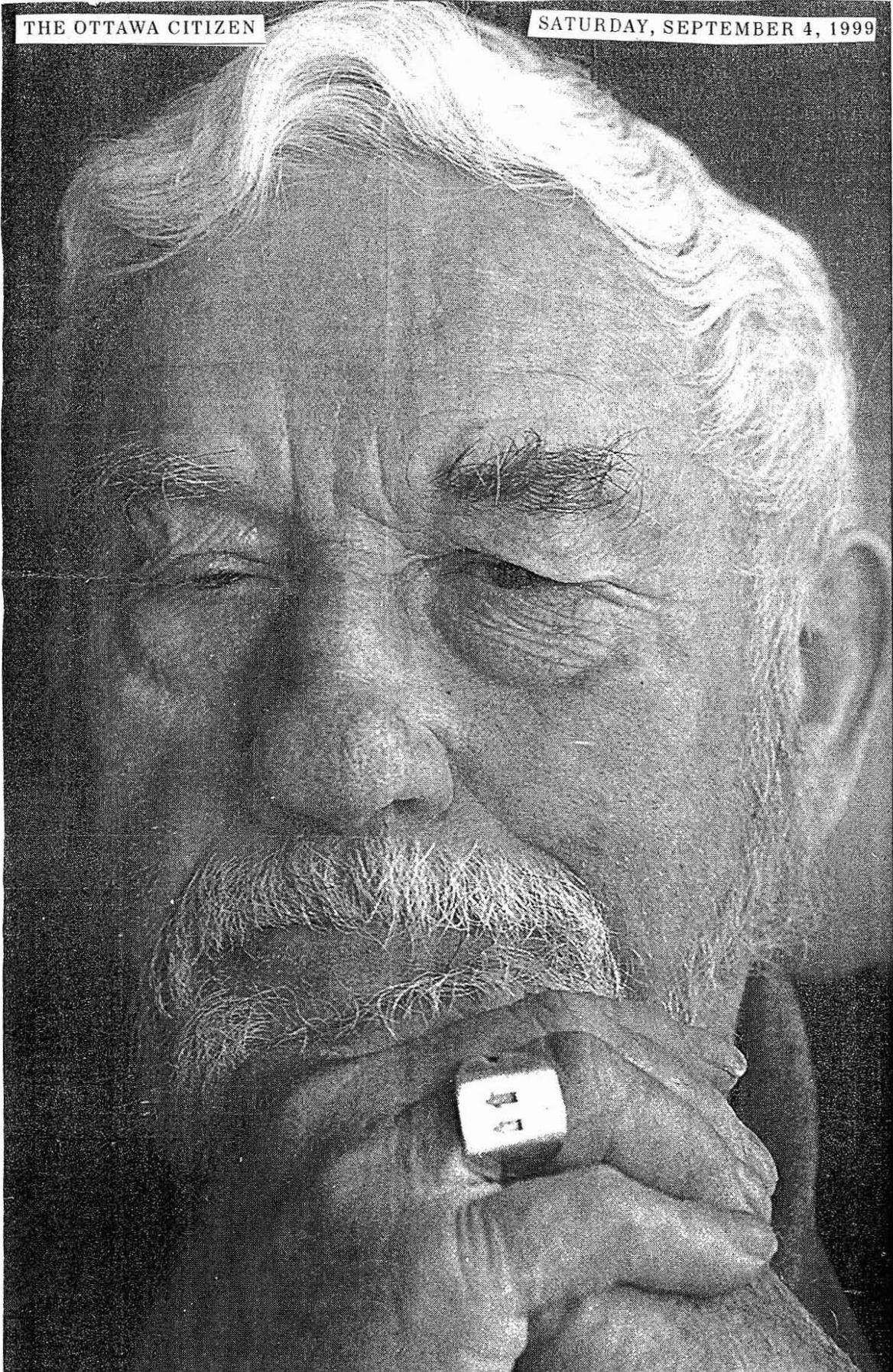


# In pursuit of history

THE OTTAWA CITIZEN

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 4, 1999



ROD MACIVOR, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN

**Hugh MacMillan developed an interest in family history early on, which led to an interest in the fur trade, which led to a career in Canadiana research.**

# Hugh MacMillan has been dogged and tireless in sleuthing for rare and priceless artifacts that illuminate Canada's past, Allan Levine writes.

