



CLT MTL Je Me Souviens

Story by Candice Marie Sage, PhD

COVER STORY

The City of Montreal is situated on the Island of Montreal, surrounded by a suburban sprawl to the north, south, east, and west. Both the City and the Island take their names from its centrepiece - a long-dormant volcano, first called Mont Royal by French explorer Jacques Cartier in 1535.

A traditional place of convergence and confluence where the mighty St. Lawrence and Ottawa rivers meet, the land was originally inhabited by Indigenous Peoples. Today, Montreal is part of the unceded Indigenous territory of the Kanien'kehá:ka Nation (pronounced Gah-nyen-gé-ha-ga), better known as the Mohawk Nation, part of the Haudenosaunee Iroquois Confederacy of Six Nations. In the Mohawk language, the Island of Montreal is called Tiohtià:ke (jo-jah-gay) which means "where the currents meet." The name is apt, as waterways across the region served as trade routes for Indigenous Peoples for thousands of years.

It is also a fitting moniker for the millions of Old-World immigrants who put their first foot down in the New World here after the city was founded in 1642. Their stories, as of those of subsequent generations, is also my story; as a native Montrealer, I am a melange of DNA, including Irish, French, and German.

As with the city's other ethnicities, Montreal's Celtic culture is neither a collection of distinct customs, nor a nostalgic echo. It is a living, layered - and often contested - identity, shaped by centuries of colonialism, migration, memory, resistance, and reinvention. Irish, Scottish, Welsh, and Breton communities have all contributed distinct cultural threads which come together - but never fully combine - within Montreal's complex, multilingual tapestry.

However, those diverse Celtic traditions of storytelling, music, and dance have evolved together. Whether it's the soothing sound of the uilleann pipes at Hurley's Pub on Crescent St. or grim ghost stories passed down through neighbourhood walks of Griffintown, cultural expression is a matter of survival; a way to anchor a community.

There is also a genuine time of gathering and kinship to herald the coming of Spring after the long Canadian winter: the St. Patrick's Day Parade, where - at least for one day - all of Montreal's peoples, regardless of their ancestry, gather to march, play music, dance, and celebrate a culture that is uniquely Celtic Montreal.

Celtic Montreal

Musician Dave Barton is a founder of the Montreal-based punk band The Peelers. With roots in Fermanagh, Northern Ireland,

his family settled in North Glengarry, Ontario, an area rich in Irish and Scottish Gaelic heritage just over the western border of Quebec. He reflects on Hugh MacLennan's classic Canadian novel *Two Solitudes*, which is set in Montreal; "the Ottawa river flows out of Protestant Ontario into Catholic Quebec - and that is where my story starts."

For others, it begins even earlier. "I'm Irish down to the ground," says Antoine Maloney, a founding member of *Ciné Gael Montréal*, a long-running film series showcasing Irish cinema. "Single root and stem. That family tree is Irish." His Irish father's people were from Constable, New York. He notes his mother "did her Master's in French in Quebec City and spoke French fluently" - hence his Francophone given name.

Professional story-teller Mike Burns carries his stories like family heirlooms. "My mother's people are called the 'wine' O'Connells - we've been called that for 600 years." A piece of family lore, Burns tells the tale of two brothers, a castle, and a supper cooked in wine instead of water. The siblings shipped hides and wool to Spain and brought in brandy and wine - "a great trade in exporting the stuff that would keep you warm on the outside and importing the stuff that would keep you warm on the inside." Burns grew up in a "rambling house" where people "brought music and stories and songs and a fiddler and the Guardian," adding, "You don't know when you are that age that that's not everywhere."

Author and Montreal historian Matthew Barlow currently works and lives in Massachusetts. He returns to Montreal with a sense of reclaiming an Irishness long submerged through the oppression that took place in the city's Lachine Canal district. "I am an Irish

Montrealer. My grandfather, who was the most important person in my life, introduced me to Irish Montreal." Barlow's journey crosses cities - Vancouver, Toronto, Boston - but finds its tether in Griffintown. "One of my ancestors died in an industrial accident in 1882 there, so I started working on the history of the area."

