

THE IRISH SETTLEMENT OF ST. COLUMBAN

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At the foothills of the internationally famous Laurentian Mountains, located some forty miles north of Montreal, lies the Irish settlement of St.Columban. This municipality marks one of the small centers in Quebec established by the people from the Emerald Isle. The subject of this article deals with the Irish emigration to Canada in the early nineteenth century, the first Irish parish in Montreal, a sketch of Most Reverend Bishop Phelan, D.D., the pioneers of St.Columban, the foundation of their parish with its growth and decline, and finally, a picture of the community as it is today.

The Irish who emigrated to Canada around 1823 were mainly farmers who had been ruined by the fall in price of produce resulting from the slump following the Napoleonic Wars. There was a return to pasture land causing the eviction of the tenants-at-will. The general depression of the times in the British Isles owing to the transition from hand labour to machinery put labourers out of employment which was already large and increasing fast. Previously, in Ireland, there was a partial famine in 1817 and another in 1822, due to the failure of potatoes, which was the chief subsistence of the Irish peasants. Religious discontent, bad harvests, and disease added to the unrest. The miseries of these good people were emphasized by rents, tithes, and leases. In contrast, by emigrating to Canada with its vast acres of land, the Irish were removed from distress and want, and were given the opportunity for independence and happiness.

The first mention of the Irish in Montreal was in 1817. This small group of people used to attend Mass at the French-speaking Bonsecours Church. Reverend Father Richards Jackson, a member of the Gentlemen of St.Sulpice, was an assistant at this church and noticed the Irish faces among the congregation. This zealous priest became their shepherd. He opened a school for their children in 1824, in the old Recollect Convent on Notre Dame Street, near McGill Street. The next year Father Jackson restored the old Recollect Church which had fallen into disuse and which had been used as a barracks. This building became the original church of the Irish. In 1829, Reverend Father Phelan was named pastor of the Irish parish, and in both that year and in 1834, it was found necessary to enlarge the Recollect Church due to the increase of Irish immigrants.

As Reverend Father Phelan was the founder of the settlement and parish of St.Columban, it is fitting and proper at this time to give a brief account of his history. Patrick Phelan was born in 1795 at Ballyraggot, in the diocese of Ossory, County of Kilkenny, Ireland. He emigrated to Boston, U.S.A. while he was young. Choosing the sacred priesthood as his true vocation, he was sent by his Bishop, Msgr. De Chevrics, to the Grand Seminary in Montreal to study theology. Some years later, in 1822, Father Phelan entered the

Society of the Gentlemen of St.Sulpice, and he was the first priest ordained by Msgr. Lartigue in 1825. After his ordination, the Superior of Montreal asked for and received permission from Msgr. de Chevrics at Boston to allow the newly ordained priest to remain in Montreal, as a Sulpician, to administer to the Irish Catholics. As previously mentioned, Father Phelan was pastor of the Church of the Recollects from 1829-43. He was consecrated a Bishop in 1843 at the historic Notre Dame Church in Montreal. Bytown, now called Ottawa, was under his jurisdiction from 1843-47. Most Rev. Bishop Phelan was named Coadjutor to Msgr. Gaulin of Kingston, and in 1852 was named Administrator. In 1857 he became Titular Bishop and it was during his administration that the Cathedral was built. The beloved Bishop Phelan is buried in the Cathedral in Kingston, Province of Ontario, Canada.

After Father Phelan was ordained a priest in 1825, he was interested in establishing a township and surrounding settlement in the vicinity of Montreal, where Irish immigrants of the farming class could be placed after their arrival in Montreal. He had in view the people of his native county Kilkenny, as well as those of Carlow, Kildare, Offaly, Laoighia and Tipperary.

As the northern part of the County of Two Mountains was still unsettled, and as it was a seigniory of the Gentlemen of St. Sulpice, Father Phelan directed the voluntary immigrants to this section of the county which became the municipality and parish of St.Columban. This district was shaped in the form of a triangle with the North River as its base, and the County of D'Argenteuil on the west, and the County of Terrebonne on the east.

The first colonists probably traveled by stagecoach, which went at the rate of six miles an hour. Leaving Montreal they likely passed through the villages of Ste. Therese, St. Augustin, Ste. Monique to Ste. Scholastique. From there the pioneers took a horse wagon to the North River, which they crossed by means of a raft.

At first the early settlers built shanties for their dwellings, which were later replaced by sturdy log-houses made from red cedar and with pointed roofs. The government supplied the colonists with farm implements, such as: ploughs, scythes, picks, spades, etc. They were also given blankets and utensils for setting up house. A vegetable garden was planted to help food needs for the family. For heating purposes, fireplaces fed by logs were used, while for lighting convenience, candles and lanterns were used. The immigrants brought in for themselves machine-made clothes which they had to make last as long as possible. Then, when they required replacement, clothing was mainly homemade.

