

Nothing Short of a Miracle!

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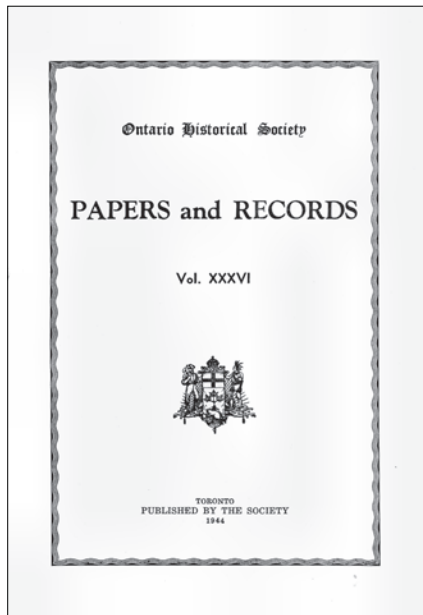
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Nothing Short of a Miracle!

by Dorothy Duncan

One hundred and ten years ago, in June of 1899, a pamphlet was launched that became the foundation for one of the oldest historical journals in Canada. Originally called *Papers and Records* and after 1947 continued as *Ontario History*, this publication was just one of many new initiatives undertaken when the Pioneer and Historical Association of



the Province of Ontario was transformed into The Ontario Historical Society (OHS) at the end of the nineteenth century. Founded in 1888 as a federation of eight local historical societies, the members soon realized that the Association must expand its horizons and widen its terms of reference if it was to succeed as a provincial historical society. Months of debate and discussion, lobbying for sup-

port from the provincial government and an extensive exploration of all the alternatives followed. Finally, the Association came to the decision that the membership must be broadened, a permanent home found and a new constitution drafted. At a special meeting of the Association on 23 May 1898, chaired by President James Coyne, the new constitution

was adopted that contained the commitment that "The Society shall engage in the collection, preservation, exhibition and publication of materials for the study of history, especially the history of Ontario and Canada."¹ President Coyne also anticipated the arrival of this new initiative in the *Annual Report of the OHS* for 1898 with the declaration "Through this publication The Ontario Histori-

¹ Constitution of The Ontario Historical Society, adopted 23 May 1898, The Ontario Historical Society Archives.

cal Society would preserve and circulate rare documentary sources, encourage the writing of history of a higher and more exact character, and generally stimulate interest in Ontario's past."²

On 1 April 1899, An Act to Incorporate The Ontario Historical Society received Royal Assent and the new organization was immediately launched into a number of new activities including the first publication of *Papers and Records*. During his presidential address on 14 June 1899, at the Annual Meeting of the newly incorporated Society, James Coyne announced:

Besides issuing the usual annual report the Society has during the past year made a beginning in the publication of records and other historical material. The pamphlet of "Papers and Records" placed in the hands of our members to-day is but the first, we hope, of a series of similar productions. By such publications historical material will be preserved which might otherwise be destroyed by fire, mislaid by a careless employee, or in various other ways lost to the world. Baptismal, marriage and burial records of the pioneers may be the dry bones of history; but it is by such skeletons that the living forms are supported which otherwise would be mere masses of limp and inert tissue. Many early marriages were performed by justices of the peace whose records (where records were kept at all) are in private hands and exposed to all the vicissitudes of time and change. It is important that these should be gathered, preserved and published for the use of students interested in following up the history of settlement. So with early letters, diaries, genealogies and other manuscripts, maps, portraits, etc."³

The members who received their copy that day were greeted with this message from the editor, David Boyle:

Introductory.

The Ontario Historical Society herewith presents to its members the first volume of what is hoped will be a long list of valuable records and papers. The Editorial Committee regards itself as fortunate in securing copies of the Langhorn and McDowall Registers, which have been obtained through the good services of Mr. T.W. Casey, of Nanapanee. These covered what was known as the Midland District, but, as the descendants of the persons mentioned therein are now widely scattered over the whole Province, they will doubtless be of increasing value to a very large number of persons. The existence of these Registers has been known to very few—one of them, the Langhorn St. Paul's Register came to light only after part of this publication had been sent to the printer. It is now in the safe keeping of the officials of the Kingston Diocese.

