

“If the evil now growing around us  
be not staid”:  
Montreal and Liverpool Confront the  
Irish Famine Migration as a  
Transnational Crisis in Urban  
Governance

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*During the summer of 1847, hundreds of thousands of Irish migrants fleeing famine and social upheaval in their native land made their way to the bustling North Atlantic port cities of Montreal and Liverpool. Their migration was marked by outbreaks of epidemic disease that helped fuel public doubts about the project of liberal urban governance. The imperial, colonial and municipal authorities were forced to adopt innovative practices of authority in the midst of the ensuing crisis. This article explores the similarities between the response to these events in Montreal and Liverpool as well as the way that these responses were inextricably linked to local circumstances. In doing so, it examines the way that political practices were debated and implemented across the North Atlantic World in the middle of the nineteenth century.*

*Durant l'été de 1847, des centaines de milliers de migrants irlandais fuyant la famine et la tourmente sociale de leur terre natale ont gagné les villes portuaires grouillantes de vie de l'Atlantique Nord qu'étaient Montréal et Liverpool. Leur migration s'est accompagnée de flambées épidémiques qui ont exacerbé le doute qu'entretenait la population quant au projet de gouvernance urbaine libérale. Les autorités impériales, coloniales et municipales furent contraintes d'adopter des pratiques novatrices d'exercice du pouvoir au plus fort de la crise qui s'ensuivit. Le présent article explore les similitudes entre les réactions que suscitérent ces événements à Montréal et à Liverpool ainsi que les liens inextricables entre ces réactions et la conjoncture locale. Ce faisant, il examine la façon dont les pratiques politiques étaient débattues et mises en œuvre dans le monde de l'Atlantique Nord au milieu du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle.*

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IN 1847 MORE than a quarter of a million Irish men, women and children fled their native land in an effort to escape famine, social upheaval, and epidemic disease.<sup>1</sup> This complex social crisis, rooted in a profound reorganization of rural social relations and economic restructuring, unfolded on a global scale. As migration became the favoured strategy of displaced Irish men and women in search of opportunities to rebuild their shattered lives, the impact of this transformative moment accompanied them on their migratory journeys across the North Atlantic world.

Montreal and Liverpool – two turbulent hubs of transatlantic migration – were plunged into crisis by the tumultuous events of 1847. In both cities the famine migration ignited sectarian tensions and prompted debates about the role of the state in policing and regulating migration, migrants, and the urban landscape. The tensions and conflicts set off by the famine migration cut to the core of the challenge facing the project of urban governance in the Victorian North Atlantic world: that of fostering an orderly and prosperous society when the social and economic processes generating urban wealth were inextricably linked to crises in public order. The prosperity of politically engaged urban elites depended on the creation of a workforce that, like commodities and capital, was increasingly mobile on a global scale. The emphasis on circulation that defined society and economics in these two commercial towns exacted a price. Both cities were faced with repeated outbreaks of epidemic disease, which thrived in the insalubrious environments of migratory journeys. Furthermore, the rapid demographic transformation touched off by the famine migration fuelled class and sectarian conflict. The residents of Montreal and Liverpool quickly discovered that, despite their most concentrated efforts, they could not shield themselves from the social and economic turbulence unfolding across the North Atlantic World.

Historians have long used moments of crisis as a way of exploring more gradual transformations in social relations and political cultures.<sup>2</sup> Epidemics, moral panics, and military conflicts often created a space for the public to debate shifting ideologies, institutions, and the power structures constructed around ideas about class, race, and gender. This methodological approach has recently been employed by historians interested in tracing the transition to liberal and democratic governance in the first two thirds of the nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup>

1 There is an extensive literature on the Irish Famine and its global impact. Titles particularly pertinent to this project include Christine Kinealy, *This Great Calamity: The Irish Famine, 1845-1852* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1995); Kerby Miller, *Emigrants and Exiles: Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985); Frank Neal, *Black '47: Britain and the Famine Irish* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997); Peter Gray, *Famine, Land, and Politics: British Government and Irish Society, 1843-1850* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 1999).

2 See, for example, three works that have taken epidemics as an opportunity to explore broader social tensions: Esyllt Jones, *Influenza 1918: Disease, Death, and Struggle in Winnipeg* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007); Howard Markel, *Quarantine! East European Jewish Immigrants and the New York City Epidemics of 1892* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999); Charles Rosenberg, *The Cholera Years: The United States in 1832, 1849, and 1866* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

3 David Arnold's work on colonial India is a good example of this. See *Colonizing the Body: State Medicine and Epidemic Disease in Nineteenth-Century India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993) and *Famine: Social Crisis and Historical Change* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988).

Examining responses to the famine migration in Montreal and Liverpool provides us with an opportunity to pose broader questions about public engagement in the project of urban governance. The parameters of this project were being set within a liberal political framework.<sup>4</sup> Managing complex processes like migration, urban growth, and public health with expert precision while maintaining reverence for property rights and private initiative was the guiding principle of liberal political elites across the North Atlantic world.<sup>5</sup> The events of 1847 and the response of a politically engaged public thrust this approach to urban governance under the microscope. In both cities, an agitated public demanded that the authorities take sweeping actions to protect the manifestations of disorder associated with the famine migration, the most notable being an outbreak of typhus and highly visible indicators of destitution. The liberal perspective of the authorities at the imperial, national, colonial, and municipal levels made them deeply hesitant, if not outright opposed, to intervening in the private initiatives of Irish landlords, urban property owners, and shipping interests engaged in the transportation of migrants. In an era when liberal notions of authority placed a high value on engaging in public discourse with reason and restraint, the residents of Montreal and Liverpool encountered the crisis of the famine migration in visceral ways that forced them to confront their faith in the project of liberal imperialism. The press provided them a forum through which to describe this experience in a language rich with sensory detail, emphasizing the sight of emaciated migrants on the city's streets and the stench of diseased bodies collapsed on the bustling docks of their towns.<sup>6</sup>

This study explores the conflict that ensued between the public and the state by evaluating government documents and the extensive literature that emerged around public health during this period. Its evidence draws most heavily on the local press. Newspapers are crucial records of elite public discourse of the time. They provide glimpses into how urban elites – who owned, edited, wrote to, and read the newspapers of the early nineteenth century – were circulating ideas about migration, public health, and governance across the North Atlantic world.<sup>7</sup> Through the press, we can trace the impulses for reform that shaped public life and gain a sense of how the public engaged in this process. The purpose, therefore, is

4 See Jean-Marie Fecteau, *La liberté du pauvre : sur la régulation du crime et de la pauvreté au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle québécois* (Montreal: VLB, 2004); Ian McKay, "The Liberal Order Framework: A Prospectus for a Reconnaissance of Canadian History," *Canadian Historical Review*, vol. 81 (December 2000), pp. 617-645; Patrick Joyce, *The Rule of Freedom: Liberalism and the Modern City* (London: Verso, 2003).

