



JEANIE JOHNSTON JOURNAL

An Irish
Famine Ship
Revisits Canada
and Grosse Ile in
the 21st Century

Catherine
McKenna

Foreword by
J. Peter Shea

Jeanie Johnston Journal

*An Irish Famine Ship Revisits Canada
and Grosse Ile in the 21st Century*

By Catherine McKenna

Foreword by J. Peter Shea



THE JEANIE JOHNSTON

for my parents
PATRICK DESMOND
and
ANNE MAUREEN MCKENNA

And our ancestors
PATRICK MCKENNA
(and first wife who died in the sheds at Montreal)
and
JOSEPH ROONEY,
who emigrated to Quebec
during the Famine years

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Foreword	7
Introduction	11
Prelude to a Journal	14
The St. Lawrence – 5 p.m., Monday, Sept. 22, 2003 . . .	14
3:30 a.m., Tuesday, September 23	17
Montreal – Monday, September 22	18
Journal	23
The St. Lawrence – 5:30 a.m., Tuesday, September 23 . .	23
Grosse Ile – 7:10 p.m., Tuesday, September 23	26
3:15 a.m., Wednesday, September 24	29
Wednesday a.m., September 24	30
9:10 p.m., Wednesday, September 24	35
4:00 a.m., Thursday, September 25	37
Quebec City – 6:15 p.m., Thursday, September 25	42
Thursday p.m., September 25	43
Friday a.m., September 26	44
7:30 p.m., Friday, September 26	45
Saturday a.m., September 27	46
Sunday, September 28	46
Thursday p.m., October 2	47
Supplementary Material	49
Dennis Reen – CBC Interview at the Port of Montreal . .	49
The Speeches at Grosse Ile – September 24, 2003	55
Martin Burke – Ambassador of Ireland to Canada	55
Georges Farrah – Member of Parliament for Bonaventure-Gaspé- Iles-de-la-Madeleine-Pabok	56
Captain Tom McCarthy	56
Dennis Reen – CEO of the <i>Jeanie Johnston</i>	57
Mr. Brendan MacGearailt – Mayor of Kerry	59
Mr. John Browne – Minister of State at the Department of Communications, Marine and Natural Resources, Ireland . . .	60
Jo-Anick Proulx – Master of Ceremonies	64
The Most Reverend Bruce Stavert, Archbishop of Quebec . . .	65
Monsignor Jean Pelletier – Pastor, St. Patrick’s Parish	66
Related Reading	68
Acknowledgements	69
Index	70

Foreword

I have not yet met Catherine McKenna, but I look forward to the opportunity of sharing stories of our similar experiences on board the *Jeanie Johnston*. Having read her journal, I am not the least surprised that she was the winner of the essay contest that won her a spot as a sail-trainee on the *Jeanie Johnston* from Montreal to Grosse Ile, and then back to Quebec City. Her narrative exudes the passion and enthusiasm which she obviously brought to this project, along with a solid understanding of the historical and cultural significance of the visit of the *Jeanie Johnston* to the Irish community.

Catherine's time on board the *Jeanie Johnston* started shortly after mine ended. I, too, had followed the *Jeanie Johnston* project with great interest for many years. As an active member of Montreal's Irish community, which had planned with great anticipation the originally scheduled visit of the ship to Montreal in the summer of 2000, I was disappointed to hear that the maiden voyage was postponed and nearly cancelled outright. Trying to predict in what year, if ever, she would cross the Atlantic became a sport in local circles. Scepticism gave way to elation when the good news reached Montreal that the *Jeanie Johnston* was launched (in fact relaunched) from Blennerville, County Kerry, Ireland and was sailing for Florida in April of 2003.

It was my eldest son, Patrick, who was living in New York City at the time, who brought to my attention that the *Jeanie Johnston* was taking on paying passengers, or more accurately, sail-trainees, for all legs of her voyage from Ireland, then up the eastern seaboard of the United States and Canada, and then back again to Ireland. Being an avid recreational sailor for more than 30 years, as well as a descendant of 19th century Irish immigrants, I could not pass up what would be the

opportunity of a lifetime, namely to sail on board a genuine square-rigger and floating museum of the Great Irish Hunger. It was a difficult decision to decide on what leg of the voyage to sail. If time and money were immaterial, I would have signed up for the entire multi-month trip. Certainly the Montreal to Grosse Ile/Quebec City segment that Catherine McKenna had the good fortune of sailing would be the most emotional, as it would include a visit to the hallowed burial sites on Grosse Ile.

