

The Irish of the Miramichi

by

Dawn McLean and Merle Milson



D.M.

Illustrations by Dawn McLean

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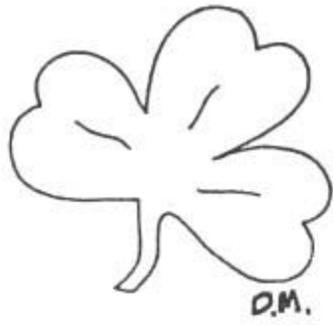
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CHAPTER I

For years, the Irish have told legends of little men in green. They are called leprechauns. Leprechauns are full of fun. They are hard to find because leprechauns live in the woods. They are also rich. Each leprechaun has a big pot of gold. If you catch a leprechaun he must give the pot of gold to you. It is not easy to catch a leprechaun, though. They are very quick to get away.



Another Irish legend that many Miramichiers know is about Middle Island. A large lake is found about one mile inland from the Miramichi River. This lake is almost the same size and shape as Middle Island. Middle island is an island about one mile downriver from Chatham. It is in the middle of the Miramichi River. Irish legend has it that leprechauns dug up a large piece of land. They placed this piece of land in the middle of the river. They did this so that the Irish people arriving here from Ireland would have a place to land. That is why the lake and the island are nearly the same in size and shape.

Irish legends like these are very old. However, in New Brunswick these legends might have been lost. There are many Irish people in our province, but for a long time they forgot about their past. Their Irish-Canadian history was being lost.

That was before the Irish Canadian Cultural Association of New Brunswick was born. A group of Irish people set out to save their past. They worked hard and it paid off. They began their work in 1983 and the work continues today. First, they made the public see how important the Irish were to this province's history.

CHAPTER II

Much has been written in New Brunswick history about the English Loyalists who settled mainly along the Saint John River. Also, a lot has been recorded about the French Acadian settlers of northern New Brunswick. But very little has been written about another Important group—the Irish settlers.

From the very beginning the Irish were part of the settlement of New Brunswick and the Miramichi. Settlers had been coming here from Ireland as far back as the 1760's. Why would people leave their homeland to move to Canada? Remember Canada was mainly a wild, unsettled land at that time. To answer this question we need to know a bit about Irish history.

For hundreds of years Ireland had been ruled by England. This was a very unhappy time for most Irish people. Ireland is a country of few industries. The most important industry by far is farming. To do well in the farming industry a person needs good land. The farming industry in Ireland has always centered on growing potatoes. But Ireland had been divided into large blocks of land called estates. Each large estate was owned by an English lord. Each estate was then divided into much smaller pieces of land. Irish farmers were forced to rent their land from the English lords. These English lords often didn't even live in Ireland. They left the running of the estate to a paid man. In time, the estates became so badly divided that each Irish farmer only had a very small piece of land to farm. Most Irish people were very poor while the English lords grew very rich.

There were other big problems in Ireland. For example, the Irish farmer could be forced out of his small home and piece of land whenever the lord chose. He would be given no money for any Improvements made to the land or the buildings on it. By about the year 1800, there were six million Irish people trying to make a living in a land where the only money was in the hands of a few ruling English lords.

Another big problem in Ireland was that the English rulers were mainly Protestant. However, most of the Irish people were Roman Catholic. Ireland had been a Catholic country for hundreds of years. It had become Catholic because of the work of its most famous person, Saint Patrick.

CHAPTER III

Saint Patrick was born about 387 A.D. At first he may have lived in England or Scotland. His English name was Sucas. His name was changed to Patrick when he joined the Catholic Church. Patrick had an exciting life. He had been stolen from his home when he was sixteen. He was taken by ship to Ireland. He was a slave there for six years. Patrick was forced to take care of his owner's animals. This hardship made him turn to God.

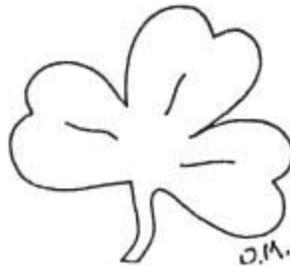
Later, Patrick ran away to France. There he became part of a Catholic order of priests. In the year 432 he had a dream that told him to go back to Ireland. He did this and was a priest there for the rest of his life. Over three hundred churches were founded by Saint Patrick. More than one hundred twenty thousand Irish people were brought into the Catholic Church by his work.

