

“FORGIVE MY NOSTALGIA”:
The construction of
Griffintown, Montréal, as a *lieu de mémoire*

John Matthew Barlow
Department of History
Concordia University, Montréal
presented to:
Canadian Historical Association Annual Meeting
University of Western Ontario, London, ON
30 May 2005

In Richard Burman's 2003 documentary, *Ghosts of Griffintown: Stories of an Irish Neighbourhood*, there is a rather telling moment in the midst of an otherwise innocuous, and seemingly out of place, interview with two former residents of Griffintown, Charlie Blickstead and Bill Greenberg. When asked by the interviewer, Patricia Burns, what it was like to grow up Jewish in the midst of all the Irish Catholics in Griffintown, Greenberg answers: "Very difficult. Not easy. We basically had to defend for ourselves to live down there." Blickstead, an Irish Catholic, immediately objects: "I never heard of the Jews being molested." Greenberg immediately back-pedals, "We weren't molested." Blickstead then laughingly recalls, "Not like the French!" Greenberg lightens up some at this memory, "No, that's right, the French really got beat up."¹

With this interview, we are witness to a rather fascinating aspect of the reconstruction of Griffintown as a *lieu de mémoire*, to borrow from Pierre Nora, by the Irish Catholic community of Montréal in recent years. In this reconstruction of the neighbourhood, the presence of other ethno-religious groups in Griffintown are dealt with in a telling manner: they are either ignored or explained away in such a way as to give the impression that their presence was nothing more than tokenistic, or, as in the case of the large *Canadien* minority, they become the punch line to the joke, as we have seen above with Blickstead and Greenberg.

Griffintown was a working class neighbourhood located at the outlet of the Lachine Canal, near the old port of Montréal. It was originally settled as early as 1815, primarily by Irish Catholics. This trend of Irish dominance continued throughout the nineteenth century, especially after the influx of Irish Catholic refugees into Montréal both before and during the Famine crisis of the late 1840s in Ireland. But, as the nineteenth century progressed, the small *Canadien* population began to grow in size, and a good number of Anglo-Protestants also moved into the neighbourhood. By the

¹ Interview with Charlie Blickstead and Bill Greenberg, *Ghosts of Griffintown: Stories of an Irish Neighbourhood* (Lachine, QC: Burman Productions, 2003).

Catholic Church at the centre of the community, St. Ann's, was demolished. Yet, if the physical markings of the neighbourhood are gone, largely replaced by abandoned buildings and empty lots, its memory has been rekindled in recent years by the Irish (Catholic) community of Montréal. Indeed, the former site of St. Ann's is perhaps symbolic of the neighbourhood in general. It stood abandoned and largely forgotten for the better part of a generation until the Ville de Montréal, at the urging of Montréal's Irish community, created Parc Sainte-Anne/Griffintown on the site in the mid-1990s. Similarly, the memory of the neighbourhood appears to have also undergone a period of renovation and revitalisation in the late 1990s, leading into the early years of the new century.

Figure 2: Parc Sainte-Anne/Griffintown



When he began working on his documentary in 1998, Burman was initially surprised at the intensity of the memories of Griffintown: “What attracted me to doing this was what people felt

about living there. It was a community that people felt something strong about.”³ And it is this strong connection to the memory of the Griff, as it is commonly known, that has seen it reconstructed as a *lieu de mémoire* in recent years: a symbolic site of remembrance created by and for Montréal’s Irish (Catholic) community, to serve as its official preserve of an imagined historical past, or better yet, memory, to be jealously safe-guarded by the “official” custodians of the community’s memory. Nora argues that:

[L]ieux de mémoire arise out of a sense that there is no such thing as a spontaneous memory, hence we must create archives, mark anniversaries, organize celebrations, pronounce eulogies, and authenticate documents because such things no longer happen as a matter of course. When certain minorities create protected enclaves of memory, to be jealously safe-guarded, they reveal what is true of all *lieux de mémoire*, that without commemorative vigilance, history would soon sweep them away.⁴

And so we have the Griff, a *lieu de mémoire*, created by an Irish Catholic double minority in Montréal, in both religious and linguistic terms, as a protected enclave, there to serve as a site of memory for the community, to be safe-guarded by these self-appointed custodians of the community’s memory. In this manufacturing of a mythologised Griffintown, dissenting views, which are oftentimes more critically reflective of the neighbourhood’s history, are either completely expunged from the record, or else dealt with in a humorous manner, as if to disarm these dissenting views. This is especially true, as I will argue here, when it comes to the Other, various ethno-linguistic or –religious groups, in Griffintown.