A recent *Citizen* article described the discovery of the brass compass case of Sir Alexander Mackenzie by two dogged historical sleuths. It was located in New Zealand and repatriated to a museum in Eastern Ontario.

Hugh P. MacMillan, along with David Anderson — both of them skilled fur-trade researchers — spent more than a decade locating the artifact and returning it, on permanent loan from its owner, Pipe Major Rolland McKenzie. The compass case is a rare memento of one of Canada's greatest adventurers and explorers.

Mackenzie's accomplishments are a matter of general knowledge. But not those of Hugh MacMillan, who, since 1960, has been in constant pursuit of hidden historical bonanzas. Experience gleaned from 25 years as liaison officer for the Archives of Ontario have made him a historian's Sherlock Holmes.

In 1984, he was honoured by Laurentian University in Sudbury with a Doctorate of Letters for bringing many lost historical documents into the care of the Ontario Archives. He also helped found the Nor'Westers and Loyalist Museum in Williamstown, as well as the Pioneer Museum in Dunvegan.

Mr. MacMillan is first and foremost a hunter. The game he pursues is the rarest of Canadiana, priceless and irreplaceable historical documents and relics. One of his hunts may take years and require much travel. He delivers his finds to serious collectors, museums, historical societies and archives.

Mr. MacMillan has done more for Canadian history than a platoon of teachers college grads. The reason is simple: He has personally searched out and acquired hundreds of important collections of primary sources. To quote Hugh, the salutation at the bottom of his letters is "Yours, Aye!" the equivalent of "Ready, aye, ready!"

Hugh MacMillan was born in Fitzroy Harbour, near Arnprior, some seven decades ago. The eldest of five children of an itinerant Presbyterian minister, he can trace his roots back to Scotland. His great-great-grandfather John Roy MacMillan came from Lochaber to Glengarry County in 1792. *The Lochaber Emigrants to Glengarry, 1792-1802*, published in 1994 with eight authors, including Hugh MacMillan and his son Ian, also a historian, details how one of his great-great-grandfather's brothers, Allan, and his first cousin, Archibald, brought 446 kinsmen to Canada in 1802.

They settled near Buckingham, Que., and in Glengarry. Impoverished by harsh life in the Highlands, the Scots saw new hope in the vast and fertile lands of the Canadas. But not all were destined to be farmers. Many were businessmen, and still others recognized the potential of the fur trade. Thus they came into the fraternity of the North West Company, archival of the Hudson's Bay Company.

Hugh MacMillan's connection with the fur trade began with his brief involvement in trapping, which was confined to skunks and groundhogs. While in grade school, he and his brother Grant ran a small trapline for pocket money. The tails of skunks and groundhogs fetched 25 cents each. On one occasion, reeking of skunk, they inadvertently interrupted their mother's meeting with the ladies of the church. Mother was not amused, and the boys were forced to sleep in the barn for two nights.

Mr. MacMillan's interest in family history led him to the fur trade, when he learned of the adventurous career of his kinsman James MacMillan (1786-1858), a North West Company partner and assistant to David Thompson, the famous mapmaker, who lived in Williamstown from 1815 to 1837. An offshoot of this interest resulted in many trips with fur-trade canoes between 1965 and 1985.

In company with Prof. Edward Cowan, director of Scottish Studies at the University of Glasgow, Mr. MacMillan organized eight tours to Scotland. Many leads in his paper sleuthing were generated by the Scottish history buffs they took on these tours.

Many of his discoveries involve Glengarry families with a fur-trade connection. One such case related to 39 MacDonell letters written between 1796 and 1833. William Johnson MacDonell, in Boston, was the recipient of these missives, which bring out important and unknown information about the fur trade and the War of 1812. The letters were from MacDonell's sister, Penelope Beike, whose home in York (Toronto) was burned by the Americans in 1813.

Other letters in the collection were from MacDonell's brother Miles, agent of Lord Selkirk who brought Highland settlers to Red River (Manitoba) early in the 19th century, and also from his brother John, a North West Company partner. The MacDonells were all siblings of "Spanish John" MacDonell, assistant to Sir John Johnson, leader of the Loyalists from the Mohawk Valley to Canada.

