

Irishness leaves its mark on Ottawa



Chris Mikula for THE CITIZEN'S WEEKLY
Claude Bourguignon and Fergus Keyes say it's important the community of St. Columban not forget its roots: 'The Irish were big contributors.'

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"I was never sure if my great-great-grandfather was from Kilkenny or Tipperary. So Claude went through his extensive files and came up with the original document from 1828 that transferred the land to him. And it said, 'Patrick Keyes, late of Kilkenny.' So now I know."

Researching the history of St. Columban has been a long and, frankly, lonely exploration for Bourguignon, and he's pleased by recent developments.

"It was very nice," he says with a careful show of scholarly understatement, "to see the gang of all these descendants."

It was almost inevitable that their ancestors' history would get buried, he says. "St. Columban is a very, very small place. In 1966, there were just 300 people" — very few of them connected to the community's Irish legacy. And while the population has grown in recent decades thanks to its proximity to Mirabel, St. Jerome and Montreal, the new residents have no ties at all to earlier Irish times.

So it has been up to Bourguignon to tend the flame. He may have no direct Irish lineage, but, he suggests, his attraction to St. Columban's early character is entirely natural.

"I have a great affinity with the Irish because of the Celtic connection," he says, referring to the ties between the ancient Celts of Ireland and those of Gaul, part of which became France. As a young man, he couldn't get enough of all things Irish, especially traditional folk music.

These days, his meticulous energies are poured into telling the story of St. Columban's Irishness. The dedication in his book, translated, reads: "In homage to the valiant Irish pioneers of St. Columban and to their descendants, for the courage shown in their quest for a new land."

Says Keyes, "He's really excited about everything we're doing. I think

it's because for 20, 25 years he's been the sole custodian of St. Columban's Irish heritage. Even though he isn't related to it, and his English isn't fluent, he somehow decided that the issue was important. He's always talked to us and given us information, but now that we're organized, he thinks this is terrific."

For good reason. The people who have assembled around Keyes (a group to which Bourguignon now belongs) and the people who have been in touch with him are enthusiasts with an impressive zeal for discovering the past. Kelley O'Rourke-Thomassin, a Montrealer, has mapped out the cemetery and undertaken all kinds of sound historical detective work to uncover intriguing aspects of life and death in St. Columban.

Ottawa's Jeff Legault — a descendant of Thomas Whelan and Mary O'Neil, who emigrated from Ireland in the 1820s to live and die in St. Columban — has conducted genealogical research that shows his family's ties with that tiny Laurentian community. It was Legault's grandfather, John Joseph Patrick Whelan, who started the Whelan funeral home business in Ottawa.

In fact, the funeral homes run for years by Kellys and McEvoy's were also founded by St. Columban descendants. "Between the McEvoy's, Kellys and Whelans, all of whom were involved in the funeral home business in Ottawa," says Al Lewis, "St. Columban's alumni probably buried about a third of Ottawa's population since the 1920s."

Lewis, creator of "Bytown or Bust," the extensive website dedicated to Ottawa history, has tracked a number of

names from St. Columban to the Ottawa area, including early canal workers between 1826 and 1832, and farmers who eventually settled on wilderness farmland in Gloucester and Osgoode Townships.

All kinds of people who are not formally part of the group have contributed to it through the sheer force of their passion for the past. One former Montrealer now living in Mississauga, Sheila Hennessy Brandl, is painstakingly copying out every birth, marriage and funeral entry from registers in Montreal's predominantly Irish parishes, getting them digitized through the Quebec Family History Society. This has provided the St. Columban group with invaluable evidence of their antecedents' movements.

She does it, says Keyes, marvelling, for the pure love of it. "She's out there saving Irish heritage, and nobody even knows about her."

For such people, history is clearly not a collection of irrelevant documentation, dry, dusty and dreary. It is the vibrancy of people, with all their joys, challenges and bittersweet sorrows. It is a sense of belonging, an instinct for the shared journey. It is a recognition of enduring contributions.

"It's an important issue, especially in Quebec," says Keyes. "As the English-speaking community dwindles, people just forget. But the Irish were big contributors to Quebec, at all levels of government and professions and business. It's important to remind people of that."

"We're letting everyone know: listen, we didn't get off the boat yesterday. We've been here a long time. We've been contributing for 200 years. We don't want people to forget that."

Keyes and his group will do everything they can to ensure that that doesn't happen.

Ah, *ces irlandais*. Broken stones will be mended, memories will be replanted, indomitable spirit will be honoured in renewed appreciation.

The message will reappear, etched with pride. And heritage, once again, will be carved deeply into stone.

Janice Kennedy is a senior writer at the Citizen.

To know more

For more information on St. Columban and the gravestone restoration project, go to www.stcolumban-irish.com