



# Historically Speaking

The Newsletter of the Cobourg and District  
Historical Society

November 2024 — Issue 351

## Celebrating Lieutenant-Colonel John Weir Foote

Rob Mikel has always called Cobourg home despite living in Toronto for 40 years. He has researched Cobourg's history for 50 years and is a passionate advocate for the history and architecture of Cobourg. After studying history and architecture at the University of Toronto, he worked for many years at the Toronto Historical Board and later Heritage Toronto. He is the recipient of several awards including the Lieutenant Governor's Ontario Heritage Award for Lifetime Achievement. He has authored two books including *Cobourg, the Spirit of Place*. During his formative years he came to know his neighbour John Weir Foote. Rob brings history to life.



Virginia Mclaughlin is a relatively recent resident of Cobourg and has the privilege of living in Ravensworth, once home to John Weir Foote. Ensuring that Foote's importance and legacy are not forgotten has become a passion.

Together they will give an overview of Foote's early life, his wartime experience, focusing on his heroic deeds at the battle of Dieppe and his later life as an MPP and active local resident. Perhaps they will even touch on his involvement with Strathmore and Brookside.

Join us on Tuesday, November 19, 2024, for an informative presentation in Cobourg's Victoria Hall. Doors open at 7:00 pm and the meeting starts at 7:30 pm. **Note that this meeting is on the third Tuesday rather than the usual fourth Tuesday.** All are welcome! Members are free and guests are \$5.00. There will be coffee/tea and the usual cookies so bring a friend or two.

***Our Previous Meeting***

**Agriculture in Northumberland: A History of the Family Farm**



A capacity audience filled Victoria Hall’s Concert Hall to hear Paul Burnham explore the history and the importance of the family farm in Northumberland.

The Burnham family were among the first in the Cobourg area. Their family has been influential in Northumberland farming, industry and politics for over two centuries.

Anne and Paul Burnham opened the Burnham Family Farm Market in 1994 and have been supplying the Cobourg area with local vegetables and produce ever since. Much of their seasonal fruits and vegetables are grown

on their sixth-generation family farm, located between Cobourg and Port Hope on County Road 2.

Paul highlighted several technical innovations – tractors instead of oxen, powered combines instead of threshing parties, electric milking machines instead of hand milking, insemination using frozen semen, tile drainage to better control moisture in fields – that have changed how farms operate.

Following his presentation Paul answered dozens of audience questions including those about the impacts of climate change on his farm (very little so far), the impact of marketing boards (generally positive since they ensure a fair profit for farmers), the availability of bank loans to purchase machinery (makes it easier to purchase needed equipment but must be used cautiously), revenue from solar panels (guaranteed payments ending in a few years), genetically modified crops (not widely used for vegetables), the use of temporary foreign workers (good for farmers) and many others.



If you were unable to attend the meeting you can watch the video at <https://youtu.be/1ZggXbyOxbM>

## Future Events of Our 2024/2025 Program

<p><i>Celebrating Lieutenant-Colonel John Weir Foote: Foote</i> was a Canadian military chaplain and politician who received the Victoria Cross for his actions during the 1942 Dieppe Raid. Born in Madoc, he eventually made his home in Cobourg. Presented by Rob Mikel and Virginia McLaughlin</p>	<p><b>Tuesday, November 19, 2024*</b></p>
<p><i>The Story of Our Garden Club:</i> The Cobourg and District Horticultural Society was founded in 1859 and has been in operation ever since. The club even continued to hold virtual monthly meetings with speakers during the pandemic. Let's learn more and dream about summer in January by celebrating the club's 160+ years in operation with presenter Sarah Holland.</p>	<p><b>Tuesday, January 28, 2025</b></p>
<p><i>Crime and Punishment in Northumberland County: A Historical Perspective.</i> At one time, the county had four correctional centres but only one remains. Presenter John L. Hill, retired criminal lawyer and author, will share anecdotes about his experiences that shed light on their operations.</p>	<p><b>Tuesday, February 25, 2025</b></p>
<p><i>What are Rebellion Boxes?</i> to be presented by Darryl Withrow. Rebellion boxes are some of the most prized artifacts in the Sharon Temple's collection. These small wooden boxes were handcrafted by prisoners from the Rebellion of 1837 as they waited in jail for their trials.</p>	<p><b>Tuesday, March 18, 2025*</b></p>
<p><i>CDHS Annual General Meeting</i> followed by <i>British Home Children</i>. Marg Graham and Dianne Conway will tell the home children's stories, dreams, nightmares and their contributions to life in Canada.</p>	<p><b>Tuesday, April 22, 2025</b></p>
<p>Dinner and presentation of the unsolved murder in Madoc <i>Who Killed Charles St. Charles</i> by author Gord Pitts. Further details will be available nearer to the meeting date.</p>	<p><b>Tuesday, May 27, 2025</b></p>

