

FROM THE OUTER HEBRIDES TO THE EASTERN TOWNSHIPS OF CANADA IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

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Abstract

The Potato Famine of 1846–56 severely affected the West Highlands and Islands of Scotland, forcing mass emigration to the New World. Those who settled in Quebec kept alive memories about the homeland, the Atlantic crossing, the allocation of land in the Eastern Townships, company houses, pioneer homesteading, optimism, faith, and community spirit. Only newspapers and official records document the famine, while fireside stories handed down through generations tell of faith, hope, loyalty, honesty, neighbourliness and hard work. Today, Scotland's "Old Alliance" with France is reflected in a new relationship reviving interest and kinship on both sides of the Atlantic.

Résumé

La Grande Famine de 1846–1856 a durement affecté les Highlands de l'Ouest et les îles d'Écosse, menant à une émigration forcée vers le Nouveau Monde. Ceux qui se sont installés au Québec ont gardé vivantes les mémoires de la mère-patrie, de la traversée de l'Atlantique, de l'allocation de terres dans les Cantons-de-l'Est, des maisons fournies par les employeurs, de l'installation sur les terres en concession, de l'optimisme, de la foi, et de l'esprit communautaire. Seuls les journaux et les documents officiels racontent la famine alors que les récits au coin du feu transmis de générations en générations parlent de foi, d'espoir, de loyauté, d'honnêteté, d'entraide entre voisins et de durs labeurs. Aujourd'hui la « Vieille Alliance » entre l'Écosse et la France se retrouve dans un nouveau lien qui fait revivre l'intérêt et les liens de parenté des deux côtés de l'Atlantique.

Emigration and settling in a new land is one of the most emotive experiences of life. No matter the reason – personal decision, such as a new job, or the tragedies of famine or oppression – every immigrant

lands in the new country hoping for a better life and future. The sense of optimism is often at odds, however, with an overwhelming sense of homesickness, despite the fact that, for many (even today), the homeland may represent hunger, poverty, destitution and conflict. Such deprivation was the predicament of hundreds of Hebridean immigrants to the Eastern Townships of Quebec in the mid- to late-1800s.

Earlier in the century, some, who may have seen *the writing on the wall*, had already emigrated to seek better prospects or even adventure, but, from the mid-1840s, most Hebrideans set sail with no choice in their fate. As Christie MacArthur, who was born in Milan in 1888, explained: "My father (Alexander MacDonald) was born on the Isle of Lewis... I think he was fifteen when he came to Canada... well, they were kind of *forced* to leave." As she recounted the fireside reminiscences of her generation, Christie retained her mother tongue till the end of her days, as well as a sense of longing for a homeland she never saw.¹

Although the welcome and reassurance of earlier settlers help newcomers adjust, it may well be natural to look for reminders of home. There maybe few landscapes, however, more contrasting with Quebec's vast areas of inland forest, than the wild, rocky, islands of



the Outer Hebrides – some do not have a single tree. As it may be difficult for anyone who has never been there to imagine such contrasts, it may be useful to have a brief description of the islands once home to Quebec's Gaelic settlers.

Situated off the west coast of Scotland on the edge of the Atlantic Ocean, the Outer Hebrides are made up of a string of islands, three of which retain strong links to the Eastern Townships: Lewis (the most northerly), Harris and North Uist.² Windswept, with few trees and plenty of rocks, they have been populated by Gaelic-speaking people for



countless centuries. Most inhabitants were tenants on very small, subsistence farms, known as *crofts*, the average consisting of two to ten acres of variable land. Fertile stretches of sandy soil by the sea, known as *machairs*, were both tilled and used as used for grazing,³ but large areas (particularly in Harris) are so rocky, with such meagre pockets of earth that they had to be scraped into buckets and deposited into raised beds to create enough to grow crops. The foot-plough (*cas-crom*) was used for cultivation and seaweed used to fertilize the soil for growing potatoes, turnips, oats, and a little barley.

Most crofters kept sheep (which could be grazed on the heathery hills) and one or two cows for the family needs. While the women and children did most of the work connected to the animals (milking, butter- and cheese-making, spinning, knitting and weaving), the men were expert boatmen and fishermen who, even in the stormiest weather, fished the coastal waters as well as the North Sea.

These hardy people lived in small, thatched cottages, which, by today's standards, may seem very humble, yet they were comfortable enough with home-made furnishings and hand-woven blankets. Though they had few material possessions, they were, however, inheritors of an enormous wealth of tradition handed down from generation to generation – Gaelic legends, folktales, poems and songs, which, even to this day, are regarded as comprising one of the richest oral and literary cultures in the world. Most were monoglot

Gaelic speakers, which was the case in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland until the Education Act of 1872, when all children had to be educated in English. Though politically part of the British Isles, the Outer Hebrides were distanced both by language and the sea, therefore almost unaware that these years of hunger were part of a *bigger picture*. British government officials, meanwhile, were making plans to alleviate the increasing problems of the Potato Famine in Ireland and the Scottish Highlands. The most destitute were about to become part of an international plan, with Britain's interests overseas providing the solution.⁴