“The French influence on Celtic culture in Montreal is nuanced and structural. Rather than erasing Celtic identities, it shapes how those identities are expressed, preserved, and adapted.”

The relationship between Indigenous (particularly Mohawk) and Celtic cultures is marked less by visible cultural exchange and more by parallel experiences around colonialism, shared values about the importance of community, the lands which one inhabits, and emerging ethical awareness about social and environmental inequities. Instead of convergence, it reflects mutual recognition within a colonial landscape.

Montreal's Celtic identity is stitched with contradiction - memory and resistance, celebration and grief. The idea of a "Celtic convergence" sounds poetic - Celts mingling with the French, Indigenous, and the immigrant world, however, Montreal's saga is something more dynamic, where displacement and belonging go hand in hand, layered beneath class, politics, and history.

The Colonial Past

Montreal's history is rife with oppressors, the oppressed, and accomplices. First colonized by the French, the land was never



legally ceded or sold by the Mohawk Nation to colonial authorities. As such, Montreal exists on land taken without treaty. New France (including Montreal) was ceded to the British with the Treaty of Paris in 1763, after the Seven Years' War. The new Province of Quebec, or Lower Canada, was primarily Francophone, Catholic, and rural. The British brought Protestant institutions, English laws, and mercantile capitalism, and Montreal soon became the political and economic centre for a small elite of anglophone industrialists, bankers, fur traders, and merchants. The French population was excluded from political and economic power, leading to a wave of rebellions in 1837-1838 and violent suppression by the British. When the British merged the Provinces of Upper (Ontario) and Lower Canada, French Canadians were further marginalized as English became the dominant language of politics and commerce. Though the Mohawk Nation had supported the British as allies in war against the French, the British colonial system refused to treat the Mohawks as sovereign equals. The colonizers eventually implemented the Indian Act of 1867 to impose governance structures like band councils that weakened traditional Indigenous leadership across the country.

People from the Celtic nations came to Upper and Lower Canada also - primarily the Irish, Scottish, and Welsh. The French Bretons settled mostly in Quebec. Colonial legacies shaped community dynamics, playing out in the divides between Anglo-Protestant elites versus working-class Catholics, settlers versus Indigenous people, and "Lace Curtain" versus "Shanty" Irish.

In his first book, *Griffintown: Identity and Memory in an Irish Diaspora Neighbourhood* (UBC Press, 2017), Matthew Barlow provides a rich, deeply personal and academic exploration of Irish Montreal identity, postcolonial culture, and diasporic belonging. It serves as a cultural anchor for the "Griff" Famine Irish as a narrative of struggle, migration, and working-class identity. The neighbourhood emerges as a symbolic "origin myth" for Irish Montrealers, who lived and worked there alongside their Catholic French-Canadian neighbours. Barlow challenges the myth of Irishness, describing the term "Lace Curtain Irish" that bourgeois Irish used to distinguish themselves from the working classes, reflecting internal class divisions and identity. He reflects on the differences between Irish and Scottish immigrants. "There were Irish mayors and Irish premiers, but I still don't think they had the same kind of power base the Scottish Montreal-

ers would have had. Even the wealthy Irish folk in Montreal wouldn't have had access to those corridors of power."

Bruce Bolton, Past President of the St. Andrew's Society of Montreal, notes that the Scottish arrived before the British Conquest and developed an early alliance with the French. They soon began building modern institutional foundations, like McGill University, banks, churches, and hospitals. The city's "Golden Square Mile" was the heart of the elite - many Scottish, English-speaking industrialists, including their architecturally impressive mansions. Not all Scots who immigrated were wealthy. From 1750 to 1860, Scottish aristocracy and clan chiefs unleashed the Highland Clearances, which saw the forced eviction of Gaelic-speaking tenant farmers from their homelands. Gaelic culture in Scotland was decimated, leading to mass immigration to Canada. Bolton explains that the Scots intermingled with the Montreal population, leading to "intermarried families...where the priest would bury the French wife in the Catholic cemetery and the Protestant husband in another just on the other side of the fence." At first, it was only the Scots and French. The Scots were considered modest, humble, quiet, and very generous, "and then the Irish arrived in the 19th century," notes Bolton, "and they were much more vivacious, open - partying, having fun."