The first colonists went to mass and made their Easter Duty at Ste. Scholastique which was situated about nine miles south of the settlement of St. Columban. If the weather was

fine, they walked the whole distance through the woods. When the weather was inclement, they were accustomed to come to the crossroads located near the site of the present church of St. Columban. The pioneers recited prayers at a wayside cross which was created there. A chapel was built near this cross in 1835, but for many years after its construction, the old folks would say: "to go to the cross" instead of: "to go to church". The first school in the settlement was in a part of the chapel. When the chapel was repaired, a separate building was built for the school, and the original classroom became the sacristy of the chapel.

From 1825 to 1835, the number of families in the settlement increased, and in the latter year there were about one hundred. With Reverend Father Etienne Blyth, as resident parish priest, and with the opening of the first school, as mentioned above, around 1843, the settlement and parish grew rapidly, and towards 1850 there were two hundred families and at least three schools.

The hardships of pioneer days were very severe and more so in and around St. Columban. A part of the soil was mountainous and composed of a mass of granite rock almost destitute of vegetation. As it had done elsewhere, Irish energy produced crops in spite of the rather barren land, and in face of almost insurmountable obstacles. Some elements of progress were made which assured the Irish people at Saint Columban a modest comfort, the fruits of constant work and the practice of economy. They had not yet learned the value of contour plowing, or the rotation of crops, or the use of fertilizers. Although the government had spent money to improve the roads, the communication system in the early days was still in a pitiable state. From the first concession of St. Columban to Riviere a Gagnon, the road was literally covered with stones and pebbles. In the last concession, the roads were in a better state for transportation.

One now comes to the founding of the parish at St.Columban. On October 14, 1835, the parish priest of the Recollect Church in Montreal, Rev. Father Phelan, and the parish priest of Ste.Scholastique, Rev. Father Vallee, convened a meeting at the chapel of St.Columban which had already been built, for the purpose of electing trustees for the administration of the temporalities of the said chapel. It was resolved that Rev. Father Phelan be appointed President, and three persons be named from each Cote, namely, Cotes St.Paul, St.Patrick, St.Nichols, St.George and North River. For Cote St.Paul the persons elected were: John Phelan, Richard Blansfield and James Conway. For Cote St.Patrick: Capt. Phelan, John O'Neill and William McGrath. For Cote St.Nicholas: Thomas McKenna, Felix Murphy and James Madden. For Cote St. George: Patrick Ryan, Philip Kennedy and Hugh Madden, and for North River: Captain Sexton, Richard Power and John Ryan. The following persons were unanimously appointed church wardens – in – chief: 1st, John Phelan; 2nd Capt. D. Phelan, and 3rd, John Ryan. This election was agreed upon and approved by the President, Rev. Father Phelan, and it was witnessed by Rev. Father Vallee of Ste. Scholastique. A short time after Rev. Father

Etienne Blyth arrived in St. Columban. He subsequently became the first parish priest at St. Jerome. Rev. Father Dolan succeeded him and was cure for 1838-40. For the next forty-five years, Rev. Father Falvey was the pastor at St. Columban.

From the admirable sketch on St.Columban written by Most Reverend Lawrence Whelan, D.D., present Auxiliary Bishop of Montreal, one is indebted for the history of the parish and settlement up to 1935. St.Columban developed and reached its zenith during the pastorship of Rev. Father Falvey who spent forty-five years among the Irish. He was born in Limerick, Ireland, in 1797, and came to the Province of Quebec as a youth. After his ordination he did parish work for a few months at two other towns in Quebec, namely, Sorel and Valleyfield. In 1840, he was chosen by Most Reverend Bishop Lartigue to direct the Irish people, both in their spiritual as well as their temporal matters. During his long pastorate this saintly priest was their shepherd, their lawyer, their teacher and benefactor. Father Falvey kept up the Irish tradition of saying the Angelus on hearing the ringing of the church bell; the custom of reciting the rosary daily; the ever faithful attendance at Sunday Mass; the great devotion which the Irish have for the Mother of God. He enrolled the young women in the Children of Mary and the school children in the Association of the Holy Childhood. Knowing the value of reading, he collected a library in his presbytery for the benefit of his parishioners, and these books included religious as well as profane ones. Father Falvey also improved the industrial capacity of the settlement by having more sawmills built, and these in turn not only enabled him to erect a bigger and better church, but also permitted the settlers to make more substantial homes. He retired in 1879 but continued to live with the new pastor of St.Columban's. Father Falvey wished to remain where he had laboured most of his life among the Irish people whom he loved so much. He died in 1885 and is buried in the St.Columban cemetery.