**\*Several of our meetings have been rescheduled from the usual fourth Tuesday to accommodate usage of Victoria Hall by the Northumberland Players.**

## Early Birds In Cobourg's Core

**Percy Climo, Historian**

Land owners on Township Lots numbers Sixteen and Seventeen, what is today Cobourg's core or downtown, were first occupied by two settlers. Eluid Nickerson took up land on the east side of Division Street and Nathaniel Herriman had the township lot on the west side. Both families sold out and moved elsewhere after clearing some land and erecting shelter. Herriman departed before 1804 and Nickerson left for Grantham Township in the Niagara

Peninsula in 1816. His lands north of King Street were sold to John Spencer and that part of his holdings south of King Street went to Ebenezer Perry.

The Herriman family is not listed in the 1804 township census, the first record of what we have today. They had moved to Haldimand Township for a short period. By 1808, when the deed of bargain and sale to Moses Alley was drawn up, Nathaniel and his wife Bethania were residing in the Township of Champion, County of Jefferson over in New York State. Alley purchased the north 150 acres from Herriman in consideration of 100 Pounds. Also, in 1808 Herriman sold his 'south 90 acres, the lakefront; to Nathan Williams. The deed for this sale is now missing in the Cobourg Registry Office. It is alleged that this transaction was made for a yoke of oxen. This area of land extended from Division Street to Spring Street, south of University Avenue to the lake.

In 1811, Nathan Williams sold his 90 acre parcel to John Ross, who later in 1813 resold this parcel to James Williams, except for one acre lot, located on the north side of King Street about mid-way between Division and George Streets of today. This lot was used for a blacksmith shop by the owner, Jacob Firman for a number of years. Mrs. Margaret Wells, daughter of Samuel Ash and born in Hamilton Township in 1803 tells us: "The first place of business in Cobourg (downtown) was a blacksmith shop located on the north side of King Street. Firman's land purchase was registered in 1812 but most likely he had arranged to locate before that date. In the year 1812, two property registrations are of special interest. The southwest corner of King and Division Streets went to Dr. Timothy Kittridge. The Buck property is the location of the Bank of Toronto of today. Buck had come here from New Hampshire and had erected a tavern at this corner which he named Buckville Tavern. Mrs. Wells tells us he was desirous of having the name of the location changed from 'Hardscrabble' to 'Buckville'. A sign was painted and erected on two cedar posts before the door, but the glory of 'Buckville Tavern' was of short duration for when the proprietor, opened the door on the morning following the erection of this sign, all that remained of it was about a foot and a half of cedar posts, the rest of it having disappeared mysteriously during the night."

Elijah Buck remained in Cobourg for the rest of his life and his descendents have been contributors to Cobourg's advancement. Buck owned more property to the north of King Street and his name is retained by Buck Street, located between Division and George Streets.

Elijah Buck died on Saturday, the 17<sup>th</sup> of December, 1842, aged 65 years. The *Cobourg Star* of December 21, 1842 reports "He was a native of New Hampshire, he, early in life immigrated

to this country and settled in this town, then nearly a wilderness, formed the nucleus of Cobourg, his chosen spot, now the district town with its churches harbour, college and numerous schools. He lived for many years the oldest resident of the town. Thus he was happy in being at once the founder of the village, and the father of the place, a man of most independent mind and inflexible principles, either moral or political, and whereupon the approach of death met him with fortitude that became a man and resigned himself with much dignity into the sleep of the death.”