Being mainly a fresh-water sailor on the lookout for a new experience, however, I chose the leg which I thought would provide the best open-ocean sailing in Canadian waters. The four-day, 450-nautical-mile voyage leaving from Halifax took us around Cape Breton, through the Cabot Strait, into the Gulf of St. Lawrence (passing between the Magdalen Islands and Prince Edward Island), and then up the Miramichi River to our destination, Miramichi, New Brunswick on September 6, 2003. The voyage provided everything that I had hoped for, and more. Our weather provided a bit of everything: sun, wind, calm, rain, and storm. The first day out, sailing up the northeast coast of Nova Scotia, was absolutely beautiful. It was mid-summer weather: sunny and in the low twenties, with a light breeze and schools of porpoises frolicking ahead of our bow. I discovered why the spar that acts as a support for (and is just below) the bowsprit is called the ‘dolphin-striker’, as these gregarious aquatic mammals seem to make contact with the ship with every leap. The clear, star-filled sky that evening made my 4 to 8 a.m. watch pass quickly. It was a perfect time to contemplate the passage of my immigrant Irish ancestors through waters near these more than a century and a half ago. There was less time for contemplation two nights later, however, when we were beating westward, just south of the Magdalens, into a strong rain and wind-whipt sea. On that night, most of the sail-trainees were hugging the leeward rail

of the vessel and losing the evening's meal into the foamy brine. As Catherine remarks in her journal, wooden ships leak in a good rain storm. I was fortunate that a persistent leak above my top bunk missed me by just inches and landed on my bunkmate below me. He tried sharing a bunk with one of the waxed figures in the museum part of the ship, but soon realised that a slightly soggy, six-inch thick foam mattress was still more comfortable than the straw and wood-slat sleeping surface that the poor immigrants had to endure.

The final leg of our voyage consisted of motor-sailing ten miles up the Miramichi River to the town formerly known as Chatham (now a part of Miramichi). As we moved up the river, having taken on the required river pilot, in addition to journalists from Miramichi's radio and television stations, we were joined by a flotilla of small boats, including pleasure craft and fishing vessels, numbering at least one hundred in a heart-warming escort to our inland destination. Along the way we slowed down to salute, out of respect, the Celtic cross that stands on Middle Island, in honour of the Irish Famine immigrants who are buried there. Although less well known, Middle Island is the Miramichi's Grosse Ile, the site of hundreds of Irish buried in unmarked graves. The New Brunswick Irish community turned out in the thousands to enthusiastically welcome us to our dock. Like that of Catherine's, my wonderful adventure on this beautifully crafted vessel, came to a painfully abrupt ending when, with baggage neatly stowed on deck, it was time to say farewell to the permanent crew and my fellow trainees with whom I had bonded so well in such a short time.

I was fortunate to have sailed on the re-creation of the *Jeanie Johnston*. The original ship's Irish immigrant passengers were also fortunate (if the word 'fortunate' can be used to describe people fleeing from hunger and disease) because the *Jeanie Johnston* never lost a passenger. This good fortune was certainly not the norm for

most travelers aboard the infamous 'coffin ships'. More typical was a ship such as the *Sir Henry Pottinger* which, among other trans-Atlantic voyages, set sail from County Cork in early June 1847 with 399 passengers. During the 50-day crossing, 98 people died at sea. When she was quarantined at Grosse Ile, seven more perished on board, and later 22 died in the hospital sheds on the island. A Daniel Shea, aged 38, was one of the passengers who died in the quarantine hospital and his name is inscribed in the memorial on Grosse Ile. There is a possibility that this was my great-great grandfather who had that name and whose son, Daniel Shea, Jr., made it to Montreal with his mother and older brother, to start a new life.

J. Peter Shea
Montreal Irishman of the Year 2001
24 January 2005
Montreal

Introduction

The original *Jeanie Johnston*, a three-masted, square-sterned sailing ship, was built in 1847 by the highly-respected Scottish shipbuilder John Munn on the Rivière St. Charles in St. Roch, Quebec. She was the smallest of four barques (408 tonnes, 106 x 24 x 18 feet) built by the Munn shipyard that year during the most vital time in wooden shipbuilding in Quebec City.

She was sold to Irish merchants John and Nicholas Donovan of Kerry and sailed from Tralee, Ireland on April 24, 1848 with her first load of 200 passengers. She returned to North America 16 times between 1848 and 1855: 11 of those voyages were to Quebec. Although considered one of the ‘coffin ships’ of the Famine era, she was unique in that she never lost a single passenger, not even when she sank while traveling from Quebec to Hull, England with timber in 1858. All were rescued after she ran into trouble on the Atlantic by the passing Dutch ship, the *Sophie Elizabeth*.

