

Suzanne Aubry

Fanette

VOLUME 1

Uptown Conquest

A Novel

Translated from the French by

Martina Branagan

Author's Note

The starting point for this historical saga is a tragic event, *The Great Famine*, caused by the potato blight which forced tens of thousands of Irish into exile in the United States, Australia and Canada in the mid-nineteenth century.

The Quebec region was a vital haven for Irish orphans whose parents died of typhus or cholera in the "coffin ships" that brought them to Grosse Île, where immigrants were quarantined in conditions that are difficult to imagine today.

Although inspired by these historical facts, *Fanette* is a work of fiction. I gave the heroine my ancestral family name, O'Brennan, but all the characters are creations of my imagination, apart from Father Bernard McGauran, Father Elzéar-Alexandre Taschereau and Doctor George Mellis Douglas who really existed and to whom I lend fictional action and dialogue. I invented a newspaper, *L'Aurore de Québec*, for the purposes of my novel; there were actually two newspapers *L'Aurore* and *L'Aurore des Canadas*, which appeared in Montreal between 1820 and 1840. The village of La Chevrotière and the Portelance seigneurie are fictitious. In the interests of credibility, I sometimes refer to people who marked the first half of the nineteenth century: Monsignor Signay, the politicians Louis-Hippolyte La Fontaine and Robert Baldwin, and Monsignor Turgeon, to mention but a few.

Part One

Exile

I

Village of Skibbereen, South of Ireland

May 1847

“A Fhionnuala!”

She turned her head toward the voice and saw that her father was calling her. His large frame stood out against the blue-grey storm-laden sky. Her stomach suddenly knotted up. She was afraid that he would give her more bad news. She could still see the little body of her brother Kevin, wrapped up in a white sheet, his eyes closed and his mouth pale and firm, like the rag doll that belonged to Felicity, the Mayor’s daughter. Her mother held Kevin to her and rocked him, singing a monotonous melody with meaningless words. Her father put his head in his hands, crying without tears, his mouth so wide that she thought at first he was laughing. Afterwards, he came out of the house and made a little box with ill-fitting boards. He placed the box down on the kitchen table and laid the lifeless body of the baby in it, while her mother prayed in silence, her eyes closed in grief.

“A Fhionnuala!”

Putting down the tiny cart she had made with a few branches and dry twigs, she ran toward her father. He was still too far away for her to make out the expression on his face. She stopped for a moment to catch her breath. Fields of potatoes stretched as far as the eye could see. The leaves were blackish and shriveled. Her father had explained to her that the potato crops were decimated by a disease; she no longer remembered the name. This was why she often had a stomach ache, a gnawing pain that never let up. Sometimes, a huge sailboat from England tied up in the port of Skibbereen. All the residents rushed to the quay and jostled with each other to grab the food which the gaunt and dirty dockers barely had time to carry onto dry land. Her father returned to the house once with a black eye. He had been attacked by a neighbour, Mr. Fitzpatrick, over a bag of flour. She found it hard to understand that this

was the same Mr. Fitzpatrick who let her pinch apples from his orchard without raising an eyebrow and gave her sticky cinnamon sweets which he kept in his pocket.

Fionnuala started to run again and got closer and closer to her father. To her great relief, she saw that he was smiling. He took her in his arms and lifted her from the ground. She was small in stature and light as a feather, even for a girl of seven. Her father's grey eyes blended with the sky and his red hair seemed to emblazon his head.

"Conas a tá tú, a chailín? How are you, my girl?"

Her father always spoke to her in Irish, refusing to speak English, the language of the enemy, as he called it, even though he had been forced to learn English at school.

"Tá ocras orm. I'm hungry."

He put her back down on the dusty ground. His face had turned serious.

"Táimid chun turas fada a dhéanamh, a Fhionnuala. We're going to go on a long journey Fionnuala. Ní bheidh ocras ort a thuilleadh. You will never be hungry again."