“His remains were followed to the grave by a large and respectable assemblage of people.” Buck had moved to Cobourg about 1810.

Dr. Timothy Kittridge, a physician, sold his land on the east side of First Street to Ebenezer Perry in 1816. At one time First Street was known as Kittridge Lane and later was referred to in a deed as Potash Street. A potash industry was located for a time between this street and the mid-town creek. First Street of today has an orientation different from other streets. Originally, it was part of the Indian trail that came up from the lake bank to bypass the mid-town creek estuary. Along with King Street west, it was Cobourg’s first street. Other names that appear on early property transactions are Jeremiah Lapp and his two sons-in-law, Nathan and James Williams. Nathan married Elizabeth Lapp and James linked up with Rachel Lapp. John Ross purchased property from Nathan Williams in 1811 and was involved in other property deals later.

About the year 1817, others arrived in the settlement and growth of the present day downtown core commenced. Such names as John Monjeau, Benjamin Throop, David Washburn, Barnabus Bidwell, James Grey Bethune, Robert Henry, Francois Trudeau, Alexander McDonnell, etc. all figure in early property transactions in Cobourg’s core.

Percy Lloyd Climo was born in Cobourg to Elizabeth and Henry Climo on 17 October 1906. The Climos lived on Stuart Street while Percy attended public school and worked in his father’s King Street store. Climo left Cobourg in 1927 to attend Queen’s University and completed a Mechanical Engineering degree in 1931. In 1935, he married Ada Lenore Harper from Hamilton Township. They had a son and two daughters. In 1973, he and Ada were divorced and a few months later Climo married a Toronto widow Elizabeth Morgan Leith. The pair moved to the Cobourg area where Climo conducted research on local historical events and politics. He wrote extensively on the history of Cobourg including three books: *Early Cobourg*, *Let Us Remember* and *Cobourg 1914–1919: A Magnificent Sacrifice*. Climo died in 1991 at the age of 84.

# Member Matters

## ***New Members***

Please welcome our newest CDHS member: Mike Jones

## ***October Meeting Video***

If you missed our October meeting you can watch the video at: <https://youtu.be/1ZggXbyOxbM>

## ***Renew your membership for 2024-2025***

Thank you for your past membership with the CDHS. Your membership is very important to



us, and now it's time to renew for the 2024–2025 season.

In addition to our face-to face meetings each month, we provide our informative *Historically Speaking* newsletter and continue to keep our Facebook and our <https://cdhs.ca/> website updated.

We incur costs that include audio/visual equipment for the

meetings; preparation and production of promotional materials (pamphlets, banner); honoraria to the speakers who will be preparing their talks and contributions to permanent historical features in Cobourg.

We have kept the membership fees the same as last season:

Individual Membership: \$30 Family Membership: \$50

# Announcements

## ***Lakeshore Genealogical Society***

### **Sons of the Soil presented by Janet Few**

Every family has ancestors who worked on the land. How can we find out more about them, the farms where they worked and the lives that they led? This session covers a range of sources, many of them under-used, which help to shed light on the working lives of our rural British ancestors.

Janet is an experienced family, social and community historian who lectures regularly on historical records, immigration records, methodology and skills, one-place studies, and places and ethnicities throughout the UK. She has been involved in surname research

since 1982. Janet completed her doctorate at the University of Exeter, researching migration patterns in nineteenth century North Devon. In her quest to track down those who left North Devon for their new homes she has worked with many records for countries across the English-speaking world.

This meeting is a Zoom only event on November 13, 2024 at 7:30 PM. Email [LGSregister@gmail.com](mailto:LGSregister@gmail.com) to register.

### **Cornish Settlements of Hamilton Township presented by Scott Baker**

Scott Baker spoke to us previously about the large group of Cornish settlers that settled in Northumberland and Durham counties in the 1800's.

