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A Black And Green Saint's Day

Ireland, Montserrat Share History — and a Celebration of St. Patrick

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SPECIAL TO THE BIR

When you think of the biggest St. Patrick's Day celebrations in the world you probably think of Dublin, Boston, New York, or the Caribbean. Well, you

probably don't think of the Caribbean; but you should. The tiny island of Montserrat in the tepid waters of the world's most honeymooned sea has been celebrating St. Patrick's Day since 1768.

Settled by former Irish indentured servants from nearby British colonies, it proudly bears a harp on its flag and there has long been a vibrant Montserration Community here in Boston.

In recognition of the is-

lands' shared histories and heritage, on March 26th, the Irish Immigration Center will combine its annual St. Patrick's celebration with the "Black and Green" event it jointly hosts every spring with the Montserrat Aspirers.

"This is the first time we have combined the two events," said Sister Lena Deevy, IIC Executive Director. "But with our long shared histories, and the shared struggles of Irish immigrants and displaced Montserrations right here in our city, this is the perfect year to do so."

In both the U.S. and Montserrat, the first St. Patrick's Day commemorations were protests as well as parties. In the U.S. early parades were an assertion of Irish pride in the face of discrimination and hostility. In Montserrat a famous slave uprising on March 17, 1768, launched the tradition of celebrating the island's Irish roots and the pursuit of freedom on the same day. In fact, the same week.

For while Irish have cultivated a worldwide reputation for throwing a mean party, in Montserrat, St. Patrick's Day celebrations typically last for a full seven days. This year March 11 to March 18 will be a full blown fiesta of feasts, parades, concerts, and outdoor productions putting even Southie on Sunday in the shade.

Traditionally, St. Patrick's Day in this little British territory was celebrated in its southern town that bears the most fitting of names — St. Patrick's. But since the eruption of the Soufriere Hills volcano in 1997 the south of the island has been uninhabitable and unsafe. Festivities were forced north.

Indeed, it is the continued eruption of that volcano that has created a more unwelcome bond of similarity between Boston's Irish and Boston's Montserrations. After the initial 1997 eruption, the U.S. government gave Montserration refugees permission to live and work here until the danger passed — granting them "Temporary Protected Status" (TPS). Many of these folks settled into homes, jobs, and churches in Dorchester. But in February of last year, the U.S. revoked the TPS allowances, saying that the situation was no longer temporary and the 292 folks still here would have to leave.

Some went to England with nothing, and some elderly are on still on waiting lists for housing in Montserrat. Others had nowhere to go. They had built lives, community and, in some cases family, here. But with TPS expired, everything changed overnight. Vol-

unteering at the local church before Feb. 28, 2005, was a valuable contribution to the neighborhood. The next day, the same volunteers were labeled "illegal." They had joined the thousands of local undocumented Irish immigrants in life in the shadows — unable to renew driving licenses, to travel home to parents, and constantly fearful of arrest and deportation.

"It's really difficult" said Janice Galloway of the Montserrat Aspirers. "After TPS expired people were not able to work and their employers were afraid to help them and afraid to try and sponsor them. Most had no choice but to leave."

The Black and Green St. Patrick's Day will be a celebration. It will be everything you would expect from the people of two islands who know how to enjoy themselves. But it will also be a time to reflect, to dwell on the daily struggles of immigrants and displaced people, and to rededicate ourselves to the pursuit of justice.

And that beats a Sunday afternoon on the couch.

The event will be held on Sun., March 26, at the Montserrat Aspirers Hall, 358-364 Washington Street, Dorchester. Call Corey at the Irish Immigration Center at 617-542-7654, Ext. 19, for details or more information.