

The first step on the Poets' Pathway::[Final Edition]

Janice Kennedy. The Ottawa Citizen. Ottawa, Ont.:Sep 10, 2006. p. A6

People: Lampman, Archibald, Scott, Duncan Campbell, Royds, Bill, Artelle, Steve, Campbell, William

Author(s): Janice Kennedy

Document types: News

Section: *News*

Publication title: The Ottawa Citizen. Ottawa, Ont.: Sep 10, 2006. pg. A.6

Source type: Newspaper

ProQuest
document ID: 1125786731

Text Word Count 3929

Document URL: <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?did=1125786731&Fmt=3&clientId=58622&RQT=309&VName=PQD>

Abstract (Document Summary)

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Birthplace of the pathway project, this area near Uplands Drive was where [Bill Royds] went snowshoeing late one winter day a dozen years ago and realized -- hearing the frosty silence and seeing Parliament Hill on the distant horizon -- he was probably tramping in the final footsteps of Lampman, Ottawa's greatest poet. An environmental activist, heritage enthusiast and poetry

buff, Royds saw the serendipitous confluence. He already knew the area needed to be preserved for its beauty and ecological importance. Now he understood that heritage and cultural significance had to be added to the preservation arguments.

At the centre of Beechwood Cemetery's Poet's Hill, which will be officially unveiled this week, the sightline draws visitors' eyes through the trees to the distant Peace Tower. The image is at once lovely, inspiring and powerfully symbolic. The buildings of Parliament Hill have gripped poetic hearts since they rose in their first Gothic incarnation in the 1860s and evolved into the present configuration, dominated by the Peace Tower, after the great fire of 1916. In his long epic poem about an envisioned Canada, [Nicholas Flood Davin], the Irish expat and western MP who is buried at Beechwood not far from Poet's Hill (and whose grave is marked by a handsome bust), evokes the nobility of Parliament Hill. From Lampman ("glorious towers") to Scott ("imperious towers") to their contemporary Susan Frances Harrison ("sunlit towers"), others have as well. Heading in the opposite direction, into the cemetery, visitors can wander along paths rich with history and natural beauty. Lampman and Scott used to roam through the area (and Lampman wrote a sonnet about Beechwood, which the cemetery displays at its entrance), and both are buried there. So are Davin, Campbell, [William Pittman Lett], Arthur Bourinot and, as recently as 2003, Governor General's Award-winner [John Newlove], whose flat marker says, simply, "Poet."

Full Text (3929 words)

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The unveiling of Poet's Hill in Beechwood Cemetery this week will mark a milestone toward a dedicated group's vision of creating a 30-kilometre route celebrating the capital's natural beauty and literary heritage

Archibald Lampman was never a robust fellow. A childhood bout of rheumatic fever had damaged the heart of Ottawa's most famous poet and left him with a weakened constitution. But he loved nature. Frail or not, he insisted on glorying in the area's great outdoors through all the seasons.

In the summer, he and his close friend -- and fellow poet -- Duncan Campbell Scott could be seen canoeing endlessly up and down the canal and along the Ottawa River. And in winter's cold, which he loved as much as he loved the furnace blasts of summer, Lampman tramped about the woods on snowshoes.

His final poem, the sonnet called Winter Uplands that generations of Canadian schoolchildren have studied, is about one such excursion, a spiritual evocation of stinging frost, fields of rippled snow, the distant city and the silent beauty of winter in the wilderness.

Lampman completed the poem on Jan. 30, 1899. Just 37 years old, he died of complications from pneumonia 11 days later. Despite an earlier falling-out, his moody friend Wilfred Campbell marked the occasion with a poetic elegy, Bereavement of the Fields, that remains one of the most eloquent expressions of grief in Canadian literature.

Nearly a century later, Hunt Club resident and community activist Bill Royds was out snowshoeing early one evening through the woods and upland meadows near his home. It was February and the darkness had crept in everywhere except on the horizon, which still glimmered red.

"As the sun set, I got the image of the poem," says Mr. Royds, a 59-year-old computer programmer for the Department of Canadian Heritage. "I could see a bit of Parliament Hill and the city. I could see a kind of blue sunset with a red framing. I thought, 'that's the scene from the poem.'" It occurred to Mr. Royds that he was snowshoeing through more or less the same area Lampman had been on his final winter trek.

It was a moment verging on epiphany. As a community association representative, Mr. Royds was already committed to the preservation of the ecologically sensitive area, threatened by the unending incursions of developers. Now, he felt, he had the strength of historical and cultural significance to add to his arsenal of arguments.