What we get then is a universalising and essentialising representation of Griffintown as *the* Irish Catholic, if not Irish, experience in Montréal. In reality, however, Griffintown was never home to even the majority of Irish Catholics in the city. Large populations of Irish Catholics existed

³ Kristian Gravenor, “Long Live the Griff”, *Montréal Mirror*, 16 January 2003, url: <http://www.montrealmirror.com/ARCHIVES/2003/011603/front.html>, accessed 12 January 2005.

⁴ Pierre Nora, “General Introduction: Between History and Memory,” *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past, Vol. I: Conflict and Division*, Pierre Nora, ed., Arthur Goldhammer, trans., Lawrence D. Krizman, ed., English-language edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), pp. 6-7.

across the Lachine Canal in Pointe-Saint-Charles, as well as in neighbourhoods such as Verdun, Notre-Dame-de-Grâce, Little Dublin, and Hochelaga/Maisonneuve. In addition, this reconstructed, essentialised Griffintown serves to remove those Irish Catholics of Montréal who were not working class, the so-called “lace curtain Irish”, from the community’s collective memory. Moreover, those Irish who were not Catholic are also removed from the historical memory, as Griffintown has been cast an *Irish* neighbourhood, not Irish Catholic, and the synonymy between Irish and Catholic in this reconstructed memory is absolute. Finally, in recreating Griffintown as an Irish Catholic neighbourhood, these other ethnic groups are effectively removed from the landscape, or else reduced to the background. What we are left with is a new view of Griffintown, manufactured by the Irish Catholic community of Montréal, one that is *based* upon the historical past, but has been carefully massaged and sanitised to serve the community’s needs today, which seem to be related to re-claiming what is regarded as the rightful place of the Irish Catholics in Montréal’s multi-cultural and multi-ethnic history and contemporary socio-cultural fabric.

What makes this reconstructed vision of Griffintown somewhat unique is the absence of the state from the commemoration and veneration of the neighbourhood, other than the Ville de Montréal’s creation of Parc Sainte-Anne/Griffintown. Even this, however, must be cast against the Ville de Montréal’s 1990 decision to officially rename the area the *Fabourg des Récollets*, in honour of the religious order and recalling the Recollect Gates to the old walled city. However, as Don Pidgeon, historian of the United Irish Societies, and one of the key players in the emergence of Griffintown as a *lieu de mémoire*, fumes about this decision: “It’s saying that the Irish never existed.”⁵ More recently, Parks Canada historians Yvan Desloges and Roch Samson convened a committee involving the Irish community of Montréal with a view towards creating a national historic site of commemoration, celebrating the history of the Irish not only in Montréal, but Canada as a whole.

⁵ Sharon Doyle Driedger, “The Pluck of the Irish,” *Maclean’s* (17 March 2003), p. 38.

However, the committee was a non-starter, as the Irish community did not wish to cede control over their history to the state.

The carefully reconstructed history of Griffintown and the jealous safe-guarding of it by the vested interest of the Montréal Irish community become clear in the various cultural productions upon which my work here is based. Along with Burman's documentary, I have also made use of Patricia Burns' collected oral histories of the Irish in Montréal, *The Shamrock & The Shield*, and an article in *MacLean's* St. Patrick's Day 2003 issue by Sharon Doyle Driedger. Burns and Doyle Driedger both have direct connections to the Griff; Doyle Driedger grew up there and Burns' father, Jimmy, was a local legend. Burman, as well, can trace his family back to Griffintown. Finally, in November 2001, the Centre for Canadian Irish Studies at Concordia University hosted a night commemorating Griffintown, captured on film by Burman and entitled, *A Griffintown Evening*. In each of these various cultural productions, we can see a very strong image of a romanticised, and Irish, Griffintown emerge, one that is perhaps best captured by Doyle Driedger in her description of the neighbourhood:

Griffintown had an atmosphere of an old black-and-white movie. Think *The Bells of St. Mary's*, with nuns and priests and Irish brogues and choirs singing Latin hymns. Then throw in the Bowery Boys, the soft-hearted, tough guys wisecracking on the corner.⁶

Nevermind the fact that the Bowery B'hoys of New York City were actually anti-Irish nativists. Burman, Burns, and Doyle Driedger all conspire with their interviewees and informants, all former residents of Griffintown, to re-produce and re-create this essentialised and, ultimately, mythic Griffintown.

