

Who are the Moonrakers?

The term Moonraker is used to describe people from Wiltshire England, sometimes called the County of Wilts. The word Moonraker is associated in the minds of many with a James Bond novel and film crafted by Ian Fleming. I have no idea why he called one of his books *Moonraker*, although a clue might lie in the fact that Fleming is buried near Swindon, Wiltshire—even though he was born in London.

Wiltshire is in the south west of England (Wessex). It's landlocked and surrounded by six counties (Dorset, Somerset, Hampshire, Gloucestershire, Oxfordshire and West Berkshire). Wiltshire covers an area of a little more than eight thousand typical Canadian farms of 100 acres. Population in 2001 was 613,024. Population in the mid 1800s was around 250,000 and stayed there for some sixty years as a result of emigration. Folks from Wilts, use the term Moonraker to describe themselves in a fun-way like Newfoundlanders call themselves Newfies. The origin of the term is in the following story:

Years ago, they say, Wiltshire men smuggled liquor. One bright moonlit night—remember that, the bright moon—a couple of Wiltshire smugglers saw an Excise man coming their way. They dumped their barrels of contraband liquor into a pond. When the patroller left, the men from Wiltshire used wooden hay rakes to fish the barrels out of the pond. But the suspicious Excise man came back and caught the smugglers with their rakes in the pond. The Excise men asked the local yokels what they were doing. Raking in the cheese, they said. The government man laughed at the Wiltshire men for being so stupid and rode off.

You can easily imagine that the better-known word, Moonshine¹, meaning illegal alcoholic beverage, flows from the Moonraker² story cited above.

Here written in Moonraker dialect, or what's often called West Country dialect, is some of the above story as told in a poem³ written by Edward Slow in 1894 and spoken like a Hollywood actor playing the part of a pirate.

Moonraker poem

*Down Vizes way zom years agoo,
When smuggal'n wur nutben nen,
An people wurden nar bit shy,
Of who they did their sperrits buy.
In a village liv'd a publican,
Whi kept an Inn, The Pelican,
A man Zid wur, a man a merrit. . . .*

Moonrakers, like Newfies in Canada (at one time), were the poor of the poor in England. For the most part, the Industrial Revolution by-passed Wiltshire and many of the Moonrakers were farm labourers. Their purchasing power eroded from one generation to the next. Infant mortality decreased as a result of better sanitation and Moonraker families became larger and poorer. Impoverished Moonrakers became prime candidates for emigration, and they were often 'encouraged' by local officials.

Between 1829 and 1831, nearly 1,000 Moonrakers living in Warminster, Wiltshire or within a radius of ten miles received assistance to emigrate. Assistance came from parishes, churches, and individuals such as the Marquess of Bath. It's estimated that 370 or 14.8 per cent of the population of Warminster Parish immigrated to Upper Canada between 1830 and 1832.⁴

The first group migration of Moonrakers was organized by Reverend Silcox. He visited Canada in 1829 and returned the next year with 65 people from Corsley, Wiltshire, located four miles from Warminster. In 1831 he returned to Canada with 254 passengers again from Corsley who had been

assisted to leave by the parish and other benefactors. Letters home from Dummer Township indicated that this group received axes and provisions for their first year.

A book published in 1909 about life in the town of Corsley comments on the the 1830 emigration; and one imagines that the same things were said about the emigrants of 1831:⁵

*the parish shipped off at its own cost sixty-six of the least desirable of its inhabitants, about half being adults and half children, or "under age." This was only following the example set by natives of Corsley who had previously emigrated on their own account. . . These emigrants consisted of "several families of the very class one would wish to remove—men of suspected bad habits, and bringing up their children to wickedness." There were several poachers among them, and other reputed bad characters.*⁶

William Lyon Mackenzie, the leader of the Upper Canada Rebellion of 1837 described the Corsley group of 1831 in positive terms:⁷

Quebec, April 22-25, 1831.

One forenoon I went on board the ship Airthy Castle, from Bristol, immediately after her arrival. The passengers were in number 254, all in the hold or steerage ; all English, from about Bristol, Bath, Frome, Warminster, Muden Bradley, &c. I went below. . . . These settlers were poor, but in general they were fine-looking people, and such as I was glad to see come to America. They had had a fine passage of about a month, and they told me that it was the intention of many of them to come to Upper Canada. Fortune may smile on some, and frown on others ; but it is my opinion that few among them will forget being cooped up below deck for four weeks in a moveable bed-room, with 250 such fellow-lodgers. . .

