

# Book relates untold story of Irish Canadians

By Derek Nelson  
Thomson News Service

There are books that are enjoyed like a favorite meal. You eat straight through from beginning to end without a pause, leaving the dinner table totally satisfied.

Then there are books that are more like a smorgasbord, a buffet where one grazes, sampling a delight here, experiencing a new taste sensation there, rejecting a disagreeable flavor at a third stop.

The Untold Story: The Irish In Canada (edited by Robert O'Driscoll and Lorna Reynolds, Mika Publishing Co., \$150) is that second kind of book.

Its two volumes totalling 1,041 pages are divided into 13 sections with 74 entries and touch on almost every aspect of the Irish settlement of Canada.

It is not narrative history, nor is it the easiest read. Some parts are too scholarly for easy digestion; others too parochial. But for anyone intrigued by their Irish roots or the roots of their Irish neighbors, it is worthwhile, perhaps a must.

Surprisingly, even after more than a century of limited Irish immigration—and the two decades of downright discrimination against Irish immigration that began with immigration law "reform" in 1968—about one in nine Canadians still claim some Irish blood.

Perhaps three per cent of Canada's 25 million people remain of pure Irish lineage, more than most of the other peoples who've populated Canada.

And yet, rather remarkably considering that this is the age of multiculturalism, virtually nothing exists in print about Irish-Canadians as a people or peoples.

Robert O'Driscoll, the elfish founder and driving force behind Celtic Studies at University of Toronto, set out a few years ago to remedy that omission.

The difficulties he faced were legion, not the least of which is confusion over who is Irish, and what being Irish means.

The two volumes mirror that reality by the very color of their covers: volume one is green, volume two is orange.

Is it Irish to be Roman Catholic, a political Republican, a believer in St. Patrick's Day Parades, hurling, the Gaelic language and an unending stream of invective against England and things English.

Or is it Irish to be Protestant, a political royalist, a believer in July 12 parades, soccer, the English language and unending invective against Popery and things (Irish) Catholic.

### TWO IRELANDS

It is, in fact, to be both. There are two Irelands, two Irish peoples, two Irish traditions. That's

especially true in Canada's case, since probably half the Irish who settled here were Protestant and the other half Catholic.

It is one of the strengths of The Untold Story that most—although not all—of the contributors understand that truth.

One of the unfortunate byproducts of the labels used in Ireland to describe the two ethnic groups that comprise the population—Protestant and Catholic—is that people tend to think of those words in religious terms only.

Protestant and Catholic are simply labels for Irish ethnic groups, much in the same way that the labels Hindu and Sikh differentiate the two warring peoples of the Punjab.

It is to O'Driscoll's credit that he takes a step back from the Protestant-Catholic wars to emphasize the common Celtic heritage of all Irish.

Many in Ulster today argue that long before Christianity came to Ireland, the ancestors of the people who became Protestants, the Cruthin and Ulaid, were fighting with the ancestors of the Gaels, who became Catholic.

But even if that were true, it doesn't diminish their joint Celtic origins. Nor does it prevent the "federation of the heart" that O'Driscoll so ardently advocated in his march towards publication

## Lifestyles

of these volumes.

No Protestant Irishman believes he is other than an Irishman, although he may also be British. And no Catholic Irishman would deny that the Protestants... although some would deny the Protestant his British dimension.

There are fascinating examples in The Untold Story of this elemental Irishness that belongs to all from The Auld Sod.

One was that the first St. Patrick's Day celebration in Canada on record was held by Protestant Irish officers of the Quebec City garrison in 1765. Naturally, after service, all adjourned for dinner at a local tavern.

That's from the Irish in Quebec, one of the entries dealing with Irish settlement in the various parts of Canada.

It is interesting to note that just this past year the old Orange city of Toronto held a St. Patrick's Day parade for the first time in decades, and while the Orange Order wasn't represented, at least one Protestant band participated.

### LIVING EXAMPLE

It is a living example of the sub-theme that runs through some—although, again, not all—of the

essays: Canada as a land of accommodation for both Irish Protestants and Catholics.

Love wasn't the glue that bound them, but mutual tolerance of differences combined with tension created by those differences—a joint acceptance of limits (which is probably the definition of a truly civilized society).

The Untold Story is far from perfect. The very nature of its make-up, with scattered contributions of uneven quality, style and intent, means that while some individual essays are superior, others fail for reasons ranging from brevity to partisanship. (Padraic O'Laighin's abuse of the word "Holocaust" in his essay on the death of Irish immigrants at Gosse-Isle is a glaring example.)

But O'Driscoll's vision has succeeded in one elemental way. His books lead the way to putting the Irish back on the multicultural map, not as "British" (where the Third World-oriented multicultural industry in Canada has tried to relegate them in past years) but as themselves.

—Derek Nelson, a native of Ireland, is a Thomson News Service columnist.

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