This paper, then, grows out of a larger chapter of my dissertation on the cultural history of Griffintown. In this chapter, I situate the reconstruction of Griffintown as a *lieu de mémoire* within the cultural framework of the reinvigoration of the Irish diaspora in general over the past decade or

⁶ Doyle Driedger, "The Pluck of the Irish," p. 39.

so, as well as the re-Irishification⁷ of Montréal. By the re-Irishification of the city, I am referring to the recent Irish cultural revival in Montréal, one that is primarily expressed through the stereotyped and typical images of the Irish, from the plethora of Irish pubs in Montréal (three within three blocks of Concordia's downtown Montréal campus), to the popularity of courses on Irish dance, language, and music. The re-Irishification of Montréal has also seen the establishment of the Canadian Centre for Irish Studies at Concordia, which has a dual mandate to both liaise with the Irish community of Montréal, which has led to various cultural events of the ilk of *A Griffintown Evening*, as well as to deliver an academic basis to Irish Studies at Concordia. This re-Irishification is, not surprisingly, centred around Montréal's St. Patrick's Day parade, one of the largest and longest-running such celebrations in the world, the first one having been held in 1824. The trendiness of all things Irish has extended across ethno-linguistic lines in the city to the larger population, and it is not surprising to see a multicultural audience taking in the films of Montréal's Irish film programme, *Cine-Gael*.

There are particularities that make this re-Irishification of Montréal unique to the specific location and place and, not surprisingly, are connected to those cultural factors that make Montréal a unique place in general, most notably language and identity. In the wake of the 1995 referendum in Québec, there has been an attempt to rethink and redefine the boundaries of the imagined community of the Québec nation. This has seen thinkers as diverse in political outlook as Gérard Bouchard, Jocelyn Létourneau, and Jocelyn Maclure attempt to recast the Québec nation as a multicultural one, and one that includes not just the *québécois*, but also those members of other cultural communities who have been more reluctant to include themselves within an imagined

⁷ Credit for the invention of this term must be given to Donna Whitakker, Secretary to the Chair of the Department of History at Concordia, herself an Irish Montrealer.

Québec nation, including the Anglophone population of Montréal.⁸ Meanwhile, this Anglo community itself has fractured since the 1995 referendum, as the constituent elements of the community have reclaimed their individual ethnic identities. To be fair, it must be noted that the so-called “Allophone” communities managed to retain their ethnic identities as Jewish, Italian, Greek, and so on within this larger Anglophone conglomeration over the course of the 1970s, 80s, and early 90s. However, what has also occurred in the years since the Referendum is a fracturing of the “old-stock” Anglo-Irish community. Not only have the Irish reclaimed their heritage within the framework of Montréal’s socio-cultural fabric, so, too, have the Scots, as can be seen, for example, in an exhibit at the McCord Museum entitled “The Scots: Dyed-in-the Wool Montrealers” in 2004. Indeed, in post-Referendum Montréal, as the city’s economy recovers and identities are being rethought, it has become somewhat retrograde to identify oneself as an Anglo Montrealer. Increasingly, identity in the imagined community of Montréal is, in terms of language, a removal of the hyphenation, while, at the same time, an increased awareness of the various cultural communities that comprise the city’s population. Thus, the re-Irishification of Montréal must be viewed within this context, for one.

