

Beyond Inheritance:

Oral Histories and the Construction of Irish Identity and Memory in Montreal

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Abstract

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This study examines how members of Montreal's Irish community learned to be Irish. The questions that animate this oral history project are: How did my narrators develop a meaningful connection with their ancestral Irish roots? How, in turn, did their lived experiences shape their understanding of Irish-ness? And just how did my interview partners lay claim to their Irish heritage? This thesis seeks to explore the layered history and complexity of Irish identity, culture, and personal memory as they have been passed down through generations, though not necessarily in storytelling acts, as reflected in the eleven oral history interviews completed for this project. It examines themes of memory and connection with familial and communal pasts and asks how these connections have been maintained—or, in some cases, been lost—within families and the larger community. It is particularly interested in the role of class in shaping the types of connections that the eleven narrators forged to their Irish identity. Ultimately this study argues that Irish identity was not simply inherited from one generation to the next. Rather, it was actively performed and maintained in various ways—particularly through connections with Irish history, the Montreal Irish community, and personal or familial memories and stories.

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Introduction

This project began as an oral history study that sought to examine how stories and memories of the Irish Famine have been told, and re-told, in Irish Canadian families since the 1840s. How do people remember the past? How have vernacular memories evolved over time? Which memories and stories, if any, have been transmitted from one generation to the next about the Irish Famine? As my research unfolded, it became clear that the reach of such familial and vernacular memories was limited and rarely extended beyond three generations. Accordingly, I started to ask a different set of questions: How had my narrators learned to be Irish? How did their lived experiences shape their understanding of Irish-ness? And just how did my interview partners lay claim to their Irish heritage?

Whereas the annual St. Patrick's Day parade remains one of the most visible and significant expressions of Irish culture and celebration in Montreal, Irish identity is far more complex than this single day in March. This thesis seeks to explore the layered history and complexity of Irish identity, culture, and personal memory as they have been passed down through generations, though not necessarily in storytelling acts, as reflected in the conversations with the eleven narrators who participated in this project. It examines themes of memory and connection to familial and communal pasts and asks how these connections have been maintained—or, in some cases, been lost—within families and the larger community.

Using oral history, this project seeks to uncover stories and memories that have not been widely addressed in recent scholarship. Historical research on intergenerational memory and inherited identity within Montreal's Irish community—particularly studies employing oral history—is sparse. This scarcity was one of the primary reasons for undertaking this project. The Irish in Quebec have had a monumental impact on both the province and the city of Montreal,

providing a foundation for numerous historians studying the Irish in the region. Robert J. Grace's work on the Irish in Quebec offers a comprehensive overview of the historiography of the Irish in the province, including one section dedicated specifically to Irish institutions, migration and settlement patterns in Montreal.¹

More recently, the works of Sharon Doyle Driedger, Patricia Burns, and Matthew Barlow have explored the Irish community within the city, with particular attention to memory and oral history. Driedger's research examines the history of Irish immigrants in Quebec and Montreal from the early nineteenth to the twentieth centuries, focusing on how they established a sense of community and identity, particularly in the Griffintown neighbourhood.² As Driedger holds, the Irish were instrumental in shaping Montreal, especially in its southwest areas of Griffintown and Pointe-Saint-Charles.³

The Shamrock and the Shield by Patricia Burns is an invaluable monograph that examines memories of the Irish in Montreal. Based on oral interviews conducted in 1991, Burns explores the lives and recollections of several Irish Montrealers and their experiences throughout the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Burns rarely interjects; each chapter begins with a brief introduction to the narrator before allowing their story to unfold. This approach gives the book the feel of a memoir rather than a conventional historical account. Nevertheless, Burns's aim is clear: to prioritise the experiences and memories of her interviewees by placing them at the centre of the narrative.⁴ *The Shamrock and the Shield* offers a wealth of stories and insights into the Irish community in Griffintown and Montreal, providing a deep understanding of the

¹ Robert J. Grace, *The Irish in Quebec: An Introduction to the Historiography* (Québec: Institut Québécois de Recherche sur la Culture, 1993).

² Sharon Doyle Driedger, *An Irish Heart: How a Small Immigrant Community Shaped Canada* (Toronto: Harper Collins, 2010).

³ Ibid.

⁴ Patricia Burns, *The Shamrock and the Shield: An Oral History of the Irish in Montreal* (Véhicule Press, 1998).

community's lived experiences over the course of the twentieth century.⁵ This oral history project seeks to offer an alternative historical analysis, drawing arguments and insights from the conversations between interviewer and interviewee. Because this project takes place more than thirty years after Burns's work, it allows readers to observe how the community has evolved over time.

In the concluding chapter of his *Griffintown*, Matthew Barlow analyses the community's "return" to Griffintown after the area had been deindustrialized and largely abandoned by both the Quebec government and the city of Montreal.⁶ Barlow argues that after the Quiet Revolution there was a "*re-Irishification* of Montreal as the Irish-Catholic community sought to reclaim its place within the history of the city, as well as upon the contemporary cultural fabric of Montreal."⁷ He claims that even though the Irish did not return physically to Griffintown, the history and memories of the community were revived through memory work.⁸ Barlow's study focuses primarily on communal memories, emphasizing how the Irish community in Montreal—and the families who once lived in Griffintown—worked to reassert the notion that it was historically an Irish neighbourhood. Barlow discusses events such as the *Remember Griffintown* weekend in 2008, which centred on the Irish community reaffirming and celebrating the area's Irish heritage. He also references films like *Ghosts of Griffintown* (2003), which played an instrumental role in cementing the image of Montreal's Griffintown neighbourhood as an Irish space with contemporary audiences. Overall, Barlow's work demonstrates how the community sought to reclaim Griffintown's identity and status as an Irish neighbourhood.

⁵ Burns, *The Shamrock and the Shield*.

⁶ Matthew Barlow, *Griffintown: Identity and Memory in an Irish Diaspora Neighbourhood* (UBC Press, 2017).

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

In contrast, this project shifts the focus of inquiry from the communal memories surrounding a single neighbourhood to the intergenerational transmission of vernacular, familial memories, traditions, and cultural practices. Although several of the participants grew up during the period of “re-Irishification” that Barlow describes, this project aims to illuminate how the community developed in a manner that was not place-bound even though many of my narrators shared place-based memories. By combining multiple thematic approaches and building on the work of these three historians of Montreal’s Irish community, this project offers a new perspective on intergenerational inheritance—or lack thereof—of Irish memory, identity, and culture. Based on interviews with eleven narrators, I will argue that Irishness, or learning to be Irish, was not simply inherited from one generation to the next. Rather, it was actively performed and maintained in various ways—particularly through connections to Irish history, the Montreal Irish community, and personal or familial memories and stories.

This thesis is comprised of three chapters, each exploring how members of the Irish community in Montreal have connected with their ancestral past, their family’s history, and the neighbourhoods where they resided or grew up. The first chapter examines narrators’ connections to communal history. It focuses on how members of the Irish community in Montreal engaged in visits to Grosse Île as a means of reconnecting with the history of the Famine and the broader history of the Irish in Montreal. Similarly, narrators undertook diasporic visits back to Ireland as another form of engagement with their ancestral heritage. Chapter One highlights the transformative experiences of these visits, demonstrating how both Grosse Île and trips to Ireland provided opportunities to connect with personal and communal history. It frames these visits as a form of performance, showing how these interview partners actively engaged with their heritage to reinforce their sense of Irish identity. The chapter argues that it was

through these active visits that Irish Montrealers maintained and strengthened their connection to both ancestral and communal history.

The second chapter focuses on the narrators' connections to their localized Irish community in Montreal. It examines the multiple ways in which the interview partners created and sustained their Irish identity, emphasizing the concept of performed ethnicity. Through participation in activities such as the St. Patrick's Day parade, familial celebrations, and music and dance events, the narrators actively reinforced their Irish identity. This chapter demonstrates that such practices of performed ethnicity were essential for maintaining and deepening ties to the Montreal Irish community, further supporting the idea that Irish identity is actively created and sustained through communal engagement, participation and performance.

The third and final chapter explores these narrators' connections to their personal ancestral history and memories. It highlights the limited availability of oral histories and family stories among the interviewees and examines how genealogical research and engagement with material culture—such as family bibles and letters—helped them reconstruct their family histories. Drawing on the concept of the temporal reach of memory, this chapter explains why certain oral histories were partially or entirely absent. It argues that, for the family historians in this project, active research—rather than inherited memories and stories—was the key to maintaining and deepening their connection to their ancestral past, and ultimately to understanding their place within their own familial narratives.

In 2015, Alexander Freund published an influential study discussing the transmission of memories across generations. Freund argues that memories were not simply inherited by chance; rather, they were actively communicated, whether through everyday interactions or deliberate efforts. He also emphasizes the fragility of memories, suggesting that they often endure for only

a few generations, which limits one's ability to access memories from more distant ancestors.⁹

This project seeks to build upon Freund's arguments, demonstrating how his insights translate to the Irish community in Montreal and how memories have been preserved and transmitted within this community.

The first chapter of this study turns to narrators who returned to Ireland as a rite of passage as they sought to construct, reconnect with, or maintain a connection to their ancestral homeland. The concept of diasporic returns and the scholarship surrounding the desire for a diasporic connection to one's homeland has developed over several decades. More recently, the collection of essays in *Rites of Return: Diaspora Poetics and the Politics of Memory*, edited by Marianna Hirsch and Nancy K. Miller, examine where, how, and why individuals choose to return and highlights the human need for rootedness.¹⁰ The authors argue that these roots are not only tied to the ancestral homeland but also to intergenerational identities, cultures, and memories. Similarly, Erik Olsson discusses diasporic return visits as a means for individuals to anchor themselves within their ancestral past.¹¹ Other historians have explored diasporic returns, though much of the scholarship focuses on permanent visits aimed at reconnecting with the familial past and maintaining that connection. However, historians such as Lauren B. Wagner and Takeyuki Tsuda examine a different type of return: non-permanent visits. Wagner's article considers Dutch students of Moroccan ancestry who visit Marrakech, exploring the complexities of their identities during brief stays in their ancestral homeland.¹² Tsuda analyzes both permanent

⁹ Alexander Freund, "A Canadian Family Talks about Oma's Life in Nazi Germany: Three-Generational Interviews and Communicative Memory," in *The Canadian Oral History Reader*, ed. Kristina R. Llewellyn, Alexander Freund and Nolan Reilly (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015).

¹⁰ Marianne Hirsch and Nancy K. Miller, *Rites of Return: Diaspora Poetics and the Politics of Memory* (Columbia University Press, 2011).

¹¹ Erik Olsson and Russell King, "Introduction: Diasporic Return," *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies* 17, no. 3 (2008).

¹² Lauren B. Wagner, "Visiting 'Home': Considering Diasporic Practices through Assemblage Dynamics," *Global Networks* 23, no. 1 (2023).

returns, considering factors such as heritage and economic motivations, and non-permanent visits, with the latter being the primary focus of this project.¹³

More specific to this project, several studies have addressed Irish return migration, including Mary P. Corcoran. Corcoran examines Irish emigrants from the 1980s who returned a decade later, conducting interviews to document their reasons for emigrating, their motivations for returning, and their experiences upon permanent reintegration into Irish society.¹⁴ Caitríona Ní Laoire builds on similar work, arguing that various economic and social factors influence return migration, with one of the primary motivations being the desire to spend a particular “life stage” in Ireland.¹⁵ More recently, Alan Fernihough and Cormac Ó Gráda have studied transatlantic return migration to Ireland, although their research primarily focuses on the period before the First World War.¹⁶ As Corcoran notes, scholarship on return migration to Ireland remains relatively sparse, making it a largely underexplored area.¹⁷ Studies of diasporic returns as a cultural and identity-building experience are far and few in between. This oral history project centres on the stories of members of the Irish diaspora returning to Ireland, highlighting the transformative experiences of these visits and their impact on participants’ understanding of Irish identity, as well as their connection to their Irishness when returning home to their diasporic community.

Another significant site connected to the Irish community in Montreal is Grosse Île. Grosse Île holds an important place in preserving and educating people about the Irish

¹³ Takeyuki (Gaku) Tsuda, “Why Does the Diaspora Return Home? The Causes of Ethnic Return Migration,” in *The Challenges of Diaspora Migration*, ed. Rainer K. Silbereisen and Peter F. Titzmann (Routledge, 2014).

¹⁴ Mary P. Corcoran, “The Process of Migration and the Reinvention of Self: The Experiences of Returning Irish Emigrants,” *Éire-Ireland* 37, nos. 1–2 (2002).

¹⁵ Caitríona Ní Laoire, ““Settling Back”? A Biographical and Life-Course Perspective on Ireland’s Recent Return Migration,” *Irish Geography* 41, no. 2 (2008): 207.

¹⁶ Alan Fernihough and Cormac Ó Gráda, “Across the Sea to Ireland: Return Atlantic Migration before the First World War,” *European Review of Economic History* 29, no. 1 (2025).

¹⁷ Corcoran, “The Process of Migration and the Reinvention of Self,” 177.

immigration experience to Canada. Due to its historical significance, numerous studies have examined its role, highlighting not only its importance to the Irish community but also its broader relevance to Canadian history. Marianna O’Gallagher is one of the most prominent Irish Canadian historians, having published several works on Grosse Île. Originally published in 1987, her *Grosse Ile: Gateway to Canada, 1832–1937* provides a comprehensive account of the island’s historical importance, detailing its opening in 1832 as a quarantine station during the cholera epidemic and its continued use during the Irish Famine, particularly in 1847.¹⁸ O’Gallagher allows readers to understand not only the island’s significance during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries but also how it evolved in the decades following the Famine.¹⁹

In 1995, O’Gallagher, alongside Rose Masson Dompierre, published *Eyewitness: Grosse Isle, 1847*, which focuses on firsthand accounts of those at the quarantine station during the one of the hardest years of the Famine in Canadian history. This work shifts the emphasis from the island itself to the experiences of the Irish immigrants arriving in Canada and the medical professionals who tended to the sick and destitute.²⁰ Beyond her publications, O’Gallagher played a pivotal role in ensuring Grosse Île became a national heritage site, advocating for the island’s recognition and its importance to the Irish community in Montreal and Quebec. Her efforts were particularly crucial in the 1990s, a period when public education about the Famine at Grosse Île was limited, as she pushed Parks Canada to alter its commemorative approach to feature the Famine more prominently.

¹⁸ Marianna O’Gallagher. *Grosse Ile : Gateway to Canada, 1832-1937* (Ste-Foy, Quebec: Carraig Books, 1984).

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Marianna O’Gallagher and Rose Masson Dompierre. *Eyewitness : Grosse Isle, 1847* (Sainte-Foy, Quebec, Canada: Livres Carraig Books. 1995).

Similarly, Michael Quigley published work on Grosse Île in the late 1990s, providing a brief yet insightful overview of the island and its role during the 1847 Famine disaster.²¹ Both Quigley and O’Gallagher, along with Dompierre, were publishing during the 1980s and 1990s, a period in which Grosse Île received growing public attention. These historians actively participated in efforts to have the island officially commemorated as a national historic park.²² This thesis seeks to build on the works of O’Gallagher, Dompierre, and Quigley by shifting the focus from the historical significance of the island and eyewitness accounts toward its contemporary history. It explores the role the island plays today in educating the public and providing members of the Montreal Irish community the opportunity not only to engage with an Irish historical site, but also to reconnect with their past and learn about major events in Irish history.

In the 2000s, Margaret G. H. MacLean and David Myers published a book for the Getty Conservation Institute in Los Angeles, focusing on Grosse Île and its eventual management by Parks Canada. Their work provides a comprehensive overview of how the island became a historical site, detailing its preservation, tour programs, and the ways its educational content is tailored for different audiences.²³ This study builds on the historical works of MacLean and Myers, while shifting the focus from purely historical analysis to the lived, communal experiences associated with the island.²⁴ This thesis seeks to extend this research by examining how active members of the Montreal Irish community engage with Grosse Île today, highlighting both its historical and communal significance through firsthand accounts.

²¹ Michael Quigley, “Grosse Ile: Canada’s Island Famine Memorial,” *History Ireland* 5, no. 2 (1997).

²² Margaret G. H. Mac Lean and David Myers, *Grosse Île and the Irish Memorial National Historic Site* (The Getty Conservation Institute, Los Angeles, 2003), 16.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

My study additionally focuses on communal activities and their importance in the continued expression of Irish culture in Montreal. The St. Patrick's Day parade is one of the most significant of these activities and scholarship on the parade is extensive. In 2024, Alan Hustak published *One Long Line of Marvel: 200 Years of Montreal's St. Patrick's Parade*, providing a comprehensive history of the parade over the past two centuries, primarily drawing on local newspapers to chronicle its evolution decade by decade.²⁵ While historical scholarship often emphasizes the parade's broader cultural and civic significance, Hustak's work emphasizes the lived experience of participants. It examines how anticipating and participating in the parade allows members of the Montreal Irish community to maintain, transform, and strengthen their connection to their heritage. Building on previous work, this thesis does not seek to retrace the parade's historical evolution, but rather to explore the transformative impact it has had on participants into the twenty-first century. It investigates how and why the parade has been so influential for narrators in this project, highlighting its role in shaping personal and communal Irish identity in Montreal.

A central protagonist of this study is the often-maligned amateur family historian. As historian Tanya Evans has noted, "[f]amily historians have been dismissed by professional and academic historians, in Australia and beyond, as 'misty-eyed and syrupy' and their findings and practices deemed irrelevant to the wider historical community."²⁶ Such dismissive comments, Evans argues, obscure what she calls "[t]he radical potential of family history": "Family historians believe that they are filling in the gaps left by 'official' history and that they are challenging the elitism of the Academy."²⁷ Just as so-called amateur historians can uncover

²⁵ Alan Hustak, *One Long Line of Marvel: 200 Years of Montreal's St. Patrick's Parade* (Vehicle Press, 2024).

²⁶ Tanya Evans, "Secrets and Lies: The Radical Potential of Family History," *History Workshop Journal*, no. 71 (2011): 49, 51.

²⁷ *Ibid.* 55.

stories and perspectives that are often overlooked or forgotten in mainstream academia, “academics can add context, complexity and ambiguity to the histories of their families, encouraging them to question the characterization of individuals as either weak or powerful, successful or not,” as Evans holds.²⁸ Historian James B. Rhoads similarly heralds family history as one of those rare fields of historical inquiry where amateurs and professionals can work in tandem. As Rhoads writes: “Personally I hail this development, and I believe that the whole discipline of family history will be the beneficiary of these endeavors.”²⁹ My study, too, aims to highlight how amateur historians provide insights into their own family’s histories in innovative and generative ways. It seeks to illuminate not only the research findings of my narrators, but also to showcase the transformative act of doing family history.³⁰

Over the course of the conversations conducted for this project, the concept of being a family historian emerged as a particularly resonant one. My narrators relied primarily on three types of sources in their research: genealogy, oral traditions, and material objects. Following our formal interviews, several narrators engaged or expressed interest in conducting genealogical research into their family histories. Some had devoted countless hours—sometimes decades—to this work, while others had opted for more accessible approaches, turning to popular websites like Ancestry.com or Irishgenealogy.ie to uncover information on names, dates, and census records. Genealogist and historian Kelley O’Rourke turned to a close reading of Irish gravestones in St. Columban Cemetery to identify Irish family ancestors.³¹ By cross-referencing

²⁸ Evans, “Secrets and Lies,” 55.

²⁹ James B. Rhoads, “The Importance of Family History to Our Society,” *The Public Historian* 1, no. 3 (1979): 7.

³⁰ For the purposes of this project, the term family historian is used in a more specific sense, referring to individuals who research their own families by gathering and analysing sources to better understand their personal pasts, particularly through genealogical research and material objects. The family historians examined in this project more closely align with genealogists rather than with academic family historians contributing to social history.

³¹ Kelley O’Rourke, “Grave Matters: Mapping the Untold Stories of the Saint-Colomban Cemetery,” (master’s thesis, Concordia University, 2024).

material culture with genealogical sources, she uncovered over 140 individuals buried in the cemetery who had previously been unknown; only ten headstones had been intact and legible. Her work demonstrates the creative potential of genealogical research in uncovering one's Irish ancestral past and makes an important contribution to our understanding of Irish settlement patterns in the rural town of St. Columban, north of Montreal.³²

This study draws on oral history as its central source and major methodology. As other historians have noted, oral histories “provide the richest clues and deepest enigmas in the family's past. Enticing, baffling, revealing, and enlightening, stories constitute a family's heirloom seeds.”³³ In Joseph Amato's work, one can feel the passion with which his narrators spoke; the stories they shared carry a genuine emotional weight that is evident even within the formal interview setting. In my research, too, there were similar instances of intense emotions. I hope to build upon the work of Amato and other family historians who have demonstrated the power that vernacular memories and family stories hold as they are being transmitted from one generation to the next.

Accordingly, oral history research – complemented by insights from the fields of memory, folklore, and storytelling – represents the central methodology of this research project. In the second half of 2024, I had the privilege of conducting nine oral history interviews with eleven Irish-Canadian narrators in the greater Montreal region. When I first began the research and recruitment process, I did not set out to interview a specific type of person. Indeed, I had no particular group in mind with regard to gender or age though I did restrict my search to interview partners of Irish ancestry.

³² O'Rourke, “Grave Matters,”

³³ Joseph Amato, “Rethinking Family History.” *Minnesota History* 60, no. 8 (2007): 333.

To begin recruitment, I contacted two of the main Irish societies in Montreal to help distribute my recruitment poster, which led me to connect with Patrick Shea and Ken Quinn. Ken Quinn, the past president of the St. Patrick's Society, currently serves as the historian for the United Irish Societies while Shea has been active in the Irish community for decades, following in the footsteps of his father, Peter Shea. I also reached out to Shawn O'Donnell, a family acquaintance. Shawn O'Donnell and his sister, Colleen, both grew up in a strongly Irish household in Pointe-Saint-Charles and were eager to participate. During our conversation, one of the O'Donnells mentioned their brother, Mark, who had recently relocated from Montreal to a remote community in Alberta, as another valuable interview partner.

The O'Donnell siblings, along with narrators such as Dany Doyle Sr., Fergus Keyes, Christie Brown and their families grew up in or around Montreal's historically Irish neighbourhoods, particularly Griffintown and Pointe-Saint-Charles.³⁴ Shawn O'Donnell connected me with Kate McNinch, who expressed interest in participating in this study. When I visited McNinch at her home in Hudson—just outside the island of Montreal—she suggested that her mother, Elizabeth Moody, would be an excellent contributor to the project.

Another participant, Scott Phelan, a family friend, is a past president of the St. Patrick's Society and an active member of the Montreal Irish Monument Park Foundation. Phelan was among the first individuals to express interest in participating and later introduced me to Fergus Keyes, who has also been deeply involved with the Monument Park Foundation. Through Phelan, I was connected to Daniel Doyle Sr., president of the Erin's Sports Association—a historic Irish men's club. The final participant, Christie Brown, was introduced to me through a series of email exchanges that primarily originated with my father. Christie Brown, another past

³⁴ Steven High, *Deindustrializing Montreal: Entangled Histories of Race, Residence, and Class* (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2022), 230.

president of the St. Patrick's Society, has been an active and engaged member of Montreal's Irish community since her early adulthood.

It is quite evident that most of the interviewees for this project were found through the "snowball method." This approach is a common yet essential component of oral history research, as it offers several advantages while still presenting certain drawbacks. The snowball method allowed me to easily reach a number of like-minded individuals who were actively involved in the Irish community and eager to share their ancestry and stories with me.³⁵ Additionally, because several of the interview participants were referred to me by others, a level of trust was established between myself and the narrators even before our first meetings.³⁶ This sense of trust created a comfortable environment for not only the interviewees but also myself during our conversations. It is also worth mentioning that, as a first-time oral historian, my interviewing skills developed during the course of my research. The added comfort provided by the snowball method contributed significantly to the smooth flow of the interviews, far more so than if I had been speaking with complete strangers during our first encounter.

