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**Ireland and Lower Canada in the early nineteenth century: Love  
in a time of cholera**

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## **Ireland and Lower Canada in the early nineteenth century; Love in a time of cholera<sup>1</sup>?**

This seminar is an overall view of my doctoral thesis, which is an analysis of representations of Ireland and the Irish in early nineteenth-century writing in what was Lower Canada, now Quebec. I will firstly provide some historical background, crucial to an understanding of some of the issues that arise in the texts. I will then discuss the culture of written production in Lower Canada from the 1820s to the 1840s, as well as outline some important historiographical debates in relation to this complex period, which centre on the *patriote* movement rebellions of 1837-8.

### **Historical Overview**

Following the victory of the British in Quebec in 1759, the Treaty of Paris provided for the secession of what was *La Nouvelle France* in 1763. Their new colonizer's attempts to override existing French Law were opposed by the *Canadiens*, and the Quebec Act of 1774 safeguarded these laws, and served to guarantee to the British the loyalty of their new subjects in the light of the dangers of corruption from their Republican neighbours to the South. The Constitutional act of 1791 granted assemblies to the British colonies of North

America, creating the entities of Upper Canada, which is now Ontario, and Lower Canada, now Quebec. What may seem an anachronous gesture in granting self-governance on the part of the British, can be explained by the events of 1776 in the United States. The *Canadiens* were granted an elected parliament, and a religious tolerance envied by Catholics in Ireland and Britain, who were still awaiting much promised emancipation. Despite their French ancestry, the revolution of 1789, with its resonance of regicide and anti-clericalism was viewed in a negative light in Lower Canada, aided in no small way by Catholic Church propaganda which preached devotion to an absolutist monarchical system. The parliamentary freedoms granted in 1791 however, were impeded by an impasse which developed between the democratically elected assembly and the appointed Legislative and Executive councils. Conflict arose between the representatives of the British merchant class, the *parti bureaucrate*, and the *parti patriote*, as the *Canadien* members called themselves. Despite the ensuing tension, the *Canadiens* retained their loyalty to the British monarchy, a loyalty intensified by the American invasion of 1812, which provided a further occasion for Canadians to display their devotion to their monarch. We therefore have a situation where the US and France, two countries of great importance in the evolution of Lower Canada, are problematic for *Canadiens* due to their republican tendencies. How then do we explain a rapid ideological turnabout from devotion to a monarchical system, to the espousal of republicanism by the *patriotes*, as evidenced in the risings of 1837-8? It is my contention that images of Ireland provide the impetus for the ideological shift that took place in this

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<sup>1</sup> The cholera outbreaks of 1832 and 1834 are said to have originated among immigrants from Ireland.

period, leading to a questioning of British attitudes towards her colonies. Ireland is entrenched in the political discourse as the *patriotes* seek to make comparisons with the situation between Ireland and Canada in their attempts to question, and later vilify British colonial rule. An Act of Union between the two provinces then called Canada followed the rebellions in 1840, leading to an inevitable francophone minority when the former Lower Canada was subsumed in a combined assembly with Anglophone Upper Canada.

Any reference to Canada in this period, undoubtedly conjures up associations with the mass emigration from Ireland of the 1840s. We should however be aware of the significance of pre-famine emigration of the Irish to Canada, in contrast with post-famine studies relating to the US, which tend to dominate North American emigration literature<sup>2</sup>. This present study concerns a period therefore where the volumes of Irish immigration to what was British North America, are at their largest. The Irish arrived to a fellow British colony complete with the baggage of the colonial situation in Ireland. As both Ireland and Canada were involved in a quest to define their relationship with Great Britain, how did the Irish in Canada define this quest, and was their definition in accordance with that of the *Canadiens*?