The Irish people have always been great story-tellers. As we have read before, legends are an important part of Irish life. Many stories about Saint Patrick are told even today. One legend tells about Patrick and the snakes. It is said that he put all the snakes under a spell. Then he drove them all to the ocean. That is why there are no snakes in Ireland. It is from legends like this that we learn about Saint Patrick.



Saint Patrick is honored by the Irish on March 17 every year. The Irish wear shamrocks on that day. The story behind the shamrock comes from another Irish legend.

It seems that one day Saint Patrick was teaching the people about God. Catholics believe in the Trinity. The Trinity teaches that God is really three-in-one. The Trinity says that God is the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit all in one. The Irish people found it hard to understand the idea of the Trinity. Saint Patrick picked up a shamrock. A shamrock has three leaves on one plant. Saint Patrick showed how God was like the shamrock. Both were a Trinity or three-in-one. Then the people were able to understand.



The Irish people loved Saint Patrick. They did not want to forget his teachings and they wanted to stay Catholic. Because of this, their Protestant English rulers feared them and didn't trust them.

CHAPTER IV

As you can see, Ireland was a poor and unhappy country. That is why many people left to make a new life for themselves in New Brunswick. Between 1812 and 1850, seven out of every ten people coming to New Brunswick came from Ireland. When many of these Irish settlers got here, much of the best land had already been taken. The best land was along the rivers. There you could find fish to eat and water for drinking. Also most people and goods arrived by ship because there were few roads. Because the land close to the river was gone, the Irish had to settle far inland. The Irish settled far in the woods for another reason. They were not very well-liked by the English settlers who were already living here.

Settling in the woods made for a hard life. But anything was better than what they had left behind in Ireland. In all, about 160 of these small Irish settlements grew slowly in the backwoods of New Brunswick. Just one example would be Barnaby. Barnaby is a small village about fifteen miles from Chatham. It is about eight miles inland from the Miramichi River. Barnaby was founded in 1825 by Irish settlers. Even today, it is one of the largest all- Irish settlements in New Brunswick.

Many of these 160 settlements slowly died out and are no more to be found today. There are many reasons why this happened. First, the Irish settlers became better liked as time went by and many of them moved to larger towns. Also, the children of these first Irish settlers were not happy living in the woods. When they got old enough they moved to the cities to find work and a better life.

It was in 1984 that the New Brunswick Irish Cultural Association made a map of New Brunswick. The map showed where these 160 villages had been found. The map also showed names, dates, and other facts about the Irish and what they have done for New Brunswick.

But perhaps the biggest undertaking of the Cultural Association was the Miramichi Irish Festival. The Irish Festival has become an important part of the Miramichi summer. It brings thousands of people to the Miramichi each year. Visitors come to remember their Irish roots. The Miramichi is a good place to do this since so many Irish people live in Newcastle, Chatham, and nearby villages.

CHAPTER V

Irish settlers had been coming to the Miramichi since the 1760's. But by far the largest number of them arrived between 1845 and 1850. This was because of the failure of the potato crop in Ireland. The summer of 1845 was a very rainy one in Ireland. That fall the potato crop failed. No one is sure, but it seems the disease that killed the potato crop came from the United States. In fact, it was only the summer before that the American potato crop was a failure because of this same disease. In Ireland, where the potato was the chief food, people began dying of hunger.

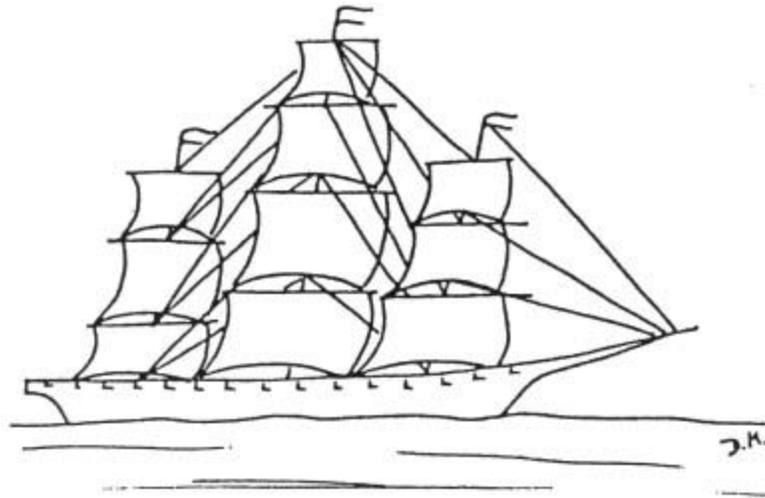
The English government ruling Ireland tried to help the poor Irish people through this tough time. Over two million dollars was put aside to make jobs for Irish farmers who had no work or money. Also, a lot of corn was bought from the United States. It was sold at one cent a pound to the Irish people. But most people would not buy the corn. It was only good for making bread and they hardly ever ate bread.