In this presentation, he examines in more detail a few of those Cornish who immigrated to Hamilton Township and settled in locations such as Plainville, Camborne, Cornish Hollow and Cobourg.

Through the use of Genealogy and local histories you will learn about a few of the families that settled in Hamilton Township and their contributions to society. Names such as Davey, Rosevear, Tinney, Bond, Baker, and Harper.

Speaker Scott Baker calls Peterborough home but most of his ancestors in Canada were from Cobourg and Hamilton Township, and include early settlers. He has always had an interest in family history from days spent as a child with his grandparents. In addition to the Lakeshore Genealogy Society, he is a member of the Cornish Association of Durham and Trent Valley Archives.

This meeting is a Zoom only event on December 11, 2024 at 7:30 PM . Email [LGSregister@gmail.com](mailto:LGSregister@gmail.com) to register.

### ***Kingston Historical Society***

Many of the Kingston Historical Society's recent meetings are now available on YouTube.

Visit <https://www.kingstonhistoricalsociety.ca/events-news/> for more information.

# History of Strathmore House

Page R-2 The Independent , October 19, 1988 Real Estate Section A-Clark Family (07-01)

## Heritage house of the week



38 King Street East

Illustration by Barry King

## The beaux-arts tradition endures

by Barry F. King

*Just east of the town limits, fourteen acres with never-failing stream and pastures, gardener's dwelling, groves, barns, stables, and other outbuildings. Main house has fourteen rooms and all modern conveniences. - Cobourg World, August 26, 1904.*

This was Judge Clark's description of his home, Strathmore, as it was first advertised for sale in 1904. The home the Judge had built formed only the beginnings of the grand structure we see today.

New owners in 1905, the Donnelly's, from Pittsburgh, carried out extensive renovations. From portico to porte-cochère, with wings added to east and west, the "new" mansion became a fine example of the Beaux-arts tradition in architecture. A re-birth of classical

forms, the Beaux-arts movement began in France and was very popular in the U.S. at the turn of the century.

George MacKenzie Clark, the son of Charles Clark and Helen McNabb, was born in Belleville in 1828 and, shortly after his birth, the family moved to Cobourg. Educated at Upper Canada College, he commenced the study of law in the offices of Col. D'Arcy Boulton and later established a partnership with William Weller, the stage-coach operator who became Cobourg's first Mayor. In 1850, he married Eliza Weller, William's daughter.

A Junior Judge of the County Court at 26, he was appointed to Surrogate Judge of the Maritime Court of Ontario in 1879, and, in 1882, became Senior Judge of the United Counties of Northumberland and Durham.

A close personal friend of Sir John A. Macdonald, he was praised as a skilled arbitrator.

Shortly after the death of his last surviving daughter, Mrs. Hugh C. Dennis, in 1897, the family moved to Swayne and College streets and placed Strathmore for sale. After renting it for the summer of 1904, Charles Donnelly, a wealthy American industrialist, bought the estate for \$12,500, and carried out the major additions we see today.

Part of Cobourg's American summer colony, Donnelly owned a gasoline launch (with revolving chairs and out-riggers) for sport fishing, and even shared, with three other American millionaires, in the purchase of Rice Lake's Hickory Island. Industrial pursuits were not neglected, however, with the chartering of the Northumberland and Durham Power Co. Ltd. in 1905.

The purpose-to develop electrical power at Healey Falls. Charles was a director.

At his death, only a year later, his estate was estimated to be valued between eight and 14 million dollars. The Donnellys had developed close ties here - one daughter was married to David Dick of Cobourg - and continued to summer at Strathmore until 1913. With a sudden reversal of family fortunes and subsequent bankruptcy, it was reported that the family fled Strathmore without their belongings. The home, itself, was taken over by a Pittsburgh trust company and ownership was debated in Canadian Courts until 1918.