## **Culture of Written Production in Lower Canada**

Although the texts under analysis are contemporaneous with Hugo, and Balzac, we must remember that we are dealing with a 'littérature en herbe'; the first indigenous novel published in Lower Canada was in 1837, the year of the *patriote* rebellion. The journalistic output under analysis is of a variety of genres, but can be considered as 'le lieu du dicible' for the period, and the only location for public verbal expression in Lower Canada. The first uniquely francophone newspaper was published in 1806, although there were bilingual publications prior to this date, leaving a corpus in French that belies Lord Durham's infamous 1839 dismissal of French-Canadian culture. Durham was the administrator sent by London in the wake of the rebellion crisis of 1837-8. He claimed the *Canadiens* were a people without literature and a history in his Report, which advocated an early version of cultural ethnic cleansing. When I say *Canadiens*, to whom do I refer? In this post-nationalist, post-modern world identity is increasingly problematical. Definitions of national identity are the source of re-evaluation, and Linda Cardinal in a previous seminar in this series spoke more knowledgeably than I on the subject of Quebec identity. I should point out that in my case, I am using the French term *Canadien* to refer to what are contemporary *Québécois*. This is simply because that is what the writers of the time called themselves; the hyphenated *Canadien-français* only began to appear subsequent to the rebellion period. Let me quote Helen Taft Manning to illustrate this point:

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<sup>2</sup> See Wilson, 1989, for a comprehensive summary of Irish emigration to Canada.

*The French-speaking inhabitants of the Lower St Lawrence Valley were the only part of the population who laid claim to the title of Canadian, and it was accorded to them freely by the English-speaking residents in the province*<sup>3</sup>.

We shall analyse later how the Irish fit into this nineteenth century definition of *Canadien*.

### **Journalism in Canada in the Early Nineteenth Century**

I shall now briefly outline some important considerations in relation to the context of journalistic production in nineteenth-century Lower Canada.<sup>4</sup>

Many publications are sporadic in nature. **Le Canadien**, one of the most important newspapers, was out of circulation from 1825 to 1831, depriving us of a source of analysis for these important years.

There was a culture of low literacy levels -- it is estimated that 10% of the population were literate. There is evidence to suggest that those who were literate were bi-literate, as commentary between the English and French

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<sup>3</sup> Manning, p. 10

<sup>4</sup> See Lamonde, 2000, for further reading.

newspapers indicates that readers keenly analysed, commented upon and translated between the two languages. There are documented accounts, however, which point to the increased politicization of the entire population, as in public readings in rural areas of the *patriote* newspapers such as **La Minerve**, which would greatly enlarge the impact of any circulation figures.

The culture of a 'Presse de combat' is another important feature of journalism in Lower Canada at the time. Newspapers of opposing ideologies were scathing in their criticism of rival publications. Libel laws were of course not developed to the same extent, and a culture of personal insults was evident on all sides of the linguistic and political divide, and a feature of most editorials. Rival opinions on matters relating to Ireland often dominate exchanges between editors, and a recurrent feature of the discourse was whether the situations of Ireland and Canada could be considered as parallel. We will see how the *patriotes* promoted and encouraged the parallel between Ireland and Canada in their questioning of British colonial rule.

Although there was no official censorship, there are examples of the arrest and imprisonment of *patriote* journalists throughout the period. The more famous arrests in 1827 and 1832 were those of two Irish journalists Jocelyn Waller and Daniel Tracey, which are well documented in all publications. Along with another Irishman Edmund Bailey O'Callaghan, Waller and Tracey formed a formidable

intellectual triumvirate, and were the driving forces behind the sole anti-governmental publication in English, the **Irish Vindicator**<sup>5</sup>.

Since newspaper articles were unsigned, and correspondents to the editor availed of pseudonyms, it was difficult to ascertain the authorship of articles.

### Historiographical Issues

In order to further analyse the relationship between *patriote* discourse and Ireland, and their respective places in a history of ideas concerning the *Canadien* image of Ireland in the early nineteenth century, some reference to Quebecois historiography and the *patriote* movement is necessary. Quebec also has had its school of revisionism<sup>6</sup>; traditionally the *patriotes* and the rebellions have tended to be associated with a school of separatist historiography in which their rebellion is seen as the first symbolic step in a struggle to overthrow British imperialism and fulfil Quebec's right to national self-determination. The rebellion's failure is seen as the launch pad for English domination, which is viewed by some as continuing to this day. More recent readings such as those by the University of Toronto historian Alan Greer in his book, '**The patriots and the people**<sup>7</sup>', throw further nuances on such an interpretation of the rebellions. Greer sees the rebellions as falling into the framework of a general questioning of governance,

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<sup>5</sup> See Grace, 1993, for an excellent biographical introduction to these journalists.

