

The Forgotten Shipwreck of the Rob Roy - Part I

By Kelley O'Rourke & Katherine Diamond

Canadian Irish Migration Preservation Network (CIMPN)

A Three-Part Series

This three-part series forms part of CIMPN's Irish Mile project, developed with the support of the Secrétariat aux relations avec les Québécois d'expression anglaise (SRQEA). Through research, historical interpretation, and genealogy, the Irish Mile highlights the people, places, and stories that shaped the Irish experience in Quebec.

The story of the *Rob Roy* is far more than the account of a tragic shipwreck. It is the story of the early Irish who came to Quebec before the Great Hunger (*an Gorta Mór*) of 1845–1852, the families whose lives were forever changed on the night of 30 April 1827, and the descendants whose memories continue to preserve this remarkable chapter of Canadian and Irish history.

Although the wreck claimed the lives of twenty-four passengers, no known document records all their names. Instead, their stories survive in scattered newspaper accounts, parish records, survivor memoirs, family histories, and the recollections of descendants. By bringing these sources together, we can begin to reconstruct the identities of those who were lost and follow the lives of the families who carried their memories forward.

This three-part series follows that journey—from the tragedy itself to the painstaking work of restoring the identities of the victims, and finally to the survivors whose resilience and family stories have preserved the legacy of the *Rob Roy* for nearly two centuries.

In telling this story, our goal is not only to remember the shipwreck, but to seek to restore the names, families, and lives behind one of the earliest Irish migration tragedies in Quebec.

Part I – Before the Famine: The Forgotten Shipwreck of the *Rob Roy*

The voyage from Belfast, the shipwreck at L'Islet, and the human tragedy that unfolded within sight of the Quebec shore.

Part II – Restoring the Twenty-Four: *Reconstructing the Victims of the Rob Roy*

Using contemporary newspapers, parish records, survivor accounts, descendants' stories, and genealogical research to reconstruct the identities of the passengers who lost their lives. As additional records are discovered and descendants come forward, this reconstruction will continue to grow.

Part III – Beyond the Wreck: The Families That Endured

Exploring the lives of the survivors who lost loved ones aboard the *Rob Roy* and discovering how their descendants have helped preserve the memories of those who never completed the voyage.

A forgotten chapter of Early Irish migration

When Canadians think about Irish immigration, their minds almost immediately turn to the Great Hunger (*an Gorta Mór*) of 1845–1852 and the fever ships that arrived at Grosse Île in 1847. Those stories deserve their place in history. Yet nearly twenty years earlier another group of Irish immigrants crossed the Atlantic with hopes of building new lives in British North America.

Many never reached their destination.

On the night of 30 April 1827, the brig *Rob Roy* struck the shoals off L'Islet only a short distance downstream from Quebec City after successfully crossing the Atlantic. Within hours, the disaster claimed the lives of 24 passengers—19 children, three women, and two men.

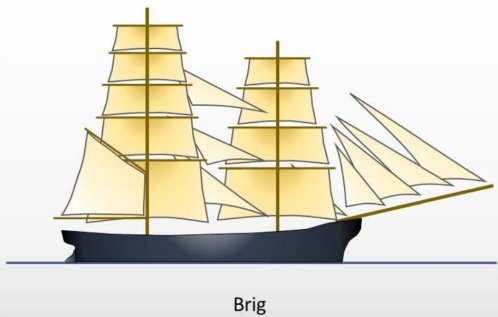
Leaving Ireland

The *Rob Roy* departed Belfast in early April 1827 carrying approximately 151 Irish emigrants bound for Quebec. Many intended to become farmers in Lower Canada and some others moving on to upper Canada attracted by the availability of land and the promise of a better future.

The story of the *Rob Roy* also reminds us that Irish migration to Quebec did not begin with the Great Famine. Thousands of Irish men, women, and children crossed the Atlantic during the decades before 1845, many bringing valuable trades, education, capital, and cultural traditions that would help shape the development of Lower and upper Canada.

Lloyd's Register and the Aberdeen Register of Shipping describe the *Rob Roy* as a 243-ton, two-masted brig built at the Aberdeen shipyard of James Adamson in 1819. Registered in Aberdeen, the vessel was copper-bottomed and regularly carried emigrants and cargo across the Atlantic. Commanded by Captain William Kenn (also recorded as Kean in Lloyd's Register), she sailed established routes between Greenock, Belfast, Liverpool, New Brunswick, and Quebec, transporting hundreds of emigrants seeking new opportunities in British North America. (*Sources: Lloyd's Register; Aberdeen Register of Shipping.*) In March 1827,

Advertisements in the Belfast Commercial Chronicle announced that the *Rob Roy* would depart Belfast for Quebec under Captain Kenn's command, encouraging prospective emigrants to secure passage aboard what was described as a "first-class fast-sailing brig." The ship sailed in early April carrying 151 passengers, many of them Irish families hoping to establish new lives in Lower and Upper Canada.

