

Canada and Ireland

A Political and Diplomatic History

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*In memory of my father
Robert Gardner Currie,
and my brother
Robert Graham Currie*

Contents

Acknowledgments / ix

Introduction / 3

- 1** The Irish Home Rule Debate, 1882–1921 / 7
- 2** French Canadians and the Irish Question, 1882–1921 / 29
- 3** Parallel Paths? Ireland and Canada, 1922–1939 / 42
- 4** Unionism versus Nationalism in Northern Ireland / 57
- 5** “Ourselves Alone”: Neutral Eire and the Commonwealth at War / 75
- 6** Establishing the Irish Republic, 1948–1949 / 93
- 7** Irish Questions / 101
- 8** Canada and Ireland in the 1950s / 109
- 9** Ireland: Roads Not Taken / 121
- 10** Canada: Change and Continuity / 135
- 11** Canada and the Early Troubles, 1969–1972 / 151
- 12** The Search for a Settlement / 165

13 A Farewell to Ireland? / 186

14 The Belfast Agreement / 204

Epilogue / 218

Notes / 225

Index / 253

Introduction

IN SEPTEMBER 2005, JOHN DE Chastelain, the chief of the body overseeing the decommissioning of paramilitary weapons in Northern Ireland, announced that a major part of his task had been completed. The Irish Republican Army (IRA), which had waged a thirty-year war against the British in Northern Ireland, had finally put its arsenal “beyond use.” It was a significant and long-awaited moment in the Irish peace process. Few people, however, noted the significance of a former Canadian general overseeing this process, for it was against Canada that the IRA had first taken up arms. After the American Civil War, thousands of Irish had returned from operations in the South to find that no employment awaited them. The Fenian Brotherhood, an Irish revolutionary society, chose to exploit this manpower for an assault on British interests in the Americas. Beginning in April 1866, more than a thousand Irish Americans crossed into Canada aiming to hold it for ransom in exchange for Ireland’s freedom. On a banner allegedly carried by the intruders, and on select items of clothing, were the letters IRA. It was among the first references to that organization and the invasion of Canada its first engagement with British forces. More than a century later a Canadian soldier would oversee the disarmament of the Provisional IRA, a group claiming direct descent from the raiders of the 1860s. In the many decades separating these events, Canada would be involved in, intrigued by, and frustrated with the politics of Ireland. *Canada and Ireland: A Political and Diplomatic History* reveals the fascinating story of Canada’s long and tumultuous engagement with the politics of that troubled island.

The Fenian raids had not deterred Canadian interest in Irish politics but quickened it. When, in the late nineteenth century, moderate nationalists advocated a parliament for Ireland within a British constitutional framework, support was immediately found for it in Canada. Indeed, the Canadian precedent of self-government was embraced by many as a compromise between the status quo, to which Irish nationalists objected, and

an Irish republic that Britain would not grant. The debate over “home rule” would dominate Irish politics and engage and divide Canadians for half a century. Some years later, after renewed nationalist unrest, when Ireland achieved a measure of independence, its constitutional status was stated to be “that of Canada.” Between 1922 and 1949, southern Ireland, variously known as the Irish Free State and Eire, existed as a dominion based on the constitutional precedent of Canada. After the first decade of cooperation, however, Ottawa had difficulty knowing how to relate to the Irish Free State. Its domestic and foreign policies, and relations with Britain and the commonwealth, rapidly diverged from the Canadian precedent on which the state had been founded. This, however, ought not to have come as a surprise. Whereas Canada had attained dominion status through a gradual acquisition of powers, the Irish Free State had acquired its status as a result of armed insurrection. For many, its “Canadian” status was something to be endured, not celebrated, and to be done away with at the earliest opportunity. The person who would rewrite Ireland’s constitutional status was Eamon de Valera, who introduced a new constitution in 1937 abolishing the post of governor general and instituting the office of Irish president. The country’s name was changed to Eire, with the new constitution laying claim to Northern Ireland – a region of the United Kingdom – as part of its national territory. When Britain went to war against Nazi Germany in 1939, de Valera announced that, unlike Canada, his country would not rally to Britain’s defence.