The letters, now in the Glengarry Historical Society's archives in Williamstown, give a fresh look at the Red River battles of 1815-1816 between the Hudson's Bay Company (Selkirk) and the North West Company. The brothers were on opposite sides!

These same 39 letters finally fell into Mr. MacMillan's hands 20 years after his investigation began. The trail, which started in 1972, followed clues he gleaned from *The Onlooker*, an obscure Unitarian Church paper, and led him to Paris, Ont., Montreal, Glengarry County and Toronto. Mr. MacMillan exhausted every clue and reluctantly abandoned the chase pending some new tip.

The break came in 1992 when Carol Warren contacted Mr. MacMillan. Ms. Warren owned the 39 letters, which had come to her from her father and an aunt, who had been left them by a friend, who inherited them from her brother, an antiquarian collector who in turn had been left them by his friend, William John MacDonnell, a son of William Johnson MacDonell of Boston, who had moved to Toronto. Serendipity was clearly at work here.

Many of his leads, despite their initial promise of success, lead nowhere. Less-than-enlightened heirs, family jealousies, personal sensitivities, hidden agendas and government bureaucracies all serve to confound critical negotiations and recoveries. This is not to mention the homebodies with a penchant for "cleaning up" the items in question, more often than not destroying the worth of the artifacts.

Mr. MacMillan's colleague at the National Archives in Washington, D.C., David C. Mearns, shares his view of the requirements for a successful acquisitions program: "To be truly successful, a program — particularly in the field of manuscripts —

must be imaginative, constant, aggressive, patient, prepared for protracted negotiations, definable, flattering and fun!"

Hugh MacMillan's forthcoming book, *Adventures of a Paper Sleuth* — part autobiography, part 'how-to' book, part mystery story — will set out in detail all the fun, triumph, embarrassment and disappointment engendered in honing a career that is almost without parallel among those who make their life's work in Canadiana research.

The following cases illustrate the paper sleuth at work:

In 1975, Mr. MacMillan was asked by his cousin Duncan Grant to locate family papers and portraits. The trail led to Montreal, where a portion of the archives were in the hands of Gordon Urquhart, a Grant cousin. But Mr. Urquhart proved elusive. Making contact with him took more than a year, and was achieved in a most unorthodox fashion.

Mr. MacMillan located a rented storage space containing Mr. Urquhart's canoe atop his decrepit Jaguar. Mr. MacMillan pinned a note to the canoe. He finally was contacted some time later, only to meet with disappointment. Mr. Urquhart's apartment building had burned to the ground, consuming all his possessions. The portraits and papers were lost forever. Prominent among these were portraits of Alexander Grant (a cousin to Mr. MacMillan's

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### **In the attic of the Brockville courthouse ... Hugh MacMillan uncovered — literally, concealed under two feet of pigeon dung — 28 wooden cases of records.**

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great-great-grandmother) and his wife, Margaret MacDonnell, an aunt of Simon Fraser, discoverer of the British Columbia river that now bears his name. The trail was at an end. Or so it appeared.

Ten years later, in 1985, Mr. MacMillan was leading a Nor'Wester brigade of voyageur canoes to a historical trade conference at Montreal. They had embarked from Ottawa two days before and were camped at Duldreggan Hall, an old Nor'Wester Company house near L'Orignal.

Their hosts, Betty and Drummond Smith, told Mr. MacMillan a tale of stolen 19th-century letters addressed to an Alexander Grant, Esq., Duldreggan Hall, L'Orignal, Upper Canada. Duldreggan Hall had been in the possession of Grant's descendants previous to its purchase by Drummond's father around the turn of the century. The only information the Smiths had about the papers was that they had been seized by the Montreal police from two burglars.

Mr. MacMillan soon found that the papers had been deposited by the police with the Quebec Archives. They turned out to be the very letters formerly in Gordon Urquhart's possession. The detectives theorized that the thieves torched the building to cover any evidence. The collection of papers was incomplete, and the portraits nowhere in evidence, but the case was still an unexpected windfall.

One of Hugh MacMillan's first major recoveries was a large cache of 19th-century Quarter Session records found in the attic of the Brockville courthouse. After being assured by a county official that a search would reveal nothing of value, Mr. MacMillan uncovered — literally, concealed under two feet of pigeon dung — 28 wooden cases of records. The Ontario Archives' accountant displayed neither a

sense of humour nor of mission when questioning an invoice for a shovel in Mr. MacMillan's expense account.

