
GLENGARRY HISTORICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

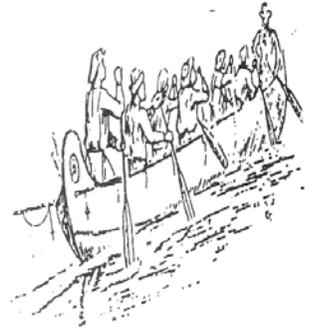
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NEXT MEETING

Date: Thursday, October 6, 2005
Time: 8:00 p.m.
Place: Alexandria United Church-on-the-Hill
Topic: **The Battle of the St. Lawrence**



The Battle of the St. Lawrence

Nathan M. Greenfield will be joining us on Thursday evening, October 6, to discuss his recently published book, *The Battle of the St. Lawrence: The Second World War in Canada*.

The battle of the St. Lawrence remains unique as the sole breach of North American territorial integrity between the ending of the War of 1812 and September 11, 2001. The battle raged from May 11, 1942 until the final sinking of HMCS Shawinigan on November 25, 1944. In the span of two and a half years, German U-boats succeeded in infiltrating the waters of the Gulf of the St. Lawrence, torpedoing 27 ships, of which 24 were sunk with a loss of 364 lives.

This is a page in Canadian history that has all but been forgotten. Nowhere does the story appear in our school curriculums, too often still bending the knee to Great Man Theories of history. Greenfield describes it as an on-going act of forgetting. This banishment from mainstream Canadian history lends itself however to the invention

of myth and the distortion of reality. Greenfield topples two such myths; that the King government staged the sinkings to boost the sale of Victory Bonds, and “that wartime censorship prevented word of the battle from reaching beyond the Gaspé.

Greenfield points out that many bona fide Canadian newspapers carried the story as it unfolded and, as a matter of public record, the Quebec National Assembly debated the situation in the St. Lawrence while Hansard documents its discussion in the House of Commons.

As Greenfield avers, in the wake of World War II, contemporary Canadian historians avoided discussion of a battle they perhaps perceived as a defeat. Whatever the reasons, Greenfield describes his book as “an act of historical discovery.”

The Battle of the St. Lawrence provides detailed descriptions of the torpedo warfare waged between 1942 and 1944 that touch on a variety of historical topics.

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**Edith Aston-McCrimmon
1929-2005**

McGill University lowers its flag upon the death of Prime Ministers, Governors General and Heads of State. In early September, McGill took the unprecedented action of lowering its flag to half-mast to honour the passing of one of its longest serving and best-loved professors – **Edith Aston-McCrimmon**.

Edith received a Diploma in Physiotherapy from McGill in 1950 and began her career with the Belleville General Hospital in Belleville, ON. From there, she moved on to the California Rehabilitation Centre, returning to McGill in 1952 where Edith worked as a demonstrator and lecturer while spending summers providing physiotherapy services at the summer camp for the McKay Centre for Deaf and Crippled Children.

She pursued her own education earning both a B.Sc. and M.Sc.A. in her chosen field from McGill. In 1962, she was appointed Assistant Professor, as well as Demonstrator in Anatomy and Co-ordinator of the Physical Therapy Program. She was further appointed as an Associate Professor and, in 1988, Edith became the Associate Director, Physical Therapy Program, at McGill, a post she held almost continually until her retirement, a bit of a red herring, as Edith never did actually retire.

Throughout her career, Edith attended over 40 courses to continually upgrade her skills. She was the author of numerous articles on Physical and Occupational Therapy and spoke at over 20 invited engagements. She was involved professionally with both the Canadian Physiotherapy Association (CPA) and the l'Ordre professionnel des physiothérapeutes du Québec, serving as President of both associations, while chairing or serving on many of the associations' committees. In 1976 the CPA made her an Honorary Member and then a Life Member in 1997. In 1999, the l'Ordre professionnel des physiothérapeutes du Québec further awarded her Le Priz d'excellence

In her pseudo-retirement, Edith assumed responsibility as the Southern Co-ordinator for the Certificate in Health and Social Services Management offered through McGill's Centre for Continuing Education to the managers of the Nunavik Regional Board of Health and Social Services at Povungnituk and Kuujuaq.

Edith's Curriculum Vitae runs to ten pages, an outstanding testament to her career in Physical and Occupational Therapy at McGill. Even more astonishing is the simple fact that her CV speaks only to her professional career, leaving aside her myriad volunteer activities and personal pursuits. Here in Glengarry we have lost one of our brightest lights. A Lifetime member of both the Glengarry Historical Society and the Glengarry Pioneer Museum, Edith has always been a great supporter of our organizations and events. To restrict an obituary for Edith to one page is a virtual impossibility. She enjoyed skiing, swimming, cooking, gardening and, above all, reading, just a few of her many activities. Edith Aston-McCrimmon was a one-of-a-kind lady. We offer heartfelt condolences to Don as well as the Aston and McCrimmon families.

Nathan M. Greenfield, Ph.D.

Educated in New York and Montreal, and formerly the pop culture historian for CBC Radio One's, *Definitely Not the Opera*, Dr. Greenfield writes for the *Times Education Supplement* and the *Times Literary Supplement*.

On a chance visit to the Gaspé in 2001, Greenfield stumbled across evidence and old battle scars from the battles fought in the Gulf. His interest piqued, he began investigating the contours of the battle which resulted first in an article for *Maclean's* magazine, followed by the presentation of a paper at a military history symposium. The final product of all this research is *The Battle of the St. Lawrence*.

