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Bringing the graveyard back to life is key to restoring

Mouldering memories

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Few people today remember St. Columban, Canadians of Irish background honour their roots in immigration sites in Atlantic Canada, in Quebec City and Montreal, in the Heterborough area, in the Ottawa Valley, but they forget St. Columban, which preceded many of the immigration waves that landed in these other places.

Native Ottawans with names like Whelan, Casey, Blanchfield and O'Connor may not even know of the small Laurentian community that their Irish ancestors settled, and from which the sons and daughters of those ancestors moved westward.

Outside some descendants, in fact, few people today have even heard of St. Columban.

But a small group — two dozen people fuelled by enthusiasm and a passion for the legacies of the past — is determined to change that. Montreal and Ottawa descendants, mostly of early St. Columban settlers, they have launched an initiative to preserve the memory, and some moving physical reminders, of their ancestors and this important piece of Canadian heritage.

There is no group name other than the one they've given to their primary effort, the recently launched "St. Columban Cemetery Restoration Project." That initiative grew out of a trip to St. Columban last fall by a number of these descendants.

It started when Fergus Keyes, a 27-year-old Montrealer, inherited a slew of genealogical papers from his mother, originally an O'Connor from Ottawa. He decided to start up an Internet site devoted to St. Columban, from which his paternal antecedents had relocated to Montreal a couple of generations earlier. Response to the site came in from numerous St. Columban descendants, and a trip to the ancestral home, and its memorial cemetery, was arranged last October.

"We had heard that some of the tombstones had fallen down, and some were broken, so we decided to see if we could find them and do something about them."

Claude Bourgoignon joined the group. Bourgoignon is the local historian who has been the keeper of the Irish name when no one even knew a flame existed. A celebrant of St. Columban and author of the 1988

book, *Saint-Columban: Une épopée irlandaise* ("St. Columban: An Irish Epic"), Bourgoignon is the go-to source for all things St. Columban. His book, available in French only, will appear in a new edition next month. And as in the original, Bourgoignon will weave his own text through assembled archival pictures, documents and correspondence to produce a breathtakingly comprehensive picture of the little community — from father Dolan's battle with the bottle to the hardships suffered by the suppressed Irish settlers during their first Laurentian winter.

Having the French-speaking Bourgoignon join the little group of St. Columban Irish descendants, in other words, was the most logical thing in the world.

Someone had heard that some of the tombstones — the ones that weren't just broken and disintegrated in the little cemetery — had actually been removed and tossed in the woods behind the church, nowhere near the resting places of the people they memorialized.

With Bourgoignon's help they located a number of them. Shocked at the sight of so many discarded memorials to their ancestors — broken and scattered about the brush like debris — they gathered them and laid them out. Then they took pictures of them and covered them until they could return in the spring and see about repairing them and, where possible, restoring them to their proper sites in the cemetery.

Other missing stones they knew would remain missing — gravestones, for example, that were rumoured to have been given away and used by people as patio stones.

The group members were upset, says Keyes. "We kept thinking, all these early Irish immigrants — the very earliest wave of them, people with descendants in Montreal, Ottawa, Toronto, the northeastern U.S. — all these Irish pioneers who contributed so much ..."

They basically told us they have no interest in it: too bad, lots of cemeteries in

Canada have been destroyed, tough luck."

Which, to Irish sensibilities, sounds more like a challenge than anything else.

"So we decided to set up our own thing — raise some funding, do the repairs ourselves."

That is how the St. Columban Cemetery Restoration Project was born last fall. Since that time, group members have raised more than 12,000 of the 155,000 they think will be necessary for the whole enterprise. Their cause has been endorsed by Montreal's venerable St. Patrick's Society, which is helping them collect their tax-deductible donations. They have mapped out the 1833 cemetery, established even before the settlement's permanent church, and started assembling the family histories of the people buried there. They have started planning tombstone restoration, the creation of a permanent memorial for those whose original markers have disappeared forever, and the launch of a virtual online cemetery index.

And today in Montreal, at the St. Patrick's Parade that has been marching through the city's streets since 1824, they will carry a banner that proclaims their roots and their project, part of the awareness campaign meant to accompany all of the above.

The group, in short, plans to do more than restore broken stones. It wants to bring the lives of St. Columban et al. back to life. Its memory should be kept alive.

