Identifying the Old Country Origins of Your New Brunswick Irish Ancestor

By Peter D. Murphy

Nothing can quite compare to the experience of standing — for the first time — in the ruins of one's ancestral home beneath a blue Irish sky! But in order to have that experience, you will need to discover the single most sought after — and the single most elusive — piece of information the genealogist seeks: Where did my immigrant ancestor come from? (Or, perhaps more accurately, where do *I* come from?) Many of us have little more to go on than a name and a vague sense of Irishness. Where do we begin?

I am blessed — or cursed — to count two unrelated Murphys among my sixteen great-great-grandparents. For most genealogists, the search for a specific place of origin in the "old-country" might be compared to a search for the proverbial needle in a haystack. There are Murphys in every parish in Ireland! All that said, the occurrence of a surname with a seemingly *regional* flavour is often much more localized than even the locals realize. To anyone born in southern New Brunswick, the surnames Sherwood and Kierstead — to cite two of many possible examples — sound nearly as common as Smith and Jones will to an Englishman. On close examination of nineteenth century census records, however, one would find these names concentrated in only one or two rural Kings County parishes. Similarly, a tour through rural west Cork could, in some respects, be compared to a drive through New Brunswick's Acadian Peninsula. (On this stretch of the road, every second house is occupied by a Legere [a Driscoll in Cork]; now, clearly, we are in LeBlanc [O'Mahoney] territory.) So in its Irish context a name can reveal a lot more than one might expect. And the same is true both of surnames and Christian names. You tell me that you immigrant ancestor was called Moses Whalen. If I were a betting man, I would wager a thousand dollars he was born in Waterford or Wexford. Why? Because among Irish Catholics, the Christian name Moses was used almost exclusively in Counties Waterford and Wexford. Florence is a "girl's name." Not in County Cork! The list goes on and on. So where does one begin his search for Irish origins? Begin with the name of your immigrant ancestor.

Patterns of Immigration:

When undertaking genealogical or biographical research, it is always helpful to learn as much as one can about the general history of the area where one's subject settled. This is true not least of all because humans are in large measure *formed* by their environments. What sort of education we receive, whom we marry . . . and a host of other realities of our adult lives are more or less determined by the situation of our birth and upbringing. When it comes to identifying the specific place of origin of an Irish immigrant ancestor, the first question the researcher ought to ask is: Where did she settle? Irish immigration to and settlement in New Brunswick, while a complex process, was determined, in the first instance, by pre-existing trade links between ports in Ireland and in New Brunswick.

In the vast majority of cases, the earliest waves of immigrants simply set sail from the port nearest their home village or townland and ended up "across the pond" — in Miramichi, St. Andrews or Saint John, for instance — simply because that's where the vessel was headed.

Settlement in a host community was possible and followed immigration only where there was a hope of viable employment. As an example, a group of fishermen from the Cooley Peninsula of County Louth ended up settling together in the Lower Cove district of Saint John because, while the local New Brunswick-born fishing population had gone on to "bigger and better things" — in terms of employment — they nevertheless continued to *eat* fish. In New Brunswick, several large-scale regionally-based patterns of settlement developed as a result of prior (and ongoing) trade links.

St. Andrews: During the first quarter of the nineteenth century, the port of St. Andrews in Charlotte County developed strong links with the Irish ports of Derry (or Londonderry) and Donegal. Eventually, the town of St. Andrews and adjacent communities became home to large numbers of immigrants from Derry and Donegal and their environs.

Saint John: Saint John's pre-eminence as a trading port laid the foundation for a complex web of transatlantic

migration patterns. While significant numbers of Irish immigrants sailed to Saint John from the ports of Liverpool, Newry (in County Down), or Sligo (and several other small ports in west Cork), the great majority of Irish arriving in Saint John in the nineteenth century sailed from Donegal or Derry in the north and Cork (Cobh) in the south.

Miramichi: If your immigrant ancestor settled on the banks of the Miramichi, chances are he or she hailed from within fifty miles of the City of Waterford or from somewhere in Counties Waterford, Wexford, Kilkenny, Tipperary, or east Cork. As early as the seventeenth century, trade links had developed between Waterford and the ports of Newfoundland — based initially on a seasonal fishing migration. Eventually, the "Waterford Pattern" extended to embrace much of northern Nova Scotia and the Miramichi.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, people of Irish birth or ancestry had settled in every county and in every parish of New Brunswick. If your ancestor settled in an area remote from the principal ports of entry, it may be difficult to identify his or her place of origin in Ireland. If, for instance, your Irish-born great-great-grandfather, Michael Sullivan, ended his days in Madawaska County, it might be reasonable to ask yourself if he arrived in the New World at Québec. In any case, it is important to remember that patterns speak to the generalities of life and where genealogical research is concerned we are looking at the specifics. While it is helpful to know that the majority of Irish settlers on the Miramichi came from the vicinity of Waterford, it does not necessarily follow that *your* Irish-born Miramichi ancestor did. After all, we are talking about an individual and individuals seldom conform to every pattern. I can think of several Irish-born settlers in Kent County who arrived in Saint John, of Saint John settlers who arrived at St. Andrews, and of at least one Miramichi settler who first set foot in the New World at Boston!

