

COMMEMORATING CANADIAN POETS

Date: May 3, 2005
To: National Capital Commission
From: The Poets' Pathway Committee, on behalf of
The Greenspace Alliance of Canada's Capital and
The Ottawa Literary Heritage Society

Summary

A commemoration of Canada's literary heritage since Confederation is overdue. A Poets' Pathway in Ottawa would be a fitting tribute. It will commemorate Canadian poetry as well as preserve specific views and landscapes that have contributed to the capital's unique literary environment.

One anchor of the Poets' Pathway is likely to be established at Beechwood Cemetery by the fall of 2005. Another key anchor is a heritage park on NCC-owned lands in the Southern Corridor.

It is recommended that, as a first measure, the Southern Corridor lands be reserved for potential designation as a Canadian Poets' Park.

Introduction and background

The Greenspace Alliance of Canada's Capital presented the concept of a Poets' Pathway at the inaugural meeting of Commissioners with interest groups in May 2002.

The Poets' Pathway Committee has since worked with Ottawa City staff and achieved incorporation of the Pathway proposal in Ottawa's Official Plan and its Arts and Heritage Plan of 2003.

The Southern Corridor is an unbuilt swath of land of about 150 ha between Walkley Road and Hunt Club Road, and between the Rideau River and the Airport Parkway; it includes about 40 ha of mature forest, called McCarthy Woods. Most of this land is owned by the NCC and was declared surplus in 1988. Political and popular opposition has prevented its development.

The Poets' Pathway Committee has produced designs for a commemorative site at the entrance to McCarthy Woods as well as an initial sketch of options for a literary heritage park in the Southern Corridor.

The Ottawa Literary Heritage Society grew out of the Poets' Pathway Committee and was formed in May 2003. Its mandate is to promote the civic and national significance of Ottawa's literary history through education, documentation and communication initiatives, as well as through commemoration projects such as the Poets' Pathway.

The NCC's commemoration and programming mandate does not restrict it to activities in the core area of the National Capital Region.

During policy development for the Commission's Commemoration Strategic Plan, staff has found representation in the Capital of Canada's Intellectual and Cultural Life to be nearly absent.

An overdue commemoration

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. A commemoration of Canadian literary achievement here in the capital would fulfill the vision expressed by several architects of Confederation, and of many writers of national importance who have called Ottawa home. (Please refer to "Ottawa: Canada's Literary Capital," attached.)

Canada's literary culture is characterized by its sense of place and, in particular, an engagement with the natural environment. The landscape that Archibald Lampman described in "Winter Uplands" and the view of the Rideau River as expressed by Alfred Garneau in "La Rivière" are still available in precious spots – in the Southern Corridor. Both of these renowned poets – exponents of the Confederation Poets and the Mouvement littéraire respectively – called Ottawa home in the nineteenth century and made lasting impressions on Canadian literary culture.

A commemoration of poetry in the national capital must build on that sense of place. For a fitting commemoration, the Southern Corridor is a necessary anchor.

Current status

Discussions with the Beechwood Cemetery Foundation have begun with the aim of inaugurating the first phase of the Poets' Pathway by this fall.

An appeal of designation of part of the Southern Corridor lands in the City's new Official Plan as Open Space is pending. Discussions are ongoing in the context of the City's development of a Greenspace Master Plan and associated Official Plan amendments.

A recent environmental evaluation of greenspace in Ottawa's urban area has designated most of the meadow adjacent to McCarthy Woods as "prime feeding habitat for urban woodland raptors," including Screech Owl, Cooper's Hawk and Merlin.

Recommendations

1. That the Commission agree in principle to a commemoration of Canadian literary heritage and, as a first measure, recommend that staff take the Southern Corridor lands off the list of lands surplus to its mandate and reserve the land for potential designation as a Canadian Poets' Park.

2. That the option to designate the Southern Corridor as a literary heritage park be part of a comprehensive planning study for these lands.