Many of the Corsley emigrants did well, according to letters supposedly written by the emigrants and edited by Poulett Scrope, who was the brother of Charles Thomson Scrope, a British politician who rose to political prominence in the 1830's when he became involved with colonial matters and as Lord Sydenham was responsible for implementing the Union Act in 1840, which united Upper Canada and Lower Canada as the Province of Canada. And later Charles became Governor General of Canada until his death in 1841.

In his introduction to the letters, Scrope wrote: *The population of these kingdoms is notoriously excessive as compared with the demand for labour. . . . many an able-bodied man. . . is unable to obtain employment, and reduced to pauperism here, to mendicancy in Ireland; becoming a burden to his country instead of a valuable instrument of production. Large numbers of these persons are every winter on the verge of starvation, protracting a life of misery on an average allowance from their parishes of 2d. per day to each individual in a family.*

. . . there exist, within a few days sail, parts of the British Dominions where the labour of these persons is in such demand that they could obtain by it for themselves and their families an abundance, not only of necessaries, but of comforts even, and luxuries—and to which they may be conveyed for less than the cost of keeping them in idleness and misery during one twelvemonth in this country—it does appear evident that their removal to such a comparative paradise at so small a cost, should they be willing to go, (and how many of them would refuse ?) is the simplest and most eligible means for improving their condition. It is clear, too, that their removal in this manner would equally relieve their fellow-labourers who remain at home . . . would free the country from the burden of supporting a large body of unprofitable, and often criminal and turbulent, because unemployed and miserable, paupers—in short, would put an end to all the evils that are confessedly occasioned by the redundancy of our labouring population, and replace them by the benefits which must accrue to Britain from a rapidly increasing and prosperous colonial population, employed in growing food for us on the rich soils of America, and exchanging it with our home manufacturers for the produce of their labour.

If your ancestors came from England in the 19th century, and if you have any of the names below in your family tree you might have Moonraker DNA. Some of the family names of Moonrakers who emigrated from Corsley, Warminster, Downton and other areas to Peterborough and other places in Upper Canada including Oro Township and the Talbot Settlement are: ¹Alexander, Allen, Allworth, Amor, Annett, Ball, Bampton, Barrow, Barter, Beilby, Biddlecomb, Bishop, Bridle, Bullock, Bundy, Carpenter, Cash, Chalk, Champ, Clements, Compton, Curtis, Cuzner, Dale, Deare,, Deere, Dredge, Dunford, Eastman, Edmonds, Edwards, Elsbury, Foe, Ford, Forder, Frampton, Friar, Futchter, Gauntlett, Gilbert, Goulding, Grant , Grish, Gutteridge, Harding, Harnett, Harrington, Harris, Henitage, Higgs, Hill, Hudson, Hunt, Janes, Jeanes, Jellyman, Jennings, Jennings, King, Latty, Light, Light, Martin, Moody, Moore, Mussell, Noyse, Payne, Penny, Perry, Prangleys, Pressy, Pretty, Prince, Prince, Riley, Rogers, Sanders, Saunders, Scott, Shergold, Silcox, Singer, Small, Smith, Snelgrove, Swayne, Thomas, Thorn, Treasure, Watts, Webb, Weeks, West, Westcomb, Whatley, Wheeler , Wilshire



Some of the first emigrants from Wiltshire were weavers and they might have lived in cottage like the one depicted here.

Figure 1 Last weaver's cottage Corsley, undated

¹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moonshine>

² <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moonrakers>

³ <http://edwardslow.wordpress.com/biography/03-wiltshire-moonraking/>

⁴ Brunger, "English Assisted Emigration", 7-31.

⁵ Maude, E. Davis, *Life in an English Village, an Economic and Historical Survey of the Parish of Corsley in Wiltshire*, 1909, 80.

⁶ See paper re Corsley emigration at the Longleat Estate Office, and Corsley MS. Overseers' Accounts for this year, as found in Davis, *Life in an English Village*, 80.

⁷ W.L. Mackenzie, *Sketches of Canada and the United States*, 1833, p. 179-81. G. Poulett Scrope, *Extracts Of Letters, Poor Persons, Who Emigrated Last Year Canada and The United States*, 1832. Jean Murray Cole, *Origins, The History of Dummer Township*, 1993, p. 20-23.