One potential disadvantage of using the snowball method is the limited diversity among interviewees. Several of the interviews were conducted with siblings or parents which naturally led to some overlapping stories and viewpoints. This can introduce a degree of repetition into certain testimonies and narratives. However, it was fascinating to highlight both the similarities and the differences that emerged, showcasing that such potential drawbacks were mitigated by this project.

³⁵ Matthew Bailey, "Snowball Sampling in Business Oral History: Accessing and Analyzing Professional Networks in the Australian Property Industry," *Enterprise & Society* 20, no. 1 (2019): 75-76.

³⁶ *Ibid.* 76.

It is important to note that, because most interviews were conducted through referrals, there was a lack of diversity among participants overall. Several of the individuals who took part could be described as “ethnic leaders,” a term used by historian Lisa Rose Mar.³⁷ In her work on Chinese immigrant communities in Canada and the United States during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Mar defines ethnic leaders as “middlemen” who sought to represent their immigrant communities to the broader host society.³⁸ While the situation is not entirely parallel, many of the narrators who hold prominent roles within Montreal’s Irish community have similarly acted as representatives and voices for the diaspora. Such figures play a vital role in ensuring the progression, organization, and preservation of their community within a larger host nation, akin to the ethnic leaders described in Mar’s work. Several participants in this project have dedicated countless hours to advocating for and sustaining the Irish community in Montreal. Although interviewing such community leaders was not part of the initial plan, it is not a limitation but rather an important factor to acknowledge. The conversations and testimonies presented in this project are, in part, shaped by these leaders’ perspectives. To balance this, I made a deliberate effort to seek out and interview individuals who did not hold formal positions within the community even including some who were intentionally distancing themselves from both the Montreal Irish community and their Irish heritage.

I approached the interviews with my participants as a cultural outsider. Although I have lived in Montreal my entire life as an anglophone, I am not of Irish descent. This fact did not come up frequently during our conversations, though I was asked occasionally “Are you Irish?” or “Where in Ireland is your family from?” I would explain that I am not of Irish heritage but

³⁷ Lisa Rose Mar, *Brokering Belonging: Chinese in Canada’s Exclusion Era, 1885-1945* (Oxford University Press, 2010), 5.

³⁸ Ibid.

rather a student of Irish history. Thankfully, I felt welcomed by every participant and encountered no hesitation once this was clarified. Being Irish—or not—does not diminish the quality of the project or the interviews; it simply frames them from the perspective of an outsider. I was fortunate to listen to and share in the rich stories and memories that the eleven Irish Montrealer's were willing to discuss.

The final type of source discussed throughout the project were objects of memory. These objects are fascinating because not every narrator connected with them or even mentioned them as linked to their ancestry. Whether it was family Bibles, newspaper clippings, or simply references to lost or missing objects, these vessels of memory held clear significance for the participants, serving as tangible connections to their personal and familial pasts. According to Mary Ellen Bell and Susan E. Bell, two sisters who wrote an article titled “What to Do with All This ‘Stuff’?: Memory, Family, and Material Objects,” there is a difference between family objects and family belongings. They argue that “[a] family belonging is an object that has a family or personal story connected to it. An object tends to be one of many and without a specific story. Sorting out the difference between a family object versus a family belonging is the work of family members and is the work that tends to stir and surface family memories and history. It is our belongings that we tend to keep.”³⁹ They additionally argue that the monetary value rarely seems to factor in when families designated “things” as either belongings or objects.⁴⁰ Objects have the power to convey stories, but they also have the ability to spark newfound interests in historical memories. As oral historian Anna Green notes in her study “Grandparents, Communicative Memory and Narrative Identity”, “[i]nherited objects, as

³⁹ Mary Ellen Bell and Susan E. Bell, “What to Do with All This ‘Stuff’? Memory, Family, and Material Objects,” *Storytelling, Self, Society* 8, no. 2 (2012): 81.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

indicated in the earlier interviews, appear to be a powerful mnemonic medium from childhood onwards. Memories of grandparents were often accompanied by an inherited treasured object of some kind.”⁴¹ This thesis will briefly discuss material objects and the types of memories they are able to convey. More specifically, however, it will focus on how the process of acquiring or searching for family heirlooms has the potential to inspire further research and deeper interest in family history.

In the final analysis, this study argues that Irish identity, or “Irishness,” is not simply passed down from one generation to the next. Rather, it is through active participation and performance—whether communal or personal—that members of the Irish community uncover, strengthen, and transform what it means to be Irish in Montreal.

⁴¹ Anna Green, “Grandparents, Communicative Memory and Narrative Identity,” *Oral History* 47, no. 1 (2019): 88.

Chapter One: Visits to the Past

Patrick Shea was born in the Notre-Dame-de-Grâce (NDG) area of Montreal in 1973. In the 1980s, while attending elementary school, his class was asked to write a poem on any subject. The winning entries from schools across the country were to be published in a book. Shea wrote an epic poem about his ancestors' emigration from Ireland to Canada and ultimately became the winner from his school.¹

Patrick Shea:

Ireland to Canada

The country of Ireland,
That is where my ancestors came from.
They worked very hard in this land, in the cold winter, and under the warm sun.

They came from the counties of Antrim and Kerry
And both were very merry.
My family descended until it created me,
As I am now, as you can see.

One day, England took all of our food,
And cut down all of our trees
They were not polite, but very rude,
They kept the supplies for themselves or shipped them overseas.

Then our final hope, the potato crop, failed.
We were starving and all dying off.
We would have to emigrate to Canada,
Over the sea and very far off.

The trip was very long and hard.
In ships no bigger than my backyard,
Sailing over the Ocean blue,
We were all sick with the flu.

Arriving in Canada we stopped at Grosse Île.
Some started working at the local mill.
Some travelled down the St. Lawrence to Montreal,
Where we started a new life up until now.

¹ Patrick Shea, Interview with the author. August 29th, 2024.

Up until my generations,
We have all fulfilled our missions:
To give thanks to Almighty God,
And to help other without a negative nod.

Shea, Tierney, McCormick, Donnelly, Casey and Cowie
Together we are one.²

It is interesting to note that the poem employs the terms “my ancestors” and “we,” suggesting that it is written within a familial narrative context, emulating the hypothetical journey that Shea’s ancestors had undertaken from Ireland to Canada. Patrick refers to the origins of the Irish people, who were hard-working and deeply connected to their land, until the catastrophic Famine of 1845. He emphasizes that this Famine was not simply a natural disaster, as commonly depicted in revisionist interpretations, but instead attributes blame to “England” for the horrific events that transpired. This aligns closely with the nationalist interpretation of the Famine, presented in language that remains accessible to an 11-year-old boy. John Mitchel’s work on the Irish Famine, published in 1861, provided a foundational framework for Irish nationalist scholarship on the subject. Its key themes are echoed throughout Patrick Shea’s poem, particularly the claim that the British were responsible for the massive food exports that occurred both before and during the Famine years.³ Furthermore, the anti-British sentiments expressed in Shea’s poem mirror those in Mitchel’s writings, with the Irish historian repeatedly describing the British as “monstrous,” “cruel,” and “tyrannical.”⁴ When discussing the British government, and in particular the monarchy, Mitchel states, “I thank God that I live in the days when I shall witness the utter downfall, and trample upon the grave, of the most portentous, the grandest, meanest, falsest, and cruellest tyranny that ever deformed this world.”⁵ The poem continues by

² Patrick Shea, “Ireland to Canada,” in *Shouldst and Pearls V*, ed. Terry Collins and Joanne Collins. 1985.

³ John Mitchel, *The Last Conquest of Ireland (Perhaps)*. (Glasgow: Cameron & Ferguson, 1876), 104-105.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid. 179.

highlighting the treacherous journey aboard the coffin ships, while reinforcing the imagery of the Irish people's willingness to work hard and maintain their faith in God upon arriving in Montreal. It concludes with a theme of community and unity, underscored by the names of all his ancestors and those who arrived in Canada during the Famine years. This poem not only reflects the interpretation of young Patrick Shea, but it also serves as a reminder that such conversations and viewpoints were not exclusively reserved for historians. Just how was an eleven-year-old boy able to construct such a political and historical account of his family's journey from Ireland to Canada during the Famine era?

This chapter will examine the popular-historical scholarship that shaped young Patrick Shea's representation of Irish Canadian history and investigate how the generations of narrators, ranging in age from their early 40s to their mid-60s, learned about and made sense of this foundational narrative of the Irish in Canada. As we will see, most narrators situated the history of the Famine within the domain of "History"—a history defined by book learning and formal education, distanced from the social space of familial memory, reinforcing familial and communal silences. It was through "pilgrimage" trips to Grosse Île that some of my narrators experienced a rekindling of their understanding and connection to the Famine. Furthermore, it was not merely through invoking the Irish Famine, but through undertaking rites of return—travelling to Ireland, the homeland of their ancestors—that narrators reclaimed a personal, deeply felt connection to their ancestral roots. Ultimately, the active trips to Grosse Île and back to Ireland provided the narrators of this project an opportunity to reconnect or transform their connection with their ancestral roots and history evolving their Irish Canadian identity.

Patrick Shea was born in NDG and spent his youth in this Montreal neighbourhood. Shea's family had made significant strides in their socio-economic status over several

generations and was comfortably middle-class by the time he started school.⁶ From a “very early age,” Shea was involved in the Irish community in Montreal.⁷ His father, Peter Shea, was a long-time member of the Montreal St. Patrick’s Society. Like his grandfather and his father before him, Patrick Shea attended the historically Irish-Catholic Loyola High School and College, although the nature of the school has shifted towards a more elite private school. Patrick’s involvement in the community began at a young age, when he started ushering at the St. Patrick’s Society Ball at just 15 years old.⁸ Additionally, Patrick’s father played an active role in the communal events tied to the Irish community, often participating in Irish studies events. In the 1980s, both Shea and his father attended an Irish historical studies conference in Quebec City, which was led by Marianna O’Gallagher. Shea discussed during our conversation how this event was pivotal in shaping the knowledge that informed the creation of his submitted poem.

Marianna O’Gallagher was born in 1929 and grew up in Quebec City in an Irish household. She is best known as a historian who studied and published work on Irish heritage and roots in Quebec City, with a particular focus on the significance of Grosse Île. O’Gallagher was not only a historian but also a key figure in the development of the community organization Irish Heritage Quebec, founded in 1973.⁹ Furthermore, she played a crucial role in the efforts to have Grosse Île designated as a National Historic Site in 1984.¹⁰ O’Gallagher published several articles and monographs, primarily in the 1980s and 1990s, focusing on Irish history, especially in Quebec City, while also discussing the broader Irish community in Quebec.¹¹ O’Gallagher

⁶ Patrick Shea, Interview with the author. August 29th, 2024.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ “Being Irish O’Quebec” Presented at the McCord Museum, March 20, 2009. (https://www.musee-mccord-stewart.ca/app/uploads/2009/03/musee-mccord_exposition_irlandais-o-quebec_textes_2009_en.pdf) 32.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ See O’Gallagher’s additional work on the Irish community in Quebec within, Marianna O’Gallagher. *Saint Brigid’s, Quebec : The Irish Care for Their People, 1856 to 1981*. (Quebec: Carraig Books, 1981), and Marianna

examines the role of Grosse Île in her book *Grosse Île: Gateway to Canada, 1832-1937*, dedicating several sections to the Irish Famine. Her work paints a grim picture of the experience of Irish immigrants during the notorious year of 1847, highlighting the lack of government aid from the British, which exacerbated the Famine, and the dire conditions endured by the Irish people. She also explores the harsh realities aboard the coffin ships, themes that are echoed throughout Patrick Shea's poem.¹² Given his early involvement and the deep-rooted connections of his parents within the Irish community in Montreal, it is evident that, by the age of eleven, Patrick Shea was thoroughly immersed in Irish culture and heritage. His upbringing was profoundly influenced by his family's active participation in the community since the 1970s, as well as his father's engagement in Irish historical conferences during the 1980s.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Irish studies in Montreal, Quebec, and Canada gained increasing popularity within the community, exemplified by the founding of the Canadian Association for Irish Studies (CAIS) in 1973 and the creation of the *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* in 1975. O'Gallagher's work, along with the growing presence of Irish organizations and community involvement, highlights the types of discussions and the level of access available to those eager to engage with this knowledge. Individuals like Patrick Shea's father, who actively sought out such resources, helped make the narratives explored in Shea's poem accessible to both the wider community and to a school-age boy.

In addition to the work and lectures delivered by O'Gallagher, Patrick Shea also mentioned that his poem was influenced by James Magnan's *The Voyage of the Naparima*. First published in 1982, *The Voyage of the Naparima* is presented as the diary of Gerald Keegan,

O'Gallagher and Rose Masson Dompierre, *Eyewitness : Grosse Isle, 1847*. (Sainte-Foy, Quebec, Canada: Livres Carraig Books, 1995).

¹² Ibid. 47-49.

chronicling his journey from Ireland to Canada in 1847.¹³ The authenticity of Magnan's work has been questioned on several occasions, with numerous historians declaring it to be a work of fiction. As a result, it is seen more as a collection of potential primary sources than a first-hand account.¹⁴ The combination of Patrick Shea's familial influences, the growing prominence of Irish studies, and the presence of historical associations clearly impacted his ability and willingness to construct such a historically and politically charged poem.

In each interview conducted for this project, my narrators touched upon the history of the Famine. Unlike Patrick Shea, though, they had not encountered the history of the Famine in their childhood and youth. Mark, Shawn, and Colleen O'Donnell, along with Daniel Doyle Sr. and Christie Brown, all noted that the Famine was scarcely discussed in their familial circles.

The O'Donnell siblings grew up in the Irish-working-class neighbourhood of Pointe-Saint-Charles in the 1960s. Though their parents were both of Irish descent, they rarely discussed historical events such as the Famine. According to the three siblings, their parents were rather reserved and mostly confined their interactions to their own community.

Davis: And so, your, your parents never really talked about... the Famine?

Mark O'Donnell: No. never.

Davis: No.

Mark O'Donnell: Never.

Davis: Do you kind of have an idea why? Or...

Mark O'Donnell: I... I don't, I don't know why it was like... it's like they didn't really... they, I don't know if it was just... I don't remember anybody else's parents either, it was almost like, not that you were ashamed to be from Ireland, be Irish or anything, it was like they just, 'oh well... you know, you don't want to talk about, being poor, or being from the Famine' I don't know what it was really. But nobody, nobody in my family ever seemed to know anything more than the bare minimums of 'oh yeah there was a Famine' type of thing you know? Or if they did know it was different... it was distant.... uncles or aunts... or something, I never heard it, you know, I never heard... their... their versions of it... would have been nice but yeah..."¹⁵

¹³ James Magnan, *The Voyage of the Naparima* (Carraig Books Inc., 1982).

¹⁴ Mark McGowan, "Famine, Facts and Fabrication: An Examination of Diaries from the Irish Famine Migration to Canada," *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 33, no. 2 (2007): 50.

¹⁵ Mark O'Donnell, Interview with the author. September 24th, 2024.

Shawn O'Donnell: Our father's family didn't talk much about anything so you never really...

Colleen O'Donnell: But I think in those days...

Shawn O'Donnell: They didn't...

Colleen O'Donnell: They just... I don't know if it was just our families

Shawn O'Donnell: Oh no yeah, they just...

Colleen O'Donnell: Or maybe it's the Irish, they don't talk a lot about...

Shawn O'Donnell: Hardship.

Colleen O'Donnell: Hardship.

Shawn O'Donnell: You try and suck it up. It's like they...

Colleen O'Donnell: Yeah, whereas in other cultures, they never want you to forget. And and and, or they're taught when they're young the history of what happened. We don't really know we just you know...

Shawn O'Donnell: Yeah...

Colleen O'Donnell: Have a concert.... **laughs**

Davis: And when you were kids, did anybody that you knew growing up here, sort of ever talk about the Famine or?

Colleen O'Donnell and Shawn O'Donnell: No...¹⁶

The O'Donnell siblings were particularly perplexed when asked about their parents' reluctance to engage with Irish history. As the siblings noted, not only was the Famine seldom mentioned, but so, too, were other hardships faced by the Irish community. Shawn O'Donnell acknowledged that his father was notably taciturn when it came to matters concerning Ireland, as reflected in the lack of dialogue about the Famine. These silences echo the sentiments explored in Henry Greenspan's work on survivor silences following traumatic events, which he categorizes as "the unsaid."¹⁷ The O'Donnell siblings explained during our conversations that their parents simply did not talk about these events or other hardships—not because they were unaware of them, but because they chose not to—similar to the survivors described in Greenspan's work.

How could an event of such magnitude and significance to the narrators' ancestors and community be seemingly forgotten or remained unmentioned? Jan Assman has distinguished

¹⁶ Shawn and Colleen O'Donnell, Interview with the author. September 10th, 2024.

¹⁷ Henry Greenspan, "The Unsaid, the Incommunicable, the Unbearable, and the Irretrievable," *The Oral History Review* 41, no. 2 (2014): 230.

between two subtypes of collective memory: communicative memory and cultural memory. According to Alexander Freund, “Cultural memory is defined as a society’s long-term memory. Communicative memory is the short-term memory that is maintained by the living three to four generations”.¹⁸ According to Assman and Freund, the Famine and its memory would fall into the category of cultural memory rather than communicative memory. This distinction is evident throughout the conversations in this project, as communicative memories of the Famine were not discussed. Aleida Assman adds an intriguing layer to the concept of cultural memory. She argues that within cultural memory, there exists both a “canon” and an “archive.” Assman describes the canon as the set of memories that are actively preserved and promoted within society. She notes, “the active memory of the canon perpetuates what a society has consciously selected and maintains as salient and vital for a common orientation and a shared remembering; its institutions are the literary and visual canon, the school curricula, the museum, and the stage, along with the holidays, shared customs, and remembrance days”¹⁹. Assman further argues that archival memories are accessible only to “specialists” and are not widely circulated as common knowledge.²⁰ Interestingly, when applying this theory to the Famine, we can argue that the Famine has been relegated to this archive of memories, rather than being included in the cultural “canon” of shared societal knowledge. This idea is reinforced by Mark O’Donnell’s statement, where he and his family were aware of the Famine and its tragedy, yet the three O’Donnell siblings described their understanding of the Famine as being primarily acquired through “book learning” rather than through communal teachings. Assman highlights that what is considered

¹⁸ Freund, “A Canadian Family Talks about Oma’s Life in Nazi Germany,” 7.

¹⁹ Aleida Assman, “Re-framing Memory: Between Individual and Collective Forms of Constructing the Past.” In *Performing the Past: Memory, History, and Identity in Modern Europe*, ed by Karin Tilmans, Frank van Vree and Jay (Winter Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2014), 43.

²⁰ Ibid. 43-44.

part of the canon or archive is fluid and non-permanent, allowing cultural memories to transition between public and professional spheres. However, after examining the Famine, it is evident that for the O'Donnell siblings during their youth, the Famine remained largely within the realm of archival memory.²¹

The Irish Famine itself is not an event that is commemorated or discussed within public spheres either in Ireland or its diasporas. As Camilla Orjuela has observed, in drawing on Emily Mark-FitzGerald's important study, "'the imprecise nature of the Famine' and 'its lack of central characters, linear narrative, heroic episodes or key dates' made it rather unfitting for commemoration. Violence, which is structural rather than direct, can indeed be 'imprecise', and Famines often lack a clear start and finishing point."²² The narrators of this project, who grew up in the 1950s to 1970s, were part of an era when commemoration of the Irish Famine was relatively limited. Major Irish Famine commemorations in Quebec, such as the Black Rock Monument and Grosse Île, existed during the youth of the narrators, yet were recognized as official sites of commemoration for the Irish Famine only in the 1990s.²³ The lack of communal dialogue, coupled with the scarcity of commemorative initiatives, contributed to an environment in which the O'Donnell siblings were raised, where the Famine was simply not discussed.

Silences surrounding the Famine within the families involved in this project were not uncommon, particularly following the intensity of Famine commemorations in the 1990s and early 2000s. The sustained level of public attention during this period contributed to what several narrators described as "Famine fatigue," as repeated commemorations and widespread discussion

²¹ Assman, "Re-framing Memory, 44.

²² Camilla Orjuela, "Remembering/Forgetting Hunger: Towards an Understanding of Famine Memorialisation," *Third World Quarterly* 45, no. 2 (2024) 264. And Emily Mark-FitzGerald, *Commemorating the Irish Famine: Memory and the Monument* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013), 61.

²³ For more information on the Montreal Irish Monument Park Foundation see, <https://montrealirishmonument.com/history/>.

led to a sense of fatigue with the topic. As a result, some narrators and their families felt less inclined to discuss the Famine in depth, given its long-standing prominence in public discourse during the late 1990s. This phenomenon of Famine fatigue was not unique to the Montreal Irish community; according to Cormac Ó Gráda, it was also experienced in Ireland and across other Irish diasporic communities.²⁴

What is fascinating about the memory of the Irish Famine, especially as it pertains to the narrators of this project, is that whereas some interviewees, such as Daniel Doyle Sr. and Christie Brown, view the event as tragic, they struggle to connect with it on a personal level. Daniel Doyle Sr. grew up in the Irish neighbourhood of Griffintown in Montreal, before moving to the nearby historically Irish community of Pointe-Saint-Charles. Raised in the 1960s and 1970s, both of his parents were of Irish descent. Doyle Sr. emphasized that his family actively showcased their Irish pride and heritage and that they were involved in various Irish organizations and participated in the annual St. Patrick's Day parade. Christie Brown, who grew up in Lachine, just west of downtown Montreal, during the 1970s and 1980s, had a different family dynamic. Whereas her father's ancestors had been Scottish, her mother was of Irish descent. Throughout our conversations, Christie explained that her family primarily identified with her Irish heritage, as her father did not discuss his Scottish origins. Both Daniel Doyle Sr. and Christie Brown openly discussed their personal distance from, or lack of connection to, the Famine. Daniel Doyle Sr. remarks "I get it, mentally and they shouldn't let these guys, [forget what they] did for us to get us over here and I, I totally appreciate it cause, best place to live is here in Canada. But how could I appreciate something that's so far back in history to a point? I don't know..."²⁵ Daniel Doyle Sr. suggests that there is a personal disconnect with the events of the Famine,

²⁴ Cormac Ó Gráda, "Making Irish Famine History in 1995," *History Workshop Journal*, no. 42 (1996): 99.

²⁵ Daniel Doyle Sr., Interview with the author. October 9th, 2024

attributing this to the temporal distance between the Famine and its impact on the Irish community worldwide. Christie Brown expresses a similar sentiment, stating that, due to the passage of time, she finds it difficult to connect with the Famine on a personal level. Although, as she acknowledges, her family was likely affected by the event, she still struggles to establish a personal connection with it.

Christie Brown: I think it's because I so completely dissociated myself from, that experience that... it's like reading about atrocities in another country that absolutely are horrible but... [...] So, the fact that it felt so removed from my actual life experience it was like okay that's interesting, but it never even dawned on me to look into my history from that point of view. It was something that happened to the community as opposed to my family specifically.²⁶

She acknowledges that the Irish Famine is a key and foundational event for Irish communities and their diasporas worldwide though she struggles to connect with it on a personal level. This sense of disconnect allowed the Famine to remain, in her view, at a distant—something to be encountered in history books, at a remove from her identity. Similarly, Sean Kenney, in a 1997 study on reflections of the Famine, argues that he was raised without a strong connection to the tragedy and found it to be an event he could not relate to: “It [the Famine] was something that had happened to people not like me”.²⁷ His words echo Brown's perspective.

Families played a crucial role in fostering, or inhibiting, Famine dialogue. Both Christie Brown and Patrick Shea demonstrate that connections to the history of the Famine may vary significantly despite being born in the same generation and being good friends during their youth. Patrick, through his poem, claimed the Famine as part of his personal identity, using language such as “my ancestors” and “we.” In contrast, Brown acknowledged her ancestors were likely directly affected by the Famine but expressed a lack of personal connection to the event.

²⁶ Christie Brown, Interview with the author. October 21st, 2024

²⁷ Sean Kenney, “A Nightmare Revisited”, in *Irish Hunger: Personal Reflections on the Legacy of the Famine*. ed. Tom Hayden (Boulder, Colo.: Roberts Rinehart Publishers, 1997), 185.

