

A Small Piece of Ireland?

Who makes an historical place an Historic Site? Far from being a simple matter of recognizing history where it has occurred, the naming of historic sites sometimes turns acutely political, reminding us how much history is made — and remade — in the present.

Sometimes governments compete for the control of history. I once met an historic sites official who, while working for the federal government, drafted a letter to Alberta offering to make the buffalo jump called Head-Smashed-In into a National Historic Park, to be developed by the Canadian Parks Service of Environment Canada. By the time the letter worked its way through channels, the official had moved to the Alberta provincial service, where he had the curious duty of drafting the reply to his own letter. Alberta's reply was, more or less, "Keep your federal paws off our Alberta heritage." So it was Alberta, in association with the Blackfoot people of southwest Alberta, which developed the magnificent museum at that remarkable site, which is one of the Canadian places recognized by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site.

Apart from the usual federal-political wrangles, the making of an historic site can also become a battle between governments and people over control of the past, the meaning of the past, and whose history shall be commemorated. In recent years, there has been no more vivid example than Grosse-Ile, a small island in the St. Lawrence downriver from Quebec City, which may or may not one day be a National Historic Site. (See *The Beaver*, February/March 1991).

Forts and battlefields dominated the list of national historic sites for many years after Canada established its first historic park, the battlefields of Quebec City, in 1908. But in recent decades, the Historic Sites and Monuments Board



*The Celtic Cross on Grosse-Ile.
(Canadian Parks Service).*

(HSMB) — which advises Ottawa on places "of national historic significance" — has sought more diversity in what is commemorated. Today the HSMB actively seeks, not just battlefields and prime ministerial birthplaces, but sites that give tangible expression to many themes of Canadian history. So a cannery in Steveston, near Vancouver, is now a national historic site on the theme of the fishing industries, and the

Motherwell homestead, near Yorkton, Saskatchewan, interprets Western agriculture.

It was in that light that the HSMB began to consider Grosse-Ile. The HSMB had identified immigration as a key theme in Canadian history, and in 1984 it recommended that Grosse-Ile become a national historic park dedicated to that theme. From the HSMB's point of view, Grosse-Ile seemed a plausible candidate for an historic site to interpret immigration. Between 1832 and 1937, when millions of immigrants came to Canada by ship, Grosse-Ile served as a quarantine station for immigrants who came up the St. Lawrence. Like Ellis Island in New York or Sydney's Quarantine Island, it seemed a likely place to tell the story of immigration, and perhaps even to create a genealogical research centre.

The Canadian Parks Service of Environment Canada (usually known until recently as Parks Canada) took up the HSMB's recommendation in a "Development Concept" for Grosse-Ile, published early in 1992. The ninety-page document declared its respect for the actual state of the island, but it also foresaw an elaborate development, capable of attracting large numbers of visitors to a park dedicated to the theme of immigration.

The reaction was a storm of protest. "Compared to what we are used to, it was out of all proportion," says Tony Bull of the Parks Service. Letters flooded in to the Parks Service, politicians, and the Prime Minister's office. There were hostile editorials in the press, and some 20,000 signatures on a petition opposing the plan.

The Parks Service and the Canadian government were being castigated for planning a theme park over the bones of the dead, and the criticisms came with particular force from Irish-Canadians. Grosse-Ile does not mean immigration to them. In the history of Ireland and its people overseas, Grosse-Ile above all means sickness, suffering, and death.

Grosse-Ile was a quarantine station for more than a century, but its busiest, most desperate years were 1832-34, when cholera ravaged the immigrant fleets, and the late 1840s. In both periods, most of Canada's immigrants and almost all of those quarantined on Grosse-Ile were Irish. When the potato famine struck in the late 1840s, a million and a half people fled Ireland (and another million died there). Of those heading for Canada, one in six died en route, and at least 5,000 (some say 20,000 or more) are buried on

Grosse-Ile. These facts make Grosse-Ile one of the largest mass graves in Canada and the most important Great Famine site anywhere on earth outside Ireland. Though many Irish refugees did reach Canada and survive, their descendants see Grosse-Ile less as the place to celebrate immigration than as a memorial to dead Irish refugees.

In its eagerness to develop its theme of immigration, the Parks Service had been shockingly negligent of these concerns. It had entitled its Grosse-Ile plans "Canada: Land of Hope and Welcome." It had emphasized that members of many ethnic groups had immigrated up the St. Lawrence — although most of them, being in good health, had passed right by the Grosse-Ile quarantine station. The Development Concept even reported that the Irish tragedy of 1832 and

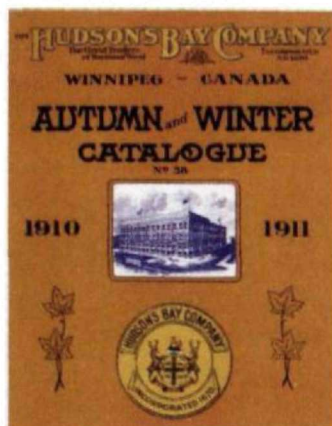
1847 had been "overemphasized" and should not be dwelt on.

