

It helps if you're Irish



I believe that one's heritage is important, and should be particularly important to the individual, as long as it is not carried to extremes.

With the possible exception of First Nations people, all of us in Canada were either born somewhere else, or are directly descended from people who came from some other land.

Many of these lands have been the scenes of ethnic animosities that go back centuries, and continuing such squabbles in this country is, to my mind, taking pride in one's heritage too far. If people want to continue those fights, they can take them elsewhere.

But positive celebrations are another matter.

For example, St. Patrick's Day was Sunday, and I'm willing to bet there are some of you with not one drop of Irish blood in you who celebrated in some way, even if it was nothing more than tilting back a pint of Guinness, wearing something green or trying one's hand at making Irish coffee.

Well, I have lots of Irish blood in me. As far as anyone can determine, my father's background was totally Irish. While he was born in Canada, both of his parents were from the Emerald Isle, and many of his relations still live there (I correspond with several of them).

The Irish case on my mother's side is not quite as strong, but I know there's some there, especially on her mother's side.

So I usually celebrate St. Patrick's Day. I try to make sure I have at least one Guinness. About the only green article of clothing I own is a T-shirt, but I usually wear it the big day. And over the last couple of years, if I do say so myself, I have developed something of a knack for making Irish coffee.

In fact, the celebrations were a little more involved this year. What started as a casual suggestion from a cousin that we do a bit of pup-crawling St. Patrick's Day kind of evolved into a rather large sit-down dinner with most of the extended family Friday night. I think part of the motivation was that my father's sister and my uncle to whom she was married both passed away in the last couple of months. True, the place we ate was somewhat more elaborate than a pub, and I don't recall anything particularly Irish on the menu, but they at least had Guinness, which is what most of us were drinking. In other words, mission accomplished.

And I had already made sure I was well equipped with the necessary fixings for Irish coffee (the recipe is pretty easy to find with a bit of Googling).

I have to believe there are a lot of other people of Irish ancestry who have celebrated in some way.

So I was a little surprised to find a press release in my emails one day last week that was headed with the line "Irish-Canadians not fans of St. Patrick's Day, according to survey."

The survey referred to was evidently commissioned by Ancestry.ca, and it apparently revealed that 60 per cent of Irish-Canadians do not celebrate the occasion. It also indicated that more than a quarter of Canadians claim to have Irish ancestry (I don't have to claim anything in that regard), yet two-thirds of them believe that Canadians in general do not have an accurate understanding of Irish culture.

Part of the problem appears to be a lack of appreciation for Irish contributions to Canada. The aforementioned press release stated that at least one-third of Canada's Prime Ministers had some Irish roots, including Sir John Thompson, Lester Pearson, Brian Mulroney and Paul Martin.

Of somewhat more recent interest, the late Stompin' Tom Connors had some Irish in him too.

Thomas D'Arcy McGee, one of the few victims of a political assassination in Canada, was Irish too. During his time (he was one of the Fathers of Confederation), he became (possibly unwillingly) part of the controversy between the Irish and the anti-Irish that made it's way across the Atlantic (I've already stated what little use I have for such conflicts). In fact, a Fenian sympathizer named Patrick James Whelan was convicted and hanged for the murder of McGee. There are many people (myself included) who believe they got the wrong guy.

There are lots of other examples. The point is I am well aware of the contributions the Irish have made to the Canadian scene. As well, contributions have been and are made by the people who come from other countries and those who are their descendants. Besides, as I already stated, you don't have to be Irish to celebrate St. Patrick's Day, any more than you have to be Catholic to celebrate the election of Pope Francis.

As well, how many of us reflect on why it's celebrated. March 17 is the date St. Patrick died, in 460, according to some sources (I'm getting this from Wikipedia). It's meant to honour the man who banished snakes from Ireland (I get that from Wikipedia and from what my kindergarten teacher taught us March 17, 1964).

The day might have been established to celebrate a man, but today, it's meant to celebrate Ireland.

Speaking as an Irishman, who incidentally is not too fond of the colour green and, with the exception of French fries, hates potatoes, I'm happy to celebrate the island.

I visited there some time ago. Actually, this June will mark 28 years since I made the trip (I start a bit when I think of how long it has been).

My relations are from Northern Ireland, and most of us know it was the scene of a lot of unpleasantness and violence throughout much of the 20th century. Since I was a kid, I had always planned to go there some time. My parents spent a couple of days there in 1967 when my mom accompanied my dad on a business trip to France and Spain, and they were forever enchanted by the place (my mother especially).

I always said I would go when things quieted down over there. I do not know what it was that changed my mind, but I one day came to realize that such thinking might very well mean I would never get to Ireland.

The upshot was I went there for my first vacation after getting into this line of work.

Since then, there have been a lot more treks by members of the clan, heading in both directions. And it is my hope to some day do it again myself.

Incidentally, for the benefit of any purists out there, in Ireland, they serve Guinness at room temperature. We had it chilled Friday night.

Would it be anti-Canadian of me to say I prefer the Irish way?