Fionnuala looked up in awe at this giant with the red hair. Go on a long journey, never be hungry again... Had her father suddenly become a magician like the one she had seen at the village fair, who pulled scarves out of his hat?

A few days beforehand, Ian O'Brennan and his wife, Maureen, had been visited by Thomas Flanagan, an Irish immigration agent who passed himself off as an official representative of the British government. In truth, this little man with a bulging belly and chubby cheeks, who seemed unaffected by the famine, was working for himself and took advantage of his compatriots' misery by selling them hope of a better future. Flanagan settled down at a wobbly wooden table, having first checked to see if the chair was clean before sitting down, and started to speak in English with an affected accent which made Maureen smile to herself. Fionnuala retreated to a corner, chewing on a rag to stave off her hunger. She heard her brothers Arthur and Seán yelling and chasing each other outside. Her eldest sister, Amanda, who had copper red hair and grey eyes like their father, set a cup of steaming tea

down in front of him. Helena, the twin of the dead child, Kevin, slept in a wooden box placed against the wall.

The man spoke quickly. Fionnuala only understood the odd word: voyage, ocean, Canada. Her mother, hands on her round belly, seemed to be hanging onto every word. Her father stared at him intently and then turned toward the window as if he already imagined himself elsewhere, far from Skibbereen, from misery and hunger which had been rampant for months. Flanagan continued to hold forth, describing with grand gestures the comfort of the *Rodena*, the sailing ship that would take them to a better world. The voyage would last no more than three weeks, he said. The food would be plentiful and the berths comfortable. In Canada, lands were vast and rich; they could be obtained for next to nothing. Thousands of their compatriots had undertaken the Atlantic crossing and now lived happy and fulfilled lives.

Silence followed the speech from the immigration agent. His cheeks were flushed as if he had forgotten to breathe between each sentence. Ian glanced at Maureen, who smiled back faintly. Her black hair highlighted the pearly whiteness of her skin; a ray of hope shone from her blue eyes that were underlined by mauve shadows. After a while, Ian turned toward Flanagan and said to him in Irish:

“Cé mhéad? How much?”

Flanagan cracked a saccharine smile.

“Three pounds per traveler.”

Ian made a mental calculation. Three pounds per person, and there were seven of them, without counting the unborn baby. That added up to more than twenty pounds.

“Tá tú as do mbeabhair! You’re mad!”

Maureen placed a hand on her husband’s arm, urging him to remain calm. The agent shrugged his shoulders, unruffled. The total amount was very reasonable, he explained, his lips curled into a smile intended to be reassuring. Ship captains had considerably raised the cost of transport. Places were disappearing as fast as the scarce produce that England shipped to her colony at extravagantly inflated prices. There were only twenty berths left on the *Rodena*,

which could take no more than two hundred and fifty passengers. Sucking her thumb, Fionnuala looked at the immigration agent's mouth which opened and closed like the frogs her brothers caught in the pond behind their house. Ian shook his head, outraged, and got up, pointing out the shabby furniture and empty bread bin. How could they raise such an amount when they did not even have the means to buy a loaf of bread and were more than six months in arrears on the ground rent?

Flanagan chuckled smugly. He explained that the landlords were trapped. With the imposition of the English Poor Laws, each owner was required to subsidize tenants whose annual rent was lower than four pounds. He was convinced that their landlord would be delighted to rid himself of such penniless tenants and repossess their land. Ian looked at him, trying to understand. For the first time, he spoke in halting English:

"You mean... Our landlord would agree to pay for our voyage!"

Flanagan's smile broadened.

"Exactly!"

Ian glanced at his wife, who nodded in agreement. The immigration agent, sensing that he had captured the couple's attention, advised them to pay a visit to their landlord at the earliest opportunity. Their sole choice was to obtain the money for the voyage or stay in Ireland and starve to death.

