

The Costellos, Nolans and Quilters in Kerry and Canada: A case study of chain migration

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The study of migration, and especially of emigration from Ireland, has been a rapidly growing branch of history in recent years. The emphasis has at the same time switched from macro, based on various demographic sources, to micro, based on case studies of individuals and families, often drawing on letters to and from emigrants as the primary source. The works of such as David Fitzpatrick on migration to Australia [7], Kerby Miller on migration to the United States [12], and Bruce Elliott on migration to Canada [6] are among the classics in the field. A recurring theme in this literature, reflected in the title of Miller's book, is the difference between emigration and exile. Many emigrants went not into lonely exile, but to a warm welcome in some part of the New World from relatives who had emigrated there earlier. With a little effort, one can sometimes trace these migration chains over many years or decades.

The Costello–Nolan–Quilter family group from north Kerry is one such example. The story of the success and influence of the Costellos and Nolans in the early history of the city of Calgary in Alberta, Canada has been outlined in an earlier and now dated paper [4]. Much new material which has since come to light, particularly concerning an intermediate stage of the migration chain in eastern Canada, may be of interest.

The story begins with the emigration of Thomas Costello (*c.*1796–*c.*1862) from Kerry to Canada in about 1825, apparently with his wife, *née* Mary Quilter (*c.*1800–*c.*1870), and their two young daughters, Mary and Johanna. Thus began a chain of migration which was to last well over sixty years and to be of profound significance for the early development of the city of Calgary. Thomas was probably born in the townland of Trienearagh, between Listowel and Duagh. His brother William (Billy) inherited the family farm in Trienearagh, and married

Catherine Nolan, a daughter of William Nolan and Johanna Buckley, who themselves lived on a smallholding at Greenville on the western outskirts of Listowel. I have so far been unable to find the names of Thomas and Billy Costello's own parents. The Nolan farm at Greenville is now the home of Jim Sheahan, whose family inherited it through marriage, while the Costello farm in Trienearagh is currently the residence of Billy's great-granddaughter, Mrs. Mary Stack (*née* Costello) and of her son Paul and his family.

I have also been unable to date to discover either from what part of Kerry Mary Quilter came or whether Thomas and Mary lived in Trienearagh or elsewhere before they emigrated. In Canada, they first stayed in Québec City, Lower Canada (now the province of Québec) where their third child, William, was born on August 4, 1826. They then moved to Perth in present day Lanark County and finally settled by 1828 in Horton township in present day Renfrew County, both then in Upper Canada (now Ontario). In Horton, the Costello family grew to ten children.

At this point, one should perhaps pause to consider the environment which the Costellos were leaving behind in Kerry, and that which greeted them on their arrival in the New World. In those pre-famine days, cheaper passage via established shipping links made Canada a more popular destination than the U.S. for emigrants from Ireland. Houston and Smyth [9] have shown, however, that Catholics comprised only a third of Irish settlers in Canada and that Kerry people were particularly underrepresented there, while the Orange Order flourished, even in Horton township. While every migration chain must begin somewhere, one is left wondering as to who or what was responsible for the Costello family's decision to cross the Atlantic. A clue may be provided by the fact that, in 1825, a Michael Costello also travelled from Listowel to Canada, in his case coming with his wife and seven children on the ship *Amity* and settling in Ennismore township, near Peterborough, Upper Canada. These Costellos were among the second of two groups of Peter Robinson settlers, the beneficiaries of an experimental Government-sponsored free emigration scheme, coordinated by Peter Robinson (1785–1838), after whom Peterborough was named, and Robert John Wilmot Horton (1784–1841), after whom Horton township was named. The story of this scheme has been well documented by Carol Bennett [1] and indeed remembered also by Listowel's own Bryan MacMahon [11].

A local landlord, Lord Ennismore (after whom Ennismore township was named) and an agent named John Church had supplied the connection between Peter Robinson and the people of the Listowel area. Among the 1825 group of Peter Robinson settlers, there were Cahill, Collins, Foley/Pope, Galvin, Hagarty, Keane, Shanahan/Brick and Stack family groups originating, like the Costellos, in Listowel. It is important to note, however, that the Peter Robinson settlers registered at official centres which were not necessarily in their home districts, so some of these families may have come from other parts of north Kerry or further

afield. Most of them also settled in Ennismore township, where the memory of their Listowel origins is preserved to this day in the road named the Listowel Line and also in the history of Ennismore township [8] written by Clare Galvin, a regular visitor to his ancestral homeland in Kerry. As Thomas Costello and Mary Quilter were considering travelling to Canada in 1825, they too may well have approached John Church in Listowel with a view to applying to join in the Peter Robinson migration but evidently they were not selected.

