

A century since any family member has set foot in Ireland, a grandson returns as a citizen

A 'Quebec anglophone' identifies parallels between Quebec and Ireland

WHEN 26 year-old Cavan native, Michael Smith, joined a massive exodus out of Ireland in 1901, he probably never dreamed a hundred and four years would pass before either he or a descendant would set foot back on the emerald isle.

But grandson, Richard Smith, 40, became the first one to complete the circle, literally and figuratively, by landing in Dublin last week from Tokyo, Japan where he is temporarily working. Moreover, thanks to the 1986 Immigration act changes, which extended citizenship to the grandchildren of Irish born citizens; he arrived as an actual Irish passport holder.

"I never met my grandfather since he died 20 years before I was born. But according to my own father (who died in 1981), he was very nationalist. And he claimed he could never return to Ireland to visit because it would be too hard to leave it again".

Smith's family legend has it that Mike Smith's father, John Smith, died before their departure in an incident linked to the Irish independence movement. The incident became the catalyst for their move. Grandson, Richard, can relate, given that 80 years later, in 1981, politics led his family to emigrate from Canada's majority-French-speaking province of Quebec to the neighboring English-speaking-majority province of Ontario.

However in this case, the roles were reversed as Richard's family were joining an exodus of Quebec's minority 'anglophones' (a Canadian expression attributed to those whose first language used in public is English), which swelled to become the biggest internal migration of people in Canadian history.

Known as Canada's rebellious French-majority province, Quebec has an independence movement which bears remarkably similarity to our own homegrown experience; and came within a whisker (49.5 % Yes) of pulling Quebec out of Canada in a 1995 referendum.

Also like the Irish independence movement, the Quebec version has had its violent

moments in the 1960's and 70's; and a majority of Quebec's members of Canada's Parliament currently belong to the secessionist, Bloc Quebecois.

Following the 1995 vote, Montreal-area anglophone-majority municipalities passed strong pro-Canada resolutions that introduced the prospect of partitioning Quebec should its francophone majority vote produce a 'Yes' side victory.

Unlike Ireland, the first secessionist Parti Quebecois Quebec government in the 1970's enacted some of the world's most sweeping language laws that, among other changes, forced Montreal's English speaking business community to shift its operations into French.

Neither willing, nor in many cases able to comply, much of Montreal's then unilingual anglophone business community, shifted their head offices and companies to Toronto. Those not in a position to move, often found the laws ominous, and Smith feels the laws played a role in his own father's death.

But this time a son's loss did not spawn bitterness, but resolve instead to find solutions. Richard returned to Quebec after University in Ontario, learned French, and became one of three founders of the Greater Quebec Movement (GQM). Known in the Canadian and American media for its advocacy of integrated francophone/anglophone bilingual schools, it also supports the drafting of separate written constitution for Quebec.

He has spoken and published articles on constitutionally and language related issues, and has been invited to brief a who's-who of Canadian and Quebec politics. One favorite speech opener is his reference to an Irish story of how two Irish men in a pub encounter an atheist, who they acknowledged as such, yet given the Northern Ireland's system of religiously divided institutions and identities, they ask if the atheist is a "Catholic atheist" or a "Protestant atheist".

Similarly Quebec's language based institutions have gone beyond protecting the anglo-



■ Canadian Richard Smith, left, is pictured in Ireland earlier this month. His grandfather emigrated from Cavan in 1901

phone and francophone fact of Quebec, Smith contends. "They have acted to crack Quebec society, and trigger a competition between anglophones and francophones for immigrant recruits to each side's respective institutions".

He observes "Francophones fear English-language schools,

protected in the Canadian constitution, attract and anglicize immigrants, thereby threatening to marginalize Quebec's French character. Anglophones claim Quebec's restrictions on English schooling and language, represent a violation of human rights, and poses a threat to the viability of their

minority language institutions".

"How this competition plays out could ultimately decide if Quebec feels obliged to leave the federation or not" says Smith. But he is heartened by the enthusiastic reception the GQM's vision for integrated French/English schools has received among francophones and younger Anglophones, as a basis for a real common Quebec identity.

But while that is the challenge of his generation, it is not what is on his mind this week. Instead, he hopes to tour the county of his ancestors, and bring back a little earth to place on the grave of his grandfather.

He adds "I hope, wherever he is, he realizes some closure this week with my visit. Ireland is free, integrated within the European Union and prosperous. The entire island seems to be inching towards a permanent peace. If my grandfather were here, he would not need to feel dispossessed anymore, because he could consider his pride of heritage restored".