As the newspapers of the day make shocking reading, it may have been a blessing that the Gaels had neither the means to buy them nor language to read them. The strongest opinions were from the British Government official in charge of emigration, Sir Charles Trevelyan, acting in his role as Assistant Secretary to HM Treasury (1840–1859). His speeches were reported in daily newspapers such as the *London Times*, *The Glasgow Herald* and *The Scotsman*, proposing emigration as the solution for famine victims in Ireland and Scotland. Summarising Trevelyan's speeches for English-speakers readers in Lowland Scotland, an unnamed columnist for *The Fifeshire Journal* wrote:

Ethnologically the Celtic race is an inferior one, and attempt to disguise it as we may, there is naturally no getting rid of the fact that it is destined to give way to the higher capabilities of the Anglo-Saxons... emigration to America is the only available remedy for the miseries of the race...⁵

Emigration agents were already at work in the worst hit areas of the Highlands, while estate factors identified families in arrears of rent informing them that if they did not pay, they would have to be cleared from the land. In the Isle of Lewis, for example, the land-owner, James Mathieson (a wealthy tea and opium baron), appointed a factor, John Munro MacKenzie, whose diary makes gruelling reading⁶ – crofting families in arrears of rent were to be denied the right even to cut peat for fuel if they refused to accept the terms offered to them via the emigration scheme. In other words, if they didn't starve, they would die of cold.

In 1852, with the plans of removal already in place, Trevelyan "contemplated with satisfaction... the prospects of flights of Germans settling here [in Britain] in increasing numbers ... an orderly, moral, industrious and frugal people, less foreign to us than the Irish or Scottish Celt..."⁷

Without exception they were Gaelic speakers, the majority monoglot, with neither the means nor the ability to read the newspaper reports of the day. Despite the passing of time – more than a century and a



half – there is still a sense of loss in these islands that is deeply moving. A visit to any local history society in Lewis, Harris and Uist reveals raw memories stored in a huge range of items, such as poignant letters and photographs of derelict houses, each with an emotional as well as historical tie to Quebec. While immediate relatives grieved to see the emigrants depart, succeeding generations talk of *distant cousins* or kin in Quebec. Holding on to their memories, some still wonder what it must have been like for those who were part of that exit.

This paper records the actual words of the descendents of emigrants, told through each generation and interpreted by the tellers themselves. A few, such as Christie MacArthur, were first generation Quebecers, though most are second, third and fourth generation who have lived their entire lives in the Eastern Townships. (With their permission, speakers are named as contributors and custodians of oral history and the recorded interviews and transcriptions have been archived for safe-keeping.⁸)

The historian searching for comment upon political or social issues that affected emigration during the time of the Potato Famine may be disappointed. Among those who actually went through the experience, personal accounts of emigration usually begin on the ship: six or eight weeks of cramped conditions, storms, seasickness, cholera and, for some, death and bereavement. Their descendents still speak of the shock of landing in thick forest, encountering temperatures

ranging from 30 below in winter to searing, humid heat in summer, blackflies, mosquitoes, bears. Having lived their entire lives close to the sea-shore, breathing in the fresh sea air, the realisation that they would never again see the ocean was almost unthinkable. To a people who had never known trees, far less swung an axe, such memories were enough to replace any famine story with ones about their first winter and the struggle to make a living.

The immigrants named their towns and villages after the ones they left – Stornoway, Tolsta, Dell, Gisla, Ballallan, Ness, Back... They built churches and schools throughout the area, though, as in Gaelic Scotland, these came under an education policy that insisted on English as the only language of the classroom and playground. Their church services, however, were primarily Gaelic and they lined out the psalms as they had done back home: “And we had good precenters in those days,” as Ivy MacDonald recalled.⁹ Daily family worship was also in Gaelic, and for some families, remained so until the late 1970s.

The Gaels got on well with their French neighbours who, in the early days, were by far the minority. People were willing to lend a hand, no matter the language used to communicate. In 1992, eighty-one year-old Russell MacIver, whose people came from Balallan, recalled with pride the skill of the carpentry in those days, as he described a *barn-raising bee*:

I saw one – I was pretty young... my Uncle Neil MacDonald, he put one up in Balallan here. They had a bee to put the barn up... [Did he get help?] Gosh, the whole neighbourhood, maybe twenty, thirty men came... everything was all ready and fitted... just put it up and into place. And the ones that made those fittings, they knew what they were doing! They were all ready to put the wooden pin in – there were no nails then. And I remember one year there was a French fellow... and he came around one day and he asked my father “You come tomorrow, help lift big barn?” [Laughs] Oh, about a mile further on... Oh yeah, everybody would help.

