Once Upon a Time in a Rural Irish Community

by Marion M. Lynn

L'auteur se rappelle sa jeunesse dans la vallée d'Ottawa où un grand nombre d'immigrants irlandais s'étaient installés au 19e siècle.

My five sisters, one brother, and I were very aware of our Irish heritage from the time we were small children. This awareness came through language, music, family stories, and the rituals of wakes, weddings, chivaris, and celebration dinners.

The Ottawa Valley and eastern Ontario were predominantly settled by Irish and French during the nineteenth century, and 150 years later, the tenacity of the Irish culture is still evident. Hastings County is peppered by names such as Cassidy, Murphy, O'Neill, Woods, and Gunning. Growing up in this community in a large family where both lines are of Irish descent, my five sisters, one brother, and I were encircled by Irish culture. We were very aware of our Irish heritage from the time we were small children. This awareness came through language, music, family stories, and the rituals of wakes, weddings, chivaris, and celebration dinners.

As well as having the lilting accent of the Ottawa Valley, our family used phrases that harked back to a Celtic culture. When we cleared the table after dinner, one person's job was to red up the table and another's was to put away the victuals. Girls were called little lassies and boys wee laddies. You washed your paddies and tied up your locks with ribbons. Children were called young'uns or gaffers—ragamuffins if they were a bit messy. Old people were geezers; one with a sour face was called a physiog, a sad face was woe-be-gone; sneaky ones were whistle-trickers. Reference was made to a fine figure of a woman but putting on airs was dismissed as high falutin'; the rich were called high mucky-mucks. Everyone understood who was included when one talked about "the likes of us." People were accused of mogging along, traipsing, or galavanting the road. A mess was a fine-how-do-you-do, a fracas, or a real bollocks. If you did not take care of things you were accused of rim-racking. A large group of people was a whole banjotry and a get-together was a come-all-ye. Our father used such expressions as "do you ken?" or "do you mind?" for do you know or do you remember. Teasing was called joshing or codding and they loved to do it. If a fight broke out it was a real, old donnybrook, but the back of your hand or a two-hander were used as threats to keep people in line. Men wore work clothes, hack pants, or fine shirts. Women wore waists and skirts. If you dressed poorly you might be called a shitepoke. People who did not work hard were good-for-nothings. Expressions were often aslant, indirect. Our father admired a man who was clever in his own house. If you had a romantic interest in someone, you set your cap for him. People framed their words, or put them in a context, starting sentences with such expressions as "now mind you," or "now let me tell you." One of our aunts made a statement, added the words "I say," and repeated the statement. Our mother liked to leave one hanging with the final words "and I don't know what all." She was once asked by a newcomer to the family, what were "what-alls" anyway. Words were often repeated to ensure accuracy. A person might be described as a little, wee, tiny bit of a thing. Imagination was vivid and "imagine that!" was a common response to a variety of situations. The oral tradition was predominant with people constantly visiting, telling yarns, and singing at the drop of a hat. They lived by their wits and wit was one of the most admired and competitive parts of this oral culture. Even as young children we learned to be clever at getting in a barb or two.

Music, poetry, and stories were a part of daily life. Edith Fowke considers Irish songs as perhaps the most central to folksongs of Canada (O'Driscoll and Reynolds). My mother sang as she worked and told stories to her brood of children. As well as the well-known songs such as "Danny Boy" and "I'll Take You Home Again Kathleen," we heard songs that we had never seen written down before or since. These frequently began with "Come all ye" or "By the rising of the moon." Others were about "way down in a low, green valley where me and my people grew" or "down in the valley, the valley so low." Anyone who has visited Ireland understands the centrality of low green valleys. These songs were about love and longing, and about loss and betrayal. One of our favourites was called "Frozen Charlotte," about a young woman who wore only her beautiful summer shawl on a winter evening in order to impress her lover, but froze to death as a result of this misplaced vanity. Our mother always cried while she sang this one. Our father had a beautiful singing and reciting voice. Our parents met at a community gathering where he was giving a recitation. One of his favourite songs was "The Wild Colonial Boy," and he would become quite disgusted if we mixed up the names of Kelly or Fitzroy as we were trying to sing along. Music was also a central part of community parties. Both men and women played fiddle, piano, guitars, banjoes, and mandolins. Everyone square-danced whether at a hall or a house party. Some-

times there would be a platform dance; the men would build a large wooden platform and people square-danced outside on a summer evening. Our father was the best caller for square dances in the community, calling with a loud, clear, sing-song voice the allemand lefts, dosedos, and grand change, dipping and diving on the ocean wave.