Sometimes no amount of perspicuity, diplomacy or charm is enough to get one through the door. For several years, Mr. MacMillan pursued a lady who owned Baptist Church records from 1810 onward. Thelma Stevens lived near Athens, Ont., but Mr. MacMillan got his tip from her cousin in Osgoode.

Thelma required the exercise of all of his powers of persuasion to establish confidence and allay suspicion of outsiders. He was invited to see the papers, on the clear understanding that he could not have them — at least not yet. The directions to the Stevens farm ended with: "You can't miss it because there is a large bear cage on the front lawn. But it's empty."

She explained that, during the Depression, her family had found an orphan bear cub and put it in the cage to attract passersby with their children to stop and buy produce. The bear died and they sold the business, but "things haven't been the same since the bear died."

Thelma could not locate a picture she wanted to donate, which she described thus: During Prohibition, her brother drove into Athens in their Ford Model T, with the bear sipping a beer, seated next to the driver. (There was no way to stop a bear from drinking beer in a car during Prohibition, though that was certainly not the case for a human.)

As for the papers, Mr. MacMillan did get a chance to examine them, but in the end, Thelma donated them to McMaster University in Hamilton.

A collection that did not escape Mr. MacMillan was the Hamnet Pinhey papers from Horaceville, South March Township. Mr. Pinhey had extensive land holdings and with his son operated the Bytown and Nepean Toll Road Company. Mr. Pinhey kept a diary noted for its brevity. With his crabbed script he got an entire month on a single page.

Thanks to Philip Shackleton of Manotick, Mr. MacMillan was able to salvage this exciting collection of Pinhey papers and ephemera. Actually, Mr. Shackleton did most of the salvage work. In 1966, he was called by the late Ottawa auctioneer Bill Walker to examine the residue after a phalanx of dealers and pickers had creamed all the antiques and art from a Pinhey family home in the Glebe.

As is usually the case, they left all the paper. Not long ago, Mr. Shackleton said to Mr. MacMillan from his home in Moosomin, Sask., that the house in question was at the very least ankle-deep in letters, posters, photographs, diaries and business records. Philip Shackleton was one of the few antique dealers who would ever bother with papers. This particular find led Mr. MacMillan to Charles Hill, great-great-grandson of Hamnet Pinhey and curator of Canadiana at the National Gallery.

Mr. Hill donated another treasure trove of Pinhey documents to the Ontario Archives.

Hugh MacMillan has an incredible reserve of such stories, an avuncular style and the kind of personality that makes total strangers feel at ease. An hour a day in his company is the best of elixirs. Hugh makes history come alive.

Mr. MacMillan has lived in Guelph for a number of years but will soon move to Ottawa, and keep on searching.

If there is something of historical import worth hunting for, count on Hugh MacMillan to be there, beating the bushes, following the trail, and, unlike many of us, happy in his work.

MEMOIR

# Hands-on historian

## Adventures of a Paper Sleuth

By Hugh P. MacMillan

Penumbra Press, 343 pages, \$35

REVIEWED BY D'ARCY JENISH

In January, 2004, I went on a book tour of eastern Ontario that took me to Ottawa, Brockville, Malorytown and the Glengarry County villages of Williamstown and Alexandria. For the Glengarry portion, my travel companion was a delightfully loquacious octogenarian named Hugh P. MacMillan, who is legally blind, nearly deaf (his hearing aid popped out in my van one night and could not be retrieved until the morning) and walks with a cane and a limp due to an old hip injury sustained while canoeing one of this country's wild rivers.

Despite these infirmities, MacMillan was an engaging and energetic traveller. As I navigated narrow, snow-covered country roads, he kept me entertained non-stop with tales of his enormous, extended family and his checkered career. MacMillan's Scottish ancestors arrived in Glengarry in the early 19th century, and these pioneers produced hundreds of descendants, including an aunt who became a madam during the Klondike gold rush and an uncle who was a Montana rancher and compulsive gambler. MacMillan's career included stints as a soldier, farmer, sailor, journalist, insurance agent, PR man for a circus and two and a half decades as a roving archivist for the Archives of Ontario, a job that took him all over North America in search of historical records.