The pioneer settlers shared skills and learned new ones, some attaining legendary expertise, as in the use of the broad-axe or the pit-saw. The magnificent covered bridge near Gould, for example, was hand-sawn and constructed by such men. The French welcomed the expertise of experienced wheelwrights and millers who had learned their trade *at home in Lewis*. Historian Donald MacDonald noted that a mill-stone was even sent from Lewis to Megantic¹⁰ and to this day, old water-mills in Lewis testify to the technical skill attained in previous centuries.¹¹ In Stornoway, Quebec, a local oral history project records that in 1853 a French family, les Legendres, moved into the area to start a milling business: “Les frères Legendre font construire



le premier moulin à scie par Donald McLeod qui construisit plusieurs moulins dans la région."¹² [The Legendre brothers had the first sawmill, built by Donald McLeod who constructed several mills in the region.] The grist-mill served a wide area and, as Russell recalled, a trip to the Legendre's Mill in Stornoway was an enjoyable day out as well as a necessary preparation for winter: "And those old Legendres, they could talk Gaelic just as good as anybody else. And the second generation and the third generation they could talk a little."

One of the skills the Gaels learned from their French neighbours was the use of the ingenious *stump-puller* used in land clearing¹³ though completely unknown to crofters who had once tilled peaty or sandy soil. For almost every aspect of life, there were huge adjustments to be made, not only to the extremes of temperatures but also to the landscape and vegetation, a combination of swampy wet land with thick brush, dense areas of conifers that had to be burned to create fields. Building materials and techniques contrasted hugely to those they left behind, yet they soon learned how to make warm, comfortable homes and how to keep the kitchen cool in summer. There were maple groves with glorious autumn colour and springtime sap to be used for syrup-making, though, as Duncan McLeod wryly remarked, it was not quite as they had imagined when emigration agents told them they would *only need to tap a tree* to get sugar. Homesteading proved to be endless hard work, yet with little opportunity to earn any money to

buy farm implements necessary for improvement. Russell explained how they found a solution:

When it was haying time in Vermont, they'd walk from here up to Vermont to do the hay, and it was all that crooked sticks, you know. They didn't have mowing machines then... just a scythe... And one time there was a bunch of men went up to Vermont, my great-uncle, Neil Beaton was among them... They used to have to walk up there and walk back... My father had a cousin went up one time by bicycle, then came back... Well, the time that Dave Nicolson's grandfather went, he died there – they were in the haying, that'd be July probably. And his wife didn't hear about his death until they walked back in September or October... It was one hot day, oh, it was awful hot – terrible! And they took out this ice cold water and he drank so much it just killed him.¹⁴ Of course they couldn't do nothing, they just buried him... I suppose he'd be thirty or forty.

Working for a lumber contractor also had the potential of bringing home much needed cash. Johnnie A. MacLeod from Dell recalled his winters in a lumber-camp in the late 1920s when he learned that logging was a fairly miserable job, whereas there was “real prestige” attached to the river drive. Johnnie, whose mother tongue was Gaelic, joined a camp crew, and found that the English he had learned at school was of little use among eighty-five Frenchmen, all brought in for the woods operation.¹⁵ Camp routine was fairly standard: the men slept in the



one bunkhouse, heated by a central wood-burner and memorable for the bed-bugs, lice, body odour, and stifling atmosphere. The *day* began at 3:30 a.m. with breakfast of beans, bread, and tea eaten outdoors. The first job was putting pulpwood into the river, ready for the drive. At 9 a.m. they stopped for the next meal, beans again. Back to work, tree after tree after tree was felled until lunch-time, at 2.30 p.m. – same as breakfast. Back to work till nightfall and the fourth meal of the day, a welcome plate of boiled beef and potatoes at the camp, again served outdoors. Back in the bunkhouse, despite fatigue, the men made their own entertainment of songs, stories, jokes and the occasional fiddle tune and step-dance, their only respite from a hard, dangerous and often lonely way of making a living. At times they went to bed wet, and always with their clothes on – a far cry from cutting peats and eating potatoes and herring back home in Lewis, Harris or Uist.

Like many of the men from the first few generations of Hebridean settlers, Alex MacIver learned to swing an axe from an early age. In the lumber woods he began working on the “river drive” at the age of nineteen in 1935: “I used to hire on for the log drives. And some of the drivers were younger than that. You’d pack your lunch and work for ten cents an hour for ten hours a day.” For Alex, as for most lumbermen, the bunkhouse songs and recitations were the most enjoyable part. It was a life that was fraught with danger and hardship and, as Russell recalled, for some families there was anguish and tragedy:

There’s quite a knack in handling them logs in the water... There’s some fellas could walk on them, and drive them, and ride them down the river. ‘Course there’s a lot of them got drowned too... There’s a first cousin of my grandfather MacIver, Donald MacIver, same name, he came over from Loch Garvaig, and he just came over in time to go on the drive in spring... He didn’t know anything at all about handling and stuff, you know, and he got drowned. He’s buried in the MacIver cemetery. He was thirty years old, a nice fellow, strong and healthy. Yeah, there was a Tormod Matheson... he got killed by a tree... I think it’s marked on the gravestone ... And I think there was a Beaton in the woods there got killed by a tree, a young fella. He was out with MacKenzie in Marsboro. Oh there’s quite a few.

