

## ONTARIO HISTORY AT 100 YEARS

Through *Ontario History*, the Ontario Historical Society provides Canada with its second oldest continuous historical publication. In 1899 the Society began to print *Papers and Records*. This was only two years after George Wrong of the History Department at the University of Toronto began the *Review of Historical Publications Relating to Canada*. Since 1920 the *Canadian Historical Review*, a publication of the University of Toronto Press, had served as a successor to that earlier national journal.

From the outset, the two sets of publications were as different as the organizations that had created them. The OHS had been founded in 1888 as the Pioneer Association of Ontario. The original name provides a clue to the early nature of the OHS. Imbued with a profound sense of progress, early activists wanted to record the ascent of Ontario from rudimentary settlement to proud member of an industrial British empire stretching around the world. The pioneers needed to be given their due.

This orientation was expressed in the Society's early publications. Contributions were highly eclectic, much as the contents of most historical journals remain today. When I was doing research into those records, two things leapt out at me: the prominent role of women, and the attention paid to everyday life in the early days of agricultural settlement in the province.

One character came to fascinate me. Clementina Fessenden not only had an alluringly exotic name, but as I was later to find tramping around the Anglican church and cemetery in Dundas before having my investigation at the Hamilton Public Library stopped by an anti-Harris day of protest, Clementina Fessenden was 'she who would not have her age ever known.'

Clementina Fessenden was an ordinary Canadian who retains historical significance for two reasons other than her determination that no one know how old she was. Using the OHS as her base, Fessenden agitated for a flag day to spread the gospel of imperialistic patriotism. Eventually the letters she wrote, the articles she composed, and the speeches that she gave resulted at the end of the nineteenth century in the creation of Empire Day. This idea then migrated to Britain, but critics like Queen's University professor Oscar Douglas Skelton denounced the annual school exercise as no more than stuffing jingoism into young minds.

History mattered dearly to Clementina Fessenden. It promoted patriotism and lifted into humanity's realm a country small in the world's arena. In believing that history promoted patriotism, and her own Loyalist heritage in particular, Fessenden differed little from many seeking to expand the subject in any number of countries. Women and men worked together in the enterprise despite frequently thorny disagreements.

If Clementina Fessenden, the wife of an Anglican priest who eventually died in poverty, represented one stream, then George Wrong stood for another. Wrong's family background was equally obscure, but he had married the daughter of prominent Liberal and University of Toronto Chancellor Edward Blake. No less an imperialist than Fessenden, Wrong was inspired by an Oxford University that he had viewed fleetingly one summer. He began the *Review of Historical Publications* to establish critical scholarly standards. Unlike the OHS's publications, the *Review* aimed at bringing Canadian history into line with developments originating in Germany.

In Fessenden the populist, and Wrong the university scholar, we see two strands among the history promoters that remain to this day. The university group, once very small and very struggling apart from its power through words, gained strength in numbers as post-secondary education expanded after World War II, particularly during the 1970s when the number of universities in the world doubled. The OHS and its journal gradually shifted in this direction. The editorial advisory committee draws on university historians, but a conscious attempt is also made to enlist independent scholars.

Some would like to see *Ontario History* as a popular magazine, but the stumbling block has always been money. The English-speaking population of the entire country is smaller than that of either the state of New York or California. Even when writers for the journal are commissioned, as they seldom are, there is no remuneration. Volunteer commitment has kept the publication going, although severe cuts have recently reduced the journal to two issues a year rather than four.

The two strands of historical interest represented by Fessenden and Wrong continue to run parallel rather than being fully inter-twined. Respecting these differences in the face of a larger world little interested in internecine quarrels or proclivities is critical to successful historical enterprise. Today only one half of the journal's subscribers also take Society membership. There would be no *Ontario History* without The Ontario Historical Society. The journal is only one of a number of programmes that OHS undertakes to advance historical interest in the province.

*Ontario History* today remains contested space as much as it was in the past. It strives to inform through providing the most insightful new provincial history intended to reach readers of varying backgrounds. While what results is not always to everyone's taste, the journal's offerings attempt to appeal to a broad cross-section of historical interests. The expansive mandate governing *Ontario History* during its first century will need to continue during its second.

By Terry Crowley. Reprinted from the *OHS Bulletin* no. 114, with the permission of the Ontario Historical Society.