Confronted with the hurt and the anger of the Irish community, the Parks Service backtracked. When a supplementary development plan appeared early in 1993, "Land of Hope and Welcome" had vanished. The Service agreed any suggestion that Irish suffering had ever been overemphasized was "inappropriate". It stressed that the island's graves and its memorial character, as well as the "Irishness" of its history, would be respected in any park development. Yet the new hearings that the Parks Service held in April 1993 were still acutely political — both for the politics of the Canadian Parks Service and for Irish-Canadian politics.

Irish-Canadian politics are sometimes also Irish politics. Irish-Canadians' protests about Grosse-Ile were co-ordinated by an organization named Action Grosse-Ile, and some Action Grosse-Ile organizers have been closely linked to modern Irish nationalism. Action Grosse-Ile's historian, Michael Quigley of Hamilton, told me he had helped organize a Canadian tour some years ago for prominent Sinn Fein politician Danny Morrison, who is famous for his slogan that Northern Irish politics should be pursued "with the ballot paper in one hand and the Armalite in the other." And at the height of the Grosse-Ile protests, Action Grosse-Ile's chairman, a retired banker named Denis Leyne, was arrested in New York and charged with helping to smuggle bomb-detonators used by the IRA in Northern Ireland.

Quigley does not hide his own politics, but he stresses that Leyne, who is now out on bail, has been convicted of nothing (and, even if convicted, would not be the first Irish nationalist jailed on false evidence). Mostly, however, he stresses that if Action Grosse-Ile were only a sort of historical section of Sinn Fein, it could never have united so many diverse sections of Irish- (and

GIFTS FROM THE PAST

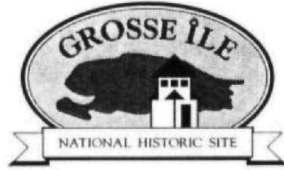
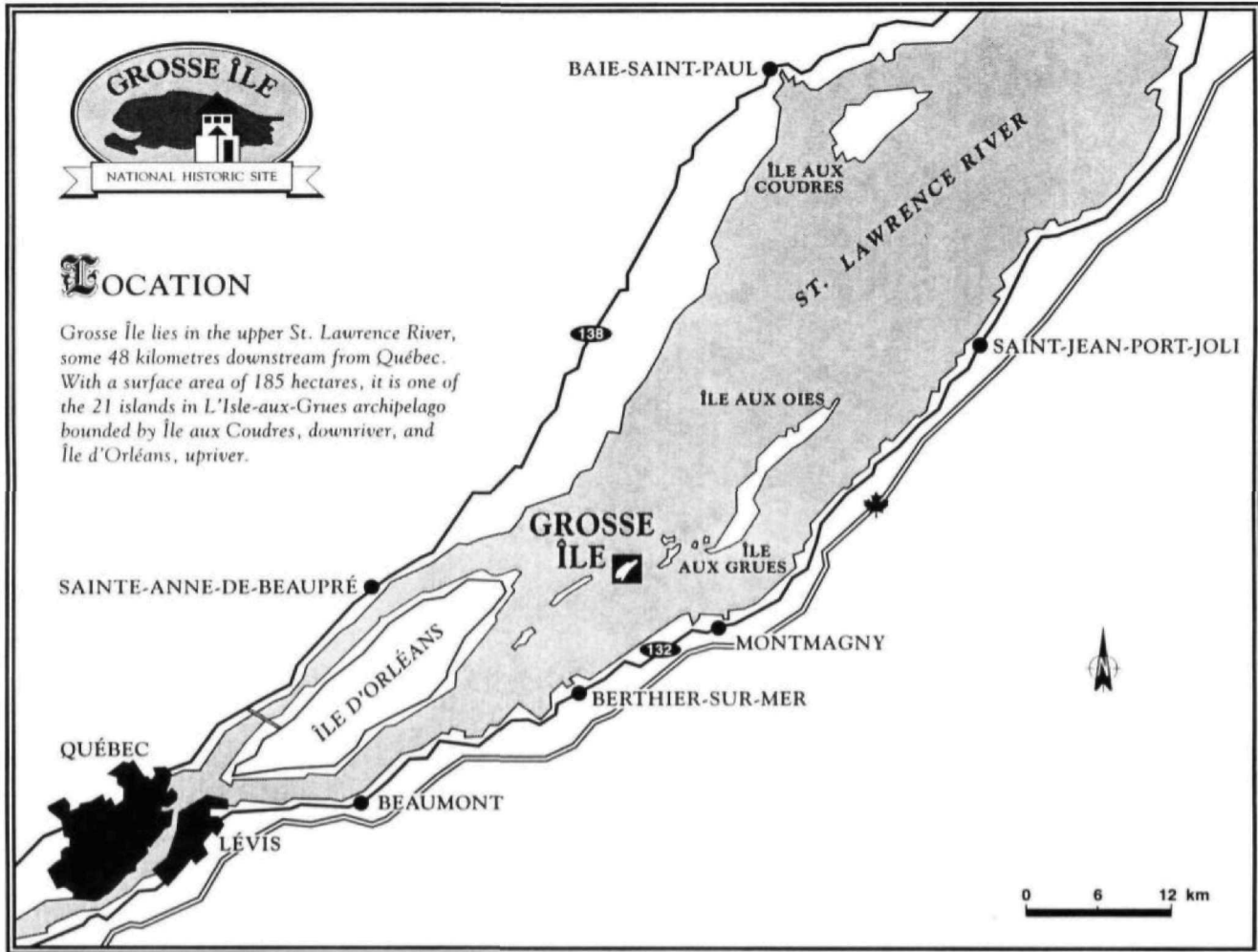