On the other hand, the re-Irishification of Montréal cannot be simply viewed within a local Montréal framework, as the past decade or so has seen a re-energisation of Irish identity throughout the diaspora. And this is connected to the economic and cultural revival of Ireland itself in the 1990s. This Irish revival is largely predicated upon the tourism industry, as it draws upon a sense of “home” for the diasporic Irish. And while this may seem somewhat bizarre, given that the majority of the diasporic Irish’s ancestors left this “home” over a century-and-a-half ago, it is still a sentiment

⁸ See, for example: Gérard Bouchard, *Genèse des nations et cultures du nouveau monde: essai d'histoire comparée* (Montréal: Boréal, 2000), Joycelyn Maclure, *Québec Identity: The challenge of pluralism*, trans. Peter Feldstein (Montréal: McGill Queens University Press, 2003); Jocelyn Létourneau, *A History for the Future: Rewriting memory and identity in Québec*, trans. Phyllis Aronoff and Howard Scott (Montréal: McGill Queens University Press, 2004).

that has taken root in the diaspora. It must be noted, however, that the Irish themselves are far less enthusiastic about this than are their government and diasporic brethren.⁹

Within this larger cultural setting, I then examine the reconstruction of Griffintown as a *lieu de mémoire* and its operation insofar as identity and belonging are concerned, through various lenses, such as gender, class, nationality, religion, and ethnicity. And with the time I have here, I wish to focus on questions of ethno-religious identities, particularly, relations between the Irish Catholics of the neighbourhood with these other ethno-religious groups that also occupied this space, especially the *Canadiens* and Anglo-Protestants.

I began with Bill Greenberg and Charlie Blickstead reminiscing about relations between the Irish and Jewish populations of Griffintown, as well as those between the Irish and the *Canadiens*. This exchange is significant for several reasons. First, Greenberg is the only voice of dissent in terms of ethnic relations in Griffintown in this symbolic reconstruction of the neighbourhood. He is the only one to suggest that it was not easy to grow up as the Other in the Irish Catholic-dominated Griff. And even if he is quickly challenged on this count by Blickstead, and even if he subsequently backs down, Greenberg's alternative view is significant. He is one of only four non-Irish Catholic interviewees, which also testifies as to how the presence of other ethno-religious groups gets reduced to a tokenistic and/or background presence in this reconstruction of Griffintown as both Irish and Catholic. Finally, this exchange also holds significance for the fact that we get a glimpse as to how these dissenting views of life in the Griff are marginalised.

Ethnic diversity in Griffintown, despite the presence of the large Anglo-Protestant and *Canadien* groups, to say nothing of smaller groups, is given short shrift in general in the cultural productions surrounding the re-birth of Griffintown. To be fair, Burman, in narrating his

⁹ See John Pollard, "Patterns in Irish Tourism," *Ireland: Contemporary Perspectives on a Land and its People*, R.W.G. Carter and A.J. Parker, eds. (New York: Routledge, 1990): 301-30; Brad Kent, "McDrama: The Sentimental in Martin McDonagh's *The Beauty Queen of Lenane* and Conor McPherson's *The Weir*," *Canadian Journal of Irish Studies/Revue canadienne d'études irlandaises* 28-29/1-2 (2002-3), p. 37.

documentary, does note the presence of not just the Anglo-Protestants and *Canadiens*, but other groups such as the Jews and Italians, but then quickly states that they “eventually settled in other neighbourhoods.”¹⁰ But, as we saw above, they did not necessarily settle in other neighbourhoods; Italians were the largest group in Griffintown by the time of the neighbourhood’s demise in the late 1960s. At any rate, this passing mention of the other groups in Griffintown, as well as the snippet with Greenberg (which runs for about 30 seconds of a 62-minute documentary), represent the only attempts to discuss the presence of these other groups in all of the cultural productions commemorating Griffintown. Indeed, of the sixteen people who provide their reminiscences of the neighbourhood in *Ghosts of Griffintown*, all but three are Irish Catholic: Greenberg, Thomas Seivewright, and Léo Léonard. Moreover, Greenberg’s presence in the film is, as noted, entirely fleeting, as is Léonard’s. Only Seivewright gets significant screen time, most likely because he has a gift as a story-teller. As we have already seen, Greenberg is very clear that he did not fit into the Irish Catholic community of Griffintown growing up. In this, he is the exception. Both Léonard and Seivewright, as well as Tom Rowe in *The Shamrock & The Shield*, all go out of their way to point out that even if they were not Irish Catholic, they all ran with an Irish Catholic crowd growing up in Griffintown. Rowe, an Anglo Protestant, even went so far as to convert to Catholicism as a teenager. Léonard notes that “A lot of Griffintowners were French Canadians[,] but they grew up Irish. And they married Irish girls. Religion had no part of it, we never fought Catholics against Protestants, we were all Griffintowners and that was it.”¹¹

But even if they did not fight Catholic against Protestant, it does seem pretty clear that they fought Irish, or at least English (language), against French, as we have already seen from Blickstead and Greenberg. Indeed, in explaining himself further, Greenberg notes, “[t]he problem was that on the way to school, my younger sister and I would manage to get to school, but then at recess time,

¹⁰ Richard Burman, narration of *Ghosts of Griffintown*.

