

# Remembering Grosse Île and the "Summer of Sorrow"

by Marianna O'Gallagher

*L'auteure nous parle de la symbolique et de la signification historique de Grosse-Île, une petite île dans le fleuve St-Laurent au large de Québec où les immigrants irlandais étaient placés en quarantaine avant de s'établir au Canada.*

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Grosse Île, a small island despite its name which means "big island," was used as a quarantine station for more than 100 years, from 1832 to 1937, a sentry guarding Canada against contagious diseases carried on thousands of immigrant ships.

It is ironic that Grosse Île is remembered, not for the fine scientific and medical advances made there (vaccination and inoculation requirements for immigrants; methods of disinfection of clothing and baggage) but for two periods of extraordinary tragedy, both involving Irish immigrants.

In 1832 cholera was carried on the immigrant ships, and the newly established quarantine station on Grosse Île could not handle the heavy numbers of sick, hence cholera ravaged the Saint Lawrence Valley. A second cholera epidemic, in 1834, was, however, contained by the quarantine.

Women were in the forefront at Grosse Île as caregivers, as nurses on the island, as founders or matrons in the several orphanages that sprang up in the cities to care for the children bereft of parents. They remained so through the summer of 1847 that witnessed the second great tragedy at Grosse Île.

This year, 1997, marks the one-hundred-and-fiftieth anniversary of the worst year of the great famine in Ireland, and its effect on Canada, and the Grosse Île connection. By the end of the summer of 1847, rightly called "The Summer of Sorrow," more than 5,000 men, women, and children either died on Grosse Île or were carried dead off the immigrant ships, to be buried with the rites of their respective churches where possible, by a diligent and attentive clergy—Catholic and Anglican, French, English, and Irish.

Besides the clergy tending to the spiritual needs of the living and the dignified burial of the dead, there were also doctors, soldiers, and nurses. In addition to the few

boatmen and other general employees of the quarantine who formed the beginning of the village of St. Luke of Grosse Île, there were people hired from the mainland villages. Names of a variety of people appear in the church registers of St. Luke and of St. John the Evangelist, the Anglican parish on Grosse Île. Remarkable especially are the baptisms on the island of babies born to the wives of the employees, brave women indeed who accompanied their husbands to this desperate place. Sad, too, are the deaths recorded of nurses who worked in the hospitals, especially that of Madame Garneau—no first name, no maiden name, not even the husband's first name to aid in the identity of this woman.

The one-hundred-and-fiftieth anniversary of the great famine is being observed in Quebec City under the title of "L'Été irlandais/The Irish Summer." The theme of "Honour the heroes, celebrate the survivors" attempts to bridge the mood between the tragedy and sadness of the Irish in 1847, and the good life that Canadians of all roots enjoy today. Lectures and conferences, liturgies and remembrances, bring to mind the hard times and the injustices of 1847, while music and drama and feasting highlight the success story of immigrants to Canada over the hundreds of years of our history.

Events began on March 17th with High Mass at St. Patrick's Church in Quebec with guest homilist Cahal Cardinal Daley of Ireland. The most important events were over the August 1st weekend: a walking tour through the Irish and the Anglican cemeteries to highlight the role of the clergy; *ceilidh* with Brendan Nolan; ecumenical service at the Anglican Cathedral of the Holy Trinity; family day on the Plains of Abraham; and a fair, "Imagine Ireland," which 10,000 people attended.

*Marianna O'Gallagher is the founder and owner of Carraig Books, which publishes books in English and French about the Irish in Quebec. She has been a teacher for 35 years in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Massachusetts, and Quebec. This past summer, she was director of "The Irish Summer/L'Été irlandais," Quebec City's commemoration of the Great Famine.*