At one point, I interrupted to say: "There ought to be a book about you."

"There is," he responded. "I've written it and it's supposed to be published one of these years."

Well, the book has landed. It's called *Adventures of a Paper Sleuth*, and it's as rich and entertaining as the man himself. Most of it is devoted to the years (1964 to 1989) he spent as a paper chaser, and MacMillan has wisely included an appendix that lists chronologically some of the things he collected. The appendix conveys at a glance the magnitude of his contribution to historical preservation in Canada.

In old barns, stuffy attics and musty basements, he tracked down the letters, diaries and journals of ordinary men and women, the business records of fur traders, lumber barons and canal builders, and assorted collections that illuminate the lives of famous Canadians such as Pauline Johnson, Sir Sandford Fleming and Sir John A. Macdonald.

Chronology is not part of MacMillan's modus operandi. Instead, he bounces from story to story like a barroom raconteur. Usually, he

tells us how he learned of the existence of various papers and how he persuaded often reluctant owners to part with them, in one case earning a backhanded accolade: "Hugh is a con man with a heart."

MacMillan deftly portrays the quirky characters he encountered in his travels, and the fascinating but unsung figures whose lives and works are preserved in historical records. Early on, we meet a Roman Catholic priest named Joseph Gravelle, the son of a mathematician, chess whiz and renowned safe-cracker from the Ottawa Valley town of Renfrew. MacMillan acquired two priceless collections from Father Gravelle. The first consisted of genealogical records of Ottawa Valley families that extended back generations to France and Ireland, and included some two million names. The second was a collection of films produced between 1917 and 1934 by the long-defunct Ontario Motion Picture Bureau, which contained footage of Sir Wilfrid Laurier's funeral and the Prince of Wales's 1919 tour of Canada.

Several of the historical figures whom MacMillan profiles seem interesting enough to warrant short biographies. There is Sidney Barnett, who inherited the Niagara Falls Museum, which his father Tom founded near the world-famous waterfall in 1827. The younger Barnett went broke in the late 19th century trying to promote a live buffalo hunt in the city of Niagara Falls, but his doomed spectacle provided the inspiration for the Buffalo Bill Cody Wild West Show that toured the United States and Europe for 20 years, and made Cody wealthy.

Then there is the saga of Narcisse Cantin, a French Canadian born near Goderich, Ont., in 1870, who acquired a small fortune as an importer-exporter operating in Buffalo, N.Y. Cantin was an inventor who developed a glue for broken crocks and a liquid furniture polish. He was also a visionary. He came up with a scheme to create a navigable waterway from the head of the Great Lakes to the Atlantic by building a series of dams, locks and canals. He spent a good part of his life and most of his money promoting his Great Lakes and Ocean Waterway project, several decades before the St. Lawrence Seaway.

MacMillan is a pure storyteller who avoids drawing grand conclusions about his life's work or the state of historical preservation in this country. But as you read his tales, you are reminded again and again that Canadian history is rarely dull and that this country has produced some truly unusual characters.

*D'Arcy Jenish is the author of Epic Wanderer: David Thompson and the Mapping of the Canadian West.*

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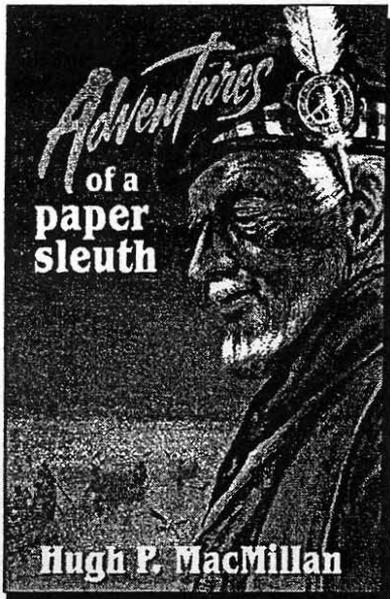
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## ADVENTURES OF A PAPER SLEUTH

“... the ‘Indiana Jones’ of document hunters”

HUGH P. MACMILLAN



Hugh P. Macmillan is a man whose life defies easy description. He was a farmer, a journalist, a mate on a towboat, an insurance agent, even a promoter for a circus. But all of this changed when he developed a passion for history and the preservation of historical documents and records.