¹¹ Interview with Léo Léonard in *Ghosts of Griffintown*.

there was no protection. So then you had to join either the English side or the French side.”¹² Rita Savoie, née Earle, recalls her childhood laughing: “We beat up the French! We beat up the boys!”¹³ Thus, at least in the schoolyard of this last generation to grow up in Griffintown, it does seem that the *Canadiens* took their fair share of lumps from the Irish.

But this reduction of the *Canadiens* to punching bags also essentialises their presence and experience in Griffintown. Despite being roughly equivalent to the Irish Catholics in terms of the population of the neighbourhood in the first half of the twentieth century, they are left to become comic relief for the Irish. Moreover, even in the case of Léonard, the *Canadien* presence is effectively removed from the landscape in his comment that while there were a lot of *Canadiens* in Griffintown, they grew up Irish (and married Irish women). Thus, the *Canadiens*, at least when they were not getting beaten upon, are Irish in this reconstruction of Griffintown.

As for the Anglo-Protestants, their physical presence on the Griffintown landscape was just as large as that of the *Canadiens*, for at least the early part of the twentieth century. Yet, their presence is just as effectively removed from the cultural landscape of Griffintown. While both Rowe and Seivewright appear in the remembrances of Griffintown, they, like Léonard, do so for what they can contribute to the remembrance of the Irish culture of the community. This, when combined with the fact that they are careful to point out that they ran with an Irish Catholic crowd growing up and Rowe’s teenaged conversion to Catholicism, effectively removes their status as Anglo-Protestants and they, like Léonard, are granted a form of honorary Irish status for the purpose of this reconstruction of Griffintown. But, while they are seemingly granted this honorary status, their Anglo-Protestant community is effectively removed entirely from the cultural landscape of the neighbourhood.

¹² Interview with Greenberg in *Ghosts of Griffintown*.

¹³ Rita Savoie, *A Griffintown Evening* (Lachine, QC: Burman Productions and Montréal: Centre for Canadian Irish Studies, 2002).

More to the point, however, aside from the presence of Seivewright and Rowe in the remembrances and eulogisation of Griffintown, there is no actual mention of the Anglo-Protestant population in any meaningful manner. There are no laughing stories told of the Irish Catholic population beating on the Anglo-Protestants, they just simply do not seem to have existed, other than perhaps in Greenberg's comment that he was left to choose between the English (as opposed to Irish, though this appears to be more a question of language than ethnicity) and French sides at recess time at school and Burman's glossing over of the Anglo-Protestant population's presence in his narration of *Ghosts of Griffintown*.

One is left to wonder, then, how relations between the Irish Catholics and Anglo-Protestants operated on Victoria Day in Griffintown. Several of those whose remembrances are featured in the cultural productions recreating Griffintown laughingly recall the Victoria Day bonfires throughout the neighbourhood. Dennis Dougherty laughingly recalls a Mrs. Howden, who "would literally save paper and wood for May 25." Sitting next to Dougherty in *Ghosts of Griffintown*, Annie Wilson recalls, "Oh God, they'd all go around the corner and get all the paper and the wood out of everybody's shed and start up a big fire." Dougherty, when asked by Burns, where the fires would be set, replies, "On the corners, and as the firemen put out that fire, we'd all run up the street and lay another one over there." Don Pidgeon recalls "boys saving up old tires, chesterfields, and chairs that had been thrown out during the year." Denis Delaney also recalls such episodes, noting that he and his fellow arsonists would always remain at least one block ahead of both the fire department and the police.¹⁴

It is significant, of course, that these fires would be set on the anniversary of Queen Victoria's birthday, even if all of this occurred after the Republic of Ireland gained its independence