The key difference between Brown and Shea appears to lie in the level of Famine discussion within their families—Patrick Shea being formally introduced to the event and its significance, while Christie Brown never did discuss it extensively with her family.

Towards the end of each conversation, I asked every narrator about their current feelings towards the Famine, hoping to gain insight into the evolution of their reflections and thoughts on the event. After posing this question, several narrators—specifically Elizabeth Moody, Scott Phelan, Fergus Keyes, and Ken Quinn—provided detailed responses. While their stances and opinions regarding the Irish Famine and its legacy varied, it was evident that their understanding and connection to the Famine as a pivotal event in Irish history had been shaped and transformed by their lived experiences or their participation in various Montreal Irish societies.

Elizabeth Moody's family originally hailed from Pointe-Saint-Charles before relocating to Verdun and eventually NDG. Her family had both British and Irish roots; however, as she mentioned multiple times during our conversations, she felt a stronger connection to her British heritage. As Moody explained, her exposure to alcoholism and repeated instances of drinking on the “Irish” side of her family motivated her to distance herself from this part of her heritage. Both Moody and her daughter, Kate McIninch, noted that their understanding of all things Irish, particularly regarding the Irish Famine, was profoundly shaped by their relationship with Quebec Irish historian Marianna O’Gallagher. The two women first met while working as teachers at St. Patrick’s High School in Quebec City.

Elizabeth Moody: But I also think it [the Famine] happened very quickly... the potato Famine, happened, seems to me if I recall, it was something that gradually happened and the potato just right up poor or whatever they have this rot... ... I mean as a historian looking at what happens, who do you blame? Who do you blame? [...] I don’t know... my thinking is always, there’s extreme difficulty in understanding, they are very complicated situations...”²⁸
[...]

²⁸ Kate McIninch and Elizabeth Moody, Interview with the author. September 15th, 2024.

Kate McNinch: It's not like oh these things just happen, they, no they don't happen in a society that takes care of the poor, that isn't motivated by greed, and colonization, that's, they don't happen in those places.

Elizabeth Moody: The British didn't give a shit about Ireland...

Kate McNinch: Exactly...

Elizabeth Moody: Not one, they didn't not care about Ireland...

Kate McNinch: No, they did, they cared about reaping it of its resources and making them more like them... that's what they cared about it.²⁹

Whereas Moody and McNinch had different perspectives on the Famine and its legacy today, both used terms such as colonization, greed, and even genocide when discussing the Famine.³⁰ This language aligns with the nationalist interpretation of the Famine, which gained prominence among both the public and scholars in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Moody and McNinch both noted that their education regarding the Famine was limited during their youth. Their understanding of, and connection to, the event did not develop solely through book learning or family conversations. Rather, as we shall see later, it was through their relationship with the renowned historian Marianna O'Gallagher that they were introduced to Grosse Île. O'Gallagher not only highlighted the island's significance to Moody and McNinch but also shaped their education and understanding of the Famine and its impact on Irish immigrants arriving in British North America.

The Irish nationalist interpretation of the Famine also emerged in other conversations conducted for this project. Scott Phelan, originally from New Brunswick, moved back to Montreal with his family when he was an infant in 1956. Growing up in Montreal-West in an Irish household in the 1960s and 1970s, Phelan noted that the Famine was rarely discussed by either his family or the wider community. However, his understanding of the Famine

²⁹ Kate McNinch and Elizabeth Moody, Interview with the author. September 15th, 2024

³⁰ Ibid.

transformed significantly when he became more involved in the Montreal Irish community, particularly through his continued work with the Montreal Irish Monument Park Foundation.

Scott Phelan: So... there's still a lot of passion in people in Ireland, when they start talking about it because it was.... A genocide. A culling of the herd, is what it was called, in, in parliament, in Britain. The whole... cultural engineering that went on in Ireland for hundreds of years, to reduce peasants to these minor plots and reduce them to a, a diet of potatoes as their mainstay, when they are then tending the farms and the cattle and the sheep, of all the rich landowners be they Irish gentry or English gentry. It was... now it's recognized for what it is... it's ... you know, like almost next to slavery, it's, it's cultural engineering, at its worst if not genocide.³¹

Phelan similarly uses the term “genocide” and aligns with the Irish nationalist interpretation of the Famine. Today, he is actively involved, with the Montreal Irish Monument Park Foundation. In fact, during our conversations, Phelan spent the first forty-five minutes discussing his role in the project, how it came to be, and its impact on shaping his understanding of the Famine. It was evident that Phelan's knowledge and understanding of the Famine had been limited in his youth. However, as he became more engaged in the community, particularly through his involvement with the park project, his awareness and knowledge of the Famine's history evolved through this active participation.

Alongside Scott Phelan, Fergus Keyes also serves as a director of the Montreal Irish Monument Park Foundation. Fergus was born in the Parc-Extension (Parc-Ex) neighbourhood of Montreal in 1948. Both of Keyes's parents were of Irish descent, and he describes his family as being proud of their Irish heritage. Yet, similar to other narrators, his understanding of the Famine was relatively basic during his youth. Like Phelan, Keyes became more involved in the Irish community only later in life, particularly with the Black Rock Project. He shared his current understanding of the Famine, but his response differed somewhat from Phelan's.

Fergus Keyes: You know often when you talk about the Famine, I often see people write up “it was a genocide”. Well, I don't like the word genocide personally, I mean I think

³¹ Scott Phelan, Interview with the author. September 25th, 2024.

it... genocide maybe relates to Jewish guys in Second World War where you had identified 6 million people who were murdered for... I don't think that it was ever a genocide. It was a different time and a different place so, Britain worked under... Laissez-Faire economics, so everybody took care of their own, it was not a welfare state. It also had a kind of a Protestant Calvinist attitude that you can't give anything to somebody for free, I mean they gotta work for it. They gotta do something for it. And there were many British that stood up in the House of Commons in, in England and argued that they weren't doing enough for the Irish. You know the quotes that come out of the other guys who said, well, let them die, we couldn't care less. That's the quotes of, of the big ones that come out but, I don't think that was the attitude of everybody.³²

Fergus's interpretation emphasizes the extreme complexity of the event. His understanding aligns more with post-revisionist interpretations of the Famine, which are cautious about using the term "genocide" while still acknowledging the British Empire's role in the tragedy. It is particularly interesting to note that both Keyes and Phelan described similar educational experiences regarding the Famine during their youth and are now involved in the same Irish commemorative project. Despite this, their interpretations and opinions about the Famine differ significantly, with Phelan leaning towards the nationalist interpretation, and Fergus adopting the post-revisionist perspective.

This range of interpretations, as seen in the perspectives of Moody, Keyes, and Phelan, was also discussed during conversations with Ken Quinn. Born in Verdun in 1968 to a very Irish family, Ken echoed the sentiments of several participants, stating that the Irish Famine was not a topic frequently discussed in school or his family. According to Quinn, it was only as he progressed through life that his understanding of the event evolved. More recently, he served as the past president and historian for the St. Patrick's Society; currently holds the same positions for the United Irish Societies. While he does not express a direct opinion on the Famine or his

³² Fergus Keyes, Interview with the author. October 30th, 2024.

feelings towards the British, he acknowledges that there is a “fence,” as he describes it, with both sides to consider.³³

Ken Quinn: I can... by the words that people used, I can tell which side of the fence there on.

Davis: Okay... and what do you mean by that?

Ken Quinn: People, will use the term An Gorta Mor... or The Great Hunger... I know they side on the republican side of things... they still blame the British Crown to this day... for, for what happened and people that use the term, The Great Famine, they don't, they, they know that the people... were under hardship, they came over here, they died coming over here... in very deplorable conditions, but they don't, they don't think of it any more than that... they don't think about it in political.. terms. They just know that people came over here, and they tried for a better life, some of them made it, some of them didn't... [...] and it goes as far... I know people who won't even become citizens of Canada, who were born in Ireland, because they would have to swear an oath to the Monarch. And they won't do it... they just won't.³⁴

Quinn highlights the differing opinions that exist within the community, particularly those expressed by Moody, Keyes, and Phelan. His reflections demonstrate that there is no unified understanding of the Famine and its legacy among the Irish community in Montreal, nor among the narrators of this project.

All four narrators who spoke eloquently about the Irish Famine and its legacy, as it pertains to their personal experiences, demonstrate that the event and its history were not frequently discussed or taught within their families. Instead, their understanding of the Famine was developed through various life experiences. Phelan, Keyes, and Quinn all cultivated their knowledge of the Famine through active participation in communal roles, particularly within Irish societies such as the Black Rock Project, the St. Patrick's Society, and the United Irish Societies. For most of the interviewees, their families did not constitute a space in which stories about Irish history, migration or the Famine were transmitted; familial storytelling and interactions did not extend to Irish history.

³³ Ken Quinn, Interview with the author. September 17th, 2024.

³⁴ Ibid.

Instead, it was through “rites of return” – particularly visits to Grosse Île – that my narrators were able to connect with and learn about their ancestral and communal history. Grosse Île, an island in the St. Lawrence near Quebec City, was originally used as a quarantine station during the 1830s, in response to the cholera epidemic. During the Irish Famine years, it became a holding area for immigrants arriving from Europe, where they had to remain until they were deemed free of disease.³⁵ Over the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the legacy of Grosse Île has evolved.³⁶ While it was repurposed in 1937 to be used to help control disease during World War II, it was not until 1974 that the island was officially recognized as a heritage commemorative site. By 1988, it was placed under the supervision of Parks Canada. Since then, guided tours have been offered, providing visitors with a deeper understanding of the island’s rich history.³⁷ These tours include visits to several important sites, such as the disinfection building, the Celtic Cross, the memorial at the Irish cemetery, the Catholic Church, and the Lazaretto.³⁸ However, the commemoration of the events of 1847 and the Irish Famine at Grosse Île is more complex than it might initially appear. While the island’s role during the Famine years is significant, much of the focus of the commemoration efforts has historically been on other aspects of its history. Parks Canada’s initiatives, which began in 1988, have primarily highlighted events from 1832, such as the cholera epidemic, as well as the island’s use by the military during World War I, rather than placing emphasis on the Irish Famine of 1847. It was not until 1996 that the island altered its commemorative narrative by “bringing the fateful year of 1847 into sharper focus than was proposed by the development concept”.³⁹

³⁵ Quigley, “Grosse Île,” 22.

³⁶ Mac Lean and Myers, “Grosse Île and the Irish Memorial National Historic Site,” 7.

³⁷ Ibid. 9.

³⁸ Ibid. 10.

³⁹ Ibid. 17.

In recent years, the focus of the Grosse Île tours has shifted to highlight the devastation that occurred on the island more specifically discussing the mass death that took place during the Famine period of 1847, as well as its spiritual significance for the Irish community. According to Parks Canada, the events of 1847 and the impact of the Famine on the Irish community are now more prominently conveyed during the island tours, particularly in the sections that feature the Celtic High Cross, the Irish Cemetery, and the Lazaretto.⁴⁰ This change was spearheaded by the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada (HSMBC), which advocated to the Canadian Minister of Heritage to present “the full story of the Canadian immigrant experience at Grosse Île.”⁴¹

The commemorative efforts on the island are of significant importance to the Irish community, as they preserve the history of their ancestors and the hardships they endured. Today, Grosse Île serves as a place of reflection and education, not only for the Irish community but also for the general public, helping visitors understand immigrant experiences in the nineteenth century and their influence on the development of Canada.

An interesting aspect of the island’s commemoration is its emphasis on the Irish community, particularly through the Celtic High Cross. The inscription on this monument serves as a tribute to the Irish who perished on the island while attempting to migrate to Canada. Its significance for Irish communities in Quebec was brought to the fore in Ronald Rudin and Robert McMahon’s moving documentary *Remembering A Memory: A film about the Celtic Cross on Grosse Île*.⁴² The Cross’ inscription is presented in three languages: French, English,

⁴⁰ Mac Lean and Myers, “Grosse Île and the Irish Memorial National Historic Site,” 22.

⁴¹ Ibid. 16.

⁴² Robert McMahon (director) and Ronald Rudin (producer), *Remembering A Memory: A film about the Celtic Cross on Grosse Île* (Montreal: 2011). The film – and supporting documentation – is available at: <https://rememberingamemory.ca>

and Irish Gaelic, underscoring the island's role as both a site of Irish history and a symbol of cultural remembrance. Those in French and English directly state: "Sacred to the memory of thousands of Irish emigrants who, to preserve the faith, suffered hunger and exile in 1847-48, and stricken with fever, ended here their sorrowful pilgrimage."⁴³ The inscription in Irish Gaelic provides a more direct and nationalist tone, stating, "Children of the Gael died in the thousands on this island, having fled from the laws of foreign tyrants and artificial Famine in the years 1847-48. God's blessing on them. Let this monument be a token to their name and honor from the Gaels of America. God Save Ireland."⁴⁴ Although Grosse Île plays an important role in educating the general public about its history and uses, the inscription on the Celtic High Cross highlights that the island holds a much deeper significance for those of Irish descent.

It is clear that Grosse Île's commemorative history is both complex and rich, particularly in relation to the Irish Famine. Throughout the conversations for this project, several narrators emphasized not only the importance of this site but also how visiting the island has become a form of "pilgrimage" for the Irish community. Marking its significance, Ireland's past president, Mary Robinson, visited Grosse Île in 1994. Since then, it has become a place for the Irish to gather, remember, and commemorate the Famine and those who perished during the mid-nineteenth century.⁴⁵ The O'Donnell siblings, Ken Quinn, and Scott Phelan all shared how their understanding of the Famine and its impact on the Montreal Irish community was deepened through their visits to Grosse Île. These trips allowed them to further appreciate and tangibly connect with their ancestral history in a meaningful way.

Ken Quinn: Yeah... I went when I was president of the United Irish Societies of Montreal. And again... then that was in... August of 2009. And when I was president of the St. Patrick's Society of Montreal [in 2022] ... I also went. I thought it was important

⁴³ Mac Lean and Myers, "Grosse Île and the Irish Memorial National Historic Site," 8.

⁴⁴ Ibid. 8-9

⁴⁵ Quigley, "Grosse Île," 36.

as president of the organizations to at least go over... and renew... my appreciation... for, for the people that came before us.⁴⁶

Quinn emphasizes that visiting Grosse Île is not merely about being present on the island, but rather about the deep meaning and emotions it evokes, particularly for the Irish community. He speaks of a sense of commitment and obligation to visit the site, a sentiment that underscores the importance of the island in the Irish collective consciousness. This obligation reflects a broader sentiment within the community, highlighting that the true significance of Grosse Île is not only in its historical value but in the act of visiting it—a ritual that “renews” their appreciation and connection to their shared heritage.⁴⁷

These visits to Grosse Île not only cultivate a renewed sense of appreciation for the site and the historical events that unfolded there, but they also inspire individuals to delve deeper into their own family’s Irish ancestry. By connecting with the island’s history, many are motivated to explore the events that shaped their past, fostering a deeper understanding of their heritage and the experiences of their ancestors.

Colleen O’Donnell: They would run bus trips to Grosse Île [in the early 2000s], so I went on one of the bus trips and we went to the fever sheds, you know like, you see the kids writing on the wall, not unlike the Nazi camp... so if you saw certain things but, you know, you learnt a lot more there and we went to like graveyards there and that was solemn and sad.⁴⁸

Colleen emphasizes the significance of Grosse Île not only for herself but also acknowledges the community-organized bus trips for those wishing to visit the island. This highlights how visiting the site was highly valued by the community throughout the 2000s and continues to be so today. The bus trips, as described by O’Donnell, were not limited to a specific generation but remain a tradition that continues. According to Parks Canada, school programs are still offered at the site,

⁴⁶ Ken Quinn, Interview with the author. September 17th, 2024.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Shawn and Colleen O’Donnell, Interview with the author. September 10th, 2024.

providing children and students the opportunity to visit and learn about the island's critical role in the Irish Canadian immigrant experience of the nineteenth century.⁴⁹

Scott Phelan's family, who originally settled in British North America in the early 1800s, may not have had a direct familial connection to Grosse Île, yet Phelan still discussed the personal connection he had towards the community through the island and its significance.⁵⁰ Visiting Grosse Île evoked emotional responses that are challenging to capture in academic discourse. They evoke – in emotive and personal terms – the lasting impact and legacy of the site—not only for the interview participants but also for the Irish community in Montreal. For instance, Elizabeth Moody shared a story from her visit to Grosse Île, where she witnessed several individuals crying at the Irish cemetery.⁵¹ This emotional connection was similarly described by Colleen O'Donnell, who also recounted the powerful emotions evoked by the cemetery.⁵² Visits to Grosse Île ultimately made a profound difference for the narrators in this project. This commemorative site has not only served as an educational tool but also created a space for emotional connection for the Irish community since the 1980s. The site continues to offer these tours and will hopefully remain a space for connection, enabling the Irish community to engage with their ancestral history, particularly the Irish Famine and the events of 1847. These visits ultimately created a space wherein the Famine and its legacy could be brought out of silence.

Similar to the pilgrimage visits to Grosse Île, several narrators in this project discussed another significant place they either had visited or wished to visit: their ancestral homeland of

⁴⁹ "School programs: Grosse Île and the Irish Memorial National Historic Site" Government of Canada, last modified October 20, 2025. <https://parks.canada.ca/lhn-nhs/qc/grosseile/activ/edu>

⁵⁰ Scott Phelan, Interview with the author. September 25th, 2024.

⁵¹ Kate McIninch and Elizabeth Moody, Interview with the author. September 15th, 2024.

⁵² Shawn and Colleen O'Donnell, Interview with the author. September 10th, 2024.

Ireland. Diasporic returns have been a common subject of academic research, particularly among anthropologists, sociologists, and ethnographers. Diasporic returns are often associated with individuals permanently returning to their ancestral homeland. In contrast, non-permanent returns to the homeland—more commonly referred to as diasporic visits—also played a vital role in the lives of several of my interview partners. According to sociologist Lauren Wagner, diasporic visits are often motivated by the desire to visit friends and family.⁵³ Although Wagner acknowledges that the experiences of generations after migration differ when visiting “home,” she argues, “it is safe to infer that post-migrant generations have a much different experience of visiting ‘home’ than that of their parents, having little experience in that place as a place of residence.”⁵⁴ David Timothy Duval further argues that “[t]he return visit, then, can ultimately be positioned as the vehicle through which transnational identity structures between diasporic communities and homelands are maintained.”⁵⁵ Several narrators of this project, especially Elizabeth Moody, Fergus Keyes, and Patrick Shea, highlight how their understanding and connection to their ancestral homeland deepened through their visits back to Ireland. While the communal visits to sites like Grosse Île allowed them to reconnect with their shared Irish history, those diasporic trips to Ireland itself provided an opportunity to reconnect with their ancestral roots on a more personal level.

A number of narrators discussed how their trips back to Ireland were profoundly significant in shaping their identity. These visits helped them further develop their sense of culture, with some even describing how the experience completely transformed their understanding of what it meant to be Irish. Fergus Keyes was one of the first to discuss his trip to

⁵³ Wagner, “Visiting ‘Home’,” 195.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ David Timothy Duval, “When Hosts Become Guests: Return Visits and Diasporic Identities in a Commonwealth Eastern Caribbean Community,” *Current Issues in Tourism* 6, no. 4 (2003): 275.

Ireland with his two sons. Born and raised in Montreal, Fergus had spent his entire life in the city, specifically in Pointe-Saint-Charles. Although he was already well-versed in his family's history, particularly as it related to their roots in Quebec, he described his visit to Ireland as another important experience in exploring his ancestral roots beyond Quebec.

Fergus Keyes: But when I turned 60, [my sons] took me to Ireland, the two of them. So were just the three of us and we got to really trip around, see a lot of things and... other than drinking a whole lot of Guinness, we had a really good time. So yeah, so we went up to Ballyragget and looked around the cemeteries and spoke to people so... the name seemed to be some familiarity to the name, there were still some people with the same last name living there. [...] So, it was... yeah it was a great trip. Really fun. We had a whole lot of good times there and, and it was interesting to walk on land, I know for sure my ancestors came from that sector. Now, where... you know, it's like saying they came from Montreal or they came from Pointe-Saint-Charles, well... you might not know but you know you could, so it, it always interesting I think to walk in the foot of your ancestors.⁵⁶

The above quote clearly showcases that Fergus, along with his sons, has a deep connection to Ireland and the land of his “ancestors.” It is significant to note that Fergus describes his experience traveling to Ireland as a spiritual journey—one that allowed him to connect with his heritage in a way he could only experience by visiting his ancestral homeland. Diasporic visits or returns to one's ancestral homeland are common not only in Ireland but around the world. As reflected in Fergus's passage, these visits have the power to reconnect individuals with their ancestral roots, offering a profound sense of belonging and understanding. As Halil İbrahim Karakan, Okan Çolak and Mustafa Mete note in their study on diasporic visits, “[d]iaspora tourism provides individuals with the opportunity to reinforce their cultural identity and sense of belonging. Such tourism activities facilitate a deeper comprehension of one's cultural roots and facilitate a reconnection with one's personal past.”⁵⁷ While it was difficult to fully capture, the

⁵⁶ Fergus Keyes, Interview with the author. October 30th, 2024.

⁵⁷ Halil İbrahim Karakan, Okan Çolak and Mustafa Mete. “Reverse Diaspora Tourism as a New Concept in Tourism: A Study on Turkish-Kazakh Diasporas,” *SAGE Open*, 15 vol 1. (2025): 3.

way Fergus spoke about his trip with his sons conveyed a sense of spiritual significance—reinforcing not only his connection to his ancestral homeland but also his bond with the memories and experiences of those who came before him.

Elizabeth Moody was the first participant to describe a truly transformative experience during her visit to Ireland. Initially, she had distanced herself from her Irish identity and culture, largely due to the association of heavy alcohol consumption with being Irish. Unsettled by her family's focus on drinking and partying, Moody chose to disassociate from that lifestyle, leading her to identify more closely with her father's British heritage. According to Vijay Agnew, in her discussion on diasporas and memory, she argues that “not all diasporic communities remember the past with longing and nostalgia.”⁵⁸ This resonates with Elizabeth's experience, where she initially had a distant, and at times difficult, relationship with her ancestral heritage. It wasn't until her visit to Ireland that her connection to, and perception of, what it meant to be Irish began to shift. The trip allowed her to see her heritage in a new light, helping her reconcile the aspects of her Irish identity that she had previously rejected.

Elizabeth Moody: I care about it very deeply now and that's why I applied for my citizenship and when I met my family in Ireland after never meeting them... I have an entirely different view of what being Irish means. And it's not sitting around heavy drinking... [...] it's the way... when I visited there, they took me to visit the Famine sights, graveyards... they have... they have an instinctive you know idea of what being Irish means, not that they are filled with resentment, but they don't like the north [...] my whole view of Ireland changed when I met the cousins. And I was happy about that and of course, the person, I went over with was Marianna O'Gallagher, who was one of my close friends, so she taught me later on [...] what it meant to be Irish...

Kate McNinch: Not just drinking...

Elizabeth Moody: Yeah, I mean I had that side, that view, and then when I met Marianna, this would have been when I was teaching, we were teaching, we were teaching at St. Patrick's, Quebec City, and I learned from her that you know, there's a lot more to it than that.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Vijay Agnew, *Diaspora, Memory and Identity: A Search for Home* (University of Toronto Press, 2005), 188.

⁵⁹ Kate McNinch and Elizabeth Moody, Interview with the author. September 15th, 2024.

Elizabeth details her visit to Ireland, where meeting distant relatives revealed a version of Irishness that had previously been unknown to her. She also reflects on how her relationship with her friend, Marianna O’Gallagher, helped her understand that her own experiences of Irish identity were not the only version of Irish culture. After visiting Ireland and reconnecting with family members, including cousins and other relatives, Moody rediscovered her love for Irish culture—its music and language.⁶⁰ Her transformation, both in terms of personal identity and her broader understanding of Irish identity, underscores the significance of diasporic visits. For Moody, as well as many narrators in this project, such visits serve as transformative experiences that foster a deeper connection to one’s cultural roots and a redefined sense of Irishness.

