



## Christmas at the emergency room / 1

### Description

# Memories and musings on a Montreal Christmas

By **Wanda Potrykus**

December 22, 2021

It was Christmas Eve babe...  
An old man said to me,  
"Won't see another one"  
And then he sang a song  
'The Rare Old Mountain Dew'  
I turned my face away  
And dreamed about you

*The Pogues, 1987*

The year was 1977. I was in my second year of working my way through my Bachelor of Arts degree at McGill University in Montreal. Money was tight as always. It wasn't easy holding down a job that demanded 20 to 30 hours of work a week plus all the class and study time that went along with being a full-time student. Nevertheless, I was lucky in some ways since I had found an inexpensive apartment to rent at 3424A Simpson Street. It was in a shabby Victorian greystone mansion fallen on hard times, which in the 1970s the owners operated as what could best be described as a 'rooming' house. The location was excellent as it was within walking distance of the McGill downtown campus and also the **Royal Victoria Hospital** where I was employed as an admitting clerk in the emergency department.

That Christmas I was scheduled to work at the hospital and, finding no one willing to replace me on my assigned shifts, I had reluctantly decided I could not return to the UK for my annual visit, mainly as I couldn't afford to lose the job or the income it provided to me. It would be the first Christmas that I hadn't made it home to my family since I



had emigrated to Canada in 1971. Trekking back and forth across the Atlantic to London, England, to celebrate Christmas and New Year had become an annual slog that I saved hard for each year. It was one I was to repeat, with only the odd exceptions like this one, for another thirty-plus years, the last twenty or so of those with a young son in tow.

‘... I’m a sucker for Christmas too, and so that year, like other years to come, I was sitting thousands of miles away across an ocean and missing my childhood home and family terribly.’

I tried very hard to be stoic about it, life doesn’t always work out the way one wants it to, but by Christmas Eve, I was pensive and more than a little sad, thinking of my family arriving at our small home at 59 Coronation Hill, Epping, Essex, England, for Christmas dinner. My youngest sister Julia, the last at home, would have ensured the Christmas Crib (nativity scene) was set up on the mantelpiece and the tree (a real one) was decorated with the collection of family ornaments and embellishments amassed over the years. She would have checked the lights and replaced the spent bulbs, decorated the living room and helped with the food shopping and the cooking, so all would be in readiness to welcome the family. She has always loved Christmas and still works hard to make it wonder-filled for the rest of us. Like her, I’m a sucker for Christmas too, and so that year, like other years to come, I was sitting thousands of miles away across an ocean and missing my childhood home and family terribly.



