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The Irish helped build Montreal, Concordia prof tells WCCM

By MARTIN C. BARRY

While Montreal has been celebrating its 375th anniversary this year, shining a spotlight mostly on the city's French founders, according to a preamble given by the Women's Canadian Club of Montreal, perhaps not as well known is the role of other another people who helped build the city — the Irish.

It was with this in mind that the Women's Canadian Club of Montreal (WCCM) invited Jane McGaughey, an assistant professor in the School of Irish Studies at Concordia University, to speak on the Irish contribution to Montreal's history during the WCCM's annual general meeting on May 23 at Victoria Hall. Over 100 people attended.

McGaughey, who will be teaching a course on the Irish in Montreal at Concordia in September, opened with two contrasting images of the Irish.

The first was of Susan Kennedy, who, during the late 19th century, was depicted by the *Montreal Witness* newspaper as a stereotypically drunken and violent Irishwoman after she murdered Mary Gal-

lagher with an axe in Griffintown.

"This is one vision of Montreal's Irish women," said McGaughey, before pointing to the next projected image as "probably more familiar to many of you." It showed the 2014 Montreal St. Patrick's Parade queen and her court. "The two images of womanhood could not be more diametrically opposed."

According to McGaughey, Montreal is one of four hubs for the Irish diaspora globally. While the historical impact of the potato famine has left some people of Irish origin with the impression that Irish immigration to America was at its peak during this mid-19th century period, the majority of the Irish in Canada actually came before or after, McGaughey added.

"Most people think that their families are famine families," she said. "It's part of the mythology of the diaspora. However, it's actually only a very small percentage of all of those Irish who had been on the move throughout the 19th century. Many more came before or came afterwards, particularly to the States."

Another factor that had a great influence on the destiny of the Irish in Montreal was the construction of the Lachine canal. Many who were arriving from Ireland in the early 1820s came specifically to help build it.

It was no accident that the Irish were hired in large numbers for this purpose, McGaughey added. "There was a very strong belief at the time that the Irish were naturally built for hard labour. This is what we would now call a very racist attitude, but it was a very prevalent attitude at the time."

The Irish labourers excavated more than eight miles of rock and soil along the canal's path, mostly manually. Although they sometimes used plows to break the



Jane McGaughey from the School of Irish Studies at Concordia University made a presentation on the history of the Irish in Montreal to the Women's Canadian Club of Montreal on May 23. ground, for the most part they simply dug downward to a depth of 28 feet using picks and shovels, wheelbarrows and occasionally gunpowder during 14-hour days, earning two shillings per day.

During this time, racist depictions of the Irish flourished in Montreal. A pseudoscientific illustration from the era that McGaughey showed compared the facial characteristics of English nurse and social reformer Florence Nightingale to those of a thuggish-looking Irishwoman identified in the drawing as "Bridget McBruiser."

"This was a process by which the Irish were denigrated as being less evolved," McGaughey commented. "It's taking what would eventually be a Darwinian type of logic and applying it as a reason to control the Irish, to not pay them enough money for their wages, to belittle them, to keep them sectioned off from not only the city but the running of the empire."

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