Thanks to the vision of Irishman John Griffin – to whom we remain forever grateful – her reconstruction was brought to fruition in Blennerville, Ireland following ten years of hard work, faith and dedication. The magnificent replica of the *Jeanie Johnston* was launched in February 2003 to begin her saga and very important tribute to the Irish emigrants of the Famine years. Although her maiden voyage included visits to more than 20 North American ports, the pinnacle of it would be, in the words of her CEO Dennis Reen, her return to her spiritual destination at Grosse Ile (the largest Famine graveyard outside of Ireland; two Irish presidents have laid wreaths there) where she paid long-awaited homage to emigrants who did not survive and also to the people of Quebec who lost their lives ministering to them. The city of Quebec has commemorated the *Jeanie Johnston* with a plaque that was unveiled on

the 27th of September, 2004. It will be installed at the intersections of Prince Édouard and St. Dominique by her birthplace in St. Roch.

I had followed the *Jeanie Johnston* project online from the beginning; reading the reports from the ship that were on her website. I could only dream of sailing with her. And I continued to dream – a painful dream – because, given my circumstances, it seemed utterly out of the question. And then there was a writing contest in our local newspaper, *The Quebec Chronicle-Telegraph*: “tell us why you should voyage on the *Jeanie Johnston*...” Lacking confidence but believing in serendipity, I penned a little essay over breakfast, wiped the toast crumbs away, typed it up, mailed it and put it out of my mind from that moment on.

Weeks later, the phone rang with the news that I had won the contest. I felt as if a magic spell had been cast over me. I walked around in an all-but-incoherent state for days and marked the dates on the calendar...

The timekeeping of a journal is through some of life's adventures, our only reference to the pace and rhythm of the mundane we have temporarily left behind. We note brief thoughts and observations, we outline events. Who, what, where and when. But we can order and structure our experiences with understanding only in hindsight as they process into memory, having been truly caught up in living the fullness of each moment. Time has now ripened this recent past and it has become part of me; I have been given so much. I hope to bring my readers into what I lived and offer some insights into what transpired beyond the chronicle of events...

This has been a moment in that time of my travels, a personal account, and the speeches that marked the part of the voyage she was conceived for.

Postscript: In 2004, the *Jeanie Johnston* visited several ports around Ireland, underwent maintenance and repairs in Cork, and culminated her year with a voyage to

La Coruna, Spain in September. Despite numerous logistic and financial obstacles, the *Jeanie Johnston* has proven to be a success: she is a functional ship, she interests the public and she can more than cover her costs. She was docked in Dublin until the end of 2004 – open to visitors – and we hope to see her sail again, *Dieu voulant*, in 2005.

Prelude to a Journal

“The two most beautiful things in the world are a ship under sail and a woman in love... be strong and master them, and they’ll take you through thick and thin; be weak, and they’ll take you to hell. If it’s to hell you must go, choose the ship...”

– CAPTAIN TOM MCCARTHY, reciting a traditional sailors’ dictum. Evening, September 24, 2003

The St. Lawrence – 5 p.m., Monday, Sept. 22, 2003

Mizzen watch. The first and most important term in the new vocabulary I will learn aboard the *Jeanie Johnston*. Where I am obliged to be and at what time. On deck, reporting to our watch leader, Frida, from 8 a.m. to noon and again from 8 p.m. to midnight. (Watches on a ship are named after the masts and the *Jeanie* uses fore, main and mizzen – mizzen being the third, or aft mast of a square-rigged sailing ship.) Rosemary, my fellow traveler from Quebec and bunk-mate, is with me on this post. I am getting to know her and 25 or so other sail-trainees in working with them.

Frida is a solid, no-nonsense young woman. Rose-



Frida, our watch leader

Sea stories abound: old reality ones that have become classics, modern imaginative ones that reach a popular audience. This story, this personal journal, is a thoughtful reflection on the great mass of immigration history and folklore that most of us North American descendants of 19th century European immigrants carry as our psychological baggage. The journal was written from notes the author penned aboard the vessel, the *Jeanie Johnston*, as she plied her way from Montreal to Grosse Ile and then back to Quebec City in September of 2003. The ship created the atmosphere in which Catherine McKenna was able to reconstruct without too much imagining the experiences of her ancestors when they braved the Atlantic in what appeared to be sturdy vessels standing in the harbours, but which must have felt as fragile as eggshells when they faced North Atlantic storms. To those of us for whom the closest thing to a physical encounter with the forces of nature is either a totally controlled workout on a machine, or a slight jerking about in a crowded bus, this journal gives a context for thought.

Best wishes to the reader who can climb into the story and sail along, capturing experiences not open in our pedestrian existence.

MARIANNA O'GALLAGHER

January 2005

Catherine McKenna lives and works in her native Quebec City at the library of the Literary and Historical Society of Quebec located in the Morrin Centre. She also teaches English as a second language.



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