A less dangerous way of earning a living was fox farming, which, in its hey-day, was a lucrative business for a few entrepreneurs. Duncan McLeod (whose grandfather was from Uig) was well acquainted with the *fox men* as he and his boyhood companions used to enjoy their own small part in feeding locally bred silver foxes:

Well, the Mathesons, they had the big one – 1920, that’s when Jimmy [Matheson] first got his breeding stock... And he bought this farm about half a mile out the road. Well, he kept say 250 or 300 females, and he

had so many males to service them, and then first of all in the spring there would be more, probably 750 to 800, up to a thousand... And then there was some who kept just one or two or three. Well [the furs] were sold out of Montreal fur market, New York, and possibly in the London fur market... Oh, right after the Second World War, oh, 1947, '48 [when the bottom dropped out of the market] [...] Well, we'd catch rabbits we'd bring them to Jimmy, to feed the foxes. And he'd give us anywhere from 15 cents to 25 cents.

His friend Russell remembered a misadventure which, more than sixty years on, amused not only Russell but one of the other *boys* involved:

We used to set snares for rabbits, and we'd sell the rabbits to the fox men – usually to Matheson's Silver Fox farm in Milan. And sometimes an owl would come along and he'd eat half of a rabbit, and we'd set a trap and he'd get caught. And we had two big horned owls at home one day, and Alex Campbell from Dell, he thought he'd like to have them. So he asked if he could have them, and we said "Yeah, you can have them." So he took them home and he put them in the hen house, and they killed all the hens! [Laughs!] Last time I saw Alex it was a few years ago, when Danny died... He asked if there was any deals going on with the owls yet! That was about sixty years ago since the owl incident.

Scarcely drawing breath, Russell continued:

One winter my father had a box-trap set for weasels,¹⁶ oh, the fur was worth something. One day, going to Milan, Murdo [Matheson] was ahead with a team [of horses] and we were behind with the other team. When he came down and he looked in and he yelled *Tha squireal agad!* [You have a squirrel!] So, they let the squirrel go... I used to catch a few of them – a dollar, and a dollar and a half. That was big money you know, for a young fella! There was a fellow from Sherbrooke used to come around... They'd buy hides... Oh they'd call here.

Conversations about hunting, trapping and fishing could fill hours of entertainment as well as interest. In contrast to what their grandparents had left behind in the Outer Hebrides, where the men hunted *guga* [young solen geese] and fished for *sgadan* [herring] but shooting deer or catching salmon was only for the privileged, there was a sense of freedom in Quebec, which soon became natural to them. Russell had a fund of stories most of which had a wry twist of humour. It was a way of life that he loved, as had his uncle Alex, who had gone *out West* for a few years and ever after was known as *Alaig Fiach* – wild Alex.

Nicknames were as common in the Eastern Townships as in Lewis and Harris, similarly reflecting wit and amusement as well as history and sense of place. To mention but a few, there was a John MacArthur



who went by the name of *John Boston* because he had visited that city as a young man “and couldn’t stop talking about it;” Alex MacIver’s uncle was known as *The Bugler* (thought to have been associated with a stint in the army); John D. Graham was *Iain Domnhuill Aoghnaidh òg* [young John, son of Donald, son of Angus]; John K. MacLeod was *Iain Coinneach an t-saighdear* [John, son of Kenneth the soldier]; John MacKenzie was known as *Seonnaidh a’ Mhuillear* [John the miller] though he had never milled in his life, but *inherited* the name from his grandfather who had been a miller in Tolsta. There was a family who all went by the name of *Sgoth* – far removed from the sea and a livelihood depending upon fishing, after several generations they were still known *Sgoth*, which is the type of fishing craft best known in the northernmost tip of Lewis.

One family of MacAulays was referred to as *Sgair*, or, more often than not, *the Sgaires*. Having often heard the story from childhood, Muriel Mayhew (née MacDonald) explained that it was one of her father’s relatives, Malcolm MacAulay, who emigrated from Lewis and settled on Bosta Hill. He was known as *Calum Sgair* – Malcolm, son of Zachary.¹⁷ He had been a fisherman and was in love with a young woman, Margaret MacLeod, from Bernera, where Muriel’s mother had grown up:

My grandmother’s ancestor, I suppose my ancestor too, was her aunt – of the Margaret in the story. Anyway they were lovers and they were supposed to get married and (as far as her parents were concerned) he

was much beneath this family and they didn't want her to marry him because he was a sailor [fisherman], I guess. And he had come home, he had come back to get her, and they would go away together. And they had decided or planned to meet one particular night and she went out to meet him on the moors and a fog came up and she lost her way, and he thought she had decided not to come, and she, I guess, thought that he hadn't come to meet her, and then he made up the song after that, was what I was told. And his name was Malcolm and her name was Margaret, and he was *Calum Sgaire* [Malcom, son of Zachary]. And in the end they made her marry a person they had chosen for her, (the local merchant, an older man, with whom she would have a more prosperous life). And she married him with her hands behind her back. She wouldn't give him her hand in marriage, and I think it was a few months or a year later she died. She was supposed to have died of a broken heart.¹⁸ Now isn't that romantic? [...] Later on I think he came to Canada [Quebec]. If I'm not mistaken, he married somebody else anyway – but he had made this song for her...

