



# spring

■ Mitts and toques will soon be mere words — but good Canadian words, B8

■ Spring needs a new start date, B10

But it's a deadly pane for birds, B4-5

## THE CITIZEN'S WEEKLY

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Crumbling gravestones are all that's left of early Irish settlers in a tiny Quebec town. Now their descendants have turned to a francophone historian to help piece together the headstones — and the history

BY JANICE KENNEDY

The bishop was not pleased. It was October 1840, and, from the Montreal diocesan office he had moved into just six months earlier, Ignace Bourget was being forced to deal with the continuing problem of Father William Dolan and the distant Laurentian parish of St. Columban.

Father Dolan had been spotted socializing around the Irish settlement, as well as neighbouring Ste. Scholastique, and Bourget wanted to get a message to him.

"If this is true," he wrote in French to Father Boivin of Ste. Scholastique, "encourage him to come back here."

Father Dolan, the former pastor of St. Columban's, had been relieved of his duties by the good bishop's predecessor not long before, after just a year's stint. The reason, apparently, was Father Dolan's distinctly non-spiritual fondness for spirits. But the priest had also grown fond of his parishioners in his brief time there, fellow Irishmen, and he kept turning up in the community to raise a glass with them.

He must leave, the bishop warned, "so that his stay in the St. Columban area does not become the subject of cursing by the Faithful."

Ah, ces Irlandais, you can imagine Bishop Bourget and his fellow French Canadian cleric's thinking. What a problematic bunch.

And what a hardy, hard-working, great-bearded and determined bunch to boot.

The village of St. Columban sits just north of Montreal, tucked into the hilly terrain where the Laurentians begin and the Shield offers farmers its thin, stony soil like a dare. These days, there are more semi-suburban homes in the area than farmhouses, and the forest has reclaimed many of the poor fields of an earlier time. The region, which borders the former Mirabel airport site, is almost entirely French-speaking these days, the old Irish name of "St. Columban" supplanted by the current "St. Columban."

But at one time it was a force of Celtic demography to be reckoned with. Its roots now all but forgotten, St. Columban was for nearly a century a vibrant Irish community, one of Canada's earliest. It faded away eventually only because it sent a steady supply of its sons and daughters to Montreal, Ottawa and the northeastern United States, where they became part of the new communities they enriched.

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A statue of St. Patrick in St. Columban church is a vestige of the Quebec community's Irish roots.

# The resurrection of St. Columban