“Kindred Spirits”in the North: Some Preliminary Notes on Indigenous Peoples in British North America and Their Donations to Irish Famine Relief

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The Irish Famine (1846-1852) was one of the most traumatic events in modern Irish history. With the repeated failure of the potato crop, upon which two-thirds of Ireland’s 8 million people depended, the social and economic fabric of Irish life was torn to pieces. By the early 1850s, one million people had perished from hunger or disease and another 1.5 million simply left Ireland.

One of the unsung episodes of the Famine was the donation of $170 (the figure is disputed) or about $6,300 USD in today’s currency, from the Choctaw Nation in the USA to Irish relief. There is much irony in this act of generosity from the Choctaw. They themselves were destitute having been forced to relocate from their traditional lands in the southeastern United States, to the designated “Indian Territory” in present day Oklahoma. From 1831-1833, this “Trail of Tears” initiated by President Andrew Jackson, himself of Irish descent, caused the deaths of thousands of Choctaws, Creeks, Cherokees, Chickasaws, and Seminoles. Yet only fifteen years later, the Choctaw, in their own poverty, recognized the plight of the Irish, identified with it, and scraped up what meagre resources they had, to share with their fellow human beings living an ocean away. According to Choctaw historian and writer LeAnne Howe: “buried deeply within the Choctaw body politic is a sense of giving shelter, food, and/or aid to our relatives, friends, and allies. Ima, giving, is a cultural lifeway.” The Irish in Ireland have not forgotten the gift and have erected a large monument, highlighted by a massive circle of eagle feathers, to the Choctaw gift, named “Kindred Spirits,” near Cork.

What has gone virtually unheralded in Canadian history is similar gifts made by the Canada's Indigenous peoples to Irish migrants who arrived in Canada, fleeing the famine. In 1847, the traditional Haudenosaune territory of Hochelaga, then Montreal, was the scene of tremendous suffering and death. Afflicted with typhus and other serious infections, thousands of Irish migrants were herded into hastily built sheds at Point St. Charles, just east of the downtown area. The Mohawk Nation of Kahnawake, south of the city on the St. Lawrence River, immediately responded to the Irish, bringing food from their lands to the fever sheds. In addition, despite living in poverty themselves, former Chief Christine Zachary-Deom reported that the Mohawks took up a collection for Irish relief in Montreal, raising about $150, or just shy of $5,000 in today's Canadian dollars.[1] This was an enormous sacrifice for a people that had been marginalized and made sedentary near the great Island that once housed their council fires. At the time, Governor General, Lord Elgin, wrote to the Colonial Office indicating that "several Indian tribes expressed a desire to share in relieving the wants of their suffering white brethren."

Little else was said and the great kindness of the Mohawks was virtually forgotten in Canada. In fact, Canada's Irish soon became part of the vanguard of settler-colonial "nation building." In Ireland, however, both the Lord Mayors of Dublin and Belfast have come to Canada to formally thank the Mohawk people for their great generosity in Ireland's time of need. For her part Mohawk Chief Zachary-Deom, remarked during a Famine commemoration in Montreal, that the Haudenosaune and the Irish shared many qualities—they are "resilient, determined, and tough people." The generosity of the Haudenosaune of Montreal was but the tip of a much larger iceberg of donations that have been left unrecognized by historians.

Table 1: Indigenous Peoples of Canada East 1845

Location	Old Name	Nation	Population	Contribution
Kahnawake	Caughnawaga	Mohawk	955	$150**
Akwesasne	St. Regis	Mohawk	450	
Lake of Two Mountains		Nipissing &Algonquin	912	
St. Francis		Abanaki	353	£15 10s*
Becancour		Abanaki	84	
La Jeune Lorette	Old Lorette	Wendat	189	£10 15s*
Restigouche		Mi'kmaq	180	
St-Maurice		Tete a Boules	86	
Trois Rivieres		Algonquin	92	
			3,301	

*Archbishop Signay's Collection; **perhaps USD, £37 10s CDN. Source: Bagot Report, 1845, p. 15, column 2, p. 17, Table, "Indians of Canada East." *Journal de Quebec*, 30 March 1847.