“However, Montreal Irish identity was layered with moral tension, ancestral reverence, and the struggle to remember the dead, including the thousands of Famine Irish buried in mass unmarked graves.

Twice a year, local company Montreal Haunted Walks offers a guided tour of areas important to Montreal's Irish experience along the Lachine Canal, including the neighbourhoods of Griffintown, Pointe St. Charles, and St. Henri. Guide Donovan King provides a brief Irish history lesson; in the 17th century, the English colonized Ireland, confiscating land and forcing Irish Catholics into serfdom and subsistence farming, severely restricting their rights. Food grown by Irish Catholics was exported to England and Scotland while the serfs were to live only on potatoes. The Great Famine (1845-1852) that devastated the Irish population was less about the potato blight than a campaign of genocide carried out by Anglo-Protestant landowners. In 1847, one million people died in Ireland and another million left. It is esti-



Montreal Flag

The flag of Montreal is white with a red Saint George's Cross and a red circle in the center, which also features five symbolic elements representing the city's founding peoples. These are the white pine for Indigenous peoples, the fleur-de-lys for French settlers, the rose for English settlers, the thistle for Scottish settlers, and the shamrock for Irish settlers.

mated that 70,000 Irish arrived in Montreal, which had a population of a mere 50,000 at the time. These Irish were often relegated as human ballast on lumber ships (deemed "Coffin Ships") returning to Canada. Hygiene was horrible, and passengers were already weakened by starvation. Typhus was rampant, and people arrived in Montreal looking like "grey zombies." Many died on route and were tossed overboard. A quarantine was set up at Grosse Île, an island in the middle of the St. Lawrence River, 280 kilometres northeast of Montreal. Five thousand Irish immigrants are buried there. In Montreal, then-Mayor John Mills had twenty "fever sheds" set up near the piers but there wasn't enough capacity to handle the sick and dying. Remarkably, the clergy, the Grey Nuns, and citizens of all kinds came to help in any way they could. Many families took in orphaned children.

Dealing with the number of dead proved very difficult. Mike Burns recounts how "they were just chucked into mass graves. No stones to mark them. Nothing." Eventually, a commemorative stone called the Black Rock was erected in 1859 by Irish workers who discovered the mass grave while building the Victoria Bridge. The massive boulder is located in Pointe St. Charles, between railway tracks and roads. It is estimated that 6,000 victims of typhus, mostly Irish, are buried there.

Sacred Sites

Sacred sites like Black Rock and Grosse Île serve as focal points of collective mourning and remembrance. Victor Boyle of the



Montreal Coat of Arms

The first coat of arms of Montreal was designed by Jacques Viger, the first mayor of Montreal, and adopted in 1833 by the city councillors. Modifications were made in March of 1938, and again in September of 2017, resulting in the version currently in use. The coat of arms was the only city emblem representing Montreal until 1981, when a stylized logo was developed for common daily use, reserving the coat of arms for ceremonial occasions. The first coat of arms was displayed on a white shield, which had a red saltire with four different charges between the arms, representative of the four main components of the population as viewed by Mayor Jacques Viger and the city council in 1833, when the arms were designed and adopted. To the top, a rose was for the English heritage of the population, a thistle for the Scots, a sprig of clover for the Irish heritage of the city, and a beaver for the French who originally settled the territory and traded in furs.

Ancient Order of Hibernians (AOH) recounts how his organization fought to return the Irish Commemorative Stone to sacred ground, and how they are still fighting to commemorate the forgotten dead beneath the Wellington Basin. “Unquiet graves,” he calls them. The annual Walk to the Black Rock is a commemorative event held on the last Sunday of May organized by the AOH and Montreal's Irish community. Gathering at St. Gabriel's Church in Pointe St. Charles before marching about two kilometres to the Black Rock monument on Bridge Street, community members, clergy, and municipal officials speak, poems are read, and wreaths laid to honour both the Irish victims and the Montrealers who aided them - crossing cultural, linguistic, and religious lines.