The gestation period took a while and full birth is still some distance off, but it was at that moment the Poets' Pathway received its first spark of life.

Ottawa's Poets' Pathway, which is still largely a gleam in its proponents' eyes, is an ambitious 30-kilometre walking and cycling route. A necklace through Ottawa's diverse greenspace -- meadows, creek valleys and forest -- it begins in Britannia and loops down through the Southern Corridor before heading north through Alta Vista and ending up at Beechwood Cemetery, one of the capital's loveliest natural treasures.

An initiative of the Greenspace Alliance, an umbrella organization that includes a dozen community groups dedicated to public and private greenspace conservation in the national capital region, the Poets' Pathway project grew out of the kind of epiphany Mr. Royds had -- a belief that cultural heritage and the environment, especially in this area, are inseparable.

The pathway committee includes environmental activists and literary experts such as co-chair Steve Artelle, whose doctorate in English literature is built on an expertise in Ottawa's 19th-century poets. The 34-year-old project manager at Library and Archives Canada spends his volunteer time with fellow pathway enthusiasts.

"As a literary historian, I love the idea of putting these things on the map and having a tangible connection to these words and these stories. There's more to this stuff than just words in a textbook."

Meant to commemorate Ottawa's poets and their contributions to our national literature (there will be plaques along the way eventually, if they can get the money), the pathway also honours the natural world that inspired those writers. It is, in short, a celebration of natural and cultural legacy, gloriously entwined.

Or at least it will be, if the gods of politics and fiscal largesse are smiling.

At the moment, only the initial stage of the project is ready. On Wednesday, Poet's Hill will be formally opened at Beechwood Cemetery, where Lampman is buried along with fellow

Confederation poets Duncan Campbell Scott and Wilfred Campbell.

The current Parliamentary Poet Laureate, Pauline Michel, will be on hand to do the readings for the event, open to the public and scheduled for 5-7 p.m.

Just the other side of the lovely gardens that flank the entrance to the cemetery, Poet's Hill is a soft natural area (with a glimpse of the Peace Tower, if you stand in the right spot and face west) with a granite lectern for readings. There is a marker plaque at the base of the hill and dedicated flower beds have been planted with perennial flowers. In time, there will also be plaques of engraved poems and a national poets' monument.

"Everything has a book theme," says Roger Boulton, the cemetery's assistant general manager. "It's going to be very attractive to a lot of people."

The rest of the Poets' Pathway will come into being over an indeterminate number of years, urban development and financial resources depending. That includes a smartly designed commemorative area at the entrance to McCarthy Woods (near the famous snowshoeing area) that the Pathway committee would like to see inaugurated as the project's next step.

Beyond that, it is still just a hope, albeit one that could be implemented without too much difficulty, since most of the route would make use of existing green corridors and recreational paths. All that's needed, according to its organizers, is the political will to protect the sensitive areas from encroaching development. And a little money.

"We have very limited resources," explains Erwin Dreessen, Mr. Artelle's co-chair on the Poets' Pathway committee. "So we're limited in what we can do. I'm afraid we've had to be much more reactive than proactive."

For Mr. Dreessen, a 62-year-old, semi-retired economist with the federal government, the biggest threat comes from development and the lack of political will to curb it. "Our anxiety stems from those areas where there isn't a pathway and development could destroy the concept."

And not just the route itself. "There's a marvellous view of the Parliament Buildings from Poet's Hill -- but that view is not protected. That's where I want to bring in the National Capital Commission and say to them, 'Surely you would support the protection of a view of the Parliament Buildings.'"

Mr. Dreessen hopes the NCC will show some enthusiasm for the project generally, despite a lack of same to date.

(Not a great deal has changed, it seems. In an 1893 column written for *The Globe*, Lampman lamented, "It is strange that in a country like this, where people talk so much about progress and prosperity and so forth, the number of those who count artistic and esthetic development as one of the things to be sought after is so few.")

The NCC agrees that cultural commemoration is important, Mr. Dreessen notes -- despite a recent survey of its heritage memorials that shows the sole NCC tribute to "intellectual and cultural life" is a memorial to hockey player Maurice Richard. But at the same time, he says, the commission limits its interest to the city core.

"And I think that's a totally outdated concept."

Outside of NCC support, Mr. Dreessen also has community sponsors and private donors on his wish list. Although it has been helped by Beechwood Cemetery and the City of Ottawa, the Poets' Pathway project has received no federal or provincial funding.

They're not asking for the moon and the stars, observes Mr. Artelle. The financial requirements are fairly small-scale, with the cost of each of the sites estimated at roughly \$8,000.