*Ged is math a bhith seòladh
 'S olc a tha e 'gam chòrdadh
 'S mór gum b'fheàrr a bhith 'm Bòsta
 Cuir an eòrn' anns an raon.*¹⁹

[Although it is good to be sailing/ It doesn't suit me at all/
 I would far rather be in Bosta/ Planting the barley in the field.]

To this day, Bosta (mentioned in the song) marks the place settled by MacAulays whose descendents are entirely French speaking today. Muriel's neighbour, Bill Young, whose people came from North Uist, added that in their young day, and even into the Fifties, "some of the French spoke Gaelic too, you know."

As anyone who grew up in the Scotland's Outer Isles will confirm, a visit with the descendents of the Quebec settlers in the Eastern Townships is very much like visiting in Lewis, Harris or any Hebridean island. The atmosphere is much like any informal *ceilidh*, the television is switched off, and, for the duration, simply does not exist. The kettle is scarcely boiled before the stories and reminiscences begin, with emotions running the full gamut, laughter to tears and often tears of laughter. There are stories of local characters, the wise, witty, foolish, brave or adventurous; the tragic life and death of Donald Morrison (the Megantic Outlaw);²⁰ cures or household hints; supernatural happenings emerge, though the story might start off, "that time Peter MacRae was killed in the granite quarry..." Ghost stories enough to make you scared to walk home might begin, "when we were working in the woods..." or "one time we were hunting..." And, as many of Township men had "served King and country," there were many

that began “I remember during the war...” The very mention of childhood Saturdays, however, was certain to evoke mirth and lively reminiscences such as on this occasion with Bill Young:

Saturday! Of course we had the well-house out back, you know, and we had the rope, with the bucket on the rope. We had to bring in the water; we had to bring in the wood... There was filling wood-boxes, splitting the kindling, piling the wood... that had to be all done the day before. Even the meals had to be prepared the day before. You might put the kettle on, or something like that, but the rest was ready. Cooking was put aside – [you’d hear] “This pie is for Sunday; this cake is for Sunday; this cold meat’s for Sunday.” Sunday there was nothing to be done.

The services were in Gaelic. And then, afterwards, they’d go home, and I had to go to Sunday School, and then I’d go home, and we’d all have dinner. And there’d be relations or somebody dropped in. They’d be all sitting quietly around on the veranda, or something, if the weather was good. And then, somebody would be elected to say a prayer, and we’d all have to go into the house, and we’d all have to get down – kneel down while prayers were said. And then in the evening, back we’d go to church. Now, you had to have something like an earthquake or the end of the world for to stay home from that! You had to go... A lot of people would come in from outlying districts and, especially in the morning service, they’d come in sleighs in the winter, and put their horses in sheds, and come in. Oh a storm never stopped them!

Differences between Lewis and Quebec landscape and weather aside, Saturday and Sunday kept all the routines of *back home*. Only religious books were read on Sunday, though in some homes, this rule applied to every day of the week. Bill Young’s grandmother was an enthusiastic reader of spiritual books, which seemed reason enough for her to decide on behalf of the entire family:

Well, it had to be religious, something religious. Oh, heavenly days! I remember the first Western story she ever caught me with in the house! Well, I got rid of that fast – or she did! It wasn’t on Sunday either! Whoosh! That was clear trash.

Besides the observation of religious customs, the settlers also continued to celebrate seasonal customs, particularly Hallowe’en when, apart from guising, it was common to play a prank on neighbours or get up to some *harmless* mischief on that special night. Ruth Nicolson (née MacDonald) recalled some of the things they got up to – usually the boys:

Like, they’d carry off your steps (if they were loose) and put them somewhere else. Or maybe the chairs on the front porch would disappear; they’d turn up again, and wherever they landed they would know who

they belonged to. Or one time they put a buggy on top of the roof of a shed – that was the big boys – it'd have to be the big boys to handle that.

Duncan D. L.'s grandfather, who had the store, was a very devoted temperance man, and, one Hallowe'en, a number of the young men, including his own son (Duncan), took tar and oil – black. And on the side of the store, next to the station – just across from the station, tracks in between – [they painted] D.L. McLEOD, SELLER OF LIQUORS. And almost every year as long as he lived, he painted it but that black oily paint would come through!

As he listened to Ruth's story from fifty years ago, Duncan laughed as he brought it up to date: the graffiti outlived both his grandfather and his father and could still be seen when, finally, around 1992, Duncan himself had the old store torn down.

One of the social events that became popular in the Eastern Townships was the Box Social, when everyone, Gaels and French, would gather from miles around in support of a special cause. Christie and Johnnie MacKenzie (*Seonaidh a' Mhuilear*) of Scotstown remembered how common they once were, usually held in the school, though sometimes in a neighbour's home:

Anything happening, like the barn burning or the house burning or something [disastrous] – everybody pitched in and did what they could with the work and if there was anything they could give, they gave... it was just some way to help people... Oh, the Scotch and French, they'd hold together just the same, getting up box-socials to help. You know, selling the boxes and the proceeds going to a family that was destitute. It was an evening thing, and it would be all free, [no admission charge] for the neighbours... it was fun... and some of them boxes would be regular shoe-boxes, you know, all trimmed up. Inside was a lunch for two people – sandwiches and a cake and cookies, and sometimes fruit – whatever you could get. In the country store there wouldn't be too much variety... Some of them would be beautiful! And as a rule, the best trimmed ones brought the most money, regardless of what was inside. [Laughs]. Well, of course, they wouldn't know what was inside till they were too late anyway – they'd have bought it! And they made tea or coffee [in the hall] – that was extra.