A sixth-generation Irish-Montrealer, Scott Phelan serves as a Director on the Board of the Montreal Irish Monument Park

Foundation. He discusses the Irish Monument Park Project, a plan to build a major memorial and cultural park at the site of the Black Rock. Phelan frames the project as one of justice and reconciliation: a sacred duty to honour the dead, a tribute to the humanitarian response of Montrealers in 1847, and a long-overdue revamp of the burial site. The project includes key partnerships with Hydro-Québec (who purchased and re-zoned the land, becoming a major sponsor), the City of Montreal (committing \$15-20 million), the Anglican Church (which donated the land for the rock), along with stakeholders like Parks Canada and 22 Irish community groups. “It feels sometimes like 6,000 little hands holding arms and moving us forward. Montreal's Irish identity - rooted in the tragedy of 1847's Coffin Ships and fever sheds - serves as both a trauma and a badge of survival.

Black Rock beats with the unmistakable pulse of memory and, with it, an ache. Some Celtic stories here are shaped by exile, families uprooted by famine, clearances, or poverty. Others made their fortunes in Montreal and established themselves and their families as community leaders. Regardless, all of this exists within the broader shadow of colonialism. Those stories are not just about what was lost, but about what was taken - language, land, autonomy, and identity. Colonial histories aren't abstract here; they still play out through the politics of language.

Language

The British colonial project in Quebec, with Montreal as the political and economic centre for a small anglophone elite, served as a common enemy to Celtic, French, and Mohawk cultures. Language became the battleground, and its suppression has left deep wounds. G. Scott MacLeod is a multi-media artist, musician, and educator of Highlander and Irish heritage who sees the St. Lawrence River as a metaphor for the meeting of cultural and linguistic streams. “Language is the portal to culture. Without the language, you will never fully understand the culture.” He explains how the reclamation, preservation, and revival of Celtic languages is both anti-colonial resistance as well as personal identity work, conveyed through artistic expression, education, and community events. Music and storytelling serve as vital community spaces for intergenerational transmission, meaning that places like Hurley's Pub are ground-zero for Celtic cultural survival and celebration.

Montreal is also home to Concordia University's School of Canadian Irish Studies, North America's only program offering a full

suite of academic credentials at undergraduate and graduate levels. Along with publishing the Canadian Journal of Irish Studies, the institution offers courses in Irish history, literature, mythology, folklore, music, theatre, film, diaspora studies, Celtic Christianity, and language.

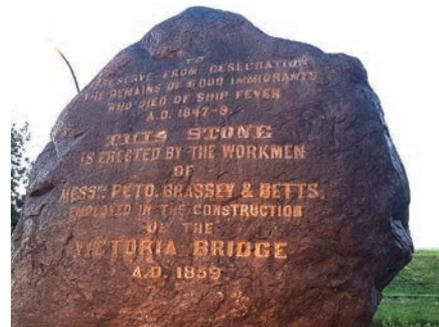
In light of British political and economic domination, MacLeod speaks of learning French or Irish as an act of cultural continuity or resistance. Bernadette Short, an Irish dance teacher, says that when she travels to rural parts of Quebec, she feels a kinship with that community - a kind of shared cultural memory with the French-speaking residents. “They also know what it means to have had your language, your traditions, pushed to the side. There is a resonance there - an unspoken solidarity.”

French in Quebec plays a dual role - as both a barrier and a bridge - shaping access to education, institutions, and cultural legitimacy.

In the fight to preserve Celtic languages, controversial language Bill 101 is a structural socio-political challenge. Scott Phelan puts it plainly: “the language laws have changed things. Of course, there is respect for why the French language needed protecting - but also a sense of loss. Some institutions suffered. Some opportunities disappeared. Yet, people adapted. They learned French. They wove their traditions into new contexts.” Matthew Barlow adds that Quebec French nationalism had a way of uniting all English-speaking cultures against a common threat. Interestingly, today non-English speaking immigrants are getting their children involved in Celtic cultural expression like bagpiping and Highland dance as it affords them the chance to learn and practice English.