Associated with Father Falvey in the teaching of the children of the parish was Reverend Sister St.Patrick. From an obituary published in a Montreal newspaper of 1905 called, "The True Witness", a great tribute was paid to this devoted religious. Sister Mary St.Patrick was born in Kilkenny, Ireland, and was the daughter of John and Mary Phelan who emigrated to Canada in 1830, and settled in St.Columban. As a girl of twelve years of age, she entered the Congregation of Notre Dame, but met with a painful accident within the convent, which resulted in the dislocation of her ankle. This injury caused her to return to her beloved parish of St.Columban. Her illustrious uncle, Most Reverend Bishop Phelan, hearing of the accident paid a visit to the settlement, and during his stay the dislocated ankle of reverend Sister Mary St.Patrick was restored to its former strength and vigor. By special privilege granted to her by Bishop Phelan, the reverend sister was permitted to pronounce her religious vows under her father's roof, and to live her religious life in her aged parents' household. She looked after the altar and sanctuary of the church; she cared for the sick of the parish; she taught catechism to the children. Like Father Falvey, she spent her whole life in St.Columban, and contributed her talents and

energy to the cause of the beloved people of St.Columban. She died in 1905 and is buried in the parish cemetery.

At this period in the history of St.Columban, the people worked at farming, the cutting of wood for fuel, lumbering, the potash industry and the cut-stone business. During the crop season some of the men hired out to assist established farmers, while during the winter the young men went to Gatineau and Grenville on the Ottawa River to work in the logging industry.

In addition to their vegetable garden, their food supply was augmented by picking wild berries, and gathering apples and plums from trees which they had planted on their farms. Syrup was obtained from the maple trees. Nearby woods provided game for hunting and streams flowing through the district supplied fish. The settlers used their farm products to barter for other needed commodities at the villages of St.Jerome and Ste.Scholastique.

Sheep provided wool and by means of hand-looms, clothing was made. Socks and sweaters were knitted. Footwear was of the moccasin type.

The people of St.Columban read the Montreal newspapers of the day such as: The True Witness, The Montreal Gazette, The Montreal Star and Weekly Herald and the Vindicator. Their relations with the French-speaking inhabitants in nearby villages were excellent, as they had contact with them in business and social activities. The Irish people led a laborious but happy life, and cooperated with one another in building houses and barns, or taking in crops, by means of working-bees. When their work was finished, the men joined with the ladies in square dances with music supplied by a fiddler.

The meteoric growth of Montreal by 1880, with a population of over 130,000 inhabitants, and with an increase of trade and commerce, affected St.Columban. Due to the difficulty of farming the land, bad roads, the lack of reforestation, the small financial returns, the mistake of the parents in not dividing the farms among their sons, the younger folk of St.Columban became dissatisfied, and many drifted to the large city of Montreal, where working conditions were better and good salaries were paid. But there were also some who went to the Province of Ontario, and even to the American cities of Detroit and Chicago. Many farms were sold at St.Columban and thus, only a smaller number of Irish still remained.

After the death of Rev. Father Falvey, new pastors were appointed to administer to the spiritual needs of the parish of St.Columban. There were Rev. Father Pierre Poissan in 1885-89; Father Charles Cadot, 1889-91; Father Forget-Despatic, 1891-1905; Father Charles Descarries, 1905-1909; Father Ludger Desjardins in 1909-1935. In 1935, the Coadjutor Archbishop of Montreal, the Most Reverend Georges Gauthier,D.D., sent Rev. Father Presseault to St.Columban. This energetic priest faced a task that might

discourage a mighty man, but as Father Falvey had done, Father Presseault rapidly transformed the parish, and set it on its course to greater activity. The people rallied with him for a fresh effort. By means of building, repairing and farming, the parish and settlement were becoming alive again. The Irish descendants of St.Columban residing in Montreal were glad to help out in every way they could. They returned on picnics; bus excursions were organized to celebrate certain events; back-to-St.Columban slogans were published so as to have large gatherings at their socials. It was during the term of Rev. Father Presseault's pastorate that St.Columban observed its centennial.

The actual year of the centennial was 1936. As the church was undergoing repair and renovation, only a preliminary ceremony was held. However, the next year, on August 17, 1937, graced by the presence of His Excellency, Most Reverend Georges Gauthier, D.D., Archbishop of Montreal, a solemn Mass was celebrated and among the distinguished guests were: Msgr. Chartier, Apostolic Vicar of Montreal; Father Hall, O.M.I. of Ottawa; Father Labelle, P.P. of St. Dominic's Parish of Montreal. Rev. Father Presseault presided at the banquet held on the church grounds after Mass, and in the afternoon a ceremony took place in the cemetery where a memorial cross was erected to commemorate the centenary. The celebrations were brought to a close in the evening by a display of fireworks. The parish priests who were appointed after Rev. Father Presseault were: Rev. Father Rene Pelletier, 1940-42; Father Misael Jodoin, 1942-46; Father Adrien Robillard, 1946-50; and the present pastor, Rev. Father Bernard Desjardins.