<sup>6</sup> See Rudin, 1997, who was inspired by Irish revisionism.



which took place in the Western world in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, often known as 'The Age of Revolutions', therefore downplaying the localized interethnic conflict aspect of events. Two Quebec academics Bernier and Salée<sup>8</sup> have equally challenged the ethnic division thesis, taking the following quote from the famous historian of Nationalism, Ernest Gellner as their premise: *Nationalism is not what it seems, and above all not what it seems to itself*<sup>7</sup>. Their argument calls for us to relativize the national question, and the nationalist quotient of *patriote* discourse. These studies do not, it must be made clear, deny the *patriote* role in the development of a distinctive ideology which questioned the structures of colonial rule, but in the case of Bernier and Salée, they stress the movement as one of emancipation, as opposed to separation. They do not dismiss the presence of the national question in *patriote* debates surrounding the rebellion, but for them it does not constitute the instigating factor. They argue that the national question was not uniquely what stirred the *patriotes* into taking up arms, but merely formed part of a number of contributing issues related to the wider social context. Nationalist discourse therefore is seen as an 'epiphenomenon', as opposed to the motivation behind the rebellions.

We therefore have a recent and important rereading of the *patriote* movement. Instead of being viewed in terms of an exclusive narrow nationalism, and their role in the development of an independent Quebec based on the exclusion of difference stressed, the inclusive nature of their thought is highlighted. The

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<sup>7</sup> Greer, 1993.

<sup>8</sup> Bernier and Salée, p. 26-36

following quote can be taken as an illustration of the *patriote* contribution to the development of a civic-based model of Quebecois identity, as opposed to one defined by linguistic or religious factors :

*Il n'y a pas que nous sachions, de peuple français en cette province, mais bien un peuple canadien, un peuple religieux et moral, un peuple loyal et amoureux de la liberté en même tems, (sic) et capable d'en jouir; ce peuple n'est ni Français, ni Anglais, ni Écossais, ni Irlandais, ni Yanké, il est Canadien... Le peuple du Canada ne sera jamais un peuple ni Français ni Anglais<sup>10</sup>.*

In contrast with later models of national identity, which developed later on in the nineteenth and early twentieth century and which were founded on exclusion of other, the *patriote* vision was not limited uniquely to the descendants of 1760. It is in direct opposition therefore to the claims of many commentators and historians who have pigeonholed the *patriotes* within a narrow nationalist framework. The *patriote* message was addressed to all citizens of Lower Canada, whatever their ethnic or linguistic background, ready to participate in the construction of a new society. We cannot however ignore the *patriote* critique of the 'ancien regime', and it is easy to read a liberation project into *patriote* writings, but care must be taken to differentiate between the questioning of

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<sup>9</sup> Gellner, p. 56

<sup>10</sup> There is not as far as we know a French people in this province, but a Canadian people, a moral and religious people, a loyal people, who value freedom and are able to benefit from it; this people is neither French, nor English, nor Scottish, nor Irish, nor Yankee, they are Canadian... The Canadian people will never be either French or English. *Le Canadien*, 21.05.1835

colonial injustices, and the desire to break with the mother country. An argument often used to illustrate the inclusive nature of the *patriotes*, and to reject the polarized ethnic divisions often attributed to their writings, is the participation of many Anglophones in the leadership of the movement. The argument goes as follows: if the *Canadiens* are in pursuit of an independent republic with French language and laws, how then do we explain the presence of Irish and Americans among their prominent ideologues? The triumvirate of Irish newspaper editors, who formed a key role as the Anglophone voice of the *patriotes*, has already been referred to. As Tracey and Waller were both dead by 1832, the year in which the movement became increasingly radical, it is Edmund Bailey O'Callaghan, considered Papineau's chief lieutenant, who is most associated with the rebellion period in particular, and who accompanied Papineau into exile in 1837. Previous research<sup>11</sup> has indeed pointed to division in the Irish community in Lower Canada in the 1830s, where recent Irish immigrants did not respond to the *patriote* message, despite encouragement from their compatriot journalists, and were lured into the opposing *bureaucrate* party. We will not speculate on the reasons for this disassociation with the *patriotes* here, but will dwell instead on the ensuing portrayals of the Irish in the press. I should point out that for the purposes of this seminar, I am quoting representative samples from a longer study which involves more nuances than it is possible to outline in paper form.