In the late thirties, Steven Hass bought the property for \$28,000, spending summers there until the early forties. In 1943, during the Second World War, the Department of Defence required the facilities of the Girls' Training School at Galt. The availability of several large estates in Cobourg prompted the leasing of several area homes as a replacement. Among these were the Willis McCook estate (now gone) and Strathmore.

In 1951 the property was purchased by the province, with the boys from the Ontario Training School replacing the girls, who were returned to the Galt facilities.

Now known as Brookside School, the old estate of Judge Clark and Charles Donnelly remains both gracious and imposing in its setting beside the never-failing stream.

<https://vitacollections.ca/cobourgdigitalcollections/details.asp?ID=48675>

Strathmore House was renamed "Brookside" after its transfer to the province.

## Vintage Movie Clips

Pete Fisher, reporter for *Today's Northumberland* online newspaper, has made available a number of short, vintage, videos. The films were taken by Pete's grandfather, Winston Fisher, and show various Cobourg related places and events. The clips are undated but from the vehicles and clothing they were likely shot in the late 1940s to early 1950s. Unfortunately, none of the participants are identified.

The clips include:

- Views of a parade in downtown Cobourg (Dominion Day, 1948?) followed by aerial views of Cobourg <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pYphxWrrRtM>
- The launching of the Corvette HMCS Cobourg which shows the crew along with the Mayor of Cobourg and other dignitaries. She was launched July 14, 1943 at Midland Shipyards in Midland (see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HMCS\\_Cobourg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HMCS_Cobourg) for further information)  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C7c83hc0fBA>
- Various Cobourg dignitaries including Lenah Field Fisher (?) at around the 00:23 mark, marching bands with a backdrop of the bandshell is Victoria Park. Probably on Remembrance Day [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xe8eGSn\\_IJ4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xe8eGSn_IJ4)
- A camera story of the Northumberland Fish and Game Association  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pcNsDUEjjWU>
- Footage of waterfront antics and of the Ontario Car Ferry  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gMtzN9JXWeg>

## Our Readers Ask

Lenah Field Fisher has been an important influence in Cobourg. Actress Helen Matthew voiced a life-sized avatar of Ms. Fisher in 2015 as a tourist attraction. You can watch Helen's presentation on YouTube at  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TJouoApBBZw>.

There are many photographs of Fisher in somewhat flamboyant attire but are there any recordings of her actual voice?





# She's little but she's wise she's a terror for her size

by Linda Manning, Arts '75



Lenah (Field) Fisher, Mac '22.

In the 1922 Ontario Agricultural College yearbook, there appears a short but apt verse:

*She's little but she's wise  
She's a terror for her size!*

The lines refer to Lenah Field, Mac '22, who, over the past five decades, has pursued a variety of careers including dietitian, teacher, restaurant owner and politician. A petite lady of barely five feet, Lenah (Field) Fisher has about her an air of gracious femininity laced with an ample dose of determination.

Back in 1919 when Lenah Field was attending Macdonald Institute, it was announced that the Prince of Wales would visit the Ontario Agricultural College. Miss Field decided that somehow she would find an opportunity to speak to him. Some 60 years later, that moment is still preserved in a photograph taken on the day of his visit. Included by him years later in his memoirs, it shows the dapper, young prince on the steps of the College and, front stage centre, laughing and looking up at His Highness is Lenah Field. She smiles as she recalls the incident. "A group of us walked across the campus afterwards," she says, "and I chatted with the prince. He said he didn't know whether he could stay for the dance that evening." There is a pause. "He remembered me though," she continues, "because later that day I received a box of cigarettes stamped with the gold insignia of the Prince of Wales."

There is an interesting footnote to this

story. Several years later, the prince's visit to Africa was made into a movie and sent to Canada for distribution. "I had just arrived in Montreal," Lenah recalls, "and my host offered to take me to the theatre to see the film. As we entered the foyer, I could see a life-sized promotion picture of the prince in the background. There were several exclamations upon my arrival and I was immediately mobbed by strangers asking me endless questions about the prince. The puzzle was solved when someone pointed out to me that I must be a close friend of the prince as there I was with him in the photograph. It was a shock to realize that the Guelph photo had been used to promote the film's Canadian tour."