The Gregarious Irish:

Wherever they have gone, the Irish — Catholic or Protestant — have looked for people from their home village or townland and, where possible, they have encouraged the immigration of their extended families and friends and facilitated their settlement. This point becomes particularly salient when trying to trace the old-country place of origin of an ancestor. Perhaps your great-great-grandmother, Mary (Sullivan) O'Brien, left no trace of her birthplace. Suddenly, the fact that her next-door neighbour was a Jeremiah Sullivan becomes more significant to your search than it might have been had Mary's tombstone noted that she was "a native of Clonakilty, County Cork." Before investing countless hours trying to determine an old-country-place-of-origin, it is essential that the researcher ask himself the following questions:

1. *Did my ancestor marry or have children in Ireland?* Looking for Paddy Driscoll's birthplace in County Cork — where Driscoll is as common as Doucet in New Brunswick's Gloucester County — might take decades. But, if you know that Paddy married a Copithorne before emigrating, a little digging will lead you inevitably to the Parish of Creagh or one of the adjacent parishes in west Cork where one is likely to find the only Copithornes in the county.

2.*What, if anything, do I know about my immigrant-ancestor's siblings, extended family and friends?* Perhaps the death notice of your ancestor, James Sproul, noted only that he was "a native of County Tyrone, Ireland," while that of his eldest and only Irish-born son, Charles, recorded that *he* was "a native of Strabane, County Tyrone and sixty-six years a resident of Shédiac." Remember, it is much easier to search the same records for more than one individual that to make *several* trips to distant research facilities. When possible, approach the key sources knowing who your ancestor chose as baptismal sponsors for his or her children, and who witnessed her wedding or his will. Remember, we Irish are a clannish bunch!

The Main Sources:

I. Death Notices:

Newspaper death notices served different purposes in different places. If your immigrant-ancestor lived and died in Fredericton, Saint John, or Moncton, or in or near a community with a daily newspaper, there is a good chance that his or her death was noted in a column entitled simply "Died." Death notices of this sort served to inform the newspaper's readership and those in their circle of acquaintance of wake and funeral arrangements. (For the Irish, particularly the Catholic Irish, wakes have always been major social occasions. In fact, in past generations, countless couples met and began courting at wakes.) Nineteenth-century New Brunswick death notices frequently recorded the place of birth of

the deceased, even when almost nothing else was noted. For instance, on June 11, 1902, readers of the *Saint John Globe* read of the death of "James Murphy, 92, a native of County Louth, Ireland, survived by eight children." I am convinced that the death notices of immigrants who came to New Brunswick as part of a chain of settlers from a single old-country parish were more likely to contain a reference to that birthplace than those of "lonely" immigrants. That even the briefest of death notices often refer to the deceased's county or parish of birth reveals a great deal about how our ancestors viewed themselves. A quick visit to the Provincial Archives of New Brunswick's website [**http://archives.gnb.ca]** will give the researcher access to an enormous collection of vital records transcribed from New Brunswick newspapers by the late Danny Johnson.

II. Tombstone Inscriptions:

Places of origin in Ireland — or for that matter, in Scotland, England, or in any of the "old countries" that peopled New Brunswick — are frequently noted on tombstones. Tombstones in many of the Province's older cemeteries have been transcribed for posterity by genealogical enthusiasts who have braved inclement weather, barbed wire, and mosquitoes to achieve their ends. Many of these transcriptions have been deposited with the Provincial Archives in Fredericton and with the local library. A word of caution: if at all possible, it is best for the researcher to inspect a tombstone of interest him or herself. Tombstone transcription can be a daunting task; monuments are often partially or entirely illegible, and more than one transcriber has exercised a greater than appropriate amount of creativity in his work. In general, tombstones are counted among the least accurate of genealogical sources. They are often erected many years after the death of the individual or individuals they commemorate, and, therefore, after memories have faded.

III. Land Petitions:

If the subject of your research settled in rural New Brunswick before 1860, there is a good chance that he applied for a land grant. Applications for land filed before 1830, in particular, tended to provide an exhilarating amount of detail about the applicant: age, marital status, number of children, length of residence in the Province and, very frequently, county of birth in Ireland. New Brunswick Land Petitions can be searched at the Provincial Archives in Fredericton or at the Saint John Regional Library (with a complete *index* of more than 67,000 petitions available on the PANB website: **http://archives.gnb.ca**).