The visits to Ireland, as highlighted by Fergus Keyes and Elizabeth Moody, underscore the importance of returning to Ireland in shaping one’s Irish identity. This sentiment mirrors the significance of trips to Grosse Île, though the meanings and contexts of these visits differ. Both types of visits, however, emphasize that the narrators’ connections to their ancestral histories were not solely inherited from their families but actively constructed and developed through lived experiences. Christie Brown, along with her parents and grandparents, spoke of the “need” to visit Ireland, suggesting that the practice of returning to Ireland is not a new trend but rather a long-standing tradition within the Montreal Irish community—especially within her family. Interestingly, both Brown and Daniel Doyle Sr. admitted to never having made the pilgrimage to Ireland, with neither being directly asked about it. These confessions highlight the communal recognition of the unique significance such visits hold, not only for those who undertake them but also for future generations. For Brown and her family, along with Doyle Sr., the absence of

⁶⁰ Kate McNinch and Elizabeth Moody, Interview with the author. September 15th, 2024.

this experience underscores the lasting impact that these diasporic returns have on the Irish community.

Christie Brown: You know it's my, my, my big shame that I was St. Patrick's Societies president and I've never actually been to Ireland, like how is that even possible? ****laughs**** every year it's on my list, it's gonna be this year, ten every year goes by and never got there, so...⁶¹

Brown and Doyle Sr.'s "shame" about not having visited Ireland stems from a deep desire to experience what many before them have—a transformative connection with their ancestral roots and homeland. This sense of longing is influenced by those who have made the journey before them and experienced the profound impact of reconnecting with their Irish heritage. Both Brown and her family, including her parents and grandparents, expressed a strong "need" to visit Ireland, highlighting that the concept of diasporic returns is not a new phenomenon within the Montreal Irish community but rather a longstanding tradition, especially within Brown's family. These diasporic visits play a crucial role in reconnecting individuals to their Irish identity and ancestral homeland, transforming their understanding of their heritage.

This chapter began with the poem written by Patrick Shea and will conclude with his experience traveling to Ireland. Shea recounted another transformative moment in his life related to his heritage and Irish ancestry when he discussed his trip back to Ireland with his father. This trip occurred when Patrick was sixteen years old, just five years after he wrote the poem for his class.

Patrick Shea: But interestingly my first visit to Ireland, I was 16. My father brought me as a Highschool graduation trip, which was very nice of him. [...] I remember arriving in Ireland and as a 16-year-old and then realizing "Oh boy I'm Canadian." Because you get there, and I knew a lot about [Ireland] through history and I knew where we were going, I knew what we were seeing, and I had a deep understanding, It would have been very different for instance if I had traveled to a country that I knew very little about I would sort of be like okay, I got to learn. I'm going to a place, that I knew a lot about, as a non-residence [sic]. Yet being there and realizing, oh yeah, these are contemporary Irish

⁶¹ Christie Brown, Interview with the author. October 21st, 2024.

people, I'm a contemporary Canadian. So yeah, it wasn't a disappointment, [...] It was actually a bit of reawakening of Canadianism of like, oh I'm really Canadian, you know? I genetically, I share genetics with all these people, you know I through my own life, and many generations of my family, we're inherently and thoroughly Canadian in every respect. So, it was a neat, I found that 16-year-old trip, was a neat, a bit of an eye opener. Visiting Ireland for the first time was a reaffirmation of my Canadianism [Canadian-ness].⁶²

This return to Ireland symbolized not just a reconnection with his Irish roots but also a return to his Canadian identity—an interesting contrast, given that it was only five years after he had written the poem in grade six, celebrating his Irish heritage. The trip allowed Patrick Shea, like many others in this project, to connect with both his ancestral past and his Irish Canadian identity, reinforcing the importance of being Canadian in the narrators' stories. While this does not mean that Patrick's identity was not Irish, it does underscore the dual nature of his identity—emphasizing the “Irish Canadian” aspect, or as Daniel Doyle Sr. puts it, “we're not Irish Canadian, [...] we're Canadian Irish.”⁶³ Shea's trip to Ireland marks a profound evolution in his identity. At eleven-years-old, when he wrote the poem, his connection to his Irish ancestry was paramount. By sixteen, his visit to Ireland—an experience shared by several narrators in this project—reaffirmed his sense of identity. For some, this trip deepened their Canadian identity, while for others, it transformed their connection to their Irish roots.

Patrick Shea's poem reflects his understanding of the Famine, shaped by the perspectives and influences of those around him during the 1980s, particularly his familial involvement in the Irish community and a pivotal trip to an Irish studies conference with his father, where they saw historian Marianna O'Gallagher. This chapter also explores the silences surrounding the Famine within the narrators' families, emphasizing the absence of conversations about the event. In these families, the Famine has moved beyond personalized memory into the realm of archival history.

⁶² Patrick Shea, Interview with the author. August 29th, 2024.

⁶³ Daniel Doyle Sr., Interview with the author. October 9th, 2024.

This chapter then turned to transformative experiences, such as visits to Grosse Île, which played a pivotal role in reshaping the narrators' understanding of the Famine and its impact on the Irish community in Montreal. Several participants noted how their knowledge and awareness of the Famine grew significantly through these visits. Finally, the chapter has examined the significance of diasporic visits to Ireland, which served to reconnect individuals with their ancestral roots and reshape their sense of identity. Overall, this chapter highlights the importance of actively reclaiming one's ancestral history, of ethnic identities that were *made* and *constructed* rather than merely inherited and transmitted.

What, then, does it mean to be Irish Canadian, Canadian Irish, or simply someone living in Canada with Irish heritage? The following chapter will delve into these crucial questions to explore the themes of identity and ethnicity as they relate to the narrators in this project.

Chapter Two: Performing Irishness in Montreal

The narrators of this project spoke at great length during their interviews about the Irish community in Montreal and the ways in which it shaped not only their own lives but also those of their families. Many of the conversations centred on what it means to be Irish in Montreal and how Irish ethnicity was closely tied to active engagement and involvement within one's local community and family. This chapter examines how Irish identity was formed and sustained by the narrators of this project. Throughout these conversations, it became evident that active participation in the Montreal Irish community played a vital role in the construction of Irish ethnicity. However, the types of participation and activities that contributed to this process varied among members of the community. The St. Patrick's Day parade, along with the festivities surrounding the holiday, provided these narrators an opportunity to engage in and perform Irish ethnicity. Class also played a vital role in the Irish community. Those from middle- to elite-class backgrounds took a leading role in Montreal's Irish societies such as the St. Patrick Society, the United Irish Societies, and the Erin Sports Association. In contrast, narrators who had grown up and come of age in the city's working-class neighbourhoods expressed and performed their Irish ethnicity in more informal and place-based fashion, particularly through family celebrations, church involvement, sports organizations, and music. Finally, some of the narrators described to me the weight that their Irish roots carried and their desire to build an identity and a life beyond the poverty and alcohol addiction they had long associated with Irish ethnicity.

The following chapter explores the various ways in which the narrators of this project and their families maintained and strengthened their connections to their local Irish community. It begins by examining the role of Montreal's St. Patrick's Day parade in constructing and preserving the Irish community's ties to both their ancestral and localized identities. The chapter

then considers how expressions of Irish ethnicity—particularly within the realm of performance—were influenced by socio-economic class, highlighting how members of the Irish community reinforced their cultural connections through both official and informal means. Finally, it addresses the experiences of narrators and their families who actively distanced themselves from their Irish heritage and community, illustrating the complex and sometimes ambivalent nature of ethnic identity.

The Montreal St. Patrick's Day parade is one of the largest and longest-running parades in North America, dating back to 1824. It has served as one of the most important beacons for identity construction and performance within the Montreal Irish community and continues to hold this significance today. Taking place every year, the parade offers an opportunity to express and perform Irish ethnicity. In terms of performative ethnicity, Kathleen Neils Conzen et al., along with historian April Schultz, argue that ethnicity is not simply inherited from previous generations but is instead performed and sustained through communal traditions and events such as parades, banquets, and family customs.¹ Both Schultz and Conzen et al. discuss the nature of festive ethnicity, demonstrating how certain groups use festivals and public celebrations to affirm and construct their identities. This concept of festive ethnicity directly applies to the Irish community examined in this project, particularly in relation to the St. Patrick's Day parade.²

In the case of the Irish community in Montreal, the St. Patrick's Day parade stands out as one of the most visible examples of performed ethnicity and culture. Participation throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries was not determined by class or socio-economic status but

¹ Kathleen Neils Conzen, David A. Gerber, Ewa Morawska, George E. Pozzetta, and Rudolph J. Vecoli. "The Invention of Ethnicity: A Perspective from the U.S.A." *Journal of American Ethnic History* 12, no. 1 (1992) and April R. Schultz. *Ethnicity on Parade: Inventing the Norwegian American through Celebration* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994.)

² Ibid.

remained accessible to all members of the community. This inclusivity is exemplified by all of the narrators in this project, who consistently participated in and attended the parades throughout their lives, despite their varied socio-economic backgrounds.

Since the nineteenth century, Montreal's St. Patrick's Day parade has undergone significant symbolic changes, altering the meaning and impact it holds for the Irish community in Montreal.³ According to Rosalyn Trigger in her study of the St. Patrick's Day parade during the nineteenth century, the parade possessed goals and themes "including affirmation of national or ethnic group solidarity, demonstration of the worthiness of the Irish as citizens, nationalist protest against British governance of their homeland, and expression of religious faith, as well as pure entertainment."⁴ Alan Hustak demonstrates in his work on the history of Montreal's St. Patrick's Day parade that during the nineteenth and much of the twentieth century, the parade was not as inclusive as it is today. At its inception, the parade was primarily organized and participated in by the Irish elites of the city, both Catholic and Protestant.⁵ Trigger similarly states that both Catholic and Protestant elites were enthusiastic about the celebrations and that the parade was simply "an opportunity for a convivial celebration of their common attachment to Ireland".⁶

Over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the parade's symbolism shifted, often in response to political situations both in Montreal and in Ireland. According to Trigger, the parade and the St. Patrick's Society experienced a religious split, which led the parade taking on a more Catholic influence. This division impacted various aspects of the parade,

³ Barlow, *Griffintown*, 35, 48.

⁴ Rosalyn Trigger, "Irish Politics on Parade: The Clergy, National Societies, and St. Patrick's Day Processions in Nineteenth-century Montreal and Toronto," *Histoire social/Social History* 37, no. 74 (2004): 160.

⁵ Hustak, *One Long Line of Marvel*, 22.

⁶ Trigger "Irish Politics on Parade," 167-168.

including its attendance and symbolism, as it transitioned from being an Irish parade to an Irish Catholic parade.⁷ Trigger further notes that parades at the end of the nineteenth century were clearly used as a way to support Ireland's fight for self-governance, as evidenced by signs and banners displayed throughout the parade reading, "God Save Ireland."⁸

The significance of the St. Patrick's Day parade is difficult to fully articulate, but the passion with which the narrators spoke about the celebration was unmistakable. Most of the narrators in this project are between their 40s and mid-60s and, therefore, attended the parade during their childhood, beginning in the 1960s through to the 1980s. Many of them have continued to attend the parade up to the present day. As it relates to the narrators, the parade's significance and symbolism have changed considerably from the 1960s to the present-day event. During the twentieth century, attendance became less concentrated among the city's elite, as more Irish Montrealers from all social classes began to participate in the parade and the festivities surrounding the event. According to Hustak, the 1960s marked the first decade in which the religious significance of the parade began to wane, with the 1966 parade being a key moment in the secularization of the event.⁹ Helene-Jane Groarke, in her master's thesis on the St. Patrick's Parades in Montreal and Toronto during the nineteenth century, discussed how religious hymns were once primarily heard throughout the parade. As secularization progressed, these religious hymns were gradually replaced by Irish songs, reinforcing the shift of the parade's focus from Catholicism to Ireland itself and highlighting the connection between the Irish diaspora in Montreal and their homeland.¹⁰

⁷ Trigger "Irish Politics on Parade," 183.

⁸ Ibid. 173.

⁹ Hustak. *One Long Line of Marvel*, 144.

¹⁰ Helen-Jane Groarke, "Becoming Irish: How Irish Catholic Identity Was Performed and Changed in the St. Patrick's Day parades of Toronto and Montreal (1858 and 1866)," (master's thesis, Concordia University, 2018), 38.

In the 1970s, student protests and language politics came to shape the annual St. Patrick's parades. The Troubles in Ireland, the FLQ crisis, and the language debates in Quebec all influenced the overall tone and spirit of the parade during the highly politicized years of the 1970s.¹¹ The *Montreal Gazette*, in March of 1977 had a small column discussing Quebec's separatist movement stating "Let all of Irish heritage make this year's St. Patrick's Day parade the greatest of all time. Remember the motto of the Order of St. Patrick: 'Quis separabit' i.e. 'who shall separate (us)'"¹² The 1980s, by contrast, marked a decade with less controversy than the previous one. The *Montreal Gazette* described the 1987 parade as "a simple parade that over the past few years has become a genuine, spontaneous people's festival, [...] The Irish spirit is as deeply ingrained in Montreal's history as is the shamrock on its flag".¹³

Well into the 1990s, the Montreal Parade continued to grow in popularity, becoming the third largest in North America, after New York City and Boston. However, attendance, like in several other cities, heavily depended on the weather, which in Montreal was unpredictable. According to the *Montreal Gazette*, some years featured winter blizzards with temperatures dropping to as low as negative 30 degrees Celsius, while other years had sunny skies and temperate weather.¹⁴ For example, in 1962, the *Gazette* highlighted how favourable the weather had been, yet the next year the newspaper noted that the parade would have been cancelled if the weather had been too inclement.¹⁵

¹¹ Although the Troubles began several years before and continued well into the 1990s, the parade was particularly affected by the conflict within this decade. Hustak. *One Long Line of Marvel*, 149, 154.

¹² "The Wearing O' The Green" *Montreal Gazette*, (Montreal, Quebec), March 17, 1977.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Hustak. *One Long Line of Marvel*, 167, 171.

¹⁵ Al O'Palmer, "Great Day For The Irish If It Doesn't Snow Or Rain," *Montreal Gazette*, (Montreal, Quebec), March 16, 1963.

Although its attendance grew with each passing decade, the parade also became much more “rowdy” over time.¹⁶ Alcohol and violence were significant problems for the parade in the 1990s, and these issues have persisted into the present day. According to Hustak, an individual tragically passed away in 2010 after attempting to jump from one of the parade floats onto a truck bed. The man had an alcohol level four times the legal limit prompting a campaign by Educ’alcool to raise awareness about responsible drinking and reduce the risk of accidents in the future.¹⁷

The participation and scale of the event grew considerably from the 1960s to the 2020s. According to the *Montreal Gazette*, in 1962, the event primarily consisted of around 20 different bands and 45 units, lasting roughly one hour and twenty minutes.¹⁸ By 1991, the parade was the largest to date, with over 35 bands and 35 different floats, lasting roughly two hours and thirty minutes.¹⁹ In 2007, the parade continued to grow in scale and length, lasting over three hours—nearly three times as long as the parade just 40 years earlier.²⁰ It is clear that the St. Patrick’s Day parade was of great importance not only to the Irish in Montreal but also to the non-Irish population, as evidenced by the continued growth in non-Irish participation and the increasing multiculturalism of the event, as discussed in a *Gazette* article in 2007.²¹ The attendance and scale of the parade indicated its popularity and significance to the Irish community. More recently, the parade has been cancelled for only the second time in its history, marking a rare fracture in its scale and size after several decades of growth.

¹⁶ Hustak. *One Long Line of Marvel*, 167.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* 187-188.

¹⁸ “Weather Is Ideal For Irish” *Montreal Gazette*, (Montreal, Quebec), March 19, 1962.

¹⁹ “St. Pat’s parade to be as big as ever: director” *Montreal Gazette* (Montreal, Quebec), March 9, 1991.

²⁰ Anne Sutherland, “The St. Patrick’s spirit: every year, same corner” *Montreal Gazette* (Montreal, Quebec) March 19, 2007.

²¹ *Ibid.*

The Covid-19 pandemic resulted in the parade being cancelled for two years. However, its significance and importance to the local Irish community, including Fergus Keyes, were on full display when Keyes organized a small walk to keep the parade spirit alive, joined by several other Irish residents from Pointe-Saint-Charles. Although the walk did not attract a large group, it demonstrated the willingness to revive the parade after a two-year hiatus.

Kathleen Neils Conzen and her colleagues discuss the invention of ethnicity arguing “ethnicity is not a ‘collective fiction,’ but rather a process of construction or invention which incorporates, adapts and amplifies preexisting communal solidarities, cultural attributes, and historical memories. That is, it is grounded in real life context and social experience.”²² Building on this argument, April Schultz, in her study of Norwegian ethnicity in parades and its performance in the United States, makes a crucial point about ethnicity’s significance, arguing that its importance goes beyond mere symbolism for these communities. Schultz states “to say that such an ethnicity is ‘merely’ symbolic, however, is to misunderstand the powerfully ideological place of ethnicity in American life.”²³ In building on Schultz’s argument, this study argues that the significance of the St. Patrick’s Day parade reaches far beyond the week-long festivities surrounding St. Patrick’s Day. Rather, the parade serves as a central pillar in performing and maintaining Irish ethnicity and culture in Montreal. In Barbara Lorenskowski’s monograph *Sounds of Ethnicity*, the concept of performed ethnicity is at the forefront of the study, echoing the arguments made by April Schultz, Kathleen Neils Conzen, and others surrounding performative ethnicity. Lorenskowski examines the importance of ethnicity, not as a static group identity or something passed down to the next generation, but as something that can be actively sought out and performed. She quotes Roger Brubaker and states that “instead of

²² Conzen et al., “The Invention of Ethnicity,” 5.

²³ Schultz. *Ethnicity on Parade*, 132.

conceiving of ethnicity in terms of belonging (which presupposes a bounded social group) we should treat ethnicity “as an event, as something that ‘happens’.”²⁴

In bringing these insights to bear on my own research, I opened each interview with an invitation to reflect on just what “Irish-ness” meant to my narrators: “Growing up, how did you know you were Irish?” Nearly every interviewee held that Irish identity was not something they had been taught, but something they had learned by practice. The annual St. Patrick’s Parade, in particular, provided an opportunity for several of my narrators to participate in an Irish cultural event from an early age on and both witness, and partake in, the performance of Irish ethnicity.

Participation in the parade was extremely popular among the narrators of this project, and the parade was practically the first topic to be discussed in relation to Irish identity. One of the most crucial aspects surrounding the St. Patrick’s Day parade, both among its historians and within the context of this project, is the focus on participation. Nancy Schmitz, in her work on the parade in Quebec since its inception, argues that it was crucial for the Irish community not only to recognize the importance of the parade but also to actively participate in it.²⁵ As Patrick Shea recalls, he attended the Montreal St. Patrick’s Day parade as a young boy. Born into a strongly Irish household, Patrick Shea’s parents, along with other family members, were actively involved in the Montreal Irish community through participation in its societies, community organizations, and attendance at the St. Patrick’s Day parade.

Patrick Shea: I would’ve at a young age, probably as an infant, but certainly as a toddler, been brought to St. Patrick’s Parade, Montreal St. Patrick’s Parade, which I effectively attended every year as a child, there may have been a year or two that we didn’t go for whatever reasons, someone was sick or whatever, but effectively that would have been something that I would do every year. [...] Yeah, from a young age, uh, it would have been... You know as simple as for instances, on St. Patrick’s Day or the day closest to St.

²⁴ Barbara Lorenzkowski, *Sounds of Ethnicity: Listening to German North America, 1850-1914* (Winnipeg [Man.]: University of Manitoba Press, 2010), 6.

²⁵ Nancy Schmitz, *Irish for a Day: Saint Patrick’s Day Celebrations in Quebec City, 1765-1990* (Ste-Foy: Carraig Books, 1991), 127.

Patrick's Day, if it was on a weekend, you know we go to grades, my siblings and I would go to grade school with shamrock. You know my parents would buy a shamrock plant, and you'd wear you know a green shirt, they'd pin shamrocks. So even, it was something you would even bring to school, it was a tradition you literally bring into your classroom.²⁶

In our conversations, both Patrick Shea and Daniel Doyle Sr. expressed a deep sense of pride in attending the St. Patrick's Day parade—not only as toddlers but throughout their entire lives.

They emphasized that, apart from a few instances of illness, they and their families rarely missed a parade. As Shea explained, the event holds significant importance in shaping Irish identity within the community, with a sense of Irishness deeply rooted in family traditions. What stood out in Daniel Doyle Sr.'s recollection was his vivid memory of the freezing cold. Despite the harsh weather, Doyle Sr.'s family continued to take part in the parade, exemplifying his commitment to participating in and performing his Irish-Canadian ethnicity.

For the O'Donnell siblings, too, a sense of Irishness was forged in shared experiences. The O'Donnell siblings recall fond memories of “being Irish,” associated not only with attending the parade, but also with concerts that took place during the holiday and their family's tradition of planting shamrock plants in honour of the occasion. Colleen, Shawn, and Mark O'Donnell were born into an Irish household in Pointe-Saint-Charles in the 1960s and 1970s. While Colleen and Shawn O'Donnell were several years older than their brother Mark O'Donnell, they all note that the St. Patrick's Day parade was a significant event for them and their community, particularly from a young age.

Colleen O'Donnell: Oh, we knew it from when we were very, very young, like this is an Irish community, mostly Irish in the Point. It's sort of half French, half Irish. Even in grade school, like you know, we had a St. Patrick's concert every year but even before going to school, we celebrated St. Patrick's Day, went to the parade.

²⁶ Patrick Shea, Interview with the author. August 29th, 2024.

Shawn O'Donnell: So we went to the St. Patrick's Parade, we marched in it. Our local church was very Irish, they had a float in it [the parade]. St. Gabriel's parish. So, we participated in the parade.²⁷

Mark O'Donnell: My mother always bought Irish shamrocks in the local florist, store and that, for around St. Patty's, we always had a pot of shamrocks, and, and we always went to the parade for as long as I can remember.²⁸

Even though the siblings described their parents as not being actively involved in the broader Irish community or its societies, the act of bringing their children to the parade and buying shamrock plants suggests that their participation was simply expressed and maintained through different avenues. These actions indicate that the St. Patrick's Day parade, and the traditions associated with it, were deeply rooted in their family's cultural expressions.²⁹ The O'Donnells, similar to other narrators, relied on deep and meaningful memories of attending the parade as being central to their Irish Canadian identity.

If scholars have likened ethnicity to an “invented” and “performed” identity, it was also one fundamentally shaped by class. One avenue through which Irish families performed their Irish identity was through the various Irish societies in Montreal. My narrators repeatedly made mention of the St. Patrick's Society, the United Irish Societies, and the Erin's Sports Association. These three associations had been highly influential within the Irish community in Montreal since the early nineteenth century. Of exclusive character, they provided their affluent members with a formal associational space. Families and individuals living in working-class neighbourhoods were not typically involved in those elite societies but expressed their Irishness in more localized, informal social settings. Several of my narrators grew up in working-class

²⁷ Shawn and Colleen O'Donnell, Interview with the author. September 10th, 2024.

²⁸ Mark O'Donnell, Interview with the author. September 24th, 2024.

²⁹ Shawn and Colleen O'Donnell, Interview with the author. September 10th, 2024. And Mark O'Donnell, Interview with the author. September 24th, 2024.

neighbourhoods where they practiced their Irish heritage in neighbourhood parties, churches, athletic associations, and musical life.