Flanagan got up, knees cracking. He would return in two days. The passage, plus his ten per cent commission, would have to be paid in one lump sum.

"Ten per cent? What for?" cried Ian.

"My fee. Do you think I work for nothing?" retorted Flanagan, indignant.

In fact, the immigration agent was already guaranteed a percentage by the captain of the *Rodena* for each passenger that he booked, but as a father with five mouths to feed, a maid and a valet to pay, he felt entitled... He took a pipe from his pocket, lit it and left, leaving a swirl of smoke wafting in his wake. The door creaked on its hinges and remained slightly ajar. A ray of

sunshine glimmered on the clay floor and dazzled on the jade pendant that Maureen wore around her neck. She turned toward her husband.

“A Iain, cad a dhéanfaidh tú? Ian, what are you going to do?”

He stared at the ray of light, his face serious. Helena started to whimper. Maureen got up, her hand resting on her abdomen, and headed with heavy steps toward the wooden box. She took the eight-month old infant into her arms and consoled her by whispering sweet words in Irish. Fionnuala watched her father worriedly: he seemed angry and she did not know if they would make this great voyage.

That same day, Ian saddled his horse to visit Bernard Crombie, the English landlord who had bought the lands from his father, Manus O’Brennan. He glowered, thinking of his father. It had been five years to the day since they had uttered a word to each other, a feat considering that they lived just a couple of houses apart. When, by chance, they did come across one another in the street or the general store, they exchanged defiant looks. Ian had never forgiven his father for having sold the family estate to Lord Crombie. The O’Brennan family had lived in Skibbereen for six generations and their lands had always been passed down from father to son. How could Manus have sacrificed the interests of his own children for the benefit of an English lord who did not speak a word of Irish and who, adding insult to injury, was Protestant? Manus had brushed off his son’s arguments, claiming that he was selling his lands at the opportune time; he foresaw that in a few years they would not be worth a shilling. No one, his sons above all, wanted to believe him. Ireland was still bountiful, thanks to potato farming. The easy to cultivate tuber adapted well to the country’s temperate climate and had attracted a good number of immigrants. The Irish population had doubled in the span of forty years, growing from four to eight million. You would have to be disgruntled, or in the depths of despair, to predict the demise of this windfall... But Manus was adamant: “By putting all our eggs in one basket, it will end up bursting” he would say to whomever would listen. Or else: “One day, when I’m six feet under and you receive your share of the inheritance, you will be on your knees to thank me for showing such wisdom!”

While waiting for this day to arrive, Manus turned his four sons against him with a done deed: he went ahead and sold his lands whether they liked it or not. Disbelief was followed by

anger. Their father had gone mad. Their mother, Lorna, had tried to intercede on their behalf but she was a nervous and submissive woman and she had little influence on her husband's decisions. Even Abbot Callaghan, who went to great lengths to visit Manus trying to make him listen to reason, returned empty handed. Poor Abbot Callaghan had quoted an extract from one of the two letters of St. Paul to Timothy: "The father who does not tend to the needs of his own family denies his own faith and becomes worse than an unbeliever." Magnus O'Brennan had listened to the Abbot's appeals without blinking an eye, and then had said:

"Déanann sparán trom croí éatrom."

"A heavy purse makes a light heart", Abbot Callaghan repeated to the four brothers gathered in the presbytery to learn the results of his efforts in pleading their case. The brothers exchanged a sombre look. Either Manus had lost his head or the devil had taken possession of his soul. Why else would he put the lure of profit before the well-being of his own family? That night, the four brothers drowned their pain and anger at the Clover Leaf, the only pub in the area. Upon returning home, Ian tripped and hit his head against a tree in front of the house. He stormed into the barn, seized hold of a hatchet and felled the tree.