Any connection between the two Costello families originating in the Listowel area or between Thomas Costello and the other Peter Robinson settlers remains to be found. Another Thomas Costello, grandson of the Horton settler, was acquainted in Toronto in the early 1900s with Rev. Fr. Paul Costello of the Ennismore family and they were satisfied that they were not related to each other. However, it is not clear that either appreciated that both families had their origins in the Listowel area.

Mary Quilter was almost certainly related to, and possibly a sister of, her Horton neighbour, Margaret Harty, *née* Quilter, a widow, who was also born somewhere in Kerry, and who bought the north half of Lot 6 in the Third Concession in Horton township from 'Thomas Costello and wife' for \$440 on March 15, 1858, although she had already been living in the township for some years at that stage. Margaret (born around 1805) had married Dennis Harty, probably in Kerry, around 1825. Michael, Thomas, Margaret and Ro(d)ger Harty, all born between 1825 and 1840 and living in Horton township at various dates, were probably their children. A possible clue to the origins of this Harty family is the fact that Roger has remained a popular name among Hartys in north Kerry to the present day. Dennis, father of the Roger Harty with whom we are concerned here, may have died in Ireland before 1851, since he does not appear with his wife Margaret in the Canadian census of that year. It could be surmised that his widow took their children to Canada after her husband's death to be near her 'sister'. The writer would welcome any information on the relationship between the two Quilters and on their precise origins in Kerry.

A possible third Costello brother is John Costello who came out to Renfrew County from somewhere in Ireland (believed to be Co Kerry also) some time after 1840 with his wife Bridget O'Connor/Connors and several Irish-born children. They were both born about 1802. By 1851 they were settled on a 200 acre farm in Admaston Township, which adjoins Horton. The adjoining farm was among the 500 acres owned by Thomas Costello when he died around 1862 and at one stage was the residence of Thomas's daughter Margaret and her husband Martin Mulvihill.

In 1862, Thomas Costello's nephew, John William (J.W.) Costello, son of Billy Costello and Catherine Nolan, left Trienearagh to join his uncle's family in Horton township, followed three years later by his brother William Nolan (W.N.)

Costello. These Costello Bros., as they became known, went into the dry goods business (men's clothing, &c.) in nearby Renfrew Village in the late 1860s and the Costello name continued to be associated with this trade in various locations across North America right up to 1987. Apart from a brief period between about 1873 and 1878 when they moved temporarily to Montréal, Costello Bros. remained in Renfrew until the summer of 1883. In that summer, Canada's 'national dream' was about to be realised with the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway (C.P.R.), the first coast-to-coast railway north of the U.S. border. The Costellos took their business from Renfrew and began to follow the construction of the railway, perhaps just inspired by the national dream, or perhaps because they were left with no alternative since the Sheriff had his officers in joint possession of their store and the liabilities of their firm were \$17,000, as reported in the *Renfrew Mercury* of July 27, 1883.

In 1876, William Nolan (1829–1905), a brother of Catherine Costello (*née* Nolan) and an uncle of J.W. and W.N. Costello, who was a pawnbroker and grocer based at Cornmarket Row in Limerick, was widowed and left with five young children to raise on his own. For his own reasons, he left the children (including the present writer's greatgrandmother) in the care of various relatives, and in about 1882 or 1883 gave up his business in Limerick and is next heard of also in Renfrew Village, attempting to rescue the failing business of Costello Bros. He too may have followed the new railway to the West.

In the 1883 construction season, the railway made rapid progress across the prairies, as chronicled by Pierre Berton [2]. Track was laid across what are now the provinces of Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta and work began on the section of the railway through the Rocky Mountains. The Costellos were among the first European settlers in the new town of Calgary, which grew up around a police fort in the foothills of the Rockies after the arrival of the railway line. The first white child born in Calgary was John Calgary Costello, a son of W.N., born in November 1883, followed within a month by the first white girl born there, a daughter of J.W. Costello, called Elizabeth Lillian. Said to have been educated in the hedge schools of Kerry, J.W. became the new town's first schoolteacher, for a few months in the spring of 1884, and his memory is preserved by the John W. Costello School, at 300 Strathcona Drive SW in Calgary, owned by the Calgary Roman Catholic Separate School Board, and blessed as recently as November 14, 1995.