Johnnie teasingly reminded Christie that “the women made the boxes and the men were bidding on them – to get the women!” She smiled as she continued:

And you ate your lunch with your partner. Sometimes some had a mark on the box, you know, for their own girl, and the rest would make him pay for that box – they'd bid it, and bid it, and bid it up until, oh! Yeah, it was fun and once in a while they'd have an orchestra [a band, to play for a dance]... in them days was a violin player and a piano player, or

an organ player. And they'd give them ten dollars – five dollars apiece for playing. Well, that came out of the proceeds, but the rest went to the night's cause.

Though Christie remembered details as if it had only been a week or two before, she wistfully recalled that “the last box-social I was at was in 1923.”

Quebec's Gaelic speakers refer to the month of April as *Mios an t-siùcair* [sugar month] as the first settlers soon learned that when April arrived they could expect to work six days a week extracting and processing maple sap for their main source of syrup and sugar. Tap a tree indeed! The reality is that it takes forty gallons of sap to make one gallon of syrup, not to mention further evaporation to make sugar. As the older generations look at the mechanised improvements that have turned this harvest into a world famous market for Quebec, they look back on the days when they would spend “all the hours of daylight God sent” tapping spigots into hundreds of maple trees to collect the sap in little tin pails. These were taken to the *sugar house* – a *bothan* (*bothy* or cabin) with a box stove and tin stove-pipe – emptied into a vat then boiled and stirred for hours and hours. Though tediously long and demanding, at least the soaking wet clothes could dry out, painfully cold feet could be eased, and – best of all – the end product would be worth it.

At the end of April, with cans and bottles stored for the rest of the year, communities would hold a *sugaring-off party*. Similar to a *harvest-home* this was a celebration for all the hard work of *Mios an t-siùcair*. Families would gather at the local hall on the appointed evening, and bring a sample of their season's syrup. They would then boil up the new syrups, and, when the experts judged it to be ready (the “soft-ball test” in cold water), everyone would go outdoors and gather round the area of clean snow (usually near a fence where nobody had trodden) designated for the highlight of the night. Spectators were told to *hold still* and *keep clear* while competitors carried the boiling liquid out of the hall and lined up to throw into the fresh snow. Instantly, it was turned into a kind of toffee, much to the delight of the youngsters in particular. Still outdoors, with fork in hand, everyone tucked in to the hard-earned treats, and, *if they were allowed*, folk would return to the hall for the second part of the celebration, usually a dance.

Not all families approved of dancing, as Maryann Morrison (Angus's mother) experienced when her father forbade it, because his generation were under the impression that Christ Himself preached against it. Scriptural references to “King David dancing before the Lord” seem of no relevance as Muriel confirmed: “I can remember a minister who said if you went to a dance and you thought the Lord

was with you He'd leave you at the door! So much for 'I will be with you always, even unto the ends of the earth!'"

Nevertheless, the acknowledgement of a spiritual aspect in every area of life was, and is, as deeply significant among the Gaels in Quebec as in the Hebrides. "In all things give thanks" meant that, even if were invited out for afternoon tea, not a sip would be taken till all heads were bowed and grace said. Until the 1990s it could still be heard in Gaelic, *Tha sinn a' toirt taing dhuit, a Thighearna, air son na cothraman priseil so tha thu buileachadh oirnn...* (We give thee thanks, oh Lord, for the precious gifts bestowed on us...).

Today there are no Gaelic church services²¹ and the aging Presbyterian population expresses regret at the closure of once vibrant churches. With church buildings sold and congregations amalgamating to retain their services of worship, there is, naturally a hope that their history will not fade into the mist. Even although the remaining Gaelic speakers could be counted on one hand, still the legacy of the first settlers can be seen the length and breadth of the Eastern Townships. Most of the descendants of the pioneers from Lewis, Harris and North Uist now speak French, and many, like their forebears, learn English after they go to school.