MacMillan managed to turn his love of history into a career as a roving archivist for the Archives of Ontario — a position he held from 1964 to 1989. He trekked all over North America in search of the letters, diaries, and journals of everyday men and women who built the country; he hunted down the business records of fur traders, lumber barons, and canal builders. He unearthed collections that shed light on the lives of entertainers, politicians, and even noted criminals. Hugh P. MacMillan was truly a foot-soldier of social history.

MacMillan's work took him into damp basements, dusty attics, and old barns on the brink of collapse. He entered the lives and living rooms of people who had amassed heaps of papers that were often thought of as junk. He used everything short of coercion to convince owners to part with their historical artifacts, which prompted one besieged owner to describe him as “a con-man with a heart.” To his many friends and admirers, though, he has long been known as the “Indiana Jones” of document hunters.

For years he entertained friends and associates with stories of his sleuthing. And now these tales have put down in his memoir, *Adventures of a Paper Sleuth* (Penumbra Press), which has been well-received by Canadian reviewers. *The Globe and Mail* called it “as rich and entertaining as the man himself.”

More importantly, however, this is a one-of-a-kind book, a book that gives its readers an idea of how archives are made — from the bottom up. An independent search revealed that *Adventures of a Paper Sleuth* is truly the only book on the subject.

It is an obscure profession, but an invaluable one. *Adventures of a Paper Sleuth* reminds us that people like Hugh P. MacMillan are on the front lines of history, collecting the disparate threads that will be woven into our collective and cultural memories.

ISBN 1 894131 622 | Quality hardcover with black and white photos | 344 pages | 6 X 9 inches | \$35.00



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#### Hugh MacMillan's appraisal clients in the past have included:

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- Bruce County Archives, Southampton, ON
- Glengarry Historical Society, Williamstown, ON
- Canadian Canoe Museum, Peterborough, ON
- Presbyterian Church Archives, Toronto, ON
- Anglican Church, Toronto, ON
- S.D.&G. Historical Society, Cornwall, ON
- Estate of Viola MacMillan, Bradford, ON
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#### The following is a selection of Hugh MacMillan's activities:

- Searches for rare and unusual historical manuscripts and relics with a "story" throughout North America and abroad.
- Distributes Nor'Wester Express, which offers manuscripts, relics, ephemera and heritage products to collectors and institutions.
- Acquires papers/relics for Glengarry Historical Society, with museums and archives at Dunvegan and Williamstown, Ontario.
- Lectures on family history & manuscripts, Nor'Westers and the fur trade.  
Press releases available upon request.

**Hugh MacMillan, D. Litt. U.E.**, former Liaison officer for the Archives on Ontario (1964 to 1989), is well known as a pioneer in the acquisition of manuscript and pictorial material. Hugh is listed in the current edition of "Canadian Who's Who", and has spent many years researching and discovering lost "TREASURES". These services, along with those of other antiquarian specialists, are available to Trust Officers, lawyers, executors, trustees and the general public. Published: Co-author (1994) of THE LOCHABER EMIGRANTS TO GLENGARRY 1792-1802; author of "ADVENTURES OF A PAPER SLEUTH", the story of his career as a manuscript detective (~~published~~ published Nov. 2004).

In addition to being a valuator / appraiser, Mr. MacMillan can assist in the placement of historical papers, rare books, ephemera, relics and art. He can also assist in locating missing heirs and beneficiaries.

St. Thomas, Ont. - Everyone is a collector in the sense that we acquire things around us that have to do with everyday living. We don't view ourselves as collectors but we are.

Douglas and Elizabeth Rigby, prominent American Collectors made the following statement in their 1944 book *Lock Stock and Barrel*: Collecting is a world habit. Collectors practice it consciously and with a definite recognized aim. The rest of us practice it more or less unconsciously.

Usually the collecting 'obsession' comes over one gradually. For some it commences at an early age. More men are apt to catch the collecting fever than are women. For a few it becomes their principle preoccupation. Eating, sex and other human activities often take second place with the most serious collectors. I have known many of them over the years. One serious book collector has in excess of 100,000 books in a medium size house. Rumour has it that his wife left the house at the 35,000 mark!

