

# Limelight

## Newsletter of the Kingston Historical Society

Kingston Ontario Canada

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The Kingston Historical Society gratefully acknowledges the financial support of the Ontario Ministry of Tourism, Culture and Sport.



### Kingston Historical Society Meeting 21 January 2026

presented live at 7pm, in the theatre lounge of the *Kingsbridge Retirement Community* at 950 Centennial Drive and simultaneously offered via >>>Zoom

Dr. David Gordon will speak on  
***“Conservative Surgery on Kingston’s Fringe:  
The Evolution of Rideau Heights, 1952-1973.”***



Dr. Gordon is a professor in Queen’s School of Urban and Regional Planning and a frequent commentator for *The Globe and Mail* and the *CBC*.

It is noted with regret, the death of Alan MacLachlan on 3 December 2025. He was a long-time member and a former president of the Kingston Historical Society. Alan received the KHS Award for 2024.

# THE KINGSTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Established 1893

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Featured Sponsor

The Kingston Historical Society gratefully acknowledges the financial support of Kingston Association of Museums, Art Galleries and Historic Sites and the City of Kingston.



*The KHS gratefully acknowledges the support of its sponsors in producing Limelight .*



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## President's Message

by Peter Gower

I look back over another successful year for the Society. Our membership remains stable, with new members replacing those who have left. Attendance at meetings always varied — but it did include one meeting with a full house at Kingsbridge — with viewers able to attend virtually from far away. Our June 6<sup>th</sup> commemoration was almost back to normal: beautiful weather, an excellent speaker, and more attendees than recent years.



2026 looks promising, as all new years do! We have another excellent programme planned, and two events to add: look for the advertisement in this *Limelight* for a gathering on January 10<sup>th</sup> to celebrate Sir John A's birthday. Please note the speaker, that it is not a KHS sponsored event and that you are asked to RSVP. The Heritage week event, whose date is yet to be determined, will have Dr. Joel Konrad from the City of Kingston Heritage Department explaining what Kingston's heritage strategy is, and introducing the new Heritage Management Plan. This includes an expanded grant program and some logic to the insurance difficulties of heritage building owners. Watch for more details next month.

(The Heritage Management Plan can be read at <https://tinyurl.com/36j48p69> )

*Historic Kingston 75* is on its way and should be with you by mid February. One reader will find a Golden Ticket in their copy, which can be exchanged for the book on the Thousand Islands which Susan Smith gave to us to present to a lucky winner! It could be you!!

Happy and prosperous 2026.

When we retired to Kingston in 2000, which we chose for its historical and heritage attributes, I soon found myself at the KHS monthly meetings. Not being sure just how formal they would be, I was surprised to be greeted almost as an old friend at the door by one whom I found was a Councillor and Tour Planner. This was Alan, a retired history teacher par excellence, a tour guide, and a Gentleman. When he became Society Secretary, he would give a spirited reading of each month's Council Minutes, adding to the task entertainment value. In 2007 he was chosen as Vice President and then became President and Past President, and after that continued on Council for the next twelve years.

In 2008 he took over the organization of KHS's annual tribute to Sir John A. Macdonald on the June 6<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Sir John's death, a celebration he would organize until 2023. It was fitting that the first speaker he chose, Roy MacSkimming, would also be the speaker at the last anniversary Alan attended.

Beginning in 2002, Alan arranged annual tours for the Kingston Historical Society, the first to Earnscliffe and Kingsmere in Ottawa, and the last to Glengarry County in 2010. A high point was the glorious cruise on the newly designated World Heritage Site, the Rideau Canal in 2007. Without organizational worries on our part, and always with Alan's informative commentary, the outings were always worthwhile.



How is he remembered by councillors:

'very generous and hospitable',

'a distinctive personality',

'whimsical, diligent and a team player',

'lighthearted and whimsical',

'kind and sincere',

'ah yes, the cartoons and videos he would send to all of us!'

And a negative:

'He thought we all spoke Gaelic.'

I see Alan now, explaining to the Heads of whichever eternal city he is in, how they could promote the place with better organized tours, and a few formal meetings. And while he accepted his fate, I hope he was thinking of Dylan Thomas as best he could:

*Na gabh gu socair a-steach don oidhche mhath sin,  
Bu chòir seann aois losgadh agus creachadh aig deireadh an latha;  
Rage, rage an aghaidh bàs an t-solais.*

## Dr. Tim Cook (1971-2025)

by Dr. Duncan McDowall

*"He who would valiant be."*

On October 25 last, the Canadian historical community – indeed, Canada at large – lost a commanding voice in the telling of our national history and heritage. Tim Cook, prolific researcher and writer, as well as Chief Historian at the Canadian War Museum in Ottawa, lost his prolonged battle with cancer. He was only 54 years old. To talk of Tim “battling” a foe is perhaps not misplaced since his professional career was wholeheartedly dedicated to chronicling the history of his nation at war.