Other Indigenous peoples, sometimes prompted by colonial authorities, made similar, if not greater donations. In Montreal, in February 1847, local Irish and Scottish citizens established the Fund for the Relief of the Destitute Poor in Ireland and Scotland. In addition to prominent subscribers such as Governor General Elgin, and ordinary Irish working-class donors, the Indigenous peoples of Canada West (now Ontario) gave generously to the fund. On St. Patrick's Day, 1847, Thomas Gummersall Anderson, the Chief Superintendent of the "Indian Department" in Canada West issued an invitation to the Indigenous nations within his jurisdiction to donate to the Fund. At least 15 bands answered the call and requested that donations be deducted from their government annuities, added to the Fund, and then sent to "our suffering fellow subjects and Christian brethren in Ireland and Scotland."[2]

Each Indigenous band, however, admitted that they themselves were in poverty and wished that they could do more. Chief Brant of the Mohawks of Quinte explained to Anderson that "We feel we have too many poor among ourselves to give much but we beg you will accept our sum of twelve pounds ten shillings as a small proof of our sympathy with them." By the

middle of May, the Mohawks, Haudenosaunee of the Six Nations of Grand River, Chippewa (Ojibwa), Delaware, Wyandotte, and Mississauga peoples had donated £115 to the Fund. By early June with further donations from the Saugeen, Ojibwa of Lake Huron, and Moravian Ojibwa, the total Indigenous gift to the Relief Fund was £172, or over $19,000 in today's Canadian currency.[3]

Table 2: Indigenous Peoples of Canada West, 1845

Location	Old Name	Nation	Population	Donation/annuity
Six Nations	Grand River	Haudenosaunee*	2,223	£25 -- --
Thames	Fairfield	Delaware	153	£ 5 -- --
Chippewas of the Thames	Munsey	Ojibwa	620	£7 10s --
OnaYoTeAka	Delaware Twp	Oneida	430	
Wyandotte-Huron		Wendat, Ojibwa, Shawnee	308	£ 5 -- --
St. Clair-Sarnia		Ojibwa, Pottawatomi	741	£20 -- --
Walpole Island		Ojibwa, Odawa, Pottawatomi	1,140	unknown
Manitoulin		Odawa, Ojibwa	1,098	unknown
Tyendinaga	Quinte	Mohawk	383	£ 12 10s --
New Credit	Credit River	Mississauga	239	£ 12 10s --
Alderville	Alnwick	Mississauga	220	£ 10 -- --
Hiawatha	Rice Lake	Mississauga	114	£ 10 -- --
Chemong-Curve Lake		Mississauga	94	£ 12 10s --
Scugog Island	Balsam Lake	Mississauga	90	£ 5 -- --
Rama		Ojibwa	184	£ 10 -- --
Beausoliel		Ojibwa	232	£ 10 -- --
Georgina	Snake Island	Ojibwa	109	£ 5 -- --
Saugeen Lake Huron		Ojibwa	197	£ 10 -- --
Nawash	Georgian Bay, Owen Sound	Ojibwa	130	£ 12 10s --
Bedford/Kingston		Algonquin	91	unknown
			8,862	£172 10s

*Mohawk, Seneca, Oneida, Onondaga, Cayuga, Tuscarora
Source: *Bagot Report,* 1845, p.25, col.2; LAC, RG10, vol. 162-163, Indian Affairs, Civil Secretary's Office, Correspondence (2301-2400) 1844-1847. £172 10s =$690 USD = £142 sterling

While many of the donation letters were dictated by Council Chiefs to the local missionary or school master, who translated the local Indigenous language into English, (in which seemed like common "boiler plate" testimonies), two letters stand out. Missives written for the chiefs of the Mississaugas of Chemong (Curve Lake) and the Mohawks of Quinte, were longer and more detailed in their commentary than the other letters. At Chemong, Chief Nogy conceded, like Chief Brant at Quinte, that his community was poor and would have liked to have given more. He added this urge to help, however, arose from "the friendships we have received from them [British settlers] in former times." No doubt Chief Nogy was referring to the settlers, many of whom were Irish from the Peter Robinson migration scheme, who had populated several areas of Peterborough County, within Mississauga lands, since 1825.