As time passes, there are fewer and fewer to tell their story, but far from fading into oblivion, there is a vibrant interest today, particularly among people who now live on the old farms or in nearby villages. Many with no family connection to the area move to escape the city and live in a beautiful place. As French speakers, they may be surprised to hear that their *new farm* was first cleared by immigrants from Scotland. Even in the 1970s I was asked "Nouvelle Écosse?" (Nova Scotia?) then, when the issue of language was raised, there was the exclamation, *les anglais qui ne parlent pas l'anglais!* (English people who don't speak English!) Today, with fresh interest in local history, many seek out the *original* family that connects them to Scotland.²²

For more than a decade there have been festivals and events in the Eastern Townships paying tribute to the Gaelic settlers – they range between *Hommage aux Premiers Arrivants Écossais* (A homage to the first Scottish Settlers) attracting 8,000 people to a three-day event, to smaller lectures at local universities, colleges, schools, societies and museums. There are also food-related experiences in a local restaurant dedicated to *les traditions des Écossais*, such as the wide range prepared at La Ruée vers Gould; the chef, Daniel Audet visited the Outer Hebrides to taste the sea air, as well as the food.²³ The well-known local landmark, Ross's General Store, is now the Auberge, where visitors can sit by the original kitchen range and taste dishes from a time when there were no boil-in-the-bags, no oven-readies, no additives, no carry-

outs and the word *organic* was yet to be invented. There was basic, nutritious old-fashioned cooking, the kind that Maryann Morrison summed up, explaining how they survived in her day: "My dear, we had oatmeal and the catechism." Food for the body, food for the soul; neglect either at your peril.

More than a hundred years on, it is the value system of the early settlers that draws today's generation as, by comparison, their own lifestyle epitomizes pressure and tension. They sense a contentedness and moral fabric that once characterized the lives of the pioneer settlers and so they come in search of qualities that are hard to find in the fast pace of the modern world. Perhaps, in tasting their food, listening to their music and their language, learning about their history and way of life, the essence of it all may rub off, even for a few days.

The Eastern Townships' heritage and tourism organisations must be commended for the all-embracing publicity of activities and events in the area. In September 2009, for example, among events listed were Scottish attractions such as *Céilidh Échos d'Écosse*, a multi-media piece about the Eastern Township pioneer settlers, with narrative, songs (some in Gaelic), music, dance and visual interpretations. The stage setting is *dans le taigh-céilidh, la "maison des histoires", contes, poèmes, anecdotes, proverbes, chansons, musique... dans l'esprit de la légendaire hospitalité des Écossais originaires des Highlands*.

While the traditions of the Outer Hebrides are woven through those of the Eastern Townships, people who have lived all their lives in this beautiful part of Quebec may find it hard to imagine standing in a place without a single tree in sight. What would it be like to sit by a peat fire? How and where is it gathered? Does it blaze and crackle like wood and do you cut it or split it? What does it smell like? Does it affect the flavour of the whisky? One sure way to find out would be to visit *les îles de Lewis, Harris et Uist*, to seek out a real peat fire, taste the food, the whisky, the music and dancing. Visitors from the Eastern Township are assured of an especially warm welcome.

ENDNOTES

1. Recorded in Megantic in 1976, tape deposited in the Museum of Civilization (formerly Museum of Man), Ottawa.
2. Depending on point of departure, today's ferry services from the mainland take between two and half and six hours or longer in stormy conditions. Though there is a daily service to most islands (twice a week to smaller ones), in stormy weather ferries may be cancelled. Flights take approximately one hour.
3. In the summer, visitors travel to the Hebrides to see and smell the *machair* ablaze with wild flowers, including some species of wild orchid. It is also a favourite habitat for butterflies and bees.
4. The background to selecting the Eastern Townships as the destination concerned an earlier land deal that connected Canada and Britain. In 1834 a group of Montreal and London businessmen, The British American Land Company, purchased around six million acres of the area known as the Eastern Townships, (les Cantons de l'Est) intending to sell off farms to English-speaking immigrants. The land was divided into eight counties, three of which (Shefford, Stanstead and Sherbrooke), being rich and fertile, were bought up by affluent English and Lowland Scots farmers. The rest proved so useless for speculation that within a few years the Company was in severe debt, so, to cancel it, half a million acres reverted to the Crown. The Canadian Government, meanwhile, had begun a land-settlement scheme offering fifty-acre land grants to any British male subject willing to settle in Lower Canada. The scheme was part of the Land Act of 1841. Later the offer was a hundred acres. Before long, British government agents co-operating with this policy looked upon this swampy wilderness as a possible solution to Britain's Potato Famine crisis – it would be offered to famine victims as incentive to emigrate. See Morrison, "The Principles of Free Grants in the Land Act of 1841."
5. Examples of letters include *The Times* (London), Oct. 12, 1847, p. 5; *The Scotsman*, (Edinburgh), July 26 and Sept. 2, 1851; *The Times* (London), May 28, 1852, p. 2. (www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/). "New Light on the Highlands," *The Fifeshire Journal*, (Kirkcaldy, Scotland), Sept 11, 1851, p. 2.
6. See published version, *Diary, 1851: John Munro Mackenzie, Chamberlain of the Lews*. For example, the entry for 23 January 1851: "There are two classes of people I would propose to emigrate, first all bad payers of rent. Secondly I would propose to clear whole townships which are generally in rent arrears."
7. Trevelyan, Charles (30 June 1852 and 14 August 1852), "Letterbook of Highland and Island Emigration Society (2)," *National Archives of Scotland*, HD4/2.