Identity, Community, and Belonging

Being Celtic in Montreal involves negotiating multiple, often conflicting identities: Celtic/French/Anglo, Catholic/Protestant, elite/working-class, bilingual Quebecer. Belonging isn't automatic - it must be proven, reclaimed, or reimagined, particularly among younger generations and mixed-heritage in-



dividuals. For example, Catholic schools and churches historically taught Irish identity. Today, younger generations seek new ways to connect. Samara O’Gorman, a young Celtic artist, activist, and St. Patrick’s Day Queen remarks “You can’t plan the future without knowing where you came from.”

Danny Doyle, President of the Erin Sports Association, emphasizes the role of community and family in preserving Irish identity, especially in neighborhoods like Griffintown and Point St. Charles. “Catholic schools were very stringent on our Irish heritage.” Their role in teaching Irish culture through concerts and events has faded, however, so Doyle advises that “if you don’t get involved, you can sort of lose it.”

Donovan King highlights how forty per cent of Quebecers have some sort of Irish lineage, due in large part to the mass immigration of Famine Irish and the number of orphans adopted by French families. He speaks of “being Irlandais” as a “passport between cultures.”

Antoine Maloney explains that for some, it’s blood, while for others, it is a case of cultural adoption. He is of Irish and Welsh lineage, describing it as a woven identity - sometimes romantic, sometimes anti-colonial, sometimes both. He highlights the gentrification and fading landmarks of Griffintown where he lives as “a complete transformation” of the Lachine Canal area. It was “a pretty beaten-down neighborhood.” And though the city has changed, belonging still finds a way. “I’m not pure Irish, but I got involved.”

Matthew Barlow notes that belonging in Celtic Montreal is often found despite formal institutions, not always through them. He says “identity here is never simple...to be Irish in Montreal is to negotiate belonging constantly - to ‘prove your bona fides’ to a community that sometimes forgets its own. And yet, people keep trying. Because belonging isn’t about ease. It’s about roots that run deep enough to hold, even when the soil shifts.”

Mike Burns followed the call of storytell-



ing from Ireland’s western edge to Quebec’s “blue, blue skies.” He explains how the Celtic community exists in pubs and dance halls, in stories passed from fiddle to footstep. “Our house was a kind of rambling house...they’d bring music and stories and songs.”

Dave Barton emphasizes those links through music, listing off the city’s Celtic artists, including “Solstice, Switchigger, the Swindlers, Pat Lesyk, Dave Gossage...that’s Celtic Montreal.”

Morgane Filleau is the president of the Association of Bretons of Quebec. Breton culture in Montreal is unique. Bretagne in northwestern France is one of the seven Celtic nations. Because Breton culture is so linguistically and historically tied to France, it can sometimes be overshadowed by Quebec’s dominant French identity. She notes, however, that Breton culture in Montreal shares music, dance, and traditional dress with broader Celtic traditions like bagpipes, knotwork, “trad” tunes, and mythology.

“The idea of Celtic convergence comes alive in these networks of societies, sports clubs, music sessions, parades, and storytelling - not just preserving culture but passing it along for next generations.”

As such, Montreal’s tapestry of Celtic cultures aren’t just museum pieces - they breathe, they argue, they show up, they play music, they bury their dead, and they show up again. People give their time, their kitchens, their Sunday mornings.

Celtic Montreal is supported by several key institutions. The St. Andrews Society preserves Scottish traditions through events, highland games, and music. The Black Watch (Royal Highland Regiment) of Canada is one of the oldest highland infantry regiments, serving both ceremonial and regimental purposes.

