



## THE IRISH ARE COMING!

On November 13, 2016, the Morin Heights Historical association hosted a talk by Fergus V. Keyes on Irish immigration to Canada and to The Laurentians. The event took place at St. Eugene Church, with 55 in attendance.

Fergus Keyes is a 5<sup>th</sup> generation Canadian of Irish descent who was born and raised in Montréal. He is a senior business executive with dual qualifications in the area of Board of Directors & Governance, as well as the Safety & Security Industry.

He is a past Chairman & member of the Board of a local History Society, is on the Boards of the Société d'histoire de Pointe Saint Charles, and the Restoration in St. Columban of an Irish Cemetery and is Chairman of The Montreal Irish Monument Foundation. These projects and others cause Fergus to be the foremost expert on Irish immigration and heritage in this part of the world.

Early Irish immigrants to Lower Canada faced social difficulty in that they were mostly Catholic, but not accepted by the French Catholics due to the fact that they spoke Gaelic, and English second. The English Protestants did not accept them as they were Catholic and their highly accented English was hard to understand.

In the 1700's, Irish immigrants were mostly deserters from either the English or French armies, or servants (slaves) of British aristocrats.

The war of 1812 saw prosperity in Ireland as the supplier of food to the military, but its end caused economic hardship and many people began immigrating to the new world. By 1831 there were 34,000 Irish in Montreal and migration northward had begun. Around 1827-28, an English Catholic priest, Patrick Phelan, helped establish a 100% Irish community in St. Columban and subsequently convinced the Bishop to allow him to build the first English Catholic church in Lower Canada. With land grants and money to build homes, the Irish began moving farther into the Laurentians, populating Gore, Shrewsbury and Mille Isles. In the 1837 rebellion, they joined in with the English in the “Gore Protest” pitting English Governance against elected officials. Finding the land that they were granted to be full of rocks and unsuitable for crop farming, folks began raising sheep and cattle and burning hardwood to produce potash that they sold to make fertilizer. Many found the life too difficult and began moving to the United States or Ontario.

A great wave of immigration from Ireland in 1847 was the result of the “potato famine” (later known as “the great hunger”), the result of a devastating drought. With the U.S. blocking their entry, 100,000 desperate people set sail for Canada. 20,000 died en route of typhus, and while the others were quarantined and screened at Grosse Ile, another 6,000 died on arrival at Montreal and are buried, along with many volunteers who died trying to help them, in a cemetery near the north end of Victoria Bridge. It is there that Fergus and the The Montreal Irish Monument Foundation are working to build a suitable memorial.

Irish immigrants and their descendants are an important part of the cultural mosaic that is today’s Quebec. It is obvious that Fergus delights in talking about this subject and answering any questions put forth. It was our great fortune to have him speak to us and V.P. Francois Leroux thanked him suitably with a bottle of Irish whiskey flavoured with maple syrup.