Our great-grandmother could get rid of warts by rubbing them with a cut potato that then had to be tied together with a baby's white boot lace and thrown over your shoulder into the field. Our mother would make us go into the field later on and retrieve the boot lace.

Our father was the president of the local fair board and his grandchildren used to like to brag that "our Poppa owns Tweed Fair, you know." It was an annual fall event at which the men wore long coats to hide the bottles of whiskey they had stashed in their pockets, of which the local Irish were inordinately fond. One year, after too much whiskey, our father fell into the creek coming home and his hat washed out to the lake. One of his grandsons helped him into the house with great pride in having rescued the errant hat. Later that evening our father led us in a square dance, while dunking his doughnut in his jar of whiskey, and insisting that we sing several songs, ending with "How Great Thou Art"—without snickering. My friend from Toronto had joined us on that occasion and willingly obliged although she had just had her appendix removed and had to hold her stomach with her hands to keep the stitches from breaking because she was laughing so hard. "That big'un has a good voice" shouted my hard-of-hearing uncle, referring to my friend. As they would say in Ireland, it was good *craic*.

The oral culture was obvious in the number of stories, some about the history of our family and others in the community, and some fiction from the books our mother constantly read or from stories she and our father had been told as they were growing up. As she was reading a book, our mother told us the story chapter by chapter. One of her favourites was *The Mill On the Floss*. Another was *Emily of New Moon*. But the family stories were the ones we really loved. These were the oral history of the Lynn's, the Gunning's, the Woods' and Curtis'. We heard about the boat trips over from Ireland, the people who died on the way and were buried at sea. Others were about tragedies such as whole families drowned as the bridge gave out and their cutter went in the swollen river. The rivers were revered and feared: the Moira, the Skootamata, but especially the awesome Black—one of the locales in Jane Urquhart's novel *Away*—whose swollen banks, eddies and rapids or thin ice could be very dangerous. We heard about the Black Donnelly's before they became famous in the published trilogy. We learned of men working in the shanties and women birthing babies as well as washing and laying out the bodies of the dead. But the stories were not all gloom and doom. We loved to hear about our father's family who came from Antrim County, about our great-grandfather who would rather read books than work and was killed by a runaway pair of oxen while he was reading. We were told that our great-grandmother burned all his books after that. And there were the six great-aunts, three of whom never married because "they thought they were too good for anyone." Instead they ran their own farm and worked as tailors and seamstresses. One old aunt, or perhaps this was the grandmother, as she became more senile, used to ask "Who is that coming down Antrim Road?" As our father told these long, drawn-out stories, our brother would interject with "What then Daddy? What then?" even though he had heard it many times before. Other favourite stories were about our great-grandmother on our mother's side, whose family had come from Strabane in County Tyrone. She was also widowed fairly young, and sort of reared six children, although it seems they mostly grew up on their own. My grandmother, at age 16, walked down the road and married Johnny Holmes. Our great-grandmother was a midwife, a healer, had charms. She had twinkling eyes and gold earrings in her pierced ears, and talked to us about her boyfriends when she was in her 80s. She could get rid of warts by rubbing them with a cut potato that then had to be tied together with a baby's white boot lace and thrown over your left shoulder into the field. Our mother would make us go into the field later on and retrieve the boot lace. Whether or not this ruined the charm, we'll never know.

Weddings were always celebrated with a community dance to which everyone was invited, all ages, including babies who slept on top of the coats on a bed. But first the newlyweds had to be chivaried. A chivari was a gathering of neighbours outside the bedroom window about midnight and very noisily banging on pots and pans to wake the couple up. Then everyone at the chivari was invited into the house for food and drinks. A few nights after this would be the community dance and gifts from all the neighbours. A marriage was considered not personal and not just family, but an affair for the entire community to celebrate and sanctify. Sometimes as children we would get mixed up as to which event had been a wedding party and which had been a wake. When a person died, they were put in an open coffin in their home and people came

for two nights to wake them before they were buried. A common expression about a lot of noise was that it was enough to wake the dead. There was a great deal of crying and wailing as well as visiting, telling tales about the deceased, gossip, laughter, and always lots of food, with whiskey being sipped on the sly by the men in the driveshed. One of the first responses to hearing of a death was to prepare food and take it to the home of the deceased, in order to feed the hordes of people who would come by for the wakes and the funeral. Like marriages, deaths were a community affair and the wake provided an outlet for all in the community to come together with their memories, sorrow, and grief, as well as emotional and economic support.

