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the memory of one of Canada's earliest Irish settlements

day) and cake afterward. But it will likely be a sedate affair.

The unruly ghosts of a past that was boisterous, tough and proud — those ghosts are long gone.

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They were a resilient lot, those Irish pioneers of St. Columban, accustomed to fighting through the poverty they had known in their homeland and surviving in the face of terrible odds. But they were also very different from the *canadiens* whose neighbours they had become. Despite sharing the same Catholic religion, many of the *canadien* natives found the arrival of these Irish newcomers unsettling.

Ten years before the Father Dolan difficulties, just before the church at St. Columban had been built and before the Montreal diocese could send Irish priests out into the Laurentian wilderness to minister to them, a Father Naud had been charged with the duty. He found much not to like.

He did not understand their strange ways. He hated the crude and unadorned chapel they had erected. He was uncomfortable with their poverty. And he decried what he saw as their less than perfect religious formation.

A lot of them had not yet made their First Communion, he wrote to his bishop in Montreal, and when he tried to gather them all together for a couple of days' instruction in nearby Ste. Scholastique, there were problems. The youngsters would have to stay there overnight, but no *canadien*, he wrote in French, "wishes to provide lodging to these children c.Vered in vermin."

As for the confessions made by the adults in the community, they were a nightmare. Made in haste and lacking detail, he wrote (replicating the language he regularly heard), "*confessions à la mode irlandaise*" consisted mostly of "I cursit, I sworn, I got in a passion."

Ah, ces irlandais.

The first Irishman to be deeded land in the area, which had been owned by the Sulpician priests, was James Murphy, at the end of 1821. The following year, the Irish started arriving in a flow, many of them farmers who had left poor economic conditions at home. Freshly arrived in Montreal, they learned about the new settlement 40 miles away and headed there to begin farming typically seigneurial lots, long rectangles roughly 175 metres wide by 1.8 kilometres long.

Pictures, documents, correspondence and stories paint a colourful picture of the little community. It's all there — from the battle with the bottle waged by Father Dolan, shown here, to the hardships suffered by the unprepared Irish settlers during their first Laurentian winter

By 1835, there were enough of them there, 100 families, that Church officials in Montreal acceded to requests for a permanent parish church, established by the Irish-born Father Patrick Phelan. (Phelan subsequently became bishop of Kingston and, with responsibility for Bytown, was the man responsible for bringing Elisabeth Bruyère to this area.)

It was never a rich parish, although it had its pride and its priorities. Church records show, for instance, that a John Kennedy was paid $20 a year in 1840 to sing during mass. And St. Columban's church always met its financial and housing obligations to its pastors, especially the beloved Father John Falvey, a Limerick-born priest who served the community for more than 40 years. (There was a two-year hiatus when he was sent to minister to Irish navvies building the Lachine Canal. That followed an 1843 incident, during the first major strike in Canadian history, in which protesting Irish workers were fired upon by British soldiers and killed.) Father Falvey's door was always unlocked, it was said, and he kept a library in his home for anyone who wanted to borrow a book.

His grave, which remains undisturbed in the cemetery, is marked with a Celtic cross and the inscription, "To the memory of Rev. John FALVEY by his grateful Parishioners."

Those parishioners were a feisty lot, too. Around 1850, when there were 200 Irish Catholic families in the settlement, the traditional animosity between Irish Catholics and Irish Protestants was at its customary fever pitch. One July, a fracas broke out between St. Columban's residents and Protestants from neighbouring communities celebrating the "Glorious Twelfth." Family oral tradition has it that the Protestants marched on the tiny white church and smeared its sides with their excrement, leaving a note that promised they would return to burn it down. For the next several weeks, St. Columban's parishioners armed themselves and took turns keeping watch, although the threat, like all such fevered threats, eventually evaporated.

The community was never rich, either. Poor farming conditions and large families meant that most young people had to move away eventually to find work. This they did in booming Montreal, in Ottawa and along the Ottawa River, with its rich logging opportunities.

St. Columban people made their mark, too. The late Supreme Court justice Emmett Hall was a native. So was Quebec justice Paul Casey. Numerous lawyers, teachers and priests hailed from the little community, and at least two bishops have been among the descendants, including the late John Behan of Ottawa.