5 Robert Morris and Richard Trainor, "Preface" in Robert Morris and Richard Trainor, eds., *Urban Governance: Britain and Beyond since 1750* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), p. 4. For more on efforts to balance liberal principals with demands for urban reform, see Thomas Osborne, "Security and Vitality: Drains, Liberalism and Power in the Nineteenth Century." In Andrew Barry, Thomas Osborne and Nikolas Rose, eds., *Foucault and Political Reason: Liberalism, Neo-Liberalism and Rationalities of Government* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 99-121.

6 For examples of these descriptions, see Archives de la Ville de Montréal [hereafter AVM], VM 21, Health Committee (City Council of Montreal), Board of Health, June 25, 1847; Liverpool Records Office [hereafter LRO], Health Committee, General Purposes Sub-Committee, Minute Book, January 1847 – October 1847.

7 A Liverpool publication was at the forefront of these transnational public discussions. See *The Liverpool Health of Towns' Advocate*, published each month throughout the second half of the 1840s. Another frequently referenced title was R. D. Grainger, *Unhealthiness of Towns: Its Causes and Remedies* (London: Charles Knight & Co., 1845).

not only to draw comparisons between Montreal and Liverpool, but to consider the role that the dynamic interplay between local circumstances and the circulation of ideas on a transnational scale played in the response to the events of 1847. This study builds on a literature that suggests that bustling and contentious urban environments provided crucial laboratories for implementing new practices of social, cultural, and political authority.<sup>8</sup> In this period the authorities broadened the state's sphere of activity, albeit within a liberal framework.<sup>9</sup> They devoted greater energy and resources to surveying and tracking populations that had been problematized as disorderly, the most notable examples being migrants, the sick, and the swelling ranks of the urban poor.<sup>10</sup> This liberal approach to governance and state formation relied heavily on the collaborative efforts of private actors like the charitable and religious communities that operated the institutions designed to reform disorderly people. It generated continuous resistance, including pressure from economic elites who railed against attempts to contribute financially and popular revolts by those attempting to avoid the gaze and force of the police officer or the census-taker.

At first glance, Montreal and Liverpool might not strike observers as two cities with a great deal in common. By the middle of the nineteenth century, Liverpool was a bustling metropolis of nearly 350,000.<sup>11</sup> It had been a major international commercial city since the seventeenth century and was a crucial point of exchange in the transnational trade of cotton and enslaved people. Montreal, meanwhile, had a population not quite one seventh of Liverpool's.<sup>12</sup> Despite the cities being deeply connected by transatlantic commerce, most Liverpoolians would have still perceived Montreal as a distant frontier settlement. Yet, in many ways, Montreal and Liverpool shared similar circumstances. Both were important regional hubs of migration and commerce that were playing a crucial role in the organization of the British Empire's global reach. In each, public life and popular culture were shaped by ethnic, religious, and racial heterogeneity.<sup>13</sup> These two cities –

8 For overviews of the process of state formation in Canada and Britain, see Allan Greer and Ian Radforth, eds., *Colonial Leviathan: State Formation in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992); Eric Evans, *The Forging of the Modern State: Early Industrial Britain, 1783-1870* (London: Longman, 2001).

9 For more on this, see Fecteau, *La liberté du pauvre*, especially chap. 2. Nearing the end of his life, Michel Foucault gave a series of interviews that touched upon the issue of governmentality and the state. See Graham Burchell, Colin Gordon, and Peter Miller, eds., *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

10 For discussions of how the state's approach to regulating migration changed over the course of the nineteenth century, see Lisa Chilton, "Managing Migrants: Toronto, 1820-1880," *Canadian Historical Review*, vol. 92, no. 2 (June 2011), pp. 231-262; Martin Pâquet, *Tracer les marges de la cité : étranger, immigrant, et état au Québec, 1627-1981* (Montreal: Boreal, 2005); Andreas Fahrmeir, Olivier Faron, and Patrick Weil, eds., *Migration Control in the North Atlantic World: The Evolution of State Practices in Europe and the United States from the French Revolution to the Inter-War Period* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1999).

11 John Belchem, "Introduction" in John Belchem, ed., *Liverpool 800: Culture, Character and History* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2006), pp. 1-56.

12 For an overview of Montreal's history, see Jean-Claude Marsan, *Montreal in Evolution*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990).

13 For a definitive account of how ethnic and racial diversity defined urban culture and politics during this period, see Mary Ryan, *Civic Wars: Democracy and Public Life in the American City during the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

and especially the neighbourhoods surrounding their bustling harbours – must be conceptualized as contact zones, where economic relationships brought people of different class, racial, and ethnic backgrounds into contact.<sup>14</sup> While this helped foster economic prosperity and cultural vibrancy, the political culture of both cities was increasingly dominated by sectarian tension between Catholics and Protestants, with elites from both communities asserting themselves as legitimate civic leaders.<sup>15</sup>

As important regional commercial centres, Montreal and Liverpool, like a handful of other port cities in the North Atlantic world, experienced economic and social change earlier and more intensely than outlying areas. In the middle of the nineteenth century, both cities were sites of significant accumulations of wealth and capital that coexisted with a sharp rise in the number of men, women, and children living in staggering poverty. These traits connected Montreal and Liverpool in a shared trajectory. Elites in both cities struggled with identical challenges to public order: sectarian conflict, poor sanitary conditions, and a popular culture that was perpetually teetering on the edge of alcohol-fuelled violence.<sup>16</sup>

The impact that the migration out of Ireland had on Montreal and Liverpool was stunning in its magnitude. In that year alone, over 296,000 Irish migrants disembarked in Liverpool, a city with just over 300,000 permanent residents.<sup>17</sup> In Montreal, evidence suggests that roughly 80,000 Irish migrants passed through the city after clearing the quarantine station at Grosse Île, just down the St. Lawrence River from Quebec.<sup>18</sup> This is an astounding number, considering that Montreal's population at the time was hovering just below 50,000. In both cities, tens of thousands of these migrants required some form of public or private assistance, whether in the form of food, shelter, or medical treatment. The massive scale of this migration turned both Montreal and Liverpool into shock cities of the Irish famine crisis.<sup>19</sup> It is difficult to measure the desperate circumstances faced by many of these migrants in a qualitative manner, but the number of people killed by the typhus epidemic that accompanied the famine migration is estimated at

14 For an overview of the theoretical idea of the contact zone, see Tony Ballantyne and Antoinette Burton, "Introduction: Bodies, Empires, and World Histories" in Tony Ballantyne and Antoinette Burton, eds., *Bodies in Contact: Rethinking Colonial Encounters in World History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), pp 1-18.