After graduating from Macdonald Institute as a dietitian, Lenah Field interned at Sick Children's Hospital in Toronto and then went on to post-graduate studies at Lakeside Hospital in Cleveland, Ohio. While there, she designed a series of special diets for diabetic children.

She returned to Canada several years later to become the head dietitian of the Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Montreal. During that time, she developed a special course for interns in her dietetics department, instructing them in the expertise of buying for large institutions. "My courses were very popular," Lenah says, "and I always found positions for my graduating students."

During this time, there was a drive

Most who are familiar with the history of Cobourg know that Lenah Field Fisher played a crucial role in not just preserving but meticulously restoring Victoria Hall. You might wonder how a single Councillor could wield such influence. The adjacent article by CDHS member Linda Manning, originally published in 1980 in the Guelph University alumni magazine, provides information on Mrs. Fisher's approach to life.

However, some personal details are not mentioned: Ms. Field was born in 1900 at 212 King St. W. She met Donald Fisher while she was working as Head Dietician at Montréal's Queen Elizabeth Hospital. They married in 1932. The couple moved from Quebec to Cobourg, following the death of Mrs. Fisher's parents.

for funds for the nurses' residence at the Queen Elizabeth. A produce company, with whom Lenah dealt regularly, had donated a cheque for only \$50. The hospital director was annoyed and Lenah suggested that she might be able to get the amount increased. "He (the director) didn't think I could do it," Lenah remembers, "but he gave me the cheque and told me to try. For the next two days, I politely refused to order when the salesman phoned. The third day the owner was at the hospital asking me whether I was suddenly finding fault with his produce. I whipped out the cheque," Lenah continues, "told him he had unmitigated gall giving us a cheque for \$50 and tore it up in front of him. He hesitated, then wrote out a second one for \$500. When he handed it to me, I asked for another zero and handed it back. There were a few tense moments then," she recalls, "but he took it back and added the third zero."

Lenah tells about a city-wide survey that was undertaken in Montreal to determine the prices paid by large institutions for food. Results revealed that Lenah was the best buyer in the entire city, outmatching all other institutions including hotels. "I was offered positions at several major hotels after that, including the Mount Royal," Lenah says, "but I had other plans." These included marriage to rubber company executive Donald Fisher and temporary retirement from the outside career world.

The Depression had begun and Lenah volunteered her services to the city of Montreal. Food vouchers were being given to needy families and Lenah's job was to find out whether each family was buying wisely. "An interesting job," Lenah comments, "though not always pleasant."

With experiences in Toronto, Cleveland and Montreal behind her, it seems, in retrospect, inevitable that Lenah would return to Cobourg, where she was born and raised. During visits home, in the 1930s, she discovered that her family home was regularly besieged by American tourists from the daily Rochester ferry. The charming seven-room dwelling had been given as a wedding present to her father by her grandfather. Prior to giving it to his son, Mr. Field had rented it to the Koerber family, whose daughter had become the silent film star Marie Dressler.

Lenah persuaded her parents to convert their home into a restaurant, retaining its period furniture, silver and dishes. Called The Marie Dressler House, it attracted Canadian and American tourists who enjoyed its distinctive French



*Lenah Field, laughing and looking up at the Prince of Wales on the steps of Macdonald Institute during his visit in 1919.*

cuisine and attentive waitresses. It was a preferred place for summer employment and many high school girls, including this writer (back in the '50s), donned the sedate black uniform and stockings and spent the summer ushering wide-eyed tourists past the tinkling music box to the Button Room for dining.

Lenah's restaurant thrived, partly because of Maurice, its French chef, but mostly because of this lady's incredible knack for public relations. The restaurant gained an international reputation and was frequented by visitors and celebrities from all over the world. In 1974, Lenah sold the establishment to a restaurateur who promised to retain its distinctive quality and fare.