The two Thomson letters are particularly valuable in shedding light on the apparently haphazard way in which our lake and river international boundary line has been drawn; and for the first time Canadians will have an opportunity not only to respect the memory of the British Commissioner for his work, but to feel thankful that we were, on the occasion of the settlement, represented by a man who was thoroughly capable scientifically, and who so firmly stood by the treaty-rights. For the privilege of copying these documents we have to thank Mr. Aubrey White, Assistant Commissioner of Crown Lands for the Province of Ontario.

The character of these and of the other papers in this issue is sufficient to show in a

² *Annual Report of the Ontario Historical Society 1898* (Toronto: William Briggs, 1899) 25.

³ *Annual Report of the Ontario Historical Society, 1899* (Toronto: William Briggs, 1900) 32.

general way the scope of what our Society has in view by way of publication. There is no lack of material. Several municipal records of early date have recently been unearthed, and from these much may be gathered respecting the development of our present system of local government.

A large portion of this Province is now beyond the mere bread-and-butter condition; and with an admirable school system, the time has come when our old people may, with dignified leisure, recall the days of old, while it is the duty, as well as the privilege, of the younger generations to study by-gone events in the light of the present day, and to lay the foundations of the future aided by the experience of the past.⁴

The “pamphlet” that Coyne introduced that day was Volume I of the *Papers and Records* and also included a copy of An Act to incorporate The Ontario Historical Society, the names of the members of the Board of Directors, the thirteen Ex-officio members and the seventy elected members, as well as eighteen papers and records!⁵

One hundred and ten years later as we review the life and times of *Papers and Records* and *Ontario History*, it is nothing short of a miracle that this publication has survived. As one individual project of the OHS it has been firmly tied, for most of its life, to the parent organization for its very survival, and so at times of scarce resources, diminishing budgets and uncertain fortunes, the editors have often been forced to suddenly cut corners,

cut the size of the publication or delay publication altogether due to the lack of funds. In the Society’s *Annual Report for 1900*, when the Society and the journal were just one year old, President Coyne announced “The Society is hampered in its operations for want of funds”⁶ and in 1902 *Papers and Records* did not appear.

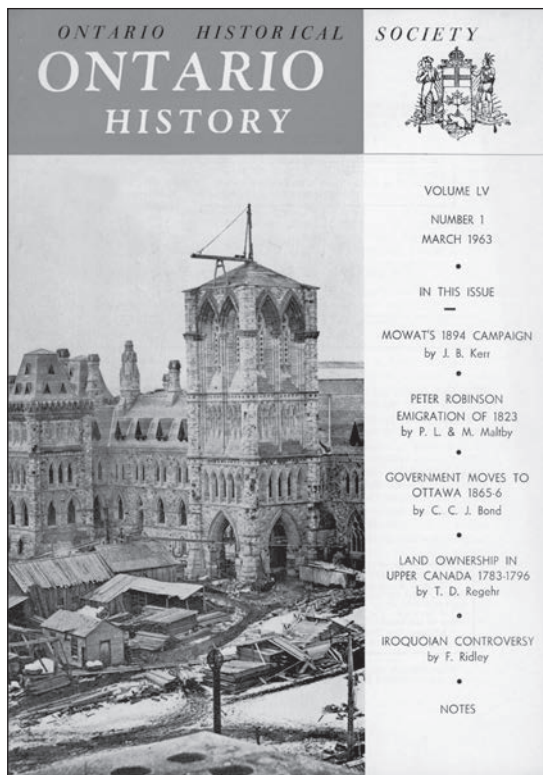
The original publishing grant from the Ministry of Education in 1898 was \$500, but by 1914 it had only grown to \$800 annually, while the membership who received the journal as part of their \$1 membership fee, had grown to 400, thus putting a tremendous strain on the budget. As a result, President Clarence Warner personally assumed the cost of publishing the 1916 issue, as did several other presidents in subsequent years. The Society and the journal were to suffer many other financial setbacks, one of the most severe during the Depression in the mid-1930s, when publishing was often suspended for lack of funds. Despite the challenges, the journal continued to be the only regular publication of the Society, and as a result often carried a great deal of extraneous material that included names of officers, committee members, presidential addresses, reports of annual general meetings, affiliated societies’ reports, and much more, in addition to the papers, records and essays for which it had been designed.