15 For an overview of sectarian violence during this period, see Frank Neal, *Sectarian Violence: The Liverpool Experience, 1819-1914* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1988); P. J. Waller, *Democracy and Sectarianism: A Political and Social History of Liverpool, 1868-1939* (Liverpool: University of Liverpool Press, 1989); Dan Horner, "Taking to the Street: Crowds, Politics and Identity in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Montreal" (PhD dissertation, York University, 2010), chap. 4; Scott See, "Nineteenth-Century Collective Violence: Toward a North American Context," *Labour / Le Travail*, vol. 39 (Spring 1997), pp. 1-26.

16 For more on discussions of public order, see Fecteau, *La liberté du pauvre*; Horner, "Taking to the Streets"; Robert Hole, *Pulpits, Politics and Public Order in England, 1760-1832* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

17 For an overview of social change in nineteenth century Liverpool, see Colin Pooley, "Living in Liverpool: The Modern City" in Belchem, ed., *Liverpool 800*, pp. 172-228.

18 For an overview of social and geographic change in Montreal during this period, see Jean-Claude Robert, *Atlas historique de Montréal* (Montreal: Art global, 1994).

19 For a discussion of the shock city phenomenon from a slightly later period, see Howard Platt, *Shock Cities: The Environmental Transformation and Reform of Manchester and Chicago* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

6,000 in Montreal and 5,500 in Liverpool, with thousands more coming perilously close to losing their lives.<sup>20</sup>

Migration from Ireland to the British Isles and North America had been occurring at a modest yet steady rate since the end of the Napoleonic conflicts in Europe in the early second decade of the nineteenth century.<sup>21</sup> The numbers accelerated rapidly and dramatically with the onset of the famine in 1845, peaking in 1847.<sup>22</sup> While some Irish migrated directly from Ireland to North America, the vast majority began their journey by boarding a steamboat bound for port cities on the west coast of England and Scotland, most notably Glasgow, Liverpool, and Bristol. Most arrived in these cities in a state of destitution. The voyage across the Irish Sea entailed steep financial, emotional and health costs. Many families came close to exhausting their resources by the time that they had completed this first migration, and they frequently fell victim to schemers seeking to defraud them of what little they had left. Migrants also experienced a dramatic physical deterioration by the time that they reached Britain. Not only had food and shelter become scarce in Ireland prior to their departure; the makeshift communities of displaced tenant farmers provided ideal conditions for contagious diseases like typhus to flourish. Cramming aboard crowded steamboats to make the trip across the Irish Sea only made matters worse.

Arriving in such large numbers in a city like Liverpool, these destitute migrants faced a dire slate of meagre options. There was little in the way of paid employment, and the work that was available in a commercial port city during this period – loading and unloading the cargo of ships – was physically demanding and offered little financial compensation. Few were in good enough health to work these jobs.<sup>23</sup> The majority of Irish migrants in Liverpool were therefore forced to rely on the charity provided by the parish under the provisions of the Poor Law.<sup>24</sup> While some were immediately placed in the fever hospitals that were being hastily established by Liverpool's civic and religious authorities, the majority found shelter by moving into cellars rented out by unscrupulous property owners in some of the city's poorest neighbourhoods.<sup>25</sup> These cellars again provided ideal

20 For an overview of the outbreak in Liverpool, see Neal, *Black '47*, chap. 5. For an overview of the typhus epidemic in Montreal, see Maude Charest-Auger, "Les réactions montréalaises à l'épidémie de typhus de 1847" (mémoire de maîtrise, Université de Québec à Montréal, 2012).

21 For more on the Irish community in Montreal before the famine migration, see Sherry Olson and Patricia Thornton, *Peopling the North American City: Montreal, 1840-1900* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's Press, 2011), chap. 2.

22 Migrants from Ireland had been arriving in Montreal and Liverpool in larger numbers since the end of the Napoleonic Wars, but the rate rose sharply with the beginning of the Irish famine in 1845, when 100,000 people emigrated from Ireland. This number rose every year, peaking at about 250,000 in 1847. For a quantitative analysis of the famine migration's impact in Ireland, see Stewart Fotheringham, Mary Kelly, and Martin Charlton, "The Demographic Impacts of the Irish Famine: Towards a Greater Geographical Understanding," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, vol. 37, no. 4 (April 2012), pp. 1-17.

23 For discussions of how famine migrants integrated into the urban communities to which they had immigrated, see Matthew Gallman, *Receiving Erin's Children: Philadelphia, Liverpool, and the Irish Famine Migration, 1845-1855* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), chap. 2.

24 For a detailed discussion of the Poor Law during this period, see Michael Rose, *The Poor and the City: The English Poor Law in its Urban Context, 1834-1914* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1985).

25 Placing strong restrictions on renting out cellars as dwelling places was the cornerstone of several pieces of local and parliamentary legislation designed to improve public health in Liverpool during this period, most

conditions for a public health crisis, as the overcrowded and poorly ventilated rooms quickly became infested with the body lice that spread typhus.<sup>26</sup>

For hundreds of thousands of Irish, Liverpool marked the end of their migration. A smaller group, however, had the means and ambition to push onwards. North America offered one chance that the industrializing cities and transformed agriculture of mid-nineteenth-century Britain did not: the possibility of re-establishing themselves and their families as independent farmers.<sup>27</sup> Even for those Irish migrants who had accumulated some capital, the transatlantic journey was a harrowing one. They boarded ships that were used to carry lumber harvested in North America to British ports, and the conditions on board were notoriously bad. Migrants were crowded into poorly ventilated cargo holds. Like the cellars their less fortunate countrymen were renting in Liverpool, the ships the Irish boarded for the transatlantic journey provided the ideal conditions for typhus to spread among malnourished and exhausted victims.<sup>28</sup> By the time that these migrants had completed their transatlantic journey, most were in a state of destitution, their savings having been exhausted and their health in a lamentable state after months of surviving on a diet that was nowhere near adequate.<sup>29</sup>

The public crisis that gripped Montreal and Liverpool in 1847 was not unprecedented. Public health emergencies that could be linked to changing patterns of migration had shaped the urban experience for millennia.<sup>30</sup> Most recently, both Montreal and Liverpool had been battered by a global cholera epidemic in 1832, a public health crisis that was itself rooted in the ways that imperialism was changing patterns of human migration, most notably with the expansion of British trade in the Indian subcontinent, where the epidemic had originated.<sup>31</sup> As efforts to govern and regulate urban space more effectively took shape, epidemics became flashpoints for new exercises in political authority and, subsequently, new practices of resistance.<sup>32</sup> For the public and for many political officials, unpredictable patterns of economic activity and human migration fostered a sense

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notably the *Liverpool Sanitary Act* of 1846. See William Frazer, *Duncan of Liverpool* (London: Hamish Hamilton 1947), pp. 23-44.