The greatest events growing up in this culture were the family get-togethers, or come-all-ye's. Family reunions—or rebellions as our father liked to call them—were an annual event. These took place in the summer in a public park or hall. There would be long tables laden with food, every woman competing for the best potato salad, devilled eggs, or fresh berry pie. And every year our father proclaimed that our mother made the best pie crust in the county. There would be prizes for the oldest person, newest baby, and largest family. The young cousins would laugh about old aunts and uncles asking if we were Will's lad or one of Irene's girls. Anywhere up to 200 people might attend these; minutes were kept and read out from the previous year. Another big annual event was the Orangemen's parade on the glorious twelfth. This was an all-day affair, lots of cousins to play with, picnics under the trees, and our special treat was a bottle of orange crush. Our father rode the horse as King Billy and our aunts and uncles marched through the village to the bagpipes, fife, and drum. On a very regular basis, members of our father's or mother's immediate family got together for huge dinners and gatherings. The houses were big enough to accommodate 20 or 25 for a dinner, the little children eating off the window sill. This might be to celebrate an anniversary, Thanksgiving, Christmas, or Easter. Easter was especially interesting with our father's siblings as they competed to see who could eat the most eggs. An aunt and uncle who were twins took this very seriously, frequently ending up in a shouting match because one or both were only pretending to have eaten the fifteenth egg and in fact were hiding part of it under the plate or in their pocket. These brothers and sisters loved to play tricks on each other, to tell tales that would embarrass, and they would end up in peals of laughter after hearing some story for the umpteenth time. As children we were amazed at how everyone seemed to talk at once, interrupting, and finishing each other's sentences. It was not rudeness but being on the same wavelength to the extent that they knew the end of someone else's sentence before it was finished. As children we were aware of their fierce love for each other, how much they shared and talked and felt connected. And we knew we were part of that. It gave us our identity, our security, and our sense of place in the community.

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The Impact Of Irish Culture

According to O'Driscoll and Reynolds, the Irish in Canada are "interwoven into the very substance of Canada itself" (xiii). Lester Pearson considered Ireland one of the mother countries of Canada (xvi). The first Irish settler is believed to be John Leahy who arrived in Montreal in 1661. The Irish made up 60 per cent of all immigrants in the first half of the nineteenth century, and at the time of Confederation in 1867, were second only to the French in numbers. In fact those of Gaelic origin, including both Irish and Scots, were larger than the French. In late nineteenth-century Canada they made up more than one-third of the total population: 1.5 million in a population of 4.5 million. In 1890, Thomas Robert McInnes, a Senator of Highland Scots background who spoke Scots-Gaelic as his mother tongue, introduced a Bill to make Gaelic Canada's third official language.

The famous names in Canada's history attest to the impact of the Irish. Thomas D'Arcy McGee is credited as a leader of the combined Protestant and Catholic Irish against the attempted American intrusion in the 1860s, and with providing the vision and imagination that helped to form Confederation. Others who left a lasting impact on Canadian business, politics, and culture include: Edward Blake, a barrister who founded the law firm of Blake, Cassels, and Graydon; Timothy Eaton, founder of the T. Eaton Co.; Nellie McClung, feminist, suffragist, political activitist, and writer; Robert Samuel McLaughlin, founder of McLaughlin Carriage Company which became General Motors; King Clancy, a legend in Canadian hockey; Morley Callaghan, one of Canada's best-known authors. Currently we have the theatre of Anna Livia with their brilliant annual productions for Bloomsday, and singers such as Loreena McKennitt. In most Canadian cities we have local haunts of Irish music and a bit of *craic*.

But the ongoing impact of Irish culture is also found in the rural areas, small towns, and villages that cover much of the eastern provinces and eastern Ontario, particularly the area known as the Ottawa Valley. This account and the following one reflect the memories of two women who grew up in Irish families in a small community in Eastern Ontario.

—Marion Lynn

References

O'Driscoll, R. and L. Reynolds. *The Untold Story: The Irish in Canada.* Toronto: Celtic Arts of Canada, 1988.