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<sup>11</sup> See Daley's 1987 dissertation on O' Callaghan

## La Malheureuse Irlande

A vision of Ireland as a victim of British colonial oppression emerges in the press in Lower Canada in the 1820s. Of key importance in this portrayal is the fear that such a fate is in store for Canada if it does not gain the reforms it seeks from *la mère-patrie*, i.e. Britain. An alliance between the Irish and the *Canadiens*, was fuelled by the Irish journalists, based on what they viewed as the common cause of the two countries, with their language and religious rights violated by the British. Not all the Irish emigrant community was in agreement with their engagé compatriots however. Texts are revealing of the divide between *Irlande* as a political symbol of British oppression, and *les Irlandais* who were increasingly flying to the ranks of the enemy *bureaucrate* party. It is therefore ironic that Ireland continued to play such a symbolic role for the *patriotes*, despite the fact that the majority of her countrymen in Canada had rejected their pluralist inclusive message.

The discourse of a miserable Ireland in the 1820s is evident in the following quote, and citations of a similar nature pepper the press in these years :

*Si ce que dit Mr. Bell dans son Weekly Dispatch de l'état actuel, ou pour mieux dire, habituel de l'Irlande, n'est pas exagéré, on en peut conclure que le peuple de ce pays est le plus malheureux de tous ceux qui ont existé, qui existent ou qui existeront probablement jamais*<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> If what Mr. Bell in his Weekly Dispatch says of the current or should it be said usual state of Ireland is not exaggerated, it can be concluded that the people of this country are the most unfortunate of those which exist, have ever existed or will ever exist. **Le Canadien** 26.01.1822

Quite a fate indeed! Later on in the article, Ireland's situation is further lamented, and said to be worse than that of the Greeks under Turkish rule. Notice particularly in this section how the actual oppressors are not named, and that as of yet there is no actual condemnation of Britain. It is almost as if the *Canadiens* have difficulty admitting Britain could be anything but tolerant towards her colonies. There is however an inherent questioning in the remark that even conditions under the Turks are preferable to those in Ireland. The proposal of an Act of Union between Upper and Lower Canada in 1822 leads to a greater overt questioning of British rule, and the emergence of a parallel discourse of colonial mismanagement. Such a critique of British colonial policy led to further reappraisal of British intentions, and speculation on the situation in other British colonies. Increasing volumes of texts begin to appear in the press referring to Ireland, which comment on matters such as the persecution of Catholics, and the use of the English language for legal texts, despite the fact that the majority of the Irish population at that time were not proficient in the language. The consequences of such a situation, where their language and religion could equally be threatened, are seen as dangers also faced by *Canadiens*, as evidenced in the following quotation :

*Quel est le résultat dans les pays ou les grands et les riches ont adopté une langue étrangère et ou les lois ont été écrites dans une langue inconnue a la*

*masse de la population; l'extrême misère la dégradation et l'avilissement du peuple*<sup>13</sup>.

The much-feared Act of Union between Upper and Lower Canada did not at this stage materialize, and was rejected in Westminster as undemocratic in 1823.

The peril to Lower Canada was thus curtailed, a fact that led to renewed praise for British democratic institutions. The seeds of distrust were nonetheless sown by the possibility that such a threat could resurface in the future, and the sorry fate of 'la malheureuse Irlande' continued to haunt *Canadiens* :

*En Irlande mes amis, on a réussi à réduire les Catholiques à la plus affreuse misère, prenez y garde; s'ils avaient été aussi fermes que nous, les Irlandais seraient libres aujourd'hui mais ils sont esclaves! Quelle leçon!*<sup>14</sup>

We have seen how the association of the *patriote* agenda with Ireland's situation had been established in the 1820s. An example of the extent to which the linkage began to pervade *Canadien* discourse is that publications opposed to the *patriotes*, the main one being **L'Ami du Peuple**, began to criticize the parallels drawn between Ireland and Canada by their ideological opponents as examples of British colonial misrule. This publication pronounces its horror that 'this

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<sup>13</sup> What is the result in countries where the great and the rich have adopted a foreign language, and where the laws are written in a language unknown by the mass of the people; extreme misery, degradation and corruption of the people. **Le Spectateur Canadien**, 29.09.1822