Christmas nativity mantelpiece – Image: Pixabay

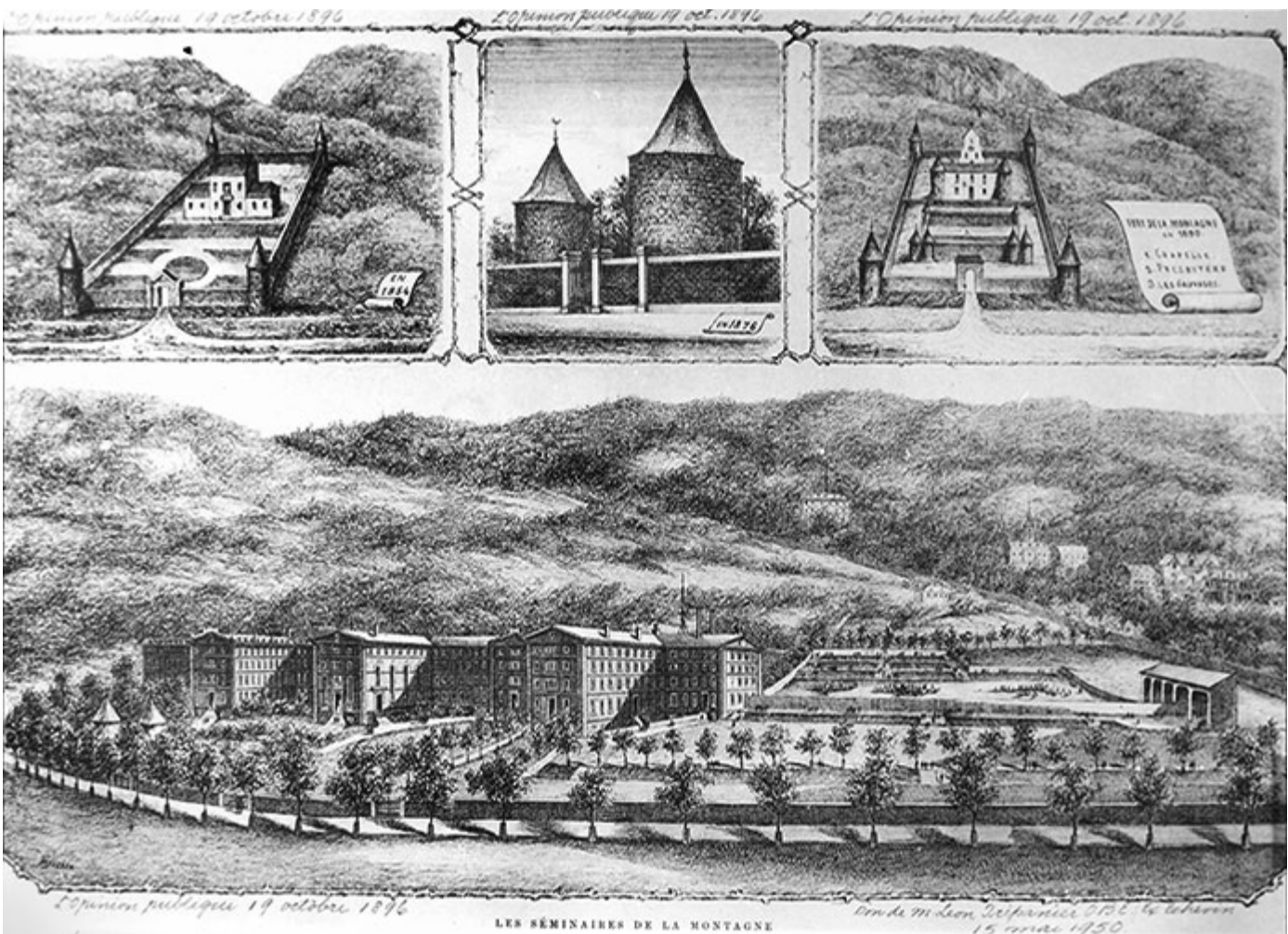
Musing during one of the rare quiet times at my station in the ER that evening as my shift drew to a close, I toyed briefly with the idea of attending Christmas Eve Mass at Mary Queen of the World Cathedral (a small scale replica of St Peter’s in Rome) located almost opposite Dominion Square in what’s now considered downtown Montreal. But I was tired after another long stressful day in the ER and knew after mass ended it would be a good and cold 25 to 30-minute walk uphill in the snow and ice back to my apartment. Plus, being Christmas, I recognized the church would be very crowded, which didn’t suit my somewhat pensive mood. I realized I didn’t want to be squashed in with a huge number of strangers, highlighting the feeling of aloneness I was experiencing. I decided instead, I would get up early before my shift began to attend Christmas morning mass in the **Grand Séminaire** complex, which was a few minutes’ walk west along Sherbrooke Street from where I lived.



Here was located what I considered my neighbourhood church since, in the 1970s, it was still open to the public for mass. It was a church or rather chapel I had developed a great fondness for in part because it was beautiful architecturally, but also because the entire complex of assorted buildings was steeped in early Montreal history. For this is the former site of the 17th century **Fort de la Montagne**, along with (it is presumed) the buried remains of the indigenous mission village that had sprung up around it.

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Today nothing is visible of the once-thriving village apparently home to a mix of 210 indigenous peoples (Algonquin, Huron, Iroquois), who were either passing through the region or in residence, as they were supposedly willing to be converted to Christianity and were living there under the protection of, and to receive instruction from, the resident religious. To this day, local archeologists still hold out hope they will soon be given the go-ahead, before too much more time passes and some proposed extensive construction begins on the site, to excavate under the current western end parking lot in the hope of discovering artifacts and insights from this brief 17th-century sojourn that might illuminate further our knowledge of indigenous daily life in and around early Montreal.



Evolution of the Grand Séminaire – Image: Public Domain

Fort de la Montagne, or the Fort des Messieurs (also known as Fort Belmont), was originally a palisaded log and earthworks fort that was destroyed by fire in 1692. Situated as it was on the higher reaches of the south-west flank of Mount Royal, it had been built in 1683 outside of and some distance from the then fortified walls of Montreal, in part to protect against marauding bands of Iroquois, who continued to feud with the settlers as well as other First Nations' peoples living in the area. It was constructed for the **Seigneurs de St-Sulpice** (the Gentlemen of St-Sulpice), an order of Roman Catholic priests who, around 1675, had been entrusted by the King of France with the mission to convert the indigenous persons of what then was known as New France, to Christianity. Nine years later, when the original fort burned down, it was rebuilt out of stone, a process that took two years.