 Brig Image Credit: Rob Roy© Aberdeen Art Gallery & Museums Collections	ROB ROY Date: 1819 Object Name: BRIG Medium: WOOD Classifications: Ship Dimensions: length 92' x breadth 24 5/6' x depth 15 7/12' Registered Tonnage: 241 ton Object number: ABDSHIP001784 Keywords https://museumdata.uk/object-search/?q=ABDSHIP001784
--	---

Disaster on the St. Lawrence

The Atlantic crossing had been uneventful.

On the morning of 30 April, Captain William Kenn reached Métis, where licensed river pilot Malcolm Smith boarded to guide the vessel through the difficult navigation of the St. Lawrence.

As evening approached, dense fog and snow squalls settled over the river.

Around 11 o'clock that night, despite continual sounding of the depth, the ship struck a reef near L'Islet and became firmly grounded.

Captain Kenn ordered the masts cut away to lighten the vessel.

Throughout the night, the tide continued to rise.

Water poured into the hull.

Passengers waited in darkness, hoping daylight would bring rescue.

Instead, it brought tragedy.

A night of unimaginable loss

One eyewitness described the scene shortly after the wreck:

"It is impossible to describe the heart-rending scenes which have passed before us."

The passengers, desperate to escape the pounding sea, crowded onto the bowsprit and attempted to reach overcrowded boats.

Many had already spent the night exposed to freezing spray, wind and waves.

Some never made it ashore.

A letter published in the *Quebec Gazette* observed: "If these unfortunate settlers had disembarked at low water... none of them would have perished."

The same report recorded one of the tragedy's most heartbreaking details:

"One woman has lost her five children."

Families torn apart

Newspaper reports reveal only fragments of the personal tragedies.

Among them were:

- Frank Chrasty, (possibly Christy or Christie) who lost his wife and three children.
- David McGarrow, who lost three of his four children; the surviving child was deaf and mute.
- Thomas Millar, who lost two children.
- Mrs. Lamb, who lost her husband, one child and almost all her possessions.

Another important clue comes from survivor David Herbison, who later recalled that "my brother's wife and child" were among those who perished in the wreck. His account provides one of the few firsthand identifications of additional victims, "...twenty-four of my fellow passengers, my brother's wife and child included, perished in the catastrophe."

— David Herbison, quoted in Sandra Stock, *The Voyage to Quebec: Many Never Made It All the Way*, *Quebec Heritage News*, September 2003.

Many of the emigrants had embarked with considerable savings and household goods intended for their new lives in Canada. Almost everything disappeared beneath the St. Lawrence.

The kindness of L'Islet

While the wreck itself was devastating, the local people responded with extraordinary compassion.

Residents rushed to assist complete strangers.

Survivors later recalled the generosity shown by French-Canadian families who provided food, shelter and care.

The *Quebec Mercury* reported that the survivors praised the inhabitants of the district, who assisted them with "the utmost kindness," while the Emigrant Society helped many continue toward their final destinations.

Who was responsible?

Although Captain Kenn escaped criticism, the official inquiry concluded that pilot Malcolm Smith had failed to exercise proper care while navigating the vessel in poor visibility. His pilot's license was suspended for twelve months after investigators concluded that the grounding resulted from his failure to properly navigate the vessel.

A story that did not end at L'Islet

Among those who survived was a young Irishman named David Herbison. A 26-year-old linen weaver and aspiring poet from Ballymena, County Antrim, Herbison had travelled to Canada not because of famine, but in search of opportunity, intending to join his brother Matthew, who had settled in Lower Canada around 1816. During the shipwreck, he lost his sister-in-law and her child, along with his personal belongings, including manuscripts of his poetry. He narrowly escaped drowning when two young French-Canadian women waded chest-deep into the icy waters of the St. Lawrence to rescue him from a small boat being swept toward the rocks.

Deeply shaken by the tragedy, Herbison returned to Ireland only weeks later. There he resumed his work as a linen weaver, married Margaret Archbold, and eventually became one of nineteenth-century Ulster's best-known poets, remembered as "The Bard of Dunclug." His poetry was published in Ireland, Scotland, Canada, and the United States, and his works were read by Irish emigrants throughout the Atlantic world. At his death in 1880, he was said to have owned a library of more than 3,000 volumes—a reminder that many of the Irish who came to Canada before the Great Famine were skilled tradespeople, readers, writers, and educated men and women whose stories have too often been overshadowed by later events.

Yet David Herbison left behind something even more valuable than his poetry—his memories. His recollections of the *Rob Roy* would become one of the few firsthand accounts of the disaster, preserving details that might otherwise have been lost forever.

For nearly two centuries, the *Rob Roy* has been remembered for a single statistic: twenty-four lives lost.

But who were they?

