruited sixteen volunteer professor-researchers from three countries, and successfully raised \$255,000 for graduate student support and travel.

Mark McGowan, the principal investigator, talks about this project in a video he did this past fall.

Video of Mark McGowan

The project has already led to some interesting developments. In October, we photographed 17,000 images of the property assessment records for nineteenth century Halifax. We developed an archival unit which has digitized the Halifax Catholic, an important mid-century newspaper, the catalogues of the early Mechanics Library, and the records of the Charitable Irish. And we are partnering with the N.S. Community College to develop a server-side relational database

program which would allow the addition of census, baptismal, and marriage records to our database through a web interface.

The genealogical work, as some of you know, is being done by a group of database volunteers, a group which is now expanding in geographical scope. We have recently recruited two volunteers from Boston who are working on their ancestors who were buried in the cemetery.

The next step is to bring some of these stories forward, the first of which will be about the Kenny family. We have traced their family tree and are bringing photographs, census records, scrapbooks, and business profiles together in a recognition of this family. And our Interpretation Committee is beginning an entrance project which, among other things, would expand the interpretation of John Sparrow David Thompson and his family.

However, the research project seeks to go farther than this. These biographies need to be set in a larger narrative about the Irish Diaspora and the transmission and reception of Church and Intellectual History. Our contemporary discourse is paralyzingly parochial, naïve, and ahistorical about the significance of our immediate aims. The history of a people, though, is not just a collection of stories about individual aims, but is more importantly a narrative about the collective projects which were developed, and the common good which those many individuals sought to create. This kind of research can help raise our sights.

Civil Society and the Catholics

The initial scope of the revitalization project aimed to renew the hearts and memories of the people. It is only when the cemetery is once again identified as a treasured memorial within contemporary forms of life that there is the will and interest to maintain and preserve the cemetery. Accordingly, an interpretation program which illuminates the social and intellectual history – the forms of life – of those who are buried there was viewed as a vital means of deepening that revitalization of the spirit.

Certainly, a social history of Holy Cross is a story about the initial

immigration of a people, the grinding hard work that was necessary to get a foothold, and then the extraordinary flowering of civil society in the mid-nineteenth century.

In the third video, Terry Murphy, a Trustee, Research Collaborator, and Professor Emeritus at Saint Mary's, talks about this flowering of the Irish Catholic community in the mid-nineteenth century and the building up of civil society which occurred.

Video of Terry Murphy

However, this flowering of civil society which Terry talks about is complex.

There are certainly some elements of, what is referred to as, the Catholic Enlightenment. The English Cisalpine Club, led by Charles Berington, Charles Butler, and John Lingard, was in the forefront of those championing Catholic Emancipation during the late 1700s and beginning of the 1800s, and the similar agitation by Irish Catholics in Halifax is well-known. Similarly, the Trusteeship model of church property which developed in Halifax has resonance with similar developments in English Catholicism. Moreover, William Robertson, Adam Ferguson, Dugald Stewart and other philosophers of the Scottish Enlightenment had theorized civil society, and their works were familiar throughout the English-speaking world.

More important than these traces of the Catholic Enlightenment, though, was the rise of the Romantic movement in early nineteenth century Europe. Unlike the mechanical, unhistorical world of characteristic Enlightenment reason, the world of the Romantics was a living historical world, involving imagination, mystery, and sentiment.

The 1830s in Halifax were notable for art exhibitions, literary talks, dramatic productions, and an explosion of weekly newspapers. The Mechanics' Library, the first public library in Halifax, was formed in 1831. Work which we are now doing on the early Library Catalogues shows that the works of Wordsworth, Lord Byron, Mary Shelley,

William Hazlitt, and the Irish poet, Thomas Moore, were freely available to library patrons.

So, the flowering of the Irish community in Halifax was certainly about economic and political capability, but it was propelled by resonance with a liberating cultural imaginary which was in the air.

The flowering was also built, though, on a particular moral view and understanding of God's presence in this world. Edward Kenny, for instance, was a first-generation immigrant, born in County Kerry in Ireland in 1800. He married Ann Forrestall in Halifax, fathered twelve children, and died in 1891, to be buried in Holy Cross Cemetery. His first job was for a merchant in Cork who was doing business in Halifax. Relocating to Halifax in 1824 to manage trade at that end, it was only a few years before Edward and his brother set up a merchant trading firm of their own, and went on to found the Royal Bank of Canada. What is not so well known is that both Edward and his brother were very active in the affairs of St. Mary's Parish, and Edward was himself a Warden. Of Edward's twelve children, three of his sons became Jesuits (one of whom was rector of St. Dunstan's College in Charlottetown), and one daughter became a sister with the Religious of the Sacred Heart.

