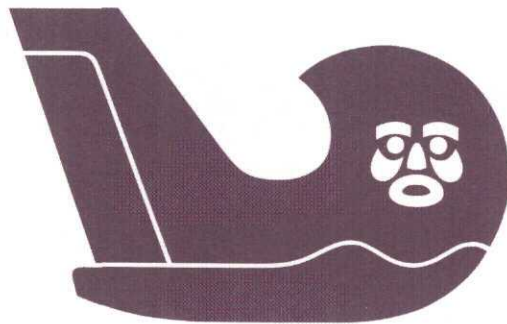


Adventures in History



First Winter

Teachers' Guide



National
Film Board
of Canada

Office
national du film
du Canada

First Winter



Level

Elementary and junior secondary

Subject Area

Canadian History, Canadian Literature

Summary

The film begins in the depth of winter, 1830, in a lonely, unsettled area of the Ottawa Valley. An Irish family, father, mother, daughter Máire (Moira), and son Tomás (Thomas) O'Dwyer, are experiencing the harsh Canadian winter for the first time. Although he has no legal claim as yet, the father has chosen the site to be a farm. Now, to earn the money they so badly need, he is far away, downriver working in a lumber camp. Before leaving he had built a rough log shanty and felled sufficient trees to provide firewood for the winter.

The lives of the mother and children are tedious and grim. They spend their days hacking at the trees the father had chopped, reducing the branches to sticks and twigs for burning. This bit of clearing is all they can do during the winter to prepare the land for farming. Tomás, at seven, is able to help, but instead often wanders off to play, dreaming of the horse his father had promised to bring in the spring. Máire, at 13, resents her brother's freedom, but their mother is protective of his childish innocence.

Their isolation, loneliness, and fear of the unknown is sometimes overwhelming. They are a people accustomed to hardship but also used to the company of a large family and many friends. Here they have no one but themselves and nothing but their prayers for comfort. Deeply religious, they cling to tradition and the ritual of prayer.

Their diet is meager and monotonous, consisting mainly of potatoes, a little salt pork, and bread made from a precious supply of flour. Their chores are new to them, the chopping of wood, the continuous battle with the cold.

On February 1st, St. Bridgit's day in Ireland, traditionally there would be a new cross over every door. The family is collecting bullrushes to weave a cross when mother is overcome by coughing. Máire had been aware of her mother's worsening health, but when she sees blood from her mother's mouth she knows that the illness is not one that will just go away. Tenderly, Máire and Tomás care for their mother; they do all they can, but it is not enough. Mother warns Máire that she must be prepared to care for Tomás and the home. She dies peacefully. Following familiar ritual, Tomás smokes tobacco and Máire sprinkles salt to ward off evil. Since the frozen ground prohibits a burial, they cover their mother's body with boughs to protect it from the wolves.

Overcome by fear, insecurity, and shock Máire decides to flee the shanty and with Tomás sets out to find their father. They begin the difficult journey through the woods, across a lake, encountering icy slopes and snow squalls. Finding nothing familiar to show the way, Máire knows she must turn back. It is, as she says in the narration, "a miracle that got us back to the shanty."

Máire resumes life as her mother had patterned it, but Tomás, forlorn and depressed, refuses to cooperate. He is convinced that only he, his sister, and trees and ice exist in the world, and that he and Máire too will soon die. Remembering how their mother's tales had given them hope and dreams, Máire tells her brother a story. She makes Tomás the hero

of the epic and herself heroine by recounting their family's trials and concluding that their courage brings them renown. Tomás is drawn away from his sorrow and begins to live the story she has told him.

Cooperatively now, the brother and sister work together at their survival. In time the days grow longer and warmer, and one day shouts ring through the forest as father returns.

Note: In the film the children refer to their mother as "A Mhamai" (A-Wommy) and their father as "A Yaddy" (A-Yaddy). These are familiar Irish terms for parents.

Aims of the Film

- To help students appreciate the difficulties faced by the immigrant during the first few months after settling in the Ottawa Valley, or in any rural environment in the early 19th century.
- To help students understand the difficulties faced by isolated and separated families, and the ways in which families coped with adversity in the wilderness.
- To explore why people emigrate from their homeland and endure so many sacrifices in the process.

Discussion Questions

1. Describe the setting for the story in *First Winter*. What was the daily routine in and around the shanty?
2. How well prepared was this family for survival in a Canadian winter? What would they have brought with them from Ireland? How did they get ready for their first winter in the Ottawa Valley?
3. Do you think it was right for the father to go away to work in the lumber camp?

4. Why do you think the family chose to live in such an isolated area?
5. What was the role of the mother? Was she happy in her new surroundings? Why was she such a tower of strength, even in death? What expectations did Máire, Tomás, and their mother have about the future?
6. How do the activities, chores, and attitudes of Máire and Tomás differ? Do the roles change with the death of their mother? Why did Tomás change his attitude in the end?
7. Why did Máire and Tomás set off for the village? Was this wise? What would you have done?
8. We often take for granted the supplies and services available in our community. What did the first immigrants do without?
9. How do you think you would have coped with the hardships and isolation endured by this family?

Related Projects

1. Research the conditions that caused the Irish to leave their homeland in the 1830s and 1840s. Do these reasons explain Irish immigration today?
2. Describe what the voyage from Ireland to the Ottawa Valley might have been like. Besides the Ottawa Valley, what other areas did Irish immigrants settle?
3. What kind of life did poor people lead in the 1830s? What promise did the New World hold for them? What was the attitude of British immigrants toward the Irish? What was the attitude, in general, toward poor women and children?

4. Consult a geography text to study the topography and climate of the Ottawa area. Analyze the information to determine how suitable the area would be for farming.
5. The family in *First Winter* did not own their land. They were squatters, hoping to acquire the land eventually. Some immigrants were able to obtain land grants in the Canadas in the 1830s. How did they do this?
6. Find out the significance of the feast of St. Bridgit's day. Do the Irish celebrate any other feast days?
7. Research Irish music and folklore. What does it tell us about the people and about their past?
8. Compare and contrast a first winter in the Ottawa Valley in the 1830s with a first winter on the Prairies in the 1890s.
9. Prepare a follow-up story about how Máire, Tomás and the father carry on through the spring, summer, fall, and "second winter."

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