In the Irish community, what was once divided along class lines - “white collar St. Pat’s” versus “blue collar Point” - is now increasingly cooperative. “We all support each other,” explains Scott Phelan. “We all show up to each other’s events.” The Irish Protestant Benevolent Society preserves Protestant Irish memory. The United Irish Societies (who organize the annual St. Patrick’s Day Parade), the Erin Sports Association, and the St. Patrick’s Society support both cultural continuity and grassroots charity. The Montreal Irish GAA (Gaelic Athletic Association) promotes Irish Gaelic games and culture in the city. Hurley’s Pub is a cultural perfor-



Montreal 1642 Tartan

In May of 2016, Council approved the creation of the Montreal 1642 Tartan. Less than a year later the St. Andrew’s Society unveiled the tartan and gifted it to the City and the citizens of Montreal at a reception at City Hall, inviting all Montrealers from every background to join together as one clan. In May of 2017, the St. Andrew’s office received the tartan registry certificate from the Scottish Register of Tartans.

mance hub for live bands, music sessions, and storytelling nights. The Ancient Order of Hibernians works on cultural and political advocacy. The Montreal Irish Monument Park Foundation is uniting community to commemorate those lost to the Famine. These institutions reflect both class and religious diversity, coalescing to preserve and promote a shared heritage.

The cultural cornerstone of Celtic Montreal is the annual St. Patrick’s Day Parade. First held in 1824, it is one of the oldest and most significant cultural events in North America. Started by Irish immigrants as an expression of identity, Catholic religious pride, and political solidarity, the yearly celebration evolved into a symbol of integration, resilience, and visibility for Irish Montrealers in a city once dominated by British and French elites. Today, the gathering keeps Irish traditions alive by promoting music, dance, Gaelic games, and the Irish language. It’s an opportunity for people to publicly fete their Irish roots, and for others to simply be Irish for a day. As Bruce Bolton quips, “the successor of an imperial British regiment - the Black Watch pipes and drums - leads the St. Patrick’s Day parade! That wouldn’t happen anywhere else in the world.” In that regard, the parade is very much a celebration of the tapestry that is Celtic Montreal.

Celtic Montrealers are finding new ways to negotiate numerous identities linked to mixed heritage, multiple languages, religions, and social classes. They bring Celtic culture to life through both art and sport.



Concordia Salus

The motto of Montreal is Concordia Salus, which is Latin for "well-being through harmony" or "salvation through harmony". This motto has been part of the city's coat of arms since 1833. It reflects the values of co-existence, diversity, openness, and inclusion that are important to Montrealers.

Art and Sport

It is human nature for people to reclaim a sense of belonging through something old and rooted. Celtic Montrealers hold a kind of quiet reverence for where they came from. It's not nostalgia – it is more like stewardship; a responsibility to carry the flame of their culture forward through art, music, stories and more. As Mike Burns notes, "it's in the ghost stories, in the tin whistle, in the way a session is passed down, not just played."

Montreal Ghost Walk has professional actors that take guests on tours of areas that are reportedly haunted, and the city even has its own haunted pub walk. The Bloomsday Festival is a literary and cultural celebration held annually that is centred around the life and works of James Joyce. It is part of a global tradition that marks June 16, 1904, when the events of Ulysses take place in Dublin with protagonist Leopold Bloom. Storytelling through film has emerged as a key medium for preserving and promoting Celtic culture in Montreal through organizations like Ciné Gael Montréal, along with local filmmakers like Scott MacLeod. As he puts it, artistic expression captures "the Celtic lyrical tapestries of lived resistance, not passive memory."

Ultimately, culture is carried through doing: the act of dancing, piping, storytell-



The Peelers

ing, and more.

Celtic music is both a cultural anchor as well as a source of adaptation and innovation, a historical record and present-day expression. It enables Irish, Scottish, Breton and Welsh Montrealers to connect with ancestral roots while evolving with local context. Montreal bands like The Peelers blend traditional music with punk, reflecting the diasporic North American Celtic experience - further proof that tradition isn't frozen, it's flexible. Band founder Dave Barton says, "The Peelers were born out of Scots Gaelic and Irish culture of Glengarry County. It's trad and punk rock, head-on." He further explains that it isn't a culture that is stuck in Ireland or Scotland - it has been transposed. He writes songs not about Ireland itself, but about Irish life in Montreal. "These stories - the blacksmiths and farmers, the storm masons and dock workers - are told in punk songs and fiddle tunes. They are a part of a modern mythology, grounded in Montreal's Celtic rhythm."