In 1956, after the death of her husband, Lenah began to take an active interest in politics. "It was rumoured," she says, "that they were going to tear down (Cobourg's) Victoria Hall. I couldn't bear that. Why, my grandfather attended its opening in 1860 by the Prince of Wales (later to be Edward VII) and was on the town council during Confederation year. I had to do something!"

Lenah was elected to Cobourg's town council in 1959, but instead of being elected Chairman of Public Buildings, as she had hoped, she was relegated to the garbage committee. Undaunted, she took more than the usual councillor's interest in the city's refuse and was often seen riding on the municipal trucks overseeing operations. She even put on coveralls and rubber boots and washed down city streets during cleanup week.

Next year, when she topped the polls,

she became Chairman of Public Buildings and began a 15-year struggle to have the town hall restored. She had it named a provincial landmark and later, by cashing in a few political IOUs in Ottawa, a National Historic Site. Lenah hopes that her beloved "Old Lady of King Street," now in its final phase of restoration, will soon be returned to its 1860 splendour.

In 1961 Lenah was elected Deputy Reeve of the council and remained in this position until her political retirement in 1975.

She was awarded the Order of Canada that year—a great honour for any Canadian citizen and much deserved by this energetic and accomplished lady. Subsequently, Audrey McNaughton, a well-known Canadian artist, painted a life-sized portrait of Lenah in recognition of her service to the life and culture of the community. This portrait hangs in the Art Gallery in Victoria Hall.

Currently, Lenah is a Governor of Sir Sandford Fleming College in Peterborough and is active with a number of bodies including the Cobourg Chamber of Commerce, Great Pine Ridge Tourist Council, the Cobourg Library Board and the Heritage Association.

If you visit Lenah at home these days, you will be greeted at the door by her latest "undertaking"—a beautiful, lanky Weimaraner puppy christened Chancellor von Cobourg. "He's as strong as I am already," Lenah says, "and smarter, too!"

As I bid her goodbye, I think it would be quite an accomplishment to be smarter than Lenah (Field) Fisher, the invincible Mac girl of 1922. □

## Poor Charles Bagot

*Professor Christopher Dummitt*

The forces of “decolonization” took one more historical victim recently in Oshawa, Ontario. That’s where the city council moved to change the name of Bagot Street, which it believes—but isn’t even entirely sure—was named in honour of Charles Bagot, the governor general of the united Province of Canada from 1841 to 1843.

The city says Bagot has to go because of his links to the establishment of residential schools for Indigenous peoples. The case echoes that of Egerton Ryerson—defenestrated from positions of honour for highly dubious claims about his alleged links to the schools. The Bagot case is about as weak. The evidence in Bagot’s case is that during his tenure in British North America, Bagot established a commission to investigate the “Affairs of the Indians of Canada” and that, amongst its recommendations, his appointed commissioners called for residential schooling.



That this report didn’t directly lead to any specific government funding of residential schools in Canada does not seem to particularly matter to the critics. Nor do the historical purity seekers seem especially interested in the fact that many Indigenous peoples themselves were demanding schooling in this era. Indeed, the actual details of the 1845 report and its historical context are, as usual, beside the point.

Bagot was a career diplomat with a distinguished record. As ambassador to the United States he set his name to a treaty that helped to demilitarize the Great Lakes. He was chosen for Canada in the wake of the rebellions in Upper and Lower Canada in 1837 and 1838. The governor needed to be someone who could show both backbone and sympathy—and a respect for cultural duality (something Bagot had already shown in his role helping to separate Belgium from Holland).

Bagot inherited a bit of a mess after the infamous Lord Durham had taken off in a huff in 1838. Durham’s replacement, Charles Thomson (later Lord Sydenham) forced through the

union of the two Canadas, ran a ludicrously corrupt election, and then convinced everyone that he had established a stable government when in fact he had not. When Thomson fell off a horse and died, Bagot came into the mess and put things back together. He did a decent job, risking his career by bringing into the government a large group of French reformers including Louis Lafontaine, even though his British overseers were anything but keen about allowing former rebel sympathizers into government. It did Bagot little good. All through his time in Canada his health had been deteriorating and he died at the governor general's residence in what was then the capital at Kingston.