The Irish problems continued to grow when the potato crop of 1846 also was a failure. The main part of the potato plant remained green, but the leaves turned black. The potatoes under the ground were no good. People began wandering through the Irish countryside as if they were lost. They were hungry and dying.

Their main goal was to find work. A few of them did find poor-paying jobs in England. But most could find nothing to do. By March, 1847, three million Irish needed food hand-outs from the English government to keep from dying of hunger. In all, the government spent nearly thirty million dollars on Irish aid between 1845 and 1851.

To add to their problems the deadly disease of cholera broke out in 1846. In two years cholera would kill over half a million people. In those days doctors didn't know how to treat diseases like cholera. If you caught cholera you knew you would die. Thousands of people began leaving Ireland in 1847 to get away from the disease and the hunger. By 1851, the number of people in Ireland dropped from eight to six million people.

How did the Irish leave their homeland? Well, it only cost about fifteen or twenty dollars to sail by ship to America. But many didn't even have that kind of money. The ships the Irish came on were not meant for people. Also, far too many people were crowded on each ship. Those who did get on board were not allowed to bring anything with them. When they arrived in America, most of these poor people only had the clothes on their backs and a way of life they could not give up.



Cholera and other diseases soon began to spread on board the ships. Of the one hundred thousand Irish people who came to Canada in 1847, some fifteen thousand either died at sea or shortly after getting here. Once they got to Canada, the people were quarantined. They were quarantined because the people already living here feared the diseases the Irish brought with them. Quarantine places were usually islands where the ships unloaded the Irish settlers. These islands were not far from cities or towns. The biggest quarantine island in New Brunswick was Partridge Island, near Saint John. Of the thirty-five thousand Irish who arrived at Saint John, two thousand died on this island.

The largest quarantine island in Canada was Grosse Isle in Quebec. Some nine thousand Irish died there. Sometimes ships would be lined up at Grosse Isle trying to unload people. Some ships had to be sent away because of overcrowding. One such ship was "the Loosetauk". It arrived at Middle Island in 1847. Middle Island was the quarantine island for the Miramichi. Two more large ships arrived there in May, 1847. These ships were "the Richard White" and "the Bolivar". There were hospitals on the quarantine islands, but they were cold, poorly-kept buildings. As well, they were overcrowded with the sick and dying. In all, some two hundred people died at Middle Island.

However, some help was given to the sick on Middle Island. One of the hardest workers there was Dr. John Vondy. He did his best to save people. However, after only a few weeks he became sick. His sister came to nurse him. He died on the island. He was only twenty-six years old. The people of Chatham were sad to hear this. Shops closed and most businesses stopped. In the summer of 1986, Vondy's courage was honored with a huge stone over his grave.

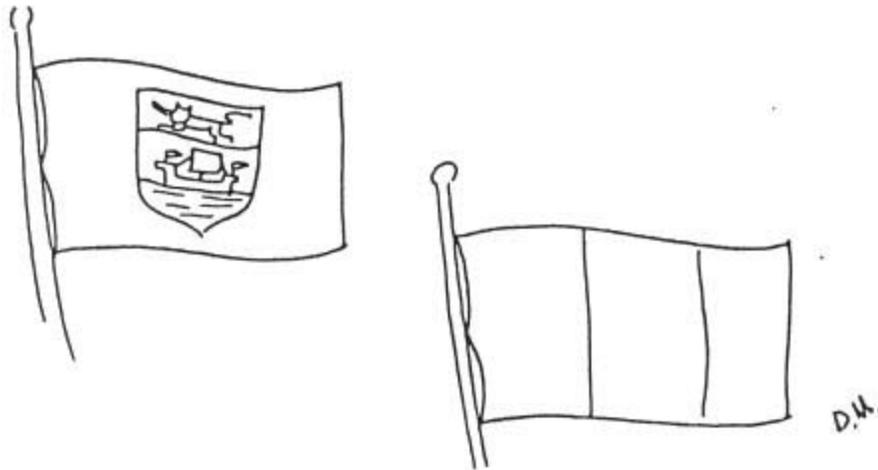
Settlers continued to come here from Ireland in smaller numbers until the 1880's. In time, the Irish married into other groups of people like the English and the Acadian French. This caused them to slowly lose their Irish culture.