Despite Eire’s having distanced itself from its Canadian foundation, when another Irish prime minister, John A. Costello, announced that Eire would become a republic, and leave the commonwealth, he made the announcement from Canada. Whatever his reason for doing so, he was undoubtedly comforted by the presence of the Canadian prime minister, William Lyon Mackenzie King, whom he deemed a friend of Ireland in a time of change and controversy. Yet, though King sought to maintain good relations with Ireland, archival records show that he was working against a rising tide of cabinet and diplomatic disillusionment. That disillusionment would only become more vocal when King’s retirement, and death in 1950, removed a moderating voice from Canadian politics. A more confrontational approach, taken by King’s own party, is reflected in the wealth of correspondence between Canada’s representatives in Dublin and London and the Department of External Affairs in Ottawa. Indeed, for most of the 1950s and 1960s, it was Northern Ireland, a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the commonwealth,

that was favourably looked on by the Canadian establishment. When the Ulster premier, Basil Brooke, visited Canada in 1950, he was given, to Dublin's chagrin, a vigorous welcome. It was Ulster, an ally in the struggle against both fascism and communism, with its government unapologetically British, that won the public relations battle in Canada during these years. Its star would remain ascendant in Canada for twenty-five years.

After 1969, Northern Ireland's star would come crashing back down to earth. That summer sectarian violence overtook Belfast and Derry, and by August the British army had returned to the streets of Ulster. Dublin protested that the British army's presence on Irish soil was a violation of its sovereignty and immediately sent officials to Ottawa in a search for allies. Dublin hoped that the new Liberal government of Pierre Trudeau, who was not an advocate of commonwealth, monarchy, or traditional alliances, would offer a sympathetic hearing to Ireland's case. Yet, throughout the Troubles, which continued for three long decades, Canada maintained a decidedly neutral stance on Irish developments. The political situation in Quebec, notably the unrest of October 1970, served to dampen Canadian support for Irish nationalism, as did demographic change and the emergence of a modern secular society. Not least was the reality that the Irish Question had been a British Empire question, and the empire was gone. Yet successive Canadian governments maintained a position on Northern Ireland that, while officially neutral, was undeniably sympathetic to the British. While Canada itself had changed so much over the years, a certain sympathy for the predicament of the British in Ireland remained in official Canada.

This book concludes with an examination of Canada's engagement in the Irish peace process. When the Provisional IRA announced a ceasefire in 1994, Ottawa expressed a willingness to help secure an Irish political settlement. The role of a former Canadian general, in co-chairing the peace talks and disarming the paramilitaries, marked a new chapter in Canada's involvement in Irish politics. Other prominent Canadians were engaged in police and criminal justice reform in Northern Ireland. Outside the political realm, Bombardier, the Quebec-based aerospace company, bolstered the peace as Northern Ireland's largest private sector employer. But it was not all altruism. The Canadian prime minister, among others, hoped that the successful resolution of the Ulster conflict within existing constitutional boundaries would send a powerful message to Quebec separatists. For this reason, Jean Charest, leader of Quebec's Liberal Party, could be found giving a stridently pro-federalist lecture at

Belfast's Queen's University, and Jean Chrétien would become the first Canadian prime minister to visit Northern Ireland since John Diefenbaker in 1961.

This is a necessary, and long overdue, book on a subject largely ignored by Canadian historians. Interest in Canada's relationship with Ireland to date has focused almost exclusively on the years leading to the consolidation of the Irish Free State in the 1920s, leaving relations over the rest of the twentieth century unexamined.¹ After Eire's decision to leave the commonwealth in 1949, there has not been one book or article covering Canada's relations with either Irish jurisdiction. Nothing has been written about bilateral relations between Ottawa and Dublin in the 1950s. And, incredibly, there has been nothing published on relations between Canada and Ireland, north or south, for the entirety of the 1960s to the 1990s.² Given that these years encompassed the Ulster Troubles, which grabbed headlines in Canada for almost three decades, this indifference is difficult to explain. *Canada and Ireland* is the first comprehensive attempt to address this oversight. Relying on extensive archival research, I examine correspondence between Ottawa, London, Belfast, and Dublin over several decades. From the Northern Ireland premier's correspondence with King during the Second World War, to Trudeau's correspondence with the British prime minister, Edward Heath, at the height of the IRA campaign, it is revealed here for the first time. This book is the opening volley in a campaign to better understand Canada's relationship with Ireland, a country that has played such a central and foundational role in Canadian history.

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