- 26 For a helpful discussion of past and current debates around the science of typhus, see Anne Hardy, "Urban Famine or Urban Crisis? Typhus in the Victorian City," *Medical History*, vol. 32 (October 1988), pp. 401-425.
- 27 Several accounts of the aspirations of Irish migrants arriving in Canada during the famine can be found in Donald MacKay, *Flight from Famine: The Coming of the Irish to Canada* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1990).
- 28 Quantitative studies suggest that up to a third of the Irish people boarding ships from Ireland and England bound to North America died either during the journey or shortly after disembarking. See Robert Scally, "The Irish and the 'Famine Exodus' of 1847" in Robin Cohen, ed., *The Cambridge Survey of World Migration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 80-85.
- 29 For personal narratives of the migration, see Mark McGowan, *Death or Canada: The Irish Migration to Toronto* (Toronto: Novalis, 2009).
- 30 Mark Harrison, *Disease and the Modern World, 1500 to the Present Day* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004), especially chap. 5.
- 31 David Arnold, *Colonizing the Body: State Medicine and Epidemic Disease in Nineteenth-Century India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), especially chap. 4.
- 32 See Harrison, *Disease and the Modern World*; Bettina Bradbury, *Wife to Widow: Lives, Laws, and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Montreal* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2011), pp. 186-188; Geoffrey Bilson, *A Darkened House: Cholera in Nineteenth-Century Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980).

of social disorder that justified innovative practices of authority. The events of 1847 are a prime example.

Over the two years of social upheaval and famine in Ireland, the authorities in Montreal and Liverpool developed experience with managing the arrival of large and needy migrant communities. In the first months of 1847, officials in both cities began preparing for another significant wave of arrivals.<sup>33</sup> However, news soon suggested that conditions in Ireland had deteriorated to such a degree that they were threatening to trigger the heaviest wave of migration yet. Still, authorities on both sides of the Atlantic expressed confidence that the infrastructure already in place to deal with immigrants would be sufficient to cope with whatever 1847 held in store.<sup>34</sup>

While linked by an imperial connection and shared political institutions, officials in Britain and British North America employed different strategies for dealing with large influxes of immigrants. In Britain, the mounting problem of urban poverty remained under the jurisdiction of the Poor Law, which had last been amended in 1834. The Poor Law collected funds from ratepayers and used them to provide charitable support for those who required it. Under the provisions of the 1834 amendment, much of this charitable support was linked to the workhouse, where the indigent were expected to labour in exchange for the support that they received.<sup>35</sup> The events of 1847, however, suggested that the Poor Law was not well equipped to deal with the social upheaval that mass migrations of the modern era threatened to unleash. The social impact of the crisis in Ireland did not remain tethered to its place of origin, where local elites could be forced to live up to their responsibilities under the Poor Law. Instead, it resulted in an unprecedented wave of migration that dispersed the consequences of economic change in Ireland across the North Atlantic world. This development stoked hostility towards the famine migrants in Liverpool, as many locals argued that the needy were only flocking to the city because they were under the impression that they could take advantage of public charity.<sup>36</sup> Mass migration revealed the shortfalls of a system in which charity was a purely local arrangement. Liverpool, even with its considerable concentrations of mercantile wealth during this period, found itself struggling to

33 See *La Minerve*, April 29, 1847; *Liverpool Mercury*, January 29, 1847; *Montreal Gazette*, May 17, 1847.

34 This confidence in existing institutions and protocols among civic elites survived longer in Montreal than it did in Liverpool, where the arrival of migrants began occurring much earlier. For an example of civic elites expressing a diminishing confidence, see the minutes of a public meeting of Liverpool magistrates published in the *Liverpool Mercury*, January 29, 1847, as they discussed their collective realization that the tools in place to deal with urban poverty would not hold in the face of an unprecedented migration from Ireland. The opening of the shipping season in Montreal created a similar sense of panic, which colonial officials attempted to discourage. Expressing confidence in the institutions that had been put in place to manage the migration of 1846 was the central message of Governor Elgin's speech from the throne in June. See *La Minerve*, June 4, 1847; *Montreal Gazette*, June 3, 1847.

35 See Rose, *The Poor and the City*. These ideas were circulating in Montreal as well, where in the months leading up to the crisis of 1847 there were calls from a number of public officials on the need for a workhouse built on the British model in the city. See, for example, *La Minerve*, January 21 and March 18, 1847.

36 Elite commentators in the Liverpool press frequently alleged that the Irish were taking refuge in the city because their poor law infrastructure was too accessible and generous. For examples, see the *Liverpool Mercury*, January 29, March 5, April 30, and June 18, 1847.



provide assistance to the thousands of Irish migrants arriving in the city on a daily basis in 1847.

In Canada, the colonial administration's strategy was concentrated on the quarantine station they had constructed on Grosse Île, an island just down the St. Lawrence River from Quebec City, fifteen years previously. Ships passing up the river to the port cities of the Province of Canada had to pass inspection at the quarantine station, which was staffed by colonial officials and medical personnel. Authorities planned to make the station, built in the midst of the cholera epidemic of 1832, the centrepiece of their efforts to manage the famine migration.<sup>37</sup> Within weeks of the opening of the shipping season of 1847, it became clear that the infrastructure at Grosse Île was buckling under the pressure of a migration of unparalleled magnitude. Reports began appearing in the local press that ships were backing up at the quarantine station. Confirming the most dire predictions made earlier in the year, medical personnel uncovered outbreaks of typhus on nearly every ship that docked at the quarantine station, and the task of separating the sick and contagious from those who were merely famished and battered by the transatlantic journey proved to be nearly impossible with the resources at hand.<sup>38</sup> Placing their confidence in these two pre-existing institutions, the colonial and imperial authorities in London and in Canada were confident that they would be able to manage whatever impact resulting from the crisis unfolding in Ireland with the infrastructure that they had established in response to earlier crises. This position would come under increasing public scrutiny in both Montreal and Liverpool as the crisis deepened.

Proposing solutions aimed at imposing their vision of order on this urban social landscape was made all the more challenging for elites in Montreal and Liverpool due to persistent uncertainty and conflict about jurisdiction. Local government remained a recent innovation in both cities. In 1835, the British Parliament passed the *Municipal Corporations Act*, which reformed civic governance across England and Wales. Prior to this, Liverpool had been governed by a self-elected body of elites. The act replaced this body with a city council elected by male voters who met certain property qualifications imposed to prevent the city's poorest residents from voting.<sup>39</sup> This new body immediately promoted reforms absent from its unelected predecessor, taking action on a variety of fronts relating to public order, introducing sanitary regulations and investing in policing and street-lighting.<sup>40</sup>

37 For a history of the quarantine station at Grosse Île that reaches into the twentieth century, see Marianna O'Gallagher, *Grosse Île: Gateway to Canada, 1832-1937* (Ste. Foy: Carraig Books, 1984).