"Once bitten, twice shy" definitely does not apply to history as any historian or history buff well knows. Dr. Greenfield has yet another book in the works about the World War I Battle of Ypres in April 1915. We look forward to Harper Collins' release of Dr. Greenfield's new book.

And Who is Ted Read?

Mr. E.H. (Ted) Read is a resident of local Glen Roy and an absolutely delightful telephone conversationalist whom I hope to meet on October 6th. He is, however, much more than this, being a survivor of the torpedoing of the SS Oakton on September 7, 1942, as she steamed toward the tip of the Gaspé peninsula.

A native Montrealer (and therefore a man after my own heart!), Ted grew up alongside the Lachine Canal in its heyday when it was thick with traffic from the great trans-Atlantic ships and the steamers from the Great Lakes. And so the young man wanted to go to sea.

His dad, C.H. Read, a native of Newfoundland, had served under Sergeant

Major Alf Brown in the Royal Newfoundland Regiment who was later to take on young Ted as a deckhand. He was quickly commandeered as a second cook aboard the Oakton which Greenfield describes as "a flat-bottomed scow, designed to fit into the small locks of the Welland and Lachine canals."

As Read described it to Nathan Greenfield, September 7, 1942 was "a beautiful sunny day" as the merchant ship ran down the St. Lawrence hugging the shoreline. "In an instant, a picture-postcard afternoon had turned to war." According to Read, "Seconds later, as I got out on deck, I felt the Oakton ... it was like it missed a beat. A deep rumbling thud, coming from beneath it. I ran, but the deck wasn't where my feet expected it to be. The explosion of the torpedo didn't destroy the deck. No, it drove the ship down – the entire length of the ship down - into the water. ... You could feel her going down."

The sinking of the Oakton, however, did not end Ted's sea-going career. He served on two more ships after her until he joined the army at the end of 1942 where he remained for the duration of the war, serving in Italy and Holland.

With the war's end, Ted returned to civilian life and went to work for Ma Bell who transferred him up here to Old Glengarry a long 28 years ago. Ted and his wife made the county their home for most of their 45 years of marriage until her death 10 years ago. Ted carries on in their home enjoying the cultivation of "grass, trees, and woods" as he puts it. We look forward to hearing Ted's stories on October 6th.

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Foremost among these was the relative state of preparedness for war between Hitler's Third Reich and the Allies. The inflated numbers of personnel in the Royal Canadian Navy and the Royal Canadian Naval Reserve

between 1939 and 1945 describe the tragedy of young men with no training who went to war, did their best with less than state-of-the-art equipment and, too often, did not come home. By dint of repetition, Greenfield drives home his point; Able Seaman So-and-So, age 20, age 22, age 19 until one is overwhelmed by the loss of such a vast number of young people.

Today we acknowledge that society has undergone a technological revolution in the past 60 years that swamps the Industrial Revolution into insignificance. In the early 1940s, radar was in its infancy, asdic operations could be disrupted simply by rough waters, the retaliatory depth charges had a constrained range. Paradoxically, the dearth of reliable technology during World War II gave birth to technology as we know it today. Shortly after the War ended, COBOL, the mother of all high-level computer programming languages, was developed by a female U.S. naval captain, Grace Hopper. Not to mention of course the best and worst product of that war, the ability to split the atom.

Technology, however, is only one of the historical subjects touched on by the Battle of the St. Lawrence. Another was the conscription issue, a hot topic in 1942 that beleaguered the always-tense relationship between French and English Canada as well as between the Federal and Quebec governments. Greenfield's research uncovers a story on the Gaspé peninsula and in and around the Gulf of the St. Lawrence that gives the lie to the traditional stereotype that French Canada did not support conscription

Gaspé MP Sasseville Roy and Quebec MNA Onésime Gagnon argued early in the battle for more government support of military personnel in the Gulf. Indeed when Rimouski's archbishop, Monseigneur Georges Courchènes, vociferously objected to the air training school established at Mont

Joli, the largest of the thirty British Commonwealth Air Training Plan bases in Canada, his own flock defected from his directives. The local Rimouski newspaper, *L'Echo du Bas Saint-Laurent*, indicates that the public supported the Fusiliers and the air base, viewing those who opposed it as "Les Dupes de l'Allemagne."

The issue of French Canada's support for the war reared its head yet again in the hotly debated issue of whether or not to close the St. Lawrence to transoceanic shipping. A tremendous loss to the local economies along the St. Lawrence, closing the river also had major repercussions for the Port of Montreal who stood to lose out to those of Halifax and Saint John. It was a difficult and thorny problem to resolve beleaguered as the King government was with security considerations that affected not only Canada but the United States and the United Kingdom as well.

Greenfield discusses all of these situations and concerns that touched upon the Battle of the St. Lawrence and he has done so in a gripping and compelling manner. Do come along on October 6th and hear Dr. Greenfield tell of how a passenger ferry, the SS Caribou, was torpedoed and went down with 136 men, women and children on board. In addition, Mr. E.H. (Ted) Read, who hails from local Glen Roy, will be with us to tell of the terrible night of September 7, 1942 when he survived the sinking of the SS Oakton.

See You on October 6th

. . . . Rosemary O.