I did not know the late George Thorman well enough to identify the extent of his lust for more acquisitions but it would seem he started as a boy collecting stamps and was still at it until shortly before his death this past January at age 84.

It took Donald Cosens, his son Mark (the auctioneer), executor Dr. Robert Farley and others over two months to catalogue the 1,800+ lots. George was 'catholic' in his collecting. There were upwards of 10,000 books, historical art, maps, relics, coins, tokens, stamps, antique furniture and many other categories. The total sales volume was about \$200,000. There were bargains and sleepers for the astute buyer. Local people knew George excelled as a teacher and local historian. He motivated many students and others to take an interest in history and perhaps become collectors. It was evident that many locals wanted to have one or more items from his collection, particularly if it related to Elgin County. In many cases this forced bidders from outside the area to pay more for many items than they would have planned on.

The following is a random selection of items and the prices realized: a Victorian secretaire, walnut with burl trim fetched \$2,000; 3 cannonballs from Fort Albany brought \$125. (George participated in archeological digs around James Bay with the late Walter Kenyon). A door lock assembly ca. 1804 from the NWCo post on Carlton Island in James Bay went to a Montreal collector for \$160. A New Haven shelf clock ca. 1880 got \$100. A prehistorical birdstone dog effigy figure was bid up to \$1,600 by a local collector and a Toronto dealer.

A Jumbo the elephant sign earned \$400, a box of 600 local photos with negatives \$500 and the Verner watercolour of Indians and canoes went for \$4,000 not even close to the \$10,000 estimate. Locals were outbid by a Mississauga collector for an oil by area artist Hattie Robertson showing a stagecoach going down the old Talbot road ca. 1880 with the church at Fingal in the background, it fetched \$300. A 1943 watercolour *Drawing in Logs* made \$850. Blood letting knives were a bargain for a Montreal collector at \$55. The same collector got six boxes of Hudson's Bay Co. research data for a mere \$75. A flow blue turkey platter made \$600. Thirteen Champlain Society volumes fetched \$650. Three volumes of the 1871 *Canadian Illustrated News* made \$700. Thirty-three volumes of the *Hudson's Bay Record Society* were a real bargain at \$800, as were the thirteen volumes of the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* at \$425. (I would

not sell my set for under \$1,000). The two volume set of Arctic explorations by Sir John Ross dated 1835 went for \$1,000. A 1631 map by Dutch engraver Henricus Hondius *America Naviter Delineata* brought \$2,100. A new and exact map of the *Dominions of the King of Great Britain on ye Continent of North America* dated 1715 was by a Dutch cartographer Herman Moll who worked in London. It was hand coloured with an outstanding 'cartouche' depicting a colony of beaver at work building a dam. Lake Ontario in 'Frontiguac Lake' and Toronto Bay is shown 200 miles north of present day Toronto. This rare map went for \$4,400. A hand coloured 1685 map of New France by Alexis Jaillot fetched \$1,150. Boswell's 1831 life of Samuel Johnson in five volumes sold for \$1,250. A hand coloured print ca. 1820 showing a native encampment in Newfoundland went for \$230.

George Thorman was an accumulator of old things rather than a sophisticated collector who specialized in certain things. It is not likely that he spent large sums for even the more pricey items sold in his sale. His specialty was getting bargains, and in many cases he would have been given things for services rendered in the local community. Walter Kenyon probably gave him duplicate artifacts from his digs around James Bay in return for help on the digs. Serious collectors are fortunate to have collectors such as George around. When their collections break up, the best of it finds its way into the hands of the specialized collector or local people who just want a relic.

George is described by his lifelong friend and fellow collector Don Cosens as an educator, author, biographer, traveller, historian, politician, TV host, bibliophile, genealogist, bird watcher. Another equally important contribution he made to society was the love of history he must have instilled in hundreds of students.

Many estate auctions put old papers and low end books in job lots, with little effort having been made to sort or categorize the items. This often works to the advantage of discerning collectors, but does little for estate sale totals. Such was not the case with this sale. Care was taken to describe paper ephemera as fully as the antiques and art.

There were six categories for the sale. One was for antiques, art, prints, ephemera, glass, etc. The others covered books, pamphlets, maps, atlases, post cards, photos, stamps, covers, coins, paper money. The preview was Monday May 5th with the sale being conducted on the following four nights.

