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A Critical Analysis of E. Moore Quinn’s “An Gorta Mór and the Campaign to Preserve Grosse Île as an Irish Historic Site”

E. Moore Quinn’s article “An Gorta Mór and the Campaign to Preserve Grosse Île as an Irish Historic Site” examines the history of Irish immigrants arriving in Canada to demonstrate the significance of the small island and how it serves as a commemorative site, as well as a symbol of Irish identity. Furthermore, Quinn argues the Canadian Government attempted the erasure of Irish communities by conveying how the politics of language and the symbol of the Celtic cross at the Heritage Site were successful in a campaign to protect the site. This analysis will inspect and assess whether Quinn’s argument is effective or not.

Quinn published her article in 2019 in the *New Hibernia Review* out of the University of St. Thomas. This journal is run out of the Center for Irish Studies department in a University founded by the Irish-born Archbishop John Ireland.¹ It is also worth mentioning that Quinn is a Professor of anthropology at Charleston College and her main research interests include “Irish and Irish American Studies” and “The history of politics of representation”.² Therefore it is not surprising that her article argues for the representation of the Irish in Canadian history. There are several points that Quinn makes about how the Irish were treated by the British such as the common idea amongst Irish people that “the English created the famine”.³ It feels as though the article tries to imply that the Canadian Government’s plan to name the island “Canada: Land of Welcome and Hope”⁴ is an echo of that erasure and mistreatment. I think it is also significant to

¹ “Honoring our roots,” St. Thomas University, 2022, <https://cas.stthomas.edu/centers-institutes/irish-studies/>

² “Faculty and Staff,” College of Charleston, 2019, <https://socanth.cofc.edu/about/faculty-staff-listing/quinn-moore.php>

³ Quinn, E. Moore, “An Gorta Mór and the Campaign to Preserve Grosse Île as an Irish Historic Site,” *New Hibernia Review* Vol 23, Issue 3 (2019): 103

⁴ *Ibid.*, 107

note that this was written in 2019, which was the same year that construction workers dug up several bones leading to the discovery of 12-15 bodies in a mass grave in Montreal near another significant Irish monument: Black Rock.⁵ This could have impacted Quinn's protective tone of Irish culture found in her article.

The article states that a letter was sent from the lobbying group Action Grosse Île to the Prime Minister⁶, however there is no information whether the letter got any response and little information on what the government had to say in regards to the postcard campaign. The only insight from the government indicated is used to point out "language that inflamed Canadian Irish sensibilities" by exposing their plan to use Irish immigration "merely as a backdrop"⁷ The article fails to give more information on why the government did not want to focus on immigration and the history of the Irish. Had they not consulted with historians, anthropologists, or members of the Irish community? Why did they not believe this cultural and emotional significance would bring tourists in? It would have been helpful to include quotes from those involved in tourism or directly involved in the develop of the original plan for Grosse Île.

The article reflects mainly one perspective, and that is one portraying the Irish in a fight to keep a space as an Irish space to commemorate the tragedies collectively. It is to be assumed that Quinn would have a strong allegiance to representing cultural landmarks of historical and emotional impacts in the Irish culture when we look to her previous works. She has written numerous books and academic essays relating to pilgrimage studies in Ireland and Canada. She is "interested in social justice pilgrimage in particular, she has written about the re-sacralization

⁵ "Evidence of mass Irish grave site unearthed during REM light-rail dig," CBC News, Nov. 30 2019, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/montreal/irish-grave-site-montreal-black-rock-1.5379413>

⁶ Quinn, E. Moore, "An Gorta Mór and the Campaign to Preserve Grosse Île as an Irish Historic Site," *New Hibernia Review* Vol 23, Issue 3 (2019): 105

⁷ *Ibid.*, 103-104

of certain global sites”.⁸ This would certainly explain the interest in Grosse Île as a topic to write on for Quinn considering the sacred connotation the island holds in Irish history as well as the annual pilgrimages that take place from Ireland. While discussing the success of the postcard campaign using the Celtic cross symbol and the “vehement secular linguistic campaign”⁹ Quinn briefly mentions these pilgrimages and questions why they were not enough to persuade the government’s change in its development plan. There is however no concrete answer or factual information to look to. This seems counterproductive to include this thought if not to elaborate on why the pilgrimages would not have been “powerful enough” or had as many “arousing reactions” as the postcards did.¹⁰ The article fails to provide a thorough examination of this, which would have made the argument of the article even stronger; that only the language from the Irish translation on the site’s panels and the visual of the cross could have the impact that it did.

It is interesting that the change in the government’s development plan for Grosse Île was announced on St. Patrick’s Day. Quinn says the Irish protesters “were perceived to have won the propaganda ‘war’”.¹¹ On a day of Irish celebration, the Irish had one more thing to celebrate. Quinn, however, does not tell us why this date was chosen for the announcement. Was this an attempt by the government to get in the good graces of the Irish community? Was this perhaps a strategized announcement to make up for their mistake of “lacking awareness of the global reach of Ireland’s sesquicentennial famine commemorations”? This would be intriguing material for

⁸ “About E. Moore Quinn,” Stylus Publishing, 2022, <https://styluspub.presswarehouse.com/browse/author/8db76d0a-e7a9-47ff-9bf4-cfdc7637fa93/Quinn-E-Moore?page=1>

⁹ Quinn, E. Moore, “An Gorta Mór and the Campaign to Preserve Grosse Île as an Irish Historic Site,” *New Hibernia Review* Vol 23, Issue 3 (2019): 109

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 109

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 107

readers and would establish the idea that the government knew of their wrongdoings towards the Irish.

Although there are still some unanswered questions, Quinn effectively demonstrates the Canadian government's lack of understanding that the global significance Grosse Île has in Irish culture and that it holds a strong place as a collective memory linking Irish identities throughout the world.