Despite the notoriously glacial pace of progress in this bureaucratic town, the group remains stubbornly optimistic. Says Mr. Royds, past Greenspace Alliance chairman, "Even if the government is slow to recognize poets, maybe citizens can."

"I know there are literary patrons out there somewhere," adds Mr. Artelle. "We need them to come out of the woodwork and support the project with partnerships and funding and community involvement."

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Just over a century ago, they were envisioning grand things for Ottawa. Products of a less cynical age, the poets of the time waxed eloquent about a young Canada's glowing future and its capital's assured place in the cultural flowering of the nation.

Wilfred Campbell, the sometimes bombastic, often curmudgeonly "difficult friend" of Lampman and Scott, compared Ottawa favourably to Venice, Athens and Edinburgh.

Lampman himself predicted that the city would become, in time, "the Florence of Canada," nourished by "an intellectual elixir, an oxygenic essence, thrown off by the immeasurable tracts of pine-clad mountain and crystal lake."

At its 1906 opening, the Ottawa Public Library grandly memorialized Lampman in stained glass (still on view in the current main branch), situating him, the lone Canadian writer, across from Dickens and next to Shakespeare.

But the drive to recognize and honour our best, even as we celebrate their context, has apparently slowed. The Poets' Pathway people think it's time to pick up the pace again. "If the NCC are going to commemorate anything," says Mr. Royds, "they should be commemorating Canadian literature, especially in its historical birthplace."

The proposed pathway is seen as both a revitalization and a restorative.

"A commemoration of Canada's literary heritage since Confederation is overdue," notes the committee's 2005 submission to the NCC. "Throughout Ottawa's history as a national capital, citizens and cultural leaders, both anglophone and francophone, have envisioned the city as a site for national literary expression." The planned commemoration, it continues, "would fulfil the vision expressed by several architects of Confederation, and of many writers of national importance who have called Ottawa home."

And a trail through those writers' natural inspiration seems to be the best way to go about it, its

backers say.

"The thing about Canadian poetry," says Mr. Royds, "is that it's not a drawing room poetry. It's always been a poetry of place."

Nowhere is that more evident than in the verse that has come out of Ottawa. The late Sandra Gwyn, author of *The Private Capital*, once described Ottawa as "an idea carved out of the wilderness." And poets associated with the place, whether passing through or resident for a lifetime, prove her point.

Lampman, Scott and Campbell, the city's three Confederation poets (so called because they were all born in the first decade of Confederation) observed the natural world around them constantly. And in countless lyric poems and a few narrative ones, they celebrated it -- rivers, meadows, forests, birds, hills, weather, animals, flowers, sunrises, sunsets.

But they were neither the first nor the last to make poetry in Ottawa.

As early as 1832, when the rough riverside community was still called Bytown, a settler/politician named Hamnett Kirkes Pinhey (he of the Point) wrote a political satire titled *The Carleton Election, or The Tale of a Bytown Ram*.

The new city of Ottawa's first clerk, William Pittman Lett, composed a long narrative poem (in rhyming couplets verging on doggerel) celebrating the community's founders and residents. *Recollections of Bytown and its Old Inhabitants* -- printed in 1874 by the Citizen Printing and Publishing Company, which assumed a vital publishing role for new work in a small city that didn't have the production capacities of Montreal or Toronto -- speaks of canal navvies, Col. By, a Clegg, a Stewart, a McArthur, a Patterson (of Creek fame) and such everyday events as trade in the booming lumber town, cholera, schooling, medical practice and news of the day. Toward the end of the century, says Mr. Artelle, it became a mark of distinction in an Ottawa obituary to observe that the deceased had appeared in Lett's poem.

In the days before Lampman, who is often mistakenly recognized as representing the beginnings of literary culture in Ottawa, there were also poets Charles Sangster and Charles Mair, who came to Ottawa to serve the new Canadian government (and wrote numerous nature poems in their leisure time). Henry James Morgan compiled the first bibliography of post-Confederation Canlit. When he wasn't busy with his duties as an MP, the eloquent Thomas D'Arcy McGee could turn it out with the best of them.

And a group of stunningly talented francophones from Quebec arrived to work for the new government -- and enrich literary life in Ottawa while they were here, with their poetry and thoughtful public discussions of art and literature. Among this group, nicknamed *Le Cercle des Dix*, were Alfred Garneau, Antoine Gerin-Lajoie and Achille Frechette. The latter married Annie Howells, sister of American critic William Dean Howells, and set up one of the liveliest literary salons in New Edinburgh, one that Lampman and Scott were known to frequent.

