

Why our ancestors left the old country

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Have you ever wondered why your ancestors left Scotland, Ireland or England to settle here 100, 150 or 200 years ago? What made them decide to uproot their families, take the arduous journey across the Atlantic Ocean and start a new life in a vast and strange wilderness?

Some had a spirit of adventure, a drive for independence, a curiosity to explore a new land. A few were remittance men, oft times the black sheep in an upper or middle-class family who was sent to the colonies and paid to stay there. And, of course, love, or lost love, prompted others to emigrate.

Many left to build a better future for themselves and, especially, for their children.

Those who emigrated in the first half of the nineteenth century left home because home wouldn't let them stay. Theirs is a story of hardship, sorrow and hope.

Let's take ourselves back 200 years. We are in the year 1815. After sixteen years of war, Great Britain celebrates the defeat of Napoleon. In Scotland, the wages for the weavers, who'd been weaving cloth for military uniforms, drop from 20 shillings a week to five. Many lose their jobs. Across the sea in Ireland, the landlords raise the rent and evictions become commonplace. Life for most Scots and Irish is bleak, lacking in hope.

For her part, Britain has three problems. First, Britain fears that the high levels of unemployment and poverty in Scotland and Ireland will result in riots and rebellions – something governments don't abide. Second, Britain is overrun by discharged soldiers, veterans of the Napoleonic Wars, also looking for jobs. Third, after the War of 1812 between the United States and Britain – a war fought primarily along the frontier of Upper Canada (now Ontario) – Britain is concerned that the Americans might invade again.

The solution? Sponsored emigration. Britain offers free passage and 100 acres of land plus rations and some implements to those willing to emigrate. Britain offers veterans of the War of 1812 land grants in lieu of passage back to Britain and offers veterans of the war in Europe free passage and land grants. Where were they sent? To the Perth Military Settlement, to the municipalities we now know as Beckwith, Drummond/North Elmsley, Perth, and Tay Valley.

Britain successfully solves her three problems. The veterans would both help settle the interior and serve as a ready-made militia in case those pesky Americans invaded again. The Scots and Irish, as well as the unemployed veterans, would help settle the interior and, by virtue of having left Britain, reduce the level of social and political unrest.

However, poverty and unemployment did not disappear. For thousands upon thousands of Scots, Irish and English, nothing, including a wilderness across the sea, could be worse than the almost unbelievable poverty that existed in Britain in the ensuing years. Those who could emigrated. Many settled in Lanark County and Ontario in general.

Then came the Great Irish Famine (1845-50), also known as the Great Hunger or *An Gorta Mor*, in Irish. When the potato blight ravaged crops in Europe in the early 1840s, the European governments stepped in to calm the crisis. When the potato blight struck Ireland in 1845, the British parliament left the fate of the Irish in the hands of her 10,000 landlords. At the height of the famine, the landlords continued to ship thousands of livestock and tons of grain to England; they did nothing to alleviate the starvation. One million Irish died. Another million emigrated.

To ease the suffering, in 1847, the governments of Upper and Lower Canada (Ontario and Quebec) agreed to accept 100,000 Irish immigrants. Some were destined for Bathurst, North Burgess and other parts of Lanark County. Many Upper Canadians welcomed these new arrivals. Others were fearful that these newcomers would be a burden on society. Worse, that they would not be loyal to Britain. Worse still, they were papists (Catholics). Anti-Catholic rhetoric erupted.

Those Catholics and Protestants who settled here got past this bigotry. That's not to say there weren't some hiccups along the way. As the people of this area will attest, community is the heart of who we are. For 200 years, we – people from different countries and religions – have become friends, worked together, raised barns together, quilted together, mourned together, and celebrated together.

Just as New Year's Eve calls on each of us to look back on the past year and forward to the next, the eve of the 200th Anniversary of the Perth Military Settlement, calls on us to look back on our history and look forward to the future. One lesson from our history is clear: many of our ancestors left home because home wouldn't let them stay.

In more recent history, we know that the displaced persons after World War II, the Hungarians in the 1950s, the Vietnamese "boat people" in the 1970s, and other waves of refugees left their homes because home wouldn't let them stay. Together, those who arrived 200, 150, 100, 50, or 25 years ago have built our communities and indeed our country. Notwithstanding some shameful chapters in our history, we have accomplished much.

Today, our government plans to welcome 25,000 Syrian refugees and members of our community are working to sponsor others. History teaches us that those who feared that the Irish would be a burden and would not be loyal were proven wrong. History teaches us that those who feared that the displaced people after World War II, the Hungarians, the Vietnamese, and others would be a burden and disloyal were proven wrong. History

teaches us that the Syrians, like those who came before, will contribute to our community, indeed have much to offer our community.

Groups have formed to help the refugees in a great many communities across the country. A few months ago, the Perth and District Community Foundation brought together representatives of service clubs, municipal governments, the faith community, and charities as well as concerned citizens to discuss what might be done in our community. The outcome? The Community Alliance for Refugee Resettlement was established. The main objectives are to raise \$100,000 by the end of this year and to use the funds to successfully re-settle three refugee families such that they become integrated into the fabric of Canadian society and have happy and productive lives among us. If you are interested in volunteering your time or contributing money, contact the Community Alliance for Refugee Resettlement, www.theCARR.ca Donations are eligible for a charitable tax receipt.