The gravestones at St. Columban, whether tossed aside or still in the cemetery, are filled with narrative. Keyes can find the stones of the first Canadians in his own family, great-great-grandparents Patrick and Honora, late of Ireland. But he also discovered a previously unknown item of personal history in the stone memorializing the family of his great-grandmother, Bridget Ryan. It is sacred to the memory of her parents, sister, brother James and brother Richard — "poor Richard who sacrificed his precious life in the American War on the 28 of May 1862 aged 23 yrs. Though not here in body is here in spirit."

"You see this," says Keyes, "and you want to know more — who this Richard was, why he went to fight in the Civil War, where he got killed."

Broken or defiantly standing, every stone tells a story.

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If Fergus Keyes is the catalyst, spokesman and chief organizer for the St. Columban restoration group, Claude Bourguignon is its anchor and resource centre.

The 48-year-old historian and author, who studied at Laval University, has been living in St. Columban most of his life — and poking around its roots and assembling its history for almost 30 years.

The study in his lovely log home is lined on one side with books, and on the other, with filing cabinets. The bookshelves are crammed with works, in English and French, on Irish history, the Irish language, the ancient Celts, Irish immigration and Canadian settlement (including Joan Finnigan's collections of Ottawa Valley oral history), even early Irish ironworking. A dozen deep metal drawers hold scrupulously filed legal documents, maps, surveys, deeds, pictures and individual folders on every family from the area.

"Anyone who's ever done any family research in St. Columban will bump up against him," says Keyes. It was Bourguignon, in fact, who solved one of Keyes's own genealogical riddles.

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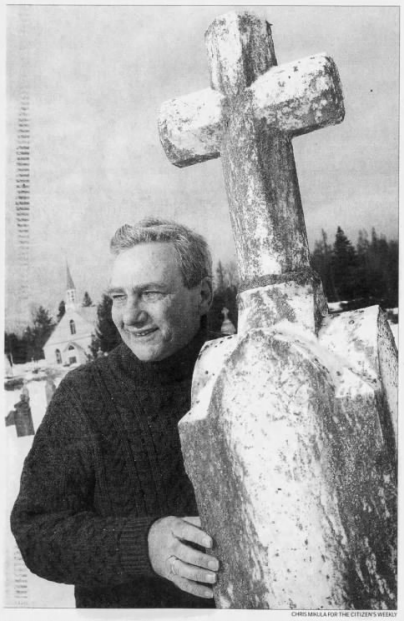

CHRIS MIKULA FOR THE CITIZEN'S WEEKLY

JANICE KENNEDY FOR THE CITIZEN'S WEEKLY

JANICE KENNEDY FOR THE CITIZEN'S WEEKLY

Montrealer Fergus Keyes launched the restoration project at St. Columban with a group of other determined family historians after trying to trace his own roots there.

paints and wallpaper," she says. "He must have been working on something with it and — maybe he had a cut — absorbed it. Apparently, it's an excruciating death."

DIPTHERIA VICTIMS, 1885-1886

O'Rourke-Thomassin discovered as well the heartbreak and fear that must have swept through the community during epidemic outbreaks.

When diphtheria hit St. Columban in the summer of 1885, three children from the same family — aged five, three and 13 months — died within four days of each other. The following January, in just over a week, another family lost its four-year-old, three-year-old and one-year-old.

NOTES FROM THE PASTOR

A wealth of information turned up in parish register notations made by different pastors. One commented that someone was a "miser." The death of another was attributed to "incontinence of wine."

But there were positive observations as well. In the late 19th century, when Curé Forget was recording things, he wrote glowingly of one "Berthe Phelan" who "was born a very special girl," a gifted child.

Her father was special, too, a native of St. Columban who studied at McGill University, graduating from there in medicine in 1865. Dr. Cornelius Phelan, nephew of the bishop who had established the community's church in 1835, went on to set up a successful medical practice in Waterloo, Que. According to an account found in *Pioneer English Catholics in the Eastern Townships* by Rev. T. J. Walsh, Phelan was the town's leading physician.

Janice Kennedy

Two St. Columban women chat outside the town's post office in this early 1900s photograph.

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