38 Articles in the Montreal press expressing fears that the quarantine station at Grosse Île was buckling under the strain of the unprecedented migration began appearing at the beginning of June. See *Montreal Gazette*, June 1 and 7, 1847; *La Minerve*, June 4, 1847. The colonial authorities expressed their concerns about the effectiveness of the quarantine station in a petition to Queen Victoria at the end of June; see *Journals of the Legislative Assembly of the Province of Canada*, Volume 6, pp. 74-75.

39 For a discussion of the impact that this had on the nascent sanitary reform movement in Liverpool, see Frazer, *Duncan of Liverpool*, pp. 20-23.

40 For a discussion of the first decades of municipal governance in Liverpool, see Ramsay Muir and Edith May Platt, *A History of Municipal Government in Liverpool* (Liverpool: University of Liverpool Press, 1907), Part One.

These solutions did not come out of the blue. Political elites in both Montreal and Liverpool were engaged in transnational discussions about the overarching project of urban governance, which was focused on the challenge of fostering a genteel and prosperous society in an era marked by social, economic, and political transformation that continuously attacked nearly every manifestation of stability. The solutions proposed and debated by experts of the time, which public officials were reading and discussing in the public sphere, focused primarily on collecting information about the communities that they sought to govern and reform. Public health campaigners like Liverpool's Dr. William Duncan, who gained international recognition during this period, maintained that, by producing detailed census data on the residences and neighbourhoods of the urban poor, various levels of government would be better equipped to police them by enforcing new and existing bylaws that addressed residential overcrowding and poor sanitary conditions. These experts, and Duncan in particular, were successful at asserting the legitimacy of their undertakings and were appointed to the municipal boards of health created as the scale of the famine migration crisis became apparent in the first months of 1847.<sup>41</sup> Duncan's efforts to discredit miasmatic theories of disease offered legitimacy to the restrained response of the colonial and imperial authorities. The proponents of the miasmatic theory of disease insisted that the only viable means of protecting the public from exposure to typhus was to quarantine Irish migrants at a safe distance from the city, as their presence within close proximity threatened to pollute the city with noxious and contagious air. Duncan insisted that the only risk of contracting typhus lay in engaging in close contact with the sick. Housing the sick in well-designed and salubrious institutions within the city, Duncan argued, was thus a prudent course for the authorities to take.<sup>42</sup>

A similar trajectory was followed in Montreal with regard to urban governance. The colonial administration in Lower Canada had established local governments in the 1830s, but they were quickly suspended when the supporters of democratic reform took up arms against the authorities in 1837.<sup>43</sup> Following a brief interlude during which the colony's elected political institutions were suspended, local government was re-established in 1841. As was the case in Liverpool, this institution became an engine of reform, drawing together urban elites devoted to the task of fostering public order. Local government attracted a cross-section of elites that transcended the political and sectarian divides that were fiercely contested at the parliamentary level. Empowered by these new political institutions, local officials carved out a sphere of activity for themselves in the

41 See Frazer, *Duncan of Liverpool*; LRO, Liverpool City Council Minute Books, January 1, 1847; AVMM1 City of Montreal, City Council Minutes, June 2, 1847.

42 See Frazer, *Duncan of Liverpool*. For an extended discussion of Duncan's take on miasmatic theories of disease transmission, see William Duncan, "The Public Hygiene of Great Britain" in *The British and Foreign Medical Review*, vol. 18 (July-October 1844), pp. 492-512.

43 For more on the establishment of Montreal's municipal government, see Michèle Dagenais, "The Municipal Territory: A Product of the Liberal Order?" in Michel Ducharme and Jean-François Constant, eds., *Liberalism and Hegemony: Debating the Canadian Liberal Revolution* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), pp. 201-220. It should be noted that at the height of the crisis of 1847, broader debates about the contours of municipal jurisdiction were taking place. See *La Minerve*, July 26, 1847.

shadow of the famine migration crisis. Eruptions of social disorder in a variety of different guises – be they the rapid growth of desperate migrant communities, a spike in public awareness regarding the insalubrities of the urban landscape, or the threats both these phenomena posed to the public health and commercial vitality – provided a justification for innovative practices of authority.

Local officials and other commentators in Liverpool and Montreal framed the crisis of 1847 in the language of burden. They insisted that, because they happened to be hubs of commerce and migration that served as engines for the colonial, national, and imperial economies, their ratepayers had been left to pay a disproportionately large portion of the costs associated with the crisis in Ireland. In Liverpool, a group of magistrates drafted a petition that they sent to Parliament in which they demanded greater financial assistance to cope with the unexpected magnitude of the migration. They reported that, within an eleven-day span in the second half of January, several thousand Irish migrants had arrived in Liverpool “in a state of wretchedness painful to behold ... and almost as soon as they land they become claimants on the parochial funds.”<sup>44</sup> While making it clear that they had no intention of absconding from their responsibility to assist the migrants in the immediate future, they argued that Liverpool’s proximity to Ireland placed it in a unique position whereby “the people of this place are called upon to sustain, out of the poor rates, a greater share of the burthen [*sic*] caused by famine in Ireland than the inhabitants of other parts of the kingdom.” For this reason, the petition concluded, “they are not without hope that the wisdom of Parliament may devise some mode of relieving Liverpool from bearing more than a fair share of the cost of this serious infliction.”<sup>45</sup>

In the face of what they considered to be parliamentary apathy, Liverpool’s parochial authorities fired off another petition to Parliament at the end of April, in which they updated the central government on the number of migrants who had passed through Liverpool since the beginning of the year, noting that over 150,000 had now disembarked from their voyage across the Irish Sea in Liverpool and that, while 48,000 had since left for North America, nearly 105,000 were still “wandering about the town of Liverpool and the neighbouring villages, or spreading as mendicants throughout the entire kingdom.”<sup>46</sup> An editorial printed alongside the petition expressed growing frustration with London’s inaction on this front far more bluntly than civic and parochial authorities had been willing to do up until that point. How would the parliamentary and imperial authorities react if the people of Liverpool had pooled their money to ship 100,000 of their most destitute fellow residents to London? This was, they maintained, precisely what was occurring in Ireland, as Irish landlords and other elites were known to be providing financial assistance to their poorest countrymen on the condition that they use it to flee the country.<sup>47</sup> The crisis of 1847 led many of Liverpool’s most

44 *Liverpool Mercury*, January 29, 1847; LRO, Health Committee, General Purposes Sub-Committee, Minute Book, January 1847 – October 1847.

45 *Liverpool Mercury*, January 29, 1847; LRO, Health Committee, General Purposes Sub-Committee, Minute Book, January 1847 – October 1847.

