

Sister Societies of Montreal - April 19, 2008

Shared ancestry; shared history

by Barbara Lavoie

A year ago, almost to the date, the Quebec Anglophone Heritage Network (QAHN) organized Montreal Mosaic, a conference held in the McCord Museum's auditorium that attracted close to 100 participants. The event had been intended to generate knowledge of the city's multicultural history and make contact with heritage-minded groups and individuals from its culturally diverse English-speaking communities.

As a follow-up to that successful event, the Sister Societies of Montreal conference was held at the historic Masonic Memorial Temple in downtown Montreal, on Saturday, April 19, from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m.

Referred to as the Sister Societies by historians, they share a number of similarities: all were founded in Montreal between 1834 and 1835 and all shared common goals and missions, to represent the interests of their members newcomers and the long-established who had emigrated to Quebec from the United Kingdom, namely Ireland, Scotland and Wales.

With QAHN's focus on the heritage of anglophone organizations across the province, representatives from four groups were invited to make presentations, the St. Patrick's Society of Montreal (Irish Catholics), the St. Andrew's Society of Montreal (Scots), the Irish Protestant Benevolent Society of Montreal (Irish Protestants), and the St. David's Society of Montreal (Welsh).

The conference kicked off with coffee and scones, provided by Montreal caterer and restaurant The Gryphon D'Or Tea Room, and an early chance for the more than 50 participants to get to know each other.

Rod MacLeod, QAHN president, who chaired the daylong event, introduced historian, author and conference keynote speaker Heather McNabb, who had been asked to provide "a glimpse of Montreal in the early 1830s." She had been the main researcher for the 2003/2004 McCord Museum exhibition *The Scots: Dyed In-The-Wool Montrealers*.

McNabb, through her lecture and slideshow of images, drawings, engravings, the writings of well-known historical figures such as Sir Hugh Allan, and even political cartoons of that time, participants gained an understanding of the political climate in which the culturally-distinct associations were founded.

She noted, "Historians generally agree economic conditions began to decline in Lower Canada during the 1830s, particularly in the rural areas, and social unrest was not far behind. By 1834 political issues were beginning to surface that eventually led to the Rebellions of 1837 and 1838. The conflict was as much a struggle for reform, and neither were they equally divided along the lines of the French against the English, but about the "have nots" versus the "establishment or

the haves. It was into this increasing immigration, urbanization, and political unrest that many of the sister societies we know today were born.“

Referring to the work of author Elinor Kyte Senior’s book, *Redcoats and Patriots: The Rebellions in Lower Canada, 1837-38*, McNabb noted, “The St. Andrew’s Society, the St. George’s Society, the German Society and the St. Patrick’s Society, were formed soon after the founding banquet of the St. Jean Baptiste Society in 1834.

“She (Senior) writes the St. Jean Baptiste Society was the social and fraternal wing of the Patriote party, while the four sister societies were under the wing of an umbrella organization, the Constitutional Association of Montreal.”

Apparently the sister societies were critiqued by a contemporary writer and member of the Patriotes in the newspaper *The Vindicator*, who wrote the sister societies were connected to the Constitutional Association in order to “assume the sacred garb of charity to conceal their dark and real designs,” and as a means to “gain political power and control of the few over the many.”

It’s important to note that at this time in Quebec, English-speakers were the majority population, compared to today’s lowest-ever proportion, almost 7 per cent of the total population.

McNabb also noted that at that time in history, “People were crazy for clubs.” Recalling there was not social safety net as we have today, no unemployment insurance, no health insurance, the networks (societies) they formed were for mutual aid, for insurance, for themselves and for others, to be a social welfare network.

All four presenters, Mary McDaid, president of the St. Patrick’s Society of Montreal, Brian Mitchell, president of the Irish Protestant Benevolent Society of Montreal, Moira Barclay-Fernie, past-president of the St. Andrew’s Society of Montreal, and Leslie West, president of the St. David’s Society of Montreal, provided detailed accounts of their societies history, activities, heritage and legacy. Details about each of the societies can be found on their websites listed below.

From filmmakers, musicians, dancers and authors, annual balls and parades, public exhibitions and events, to educational scholarships and church preservation and restoration, all four societies and its members have, over the past 175 years, made considerable contributions to the city of Montreal, and indeed the province of Quebec, and the whole of Canada. Tangible evidence of the roles they played can be found in the built environment (buildings, churches, etc.) and in the cultural environment such as the annual St. Patrick’s Day Parade – the longest running one of its kind in Canada.

And, in addition, these organizations continue to loyally serve their members and uphold their goals and missions to assist newcomers settle into a new life in a strange land with different laws, traditions, and for the Welsh, a different language, helping them become contributing members, despite being from “away.”