And contemporary with Lampman was the strange character named Nicholas Flood Davin, an Irish expatriate who ended up a dedicated Canadian nationalist and an MP from Saskatchewan. Lawyer and egalitarian (like Lampman, he believed in full equality for women), he was also a

poet much admired at the time. His long rambling narrative poem, *Eos -- A Prairie Dream*, paints his vision for a utopian Canada.

An unstable character who once danced on a tabletop in the House of Commons and often seemed to be "under the influence of alcoholic excitement," according to the governor general's visiting brother-in-law, he lost his Commons seat and complicated his personal life with a wife, a mistress and two illegitimate children. He ended up committing suicide in 1901, and influential community members erected a fine bronze monument to him at Beechwood, where Wilfred Campbell read out a poem about "his kindly satire, scintillating wit,/His classic mind."

All these, as well as men of letters like Arthur S. Bourinot -- a child when Lampman and Scott visited his home in the 1890s -- carved out poetry from the Ottawa they saw around them.

If Mr. Artelle has his way, the Poets' Pathway will be just the beginning of moves to honour that literary legacy. He hopes people will also discover other sites within the city to remember the poets.

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Those following traces of the poet might even pay a visit to St. Margaret's church on Montreal Road in present-day Vanier, then a village area where Lampman enjoyed strolling. The lovely stone church was the Anglican parish attended by Kate Waddell, the former teacher and colleague with whom Lampman is believed to have had a passionate extramarital affair. A few years after his death, Waddell had a memorial plaque to him put up in the church, and at the unveiling ceremony, Lampman's sister, an accomplished musician, played the organ. The poet's footprints are everywhere.

Mr. Artelle also hopes that the notion of honouring our writers' contributions becomes an ongoing, organic thing, not limited to dead poets of the 19th century. He mentions John Newlove, who died in 2003 and is buried in a simple Beechwood grave. Newlove's poetry won him a Governor General's Award and a Lampman Award, given to poets of the National Capital Region. He mentions Margaret Atwood, born in Ottawa in 1939. Her first home in the Glebe still stands.

"I really believe that Ottawa has a literary character," says Mr. Artelle, "a literary history that is unique across Canada. It's so connected to the story of Canada."

That story is rooted deep in the soil of the proposed pathway, he suggests. The meandering trail would lead from the shores of the great river that inspired poets, through the countryside that fed their lyric creativity, to the graveyard that memorializes them.

And those who follow it, when it opens some day in its entirety, will be tracing the footsteps of departed visionaries who helped cut a great green swath through the national imagination.

Janice Kennedy is a senior writer at *The Citizen*.

More on the web: To read poems from Ottawa's three Confederation poets, see Online Extras at

BRITANNIA

"The Chaudiere fills/The calm with its hushed roar; the river takes/An unquiet rest." (Ottawa Before Dawn, Duncan Campbell Scott, 1862-1947)

With three rivers figuring prominently in the history of the area and its one-time logging town, the Poets' Pathway begins naturally on the Ottawa River, west of the Chaudiere at Britannia. Few Ottawa poets have not written, at one time or another, about the area's waterways. Scott, who also wrote a dramatic narrative poem about a logging tragedy, used to take canoe trips along the Ottawa with his best friend, Archie Lampman. Lampman and Wilfred Campbell wrote poems titled To the Ottawa (and Campbell dedicated one to the Rideau as well), Arthur S. Bourinot wrote about Night on the Ottawa River and even public servant/man-of-letters Antoine Gerin-Lajoie must have taken a certain nostalgic joy in the setting. Author of the lovely lyric Un canadien errant, which he wrote while still a student, Gerin-Lajoie placed his exiled patriote on a foreign riverbank where he hoped the "fugitive current" would carry his words of loss and longing back home.

NEPEAN CREEK

"At morning down the Merivale road/When all the world is June,/ Of woods and fields the blest abode/And meadow larks atune." (Down the Merivale Road, William Wilfred Campbell, 1860-1918)

In 1915, Campbell bought a spacious stone farm house near Merivale Road (it exists still, a lovely home with large front lawns) in Cityview, one of Ottawa's early "streetcar suburbs," so called because they were accessible from downtown by streetcar. He called it "Kilmorie" and it was idyllic, given its natural setting. Strolling out in the morning, two minutes from his home, he came to Merivale Road, which inspired his poem about trees, wildflowers and bucolic peace. Today, where his street meets Merivale, the sweet song of the meadowlark -- should one ever stray into that inhospitable airspace -- would be drowned out by the noise of the endless traffic, the vision of maples in the sun has been supplanted by a tangle of overhead wires and the meadows full of daisies and buttercups have been taken over by strip malls, a faux-Irish pub, three gas stations and a bingo hall.