“Celtic and Québécois musical traditions share a structural and emotional DNA.”

Rhythmic patterns, podorythmie (foot-tapping), and fiddle styles reveal mutual influence, often rooted in common rural experiences. Bruce Bolton notes, "A lot of traditional French-Canadian music is based on Scottishness. When they hear it on the bagpipe, they say, 'I've heard that before.'" Some musical projects also bridge Celtic and Indigenous histories, especially in places like Griffintown.

Music in Celtic Montreal is imbued with intergenerational learning and community. Hurley's Pub music sessions and storytelling nights started back in the 1990s. Institutions like the Montreal Piping and Drumming School and the Siamsa School of Irish Music support musical mentorship and open participation across generations. Jeremy Tetrault-Ferber, a music educator with Montreal Piping and Drumming, says that older people are taking up piping as a retirement project. Siamsa teaches traditional instruments like the flute, fiddle, whistle, banjo, mandolin, and harp, as well as choir and dance, with weekly sessions for all skill levels, as well as pub sessions. Denis Martin, Director of the Siamsa Board and a music teacher, says "sessions at Siamsa are open, with no stress. We're about making people feel comfortable and helping them get over the first hurdles of playing with others, which can be intimidating." Music acts as a gateway for younger generations,

who engage with heritage through creativity and community. Those multi-generational sessions provide opportunities for storytelling too.

Dance in Celtic Montreal embodies heritage and cultural continuity, teaching identity without words, and encoding stories, rituals, and relationships through rhythmic precision and embodied performance. The city's Irish step dance scene is highly visible and intergenerational, with competitive schools and feiseanna (competitions) shaping cultural connection. The emergence of Riverdance in 1994 brought the dance form to the world stage and it remains popular, even with non-Celts. The Bernadette Short School of Irish Dance in Montreal provides one such example; a student by the name of Kahentisa (Brenna) Alfred, a young Mohawk woman whose paternal grandfather is Irish. She grew up on the First Nation's Reserve of Kahnawake Mohawk Territory and began Irish dance at the age of four. She has always felt that the "Irish were very welcoming."

Scottish dance (e.g., Highland or Scottish Country Dance) is more ceremonial and communal, tied to regiments and society events. Heather McNabb, a Highland Dance teacher, shares that some of her former students are coming back to it in their 30s.

Collaborations with French-Canadian groups (e.g., Les Pas Léger) reflect shared rhythm and communal storytelling. Irish melodies and footwork blend naturally with Québécois folk forms. Dance connects young people to culture, even when language or memory is distant. Teachers like Bernadette Short now instruct the grandchildren of their first students, highlighting dance's longevity as a cultural pipeline.

Sport in Montreal doesn't just preserve Celtic culture - it activates it, bringing together Irish, Scottish, and Welsh identities on the field, in the bleachers, and across generations. Sport is movement, memory, and belonging, without the need for a family tree or a history book. Increasingly, it's also a space where Celtic and Indigenous traditions find common ground through the Irish sport of Hurling - which is similar to Canada's national sport, Lacrosse (no, it's not Hockey!). Some pan-Celtic events in Montreal (e.g., Festival Celtique de Québec, or select Highland Games events) may include or recognize Breton participation.

Founded in 1948, the Montreal Shamrocks are a longstanding Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) club in the city, and one of the founding organizations of the Gaelic Athletic League Association of Montreal (GALA). Their mission is to promote Irish

sports and culture here and connect the Irish diaspora and wider community through healthy competition, including Gaelic football, hurling, and camogie. Jake Ouellette is the first ever Canadian President of the club. His father is Italian Canadian and his mother Irish Italian. Previous Presidents were Irish. He believes that sports provide a healthy and social “clan” for young people to engage with.

Beyond sports, these organizations help maintain Irish heritage and identity in events that involve music, language, dance, and traditional Irish community values. They participate in the annual St. Patrick’s Day parade and collaborate with other groups involved in Irish culture and education. Sports engage young people with Celtic culture and generate more opportunities for intergenerational exchange.