Tim had deep roots in Kingston. Born here in 1971 while his father studied history at Queen’s, Tim returned to Kingston, after completing his BA at Trent, to undertake an MA at the Royal Military College. One can convincingly speculate that Tim’s sojourn in Kingston, with its rich military history and active military presence, aroused his curiosity in studying men at arms. A doctorate at the University of New South Wales in Australia followed. In 2002, Tim joined the staff of the Canadian War Museum where he would stay for twenty-three years of prolific activity. His was a career that straddled the worlds of academic investigation and public exhibition of Canada’s military heritage.

As a scholar, Tim published many books that eloquently conveyed the story of Canada’s experience in two world wars. He was endowed with a passion for dogged and encyclopedic research which he married to a talent for writing lucid history that appealed to audiences beyond the arid world of academe. Military history has all too often been dry, overly triumphal, detail-heavy and institutional. Tim instead succeeded in bringing humanity and intimacy to the telling of men in conflict. Yes, some of his books assessed the vision and failures of generals and politicians such as Sir Sam Hughes and Arthur Currie in the Great War, but his real genius lay in his ability to visit the troops in the trenches asking the question “what made them fight?” Look, for instance, at his *The Secret Life of Soldiers: How Canadians*

*Survived the War or Vimy: The Battle and the Legend.* Such books were widely read and recognized by literary award juries. An Order of Canada and membership in the Royal Society of Canada followed. All this while he and his inspired staff of historians at the war museum devised exhibits and managed collections that drew thousands of Canadians through the museum's doors to marvel and reflect on what we had won and lost as a nation in conflict. On his death, the museum saluted him as its "passionate ambassador".

Tim frequently returned to Kingston as an author on tour and as a speaker. In 2021, he lectured the Society on "the fight for history," a commentary on how Canadians' appreciation of our military history has waxed and waned over the decades – cool in the anti-war Sixties and hot when we remembered Vimy or served as peacekeepers. "Canada's war stories," he remarked, "are as much about what we forget as what we remember."



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JOIN US TO CELEBRATE

*Sir John A's*

**BIRTHDAY**

Guest speaker: Duncan McDowall, Professor Emeritus, University Historian, Queen's University.

light refreshments to be served with a cash bar available

JANUARY

SATURDAY **10** 4-6 PM  
2026

Merchant Tap House, 6 Princess St.

RSVP to [katicfosecretary@gmail.com](mailto:katicfosecretary@gmail.com)

**BOOK REVIEW** by *Dr. Duncan McDowall*  
**Mrs. Simcoe: A Life in the Age of Revolution** -Kerry M. Abel

The name Simcoe is etched into Ontario's collective identity. Every August, Torontonians celebrate Simcoe Day to honour John Graves Simcoe (1752-1806), the province's first Lieutenant-Governor, a man who set in place the constitutional superstructure of the fledgling Loyalist province. On Lake Erie's shore, the town of Simcoe echoes the name of its founder. Many would argue that Simcoe's "Tory touch" with its Anglocentric emphasis on peace, order and good government still resonates in the provincial psyche. Others recall that it was Simcoe who banned slavery on the Upper Canadian frontier.

Standing in the shadow of Simcoe's fame as a governor and soldier was his wife, Elizabeth Posthuma Gwillim (1762-1850), whom he married in 1782. Orphaned at birth, Elizabeth brought inherited wealth to her union with the ambitious veteran of campaigns with the Queen's Rangers in the American revolutionary war. Her 5000-acre estate in Devon, Welford, would financially anchor their life together. She also brought a keen sense of self-worth, independence, and intellectual curiosity that pushed the boundary of eighteenth-century femininity. When Simcoe was dispatched to Upper Canada in 1791, she followed. Their first public event took place in Kingston in June of 1792 when Simcoe took his oath of office in the partially-completed St. George's Church. Over the next five years she supported her husband in his difficult assignment.

Elizabeth played out her role as "wife of" with verve and curiosity. She sketched and painted scenes including Gananoque and Kingston harbour. She kept a diary in which she recorded – much like Suzanna Moodie – the rigorous challenge of pioneer society. She collected Indigenous artifacts, studied the Indigenous way of life with empathy, even learning to paddle a canoe. Beyond this, she competently acted as the matriarch of a family, eventually bearing ten children.

The Simcoes left Upper Canada in 1797, never to return. John went on to various military adventures in Haiti, Portugal, and the Mediterranean. The call to the peerage he hungrily wanted never came. He remained an untitled country squire, and Elizabeth never became the Lady Simcoe she is so often referred to by posterity. John Graves died in 1806 leaving Elizabeth on the threshold of a forty-four-year widowhood.

It is that widowhood and the bountiful marriage that preceded it that has drawn biographer Kerry Abel to the life of Elizabeth Simcoe. As an historian possessing wide-angled erudition and meticulous genealogical skills, Dr. Abel sees her challenge as one of setting Mrs. Simcoe's life against a background of a world in turmoil and thereby measuring her protagonist's gendered behaviour against the swirling events of a revolutionary age. Comfortably positioned at the peak of the English social hierarchy, Simcoe's life experience was buffeted by revolution in America and France, "radicalism" in English society as its industrial revolution unfolded and by religious schism in a once solidly Anglican society. Hence, the book's subtitle.