And this is now how we remember him—and our history—by ripping his name from one of the very few public places where he is still honoured. The Oshawa process has followed a now all-too-familiar trajectory. The initial demand for change came in the summer of 2021 in the wake of the still as-yet-to-be substantiated claims of “mass graves” and unmarked graves at former residential schools.

Then followed what is now becoming a routine three-stage process. First, assume that people genuinely are “harmed” by street names—even streets named after long-forgotten historical figures—even streets that we aren't sure are named after those figures.

Once you've set yourself up with this hyper-sensitive Geiger counter of emotional harm, then do public consultation. But don't consult everyone. Instead, select a racially specific group of people you are certain will most likely agree with the decision you've already made. In this case the city's public consultation seems to have been to ask the very few property owners along the little street and then engage in wide-ranging consultations with almost every thinkable Indigenous group within 100 miles.

Did the city ask residents who have lived in Oshawa for their whole lives? It seems not. Did they ask anyone still associated with Bagot or his family? How about historians who know something about British North American history from the 1840s? Again, it doesn't appear to have been the case. Instead, Oshawa, like other cities, seems to think that all you have to do in these circumstances is go through a race-based consultation process in which the voices of some groups count more than others.

Once you've engaged in this process of empathetic racism—defended by the need to decolonize of course—you can go ahead and suggest a new name change. No amount of irony seems too much.

Oshawa is going an Orwellian route. The new name is “Debwewin Miikan” — an Anishinaabemowin term meaning “Truth Road.” Yes, that’s right: **truth**. This is to demonstrate the city’s support for Truth and Reconciliation. But there is, as usual, very little interest in the actual complications of historical truth and the fact that Bagot had little if any connection to residential schooling.

In multicultural countries like Canada it’s not surprising when historical figures are celebrated amongst some groups and vilified in others. There ought not to be a shock—or indeed a problem. Of all regions, Oshawa ought to know this. It is located in the Durham Region, and Durham is the classic Canadian example. Lord Durham is seen in Quebec as a villain—someone who wanted to assimilate French Canadians—who recommended, as some would put it today, a policy of cultural genocide. Yet Durham was also a liberal reformer who promoted for British North Americans the advent of what we would come to call responsible government. He is, rightly, celebrated as playing a pivotal role in the origins of Canadian democracy. Both things can be true at the same time.

Now imagine deciding a name change to the Durham Region where you set up a consultation process that privileges the voices of Quebec nationalists, and set your offence-meter to “hyper sensitive” based on what that group sees as “problematic.”

That is effectively what Oshawa did here.

What Oshawa could do is to choose Indigenous names for new streets or new schools (something it seems to have already done ) and leave in place those figures already honoured from our colonial past. This doesn’t have to be a zero-sum game—pitting one group against another.

What do you call it when people pick out the most negative aspects of one cultural group? How about when you make decisions about that group’s culture but don’t consult them and instead use a race-based consultation that excludes them specifically? I was sure that we used to have a word for this kind of insensitivity toward one particular group.

*Christopher Dummitt is a historian of Canadian culture and politics at Trent University and a senior fellow at the Macdonald-Laurier Institute. This material was originally published by the National Post and is reproduced here by permission. In October of 2018 Dr. Dummitt presented The Secret Life of William Lyon Mackenzie King to the CDHS.*

***Join us Tuesday, November 19, 2024***

***Cobourg & District Historical Society***

***Celebrating Lt. Col. John Weir Foote***



Presenters Virginia McLaughlin and Rob Mikel will speak to us about Lt. Col. Foote who was a Canadian military chaplain and politician who received the Victoria Cross for his actions during the 1942 Dieppe Raid. Born in Madoc, he eventually made his home in Cobourg.

**Concert Hall in Victoria Hall**

Members free, Guests \$5, ALL ARE WELCOME

🕒 Doors open at 7 PM 🕒 Meeting starts at 7:30 PM

For Member information, [Brianincobourg@gmail.com](mailto:Brianincobourg@gmail.com)





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