The St. Patrick's Society, established in Montreal in 1834, originally focused on defending Irish interests and caring for new immigrants affected by the cholera epidemic in the 1830s.³⁰ Other societies such as the Irish Protestant Benevolent Society, the United Irish Societies and the Erin's Sports Club, were all Irish associations that were linked with preserving and transmitting Irish culture and heritage.³¹ As Monique Rivet notes in her Master's thesis, "the Irish community was characterized by a high degree of solidarity and a network of associations ensured both the transmission of Irish culture and heritage and the maintenance of a certain degree of social control thereby preserving the groups identity."³² Over the latter half of the twentieth century, the St. Patrick's Society has played a central role in promoting all aspects of Irish culture in Montreal. Its efforts focus on maintaining and expressing Irish heritage in the city through various events including the St. Patrick's Day Ball, held annually around St. Patrick's Day, and its annual luncheon that celebrated its 191st anniversary in 2025. The St. Patrick's Society, along with several of its members, played a key role in funding and establishing the Canadian Irish Studies Foundation as well as Concordia University's Canadian Irish Studies program. These two institutions have significantly contributed to the growth of Irish history and culture within the academic sphere in Montreal.³³ These societies have clearly played a pivotal role within the Irish communities in Montreal, as reflected in the experiences of several narrators in this project.

³⁰ Grace. *The Irish in Quebec*, 101.

³¹ Ibid. 104.

³² Ibid. 40.

³³ Peter Shea, *A Brief History of St. Patrick's Society of Montreal*, Edited 2015.
<https://spsmtl.com/full-sps-history/>

Two narrators in this project spoke openly about their families' participation and involvement in organized Irish societies, such as the St. Patrick's Society and the Erin's Sports Association. Both Patrick Shea and Daniel Doyle Sr. recount how their parents' involvement in these Irish organizations provided them with the opportunity to witness, firsthand, the experience of participating in formal Irish societies. Both Shea and Doyle Sr. argue that their families' involvement was essential in their eventual participation and expression of their Irish identity through these organizations. This demonstrates how such institutions allowed certain members of the Irish community in Montreal to connect with and express their Irish identity in a formalized setting.

Patrick Shea: I would say at a very, very young age, principally, because my parents, more my father than my mother, but my parents, especially my father, they themselves had a very, you know, deep interest in their Irish heritage and Irish culture, and Irish organizations in Montreal. [...] Yeah, in his case, I would say as a younger... as an adult, he became a member of St. Patrick's Society of Montreal, which is the oldest Irish organization in Montreal. In his case, it was in the early 70s. Fun Fact, to this date he is actually now the longest serving member of the society.

Davis: Oh wow.

Patrick Shea: There are a few other members that are older than him in age, but he is the longest member, I think he joined in 70' or 71'. So yeah, [...] he became involved in St. Patrick's Society, he became member of the board of directors at the society, he became president of the society so yeah, he was very involved in, [...] you know all things Irish in Montreal.³⁴

Shea noted early in our conversations that he has been actively involved in several Irish societies and community organizations in Montreal. He attributes this deep engagement not only to his Irish identity but also to a strong desire to contribute to the broader community, following in his father's footsteps.³⁵ Daniel Doyle Sr. echoes these sentiments, stating that his father's involvement in Irish activities motivated him to participate.

³⁴ Patrick Shea, Interview with the author. August 29th, 2024.

³⁵ Ibid.

Daniel Doyle Sr.: I'm president of the Erin sports, so the... I've been a member since about 2012 also, but I've been around the club for... as a busboy for their dances in the 70s and so grew up with them. My dad and my father-in-law and few of their friends.

Davis: Okay so your parents were involved in the Erin sports...?

Daniel Doyle Sr: ...my father would be because it's a Men's club...³⁶

Both Patrick Shea and Daniel Doyle Sr. described their involvement in the Irish community from a young age. Whether it was Shea ushering at the St. Patrick's Society Ball as a teenager or Doyle Sr. working as a busboy at Erin's Sports Society events in the 1970s, it is clear that their parents' active participation in community life significantly influenced and motivated them to engage with the broader Irish community and connect with their Irish identity early on in a formal setting. However, it is also evident that class played a role in their parents' ability to participate in these formal Irish societies.

Similar to the early St. Patrick's Day parade, these societies were predominantly made up of middle- to upper-middle-class families. Historical geographers Sherry Olson and Patricia Thornton have examined the role of social and economic class in Montreal in the nineteenth- and twentieth-centuries, with a particular focus on the Irish. In their study, they argue that "[a]mong Irish Catholics, the number who made the move from rags to respectability in one generation raises doubts about the classic account of ignorant and deprived Irish Catholic labourers trapped in poverty."³⁷ It was these individuals who achieved social mobility, who became involved in such Irish societies. Patrick Shea, for example, lived in the neighbourhood of NDG, where he attended a private high school.³⁸ Doyle Sr., on the other hand, primarily lived in the smaller, working-class districts of Griffintown and Pointe-Saint-Charles, where his father was employed

³⁶ Daniel Doyle Sr., Interview with the author. October 9th, 2024.

³⁷ Sherry H. Olson and Patricia A. Thornton, *Peopling the North American City: Montreal, 1840-1900* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2011), 210.

³⁸ Patrick Shea, Interview with the author. August 29th, 2024.

by CN railways, however Doyle Sr. pointed out that his father and grandfather both worked in the offices for the railway and were not labourers.³⁹

Not all interviewees or their families were actively engaged in these formal societies, or what Shawn O'Donnell referred to as "the larger Irish community."⁴⁰ The majority of my narrators grew up in historically working-class neighbourhoods such as Griffintown and Pointe-Saint-Charles. These families developed and performed their Irish identity in ways beyond formal associational spaces. A tight-knit network of Irish rituals, churches, and sports organizations made being Irish an integral part of the social fabric of everyday life. According to Darcy O'Connor, Griffintown "was where the poorest of Montreal's poor lived in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries."⁴¹ Griffintown was primarily an Irish neighbourhood, home to one of the largest Irish Catholic churches outside of St. Patrick's Basilica: St. Ann's Church. Some participants in this study describe Griffintown as a tough working-class area, but they also emphasize that there was a unique sense of community that made it special. O'Connor similarly states that Griffintown possessed "an open friendliness among its inhabitants, who often got together to share gossip and beer on their balconies and sidewalk stoops. Yet there was also the shared poverty."⁴² Just south of Griffintown was Pointe-Saint-Charles – "The Point" – another Irish working-class neighbourhood, though it is often noted as being slightly less impoverished than Griffintown.⁴³ Like Griffintown, the Point had a large Irish population, but was also home to other immigrant communities, including the Scottish, Polish, and French Canadians. The working-class nature of these two neighbourhoods also famously gave rise to the West-End

³⁹ Daniel Doyle Sr., Interview with the author. October 9th, 2024.

⁴⁰ Shawn and Colleen O'Donnell, Interview with the author. September 10th, 2024.

⁴¹ Darcy O'Connor, *Montreal's Irish Mafia: The True Story of the Infamous West End Gang* (Harper Collins Publishers, 2014), 12.

⁴² Ibid. 13.

⁴³ Ibid. 17.

Gang, a prominent Irish organized crime group that reflected the lower-class status of both the Point and Griffintown.⁴⁴

Steven High, in his work on the working-class neighbourhood of Pointe-Saint-Charles, explores the impact of growing up in the Point and the traditional working-class environment it fostered. He delves into the experiences of children raised in the Point, who were quickly exposed to the unique and often harsh realities of working-class life. The Point was known as a relatively rough neighbourhood, characterized by high crime rates and a predominance of low socio-economic families. High highlights the situation of Christine Boucher's family, who moved from the Point to the West Island of Montreal in an effort to shield their daughter from trouble, exemplifying the difficulties of raising children in the Point's working-class environments. One of the narrators, Ken Quinn, mentioned in our conversations that after growing up in Verdun, he was told he could go practically anywhere in the city—except the Point, which was considered unsafe, illustrating how the southwest neighbourhood was perceived by outsiders.⁴⁵ However, Boucher soon returned to the Point after finishing her studies, calling it her true “home.”⁴⁶ This sentiment was echoed by several individuals who had grown up in the Point. Despite its tough conditions, being from the Point was a source of pride, and the experiences of living there helped individuals form a strong bond to their community.

The O'Donnell siblings emphasized that growing up in Pointe-Saint-Charles was central to the development of their Irish identity. When discussing their parents' involvement in the broader Irish community, the O'Donnell siblings noted that their family, along with other Irish families in the Point, tended to keep to themselves and did not engage much with Irish societies

⁴⁴ O'Connor. *Montreal's Irish Mafia*, 20.

⁴⁵ Ken Quinn, Interview with the author. September 17th, 2024.

⁴⁶ High, *Deindustrializing Montreal*, 43-44.

such as the St. Patrick's Society nor the United Irish Societies.⁴⁷ High supports these sentiments, arguing that during the twentieth century, residents of the Point often remained within the neighbourhood, with their social and work lives largely confined to the area. This created a tight-knit community, although it sometimes limited their opportunities to escape the working-class conditions of their neighbourhoods exemplified by the lack of involvement in Irish societies.⁴⁸

Speaking with others from similar working-class areas, this lack of involvement in larger Irish societies was not uncommon. Fergus Keyes, for instance, was born in the Parc-Extension area of Montreal during the 1950s. Keyes recalled that the population of Parc-Ex was largely Irish at that time, and that his family was part of the city's working class. He argued that his family's connection to and expression of their Irish identity was more localized and informal, similarly suggesting that the formal Irish societies were often reserved for the city's elite class.

Fergus Keyes: You know I don't think, I think it was a certain set of people I suppose that belonged to Irish societies. Perhaps... I don't know how to describe it. Maybe, maybe upper-middle-class people belonged to the societies and the same way, the St. Patrick's was usually, considered an upper-class Irish church, St Patrick's Basilica. But then when you came into the Point for example and you had... not, the Irish cath.... well you had St. Anne's, in Griffintown and that was like more... not saying lower class, more working class, same with St. Gabriel's in, in the Point. So, I think that the people that would have attended St. Patrick's Society in those days which again like I said were probably closer to upper-middle-class, would have been more part of these societies than most people. Most Irish people, they were just trying to make a living you know?⁴⁹

Fergus highlights the idea that class played a significant role in how individuals and their families expressed their Irish heritage. This notion is further supported by Sharon Doyle Driedger in her work on the Irish community in Montreal. Driedger argues that by the end of the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth century, there was a clear divide within Montreal.

⁴⁷ Shawn and Colleen O'Donnell, Interview with the author. September 10th, 2024. and Mark O'Donnell, Interview with the author. September 24th, 2024.

⁴⁸ High, *Deindustrializing Montreal*, 90-91.

⁴⁹ Fergus Keyes, Interview with the author. October 30th, 2024.

She argues that a figurative line was drawn down the middle of the city that separated those living “on the bottom of the hill” from those at “the top of the hill.”⁵⁰ As she states: “The high ground—the area at the top of the map, where the city’s wealthy elite lived on the leafy avenues hugging the slopes of Mount Royal [...] named the ‘City Above the Hill.’ The district at the bottom of the map, under the CPR train tracks, [...] called the ‘City Below the Hill.’ It covered roughly one square mile and encompassed parts of Pointe-St. Charles and St. Antoine Ward, and all of Griffintown.”⁵¹

Shawn O’Donnell: Some of the guys that I grew up with were active on the St. Patrick’s Society which we kinda used to say, well they’re the wealthier...

Colleen O’Donnell: The rich...

Shawn O’Donnell: The wealthier Irish, we [Pointe-Saint-Charles] were like the poor cousins...⁵²

For the Irish, this divide was evident not only geographically and economically but also in the ways each group performed and maintained their Irish ethnicity. It was clear that individuals from the upper-middle and elite classes were generally involved in the larger Irish community and its official societies. But how did those outside of these official circles express their Irish identity?

Shawn and Colleen O’Donnell shared that during their youth, their family, along with other members of their predominantly Irish community, would come together for communal events. The O’Donnells explained that these gatherings, known as “kitchen parties” in Pointe-Saint-Charles, were occasions for family and community members to gather, dance, and celebrate.

Shawn O’Donnell: And so, there was a lot of, what you would call, kitchen parties or parlour parties. And it didn’t have to be St. Patrick’s Day. You always heard the Irish

⁵⁰ Doyle Driedger, *An Irish Heart*, 360.

⁵¹ Ibid. and Herbert B. Ames, *The City Below the Hill: A Sociological Study of a Portion of the City of Montreal, Canada* (Montreal: Bishop Engraving and Printing, 1897).

⁵² Shawn and Colleen O’Donnell, Interview with the author. September 10th, 2024.

music [...] and everybody seemed to play an instrument, even if it was spoons or pots, it was always a lot of song and laughter and it was a lot of Irish songs and singing. And so you just knew like Colleen said... you just knew that was your heritage, like, you thought everybody else in the world had the same heritage as you, or the same experience.

[...]

Colleen O'Donnell: Its almost all that you remember....

Shawn O'Donnell: They were wild.

[...]

Shawn O'Donnell: And like I said... the Ukelele was popular I think because it was the cheapest instruments so... few uncles played that....

Colleen O'Donnell: Bongos....

Shawn O'Donnell: The bongos... but... a lot of them played pots, the spoons and a lot of singing.⁵³

The O'Donnell siblings mentioned that they grew up in Pointe-Saint-Charles during the 1960s and 1970s. The neighbourhood was primarily composed of row houses, which made it easier for these parlour parties to take place. While no other participants mentioned similar gatherings, these parties clearly symbolize the central role of celebration in the Irish community's identity and heritage in Pointe-Saint-Charles. Colleen O'Donnell's statement, "It's almost all that [we] remember," highlights just how pivotal these parties were for her and her siblings.⁵⁴ These celebrations were key in actively expressing and passing down their Irish heritage.⁵⁵ Also mentioned throughout this passage is the use of instruments such as the ukulele, spoons, pots, and other affordable instruments. Driedger discusses the communal and familial parties both formal and informal throughout her work. She showcases that within these working-class districts Irish "[f]amilies would gather at their front door—if they had one—to chat with neighbours and passersby. Kids squeezed three or four on the narrow stoop; kitchen chairs were pulled onto the sidewalks; grannies rocked on rockers. Now and then, an old man might take an occasional swig from a beer bottle tucked discreetly into a paper bag between his feet."⁵⁶ Even

⁵³ Shawn and Colleen O'Donnell, Interview with the author. September 10th, 2024.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Doyle Driedger, *An Irish Heart*, 382.

today, Colleen O'Donnell continues the tradition of hosting these kitchen parties in Pointe-Saint-Charles after the St. Patrick's Day parade. For her and her siblings, these gatherings represent what it means to be Irish. They are more than just family celebrations; they are living expressions of identity, and community that have continued through the generations.

Another important avenue of involvement was centered around local parishes, and the activities associated with them. Christie Brown's family was historically connected with St. Ann's parish, the predominantly Irish Catholic church in Griffintown. Brown notes that her grandmothers and earlier generations were actively engaged not only in the church and its religious activities but also in the St. Ann's Young Men's Society, which was affiliated with the parish and focused on promoting its work and supporting the local Irish community. Brown discussed how the church played a pivotal role for the Irish community in Griffintown. These sentiments were echoed by other narrators in this project, whose families were also involved in local Irish parishes, such as St. Gabriel's Catholic Church in the Point.⁵⁷

Christie Brown similarly spoke about the importance of being actively involved in the local Irish community, particularly through giving time and energy back to the community. She highlighted examples such as volunteering with making Christmas baskets, a tradition associated with their parish, which provided support to those in need during the holiday season.

Christie Brown: ...well... my perceptions is that like Irish meant that you were to give back to the community. You know if I had to boil it down, you were to participate in and to support community because ultimately, it's up to the community to help ourselves. So if I, if I look at a lot of the volun [sic]...like volunteering and... supporting social activities, so whether its Christmas baskets or... you know supporting neighbourhood, or supporting activities whether it happened to the church or not. But there was this sense that you're part of this community but if you're part of this community you have to give back to the community. So volunteering and like being a good community person was important and I think that... like that was true before I knew anything about societies and all the rest of it [...] you know I was put into brownies where you, learnt to, to be a good community person so, the whole, the whole ethos was you're, you're being raised to be a

⁵⁷ Shawn and Colleen O'Donnell, Interview with the author. September 10th, 2024.

good citizen of your community which... included giving back to the community. Whether that was through church, through school, through work, through volunteering, it was... you helped those around you.⁵⁸

Christmas baskets, involvement in the church, and volunteering for the community were all integral to Christie's upbringing, instilled in her by her parents. However, what stands out in Christie's account is her belief that if the Irish are to truly be part of the community, they must actively participate and contribute. The church served as a vital space where locals could not only share common religious beliefs but also come together as Irish Canadians. Christie Brown highlights the significance of the church in sustaining Irish heritage after the church was finally torn down, stating, "but in terms of continuing Irish culture and Irish traditions, losing St Ann's [church] was huge."⁵⁹ In particular, St. Ann's and St. Gabriel's churches were major centres for the Irish Catholic community, providing an opportunity for the Irish to connect and preserve their culture and traditions.

Shawn and Mark O'Donnell both discussed how they were involved in the Leo's Boys sports teams. Leo's Boys was a sports organization directed at giving young children in Point Saint-Charles an opportunity to play sports. According to Shawn O'Donnell "Leo's boys was a very Irish type of group".⁶⁰ Both Shawn and Mark O'Donnell as well as Daniel Doyle Sr. spoke about the organization as having a large impact on the local community. Leo's Boys was crucial for the Point, as it gave kids the opportunity to play with their fellow neighbours without their parents incurring any costs. In his study *Deindustrializing Montreal*, Steven High quotes Joe Mell, the founder of Leo's Boys, as saying that the "ideal of Leo's Boys is that no kid would ever pay any dues or would pay a cent to participate. We supplied the football uniforms, the

⁵⁸ Christie Brown, Interview with the author. October 21st, 2024

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Shawn and Colleen O'Donnell, Interview with the author. September 10th, 2024.

hockey uniforms, the ice time”.⁶¹ These sentiments were echoed by the O’Donnell brothers. As Mark O’Donnell noted “we were lucky, we never had to pay to play [sports] you know?”⁶² When asking about playing for Leo’s Boys and his experience with the sports organization Daniel Doyle Sr.’s first response was “not one penny. My mother and father never spent a penny. All my brothers, my sisters... two of them played sports, three brothers, not one penny.”⁶³ The responses from those who grew up living and playing sports in Pointe-Saint-Charles highlight the pivotal role that Leo’s Boys and Joe Mel played in providing a space for children to engage in sports and stay active within the community. It was universally acknowledged by all involved that, regardless of their economic background, children had the opportunity to participate in Leo’s Boys, fostering a connection to the Irish community in their neighbourhood through the sports teams.

Music provided another space where individuals could connect and develop their Irish identity. Mark O’Donnell spoke passionately about his love for Irish music and how it served as a vital means of expressing and connecting with his Irish heritage. Growing up in Pointe-Saint-Charles alongside his two older siblings, Mark O’Donnell developed a general interest in all things Irish. However, he noted that his strong affinity for traditional Irish music was something he pursued independently, as not all family members shared his enthusiasm.

Mark O’Donnell: Even just in the music, like nobody really sang Irish songs like, from Ireland... it was all like either Americanised versions or they didn’t even listen to it at all you know like? Like my parents really didn’t listen to much Irish music at all... other than perhaps on St. Pattys [sic] day, they sing some songs and that but for the rest of the time, it wasn’t... it wasn’t like that you know? [...] I had like St. Patty’s party, or... even just Christmas or so, but I always, they always would laugh at me because, no matter what the occasion was, I always ended up with traditional Irish music, not the Danny boy stuff, like... that commercial stuff, I didn’t play, what they sing in the pubs you know the IRA fight songs, or the... just the old good traditional Irish song you know? Or, or even

⁶¹ High, *Deindustrializing Montreal*, 42.

⁶² Mark O’Donnell, Interview with the author. September 24th, 2024.

⁶³ Daniel Doyle Sr., Interview with the author. October 9th, 2024.

the Chieftains just instrumental I like, my mother hated just instrumental, but, but I just like even just the old instrumental stuff was nice too. But, so I would always... yeah, I would have all these parties and no matter what the occasion was, I'd laugh because I'd end it with Irish songs... for the last several hours. **laughs**⁶⁴

In Barbara Lorenzkowski's monograph *Sounds of Ethnicity*, music is described as a "universal language," highlighting its power to be performed and experienced across diverse cultures and communities.⁶⁵ Although Lorenzkowski's study focuses on the performance of German ethnicity through sound—specifically speech and song—her arguments allies to the Irish community and their traditional music. Similar to Mark O'Donnell's deep connection to Irish music, the active performance of Irish tunes provided an opportunity to create a sense of community among those engaging with these songs. For Mark O'Donnell, music became a means for him and others in working-class neighbourhoods to actively perform and connect with their Irish identity. His appreciation for Irish music was not something inherited from his family. Instead, through personal exploration, O'Donnell sought out what he described as more "authentic" Irish music, which he believed more accurately represented Irish tradition.

The Irish communities in Montreal have a long-standing tradition of singing and listening to Irish music. Sharon Doyle Driedger, in her monograph, explains that during the mid-twentieth century, many residents of Griffintown and Pointe-Saint-Charles would regularly sing and listen to traditional Irish songs in the streets, a practice that was deeply embedded in the cultural fabric of these neighbourhoods. She notes, "at the end of a hard week's work, the Irish would lose themselves in music. [...] On Dalhousie Street, bits of 'Danny Boy' and Tin Pan Alley tunes would float through Mrs. Flanagan's open windows."⁶⁶ Sherry Olson and Patricia Thornton also highlight the significance of music and singing among the residents of Pointe-Saint-Charles

⁶⁴ Mark O'Donnell, Interview with the author. September 24th, 2024.

⁶⁵ Lorenzkowski, *Sounds of Ethnicity*, 127.

⁶⁶ Doyle Driedger, *An Irish Heart*, 369.

stating that “[i]n their parlours and kitchens they sang and fiddled and danced. [...] Singing brought people together and set them apart.”⁶⁷ The Irish in Pointe-Saint-Charles heavily relied on music not only as a means of expressing their Irish identity, but also as a way to connect with family and fellow Irish neighbours. This was certainly the case for Mark O’Donnell, as well as the generations before him who grew up in the area. While O’Donnell’s connection to Irish music was not directly passed down from his parents, it is evident that the Irish community in Montreal has maintained a deep and enduring bond with traditional Irish music for several generations and provided an opportunity for those living in such areas to perform their *Irishness*.

Growing up in the traditional Irish working-class districts of Griffintown and Pointe-Saint-Charles offered individuals from working-class families a range of ways to express and perform their Irish culture and ethnicity. While these families may not have been able or willing to participate in organized Irish societies, they still actively engaged with their heritage through familial gatherings, church involvement, sports associations, and music. Regardless of socio-economic status—whether among the Irish elites or the working class—there were also individuals whose families actively distanced themselves from their Irish heritage, choosing not to participate in the active performance of their ethnicity.

Throughout the interviews, several narrators noted that their families experienced and were affected by the negative—and entirely false—stereotypes that followed the Irish into their diasporas, particularly those related to alcohol abuse, violence, and laziness. The ongoing issue of excessive drinking during Montreal’s St. Patrick’s Day parade has, for decades, reinforced the association between the Irish festival and alcohol-related problems, a link that has persisted well

⁶⁷ Olson and Thornton, *Peopling the North American City*, 345.

into the twenty-first century.⁶⁸ Darcy O'Connor explores the stereotype of the "fighting Irish" across various diasporas, particularly in both the United States and Montreal. O'Connor states the Irish "were regarded as ignorant and impulsive rough-and-tumble yahoos by their American-born (and usually anti-Catholic) employers."⁶⁹ This negative stereotype often resulted in public signage in cities stating that "Irish need not apply" for jobs, with employers explicitly refusing to hire individuals of Irish descent.⁷⁰

Two participants in this project described how they or their families sought to distance themselves from their Irish roots. Elizabeth Moody, the mother of Kate McNinch, reflected on her lack of involvement in Montreal's Irish community and her hesitation to embrace her Irish heritage. Moody was clear about her family's absence from Irish societies and other community organizations. Growing up in the 1950s and 1960s, despite her mother's side being entirely Irish, there was a noticeable reluctance on the part of Moody and her family to acknowledge their Irish heritage.