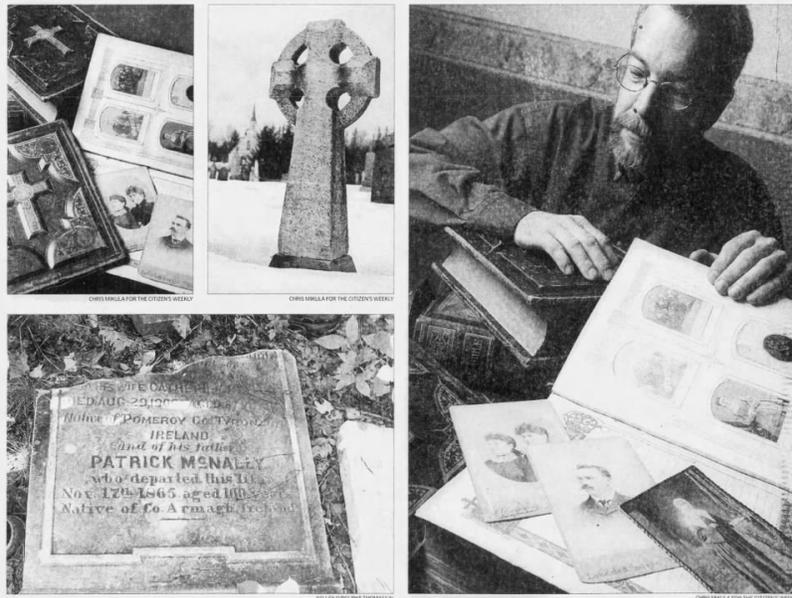
"We were upset that St. Columban, which is one of the very earliest Irish parishes, right up there with St. Patrick's, just disappeared," says Keyes. "We feel strongly that the memory of it as a community should be preserved."

Today, St. Columban's church — *église Saint-Columban*, actually — occupies the same site it has for the past 271 years, near the top of a hill and by the crossroads. It is just the prominence of the place that is different.

The paint-chipped steeple looks down on a *dépanneur* across the road advertising "olive, vin et Vidéos." And it is spiritual home these days to only a smattering of people. The area may harbour 2,000 families, says parish administrator Beatrice Daoust, but on a recent Sunday morning at the church's only mass, the faithful in the pews numbered a mere 60 to 70 people.

Daoust, who grew up in the Montreal neighbourhood of Verdun where there is a strong Irish presence, has been with St. Columban parish since 1987. She says there is a definite awareness of the parish's Irish roots. One of the church's recent stained glass windows, installed in 1993, depicts both St. Columban, a sixth-century Irish monk, and St. Patrick. The church has a statue in scintillating green of Ireland's patron saint, which it festoons each year at this time with a glittering shamrock garland of even more scintillating green.

Today there will be a special mass to celebrate the feast of St. Patrick (which officially fell on Fri-



Claude Bourgoignon used old family Bibles, photo albums and gravestones to research the history of the tiny Irish settlement near today's Mirabel airport.



St. Columban Church, circa 1890s, still stands today.

Remembering St. Columban's colourful characters

Montrealer Kelley O'Rourke-Thomson, a St. Columban descendant who is part of the gravestone restoration project, has made fascinating discoveries about the people who lived in the tiny community more than a century ago.

From the broken gravestones alone, with their carved morsels of family history, she has pieced together small biographies. Then, by matching the dates and information on the stones with entries in the parish register, especially causes of death, she has had glimpses into all kinds of lives, suggesting moments from the community narrative:

JAMES BRACKEN, DIED 1863

We know, for instance, that James Bracken, probably known as Jim or Jimmy — died in 1863 at the age of 26, and that he was a "labourer of Montreal." As a young husband, he had likely left St. Columban with his wife and small daughter (whose names are on the gravestone) to find work in the bustling metropolis. But he died "suddenly by the visitation of God," which is a puzzle, and his poor wife Mary then had to bury their daughter not three months later. The child was two years and nine months when she was laid to rest next to her father in St. Columban's cemetery.

BRIDGET MEARA, DIED 1877

We know that Bridget Meara, born in Tipperary, died of "debility" or general infirmity, at the age of 75 in 1877. Mary Dwyer Walsh died of apoplexy, or stroke, in 1881, having been born in County Wexford 63 years earlier.

GEORGE WILLIAMS, DIED 1898

By researching specific details of the day O'Rourke-Thomson was also able to learn other interesting things. George Williams, for instance, died May 24, 1898, of "Paris Green poisoning," which he had absorbed the day before. "Paris Green was a compound that was used as a pigment in