The OHS did not regain its momen-

⁴ *Ontario Historical Society Papers and Records, Volume I* (Toronto, 1899, Reprinted 1930: The Ontario Historical Society) 3,4.

⁵ *Ibid*, 5-9.

⁶ *Annual Report of the Ontario Historical Society, 1914*, quoted in Gerald Killan, *Preserving Ontario’s Heritage* (Toronto: The Ontario Historical Society, 1976)



tum, nor *Papers and Records* its stability until the mid-1940s, when some short-term support came from an unexpected source. In July of 1944 a *News Letter* was launched by the Society as a source of information and exchange of ideas for the growing number of local historical societies and community museums in the province. It became an important publicity tool for *Papers and Records* as it brought the publication to a much broader audience than ever before. In 1947 it was decided to change the name of the journal to *Ontario History*, to incorporate the *News Letter*, to introduce a Book Notes section featuring current

publications and to publish quarterly. It was also decided that the historical societies and museums in Ontario that were affiliated with The Ontario Historical Society would be listed on the back cover.⁷ In January of 1949 President John Barnett and Secretary-Treasurer George Spragge prepared a letter to enclose in the first issue:

A Message to Members

In its new Ontario History Quarterly, your Society hopes to retain the more valuable features of the annual Papers & Records and the News Letter. The quarterly form of publication is that used by most Provincial and State Historical Societies in America. In our case the heavy and constant increases in the cost of printing made some such change imperative.

Every member can be proud of the work done in the past fifty years through the publication of the forty volumes of Papers & Records in which such a great wealth of historic material has been preserved and made available for schools, colleges, libraries, and the public generally.

It is hoped that in its new form our publication will continue to render equally noteworthy service to historical education in Ontario, and at the same time stimulate a wider interest in the local history of the many communities which make up the Province.

We feel that the succeeding issues (three more in 1949) can be made much more interesting and valuable than this initial effort. To this end we earnestly urge members to send in to the Secretary suggestions, news items, and articles of local historical interest. This assistance the Editor must have if the Quarterly is to do the work it should do.

⁷ *Ontario History*, 41:1 (1947), back cover

Our membership today is approximately five hundred – the largest at any time in the past sixty years. It is, however, far below that of sister societies in American states with less population and wealth and whose historic past is far more commonplace.

The reason is that there are thousands of Ontario residents who, though keenly interested in local history, have never heard of the Historical Society or do not know that they would be welcomed as members.

Tell your friends and acquaintances about the Ontario Historical Society. Show them copies of its publications, and many of them will want to join. Take their names and the \$2.00 annual fee and send them in to the Secretary. If every member did this our membership would more than double in 1949.

On behalf of the Executive we wish you all a happy and prosperous 1949.⁸

It was not until the Annual General Meeting in Ottawa in 1954 that the membership fee for the Society was increased from \$2.00 to \$3.00 per year to be effective 1 January 1955, and single copies of *Ontario History* would be available for \$1.00.

As Canadians prepared to celebrate the Centennial in 1967 and take advantage of the newly announced grant programmes⁹ to assist communities in their festivities, the Society was again introducing some new initiatives for the journal. Two Cruikshank Silver medals were

announced in 1967 to be awarded annually for the best articles in *Ontario History* written by an academic and a non-academic.¹⁰ The following year the *OHS Bulletin* was introduced as a successor to the *News Letter* that had been discontinued twenty years before. It was to be published bi-annually and designed to serve the ever-growing numbers of historical societies and museums. It is interesting to note that, despite this new publication, it was on the back cover of *Ontario History* that the affiliated societies and museums continued to be listed until 1984.¹¹

We learn something of the challenges of co-editorship at this period from Kenneth McLaughlin, who later served as president of the Society:

The Ontario Historical Society revisited

It seems hard to believe that it was nearly a quarter century ago that I was sitting in my garret-like office in the History Department at Dalhousie University in Halifax when I had the first inkling that The Ontario Historical Society was about to play an important part in my life... Professor Paul Cornell, who was at the time serving as the editor of *Ontario History* had just written to ask if I would be interested in adding the co-editorship of the OHS' quarterly journal to my new duties when I arrived at Waterloo.