HBC Catalogue, Autumn and Winter 1910-1911. A nostalgic look into the lives of our grandparents. A facsimile of the original edition. **\$15.98 each.**



The 70th anniversary reprint of the first issue of **The Beaver, October 1920.** A collector's item. **\$6.98 each.**

(See tax information on page 48)



LOCATION

Grosse Île lies in the upper St. Lawrence River, some 48 kilometres downstream from Québec. With a surface area of 185 hectares, it is one of the 21 islands in L'Isle-aux-Grues archipelago bounded by Île aux Coudres, downriver, and Île d'Orléans, upriver.

non-Irish) Canadian opinion behind the Grosse-Île protests. When I spoke to him, Quigley, who has a doctorate in Irish history, was eager to defend the historical integrity of Action Grosse Île's presentation to the Parks Service hearing.

In its public statements, Action Grosse-Île argues not only that Grosse-Île must be a memorial to the Irish dead (and to the Canadians who tried to help the dying and the orphaned). It also insists that historical accuracy demands that the Grosse-Île historic site must explicitly link the deaths of the Irish refugees to "the genocidal outcomes" of British policy in Ireland and to British colonial misrule in general. That viewpoint would be controversial in Ireland itself. It

would be welcomed by Irish nationalists, Sinn Fein, and presumably the IRA. But the Irish historical mainstream today rejects what distinguished economic historian Cormac O'Grada calls "the genocide theories formerly espoused by a few nationalist historians." In other words, Action Grosse-Île has been seeking to persuade the Canadian Parks Service to accept historical views about Ireland that are now considered extreme in Ireland itself.

The Canadian Parks Service is most unlikely to do that. It still has its own agenda for Grosse-Île, and so far the theme of immigration remains at the top. At the hearings of April 1993, the Service warmly acknowledged the Irishness of

Grosse-Île and the importance of what happened to the Irish there. Tony Bull, who chaired the hearings, hopes the discussion can now be less polarized. "We listened and we valued what we heard and we did learn a lot." But so far, the Parks Service has not been shaken from its long-established plan to keep immigration in general, not the Irish deaths on Grosse-Île, as the focal point of its plans for the island.

Michael Quigley predicts that will continue to be unacceptable to Irish-Canadians in general. "The Irish have taken an interest in this that really is distinct. It runs across all the political sectarian lines that normally exist. This one struck a nerve."



The Medical Officers' Monument and the Irish Cemetery, Grosse-Ile.

Would many Canadians go to a beautiful but not particularly accessible island (already the boat trip costs \$100 for a family of four) to explore the theme of Canadian immigration, as the Parks Service intends? Somewhere between 20 and 50 million people in North America are said to have Irish connections, and many care deeply about them. The Irish-Canadians may be right to suggest that, even on a practical level, Grosse-Ile could have more drawing power as a place of Irish commemoration.

But the part of the Grosse-Ile hearings that I attended in Toronto

in April 1993 was not much about the practicalities of how to draw visitors to the island. It was more impressive than that, and more moving. Whatever the machinations of institutions on either side, real caring and concern was unmistakable. As Tony Bull put it, "this is certainly a groundswell of people passionately interested in their past."

Eventually the Historic Sites and Monuments Board will have to recommend how Grosse-Ile should be interpreted. Might the Parks Service drop its plans to commemorate immigration there? And if it did,

would organizations like Action Grosse-Ile cease to insist on anti-British messages there?

Irish site? Immigration site? National historic site? It does not look like being a simple decision. ♦

Christopher Moore was a Parks Canada researcher in the early 1970s. He is about one-quarter Irish.