

# A St. Columban Irish epic by Claude Bourguignon

By Kathleen Dunn

Claude Bourguignon is a walking encyclopedia, especially when it comes to the Irish settlement of St. Columban (now known as Saint-Colomban) in the Lower Laurentians near St. Jerome. Much of what he knows is contained in the recently published revised edition of *Saint-Colomban: Une épopée irlandaise au piedmont des Laurentides*. The rest is in his head or in the filing cabinets full of documents and artifacts which he has been gathering since 1978 and storing in his St. Columban home. As a freelance journalist and ethnographer, he is called upon to use that knowledge for a variety of publications and to speak at heritage, cultural and historical gatherings.

In a telephone interview recently, Claude recounted the story of a certain Elizabeth Casey who walked to St. Jerome with a sack of flour on her head to barter for ribbon for her wedding dress. I asked if that was the same Elizabeth Casey who married my great-great grandfather James Grace in 1838. It was. Claude remembers details like that and he remembers family links like mine. With such stories, he has kept our roots alive and nourished countless family trees. Needless to say, he has been a fabulous resource for the committee striving to restore damaged tombstones in the St. Columban cemetery.

Claude has no Irish roots of his own. His interest in all things Irish began with weekends and summer vacations at the family cottage in St. Colomban in the sixties. He then used his first-hand experience of the St. Columban Irish for a project during his student days in ethnology at Laval University in Quebec City. At first it was the architecture that attracted him but it didn't take long for him to expand his interest to include people.

It took him ten years to assemble enough material for the first version of his book which was published by *Éditions d'ici là* in 1988. The new version benefits from another close-to-20 years of research and includes chapters on the geography of the area, the first settlers, local industry, the economy, religious practice, education, the growth and decline of the area, architecture, and modern times.

The book is filled with photographs, some of which are arranged by original lot numbers and corresponding family names. What struck me about these photos, and what makes the book of interest to more than just St. Columban families, is that they remind me of the farms around St. Alphonse de Rodriguez, an Irish settlement in Lanaudière where my mother was born at the turn of the last century and her father and grandmother before her. In fact, Claude sees St. Columban as an "archetype" of Irish settlements throughout Quebec that got their start in the 1820s. So, as much as his book may be about the Keyes and the Brophys and the Skellys and the Purcells of St. Columban, to mention but a few, it is really about all the Irish who came to Canada and their struggle to clear the land and to make a new life for themselves. The poor soil, the inhospitable climate, the poverty, the isolation, all added up to a hard life indeed.

The book is full of details about the growth and decline of the St. Columban Irish settlement. Some readers may look for, and

find, information relating to their own families such as the Phelans who ran the Post Office and the general store for generations, or the Alexander Mackenzies who, according to the 1861 census cited in the book, ran a grist mill, an oatmeal mill, a carding mill, a fulling mill and a saw mill. Others will pick up on more general information such as that



Fergus Keyes and Claude Bourguignon(r) with the first version of Claude's book

collected by Monique Benoit for her 1980 thesis at the Université d'Ottawa. She learned, for example, from poring over the baptism registers from 1831 to 1851, that 46.5% of the parents and/or godparents could write. She comments: "À Saint-Colomban, la paroisse la plus pauvre de la région, mais peuplée d'Irlandais catholiques, le taux d'alphabétisation est deux fois plus élevé qu'à Saint-Eustache." Interestingly, we learn that Father John Falvey, the Irish-born parish priest who ministered from 1840 to 1879, shared his love of reading by running a lending library from the presbytery.

When the Irish first responded to Father Patrick Phelan's invitation to settle the Sulpician-owned land, the government supplied them with farm implements such as ploughs, scythes, picks and spades as well as blankets and utensils for setting up house. Of course, they had to build their houses. Subsistence farming seems to have become the order of the day and, just like in Ireland, the soil was best suited to growing potatoes. The Irish preferred open hearths for cooking and heating. When they eventually could afford stoves such as their French-Canadian neighbours had, the Irish found their houses to be over-heated. Each family had a woodlot and was required to provide a half-cord of wood to heat the parish church and presbytery which they had helped to build.

It would appear that the Irish started to abandon their farms after two generations on the land to take advantage of more lucrative opportunities in Montreal, Ontario and the United States. From 1861 on, there was a steady decline in the number of families from a peak of 896 to 676 in 1871, 590 in 1881, 395 in 1891, to 324 in 1901, a phenomenon which Claude says was fairly common throughout the Laurentians at that time. Gradually Eastern Europeans moved in, then cottagers, and now St. Colomban has been completely transformed into a bedroom community of over 8,000.

Claude writes that his objective in compiling this publication was to make it "un instrument de sensibilisation à la richesse de notre patrimoine collectif." I believe he succeeded. There are no immediate plans to translate the book into English, unfortunately. Copies are \$39 plus postage through him at 1-(450) 438-8077 or [claude.bourguignon@videotron.ca](mailto:claude.bourguignon@videotron.ca). As an incentive, he will e-mail buyers a 48-page listing of the original settlers by lot number.