Of course, I had known *Ontario History* as an undergraduate student and had been fascinated by the judicious blend of academic and local history, the new research findings

⁸ John Barnett and George Spragge, "A Message to Members" (Toronto: The Ontario Historical Society, 1949) The Ontario Historical Society Archives.

⁹ Ruth Home, "A Master Plan to Prepare for Canada's Centenary," *Ontario History*, Volume LIII, # 3.

¹⁰ Killan, *Preserving*, 257.

¹¹ *Ontario History*, Volume LXXVI, # 1, Benefactors, Patrons, Life Members, Historical Societies and Museums in Ontario, and Institutional Members listed for the last time, back cover.

of graduate students, documents and other related materials which were the stock-in-trade of that highly-respected periodical.... On arriving in Waterloo that July day in 1970, I was presented with what we called the "blue box," not a box used to recycle goods as blue boxes are now, but a file box containing the articles and correspondence relating to materials submitted for publication in *Ontario History*. Eagerly, I opened this treasure trove of articles and manuscripts and started reading. Who would have suspected such a range of interests, topics and authors? I can still remember with delight the first articles that I edited and that appeared in the 1970 issues of the journal.

More to the point, I also learned a hard lesson. In my desire to be efficient, I also rejected a score of articles in the early spring of 1971. By coincidence, the annual meeting of the OHS in 1971 was held in Peterborough. Far from being greeted by well-wishers, complimenting me on my choice of articles for *Ontario History*, I was met by a barrage of indignant authors whose articles had been returned to them with notes suggesting revisions, or in some cases even rejection. I quickly learned that the readers and the contributors to *Ontario History* were a feisty group. Not much has changed over the last two decades.¹²

In April 1973 the Society sent a questionnaire to its 1,194 individual members in an attempt to determine "Who and what are the members?" They were asked to rank the importance of the Society's activities and the 674 responses confirmed "encourage the formation of new historical societies" and "publish books and articles" as the two most important.

"*Ontario History* had a wide readership with 38% reading all of every issue," and "over 54% reading part of it." The membership was not enthusiastic when asked if there was a need for a new periodical publication in addition to *Ontario History* and the *OHS Bulletin*.¹³

Over a decade later as the Society approached its own Centennial in 1988 a second survey of the members again confirmed that publications remained a priority as respondents said that the most important services provided by the OHS were workshops, publications, information, assistance to affiliated member societies, promoting public awareness of heritage conservation, and providing an opportunity to meet others with similar interests.¹⁴

In 1974 an *Index to the Publications of the Ontario Historical Society* was published covering the period 1899 to 1972. Frederick Armstrong, who later served as president, paid tribute to the authors Hilary Bates and Robert Sherman in the Foreword:

The Ontario Historical Society has long been one of the most active bodies in the country in the encouragement of authors and the publication of both original documents and new research. The journal of the Society, *Ontario History*, or as it was formerly called, the *Papers & Records of the Ontario Historical Society*, which has appeared continuously since 1899, is generally recognized as both one of the most important sources for the history of the province and a quarterly with a scholarly level that has long equaled

¹² Kenneth McLaughlin, "President's message" in *OHS Bulletin*, May-June 1993, 3.

¹³ "The O.H.S. Questionnaire: Preliminary Report" in *OHS Bulletin*, Fall 1974, 1.