<sup>14</sup> In Ireland my friends, the Catholics have been reduced to the worst misery, take care; if they had been as firm as us the Irish would be free today but they are slaves! What a lesson! **La Minerve**, 06.11.1827

country until now contented and tranquil could become another Ireland'. It seems that the physical diseases brought by the Irish most noticeably in the cholera epidemic of 1832, which was linked directly to an Irish emigrant ship, are not the only contamination of the *Canadiens* by the Irish. Anti-patriote discourse equally expresses the fear that the *Canadiens* could also be contaminated via the influence of the Irish leader Daniel O'Connell, whose reform agenda are anathema to a conservative publication like **L'Ami du Peuple**. This particular newspaper was created by the Catholic Church in order to oppose the *patriotes*. As the leading pro-government Francophone publication, it was craven to royalty and the British government, and strove for the maintenance of the status quo. It therefore rejected any comparisons between a questioning of colonial structures in Ireland and Canada, thus attempting to promote the notion that Canada was stable and contented, and that any administrative problems were caused by the mistrust of *la mère-patrie* on the part of the *patriotes*.

### **Importance of Daniel O'Connell**

High on the condemnation list of **L'Ami du Peuple** after Papineau the *patriote* leader, was Daniel O'Connell. Again and again O'Connell is criticized by this paper for provoking agitation among his own people and thereby deemed an unsuitable role model for the loyal *Canadiens*. The lionizing of the Irishman by the *patriote* press no doubt contributed to his castigation by this conservative

publication. His policies are critiqued, and his methods of opposition reviled. O'Connell is pinpointed by this newspaper as the outlet for criticism of Ireland's problems, and not the British government, thus absolving *la mère-patrie* of any blame. The inference is clearly that by following his strategies, the *Canadiens* are exposing themselves to the same fate as Ireland.

O'Connell's success at gaining emancipation for his people made him a figurehead for the *Canadiens* from 1829 onwards. Following his election to Westminster, his efforts with the Radicals such as Roebuck and Hume in relation to the promotion of the Canadian reform question in Parliament assured further respect for the Irishman.

## **Radicalization**

The 92 Resolutions were symbolic of the increased radicalization of the *patriotes*. These resolutions were effectively a list of complaints to Britain; the demands centred on reforms of the administrative structure and particularly sought an elected legislative assembly, modelled on the American senate. In fact comparisons with the American model of government were becoming increasingly common in *patriote* discourse, and seen by many of their opponents as proof of their disloyalty, as well of a desire to unite with their republican neighbours.



But the elections of 1834, which resulted in a majority for the *patriotes*, which they viewed as support for their increasingly radical reform mandate, clearly catalogue the division in the Irish community in Lower Canada. Two Irish candidates, Donnellan and Walker, ran for election opposite Papineau and Nelson the *patriote* candidates. Although Papineau and Nelson secured the seat, divisions in the Irish community are expressed in articles and editorials, as well as letters to the newspapers. Donnellan had been involved in the pro-emancipation movement a few short years earlier, and this division is symbolic of the split between the *patriotes* and Irish Canadians - the two are no longer synonymous. The *patriote* press has difficulty reconciling this new state of division in the Irish with whom they still associate strongly, and continue speak of a common cause. The increasing disparity between the Irish in Ireland and the Irish in Canada is obviously problematic. The writings nevertheless show that the *Canadiens* are at pains to point out that the Irish are not considered 'étrangers'- and are embraced as *Canadien* in tune with the inclusivity of the *patriote* message. This is illustrated in the following citation where the *patriote* paper, **La Minerve**, rebukes another publication for labeling the Irish as 'étranger' :

*Les dix-neuf vingtièmes de cette population 'd'origine étrangère' se composent des compatriotes du grand O'Connell qui ont trop senti dans leur pays natal le*

*poids et le fardeau énorme des taxes et de l'oppression du petit nombre au préjudice de la majorité.*<sup>15</sup>