46 *Liverpool Mercury*, April 30, 1847.

47 *Ibid.*

vocal political actors to conclude that, rather than an integral part of the British nation, their city was viewed by the imperial authorities in London as a colonial outpost that had to fend for itself despite the contributions its merchants made to national and imperial prosperity.

These demands that more be done by the imperial Parliament in London to assist Liverpool during the crisis did not go unchallenged by supporters of the current administration. In a June debate on the matter, the Earl of Wicklow lamented that the Liverpool public continued to agitate around this issue, arguing that they “had less to complain about than any other town in the United Kingdom. It was the great emporium for the purchase of grain from Ireland and, if a balance were struck between the enormous profits Liverpool had received from the existing distress in Ireland the additions to the rates in consequence of the influx of Irish poor, it would be found that there was a great balance in favour of the town.”<sup>48</sup>

The Earl of Wicklow was essentially expressing the opinion that outbreaks of disease were the price that the elite of cities like Liverpool had to pay for the unbridled prosperity that they had achieved in Ireland during better times. Liverpool, after all, had been profoundly implicated in the economic project that was in the midst of restructuring the social order in Ireland. Rather than being used to feed the men, women, and children who had been made destitute by these new agricultural practices, much of the grain and other agricultural goods being produced on land from which rural tenant farmers had been displaced was now being distributed across global markets from Liverpool’s port. The city’s mercantile elite had been eager to engage in these new avenues of global trade and had profited enormously from doing so. Wicklow appears to have been suggesting that financing an effective response to the famine migration was thus squarely in the city’s sphere of responsibility. Wicklow and his ilk were not arguing for non-action, but rather that this was a local matter that could best be addressed by Liverpool’s civic authorities doing a more effective job of enforcing existing municipal statutes, rather than demanding London intervene with more legislation and financial support.

On the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, many of Montreal’s political elites were reaching very similar conclusions to their counterparts in Liverpool. After proposing radical measures to deal with the crisis unfolding in their city with calls for tighter sanitary regulations and stricter quarantine policies, Montreal’s municipal authorities were frustrated with the tepid response of the imperial government and their representatives in Canada’s colonial administration. Throughout the spring and summer of 1847, civic officials and their allies in the press and the colonial legislature demanded increased financial support from London.<sup>49</sup> More than material support, though, the crisis of 1847 prompted the public in Montreal to demand a greater voice in the way that transatlantic migration was managed by

48 *Liverpool Mercury*, June 11, 1847; *Hansard*, <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/lords/1847/jun/07/poor-removal-england-and-scotland-bill>.

49 Civic elites in both cities argued that London’s refusal to take decisive action would ultimately make the imperial authorities responsible for the death and suffering taking place as a result of the famine migration. See, for example, *La Minerve*, July 1, 1847.

the colonial and imperial governments. Montrealers railed against the imperial authorities in London who, they argued, considered Britain's North American colonial holdings as a convenient place to unload surplus population during moments of social and economic crisis.<sup>50</sup>

The way the events of 1847 unfolded in both Montreal and Liverpool was in sharp contrast to the colonial ideal of transatlantic migration, which viewed the process as one that could be engineered and monitored to foster the creation of an independent and prosperous society.<sup>51</sup> Public figures like Edward Gibbon Wakefield had spent the first half of the nineteenth century promoting systematic colonization schemes across the British Empire.<sup>52</sup> His was a liberal and orderly response to the work of Thomas Malthus, whose widely read writings maintained that Britain was suffering from an excess of population that threatened to be a drain on its prosperity. Providing relief to the poor, Malthus argued, was only cushioning them and the rest of society from this reality.<sup>53</sup> By establishing orderly agricultural communities, anchored by kinship networks and religious institutions, Wakefield and his sympathizers maintained that, rather than writing off its poorest residents, Britain could help transport them to the distant reaches of its empire where, with the proper social conditions carefully put into place, they could become industrious and loyal imperial subjects.<sup>54</sup>

As conditions in Ireland, Liverpool and Montreal worsened, these proposals gained renewed currency in the press, with one editorial insisting that the solution to the turmoil in Ireland lay not with emigration, but with colonization – in other words, that the out-migration of Ireland's rural poor needed to be guided and planned to avoid the scenes of social disorder that were becoming more common by the day in the turbulent port cities of the North Atlantic world.<sup>55</sup> A number of proposals discussed in the early months of 1847 called upon Irish landlords and both imperial and colonial governments to provide funding for colonization projects. Under each of these variations, the crisis unfolding in Ireland was seen as something that could be harnessed for the ultimate prosperity of Britain, its colonies, and the Empire. Migrants would be provided with financial assistance to relocate from Ireland to new communities along Canada's western frontier, where they could be put to work clearing land in the hope that, within a few short years,

50 Commentators and politicians on both sides of the Atlantic criticized the imperial authorities for treating North America as a convenient place to dump what they viewed as a surplus population. See *La Minerve*, August 18, 1847; *Liverpool Mercury*, June 4, 1847.

51 The belief that immigration, if managed rationally, could enhance colonial prosperity and public order was a cornerstone of liberal discussions of the topic. See the *Montreal Gazette*, January 13, May 13 and 14, 1847. For more on early-nineteenth-century emigration to Canada, see Pâquet, *Tracer les marges de la cité*; Chilton, "Managing Migrants."

52 For details on Wakefield's involvement in these colonization schemes, see Paul Bloomfield, *Edward Gibbon Wakefield: Builder of the British Commonwealth* (London: Longman's, 1961); Edward Gibbon Wakefield, *A View of the Art of Colonization* (London: J. Parker, 1849).

53 Hugh J. M. Johnston, *British Emigration Policy 1815-1830: "Shovelling out Paupers"* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), p. 5.

54 See Wakefield, *A View of the Art of Colonization*. For an example of how such schemes played out in British North America, see Bruce Elliott, *Irish Migrants in the Canadas: A New Approach* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1988).