In the winter of 1883–4, while J.W. was teaching school in Calgary, construction of the railway had come to a halt at the point in the Rockies better known today as the ski resort of Lake Louise. In the following summer, J.W. and W.N., now apparently trading in the names of their wives, Elizabeth (*née* Copps, a daughter of emigrants from Shanagolden) and Sarah (*née* Toye), again took to the road (or the mountains). The *Calgary Herald's* report from First Crossing, now Donald, in

the province of British Columbia (B.C.), on December 10, 1884, announced that

Messrs. E. and S. Costello have arrived with a stock of goods. They are doing a good business.

By the winter of 1884–5, construction had progressed through the mountains only as far as Beaver (now Beavermouth). The *Calgary Herald* of January 8, 1885 confirmed that

The End of Track is now at Beaver Creek, where it will remain for the winter. The tracklayers are at work on the sidings at the above place. It is said that after this last piece of work most of them are going east to enjoy the fruits of their toil.

Whether the Costello Bros. were among those who went east to enjoy the fruits of their toil, or whether they wintered at Donald, moved on with the End of Track to Beaver, or merely returned to Calgary, is not clear. By the following summer, however, they were at Beaver, for William Fletcher Bredin [3] reports that in June or July 1885 he

had a trip for a man named Costello, the father of Dr. Costello of Calgary, to pack his outfit of men's clothing from the Beaver to Revelstoke.

The only evidence that William Nolan accompanied his nephews during this phase of their career is the family legend, yet to be confirmed, that

“Old Man” Nolan became “famous” when he upset an oil lamp when “under the weather”, as they say, and burned down the wooden built town of Beaver in the old days.

Before winter had set in again, the eastern and western parts of the C.P.R. were joined up when the famous Last Spike was driven at Craigellachie, B.C., fulfilling Canada's national dream. One wonders if the three Kerry natives were present on that momentous occasion, or indeed whether, in reflecting during those harsh times on how far they had travelled, they would have agreed with a homesick Kerrywoman's tongue-in-cheek 1993 remark that the Rockies reminded her ‘a bit of Sliabh Mish and Mount Brandon at home but not as nice.’

J.W. Costello eventually settled back in Calgary where his descendants, now numbering several hundred, hold regular reunions. W.N. Costello moved on once more in 1891, this time to the U.S., eventually settling in the town of Everett in Washington state, where the Costello name remained over the door of a men's clothing store until 1987. The two brothers died within a month of each other in

1918. William Nolan ended his days as a hospital porter at the Holy Cross Hospital in Calgary, where he died in 1905. He was buried in the Costello family plot in Calgary on the very day that Alberta was elevated to the status of a province, August 1, 1905, the only one of the three whose tombstone records his birthplace: 'Listowel, Ireland'.

The presence of the Costello Bros. in Calgary was enough to bring their first cousin Patrick James (Paddy) Nolan (1862–1913) there in 1889 after a glittering career as a law student in Dublin and London. Paddy Nolan's father James had, like his uncle William, gone into business in Limerick city, where he enjoyed great success and eventually became a Town Councillor. One of Paddy Nolan's brothers, also William, was Mayor of Limerick in 1895 and 1896. Paddy himself was, however, to attain even greater fame as a lawyer and wit in Calgary. His lasting fame is indicated by the publication as recently as 1987 of his biography by Grant MacEwan [10].

The City of Calgary Archives file on J.W. Costello's son, Michael Copps Costello (1875–1936), who served as Mayor of Calgary 'during four of the most trying years of her history' (1915–8), does not acknowledge his Irish roots. By the time Paddy Nolan's only son, Henry Grattan Nolan (1893–1957), was appointed a judge of the Supreme Court of Canada (1956–7), the family's humble north Kerry origins were certainly but a distant memory. I hope that this article will go some little way to revive that memory.

This is a revised version of an article from the Ballyguiltenane Rural Journal [5]. Pádraig Óg de Bhaldráithe can be contacted by e-mail as pwaldron@tcd.ie or by telephone at 087 2547230. Further information on the Costellos, Nolans and Quilters is available on the World Wide Web at <http://pwaldron.bess.tcd.ie/costello/> A Dobbin Research Scholarship from the Ireland Canada University Foundation is gratefully acknowledged as is the assistance of individuals too numerous to mention during a research trip to Canada between April and June 1997.

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