Lord Crombie divided his land into little patches which he rented to the immigrants and farmers of Skibbereen. Ian resigned himself to becoming a tenant of land that should have come to him by right. Since the modest profits from the potato crop yields were insufficient to cover the rent, Ian got himself into debt and could no longer make the interest payments. Maureen begged him to ask his father for money to pay off his debts but, blinded by pride and resentment, Ian stubbornly refused. His younger brother, Nathan, had been hired as a sailor on an ocean-going sailing ship and lost his life in a shipwreck. His other two brothers found work as agricultural labourers and earned just about enough to meagerly feed their families. But the real nightmare began in the deadly year 1845 when mildew made its appearance. The disease spread like wildfire and decimated up to one third of the potato crop. The following year, convinced that such misfortune could not befall them a second time, the farmers stubbornly persisted in sowing potatoes again. The losses were even greater, and soon there was nothing left to eat. There was a famine. Manus had been right: putting all their eggs in one basket was ruinous. Small tenants like Ian were the first victims of the blight. More and more people fell by the wayside and died of hunger. Cholera and typhus made their appearance.

Having volunteered to care for the ill, Ian's mother contracted typhoid fever and died in atrocious agony after a few days. Manus did not shed a tear at her interment, not out of indifference, but because he had been right and the fulfillment of his prediction had brought nothing but misery to his family.

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Ian stroked his horse's head. The poor animal was so emaciated that its flanks were visible under the livery. Maureen laid her hand on Ian's.

"Bí go deas leis an Tiarna Crombie. Be nice to Lord Crombie."

Ian turned toward her and smiled at her.

"Ná bí buartha, a chroí! Don't worry, my dear."

He put his foot in the stirrup and mounted. Fionnuala came out of the house and ran to catch up with him.

"A Dhaidí! Daddy!"

When Ian turned to his daughter, he noticed her forehead was wrinkled with worry.

"Cad a tá mí-chearr leat, a chailín? What's wrong, my little girl?"

Fionnuala stopped level with him and tilted her head back to look up at him. He was perched so high that he appeared as huge as King Arthur in her sister Amanda's bedtime stories.

"A Dhaidí, tóg leat mé! Daddy, take me with you!"

He wanted to refuse but Fionnuala looked so earnest that he did not have the heart to do so. He stretched out an arm. She held on tightly and felt herself being whisked up into the air with his amazing strength. Her father was also suffering from deprivation. She often saw him giving away his share of a crust of brown bread or porridge, which Maureen sometimes

managed to buy at the general store after having queued up for hours. Somehow he had maintained his remarkable energy.

Fionnuala landed on the saddle behind her father and clung to his back. The horse set off again. She let herself be lulled by the trotting, the reassuring smell of the hay and sweat that surrounded her in a protective halo and by the sweetness of the May breeze. Her heart leaped for joy and she squealed. Ian started to laugh. They continued on their way for a few miles. The horse's hooves whipped up a fine dust. Arid field followed arid field endlessly until Lord Crombie's house appeared at the brow of a verdant hill. Ian brought his mount to a standstill. It was there, in this immense house built on the backs of the starving Irish, that his future and that of his family would play out.



II

Two years later

Chemin du Roy, Quebec

June 12th 1849

Sitting on the seat of her buggy, Emma Portelance held the reins firmly because of the numerous potholes in which the wheels often stuck. She feared one of the wheels would break. The roads were nearly impassable. *One certainly cannot rely on the roads committee to put them right!* she said to herself, dissatisfied. She was a buxom woman with a round and jovial face, but her dark eyes could see through someone at a glance. Her large feminine-looking hat, trimmed with ribbons, contrasted oddly with the fitted coat she wore while travelling. She was returning home from a weekly visit to her tenant farmer, Isidore Dolbeau, a big fellow whose weather-beaten face and garrulous, belligerent manner remained untamed by age or hard work. He had never stomached that Lord Portelance had bequeathed his domain to a woman, even though she was his eldest daughter. Although his wife repeated to him over and again that the eldest son of the family, which comprised five daughters, was a priest, Mr. Dolbeau would not budge an inch: "Each to his own trade and me to mine", he had the habit of saying about everything. Emma refrained from correcting him: "You do your work and I'll do mine."