The descendants of St.Columban who came to Montreal did very well in all walks of life. By their energy, ability and perseverance, some of them reached to top positions in the business world. One could not meet any finer people, and they became good citizens of Montreal. From St.Columban the Irish brought with them their faith which they devoutly practiced. Their sons were given an excellent education, and, if anyone of them showed exceptional talent, he was sent to college. Today, you will find some of the sons of St.Columban in the priesthood, and brotherhood, and daughters in religious communities. Numerous others are valuable lay members in the noble profession of teaching.

At the present time S.Columban is easily reached by private car or bus, as the main roads are paved from St.Jerome and Ste.Scholastique. The secondary roads in the municipality are well graded and are in good condition. New bridges have been constructed over the many small streams flowing through the region. The highways are kept open during the winter months. The names of the roads in St.Columban are still the same as a hundred years ago, such as, Cote St.Patrick, Cote St.Nicholas, Cote St.George, etc.

The original church erected around 1860 was so well built that it is fully preserved today, and it will last for many years to come. The grounds around the church are spacious, and there are several buildings, including a presbytery, a garage for private car and a school.

Across from the school, and separated by the church road, is the one hundred and nineteen year old cemetery, which contains the remains of over eight hundred Irish immigrants.

St.Columban's Church possesses three rare treasures. There is a relic of the True Cross, and a relic of the patron of the parish, St.Columban. Both relics are kept in separate reliquaries. The relic of St.Columban consists of a small bone of the Irish Abbot of Luxcuil who died in Bobbio, Italy in 615. On November 21, this relic is venerated in St.Columban's Church. The third treasure is a chalice made of pure silver with the cup inlaid with gold dating from the period of George the Third. This sacred vessel has been used in the parish of St.Columban for over a hundred years.

There are over seventy families in the parish today, and about four hundred summer residents. The racial origins of the permanent families are: Irish, French and New Canadians. The latter include people from Poland and Czechoslovakia. The parishioners have built comfortable homes and some of them are equipped with electric pumps for water supply. The cars driven by the inhabitants are the small English-types which are ideal for the hilly roads in the municipality. The people are engaged in farming and lumbering, while some of them commute to work in St.Jerome and Montreal.

Just over a mile west of the parish of St.Columban is an artificial lake, which is situated on the property of one of the original pioneers, John Funchion. This lake is a mile in circumference and is called Lake Legare after its present owner. There are about forty summer camps built around the shores of the lake. At the lower end of the lake, Mr. Legare operates a restaurant, a lodge hotel and a tennis court.

In the eastern section of St.Columban there is the charming Bonniebrook Golf Course. This golf club is well equipped with a modern lodge for serving meals, and a separate building used for a clubhouse. Between the two is a practice putting green, which is kept in perfect condition. The setting of the golf course is picturesque, as the terrain is hilly, and it is interspersed with a variety of deciduous and coniferous trees. The Bonniebrook, a little stream, meanders throughout the fairways of the course. At the side of the lodge there is a log-cabin chapel built on the side of a hill. This miniature church is surrounded by a rock garden, and is approached by a wide wooden staircase. On Sundays at 8:00 a.m. Holy Mass is offered for the convenience of the summer residents who live in the vicinity of the golf course. There are about seventy summer camps located there.

In conclusion, it would seem appropriate that something be written about the future plans of the municipality, and the parish of St.Columban. Certainly, this district is fast becoming a renowned summer resort. As St.Columban is from five hundred to seven hundred feet above sea level, it is a comfortably cool place in the summer months. Boating and swimming facilities are being improved by the construction of more and

more artificial lakes in the municipality. This development will undoubtedly attract more tourists who will buy land and build summer camps overlooking the lakes. As the population increases, electricity will be extended to the northern section of the parish. There is hope that a new paved highway will be made through the heart of this hamlet linking St.Jerome with Lachute. Rev.Father Bernard Desjardins, the devoted pastor of St.Columban's, also has plans for his parish. He is thinking of enlarging the church, so that more pews can be installed to accommodate the numerous summer residents. Moreover, the pastor would like to build a church hall where socials could be held. Rev. Father Desjardins has already established a yearly memorial service on the last Sunday of August to pray for the departed souls of the many Irish pioneers of St.Columban. This religious ceremony also gives an opportunity to the many descendants of the Irish now living in Montreal to revisit St.Columban, and to join with the parishioners in paying respect to this virtuous people who bravely struggled with adversity, and whose soul remained unconquered.