CHAPTER VI

The year 1984 was the two hundredth birthday of New Brunswick. It was a good time to remember the Irish who had died coming here as well as those who had lived. And it was a good time to begin renewing Irish pride. Farrell McCarthy and Blair Clancy, two Irish Miramichiers, had an idea. They wanted to start the Miramichi Irish Festival. There were other festivals like this in the United States. The government of New Brunswick gave the Miramichi \$15,000 to help start an Irish Festival for New Brunswick's Bicentennial year.

In November, 1983, Mr. McCarthy and Mr. Clancy called a meeting of the public. Thirty-five people came. A meeting was held every evening that week. Irish Festival Committees were formed. Everyone worked very hard. By July 13, 1984, everything was ready for the first Miramichi Irish Festival.



It was a great weekend. Each day began with a pancake breakfast at the Sinclair Rink in Newcastle. It was a good chance to meet new people and old friends. From eleven to one o'clock the booths were open at the Lord Beaverbrook Arena in Chatham. These booths had many different things to see and buy. There were Irish books, records, and hand-made goods. One booth taught about the Irish coat-of-arms and family trees. There were twenty booths in all.

The big opening of the Irish Festival was held the first night in the same building as the booths. The people were given a warm welcome. Then the real fun began!

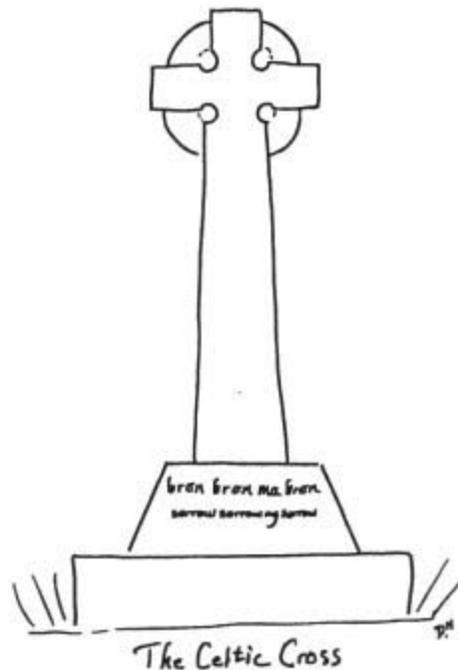
There was something for everyone. Groups of school children came from Cape Breton and Bryan Schools in Nova Scotia. This was about three hundred miles away. They came to show the old Irish dances. Later, there was a workshop where people could learn these dances.



Also, a workshop about Irish football was held for the teenagers. Irish football is different from our football. It is very rough. It allows kicking, hitting, and catching the ball. Points are made by putting the ball between two posts or running over the goal line.

Music makes up the most important part of the Irish Festival. Bands were brought here from both Canada and the United States. People came to the beer gardens and concerts in great numbers. They had a great time listening to the lively Irish music and singing.

There was time for quiet, too. Many people took time to go to a special church service. It was held at Saint Michael's Catholic Church in Chatham. Then everyone walked through Chatham to Middle Island about three miles away. They were led by the Tyrone Pipe Band. A new Celtic Cross stood on the island. It was fifteen feet high and made of grey stone. It was given to honor the two hundred Irish who died on this quarantine island so long ago.



When the first Irish Festival was over, everyone had had a great time. Also, they knew more about their Irish culture and history. People were already looking forward to the next festival. The Association had done what it had set out to do. But it didn't stop there. The Association decided to have a Saint Patrick's Week Celebration. This celebration had been held in Saint John, New Brunswick for many years, But it was only a small celebration held on March 17, Saint Patrick's birthday. The Irish Cultural Association wanted to make this celebration the biggest of its kind in Canada. So, in 1984, the Association put together a ten-day program to honor Saint Patrick. Each year they have booths, plays, and concerts. There is a special Irish church service with Irish music and spoken in the Irish language. It is one more chance for people to remember how they grew from their Irish roots. Both the Irish Festival on the Miramichi and the Saint Patrick's Week Celebration in Saint John are held each year. They continue to grow in size and attendance each year.

All of these works of the New Brunswick Irish Cultural Association have done much in a short time. They have shown New Brunswick how important the Irish have been to our history. More importantly, they have shown the Irish people a lot about themselves and their culture. Irish history has been brought back to life. The leprechauns are back in New Brunswick to stay.

NEW WORDS

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disease

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divide

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failure

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Acknowledgement:

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