What, then, was this particular moral view which connects the Irish community in Halifax to the flowering of mid-century civil society. Gerard McCool argues that Catholic theologians in the early 19th century brought the Christian wisdom tradition to life again, and in doing so, abandoned the autonomous reason of the social contract, and replaced it with a view of society as "a natural community whose culture, history and tradition were needed for the emergence and development of individual reason".² So, this communitarian impulse, and the religious vision that it drew upon, provided the ideological support that the great flowering of civil society required in the 1840s and 1850s.

The term "ideological support" implies something arbitrary, though, as

² McCool, Gerald A. (2000). "The Christian Wisdom Tradition and Enlightenment." In *Examining the Catholic Intellectual Tradition*, Anthony J. Cernera and Oliver J. Morgan (eds.). Fairfield: Sacred Heart University Press.

if it was a rationalization of the Romantic cultural impulse which was there anyway. However, culture and religion are not separate spheres, but different expressions of the same aspiration.

John Paul II has aptly summarized this relation:

Man is understood in a more complete way when he is situated within the sphere of culture through his language, history and the position he takes toward the fundamental events of life such as birth, love, work and death. At the heart of every culture lies the attitude man takes to the greatest mystery: the mystery of God. Different cultures are basically different ways of facing the question of personal existence.³

A program of interpretation at Holy Cross illuminates the past for those in the present. However, the story of Holy Cross is not just economic and political, but, as I have shown, is also religious in nature. The Catholic community, therefore, is the third community which has an interest in Holy Cross.

The constant awareness that we now live in a secular world leads us to imagine that the faith and devotion of our forebears in the nineteenth century was somehow pure and clear, unlike the interior life we struggle to maintain and build in the present. However, whatever else separates the churched and the unchurched, they both struggle alike with questions of faith and meaning.

The site cannot, therefore, be neutral about the Christian tradition which formed the matrix of understanding for the lives of those who are buried there. It can be neutral, though, in the sense of being open to all visitors and all faiths. The site could provide glimpses of transcendence which will support a dialogue among all those who come about ultimate values and meaning and, in doing so, to awaken interior lives again.

³ Encyclical Letter *Centesimus Annus* of Pope John Paul II on the Hundredth Anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*, (1991).

Conclusion

In my talk this evening, I have tried to give you a sense of the developing story of Holy Cross, how things have evolved over time.

But I have also tried to show you that the new Holy Cross – Holy Cross Historical Trust – is a collective endeavour of three communities – the Irish, the Historians, and the Catholics. Sometimes, of course, these identities are found all in one person, but many of our volunteers only have one or two of these identities which they can claim as their own. Moreover, our tent has to be big enough to communicate with other Faiths as well as the Catholic, the contemporary as well as the historical, the non-Irish Catholic or the non-Irish historian as well as the Irish.

There are many practical ways to be involved. The restoration itself will be ongoing with regular maintenance every year, and will continue on Saturday mornings through the summers. The census work on the database inches forward with the steady patient work of dedicated volunteers. We have our longer-term sights on acquisition of the caretaker's property and the construction of an Interpretation Centre there. So, there will be fund-raisers, sponsorships, and endowments. You all know the drill.

But I would like to suggest something else. In my title, I referred to the new Holy Cross as a *Lodestar*. A lodestar is a star used in navigation or astronomy as a point of reference – something that serves as a guide or model. Now, those involved in Holy Cross do not have any special wisdom or knowledge. What we are trying to do, though, is to recover an understanding of the past – to learn from our forebears – and this knowledge – this wisdom – may illuminate a path for us, as if it were a Lodestar.

As Terry Murphy has described it, the Irish Catholic community of Halifax in the mid-nineteenth century was very muscular: it started great businesses, founded important institutions, and populated the church. It was no accident that the first Roman Catholic Prime Minister of Canada, John Sparrow David Thompson, was an Irishman born in Halifax.

This past October, we started a public lecture series to create a dialogue among the existing Irish-History-Catholic communities and what we can do together. A dialogue, though, is made with people. We invite you to that dialogue. It is always the case that a collective venture of different interests is in continual tension, but it is essential to strive for balance if we are to use this project, this enterprise, to light a fire that others can see.

Thank you for your time.