### **Irlande no longer 'malheureuse'**

Changes occurring in Ireland under the administration of Lord Lieutenant Mulgrave in Ireland the mid 1830s are also the focus of much attention in Canada. The co-operation seen between O'Connell and the Melbourne government is in contrast with the increased radicalism of the *patriotes*, and division is increasingly evident between *patriote* publications. The appointment of Armagh-born Lord Gosford, an ally of O'Connell's and critic of the Orange order, to lead a new commission of inquiry into the Canadian question is seen as a further sign of hope for reform in the colony. A hiatus in the traditional view of 'la pauvre Irlande', is therefore evident, and a new vision of Ireland is presented in the wake of reforms by the British. Expectations are greatly raised, but disappointment is nigh. Following the appearance of Lord Russell's Resolutions in April 1837, which effectively constitute the rejection of *patriote* demands outlined a full 3 years earlier, the die is finally cast, and Britain's intransigence regarding reform in Canada revealed. Further splits in the *patriote* occur, and the formation of *les Fils de la liberté*, sparks the taking of arms in November

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<sup>15</sup> Nineteenth-twentieths of this population of 'foreign origin' is composed of the compatriots of O'Connell who have felt in their native country the weight and the burden of taxes and the oppression of the majority by a minority. **La Minerve**, 09.01.1834<sup>15</sup>

1837. Despite one victory at Saint-Denis, the rebellion is quickly put down by the British, and the *patriote* movement virtually disbanded, with many fleeing south of the border. Despite American reluctance to support the *patriotes*, exiled radicals in the movement attempt further onslaughts from the U.S., declaring an independent Republic of Canada under the American born *patriote* Nelson, in 1838, but this effort is similarly crushed. With the *patriote* movement in shreds, opposition to attempts to impose an Act of Union is limited. The union of Upper and Lower Canada comes into force in 1841, leading to the drowning of the remnants of a *Canadien* voice in an Anglophone majority.

### **Towards a conclusion**

The lack of participation of the Irish in the rebellion, apart from O' Callaghan, the editor of the pro-patriote Anglophone newspaper, **The Vindicator**, and a few others, crystallizes the distancing of the Irish from the *Canadiens*. This feature is to continue later in the nineteenth century, with friction between the two communities maintained not only in Quebec, but throughout Canada.

From the initial phase of agitation during opposition to the first Union project in 1822, the *patriotes* continued to draw inspiration from Ireland, in particular from Daniel O Connell, and sought to embrace their Irish fellow-citizens and include them in their vision of *Canadien*. The disappointment that the Irish in Lower

Canada did not share the *patriote* vision inspired by their homeland, and indeed sided with rival groupings is illustrated in the following quote:

*Comment se fait-il donc que des hommes même éclairés en ce pays osent regarder comme protecteurs de cette religion, le gouvernement qui l'opprime en Irlande. Ceci est d'un aveuglement qu'on ne peut concevoir. Non! Ceux-la ne sont pas des fils d'Érin*<sup>16</sup>.

It is therefore highly ironic given the symbolic importance of Ireland to *patriote* thinking, and its predominance in the written discourse of the pre-rebellion period, a discourse that contributed greatly to the development of what constituted *Canadien*, that this very concept was not embraced by the Irish themselves in Lower Canada. The failure of the Irish to support *Canadiens* could effectively be viewed as ultimately responsible for the blockage of the liberal *patriote* message, and the stymieing of a more inclusive identity model for the Francophone majority. The legacy of this Irish rebuff led directly to a more ethnocentric concept of Quebec identity, which although undoubtedly broadened in the last 50 years, remains problematic to this day. As the *patriote* model failed, the subsequent vacuum allowed for the emergence of a narrower nationalist discourse that was primarily defensive, and based on 'survivance'.

The national question was limited to a siege mentality focusing on the

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<sup>16</sup> How is then that enlightened men in this country dare to consider as protectors of this religion, the government that oppresses it in Ireland. This is a blindness that is hard to conceive of. No! These are not the sons of Erin. *Écho du pays*, 07.05.1835

preservation of language and religion, which dominated for over a century until the late 1950s. As has been stated by Bernier and Salée<sup>17</sup>, the main tragedy of the events of 1837-38, is that it imprisoned Quebecois into a binary division of their nation – one of ‘us’ against ‘them’, from which it has become difficult to escape. Whatever love the *Canadiens* may have had for the Irish in a time of cholera, it was alas unrequited.

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<sup>17</sup> Bernier and Salée, p. 35

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