Following a buffet lunch, Peter Snickers, longtime Freemason and current building manager of the Masonic Memorial Temple, conducted a detailed tour of the main hall, renown for its Art Deco ceiling. He explained the importance and significance of various symbols around the room and responding to questions and comments from participants. The group then moved to the building's front entrance, where another conference was underway. Snickers drew attention to a series of six murals, which depict the history of Freemasonry in Quebec.

Built between 1927 and 1929 to honour Freemasons who had served and fallen in the First World War and designed by architect John Smith Archibald, a member of the Masonic Foundation of Quebec, the building, recognized as a heritage resource by Canada, is unfortunately in need of some costly restoration, but the structure remains a most elegant example of beaux-arts neoclassical revival style. It continues to be the headquarters and meeting place of the Grand Lodge of Quebec. Group tours can be arranged by appointment by contacting the Temple.

During the closing discussion, for which the majority of the participants stayed, a commitment was sought on behalf of those in attendance from QAHN to organize another similar conference "before the snow flies," meaning this fall.

There was general agreement the day had been useful, thought-provoking, if not a bit disappointing because there were so few participants.

One speaker suggested QAHN should advertise the next event or events in the mainstream media, rather than just through the QAHN network and the newsletters and communication lines of the presenters and the participating organizations.

One of the many challenges the sister societies individually and collectively acknowledged in their talks was reduced membership, meaning reduced finances to continue as they have over the years. The graying of the population and the economic pressures causing underemployment, lack of secure employment, etc. which have resulted in fewer volunteers were other factors duly noted by the societies.

By coincidence or by choice, the event fell in the wake of a provincial government-sponsored public consultation into accommodation practices related to cultural differences – the Bouchard-Taylor Commission and Premier Charest's full-page newspaper ads (one recently appeared in Sherbrooke's daily newspaper *The Record*) informing residents and others, namely those interested in settling in Quebec, that Quebec is predominately a French-speaking nation, which attempts to accommodate English-speakers.

Although the issue was not raised, nor even mentioned during the discussions during the day, thoughts about the current minority status of English-speakers in Quebec and the related challenges that such status brings with it, could not have been far from the surface.

For participants learned that both the St. Patrick's and the St. Andrew's societies were founded within a month or two of the founding of the St. Jean Baptiste Society, which served the interests of the Patriotes and French-speaking minority, and these organizations, despite the fact all three

were “men only,” and essentially “a thin slice of the business elite,” openly admitted they were created out of a need to “resist oppression and emit propaganda in favour of the so-called British party.”

Further to the political climate at that time, in almost all four of the societies, their founding occurred just prior to the Rebellions of 1837 and 1838 in Upper Canada and Lower Canada, that saw the lines drawn, and guns, cannons and pitchforks, between the English (British) and the French (Patriotes).

As much an information exchange and networking opportunity, all the societies had pamphlets, documents and resources available, the event offered participants an opportunity to learn from the past, ponder the present and potentially plan for the future of Anglophones living in Quebec.

List of Resources

Masonic Memorial Temple
2295 St. Marc Street (at Sherbrooke Street West)
Montréal, QC H3H 2G9
Tel: 514-933-6739
<http://www.roughashlar.com/>

St. Patrick’s Society of Montreal
6767 Cote St. Luc Road, Suite 1
Montreal, QC H4V 2Z6
Tel: 514-481-1346
Email: stpatsocmtl@qc.aibn.com
<http://www.stpatricksociety.com/>

St. David’s Society of Montreal
Montreal St. David’s Welsh Society
543 Ste. Madeleine
Montreal, QC H3K 2L1
Tel: 514-932-7586
<http://www.stdavidsociety.montreal.qc.ca/>

McCord Museum of Canadian History
690 Sherbrooke Street West, ? Montreal, QC H3A 1E9
Tel: 514-398-7100
Email: info@mccord.mcgill.ca
<http://www.mccord-museum.qc.ca/en/>

Le Gryphon d’Or Tea Room
5968 Monkland Ave.
Montreal (Notre-Dame de Grace), QC

Tel: 514-485-7377

The Gryphon is an Irish-style bakery in the Montreal neighbourhood of Notre-Dame de Grace.
Open weekdays from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m., Saturday from noon to 5 p.m.

Redcoats and Patriotes: The Rebellions in Lower Canada, 1837-38

By Elinor Kyte Senior

Canadas Wings (1985)

A Kingdom Of The Mind: How The Scots Helped Make Canada

Edited by Peter E. Rider and Heather McNabb

McGill-Queen's University Press

The Scots of Montreal: A Pictorial Album

Edited by Nancy Marelli and Simon Dardick

2005 Vehicule Press

Saints, Sinners and Scots

A History of the Church of St. Andrew and St. Paul, Montreal 1803-2003?

Written by J.S.S. Armour