3. That the Commission agree to work with City of Ottawa staff, the Greenspace Alliance of Canada's Capital, the Ottawa Literary Heritage Society and the Beechwood Cemetery Foundation to develop an action plan for implementation of the Poets' Pathway.

The GREENSPACE ALLIANCE OF CANADA'S CAPITAL was formed in October 1997 and currently has a membership of a dozen organizations and some 50 individuals. It is federally incorporated. Its primary aim is to conserve public and private greenspace. This includes natural and landscaped places deemed significant by a community. It also works to protect waterways and wetlands.

We believe that urban greenness is essential for a community's quality of life. Places of greenness contribute to our personal, social, economic, cultural and spiritual well-being. They also connect us with the natural and cultural history of our region.

The Greenspace Alliance works with citizens and groups to save community and regional greenspace. To that end, it sends written comments and makes presentations to all levels of government.

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The OTTAWA LITERARY HERITAGE SOCIETY was formed in May 2003. Its mandate is to promote the civic and national significance of Ottawa's literary history through education, documentation and communication initiatives.

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The POETS' PATHWAY COMMITTEE is co-chaired by Drs. Erwin Dreessen and Steven Artelle for the Greenspace Alliance and the OLHS respectively.

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Ottawa: Canada's Literary Capital**Our Vision**

Great nations have always taken great pride in their literary achievements. Canada is no exception — throughout Ottawa's history as a national capital, citizens and cultural leaders have envisioned the city as a site for national literary expression and commemoration. Exemplifying that vision in October 1896, an editorial in *The Lounger*, an Ottawa periodical, proclaimed:

"It is about time that we in Canada should consider keeping alive the memories of the many men and women, who, by their literary or other gifts, have added in some degree, more or less, to the development of our culture and intelligence. Should there not be some place in the Dominion—and what more fit place than Ottawa—where not only samples of their worth might be found or consulted, but where memorials of them might be preserved."

A memorial site honouring Canadian literary achievement would fulfill the vision expressed by several of the architects of Confederation, and of the many writers of national importance who have called Ottawa home.

Thomas D'Arcy McGee, 1867:

"... if 'stone walls do not a prison make,' still less do they make a capital—a ruling city—a seat of light and guidance, and authority, to a nation or a generation. When the Parliamentary buildings were finished at Ottawa, one of the first problems was to regulate the heating apparatus, in short, to make them habitable for half the year; and this precisely is the problem with us in relation to another and equally necessary kind of plenishing and furnishing, for town and country. It remains for us to learn whether we have the internal heat and light...."

Adams George Archibald, 1868:

"[Ottawa has] been placed in a proud position. You have become the centre of a population of four millions. The eyes of this people are on you. The tastes you cultivate, the habits you cherish, the extent of intellectual life which breathes and glows among you, will show whether you deserve this glorious elevation."

Sir John A. Macdonald, 1872:

"... the civil service of Canada would compare favorably with that of any country in the world[;] here there were, among its members, poets, men of science and men of literary tastes and habits, some of whom had even European fame, and if they had not more of public acknowledgment, it was rather because of a limited sphere of action than of capacity."

Joseph Howe, 1872:

"I would have the young men of Ottawa not only dutiful and good, but refined, accomplished, and intellectual—ambitious to make the political Capital of the country the home of the Arts, the literary centre of the Confederacy, the fountain-head of elevated thought and laudable ambition. "

Sir Wilfrid Laurier, 1893

"...and when the day comes, as it will come by and by, it shall be my pleasure and that of my colleagues, I am sure, to make the city of Ottawa the centre of the intellectual development of this country..."

Archibald Lampman, 1893

"Viewed at a distance of two or three miles, from any point of the compass, bossed with its central mass of towers, its lower and less presentable quarters buried behind rock or wood, [Ottawa] is one of the loveliest cities in the world. It is so placed that it can never be anything but beautiful, and as the years go on, bringing with them the spread of a finer architecture and a richer culture of the surrounding country, its beauty will be vastly greater than it is even now. It will become an ideal city for the artist."