Apart from the burial record of William Nugent, no known document records the complete list of those who perished. Their identities survive only in scattered newspaper accounts, survivor memoirs, descendants' stories, parish records, and genealogical records.

In Part II, we begin the search to restore the identities of the men, women, and children whose journey ended at L'Islet. By following the clues left behind by survivors like David Herbison and the families who preserved their stories, we begin reconstructing one of the earliest and most forgotten chapters of Irish immigration to Quebec.

Coming Next

Part II – Restoring the Twenty-Four: *Reconstructing the Victims of the Rob Roy*

The newspapers reported that twenty-four passengers died.

Only one—William Nugent—appears by name in a surviving parish burial register.

Who were the other twenty-three?

Drawing on newspapers, parish registers, survivor accounts, family histories, and genealogical research, this series seeks to present the most complete reconstruction to date of the *Rob Roy* tragedy and the families whose lives it changed.

"I Escaped with Nothing but Life": David Herbison and the Rob Roy

Sources:

Primary Sources

Registre paroissial de Notre-Dame-du-Bon-Secours, L'Islet, registre des sépultures, 3 mai 1827. Inhumation de William Nugent. GénéalogieQuébec (Institut Drouin).
Registre maritime d'Aberdeen. Archives municipales d'Aberdeen.
<https://museumdata.uk/object-search/?q=ABDSHIP001784>

Books and Scholarly Publications

Campey, Lucille H. *Fast Sailing and Copper-Bottomed: Aberdeen Sailing Ships and the Emigrant Scots They Carried to Canada, 1774–1855*. Toronto: Natural Heritage Books, 2002.
Lunney, Linde. "Herbison, David (1800–1880)." *Dictionary of Irish Biography*. Royal Irish Academy and Cambridge University Press, 2009. <https://doi.org/10.3318/dib.003961.v1>
Tremblay, Sylvie. "Naufrage à L'Islet." *Cap-aux-Diamants*, no. 35 (1993): 56.

Family History and Community Sources

Stock, Sandra. "The Voyage to Quebec: Many Never Made It All the Way." *Quebec Heritage News*, Vol. 2, No. 6 (September 2003), pp. 8–9.

Newspaper Reports from 1827

“The Following Melancholy Particulars of the Loss of the Brigantine *Rob Roy* of This Place.” *Aberdeen Journal and General Advertiser for the North of Scotland*, June 13, 1827, 3.
“Shipwreck of the *Rob Roy*.” *Constitutional Whig*, May 22, 1827, 2.
“Wreck of the *Rob Roy*.” *Montreal Gazette*, May 7, 1827, 3.
“Wreck of the *Rob Roy*.” *The U.E. Loyalist*, May 19, 1827, 3–4.
“Wreck of the *Rob Roy*.” *Charleston Mercury*, May 23, 1827, 3.
“Frightful Shipwreck.” *The Acadian Recorder*, June 9, 1827, 2.
“Shipwreck.” *The Lancaster Gazette*, June 9, 1827, 3. Reprinted from the *New York Enquirer*.
“Wreck of the *Rob Roy*.” *The Farmers’ Journal and Welland Canal Intelligencer*, June 13, 1827, 3.

Online Resources

Aberdeen Art Gallery & Museums. *Rob Roy* (Object No. ABDSHIP001784).
<https://museumdata.uk/object-search/?q=ABDSHIP001784>
Commission de toponymie du Québec. “Cimetière des Anglais.”
https://toponymie.gouv.qc.ca/ct/ToposWeb/fiche.aspx?no_seq=438181
Find a Grave. Harrower Family Cemetery (Cimetière de la famille Harrower), L’Islet, Quebec.
<https://www.findagrave.com/cemetery/2667970/cimeti%C3%A8re-de-la-famille-harrower>
Find a Grave. Cimetière Notre-Dame-de-Bon-Secours, L’Islet-sur-Mer, Quebec.
<https://www.findagrave.com/cemetery/2532866/cimetiere-notre-dame-de-bonsecours>
Cimetières du Québec. Cimetière de Port-Joli–Trois-Saumons.
<https://www.cimetieresduquebec.ca/chaudiere-appalaches/port-joli-trois-saumons/>
Municipalité de L’Islet. *Historique de la paroisse Notre-Dame-de-Bon-Secours*.

Acknowledgements

The authors gratefully acknowledge the assistance of descendants, local historians, archivists, and genealogists whose research, family records, and shared stories have contributed to this ongoing project. Particular thanks to Sandra Stock for preserving and sharing the Herbison family history, which has provided invaluable insight into the *Rob Roy* tragedy and its legacy.

This article was researched and produced by the Canadian Irish Migration Preservation Network (CIMPN) as part of the Irish Mile™, with financial support from the Secrétariat aux relations avec les Québécois d'expression anglaise (SRQEA). The Irish Mile documents places, people, and stories that reflect the rich history of Irish migration and settlement in Quebec.