IV. Church Records:

A. If the subject of your search was Catholic and resided in an area currently embraced by the Diocese of Saint John, your search for Irish origins should begin at the Diocesan Archives at 1 Bayard Drive in Saint John. Since the mid 1980's, Diocesan Archivist Mary Kilfoil McDevitt has transcribed nearly all the Archives' pre-1900 baptismal, marriage and burial records onto hundreds of thousands of family group sheets. These records are meticulously organized, indexed, and cross-referenced by maiden surname of mother so that they are easily accessible to even the novice researcher. (N.B. Even if your ancestor's group sheet is silent as to his birthplace, it is frequently possible to infer a great deal on this question by consulting the group sheets of those who stood as sponsors for his or her children.) Mrs. McDevitt can be contacted at: The Diocesan Archives, 1 Bayard Drive, Saint John, NB E2L 3L5 (506) 653-6807.

Those interested in Irish Catholic families who settled in other parts of the province, specifically in predominantly Acadian regions, are often pleasantly surprised to find that an amazing amount of detail was recorded at the time of their ancestor's marriage, frequently including an exact place of birth in Ireland. By the time the Irish began to arrive in New Brunswick in large numbers, the Acadian population had intermarried to the point that almost every marriage required some form of dispensation from church law. In this case, a unique system of record keeping was necessitated, a system which detailed the specifics of parentage and birthplace and which far exceeded the registration requirements of the universal church. Many a Saint John or Kings County researcher — exasperated after years of futile searching for his ancestor's place of origin in Ireland — has been left asking, "Why didn't *my* Irish ancestors settle in Westmorland [or Gloucester, etc.] County?"

B. For reasons which far transcend the scope of this article, the records of the various Protestant denominations are far less useful than those of the Catholic Church in determining the Irish birthplaces of congregants. There are exceptions, however. For example: Anglican and Methodist burial registers sometimes note the old-country birthplace of an

individual brought for burial. And, if you are determined to identify a place of origin in Ireland, it is best to consult any and all sources which might contain references to your subject. The record keeping requirements of many denominations appear to have been determined at the congregational level. Occasionally, a researcher has been surprised to find an invaluable marginal notation on the baptismal, marriage, or burial entry of an ancestor occasioned by little more than the musings of a distracted record keeper.

V. "Missing Friends":

Sometimes we tend to forget that our immigrant ancestors — much like ourselves — were, in their day, part of a complex web of kinship: they all had parents, most had siblings, nieces, nephews, aunts, uncles, and cousins . . . and friends. Some of these remained in Ireland; others went abroad, to places as far-flung as Australia and New Zealand. With some, contact was maintained. With others, contact was severed — either temporarily or permanently. Beginning in 1831 and for the next eighty-five years, the *Boston Pilot* — a Catholic weekly with wide circulation — carried more than 45,000 "Missing Friends" advertisements placed by friends and relatives in search of loved ones. Many of these ads contain references to individuals who either passed through or settled in New Brunswick. No one knows exactly how many New Brunswick immigrants were reunited with family or friends as a result of the notices, but, whatever that figure, these nineteenth-century ads have helped and continue to help many of our contemporaries find their ancestors. Search for your missing friend (or relative) at:

http://www.newenglandancestors.org/database_search/MissingFriends_VOL1-8.asp

VI. Online Sources:

In recent years, internet genealogy has become a wildly popular phenomenon. New genealogical sources appear online on a daily basis. Keeping up with them could constitute a full-time job! Nonetheless, anyone attempting with difficulty to identify the specific place of origin of an Irish immigrant should visit http://www.failteromhat.com/griffiths.htm, where, at the push of a button, it is possible to search one of the only extant "all Ireland" sources: The Primary Valuation of Ireland. Compiled between 1848 and 1864, this survey of Irish land ownership and occupancy became known as "Griffith's Valuation," after Richard Griffith, the director of Ireland's Valuation Office at the time. Even if your ancestor left Ireland in 1820, reference to "Griffith's Valuation" may be helpful in determining the distribution of his/her surname nationally or within a particular county or parish. Be forewarned: If you are attempting to identify the specific place of origin of your Irish-born ancestor, John Murphy, Griffith's will be of little practical help. Perhaps, however, your ancestor had a somewhat unusual surname or Christian name/surname combination (or was married, in Ireland, to someone with an unusual surname). Referring to "Griffith's" might help you to locate a distant, or not-so-distant, kinsman with the same name, thereby narrowing your search for a specific place of origin. Overwhelmed by the online possibilities? Try accessing http://www.cyndislist.com/ireland.htm. for a growing collection of Irish resources. And, when all else fails, try *googling* your ancestor. Be sure to put his/her name in quotation marks and then to include any key words (i.e. Tipperary). Sometimes it *is* possible to find that needle in the "haystack" of cyberspace.