The Elizabeth Simcoe that emerges from Abel's interrogation is both progressive and reactionary. She was progressive in that she became an abolitionist, decrying the evil of slavery and she became an outspoken writer, illustrator and commentator in an age when women like Frances Burney and Jane Austen began to give women an independent voice in literature. She was reactionary in that her ardent Anglicanism-fed



antagonism to Catholics, especially when Parliament passed their emancipation in the English public sphere in 1829. She came to fear the stirrings of Methodism and working-class consciousness as a solvent on the fabric of the realm. Through all this, Elizabeth played the role of family matriarch and estate manager as her offspring found their own calling in marriage, the military and the clergy. Abel eloquently concludes that while Elizabeth was “never a major character on the stage of history”, she was “part of the crew behind the scenes that made a considerable difference to the performance on the main stage; she was both invisible and involved”.

This an engrossing biography that gives us an intimate glimpse of the formation of Ontario’s social and political lasting culture and then entices us to gaze through a fascinating window onto the tensions and pretensions of nineteenth century British society as it contended with socio and economic change that rattled its core values, values that Elizabeth Simcoe both prized and questioned. If you liked Downton Abbey, you will revel in this dramatic prequel of a family in flux.



Mrs. Simcoe: A Life in the Age of Revolution (Friesen Press, Altona, Manitoba, 2025, 500 pp). Available from Amazon.ca and Novel Idea Books in Kingston.

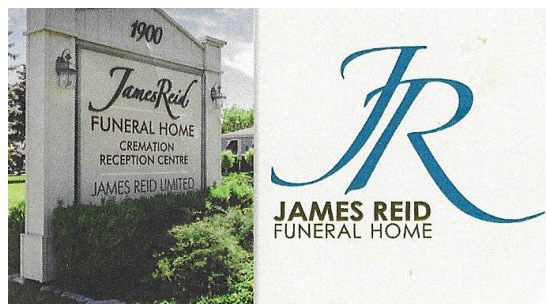
Elizabeth Simcoe’s painting of the Thousand Islands



## Hornes’s Ferry

by Betty Andrews

Appearing earlier this year -The ferry dock on the Canadian side is for sale... It's partner port on the American side, and the boat itself, are also available for purchase. (Dan Taekema/CBC)



Since Horne’s Ferry’s closure in 2024, Cape Vincent has purchased the U.S. side of the ferry’s dock, and the Township of Frontenac Islands has bought the dock on Wolfe Island, not to engage in the ferrying business, but to keep the property for a buyer with that in mind.

A consulting firm has been hired by Jefferson County to prepare an approach to persuade the government of the value of continuing a ferry service. (continued next page)

## Hornes's Ferry (continued)

A Canadian family-owned international ferry service, that crossed the St. Lawrence River from Wolfe Island, Ontario, to Cape Vincent, New York, has closed after more than 200 years of operation, with one short cessation during the Covid 19 pandemic. Horne's Ferry, as it has come to be known, was the only international auto/passenger ferry on the St. Lawrence River, and it was the last family-owned international border crossing ferry in North America.

The service began in 1802 and closed in 2024. The first owners, forebears of the Hornes are indicated in an 1849 will in which the business was passed from Samuel Hinckley to his kin, a son Coleman and a son-in-law, Demetrius Spinning, who was married to Olivia Hinckley. Their daughter, Angeline Spinning, married Thomas Horne. Angeline inherited the ferry from her father.

The ferry's Canadian dock was at Point Alexandria, on Wolfe Island in Ontario, and its American dock was at Cape Vincent, New York. There was a border patrol booth at Cape St. Vincent and at Point Alexandria. William and his son George Horne were customs officers as well as the ferry operators.

Before the Thousand Islands Bridge was built in 1938, Americans with cottages on Wolfe Island found the ferry very useful. Since 1938, taking Horne's ferry, a ten-minute ride, to go between Kingston and NY, has been an inviting alternative to the 100 km trip over the 1000 Island Bridge; it has proved convenient for locals and attractive to tourists.

In the beginning of the ferry operation the boats used were rowboats and barges; a boat that would carry 30 vehicles was bought and tried for awhile, but it was sold when deemed too big. The last Horne ferry, the William Darrell, was commissioned in 1953 by Darrell and William Horne, sons of William.



Although it has mainly been in operation for the shipping season only, at one time the ferry was charged with delivering mail and made trips year round.

The operation has not been without its harrowing moments. They have been run into on the water a time or two, and they once had a van go overboard; it was recovered with no injuries.

Captains and operators of the ferries included Thomas who was drowned, his son William who served as captain for 70 years; his nephews George and Bruce, George's sons William and Darrell who were involved when the last ferry was built; Darrell's sons Bruce and George, the latter captain for many decades until his recent death. William Darrell Horne Bates, whose mother was a Horne, worked on the ferry for 25 years after he retired from his first job, and Colin Smith, a cousin, worked aboard from 1998 until it closed. There were others of the family, including some of the women, who also took part in the business.

George Horne died in September of 2024 and, with none in the family prepared to continue its operation, the ferry service was closed.