

The Orange Order in Canada and Toronto

In early, nineteenth-century Canada, Protestant immigrants from Ireland and soldiers of the British garrison formed the first lodges of the Orange Order. From 1815 to 1850, about 575,000 Irish arrived in what was then British North America; 60% of all immigrants. The great majority of these early Irish immigrants were Protestant. This immigration fueled the growth of the Orange Order.

The Orange Order provided its members, all adult males, with entertainment and social welfare benefits. It also facilitated private and public employment for its members. Politically, the Orange Order strove to “Keep Canada British and Protestant.” At the formation of the Dominion of Canada in 1867, one-third of adult, male Protestants in British North America were, or had been, Orangemen. Also, there were more Orange Lodges in British North America than in Ireland.

By Bloomsday, Canadian Orangemen were of all Protestant denominations though Anglicans predominated. Members of Irish birth or descent were a minority. Orangemen were of all socio-economic classes though very few of Canada’s wealthy, Protestant elite joined the order. Politically, the order was most influential in Newfoundland (which did not join the Dominion of Canada until 1949) and the City of Toronto. In the Late-Victorian Era, Toronto became known throughout the British Empire as “The Belfast of Canada.” In 1894, Orangemen accounted for 41% of the city’s firefighters, 45% of the police officers, and 60% of administrative employees. All but three of Toronto’s thirty-four mayors elected between 1874 and 1954 were Orangemen, and during that period Orangemen were the majority of the City Council.

Toronto Orange Order July 12 Parade, c. 1868



Digitized by the Toronto Public Library.

After the Second World War, “the convergence of secularism, a mood of national confidence, and a vastly increased range of recreational activities undermined the *raison d’être* for Orange membership. Its decline was hastened by the obsolescence of the self-help function.” (Houston, p.172). Canadian membership in the Orange Order peaked in the 1920s with about 100,000 members. From then, membership declined steadily to about 20,000 in the 1970s. In 2016, the Orange Order in Canada had from 5,000 to 6,000 members, of which about 150 were in Toronto.

Bibliography

Canadian Encyclopedia, s.v. “Orange Order in Canada.”

Houston, Cecil J. *The Sash Canada Wore*. Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1980.

Smyth, William J. *Toronto, The Belfast of Canada*. Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 2015.