¹⁴ Interview with Dennis Dougherty and Annie Wilson in *Ghosts of Griffintown*; Don Pidgeon in Patricia Burns, *The Shamrock & the Shield: An Oral History of the Irish in Montreal* (Montréal: Véhicule Press, 1999), pp. 201-2; Denis Delaney in Burns, *The Shamrock & The Shield*, pp.

from the United Kingdom, if not the entire island. These kinds of fires grew out of localised responses to British imperialism in Ireland, and were meant, in the original Irish context, as well as in the diaspora, as a means of protesting the British presence in Ireland, even if they were largely localised and, therefore, not all that effective in the larger political sense. One wonders, though, how the Anglo-Protestant population of Griffintown felt on this day, when the Irish Catholic majority made a point of not just celebrating its own Irishness, but of including an inherent criticism of the British?

As for the other ethno-religious groups in Griffintown, ones with a much smaller presence than the Anglo-Protestants and *Canadiens*, they tend to be reduced to tokenistic in the cultural productions surrounding the reconstruction of Griffintown as a *lieu de mémoire*, if they are mentioned at all. We have already seen how Burman, in his narration of *Ghosts of Griffintown*, quickly suggests that these other groups, such as Jews and Italians, “eventually settled in other neighbourhoods.” Pidgeon, who as historian for the United Irish Societies of Montréal has quite an investment in this reconstruction of Griffintown as an Irish Catholic *lieu de mémoire*, also aids in this tokenisation of other ethnic groups in the Griff. In his remembrances in Burns’ *The Shamrock & The Shield*, Pidgeon recalls “Frank,” owner and proprietor of Frank’s Grocery Store on Ottawa Street. Frank, Pidgeon recalls, was “the first man from Lebanon that I ever met in my life.” It is also significant that Frank does not get a last name in Pidgeon’s remembrances, he is merely “Frank.” Along with this token Lebanese man (presumably he had a family?), Pidgeon also recalls the typical and stereotyped Chinese presence in the neighbourhood: a launder. Consistent with the creation of the Other, this Chinese launderer remains nameless, even though Pidgeon says he learned some “Chinese” from this man, though it remains unclear whether it was Cantonese or Mandarin.¹⁵

¹⁵ Pidgeon, in Burns, *The Shamrock & The Shield*, pp. 197-201.

At any rate, Pidgeon recalls these two men, Frank the Lebanese grocer and the nameless Chinese launderer almost in passing in his recollections of life in the Griff as a child. And while Pidgeon is blessed with the ability to tell a good tale, one is left with the impression that the inclusion of Frank and the Chinese launderer are intended as asides in his larger recollections of the Irish in Griffintown. The Chinese launderer comes up in connection with one of Pidgeon's childhood homes, which was upstairs from the laundry, and while this building was owned by a Jewish man, "the Irish still owned quite a few of the houses at that time."¹⁶ Frank comes up in conversation about an immense alcoholic Irishwoman (talk about stereotypes!) who bought her beer at Frank's, and a larger, funny tale about this woman's strong Irish accent:

I remember being in the store one day when she walked in and banged this case of empties on the counter. The thunder of it shook everything in the place and we were all scared. In her Irish brogue she yelled out to Frank: "Frank, would ye be givin' me twelve Black Arse beer?!" For the longest period of time I thought it was Black Arse beer, not Black Horse beer.¹⁷

Thus, even these Jewish landlords, Lebanese grocers, and Chinese launderers are only part of the background of Pidgeon's remembrances about the Irish, there to serve only to add colour to his stories about growing up Irish and Catholic in an Irish and Catholic neighbourhood.

Thus, we see how, in this reconstruction of Griffintown as a *lieu de mémoire* by the Irish Catholic community of Montréal in recent years, other ethno-linguistic and religious groups are effectively removed from the cultural landscape of the neighbourhood, as in the case of the Anglo-Protestants, or reduced to a tokenistic presence, as is the case with the Jewish, Lebanese, and Chinese populations, or, finally, as is the case with the *Canadiens*, who are reduced to being a punch line to a joke. By reconstructing Griffintown as an almost exclusively Irish site of remembrance, one can see part of the ways in which the Irish Catholic community of Montréal is seeking to stamp

¹⁶ Pidgeon, in Burns, *The Shamrock & The Shield*, p. 199.