Each week Emma travelled to the domain, a few miles from the village of La Chevrotière to discuss with Mr. Dolbeau the buying of equipment, the price of grain, the birthing of an animal, or repairs to be carried out. On each visit, he reminded her that a woman's place was not at the head of a seigneurie. This time, she was there to verify the account books in which each transaction was to be carefully recorded.

“Your father, Sir Portelance, God rest his soul, was wont to say: *If the work was well done, I do not see why I would waste my time doing it a second time!*”

Mrs. Portelance was about to reply dryly, then remembered the advice Eugénie had given her before leaving: “Above all, remain calm! Do not take his comments at face value, no matter how disagreeable he may be. Control yourself. Do not forget that you are the owner.” She took a deep breath and looked squarely at the farmer.

“Mister Dolbeau, I have no intention of doing the work in your stead, I simply want to verify the accounts.”

She added with kindly wit:

“To err is human.”

The farmer grumbled an incomprehensible phrase and went into the house, leaving Emma standing on the veranda, without inviting her in or offering her something to drink. Holding back her exasperation and suddenly feeling the fatigue of the trip, Emma decided to sit down on a rocking chair facing the fields. The sight of the poplars swaying in the June breeze and the air filled with the scent of hay and grass restored her good humour. Her land stretched as far as the river. She was filled with a sort of serenity that resembled happiness. Life could be sweet sometimes, when each of its scattered components suddenly formed a harmonious whole, without conflict, qualms or regrets.

The clicking of Mr. Dolbeau’s shoes on the veranda floor cut short her daydreaming. He was carrying a large ledger in his arms. He gave it to her without so much as a word and set out for the stables, claiming he needed to watch over a mare that was giving birth. Mrs. Portelance resisted making a critical comment and settled the book on her knees. She opened it and started to examine each entry in minute detail. After a while, the door of the house opened with a creak. A slim, bright-eyed woman with a face wrinkled like the bark of a tree came out, a glass in her hand.

“You could do with some refreshment, Ma’am Portelance. It’s nice to be nearing the end of spring; the sun is beating down hard.”

Emma took the glass gratefully.

“Thank you, Madam Dolbeau.”

She sniffed the amber liquid. It was cider, one of the region’s best. She drank a sip of it with pleasure. The two women exchanged a look of mutual support. Then Mrs. Dolbeau went back into the house while Emma resumed examining the ledger. After an hour’s work, failing to find a single error, she had to admit to herself that, in spite of his grouchy character and gruff manners, Mr. Dolbeau was an honest man and her father had had every reason to trust him. The farmer’s sardonic tone of voice made her shudder in spite of herself.

“So, Ma’am Portelance, I wager that you have found plenty of errors?”

Emma did her best to maintain a dignified expression:

“Everything was perfect, Mister Dolbeau.”

The farmer barely suppressed a gloating smirk.

“As the late Sir Portelance, your father, used to say, if the work was well done...”

Mrs. Portelance stood up to cut his lecture short.

“Excuse me, I must leave, I have quite a long journey ahead of me. See you next week.”

“So be it, Ma’am Portelance. Goodbye.”

He touched the rim of his straw hat with the tip of his index finger. Mrs. Portelance gave her empty glass back to his wife, who was standing in the doorway.

“Thank you again, Madam Dolbeau. That helped me swallow the pill...”

The tenant farmer’s wife could not help smiling. Emma Portelance made her way to her buggy. The horse had been tethered to the fence. Sensing Mr. Dolbeau’s scathing stare behind her, she gripped the reins and climbed onto the seat while labouring under the effort. As delicious as it was, Eugénie’s cooking was making her gain weight. She would need an iron

will to resist her sugar pie! She clicked her tongue, shook the reins and the horse took off. She was in a hurry to return home.