¹⁴ "Enthusiastic Response to OHS Member Survey" in *OHS Bulletin*, Spring 1987, 4.

that of most national reviews...This work, which has been in preparation for three years, originated in discussions between Hilary Bates and Robert Sherman, both then of the Library of the University of Western Ontario, and the writer about what could be done to provide some more useful research tools in Ontario history...The Society owes a debt of gratitude to them for their preparation of this Index, which will make the contents of its many publications so much more readily available to students of the history of the province.¹⁵

In the June 1975 issue of *Ontario History* Gerald Killan also praised the new *Index* and in his article “The Good, the Bad, and an Occasional Touch of the Ugly: Papers and Records,” reviewed in detail the early years of the journal and despite the title of his article, concluded:

Through the *Papers and Records*, the Ontario Historical Society went far toward realizing its goal of developing the study of this province's past. Admittedly the quality of the articles was often uneven, but this was more than offset by the services rendered to Ontario historiography. The periodical helped shape and direct the thrust towards professionalism and sophisticated concepts of local history. New ideas and sources were brought to light, and new areas of enquiry opened to both amateur and professional historians. The journal also provided a forum for the exchange of ideas and information among its readers, and on occasion rallied those readers behind a variety of causes ranging from historic preservation to the promotion of local history in the educational system. For all this, students of Ontario history may well be grateful.¹⁶

In 1981 when Gerald Killan was concluding his term as president he gave a “State of the Society Message” at the Annual General Meeting at Niagara-on-the-Lake. He began his Presidential Address with these words:

There is no way to hide the fact that financially, we are in a difficult situation. It may shock you to learn that every year since 1966, with only two exceptions, our annual expenditures have exceeded revenues. In 1971 and 1972 we did enjoy an excess of revenue over expenditures, but those surpluses, it must be conceded, were largely the result of selling our library and the reprint rights to our journal... What does this indicate – fifteen years of financial mismanagement? I think not... In 1978 the government froze its funding to heritage groups and continues to do so. Meanwhile inflation has sent our office and publication expenses soaring. Between 1970 and 1980, the cost of *Ontario History (OH)* doubled from \$2,200 to \$4,400 per issue... With expenses increasing so dramatically, membership fees had to be raised from \$5 in 1970 (which included a subscription to *OH*) to the current \$12 membership fee and \$7 subscription rate for *OH* (total of \$19). Understandably this has had a negative impact on our membership figures... But enough of this depressing picture. The OHS may be financially weak and the size of its membership modest, but one must not ignore the positive aspects of our organization. Our deficits are in part a testimony to fifteen years of sustained activity, programme development and enthusiasm. Since it was founded in 1888 – 93 years ago – The Ontario Historical Society has never been more vital, relevant, or credible than it is today.¹⁷

¹⁵ Frederick H. Armstrong, “Foreword” in *Index to the Publications of the Ontario Historical Society 1899 – 1972*, (Toronto: Ontario Historical Society 1974) v, vi.

¹⁶ Gerald Killan, “The Good, the Bad and an Occasional Touch of the Ugly” in *Ontario History*, 67:2 (Toronto: The Ontario Historical Society 1975) 67.

¹⁷ Gerald Killan, *Presidential Address Niagara-on-the-Lake 13 June 1981* (Toronto: The Ontario Historical Society 1981) 1, 2.



Less than a year later, Alec Douglas, in his President's Remarks in the Summer 1982 issue of the *OHS Bulletin* brought welcome news for the beleaguered Society and its journal under the title "Summing Up and Looking Ahead":

The *Ontario History* Endowment Fund, I am delighted to tell you, is now a fact. Your response to my appeal in the last *Bulletin* justified our hopes. In less than two months, members have donated \$5,000 and our Wintario application for support has been successful. I am sure that I represent the view of the membership as a whole in expressing profound gratitude to the Ministry of Citizenship and Culture for supporting this important endeavour. Anyone who contributes to or reads *Ontario History* for years to come will derive benefit from this investment.

The fund will amount to a total of \$60,000. For every dollar subscribed, Wintario will subscribe \$3. The Society is obliged, therefore, to raise another \$10,000 to reach its \$15,000 target. With interest from the fund it will be possible to subsidize publishing costs each year, thus ensuring that the journal continues to appear regularly and maintains adequate standards without an excessive increase in subscription fees.