¹⁷ Pidgeon, in Burns, *The Shamrock & The Shield*, p. 201.

its presence on the historical memory and cultural landscape of the city, one that has seen other ethno-linguistic groups claim for themselves other neighbourhoods in Montréal. Indeed, Montréal's vast multicultural mosaic is one that, while on the one hand is quite integrated, is also one that has seen various neighbourhoods so claimed. Thus have neighbourhoods like the Saint-Laurent Main and the Mile End come to be identified with the Jewish population of the city, or have we seen the emergence of neighbourhoods like Little Italy and Chinatown at opposite ends of Blvd. Saint-Laurent, on either side of the historic Jewish community. Other ethno-religious groups have laid claim to other neighbourhoods, such as Outremont, Westmount, and Parc Extension. In this way, then, the Irish, who were the first non-francophone, non-British minority group in the city, have sought to lay claim to their piece of the city's cultural landscape.

It is significant that the Irish have chosen Griffintown to commemorate and eulogise, as opposed to other largely Irish Catholic neighbourhoods such as Pointe-Saint-Charles or Verdun. In the case of both the Pointe and Verdun, the Irish have largely moved out, leaving these neighbourhoods at the same time the Irish left Griffintown, and their place has been taken by newer groups, such as Bangladeshis in the Pointe and Caribbeans in Verdun. Nonetheless, sizeable populations of Irish Montrealers still reside in these neighbourhoods. With Griffintown depopulated and little more than an industrial wasteland today, there is no one there to counter this careful reconstruction of the neighbourhood, nor is there anyone who can effectively challenge the Irish claim to Griffintown as a neighbourhood.

Moreover, the depopulation of Griffintown in the post-World War II era is also very carefully recast in this reconstruction of the neighbourhood as a *lieu de mémoire*. While passing mention is made to the fact that the Irish left the neighbourhood for greener pastures in more upscale neighbourhoods, special blame is reserved for former Mayor Jean Drâpeau, whose civic government in 1960 rezoned Griffintown as light industrial, meaning that no new residential

buildings could be constructed and those that already existed were left to rot and decay under these new zoning laws. Thus, the Irish can cast themselves as victims in this light: they were forced to leave Griffintown. This means that those called upon for their remembrances of the neighbourhood in the various cultural productions surrounding Griffintown can cast a nostalgic light on the neighbourhood.

Figure 3: Griffintown Today



Figure 4: Griffintown Street, 2004



Annie Wilson, when asked how she felt when “the neighbourhood broke up” replies: “Oh! Terrible...But if I had the chance to go back, I would love to go back.” Dennis Dougherty, sitting next to her, says “The worst day of my life was when I moved out of Griffintown, I was very, very sad. We had no choice. The whole block from Notre Dame to William Street was being torn down. We had no choice but to move.”¹⁸ For his part, Tom Rowe remarks, “Forgive my nostalgia, but in looking back, I can only say that my memories of Griffintown are essentially happy ones.”¹⁹

¹⁸ Interview with Annie Wilson and Dennis Dougherty, in *Ghosts of Griffintown*.

¹⁹ Thomas Rowe, in Burns, *The Shamrock & The Shield*, pp. 156-7.

The fact that this reconstruction of Griffintown as a *lieu de mémoire* has occurred without any meaningful involvement of the state is quite significant and perhaps fitting. It has allowed the Irish community of Montréal, or at least an interested faction of it, control and power to reconstruct the memory of the neighbourhood to suit its own particular needs and to allow for the construction of a meta-narrative of the history of the Irish in Montréal, one that is perhaps typically Irish, as it is one of resilience and strength in not only maintaining Irish culture in Montréal, but ensuring that that culture thrived. As noted above, recently, Parks Canada attempted to collaborate with the Irish community of Montréal, or the self-appointed guardians of it anyway, to create a national historic site commemorating the Irish presence in Montréal. This attempt, however, quickly went nowhere, as these guardians of the Irish community made it quite clear that they did not wish to cede control of their history to the state and were not willing to alter this meta-narrative history to suit the needs of the state in creating a national historic site. What we are left with, then, is a local community carefully crafting and jealously protecting their version of their history of Montréal. And this exactly corresponds with Nora's definition of a *lieu de mémoire*.