Similarly, Chief Brant at Quinte would have had frequent contact with the large Irish settlement in Tyendinaga Township in Hastings County, which bordered Mohawk reserve lands. In at least these two cases, in which the bands donated £12 10s each, their offerings reflected both a concern for the starving in Ireland and Scotland, but also familiarity with the Irish settler/colonists who had been their neighbours for over two decades.

The surviving documents of these gifts, however, reveal a deeper meaning behind the Indigenous donations. Most of the letters from the Anishinaabeg peoples are signed with the doodem of the signatory band chief. This is not a personal signature, as was assumed by the settler administrators who received them. According to scholar Heidi Bohaker, the doodem informs "respective understanding of time, space, history, law, philosophy, ethics, and most significantly, the foundational relationship between human beings and the world in which human beings live. Anishinaabeg leaders wrote these images on documents pertaining to their lands, at councils held on those lands, reflecting the discussions of those councils. These images are

expressions of Anishinaabe law." When a doodem was assigned to a document or treaty it was an expression of communal consent, arrived at in council, and then expressed by a symbol that was integral to Anishinaabe notions of personhood. Thus, the appearance of doodemag on these letters, was far more than assent to a "one off" donation; instead, it was an expression of how the Anishinaabe understood themselves as treaty people in their relationship with the British. Their treaties with the Crown, signed with doodemag, bound them in a reciprocal relationship with their treaty partners. These donations were manifestations of the responsibilities that treaty partners had to one another. Although they had never seen those who were in need, thousands of kilometers away, they acknowledged their responsibilities to assist "our destitute white brethren" who were children of the Crown. While the Haudensaunee peoples at Quinte and Grand River no longer used their Otara to sign the donation letters, their alliances with the Crown were no less significant in this act of giving.

When viewed through an Indigenous lens, the offerings of relief to the starving Irish were part of the way in which First Peoples viewed their treaty responsibilities when called upon. Their gift was an obligation to their ally. This generosity was well expressed by Chief John Aissane of Beausoleil, when he informed Anderson: "Your brother has read your letter to his brother chiefs, who express great pity for their White Brethren and have unanimously agreed to place at the disposal of their Great Father in Montreal [Lord Elgin] for the relief of our White Friends who are suffering of hunger the sum of ten pounds currency … The sum is small compared with the large sums that we are told has been sent to our white friends by their brethren but we are poor and give the best of our ability with willingness." (29 March 1847)

As historians, it is time that we look less to the "nation building" motifs that have so typified the writing of Canadian history and seek moments where "Kindred Spirits" prevailed.

This might be one other way of seeking truth and affecting reconciliation. Such spirit was evident in 2020, when the Irish national lacrosse team gave up their place at the coming World Games, so that the Iroquois Nationals could play in their place in Birmingham, Alabama. The Nationals had been denied a place because they, according to the World Games administrators, were not a sovereign nation. The need for generosity of spirit is ongoing.[4]

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[1] Christine Zachary Deom, "Mowhaks, Chateauguay, and the Irish Famine," Quebec Heritage News, 9, no.1 (Winter 2015): 28-29; John Mercer McMullan, *The History of Canada from Its First Discovery to the Present Time* (Brockville: JM McMullen Publisher, 1885), 485. The figure of $150 is cited by Zachary-Deom in a commemorative film produced by the Irish Heritage Trust, for the Great Famine Voices Roadshow: https://greatfaminevoices.ie/montreal-2/

[2] The letters can be found at Library and Archives Canada, Department of Indian Affairs, RG 10, Vol. 162-3.

[3] In 1841 the Pound Sterling was equivalent to £1 4s 4d Canadian. Likewise, the Canadian pound was equivalent to $4 United States currency.

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