Ontario History received still further aid and comfort, shortly after the last *Bulletin* went to press, from the Social Sciences and

Humanities Research Council. We had not expected this, because in 1981 the SSHRC turned us down. Evidently, our appeal found a more sympathetic audience in 1982. This means that we can not only maintain the present standards of the journal, but will at last be able to expand its size and further enhance both the aesthetic quality and scholarly value of *Ontario History*. The directors of the Society and the editors who have struggled so long to make ends meet will, I know, receive this news with particular satisfaction. To them I express our gratitude for persevering under adversity.

I also want to emphasize that the Ontario Heritage Foundation responded very generously when the outlook was so gloomy that we felt obliged to ask for financial support last year. Therefore, even without SSHRC funds, we would have been able to continue publication at a satisfactory level in 1982, thanks to the Ontario Heritage Foundation. In future years, nevertheless, the only sure support of the journal will continue to be our members and subscribers. The Endowment Fund is absolutely vital to our long range plans. The interest from such an investment will be the only lasting guarantee of security for *Ontario History*, and will keep subscription fees down.¹⁸

Unfortunately, this was not the case, and in 1989 the Endowment Fund was increased to \$100,000 with a combination of individual donations, funds raised by the Society and support from Wintario, in an attempt to meet the ever-escalating costs of publishing and postage. The Endowment Fund was, and is, governed by the strict terms of a legal agreement with the Ontario government to ensure the \$100,000 minimum principal balance and that the interest earned is to be used

¹⁸ Alec Douglas, "Summing Up and Looking Ahead" in *OHS Bulletin*, Summer 1982, 1, 2.

solely for the publication of the journal.¹⁹ In addition, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council has continued to be a strong financial supporter as well.

In 1993, under the editorship of Jean Burnet, a supplementary Index for *Ontario History* was published covering the years 1973 to 1992. Elizabeth Bloomfield supervised the preparation, while librarian-bibliographer, Linda Foster undertook the main labour of reading and indexing all the articles, notes and book reviews. Elizabeth Bloomfield provides details in the Introduction: "Scholarly research and writing about Ontario have multiplied in quantity and variety in the past 20 years. *Ontario History* has continued to publish 10 to 12 full-length articles a year, as well as shorter research notes and increasing numbers of book reviews since 1978. In all, nearly 770 items published in *Ontario History* between 1973 and 1992 have been indexed here."²⁰

Computerized methods of indexing and formatting were key components in the short length of time (a few months) needed to prepare this Index compared to the earlier one, which took several years.²¹

As *Ontario History* prepares to celebrate 110 years in 2009 there are still many challenges for all those involved in producing the journal as they attempt to balance articles, authors, topics, themes, escalating costs and budgets. To the editors,

assistant editors, book review editors, managing editors, members of editorial boards and committees, authors, translators and contributors, a salute to your dedication, scholarship and perseverance for more than a century.

In the Summer 2004 *OHS Bulletin*, the journal editor at that time, Rae Fleming, described an author's search for truth: "This illustrates one of the most important roles of any historian, that of a detective sifting through fragments of the past in order to arrive at historical truth, knowing full well that someone will follow with other evidence and revised conclusions. Such is history."²² Such has been, and continues to be, the goal of *Ontario History*, while at the same time it has faced many challenges and still managed to grow and prosper. Congratulations on the celebration of 110 years and may this journal continue to bring Ontarians of all ages and cultural backgrounds and their history closer together.



¹⁹ KPMG Chartered Accountants, *Financial Statements of The Ontario Historical Society, Year ended December 31, 2002* (Willowdale: The Ontario Historical Society 2003), 6.

²⁰ Jean Burnet, "Preface" in *Ontario History Index 1973 – 1992* (Willowdale: The Ontario Historical Society, 1993)

²¹ Elizabeth Bloomfield, "Introduction" in *Index*.

²² Rae Fleming, "Autumn Issue of Ontario History to Feature First Nations" in *OHS Bulletin*, Summer, 2004, 1.