8. Recordings from 1976 were part of a project sponsored by the Canadian Centre for Folk Culture Studies, National Museum of Man, Ottawa. Recordings from the 1990s are lodged in the Archives of the school of Scottish Studies, the University of Edinburgh. Copies donated to the Eastern Townships Research Centre, Bishop's University, Sherbrooke (Lennoxville), Quebec.
9. Ivy, from Milan, died in 2006 in her 101st year.
10. Donald MacDonald, *The Tolsta Townships*, p.148, and *Lewis: A History of the Island*, p. 78.
11. Though none are in use today, some operated till the 1940s. The restoration of the Swainbost mill (as a museum) shows visitors the ingenuity of the technology. Over 250 sites of mills have been identified in Lewis, many dating back several centuries; see Finlay MacLeod, *Norse Mills of Lewis*, illustrated by John Love.
12. One of the descendents, Alphonse Legendre, was recorded for the project. See Guy Lalumière et al., *Stornoway*, p. 165. See also photographs of the site, and of subsequent mills, pp. 31-32.
13. Margaret Bennett, *Oatmeal and the Catechism*, p. 19.
14. Part the advice given to emigrants (written in the pamphlets distributed on embarkation) was that new settlers should avoid drinking large quantities of ice-cold water as it could induce shock and even death.
15. John Austin MacLeod, *Memoirs of Dell*, pp. 191-193.
16. This is a simply made, rectangular wooden box with a trigger device inside that releases a sliding door, which, when set, is suspended over the opening. It is common in many parts of Canada and America. See photo, H. Glassie, p. 169, Fig. 49.
17. According to Dr Donald MacDonald, the name Zachary [*Sgaire*] is peculiar to the MacAulays of Uig. *Tales and Traditions of the Lews*, p. 58. He also refers to a Zachary MacAulay, tacksman of Valtos in 1712, indicating that the longevity of the MacAulay connection, pp. 42-3. Genealogist Bill Lawson has traced the family (ref. Q279C) and records that Malcolm, son of Zachary, was born in Bosta, Isle of Lewis, in 1824 and died in Quebec in 1902. Lawson also notes that Malcolm MacAulay and his brothers Donald, John and William emigrated from Lewis to Quebec in 1855. See Lawson, p. 54. The gravestone of Malcolm [Calum Sgaire] can be seen at Sandhill Cemetery, between Gould and Stornoway, Quebec.
18. A version of the story about Margaret MacLeod and Malcolm MacAulay was recorded by Francis Collinson in Bernera Lewis, in 1954. See also *Tocher*, 9, pp. 34-35, though there is no mention of Malcolm going to Quebec.

19. "Oran Chaluim Sgaire" can be heard on the CD *In the Sunny Long Ago* recorded by Margaret and Martyn Bennett, <http://www.gracenotepublications.co.uk/contact/>, 1999.
20. In 1976, I tape-recorded Morrison's niece, Christy MacArthur who was a little girl when he died and also Maryann Morrison who, as a teenager, used to be sent out to the sugar bush with food for Donald. I did not, however, hear the entire story at any one time, but had to piece it together from many sessions, with *gaps* filled in by reading biographic works such as Epps, Kidd, MacKay, and Wallace. The French publication of André Mathieu's novel, *Donald et Marion*, (1990) also popularised the story among newer generations.
21. According to the Presbyterian Church in Canada Archives and Records Office, <http://www.presbyterianarchives.ca/About%20Us.html>), in Scotstown, St. Paul's Presbyterian Church, services alternated between English and Gaelic, at first weekly, and then (by 1933) on a monthly basis until Gaelic services were dropped entirely in the mid-1950s. In 1976, however, I recorded a Gaelic service in Bethany Presbyterian Church in Milan, led by the Rev. Donald Gillies from St. Kilda. (The church closed in 1980 and the congregation amalgamated with the Scotstown church.) Aside from being a record of one of the last Gaelic congregations of the Eastern Townships, the 1976 tape is also one of the few recordings in existence of a St. Kildan Gaelic speaker as the island was evacuated in 1930, the year after Donald Gillies emigrated to Canada.
22. To cite one example: Peter Jort (of Swedish extraction) moved from Montreal with no inkling that the farm he bought had been cleared by a MacDonald family and the house built by Ruth Nicolson's grandfather. He knew that the area had *great skiing* and land was cheap. He soon became a regular visitor at Ruth's house and over forty years on is a fund of knowledge about the early settlers.
23. In 2010 Daniel Audet also visited these islands along with musician Daniel Fréchette as part of an educational tour of ten Hebridean schools. Children learned about the history of emigration and had a real taste of Quebec (prepared by Daniel), in buckwheat *slaps*, maple syrup and home-baked beans. In the Isle of Lewis, the school in Stornoway set up pen-pal connections to the school in Stornoway, Quebec. Local History Societies, community centres and theatres also benefited from the tour. See, *Stornoway Gazette*, 6 April (online report: <http://www.stornowaygazette.co.uk/news/local-headlines/quebec-links-to-be-celebrated-in-the-isles-1-119929>) and 13 April 2010. (Online report: <http://www.stornowaygazette.co.uk/news/local-headlines/celebrating-150-years-of-gaelic-settlers-in-quebec-1-119943>).

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