Elizabeth Moody: I don't think that my mother's family talked about it much because I don't think their father told them anything. The reason for that... very common with Irish families, was once they got here, they wanted to put a lot of the problems of Ireland away and they didn't talk about it. In fact, I think in... the Archer, this is the Archer household. It was an Irish household. [...] But they had.... My grandfather I suspect, had a real problem with being Irish because when they came here, nobody wanted to hire them. Unless it was for labour jobs or... There be a lot of signs, "No Irish need apply". Because the Irish were viewed as scum by a lot of people on the hill you know? So that was, I think a problem.⁷¹

Moody suggests that this silence may have been rooted in a sense of shame about being Irish.

According to Moody, her mother refrained from speaking about her Irish background because it

⁶⁸ Hustak, *One Long Line of Marvel*, 188. As noted earlier, this issue remains prevalent, with late Gazette reporter Patricia Donnelly describing the parade crowds as "binge drinking young people stumbling in alleyways, carrying their drinks openly as if Montreal streets had become one sprawling bar."

⁶⁹ O'Connor, *Montreal's Irish Mafia*, 5.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Kate McNinch and Elizabeth Moody, Interview with the author. September 15th, 2024.

had been suppressed by her grandfather. Moody reflects that this lack of dialogue around their Irish heritage hindered her own ability to develop a sense of Irish identity from a young age. Consequently, she did not form her Irish identity in the same way many others did, through active participation in communal and familial celebrations. According to Moody, her grandfather sought to downplay their Irish identity, preferring instead to “put a lot of the problems of Ireland away” rather than focus on their heritage.⁷²

Elizabeth Moody: No... I care more about my British side...

Kate McNinch: Ohhhh.... What a snob... **laughs**

Elizabeth Moody: No I, look I love my mother’s side. What I saw on that side,[...] was a lot of heavy drinking, everybody...

Kate McNinch: yeah, that’s true...

Elizabeth Moody: Everybody was... it was very predictable... that if you got together, it was a drink fest. And they thought, I think, that was just being Irish... I never thought that... I didn’t like it...⁷³

Elizabeth Moody intentionally distanced herself from that side of her ancestry. These harmful associations—such as being heavy drinkers, lazy, and aggressive—were not confined to Ireland alone. Alice Mauger argues that as the Irish diaspora expanded to places like Britain, British North America, and the United States, these negative stereotypes travelled alongside them.⁷⁴ Christie Brown also reflected on how her family and grandparents distanced themselves from their Irish identity as they were faced with these damaging stereotypes.

Christie Brown: But I think there was... a lot of actually dissociation to like people didn’t want to necessarily be associated as “Irish” first because it was working class... especially for Irish in Griffintown like you didn’t want to be necessarily, that to be the first thing they knew about you because they, they were discriminated against for, for jobs or the perception that well, you’re Irish so you’re all drunks and.... so I know my family did a lot of active rebelling against... being associated necessarily with those kinds of... with those kinds of perceptions. So like if you were Irish, it meant that you were gonna go, you were gonna leave work early, you weren’t going to be a serious

⁷² Kate McNinch and Elizabeth Moody, Interview with the author. September 15th, 2024.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Alice Mauger, “A Great Race of Drinkers? Irish Interpretations of Alcoholism and Drinking Stereotypes, 1945–1975,” *Medical History* 65, no. 1 (2021): 71.

worker or... that it, you didn't necessarily wanted to do brain work. You were there to do the, the blue-collar work...⁷⁵

Brown grew up in the 1970s and 1980s, a time when her family, like many others, was reluctant to openly acknowledge their Irish ancestry—a hesitation that was not uncommon among Irish communities globally.

Enda Delaney argues that it wasn't until the mid-1990s, with the emergence of the Celtic Tiger, that the Irish community both within Ireland and across its diasporas began to shed the negative stigma that had long hung over them.⁷⁶ This period marked a turning point where the stereotypes and challenges faced by the Irish were gradually replaced by a sense of pride and global recognition. As she posits: “[L]arge communities of the Irish-born and their descendants living overseas were viewed no longer as an unfortunate embarrassment to be whispered about in dark corners, but as something to be ‘cherished’”⁷⁷ Delaney highlights how the Irish community, since the 1990s, has progressed past the negative stereotypes that once hindered the expression of Irish culture, heritage, and identity.

As my interview partner, Christie Brown, reflected, her own lack of involvement with the St. Patrick's Parade stemmed from her mother's and grandmother's sense of modesty and their notable reluctance to “parade” their Irish heritage.⁷⁸

Christie Brown: like my mom's generation was much more exposed to it but when I grew up, like I knew about St Patrick's [Day] cause we wore the mittens that had the shamrocks and we occasionally went down to the parade but you know I've thought about it, like why didn't my mother want me to get involved with the.... The Irish parade, queen thing you know? And there's was this, association of... like... you know my grandmother told her, she's like well you know that when that started people used to have to get in bathing suits and walk in front of... like that's how they voted, is that you'd have to get into your bath... and then people cheered or whatever or at least that

⁷⁵ Christie Brown, Interview with the author. October 21st, 2024

⁷⁶ Enda Delaney, “The Irish Diaspora,” *Irish Economic and Social History* 33 (2006): 38.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Christie Brown, Interview with the author. October 21st, 2024

was my grandmother's interpretation where it was more like exploitation so, they didn't want me anywhere near trying to apply for princess.⁷⁹

Brown's engagement with the community only deepened after meeting fellow interviewee Patrick Shea during their teenage years in the 1980s and 1990s. Brown recounts how she and Shea worked as ushers for the St. Patrick's Society Ball, marking a turning point in her participation. Brown notes "it was my first formal introduction to [...] the Irish activities that take place. But from there they just kept asking me to join various things and that's how I continued my involvement ever since".⁸⁰ Despite her parents' efforts to distance themselves from their Irish roots, Christie Brown was able to forge a connection to this ethnic heritage through communal involvement and active participation—a bond she has sustained over the past several decades.

Overall, the stereotypes surrounding the "fighting drunk Irish" have played a pivotal role in shaping the lives of some narrators, influencing how the Irish community has been perceived across various diasporas. It is important to note that socio-economic class significantly determined the types of experiences and activities that contributed to the formation of Irish identity within Montreal's Irish community. However, regardless of class or the specific neighborhoods in which the narrators grew up, several narrators expressed a negative sense of Irishness. While aware of their cultural heritage, some sought to distance themselves from their Irish roots, which they, and their families, regarded as a cultural burden.

This project has sought to complicate notions of Irish identity. Irish-ness, as described by my narrators, was not something to be inherited, seamlessly passed down from one generation to the next, but rather something to be actively taught, expressed, and performed. To many of my

⁷⁹ Christie Brown, Interview with the author. October 21st, 2024

⁸⁰ Ibid.

narrators, the St. Patrick's Day parade offered a space they and their families could perform their ethnicity and enjoy the easy sociability of both public and private celebrations. Whereas Montreal's established Irish societies played a key role in fostering community ties, they were largely the domain of families from middle- and upper-class backgrounds. Working-class families found alternative avenues for cultural expression, through family gatherings, church activities, sports associations, and music. Despite differences in class, it is evident that Irish ethnicity and culture were continuously developed and maintained through active community participation, a tradition that remains crucial to the community today.

Chapter Three: Keepers of Memory

Several narrators involved in this project have dedicated countless hours to researching their families' pasts. During the course of my research, it became clear that those narrators were deeply invested in compiling and organizing historical information about their families—particularly the types of jobs they held, where they lived, whence they had come, and when and why they left Ireland. To answer these questions, several narrators engaged in what is known as family historical research. This kind of research is often done by amateur family historians looking to better understand their ancestry and piece together their families' history.

It is important to recognize the value of family history for non-academics, such as the participants in this project, and to consider the motivations that drive their efforts. According to Tanya Evans, “family history researchers are looking for much more than ‘who’ they are; they also seek the answers to ‘what’ and ‘why’ questions and to understand more about the historical contexts of their ancestors. [...] family historians are looking for historical understanding as well as knowledge.”¹ Indeed, my interviewees were not simply conducting family history to identify the names and dates of their ancestors, but they were also attempting to situate themselves within the broader context of the Irish diasporic experience in Canada, tracing their familial roots across Montreal, Quebec, Canada, and Ireland. Rather than relying on fragmented oral stories or folktales passed down through generations, these family historians harnessed the capabilities of genealogy and material culture to expand or shed light on their family's past. This active engagement allowed them to construct, explore, and root themselves within their ancestral history.

¹ Tanya Evans, “Genealogy and Family History,” in *A Companion to Public History*, ed. David Dean (John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2018), 172.

Family history plays a significant role for individuals seeking to understand and connect with their ancestral heritage. Several narrators in this project undertook family history research not only to uncover their connections to Montreal, but also to rediscover their deeper ties to their Irish heritage. This chapter argues that the family historians featured in this study did not simply inherit the resources and memories necessary to make these connections. Instead, they constructed their understanding of the past through deliberate and active historical research. In this chapter, I will first examine the role of contemporary family historians and their growing significance within the field of history. I will then explore three key sources used by the narrators in this project — oral traditions, genealogy, and material culture — and consider how each contributed to their ability to connect with and gain knowledge about their ancestral past.

During the 1970s, there was a significant movement within the field of history that emphasized social history and the study of society. As part of this movement, family history emerged as an important area of focus. A branch of social history, family history concentrates on understanding the experiences and historical roles of individual families within a society. Recent academic studies on family history include the work of both Peter Gossage and Magda Fahrni. In his research on nineteenth-century families in Saint-Hyacinthe, Gossage advocates for the use of the family reconstitution technique. Gossage states “the method – akin to a kind of community genealogy – involves the piecing together of individual family histories from local records of births, marriages, and deaths.”² Gossage uses genealogical research to generate statistics and insights on topics such as age at marriage, fertility, and other related issues within specific communities, or in this case the families in Saint-Hyacinthe, Quebec.

² Peter Gossage, *Families in Transition: Industry and Population in Nineteenth-Century Saint-Hyacinthe* (Montreal, Qué.: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1999), 6.

Magda Fahrni's work on the history of Canadian families focuses on how family life in Canada has evolved since the sixteenth century. Fahrni's monograph is essential for understanding how family history can be used to gain deeper insights into family life in Canada. She notes that family history as a field of research began to flourish in Canada during the 1970s. Early family historians aimed to explore the complexity of the family unit by examining themes such as marriage age, socio-economic status, fertility rates, and life expectancy, among others.³ Fahrni makes an important distinction between genealogy and family history; those engaged in genealogical research often aim to understand and "root" themselves within their lineage, while academic family historians focus on analysing broader social patterns and historical contexts that shape family life over a certain period of time.⁴

The works discussed above represent some of the major historians researching family history in Canada. In this context, it is important to note that the term *family historian*, as employed in this study, refers specifically to those who compile and analyse sources related to their own families to gain a deeper understanding of their personal histories, particularly through the use of genealogical sources as well as material objects. By contrast, the field of *family history* – as it emerged as part of the social history project by the 1970s – went beyond such careful reconstruction of the lineages of individual families to offer a rigorous and critical engagement with histories of gender, class, race, religion, affect, structures of power and community, and labour regimes. As historian Mary P. Ryan remarked as she was taking stock of the flourishing field in the early 1980s, what characterized this rich and sprawling (academic) scholarship was both its "interpretive flair and methodological ingenuity."⁵

³ Magda Fahrni, *Of Kith and Kin: A History of Families in Canada* (Oxford University Press, 2022), 3.

⁴ Ibid. 12.

⁵ Mary P. Ryan, "The Explosion of Family History," *Reviews in American History* 10, no. 4 (1982): 181.

Canadians were strongly influenced by the centennial of Confederation in 1967, which proved to be a motivating period for individuals to take an interest in researching their family histories.⁶ Such period aligns closely with the rise of the academic field as well discussed within Fahrni's work. The *Canadians and their Pasts* survey published in 2013 showed that almost "1 in 5 [Canadians] of the 3000 respondents had undertaken family history in some form in the past 12 months."⁷ This reflects the relative popularity of family historians and those researching their ancestral past in Canada, particularly over the past 50 to 60 years and continuing into the twenty-first century. When it comes to the Irish community and its many diasporas around the world, tracing family history is an immensely popular pursuit. This is exemplified by Claire Santry's book *The Family Tree Irish Genealogy Guide: How to Trace Your Ancestors in Ireland*. Santry's work is designed to help Irish Americans research their ancestry and make better use of available sources to build their family trees.⁸ Chris Paton similarly wrote a book titled *Tracing Your Irish Family History on the Internet: A Guide for Family Historians*. Paton's work is intended to support Irish family historians in their research and to help them harness the potential of digital archives.⁹ Together, the works of Paton and Santry highlight the strong interest within the Irish community in researching and preserving their family history.

Throughout this project, several narrators, including Ken Quinn, Patrick Shea, and Fergus Keyes, emphasized that they acted as family historians for their respective families. Patrick Shea was among the most well-versed, having conducted countless hours of research across multiple areas. During our conversations, he expressed not only a strong interest in learning about his

⁶ Evans, "Genealogy and Family History," 177.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Claire Santry, *The Family Irish Genealogy Guide: How to Trace Your Ancestors in Ireland* (Family Tree books, 2017).

⁹ Chris Paton, *Tracing your Irish family history on the Internet: A Guide for Family Historians* (Pen and Sword Family History, 2019)

family's history but also a dedication to seeking out information that was previously unavailable to him, going beyond simply collecting names and dates.

Patrick Shea: I was literally in high school doing genealogical research at the National Archives of Quebec, looking at baptismal records and the equivalent, so my knowledge about my family's experience, on one hand obviously the context is reading history because you know what they are living through and that's not family history, that's sort of like, what's the context in Ireland and Canada. But then, in doing genealogical research, getting very granular, not just names and dates because at the end of the day, seeing where people lived, looking at census forms, and saying 'oh, they lived, there, they lived in this type of house, they had this many people in the household, my mother's side mostly in rural Ontario, they own two cows, one sheep, so through my own interest and research and my own family, ended up learning a lot about the types of things, the places they were living, how they were living, because you know census, what's your occupation? Labourer. Boilermaker, seamstress, you know getting a good idea of their socio-economic status, where they lived in the city, how many people lived in their dwelling, you also get, you know, in census forms you see who the neighbours are. So, the Shea's or the Tierny's or the Donnelley's live here, and the next door, it could be the Turgeon's or McDougals. So, you also get a feel for the neighbourhoods in which they are living. Whether they were homogeneously Irish Canadian, or it was very mixed, in my case, different parts of the family, different experiences.¹⁰

Shea's statements support the arguments made by Evans that family historians use a variety of research methods to reconstruct the social history of their ancestors: the jobs they held, the socio-economic structures that gave shape to their lives, the resources they mobilized to make ends meet, the social networks of kith and kin – of friends and family members – in which they were embedded; and their dreams of social mobility.

Patrick Shea: There is a bit of a socio-economic progression, not in a negative way, that one is better than the other but there is an advancement of you know... laundress, labourer, boilermaker, to letter carrier, equivalent of today's bus driver, almost not a civil servant but you know and then my grandfather was the CFO [...] so a step up too.¹¹

By using census records, city directories, and other available resources, Shea was able to construct a richer picture of his ancestors' lives.¹² Ken Quinn similarly spoke about the

¹⁰ Patrick Shea, Interview with the author. August 29th, 2024.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

importance of knowing not just where his family had originally resided in Ireland but also “what life was like over there”.¹³

Ken Quinn: my Irish family, you know reading up what life was like over there... seeing the types of jobs that they may have done, seeing the type of jobs that my contemporary cousins are doing today, I mean we have doctors, we have lawyers, we have, you name it, we have it, successful business people, is it really neat to see the progression.¹⁴

Shea and Quinn also expressed their enjoyment in, and appreciation of, their family history, noting that their interest grew as they researched and connected the pieces of their past.¹⁵ Their experiences echo Evans’ assertion that “family history can have a powerful transformative impact on researchers.”¹⁶

As historian Joseph Amato suggests, oral tradition represents one of the most important sources family historians have used to deepen their understanding of their ancestral past.¹⁷ Indeed, throughout our conversations, several narrators spoke about the transmission of memories and oral traditions within their families and communities. Interestingly, they often commented on the *absence* of stories rather than relaying the stories themselves. For example, during our conversation with Kate McNinch and Elizabeth Moody, when asked if they had any stories about their ancestors or previous generations, McNinch simply responded, “I don’t know if I have sort of ancestral stories...”¹⁸. Within this project Fergus Keyes similarly acknowledged the lack of stories about his ancestors from his father stating “no he never relayed any stories about when they came from Ireland. I mean that, that’s where I dug out some information going through... genealogy and stuff,”¹⁹ This pattern is not unique to this project; Danielle Dick

¹³ Ken Quinn, Interview with the author. September 17th, 2024.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Patrick Shea, Interview with the author. August 29th, 2024. and Ken Quinn, Interview with the author. September 17th, 2024.

¹⁶ Evans, “Genealogy and Family History,” 178.

¹⁷ Amato, “Rethinking Family History,” 332.

¹⁸ Kate McNinch and Elizabeth Moody, Interview with the author. September 15th, 2024.

¹⁹ Fergus Keyes, Interview with the author. October 30th, 2024.

McGeough's research on family memories relied primarily on formal interviews with relatives highlighting how few memories are shared outside an interview setting.²⁰

The oral transmission of memories and family history is crucial for preserving heritage; however, as my work with oral stories demonstrates, the accounts that reach family historians are often fragmented and incomplete. Much in a similar vein, McGeough quotes Alexandra Georgakopoulou, who argues that "small stories are spontaneous and fragmented, occurring in everyday interactions."²¹ Georgakopoulou classifies such stories as fragments that hint at a larger narrative—a view echoed by Joseph Amato, who argues that family stories offer clues to a fuller history.²² Throughout the conversations in this project, stories were particularly sparse, and even when available, they often required contextual hints to fully understand their significance. As a result, additional research was necessary for the family historians and narrators involved in this project to deepen their understanding of their family's history.

During two interviews for this project, the oral transmission of family history and memories occurred in real time. Throughout these conversations, both Kate McNinch and Christie Brown's understanding of their past and heritage evolved as they engaged with members of the previous generation. As Alexander Freund holds in his study on communicative memory: "When we interview a family, we are not simply recording their 'finished' stories. Rather, their stories are changed during the interviews."²³ Freund additionally describes the concept of communicative memory which is central to ways in which memories are transmitted from one generation to the next. Freund states "communicative memory is based on the fleeting, unstable, disorganized, unspecialized communication between people who may alternate between the roles

²⁰ Danielle Dick McGeough, "Family Stories: Fragments and Identity," *Storytelling, Self, Society* 8, no. 1 (2012).

²¹ McGeough, "Family Stories: Fragments and Identity," 19.

²² Amato, "Rethinking Family History," 333.

²³ Freund, "A Canadian Family Talks about Oma's Life in Nazi Germany," 21.

of storyteller and listener. Communication among students on the school yard, within the family around the kitchen table, among colleagues at the water cooler, or among strangers in the supermarket are examples of such everyday communication.”²⁴ Freund’s work demonstrates that conversations, whether formal or informal, provide opportunities for family stories and memories to be shared and to evolve. These exchanges were not unprompted; both Christie Brown and Kate McNinch actively sought answers about their families’ past, supporting the view that dynamic questioning and research are key to constructing ancestral memory.

Although her mother was not formally participating in the interview I conducted, throughout our conversation, Brown would text her mother questions about their family.²⁵ On several occasions, Brown’s mother responded in real time to share the family’s history and her memories with her daughter.

Christie Brown: Oh, so here she wrote. I have not been able to determine that yet... the McKiever great-grandfather no, too early. What did I ask her... oh the Famine ships. So, the McKievers were too early they were the ones who were the rich Irish on that string of the family. The McCaffrey grandfather was later. That’s the one who came over in the early 1900s. and she isn’t sure because we haven’t been able to trace it back. And the Tierney and Nunens or the Lynchs. So, like we kinda know like okay we had Tierneys and... the McCaffrey’s, and [...] then the Lynch’s and the Nunens but that’s only like... a couple of generations back like... So... **laughs**²⁶

Christie Brown: Now she’s saying something about... [...] Oh here. The McCaffreys were from Omagh, The McKievers were from London Derry, Nunens Kilkenny, the Tierny’s and the Lynch’s they are not sure.²⁷

Brown’s inquiry reveals that her mother held a wealth of knowledge about their ancestral history. What is particularly striking is the ease with which her mother shared information that seemed new to Brown. The conversation above between mother and daughter exemplifies the type of

²⁴ Freund, “A Canadian Family Talks about Oma’s Life in Nazi Germany,” 7.

²⁵ Christie Brown, Interview with the author. October 21st, 2024.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

communicative memories discussed in Freund's work. These exchanges are typically informal, occurring between close family members in a relaxed, everyday setting.²⁸ By asking questions, Brown not only highlights the importance of inquiry but also shows how storytelling evolves through conversation—much like Freund describes—and how communicative memories are passed on through these exchanges. McGeough similarly discusses this within her article as she states “Storytellers reflect and make sense of past experience(s) through the process of telling. In an interview with my grandmother, she captured this notion perfectly when she stated, ‘You know, I hadn’t even thought of some of those things until I just told you.’”²⁹ It is evident that Brown had not recently inquired about her family’s past, and it was only through active conversation and questioning that her family history was uncovered and understood. Similar to Freund’s findings, Brown’s understanding of her family’s memories and history evolved throughout our discussion. Her knowledge of when and where her family emigrated from Ireland to Montreal appeared to be new to her, highlighting once again that family memories and history are constantly evolving and being constructed; they must be actively sought out rather than simply inherited.

Although taking place in person rather than over the phone, Kate McIninch and her mother, Elizabeth Moody, experienced a transmission of memories similar to what unfolded between Brown and her mother. After discussing several topics regarding their Irish heritage and the memories they possessed, there were moments throughout the conversation where McIninch was unfamiliar with some of the stories and memories her mother was sharing. She proceeded to question her mother about their ancestors.³⁰ One example occurred when the topic of the Famine

²⁸ Freund, “A Canadian Family Talks about Oma’s Life in Nazi Germany,” 7.

²⁹ McGeough, “Family Stories,” 22.

³⁰ Kate McIninch and Elizabeth Moody, Interview with the author. September 15th, 2024.

came up, and Elizabeth Moody began discussing her ancestors and their involvement in it. Upon hearing some of this information, McNinch seemed unaware of much of it and began asking follow-up questions.

Kate McNinch: What year was it, mum? Sorry...

Elizabeth Moody: Well, the Famine officially, is said... they say 1848... but it was around that time...

Kate McNinch: Oh, my history is all screwed up.

Elizabeth Moody: So, a lot, a lot of, a lot of people who left, Ireland, left within that...

Kate McNinch: Oh, okay...

Elizabeth Moody: Like I know my great-great-great-grandmother probably died during the Famine...

Kate McNinch: Oh, but you don't know...?

Elizabeth Moody: Well, she had a child, her two children and then eventually,

Kate McNinch: On Clarke...? What side? ³¹

These questions represent the fluidity and constructions of family memories and stories that Freund exemplifies within his work. For McNinch and Brown their family's history and stories evolved throughout the interviews and therefore represented an opportunity for their family's history to be passed from one generation to the next through such conversations. Furthermore, the conversations between mother and daughter emphasize the importance of asking questions, particularly for individuals in the younger generations. Freund also notes that memories and family stories are complex and notes that active questioning is crucial to develop these memories. He states that memories are "not characterized by the old handing preserved memories down to the young. Rather, these memories are constructed through communicative interaction."³² McGeough concurs with Freund, arguing that stories are not simply handed from one person to the next, or in the case of Brown and McNinch, from mother to daughter. Rather, as McGeough holds: "Families do not always tell coherent, linear stories. In fact, sometimes

³¹ Kate McNinch and Elizabeth Moody, Interview with the author. September 15th, 2024.

³² Freund, "A Canadian Family Talks about Oma's Life in Nazi Germany," 7.

families do not intend to tell a story to other family members at all”.³³ Throughout the discussions, it became clear that conversations—particularly those related to family heritage and memories—were often only revealed when these family historians actively questioned their parents or grandparents.