Reclamation

The engagement of young people with Celtic culture is evolving - they are learning the bagpipes, playing Gaelic sports, editing heritage videos, writing poetry, studying the Irish language, remixing traditional Celtic music with punk and other musical genres, and - all the while - developing a sense of clan. Samara O’Gorman started at 18 years old as a St. Patrick’s Day Parade Princess. She is now a Montreal Irish poet, musician, filmmaker, and sought-after public speaker for youth engagement. Her immersion in cultural preservation occurred through Irish Studies at Concordia and she is now involved with the Canadian Irish Migration Preservation Network.

As she says, “with reverence to the ancestors, I felt my heart change, something illuminated, and now I am on fire, I won’t stop, I can’t...”

“For some younger people, Celtic identity is about cultural curiosity rather than ancestry, and less about lineage and more about belonging, creativity, and meaning making.”

Kahentisa (Brenna) Alfred says, “young people are looking for community, where you belong, even if you might look like an outsider,” citing her role in the St. Patrick’s Day Parade, “they made me feel like the most Irish person there, a part of the family!”

It seems that some institutional heritage groups are beginning to intentionally engage youth, though tensions remain over how to reach them (e.g., social media over more formal engagement) and competition with other life responsibilities like school and raising a family. Also, younger generations are asking hard questions of organizations that require critical thinking: how does this culture relate to Indigenous reconciliation, or can Celtic culture be feminist, anti-racist, and relevant?

Some institutional leaders express concern over their capacity to continue their work and, perhaps more pertinently, how to get young people reengaged. “We’re shrinking as a community,” admits Danny Doyle. “It’s always the same people participating. If we could somehow unite the groups under a brand...there’s a lot of potential.”

Sadly, the short-lived Montreal Celtic Festival (2015) was perhaps an idea ahead of its time.

The Canadian Irish Migration Preservation Network (CIMPN) is a not for profit organization based in Quebec, dedicated to researching, commemorating, and celebrating the history and contributions of Irish immigrants across Canada. CIMPN is working on a digital directory that will provide public access to a wealth of resources related to Irish Canadian ancestry. Katherine Diamond is a graduate student researcher coordinating the website portal project. She says, “Montreal is emerging as an Irish destination, a part of an Irish cultural Renaissance.” CIMPN’s Montreal website project is closely tied to the Montreal Irish Monument Park Foundation. With both a digital gathering space and a physical one, it could very well serve as a launch pad for branding and promoting all that is Celtic Montreal.

Je Me Souviens

Celtic Montreal isn’t just a convergence. It’s a collision - of cultures, histories, and futures, and what survives is what is shared, what is told, sung, and fought for. There are concerns over the loss of cultural transmission due to the decline of churches, schools, and large families. Intergenerational transfer remains the glue, but it’s less about purity of lineages and more about preservation of cultures through adaptation, coexistence, and meaning making. It confronts displacement, engages with colonial histories, and



“Je me souviens” is a French phrase that translates to “I remember” in English. It is the official motto of the province of Quebec.

celebrates survival through voice, music, and memory. The future of Celtic Montreal lies in youth engagement, cross-cultural solidarity, and continued storytelling because this culture is not inherited - it is made, in the telling. Few oral histories survive anymore, so it is vital to keep the stories alive; in the pubs, on film, in the music, and the poetry. Over time, the political divides have softened. Today, the Irish Monument Park Foundation is a major bridge institution uniting both Protestant and Catholic Irish traditions. In Montreal, Celtic music and dance are not just traditions - they are evolving, participatory rituals that hold memory, forge identity, and create bridges between generations, between cultures, and between the past and the future. They are not merely preserved - they are practiced, questioned, and reimagined. And that is what keeps the cultures alive - Irish, Scottish, Welsh, and Breton, distinct and yet part of a Celtic mosaic that is ever-evolving. As such, Celtic Montreal remains exactly what it has always been: a community in the act of remembering, a people in motion, rooted and reaching at once - a yearning...to return and a refusal to forget.