55 See *Hansard*, <http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1847/jun/01/colonisation>.

they would become independent farmers and contributors to colonial economic development. The architects of these schemes associated order and prosperity with controlled fluidity – in other words, with moving emigrants to locations where their presence and their labour was useful as quickly as possible.<sup>56</sup>

As elaborate as these colonization proposals were, they were met with determined opposition. The Irish landlords opposed any measure that placed an economic burden on themselves, and they enjoyed tacit support from Parliament.<sup>57</sup> Opposition in the French- and English-language press in Canada claimed that acquiescing to such projects meant accepting mass emigration, which many continued to maintain would be disruptive. A number of French Canadian commentators interpreted colonization projects as an attack on their majority status in the region that would become Quebec at Confederation.<sup>58</sup> The events of 1847 profoundly shook those who assumed that migration could be managed in an orderly manner. Throughout the spring and summer, observers in both Liverpool and Montreal lamented the incoherency of the migration process. They argued that, because London and the colonial government in Canada had failed to adopt a well-structured and rational policy, the fluid movement of people that characterized the orderly ideal of migration had broken down.<sup>59</sup>

As these proposals floundered, the destitute migrants, many of whom were suffering from the fatal and highly contagious symptoms of typhus, became an unavoidable presence on the harbourfront and major thoroughfares of both Montreal and Liverpool. This prompted discussions in both cities about the concept of the ideal emigrant, a discussion steeped in the politics of race, ethnicity, and gender. Doubts were expressed as to whether Irish migrants fleeing the famine would ever be able to become independent and prosperous members of society. That the migrant communities huddled on the waterfronts of Montreal and Liverpool were in the midst of being ravaged by a deadly and debilitating outbreak of typhus also weighed heavily, as physical vitality was conceptualized as a crucial trait of an ideal emigrant.<sup>60</sup> Civic elites in Montreal and Liverpool expressed concern that their cities and the nature of human migration were at a turning point and that they were losing their ability to attract the type of emigrants who would foster their respective city's future prosperity and modernity.

Throughout the summer of 1847, the famine migration and the subsequent typhus outbreak prompted widespread discussion about the lack of control colonial

56 Civic elites in Montreal argued that the problem with the Irish famine migration was not its magnitude, but that the migration process had lost its previous fluidity. Rather than passing quickly through Montreal on their longer journey south and west, the Irish migrants of 1847 were being forced by material hardship to remain in the city (*La Minerve*, July 15, 1847; *Montreal Gazette*, June 14, 1847).

57 The representatives of the Irish landlord class in Parliament vigorously resisted any attempt to compel them to compensate any level of government for the financial burdens caused by the famine migration (*Liverpool Mercury*, June 11, 1847).

58 Commentators in the Montreal press expressed hostility towards any immigration plan that did not impose limits on the number of migrants allowed to settle in the colony (*La Minerve*, May 14, 1847; *Montreal Gazette*, May 12, 1847).

59 *Montreal Gazette*, May 21, 1847.

60 The deteriorated physical condition of the Irish migrants was a source of tremendous anxiety in the press, as it raised doubts about whether they would ever become productive members of society. See, for example, *La Minerve*, May 31 and July 1, 1847.

centres had over migration. Civic elites in both Montreal and Liverpool were deeply concerned that their cities were being inundated with migrants who might very well prove to be incapable of becoming prosperous and productive members of society.<sup>61</sup> Even as the number of emigrants hospitalized in the sheds began to decline slowly, public animosity towards the imperial government remained venomous in certain elements of the Montreal public. When news arrived that yet another ship had arrived at Grosse Île carrying Irish migrants in particularly dire straits, an editorial in *La Minerve* returned to the oft-repeated lament that Canada was the victim of the Irish gentry's and the British government's inability to manage and contain the crisis unfolding in Ireland.<sup>62</sup> How was Canada ever to become a successful colonial project and Montreal a prosperous city if they continued to be inundated with the sort of emigrants disembarking from these ships – referred to as the poorest and most pathetic in all three kingdoms.<sup>63</sup>

These ideas gained traction in Montreal as the crisis lingered through the summer of 1847. In August, *La Minerve*, whose editorial stance was constructed around support of French Canada's national aspirations, translated and reprinted an investigation into the famine migration originally published in the *Atlas*, a newspaper in Albany, New York. The piece argued that, because of the restrictions that New York State had placed on emigration, the state was attracting a better class of emigrants than its northern counterparts. *La Minerve* concurred with the *Atlas*, but took the argument several steps further by suggesting that, no matter what the legislative circumstances were at any given moment, the United States consistently attracted a more prosperous and ambitious class of migrant, one that was attracted to the American values of rugged individualism. Canada, in turn, was left with the rest – those destined to remain poor farmers, a significant portion of whom would come to be reliant on the generosity of Catholic religious institutions for years to come.<sup>64</sup> This was a profoundly dismal reading of the situation by a newspaper that, in most contexts, was a strident defender of Canadian institutions.<sup>65</sup> These concerns have to be read against the backdrop of the broader sweep of imperial tensions in the city, which coalesced around demands for greater political autonomy in the colonies, an issue that dominated public debate throughout this period.<sup>66</sup>

As 1847 dragged on, Montreal and Liverpool were consumed by the highly visible tragedies unfolding around them. Commerce – the lifeblood of both towns – ground to a halt. Sectarian tensions smouldered, as Protestant commentators

61 The June 14, 1847 edition of the *Liverpool Mercury* contained a lengthy editorial on the Irish character that exemplifies how the Irish were racialized and marginalized by discussions about the social crises surrounding the famine migration.

62 *La Minerve*, July 1, 1847.

63 *La Minerve*, August 2, 1847.

64 *La Minerve*, August 16, 1847.

65 *La Minerve* was the leading organ of French Canadian moderate reformers in the turbulent politics of the 1840s and was staunchly opposed to the more radical faction of French Canadian politicians who were flirting with the idea of annexing Canada to the United States.

66 For more on the political struggle for democratic reform during this period, a conflict that often took on a distinct ethnic hue, see Éric Bédard, *Les Réformistes. Une génération canadienne-française au milieu du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Montreal: Boréal, 2009).

portrayed the crisis as the product of Catholic ignorance. Public officials tried desperately to keep up with the emergency conditions, building and expanding such infrastructure as fever sheds.<sup>67</sup> In Montreal, public officials responded to demands for heightened quarantine restrictions by insisting that they would do a better job of policing the fever sheds built on the city's southwest periphery to contain the spread of typhus. In Liverpool, meanwhile, the authorities scrambled to open new hospitals and workhouses to shelter the influx of Irish migrants into the city, all the while dealing with the backlash from residents of surrounding neighbourhoods, who were outraged that public officials were putting their lives at risk.<sup>68</sup>

These conflicts, expressed in the local press, in meetings of the hastily appointed boards of health in both cities, and in public meetings attended by hundreds of local residents at a time, helped foster a transnational public sphere of shared and contested medical and scientific knowledge. Public officials and concerned residents cited conflicting opinions with regard to whether or not typhus and other diseases could be transmitted from diseased migrants to members of the broader community living in close proximity. This debate was left unresolved in Montreal. In Liverpool the public placed enough pressure on its Board of Health to initiate the transfer of sick migrants on to hospital ships floating in the River Mersey and, by the end of June, to begin transporting destitute migrants back to Ireland.