Why were stories, specifically ones that were transmitted from one generation to the next, so difficult to discover in the course of my research? This was a question that I often found asking myself during the research phase of this project. Some of my narrators, including Mark O’Donnell, Scott Phelan and Fergus Keyes, addressed this question directly when reflecting on the reason as to why some family stories and histories had never reached them. Throughout the conversations for this project, it became clear that intergenerational memories typically extend back three or four generations, meaning that memories and stories beyond those generations are often unknown or lost. Within his article about such memories, Alexander Freund supports that the communicative memories as discussed above are only “maintained by the living three to four generations, stretching over a span of some eighty years and continually moving forward in time.”³⁴ Mark O’Donnell, who grew up in Pointe-Saint-Charles during the 1970s, recalled that his family was quite reserved when it came to discussing earlier generations and their stories.

Davis: Do you remember, or does anyone ever talk about any other jobs that your parents had [...] or great-grandparents or anything, or that’s all kinda like lost?

Mark O’Donnell: Yeah, I think that’s that probably lost... I never, they never talked about the past, even, much at all, you know? That’s it, I wouldn’t know that one.³⁵

Mark O’Donnell was one of the first participants to note that memories rarely span more than three generations—a pattern also seen in several other conversations in this project and consistent with the research of Freund.

³³ McGeough, “Family Stories,” 18.

³⁴ Freund, “A Canadian Family Talks about Oma’s Life in Nazi Germany,” 7.

³⁵ Mark O’Donnell, Interview with the author. September 24th, 2024.

Two narrators noted how death contributed to the fracturing of family stories across generations. According to Mary P. Ryan, *academic* family historians have long examined the dissolution of families, and within this context, the impact of death is particularly significant. Ryan shows that both death and divorce can disrupt family structures and the memories they contain.³⁶ Ryan's arguments about the impact of death on fracturing memories are particularly evident throughout this project. Scott Phelan discussed his father's tragic death when he was 15, noting that it hindered his ability to inherit certain family memories. He explained that the stories he did hear were often forgotten because he was too young to retain them.³⁷ Fergus Keyes echoes this point, noting that his mother similarly lacked memories of her own family due to the early deaths of her parents.

Fergus Keyes: Yeah, no, my parents, my father really spoke a fair amount about St. Columban and they say we went there in the summers. He had a lot of ancestors there, he had spent a lot of his life there, even though he wasn't born there but we had, spent summers. His mom yeah, they talked about it. My mother talked a little bit less. My mother was born in Ottawa, I think she, her maiden name was O'Connor, I think I mentioned that. And I think there's an O'Connor Street in Ottawa that somehow was interrelated somehow to her family. But her own father died as they say my grandfather, at 24 and her mother died at 31 so she was basically an orphan, brought up by a series of aunts. So she never had that same thing, you know... so it was...whatever, she just didn't have that same thing.³⁸

Keyes's mother experienced a tragedy during her youth that affected both parents, resulting in a clear absence of communicative interactions and, consequently, the transmission of communicative memories discussed earlier in the chapter. This made it extremely difficult, if not impossible, for Keyes's mother to develop vivid memories of her own, leading to a break in the flow of memories from her to Keyes. This fracturing of memories highlights the importance of communicative interactions within families to preserve and pass down memories from one

³⁶ Ryan, "The Explosion of Family History," 187.

³⁷ Scott Phelan, Interview with the author. September 25th, 2024.

³⁸ Fergus Keyes, Interview with the author. October 30th, 2024.

generation to the next, as outlined in the work of Freund and McGeough. It is crucial not only to have someone willing to ask questions of previous generations but also for those generations to be willing to share their memories. Without both sides engaging in communicative interactions, the transmission and preservation of oral histories becomes nearly impossible.

In recent years, one of the most accessible ways to research family history has been through genealogical research. This is evident in the popularity of websites such as Ancestry.com, 23andMe, and FamilySearch.org. These platforms allow amateur historians to begin their research using basic information such as ancestor names, birth dates, and marriage dates. With easy access to these sites and their archives, genealogy has become increasingly popular among amateur historians. According to Claire Santry, in her book on tracing Irish ancestry, Irish genealogical research can be challenging depending on the historical period being studied, however, “it is undoubtedly a whole lot easier than it used to be. Irish Americans no longer face only the choice between taking expensive research trips to Ireland or commissioning professionals. Millions of Irish family history records, especially those used by beginners, are now online and nearly all of them are free.”³⁹ The size of the Irish diaspora has created significant interest among individuals seeking to learn more about their roots in Ireland and how their families became part of the diaspora. Several websites cater specifically to those researching Irish ancestry, including IrishFamilyHistoryCenter.com, IrishGenealogy.ie, and JohnGrenham.com, among many others. These resources provide tools and resources to help individuals deepen their understanding of their family’s genealogical make up.

Several factors motivated participants to explore and collect memories about their ancestors. Of the nine participants, only two—Fergus Keyes and Patrick Shea—began

³⁹ Santry, *The Family Irish Genealogy Guide*, 7.

researching their family history and became family historians from a young age. Shea grew up in Montreal's Notre-Dame-de-Grâce (NDG) neighbourhoods in a family deeply involved in the local Irish community. Raised during the 1970s and 1980s, he came of age at a time when family history was gaining popularity in academia and access to genealogical research was expanding rapidly. Fergus Keyes, born in the Parc-Extension area of Montreal, grew up primarily during the 1950s and 1960s. He often noted that he had been fascinated by his family's history from a very young age.

Fergus Keyes: But I, I got interested in genealogy and where the family came from and stuff like that. And it all led to back to of course St. Columban because St. Columban which had been opened in the early, which had been founded in the early 1800s was almost a hundred percent Irish Catholic community probably up to just before World War One, somewhere around the early whatever... nineteen... whatever ten, fifteen, something like that. But up to that point it was almost entirely exclusively Irish and Catholic.

[...]

Davis: And was there anything that motivated you to get into, sort of learning more about that, you said genealogy more in towards your 30s but was there a thing that motivated you or just life in general?

Fergus Keyes: No, I think just life in general. There was nothing really that kinda motivated...

[...]

Davis: Were your siblings at from a young age, also interested in their Irish heritage?

Fergus Keyes: No, not very much. My brother a little bit, but most of them had no interest and that, I was probably out of the four, the one most interested in it.⁴⁰

This was not particularly common among the Irish community members I interviewed, as many noted that their interest in exploring their Irish history developed later in life. Fergus even reflected on this when discussing his children and their involvement.

Fergus Keyes: You couldn't do it... when you're much younger, when you're young and you're just married and you're raising a family and paying a house and you have a full-time job and you know all that kind of stuff, but since I've been retired quite a long time, it's easier obviously to get involved in these kinds of things that don't have to you know... that you don't have to yeah... you know. So, I think that's why people older, when their kids are older, [...] maybe their either retired or coming up to retirement or

⁴⁰ Fergus Keyes, Interview with the author. October 30th, 2024.

something, then they say, I've got some time now, let's look at this genealogy or lets, let's get some more information about that you know?⁴¹

Fergus reinforces the idea that constructing one's family history requires considerable time and effort and that this often occurs at certain life stages; when the children have grown up and left the house and or finished working allows time for these passion projects. It involves active research, which demands both resources and dedication. As the conversation with Keyes progressed, particularly when discussing the fragmented life stories of his mother and the death of her father, he explained that the scarcity of oral stories about his family's past motivated him to actively search for genealogical records and trace his family's ancestral ties to both St. Columban and Ireland.⁴² Anne-Marie Kramer underscores the importance of family history and genealogy in her article, highlighting how genealogy is closely linked to kinship and identity. She argues "Family history or genealogy allows people to produce, express and/or deny kinship, affinity and connectedness between themselves as individuals and their close family and wider kin, both within and across the generations."⁴³ Keyes, along with the other narrators, used genealogical research to strengthen his connection to family memories and history. By examining where his family originated in both Ireland and Montreal, he gained a deeper understanding of his family's origins as well as a sense of belonging.

Among the narrators for this project, Patrick Shea had delved most deeply into genealogical research. He was one of the few participants who knew precisely where his family came from, where they had lived, and what his ancestors' occupations had been. From a young age, Shea developed a strong interest in his Irish ancestry on both his father's and mother's sides.

⁴¹ Fergus Keyes, Interview with the author. October 30th, 2024.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Anne-Marie Kramer, "Kinship, Affinity and Connectedness: Exploring the Role of Genealogy in Personal Lives," *Sociology* 45, no. 3 (2011): 392.

His father's family history is rooted in Montreal and its surrounding areas, while his mother's family is primarily connected to both Ontario and Montreal, following their immigration to Canada during the nineteenth century.

Patrick Shea: So most of what I know, which is a lot about my family, and their experiences in Canada, is and sort of their origins in Ireland, comes more from, [...] things that exist in archives, birth certificates, baptismal certificates, census records, there is this chain of records [...] but I had to go out and get it, right? No one sat me down at their knee and said “now let me tell you where we all lived” and ****laughs****. I had to go get it and because I had this interest, I did get it and I was interested in and wanted to know more and more and more.⁴⁴ [...]

This passage illustrates the drive to actively seek out information about one's family rather than waiting for it to be handed down. Shea clearly demonstrates his strong interest in his family's ancestry and genealogy, as well as his determination to gather as much information as possible. The phrase “get it” is significant, highlighting one of the central ideas of this chapter: it is through active research that one uncovers their family's history and memories. According to Joseph A. King in his study on genealogy, history, and Irish immigration, genealogy is particularly useful for studying Irish immigrants. King argues that tracing several generations can help overcome potential blind spots that historians and statisticians may have regarding the Irish and their presence in Canada and the United States.⁴⁵ Family historians such as Shea and Keyes similarly used genealogy to uncover specific details about their families, alongside the broader historical knowledge they held about the Irish in Quebec. This once again highlights the importance of combining genealogical research with other historical sources—an approach emphasized not only in the work of Joseph A. King, but also in that of fellow Irish family historian Fiona Fitzsimons.⁴⁶ Fergus Keyes did exactly that when he discussed a story he heard

⁴⁴ Patrick Shea, Interview with the author. August 29th, 2024.

⁴⁵ Joseph A. King, “Genealogy, History, and Irish Immigration,” *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies* 10, no. 1 (1984): 48-49.

⁴⁶ Fiona Fitzsimons, “Is Family History ‘Real’ History?” *History Ireland* 21, no.5 (2013): 49.

from his family about one of his forebears. Keyes shared how, as a young boy, he heard a story from his father about his grandfather's second wife but had no context behind the origins of the story and as a result, he never fully understood the full meaning of the memory.

Fergus Keyes: But his grandfather had been married, lady and had four daughters and then she died quite young, very young less than 30 maybe he brought up his daughters and then eventually got remarried but the girl he remarried wasn't much older than his oldest daughter from his first marriage. So, my father used to say, "yeah yeah my grandfather married someone much older than his daughter". So, I never understood that story, I don't know where that came from and why he would mention it or anything. I never understood the story until I got into the genealogy and saw he was a widower, and I you know... he would bring up his own kids and then met someone who was probably you know, maybe even one of his daughter's friends for all I know. I don't know but she was quite a big younger.⁴⁷

Keyes drew on the genealogical research he carried out on his family and ancestors to gain a deeper insight into the stories his father had shared with him. His interest in tracing his lineage stemmed from a desire to uncover more about his family's origins—not only in Quebec but also in Ireland. During our conversation, Keyes highlighted that a key motivation for his research was to better understand his family's connection to the rural Irish farming community of St.

Columban. Both his mother and father have roots back to St. Columban, where they eventually met, which fostered a strong personal connection for Keyes to the town. He sought to explore not just their places of origin but also the occupations they held and the influence his family exerted within the community. Throughout our discussion, Fergus Keyes reflected on how his family frequently mentioned their ties to St. Columban. However, some stories remained vague or, as noted earlier, were absent altogether. This gap in family narratives encouraged him to delve deeper through genealogical research, illuminating some of the more hidden aspects of his ancestry. This process echoes the challenges described in the work of King and Fitzsimons regarding tracing difficult or incomplete family histories.

⁴⁷ Fergus Keyes, Interview with the author. October 30th, 2024.

Building on the connection between genealogy and oral traditions, Ken Quinn demonstrated that genealogical research and DNA testing can confirm—or, in his case, contest—stories that his family had passed on through generations.

Ken Quinn: I always thought that... that my family came from County Mayo... like Quinn family came from County Mayo... Ireland, which is in the South. Only to find out after... doing my ancestry DNA and connecting with... distant but not too distant cousin, who actually lives over there, who did... was able to do more research than I was able to do, confirmed that my family actually came from the North...

Davis: do you know whereabouts in the north?

Ken Quinn: County Tyrone.

Davis: And why did you think that it was originally county Mayo?

Ken Quinn: well that's the memory thing... My dad heard it from his... his dad or his dad's cousins... and it just, it goes down that way... it's kinda [sic] like... it was probably told to my grandfather... and his brothers and sisters because his parents said it, but they didn't, they wouldn't have even know I guess... their family actually came from County Tyrone.⁴⁸

Quinn's experience illustrates Fitzsimmons' argument about the value of combining oral stories with genealogical research. However, his journey with DNA testing went even further, offering not only a clearer picture of the past but also a fundamentally new perspective on his family history. Quinn didn't seem upset by the fact that the stories he heard as a child turned out to be different; rather, he was intrigued by how his family's history had, in a way, shifted. He wasn't simply seeking the "truth," as he had never questioned where he came from in the first place. Interestingly, pioneer oral historian Alessandro Portelli emphasizes the significance of the meaning behind memories rather than their factual accuracy. In his work, Portelli argues that what matters most to individuals is not just the facts themselves, but the meaning and significance of the stories they tell.⁴⁹ Quinn could have traced his roots to County Mayo, County Cork, or—in his case—County Tyrone. While these details might seem to alter his family

⁴⁸ Ken Quinn, Interview with the author. September 17th, 2024.

⁴⁹ Alessandro Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli, and Other Stories : Form and Meaning in Oral History* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1991), 2.

history, they don't change the meaning he attaches to his heritage or the connection he feels to his homeland; the roots remain, just in a different place. Without his genealogical research and active pursuit of his family's past, he would never have discovered that his origins lay in County Tyrone, now part of Northern Ireland. This was information that even previous generations hadn't known, and it ultimately motivated him to dig deeper into his family's history and its newly uncovered ties to County Tyrone.⁵⁰ Quinn and Keyes both highlight the value of combining genealogical research with other resources, such as oral traditions, to develop and construct family history. Quinn, Keyes, and Shea also highlight a common theme throughout interviews; the lack of inherited knowledge and sources. It is clear that these three family historians dedicated countless hours to research in order to further develop and reconstruct their family histories, ultimately situating themselves within their broader Irish family tree.

One aspect that most families inherit from past generations, whether sentimental or not, is objects. These can include photographs, old books, decorations, fine china, or letters. In this project, two narrators discussed the value of objects and material culture in understanding their Irish roots in Canada and Ireland. Objects carry multiple meanings, which are not always fully captured by their typical use or how they are perceived by outsiders. Within the global Irish community, material culture holds particular significance. According to Paul Caffrey, in his study of Irish material culture, Irish culture is often seen as "pre-eminently literary, verbal, and musical."⁵¹ That being said, Caffrey additionally notes that "everyday objects and products produced or consumed by Irish people in the past have just as much significance as those of

⁵⁰ Ken Quinn, Interview with the author. September 17th, 2024.

⁵¹ Paul Caffrey, "Irish Material Culture: The Shape of the Field," *Circa*, no.103 (2003): 29.

other more materially conscious countries.”⁵² Caffrey’s study showcases that material culture of the Irish provides an opportunity to develop and connect with their Irish roots and history.

Throughout my project and the conversations that took place, these kinds of objects proved particularly significant, especially those belonging to Patrick Shea. Prior to our meetings, Shea mentioned that he owned both his family’s large Bible and a letter from Ireland addressed to his family in British North America, dated to the late 1820s (Appendices 1 and 2). Upon entering Shea’s home, I noticed a large document framed and displayed on the fireplace mantle. It was immediately clear that this was the letter he had referred to in his email, which held special significance for him. During our interview, we took a break from our conversation, walked over to the letter, and began discussing it.

Patrick Shea: So, this is a letter written from Pallaskenry, County Limerick March 1st, 1828, so this, back then letters and envelopes were the same thing so it was all folded up, so here is where the envelope was, so there’s a postmark an Irish postmark from 1828 and its addressed to my great-great-great-grandfather. So, John Shaughnessy Fredericksburg Upper Canada America, American not as in the country but the continent. So, this letter was written on March 1st, 1828, from Ireland, he was from Pallaskenry, written to him in Upper Canada which is now Ontario. What it is, it’s a three page letter obviously, [...] it’s a group letter, so basically what is it, so even though it was addressed to my great-great-great-grandfather, the goal of it was, once he received it he would pass on the news, because its co-signed, by and I say signed, but this was probably written by the parish priest, I doubt these folks knew how to read and write. So, a Shea happened to be written, this is not the Shea side of the family. But a Shea, Tracy, Shaughnessy, that’s my family, so it’s signed by a few people, and it’s really meant to... be like a newsy letter.⁵³

As Shea mentioned, this letter contained little information of practical relevance today, but it carried deep meaning about his family’s heritage.

In his work on immigrant letters sent from British North America back to Europe, David Gerber highlights the vital role these letters played in conveying important information to family

⁵² Caffrey, “Irish Material Culture: The Shape of the Field,” 29.

⁵³ Patrick Shea, Interview with the author. August 29th, 2024.

members overseas. His monograph demonstrates how crucial these letters were in maintaining familial connections across the Atlantic, serving not only as a source of news but also as a means of preserving relationships over long distances. Gerber notes “Intimate conversation, the ordinary, world-making discourse of individuals, would no longer suffice to provide anchors for the individual, so writing—an even less accustomed practice for many than reading—had to suffice to accomplish the goal of achieving continuity.”⁵⁴ In relation to the family letter that Shea possesses, its contents may not have revealed groundbreaking news. However, the letter itself embodies the kind of connection Gerber discusses in his work. It was entirely normal for migrants—or their relatives back home—to write about “food, the cost of living, the place of residence, relocation and travel, friendships, community involvement, church and religious beliefs, politics and public life, legacies and inheritance, and politics and public affairs.”⁵⁵ This letter demonstrates that, as of March 1828, a connection still existed between the family members who had emigrated and those who remained behind. It highlights the importance of maintaining that bond, a sentiment clearly reflected in the effort to keep communication ongoing through letters like this one. Gerber similarly notes within his work stating, “The letter served as the medium for doing so, but for correspondents the letter soon passed from a medium for a relationship to, in a practical sense, the relationship itself, for relationships became constituted through words on paper.”⁵⁶ From an academic or historical standpoint, this letter may not appear to be a monumental source of information. However, for Patrick Shea—serving as the family historian—it holds significant personal value. The letter helps him piece together a deeper understanding of his family: the nature of their relationships, where they lived, who they were

⁵⁴ David A. Gerber. *Authors of Their Lives: The Personal Correspondence of British Immigrants to North America in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 57.

⁵⁵ Ibid. 132.

⁵⁶ Ibid. 92.

close to, when they emigrated, and which family members made the journey and which stayed behind. This kind of information was not passed down through family stories or shared by his parents, and much of it is not easily uncovered through traditional genealogical research. Yet, through the discovery of this single letter, these otherwise inaccessible details became available to him and his family.

Material objects like this can reveal and preserve details that may not exist in conventional sources or historical records. For Patrick Shea, the letter proved to be incredibly valuable. Without it, both his connection to the past and his understanding of that past might not have existed at all—or at least, not in such depth. Similar to Ken Quinn, this letter motivated Patrick to continue his journey as his family’s historian, which demonstrates the motivational aspect of such objects as well. Paul Caffrey similarly argues that “where there is a lack of documentary evidence, [...] objects are the most truthful and revealing records of such people’s lives.”⁵⁷ Additionally, the letter played a significant role in Shea’s efforts to develop and construct his family history. Originally held by a family member in the United States, Shea tracked it down and had it shipped to his primary residence in Montreal. The letter was not simply handed down; he had to actively seek it out, gaining further insights into his family’s past. The second object he shared was the Shea family Bible, which he was particularly eager to show. He explained that it had been passed down to him by a cousin who knew of his deep interest in their family history.

Patrick Shea: This page [Appendix 2] is broken but it would have said “William Donnelly, book or bible, Montreal January 6, 1856,” and then the first page, is a poem that sounds cool but it’s a common Irish poem in fact in James Joyce’s *Ulysses* the poem appears, so it’s a rhyming poem”⁵⁸
*“William Donnelly is my name,
Ireland is my nation, Ahoghill is my dwelling place and heaven my expectation.*

⁵⁷ Caffrey, “Irish Material Culture,” 30.

⁵⁸ Patrick Shea, Interview with the author. August 29th, 2024.

*When I am dead and in my grace and all my bones are rotten
This little book will take my name when I am quite forgotten.*”⁵⁹
[...]

It was obviously a nineteenth century Irish ditty or poem [...] and then this year again this is the age where I am like really getting into this, so this was like a treasure, treasure trove and not only is it an old mid nineteenth century bible, but then also to, in the middle of it, as bibles often did and maybe they still do, there is a place where you put genealogical information. So, there is like names, there’s, got to be careful of this book, it’s got to be better bound than just masking tape, which I will do one day. So yeah, there are handwritten records or births and deaths so the owner of the bible these were his children, so birthdays and deaths of his brothers, deaths of his mother-in-law, his own death recorded 1887, so some clippings from...

So yeah, this [Appendix 2] is the clipping from probably the Montreal Star or herald of the owner of this bible’s death, in 1880s so this is literally is a newspaper clipping from the 1880s so is obviously his family.... Here, here [Appendix 2] is a new year’s card from 1881, so yeah here is some real physical, tangible, [...] So yeah that also you know as a kid seeing this was like wow this is really interesting, caused me to want to even learn more and seeing the names literally hand written and then you double check that against records, yup that’s the right date, right name, right birthdate and again just by happenstance, [...] But yeah, that’s the family bible.⁶⁰

These objects hold significant value. They not only carry nostalgic memories and can inspire individuals to become family historians, but they also help keep family history alive. In their introductory chapter to their monograph featuring a collection of essays regarding history and material culture, Ivan Gaskell and Sarah Anne Carter state that “[e]verything that survives from the past, however remote or recent, is a trace of that past.”⁶¹ While these memories may be vague, shaped by stories passed down through several generations, these objects can also stimulate interest and provide valuable information about them. Bibles have long been attached to familial connections and home life. According to Sarah C. Williams, “The presence of Bibles not only as texts but also as material artefacts formed a vital part of the fabric of home life in the

⁵⁹ Patrick Shea, Interview with the author. August 29th, 2024.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ivan Gaskell and Sarah Anne Carter, “Introduction: Why History and Material Culture?,” in *The Oxford Handbook of History and Material Culture*, ed. Ivan Gaskell and Sarah Anne Carter (Oxford University Press, 2020), 3.

Victorian and Edwardian periods.”⁶² Williams additionally states “Often, objects such as family Bibles operate as symbols around which the beliefs of family members coalesce. Family stories frequently surround the origins and preservation of such objects”.⁶³ While the Bible itself may not directly reflect the Shea family’s interest in or commitment to their religious roots, its presence, and the care taken to preserve it, speaks to Shea’s connection to his family’s past. Acquiring and safeguarding the Bible required deliberate effort, not only by Shea but also by several generations before him. For Shea, objects like this did more than offer a glimpse into the past; they also sparked curiosity and a desire to learn more about the items themselves and the people who once owned them. This interest became one of the key reasons he grew so deeply engaged with his family history.

The contents of the Bible itself similarly align with other family Bibles from that era, in particular regarding the genealogical page that showcases familial birthday, deaths and potentially key dates. (See Appendix 2). As Karin Wulf writes in her study on connections between genealogy, family history and Bibles, “the examples of the bible genealogical page showcases the interest of collecting and preserving genealogy research across generations ‘Exemplified by such homely acts of family history as the Tileston Bible, the pervasive evidence of Americans’ interest in genealogy across the centuries ought to give us pause.’”⁶⁴ Genealogical records found within Shea’s family Bible—shown in Appendix 2—demonstrate a longstanding interest in family history, dating back several generations. These pages not only helped Patrick Shea trace when his ancestors were born but also served as a tangible link connecting him to

⁶² Sarah C. Williams, “Is there a Bible in the house? Gender, religion and family culture” In *Women, Gender and Religious Cultures in Britain, 1800-1940*, ed. Sue Morgan, Jacqueline de Vries (Routledge 2010), 25.

