

LOCAL IRISH CULTURE

Alive and Well



By: Russ Disotell

They say that on St. Patrick's Day, everyone is Irish, at least for the day. However, a recent survey found that nearly one in five Canadians can claim some Irish heritage. This statement may come as a surprise to many, but the facts bear out its validity. Between 1831 and 1850 nearly 600,000 Irish immigrants arrived in the provinces that would form Canada. In 1867 the Irish comprised twenty four percent of the Canadian population, the second largest ethnic group after the French.

In our region, Irish immigrants were instrumental in the settlement of the back townships, those further from the St. Lawrence. After the War of 1812, Irish immigrants came seeking work on projects, such as canals, roads, railways and in the lumber industry. The Rideau Canal (1826-32) was completed largely by a French-Canadian and Irish workforce.

On March 17, 1996 the Irish Cultural Society of Brockville was formed to promote the culture of Ireland in Brockville and the area. The genesis of the society involved a trip to Spiddal County, Galway and locals performing Irish Set Dancing, a fortuitous meeting on a cruise of the

St. Lawrence, Ottawa's Kendellan Irish Dancers, and Eithne Dunbar's abiding love for Irish dance, the Brockville & District Multicultural Festival and Eithne's persistent daughters, who wanted to have Irish participation in the Festival. That is the abridged version!

Since that March evening, the Irish Cultural Society has performed yeoman duty in promoting Irish dance, music, literature and culture. In this effort, they have helped promote, support and educate the area's local artistic community. Irish dance classes began in Brockville in 1996 with Eithne teaching her daughters and friends the steps she knew in a space kindly supplied by St. Mary's School. Once they had learned everything she could teach, Kathleen Coyle, a qualified Irish Dance teacher from Ottawa, came to Brockville to teach. This past February it was announced that Ceili Dancing for Adults has been offered on the first Wednesday of each month by Jessica McGrath of the McGrath School of Irish Dance.

There have been numerous Irish musicians and bands stop in Brockville to ply their trade, beginning in 1997, when the first



Irish Cultural Society concert filled the BCI auditorium. Since then, Brockville has become a desired stop for top musical talent on tour from Ireland. There is an added benefit to these visits. Visiting musicians have held workshops in the area to encourage local talent. Bands such as Fiddlers Plus, Slainte and Dublin Road are products of these workshops. Eithne Dunbar has recorded two CDs of Celtic music in support of the Irish Language movement (Gaeltacht Canada).

Slainte/Dublin Road have performed at the annual New Year's Eve Concerts for 17 years now. The Irish Booth will be back at the Multicultural Festival in May with the McGrath School of Irish Dance being a part of the entertainment. There is a concert of Irish music at the Brockville Library on March 13th, and an Irish film, also at the Library, on March 15th. There will be a dinner and dance at the Brockville Country Club to be held on Friday March 20th.

On a literary note, the annual Bloomsday celebration of James Joyce is taking place on June 16th. As well, there are plans in the works for a Government of Ireland exhibition, commemorating the 150th anniversary of W.B. Yeats' birth in August. Not to mention rumblings of an Oscar Wilde project in the works.

"Now, back to the question of everyone being Irish?" To join the Irish Cultural Society, "All you need is a love of dance, storytelling and/or music." LH