As civic elites in Montreal and Liverpool lamented the condition of the migrants arriving on their shores, they drew frequent comparisons between the treatment of Irish famine migrants and that of African slaves in the previous century.<sup>69</sup> The comparison was much more than a rhetorical flourish. It was a means of expressing a collapsing confidence in liberal ideals by stating that these once dynamic and prosperous North Atlantic port cities had regressed to the human brutality of previous centuries. Comparisons were also drawn between the bustling waterfronts of Montreal and Liverpool and the Indian slums of Calcutta, an analogy strengthened by the outbreak of epidemic typhus.<sup>70</sup> This brand of racialized language points to concern that existed in both cities about the ability of

67 AVM, VM 21, Health Committee (City Council of Montreal), Board of Health, July 18, 1847; LRO, Health Committee, General Purposes Sub-Committee, Minute Book, January 1847 – October 1847, March 31, 1847.

68 Debates about how contagious disease like typhus spread were extensive in both cities during this period, especially with regard to the establishment of fever sheds in close proximity to densely populated neighbourhoods. See, for example, the debates about the construction of a new fever shed at Brownlow Hill in Liverpool, a decision vigorously defended by Dr. Duncan, who argued that a properly ventilated facility would not be a danger to local residents (*Liverpool Albion*, June 7, 1847). Numerous petitions against the new fever sheds were printed in the local press, including one by a widow who made her living renting out rooms in a house she owned in the area. She worried that the building of a fever shed in such close proximity to her home would cause her to lose her livelihood by chasing away potential renters. She therefore demanded compensation from City Council (*Liverpool Albion*, June 7, 1847).

69 References to slavery were more commonplace in the Montreal press, possibly because of the intense debate about democracy and citizenship occurring in the midst of the crisis. See *La Minerve*, May 27, August 19, and September 20, 1847.

70 Comparisons to Calcutta were a common rhetorical tool on both sides of the Atlantic. In Montreal it was no doubt a reference to the city's notoriously poor sanitary condition, but there was clearly a racial element, as the comparisons became a shorthand for grappling with the links between public health reform, civilization, and whiteness. See *Montreal Gazette*, July 15, 1847.



these migrants to become productive citizens in the near future. British stereotypes of the Irish were exacerbated by the physical and material hardships they were facing, and the Irish found themselves cast as non-whites in these discussions of migration, a construction that they would spend much of the second half of the nineteenth century struggling to discredit.<sup>71</sup>

After months of being hammered by a public crisis that did not seem to have an end in sight, civic and parish authorities in Liverpool turned to a solution marking a radical break with the principles of restrained liberal governance that had thus far dictated the official response to the events of 1847. By the end of June, as thousands continued to arrive aboard ships from Ireland every week, local officials hastily began to draw up plans to begin sending the most destitute of the migrants living in the city back to Ireland. Under the terms of the subsequent *Poor Law Removal Act*, Irish migrants who presented themselves at the Vestry Office to claim their Poor Law benefits could be forced to board steamboats that would return them to Ireland at public expense.<sup>72</sup> Reports in the local press suggest that thousands of Irish migrants were being returned to their native land each week.<sup>73</sup> The legislation was framed in the language of burden discussed earlier. Removing the most destitute of Irish migrants from Liverpool – those who had not been capable of either finding a source of income or continuing their migration to somewhere that promised greater opportunity – was a way of dumping the expenses associated with the crisis back in the laps of the Irish landlords, who would be forced to provide assistance to the famine migrants once they were back on Irish soil. It therefore was a means of taking the pressure off the parish of Liverpool by reducing the number of destitute migrants from the city's streets, but it was also a means of correcting the fundamental injustice at the heart of the crisis of 1847, which was that Irish landlords had been able to displace rural tenant farmers from their land while simultaneously escaping their obligation to support them under the Poor Law.<sup>74</sup>

News of the decision to expel Irish migrants from Liverpool was met with a mix of fascination and frustration by critics of the colonial administration in Montreal. The news arrived in Canada in the midst of the continued campaign against what many civic elites in Montreal perceived to be the stubborn inaction of the colonial authorities in dealing with the typhus epidemic. They craved the sort of bold, decisive action now being taken by the civic government in Liverpool. *The Pilot*, an English-language Montreal newspaper that was fiercely opposed to the Tory administration, came out strongly in favour of Montreal adopting a similar plan.<sup>75</sup> *La Minerve* published an editorial praising the initiative, lamenting

71 For more on Irish migrants and the politics of race, see Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

72 *Liverpool Mercury*, June 22 and 29, July 2, 1847.

73 It is estimated that about 15,000 Irish immigrants were deported to their country of origin after the *Poor Law Removal Act* was passed in June 1847. By 1854, more than 62,000 had chosen deportation over incarceration under the terms of the Poor Law. See Gallman, *Receiving Erin's Children*, p. 30.

74 *Liverpool Mercury*, June 4, 1847.

75 *The Pilot*, July 13, 1847.

that Liverpool was embarking on a plan that posed considerably more logistical challenges than the modest plan to expand the colony's quarantine facilities being advocated by Montreal's Board of Health, which was being casually tossed aside by the colonial administration.<sup>76</sup>

The famine migration crisis of 1847 did not bring about a dramatic transformation in the way that public officials at the municipal, colonial, or imperial levels of government addressed issues surrounding public health and migration. There were subdued campaigns to improve sanitary restrictions on board ships transporting migrants across the Atlantic. In the case of both Montreal and Liverpool, however, the drive to improve public health would have to be fought in increments into the twentieth century.<sup>77</sup> Still, examining the responses to the events of 1847 is a revealing exercise. It offers valuable insights into how public officials and communities across the North Atlantic world were defining social problems and proposing solutions. While local dynamics were an important component of the debate, these social crises demonstrate how local elites were tapping into transatlantic discussions about how better to assert their authority in turbulent urban settings like Montreal and Liverpool. Harnessing public fears about disease, emigrants, and the failure of public and private institutions that had been trusted to foster order during previous crises, reform-oriented elites were able to muster popular support for new practices of political authority – like the expansion of urban policing, efforts to reform the urban environment, and the application of social science to study the conditions faced by the poor. It is important to note that they did so in a highly contentious atmosphere, in which the tragedies accompanying the famine migration were doing much to exacerbate ethnic, racial, and class-based tensions. In both cities, the famine migration would play an important part in fuelling ethnic tensions that would simmer for decades to come and in cementing these inequalities and conflicts to the city's built spatial environment. For this very reason, then, moments such as this remain a vital way for historians to sharpen our understanding of how power dynamics rooted in local crises and conflicts helped shape the nineteenth century North Atlantic world.

76 *La Minerve*, July 15, 1847.

77 See Robert Gagnon, *Questions d'égouts. Santé publique, infrastructures et urbanisation à Montréal au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Montreal: Boréal, 2006); John Ashton and Howard Seymour, *The New Public Health: The Liverpool Experience* (London: Open University, 1988).