⁶³ Ibid. 27.

⁶⁴ Karin Wulf, “Bible, King, and Common Law: Genealogical Literacies and Family History Practices in British America,” *Early American Studies* 10, no. 3 (2012): 468.

them. In addition to these records, the Bible contained newspaper clippings and other preserved materials, which offered further insight into the lives of his relatives—what events they attended, what they valued, and what moments were significant to them at the time.

Outside of Bibles and letters, another interviewee in this project spoke not about material objects as connections to the past, but about how the absence of such objects can create a sense of disconnect. Christie Brown reflected on the importance of family photographs and items such as her family’s fine china set and other Irish artifacts tied to her heritage. She noted that these tangible pieces of the past play a vital role in keeping family stories and cultural memory alive. Brown’s family had owned a house in Griffintown for several generations, and it was filled with memorabilia—photos, antique china, and other heirlooms—that served as a physical link to their Irish roots and shared history.

Christie Brown: All the Belleek China and all the, you know, all the mementos that would have connected us back to Ireland on the Nunen side, it all went up in flames and in... I wanna say 1989... maybe. [...] So, I’ve lost a lot of those historical artifacts that would have absolutely been helpful to connect us back. So, the things that my grandmother kept, were things like obituaries and marriage notices in the paper and... different articles that she kept and now my mother is keeping and... yeah, I guess there just wasn’t even that concept that it would be important to, keep all this information in one place for future generations you know? ⁶⁵

These objects represented a tangible connection to the past, and Brown’s reflections highlight their significance as carriers of memory and links to ancestral history. She explains that some of those connections were lost when the items that held them were destroyed in a 1989 fire. Her anecdote illustrates how the knowledge and emotional ties embedded in material objects disappeared alongside them. Unlike the Shea family, who were able to use their preserved Bible and letter to deepen their understanding of their heritage, Christie Brown and her family were unable to access that same level of connection due to the loss of these heirlooms. Yet, Brown

⁶⁵ Christie Brown, Interview with the author. October 21st, 2024.

emphasizes that these objects had existed—and that her family had made deliberate efforts to preserve them. This mirrors the Shea family’s commitment to safeguarding their past and reflects a shared desire across families to maintain a tangible link to their heritage.

As demonstrated through the conversations in this project, material objects—or objects of memory—play a crucial role in shaping memories and in helping individuals connect to and engage with their past. Katina Lillios, in her article regarding family heirlooms and objects of memory states “Heirlooms not only evoke the sentimental feelings an heir may have had for a particular parent or grandparent, but also represent links to an ancestral past, to a place filled with relationships that transcend the bounds of a human lifetime and memory.”⁶⁶ These objects represent a connection to the familial past and to memories not transmitted through stories or genealogical records. Such memories and connections can only be accessed through objects preserved across generations. Both Christie Brown and Patrick Shea highlight how these items carry meaning and history. We can argue that these objects are significant not only in themselves but also because their survival reflects their importance. Family history is constructed through active research, but it is also preserved through intentional care, as exemplified by these objects. These items were kept for a reason, and it is the role of family historians like Patrick Shea and Christie Brown to uncover and construct a deeper understanding of their families’ histories using these objects of memory.

The family historians involved in this project dedicated countless hours to researching and situating themselves within their familial past. Their aim extended beyond simply uncovering names and dates—they sought a deeper understanding of their ancestors’ lives in both Ireland and Canada. While family historians often rely on oral histories and genealogy to

⁶⁶ Katina T. Lillios, “Objects of Memory: The Ethnography and Archaeology of Heirlooms,” *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory* 6, no. 3 (1999): 243.

piece together their ancestral narratives, this was not necessarily the case for the narrators in this project. Oral stories were largely absent from the interviews, as the temporal limits of memory rarely extended beyond three generations. In some cases, the early loss of family members further prevented the transmission of these memories. In the absence of oral accounts, several narrators turned to other forms of historical research, focusing primarily on genealogy and material culture. Throughout the interviews, it became clear that family history is not simply passed down from one generation to the next; rather, it must be actively pursued, reconstructed, and preserved by those committed to uncovering it.

Conclusion

This thesis has sought to examine how memories and stories about being Irish in Quebec were transmitted (or not) through generations of Irish Canadian families. The central argument of this project is that Irishness was rooted in active involvement in both family and community. This participation might include asking questions about the past, visiting Irish “pilgrimage” sites, and attending Irish festivals, parades, family gatherings, and parties. Indeed, as the eleven narrators of this study held, to be Irish is to be involved.

To be Irish in Montreal meant attending or participating in the St. Patrick’s Day parade, making and distributing Christmas baskets for the local Irish community, hosting or attending kitchen parties in Pointe-Saint-Charles, and celebrating other festive family gatherings. Music and dance were also integral to this sense of Irishness, whether at bars, pubs, basements, or even in the living room on a weeknight. My interview partners’ participation in community activities could range from small gestures to larger commitments that involved joining societies, taking part in parades, or participating in community projects. These activities were deeply meaningful to the narrators and represented the foundations of their sense of diasporic Irishness.

In turning to narrators’ personal family histories, this study has highlighted that memories and stories related to the distant past are both fragile and sparse, rarely reaching beyond the third generation. Many of the narrators reported that stories about their ancestors were few and far between. As the family historians among my interview partners recounted, their knowledge of their ancestors’ and community’s history was not inherited, but painstakingly gathered and reconstructed, primarily through genealogical records and material objects. For them, the research process itself became a means of connecting with their ancestral past and deepening their connection to their roots.

There are several questions that I was unable to address in this thesis, which, I hope, will be explored in future research. It would be fascinating to undertake a similar oral history project involving narrators of Irish ancestry who do not consider themselves active within the community. Another area for future research would be to undertake a comparative study of family memories and folklore in the Irish diaspora in other large urban North American centres such as in New York, Boston, or Toronto. Do members of these diasporas regard Ireland in ways akin to my narrators? Is Ireland still considered a place of pilgrimage for the world-wide Irish diaspora? Further, has the Irish Famine left traces in the intimate, vernacular family memory of the Irish diaspora beyond Montreal? These are critical questions, and I look forward to seeing them addressed in future research.

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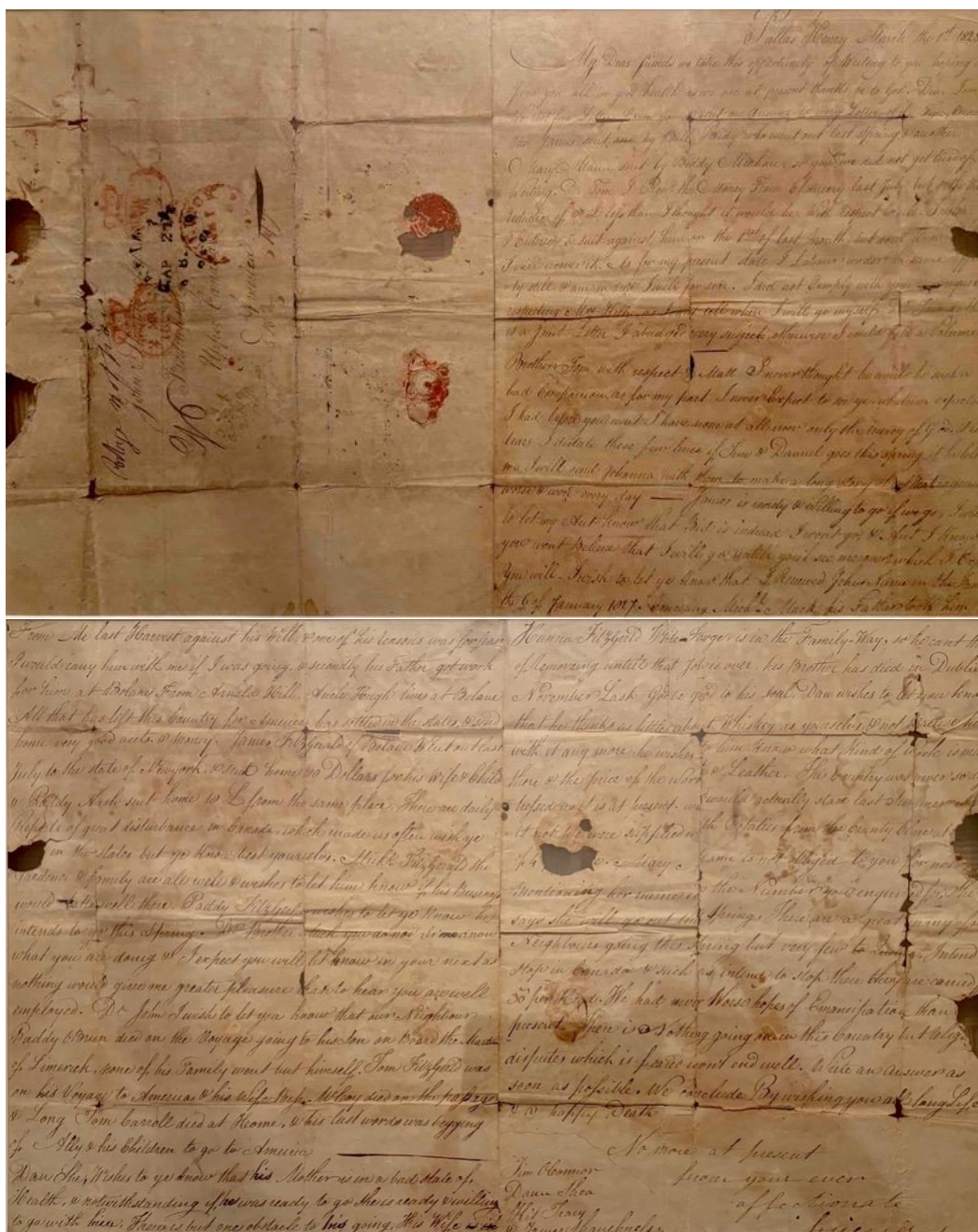
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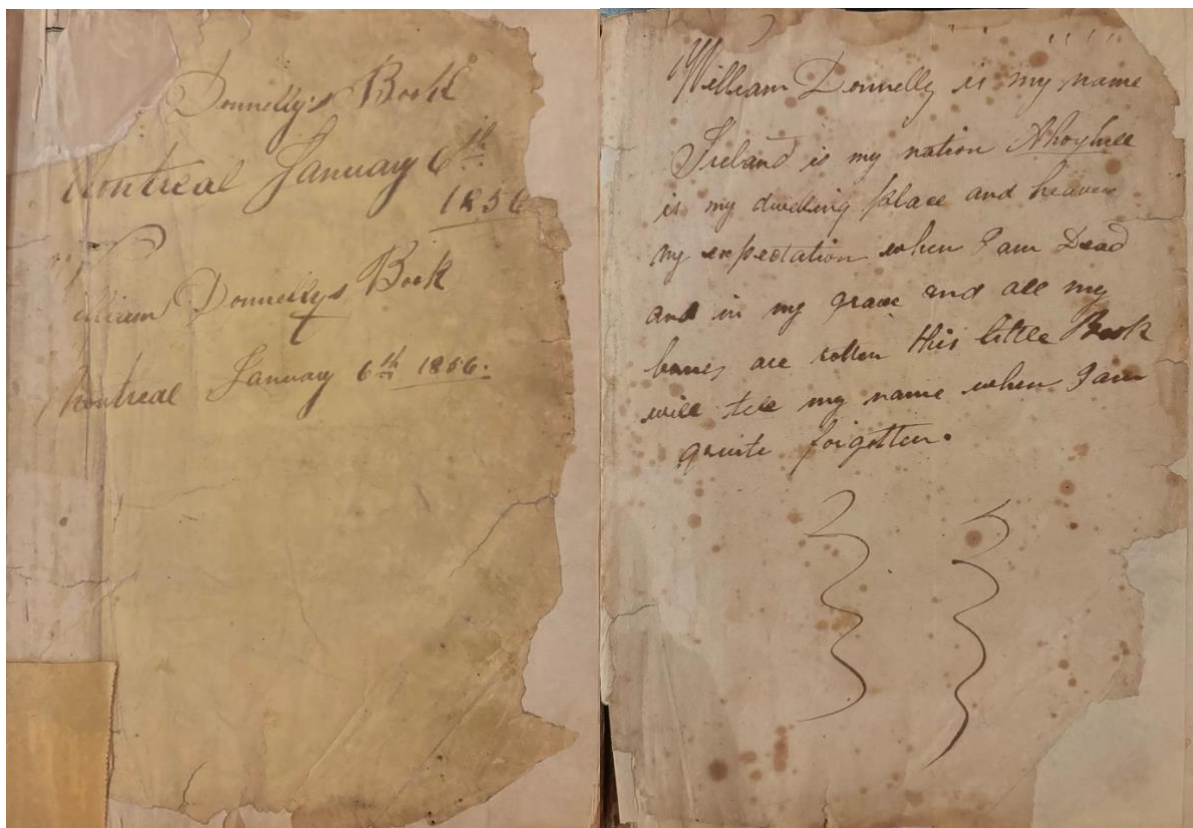
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Appendices

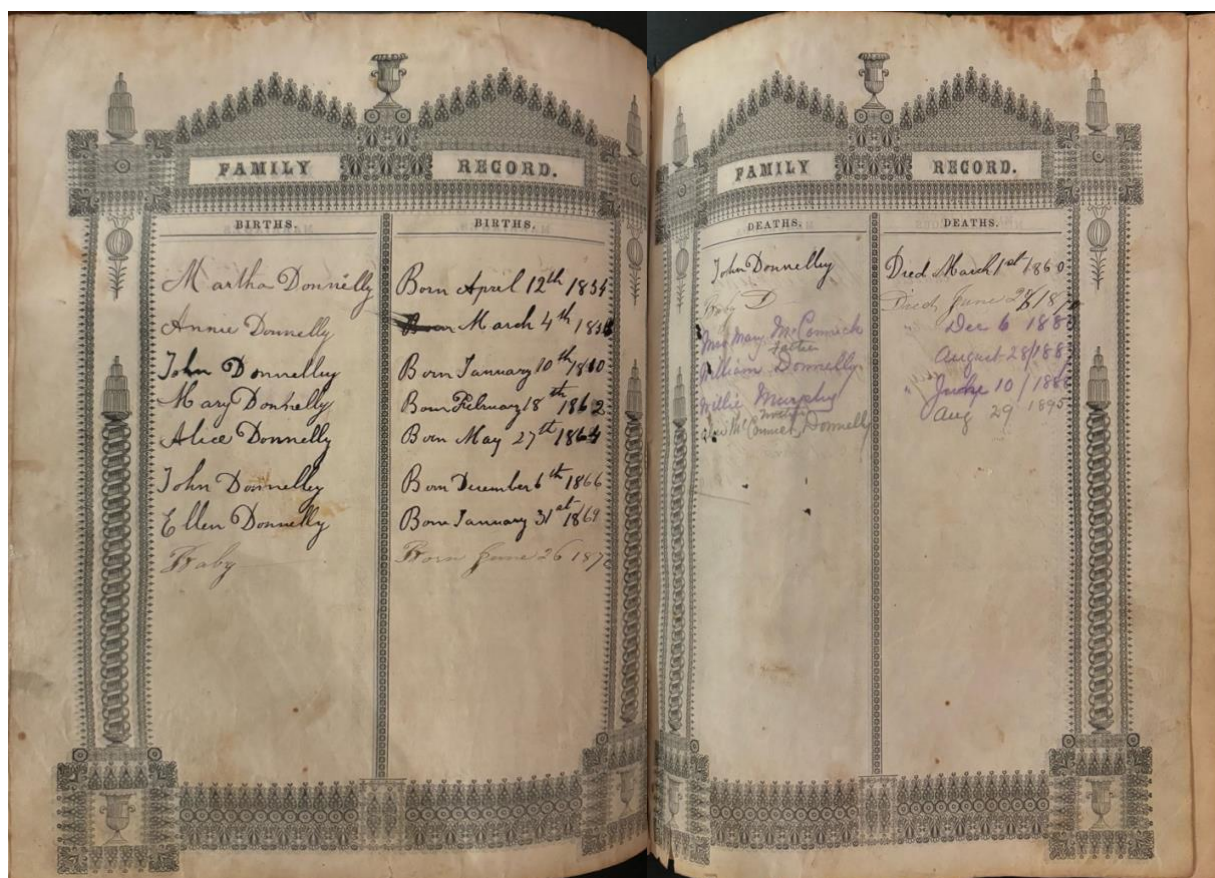
Appendix 1: Patrick Shea, Family Letter. Dated March 1st, 1828.



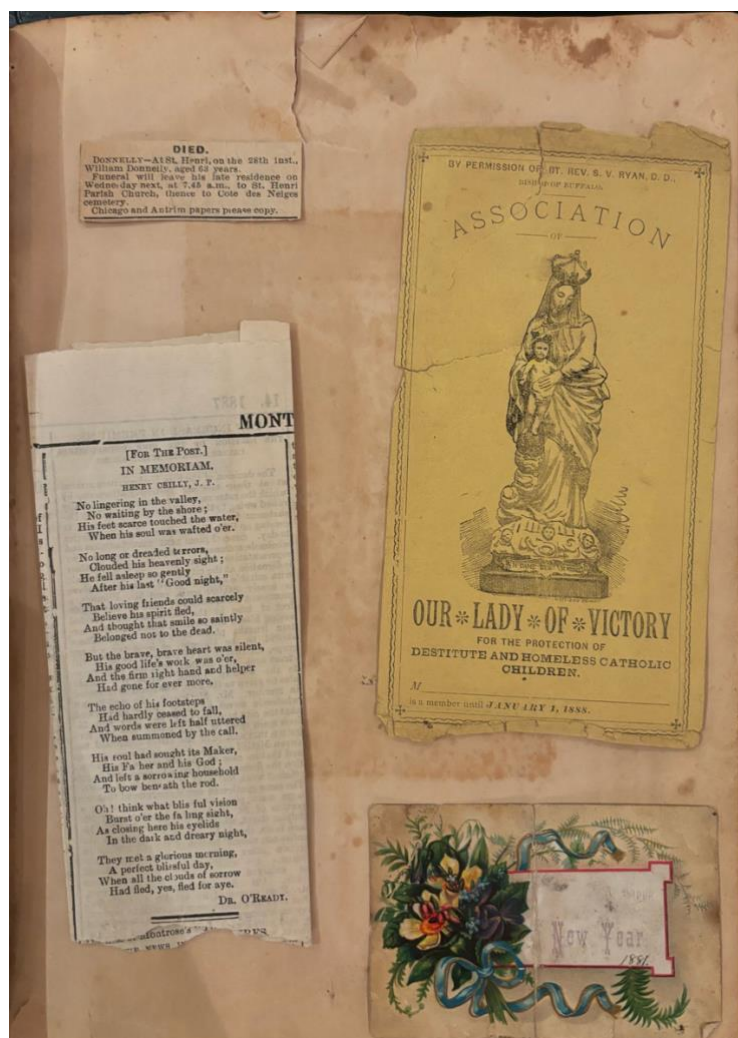
Appendix 2: Patrick Shea, Family Bible. Dated January 6th, 1856.



Appendix 2: Patrick Shea, Family Bible Genealogical Page. Dated January 6th, 1856.



Appendix 2: Patrick Shea, Family Bible Attached Clippings. Dated January 6th, 1856.



Appendix 3: Patrick Shea, "Ireland to Canada." in *Shouldust and Pearls V*, Edited by Terry Collins and Joanne Collins. 1985

IRELAND TO CANADA

The country of Ireland,
That is where my ancestors came from.
They worked very hard in this land,
In the cold winter, and under the warm sun.

They came from the counties of Antrim and Kerry
And both were very merry.
My family descended until it created me,
As I am now, as you can see.

One day, England took all of our food,
And cut down all of our trees
They were not polite, but very rude,
They kept the supplies for themselves, or shipped them overseas.

Then our final hope, the potato crop, failed.
We were starving and all dying off.
We would have to emigrate to Canada,
Over the sea and very far off.

The trip was very long and hard.
In ships no bigger than my backyard,
Sailing over the ocean blue,
We were all sick with the flu.

Arriving in Canada we stopped at Grosse Ile.
Some started working at the local mill.
Some travelled down the St. Lawrence to Montreal,
Where we started a new life up until now.

Up until my generation,
We have all fulfilled our mission:
To give thanks to Almighty God,
And to help others without a negative nod.

Shea, Tierney, McCormick, Donnelly, Casey and Cowie
Together we are one.

Patrick Shea
Grade 6
St. Ignatius of Loyola School
Montreal, Quebec

Appendix 4: Interview Guide

Start

What is your name and where do you currently live?

Irish Memory

- How did you learn about being Irish when you were a child?
- What was your involvement (if any) in the Irish community growing up?
 - Were any of your family members (parents, brothers, sisters, aunts etc...) involved in the Irish community?
 - If so, what was their involvement, and do you have any specific memories regarding that?
- Every family expresses their heritage in different ways, so what does being Irish mean for your family and yourself?
 - Do you remember any specific family memories that demonstrated what it meant to be Irish?
- Regarding the Irish Famine, what is the earliest memory or story you have regarding it?
 - Do you remember the first time you heard this story?
 - Who shared these stories with you?
 - Does your family have specific memories that they expressed regarding the Famine or their emigration experience during the Famine?
 - Did your understanding of these stories or memories evolve from your childhood to your adult life?
- What do you know about your ancestors' experiences regarding the Irish Famine and or their journey from Ireland to Montreal?
 - Whereabouts in Ireland was your family from?
 - When did your family come to Montreal?
 - Why did your family leave Ireland? Do you have any stories regarding the departure from Ireland?
 - Do you have any stories relating to the journey from Ireland to Montreal?
 - Were the conditions aboard the ships used to travel from Ireland to Montreal ever mentioned?
 - Do you have any stories regarding the quarantine station at Grosse Île?
- What are your general feelings toward the Famine today?
 - Do people share family stories like the ones potentially discussed today?

Irish Community

- What types of jobs did your family have (parents, grandparents etc,) after they arrived in Montreal?
- Where in Montreal did your family settle in?
 - Was there a specific reason as to why they chose that area of Montreal or Montreal in general?
- What do the stories and memories discussed today mean to you in general?

Ending

- Are there any stories, memories, photos, or anything else that you wish to share that we did not cover?

Appendix 5: Ethics Certification



CERTIFICATION OF ETHICAL ACCEPTABILITY FOR RESEARCH INVOLVING HUMAN SUBJECTS

Name of Applicant: Davis Watt
Department: Faculty of Arts and Science \ History
Agency: N/A
Title of Project: Remembering the Great Famine: An Oral History of
the Montreal Irish Community
Certification Number: 30020417
Valid From: August 05, 2024 To: August 04, 2025

The members of the University Human Research Ethics Committee have examined the application for a grant to support the above-named project, and consider the experimental procedures, as outlined by the applicant, to be acceptable on ethical grounds for research involving human subjects.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Richard DeMont", enclosed in a rectangular box.

Dr. Richard DeMont, Chair, University Human Research Ethics Committee



CERTIFICATION OF ETHICAL ACCEPTABILITY
FOR RESEARCH INVOLVING HUMAN SUBJECTS

Name of Applicant: Davis Watt
Department: Faculty of Arts and Science\History
Agency: N/A
Title of Project: Remembering the Great Famine: An Oral History of
the Montreal Irish Community
Certification Number: 30020417
Valid From: July 30, 2025 To: July 29, 2026

The members of the University Human Research Ethics Committee have examined the application for a grant to support the above-named project, and consider the experimental procedures, as outlined by the applicant, to be acceptable on ethical grounds for research involving human subjects.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Richard DeMont", enclosed in a rectangular box.

Dr. Richard DeMont, Chair, University Human Research Ethics Committee