That 1977 Christmas morning one of the carols sung was the beautiful **Jesous Ahatonhia** ("Jesus, he is born"), now more widely known (in English at least) as the **Huron Carol** believed written c1642 by Jesuit missionary **Jean de Brébeuf**, who was ministering to the **Huron-Wendat** people at Sainte-Marie among the Hurons (Sainte-Marie-au-pays-des-Hurons) – a French Jesuit settlement in **Wendake** (the land of the Wendat), near modern-day Midland, Ontario from 1639 to 1649. He composed the original lyrics in the Huron-Wendat language and set it to the music of a traditional French folk song *Une Jeune Pucelle* ("A Young Maid"), a simple tune that can easily be played on an indigenous flute. It made me wonder if it had ever been taught to and sung at Christmas by some of those newly baptized indigenous Christians in the Fort de la Montagne village, perhaps at one of their first Christmas masses. The lyrics to the more well-known English version by **Jesse Edgar Middleton**, often called *Twas in the Moon of Wintertime*,



~~were not written until 1926 and are not a direct translation of either the French or the Wyandot or Wandat original. Wyandot is a dialect or sister to the Wendat language spoken by descendants of the Huron-Wendat Confederacy.~~

'Two of the original four towers of the stone fort dating from 1694 still exist to this day... They now form part of the wall paralleling Sherbrooke Street and are a Canadian Heritage site, which identifies them as two of the oldest extant buildings in Montreal.'

The newly rebuilt fort also helped protect the huge **Sulpician gardens**, orchards and fields that provided food to the citizens of the fledgling city of Montreal. Indeed because of this, the area was later renamed the **Quartier des grands jardins** after those extensive orchards and fields, which in turn became large gardens when the Sulpician Order (the predominant landowner and religious power of Montreal from 1675 to 1854) gradually sold off much of the agricultural land for housing in the growing city.

**Two of the original four towers** of the stone fort dating from 1694 still exist to this day. The two northern ones were destroyed when the huge Grand Séminaire complex was constructed in the mid 19th century. They now form part of the wall paralleling Sherbrooke Street and are a **Canadian Heritage site**, which identifies them as **two of the oldest extant buildings in Montreal**. For several years, **Sainte Marguerite de Bourgeois CND** (and Canada's first female saint), and some of her nuns operated a school in one of these southern towers, with its twin acting as their residence.



Grand and Petit Séminaire circa 1860 – Image: Artist Unknown, Public Domain

During my time living on Simpson Street, the western half of the Grand Séminaire complex, designed by architect **John Ostell**, operated as a Catholic seminary, training men for the priesthood (hence the name Le Grand



Séminaire). However, in 2020, the seminary moved to 6929 Boyer at the corner of Bélanger Street in Rosemont–La Petite-Patrie, into the former convent of the Soeurs des Saints Noms de Jésus et de Marie, thus marking the end of an era in west-end Montreal history. The eastern half of the complex continues to house a private French Catholic high school – the **Collège de Montréal** (formerly also known as the Petit Séminaire and Collège St Raphael). It was Montreal's first high school founded in 1767. It moved to this location in 1870. Another school, **Centennial Academy**, has leased some of the space left vacant by the seminary and now occupies part of the western side.



Chapel of the Grand Séminaire – Image: Maisa Mreiwed

The exterior of the chapel I used to attend mirrors much of the original mid-19th century John Ostell architectural design and footprint; however, in the early 20th century (1904-7) it was enlarged and the interior 'renovated' in the Beaux-arts style according to plans drawn up by architect **Jean-Omer Marchand**. The glorious gold embossed, colourful fresco and wood embellished interior visible today mostly date from that time. It sits with its back to Sherbrooke Street in the middle of the huge building separating the two principal parts of the complex. Many who pass along this stretch of busy Sherbrooke Street aren't even aware it exists or of the beauty within.

But what you might be thinking does this lengthy aside have to do with Christmas at the ER? Truthfully not really a lot, except to provide the backdrop for one of my tales about Montreal Christmases – past, present and future.

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Feature image: [Tung Nguyen](#) from [Pixabay](#)

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