Pathway proponents view this as cautionary contrast. But there's still some greenspace along the old creek area nearby leading toward the Rideau River, and, Merivale Road notwithstanding, pathway proponents see the strip of land as a good link to the McCarthy Woods and the Southern Corridor.

RIDEAU RIVER CROSSING

"Such were the men, and such alone,/Who quarried the vast piles of stone,/Those mighty, ponderous, cut-stone blocks,/With which Mackay built up the Locks." (Recollections of Bytown and Its Old Inhabitants, William Pittman Lett, 1819-1892)

Taming the Rideau River and building a canal through the wilderness became part of Ottawa's rough-and-tumble heritage, and writers have frequently noted the young city's less than genteel

character. As Lett, Ottawa's first city clerk, noted, "ancient Bytown" was "a place of busy working men,/Who handled barrows and pickaxes,/Tamping irons and broadaxes,/And paid no Corporation taxes." The planned Poets' Pathway would cross the Rideau by means of a pedestrian bridge suspended from an existing railway bridge, but Bytown's navvies knew a rougher life as they created the waterway that helped define the city. Twentieth-century poet Raymond Souster referred to it as "the canal of green-drowsing water" and wondered about its larger metaphor: "Perhaps the canal only sleeps/ dreaming of the day both sides/of her mighty river will be as one."

McCARTHY WOODS

"I sit in the great silence as one bound;/The rippled sheet of snow where the wind blew/Across the open fields for miles ahead;/ The far-off city towered and roofed in blue/A tender line upon the western red." (Winter Uplands, Archibald Lampman, 1861-1899)

Birthplace of the pathway project, this area near Uplands Drive was where Bill Royds went snowshoeing late one winter day a dozen years ago and realized -- hearing the frosty silence and seeing Parliament Hill on the distant horizon -- he was probably tramping in the final footsteps of Lampman, Ottawa's greatest poet. An environmental activist, heritage enthusiast and poetry buff, Royds saw the serendipitous confluence. He already knew the area needed to be preserved for its beauty and ecological importance. Now he understood that heritage and cultural significance had to be added to the preservation arguments.

ALTA VISTA GREENSPACE

"How dreamy-dark it is!...This is the hour/When fire-flies flit about each lofty crag,/And down the valleys sail on lucid wing....And, far away, where stands the forest dim,/Huge-built of old, their tremulous lights are seen." (The Fireflies, Charles Mair, 1838-1927)

Mair, who came to Ottawa to work in the new government in 1868, was known for his detailed nature poetry, no doubt inspired by the beauty of the area. The Southern Corridor represents the best of what Ottawa has to offer, according to Greenspace volunteer and ecology student Thomas Kapler, who calls it "the jewel in the necklace" that is the Poets' Pathway. While the natural values used in environmental studies are, he says, elusive, a walk through the area is a powerful argument in favour of conservation. He cites Lampman's Solitude. "The Southern Corridor is one of the few places that's accessible from the city where one can find solitude." There is, he says, huge inherent value in that.

Lampman, of course, would have agreed. So would Alfred Garneau, one of the Quebec poet/public servants who came to serve the new Confederation government and ended up contributing to Ottawa's literary scene. Called "le poete du Nord," Garneau wrote arrestingly evocative verse about forests, waterfalls, wildflowers and the delicate perfection of birdsong. He would have been a natural friend of the Southern Corridor with its woods, meadows and countless bird species.

POET'S HILL AT BEECHWOOD CEMETERY

"Right in the midst a hill, fit throne for rule,/And crowning this were stately structures,

towers/And domes and gothic arches quaint, with rich/Device of ornament." (Eos -- A Prairie Dream, Nicholas Flood Davin, 1839-1901)

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[Illustration]

Photo: Duncan Campbell Scott; Photo: William Wilfred Campbell; Photo: William Pittman Lett; Photo: Nicholas Flood Davin; Photo: Archibald Lampman; Photo: Charles Mair; Map: (See hard copy for map.)

[What ProQuest missed:]

If you want to help

Donations to the Poets' Pathway project may be made through the Ottawa Sustainability Fund of the Community Foundation of Ottawa, making reference to "Poets' Pathway."

Tax receipts will be issued for donations of \$20 and more.

The Foundation is at: 75 Albert St., Suite 301 Ottawa ON K1P 5E7. For more information, contact Bibi Patel, Director of Development and Donor Services, at 613-236-1616, ext. 226.

Donations may also be made online at www.canadahelps.org/CharityProfilePage.aspx?CharityID=31222 .