This account of a unique auction can end with a quotation from the will of Edmond De Goncourt 1723. It was reproduced on the back cover of the antique catalogue. It was likely one of Thorman's favourite quotations and certainly reflected his views on the art of collecting, including the dispersal of his estate.

"My wish is that.... these things of art which have been the joy of my life shall not be consigned to the cold tomb of a museum, and subjected to the stupid glances of the careless passerby; I desire that they shall be dispersed under the auctioneer's hammer, so that the pleasure which the acquisition of each one has given me shall be given again, in each case, to some inheritor of my own tastes."

De Goncourt did have a somewhat elitist viewpoint and a rather jaundiced regard for museums. He had the right idea in seeing that his collection went to other collectors. Museums can in very large measure thank private collectors for much of their holdings. Those magpie packrat collectors do serve a most useful purpose !

# Relic of a great explorer



Sir Alexander Mackenzie, first to reach the Pacific overland from eastern Canada, had a sister in Glengarry.

Mackenzie's  
compass case ended  
up in New Zealand.  
Allan E. Levine  
tells how an area  
museum landed it.

A rare relic of Sir Alexander Mackenzie has been located in New Zealand and repatriated to Canada by two Eastern Ontario history sleuths.

The priceless artifact, Sir Alexander's compass case, has been acquired by the North West and Loyalist Museum in Williamstown, about 100 kilometres east of Ottawa.

Canadian history buffs know the story of Sir Alex, the hardy Highland Scots-Canadian adventurer, whose crowning achievement in 1793 was to be the first to reach the Pacific overland from eastern Canada.

The Mackenzie River was named after him, but not as well known, except to a few historians, is his connection with the Ottawa Valley, through which he passed by canoe on numerous occasions.

While Sir Alex returned to Scotland, where he died in 1820, his sister Janet (Jenny) Mackenzie lived in Glengarry, where she married local businessman Alexander Rose in 1794. The Roses were members of St. Andrew's Church in Williamstown, which might be why Sir Alex arranged for the presentation of a Mears (named for its famous maker) bell to the pastor of that church, the Reverend John Bethune.

The bell continues to be rung at St. Andrew's every Sunday morning. It is inscribed with Alexander Mackenzie's name.

While Sir Alex lived in Scotland, he owned parcels of land in Glengarry. Following his departure for Scotland in 1804, his business affairs in Glengarry were the responsibility of his Montreal cousin, Henry MacKenzie (variant spellings were frequent), whose wife was Ann Bethune, daughter of the Rev. John Bethune of Williamstown, to whose church the bell was donated. Sir Alex and other North West Company partners had pews in the church.

Despite his contributions to Canadian exploration, however, little remains of Sir Alex's possessions.

His papers and other belongings were retained at the great house on his estate in Avoch, near Inverness, but the building burned down in 1833. In all probability, the compass case was one of the few artifacts that survived the fire.

Sir Alexander Mackenzie was born in Stornaway, Scotland, in 1764. Owing to rising rents and poor crops, many Scots lost their land, and his father, widowed and impoverished, brought the family to New York when young Alex was only 10.

Soon afterward, the American Revolution broke out, and his father joined the Loyalists and left the children in the care of two aunts, who settled in Montreal. There, young Alex continued his schooling, but he dropped out in 1779 to enter the fur trade. By 1787, when he was only 23, canny career moves had brought him into the North West Company as a full partner.

Mr. Mackenzie was assigned to the Company trading post on the Athabaska River, as second-in-command to Peter Pond. Mr. Pond, born in Connecticut, was one of those hyperactive Americans who left their mark on the history of the lands in which they travelled, worked or settled. Mr. Pond was convinced that the river (now called the Mackenzie) flowing out of Great Slave Lake would lead to

the Pacific, this being the first step to China and to untold riches to be realized in trading with the East.

A highly-respected cartographer who mapped much of the territory now known as the Mackenzie Basin, and other parts of the northwest, Mr. Pond was the catalyst in Mackenzie's quest for a "Northwest Passage" to the Pacific. That passion was echoed, in our time, in the late Stan Rogers' moving ballad about the gallant men who often sacrificed their lives in pursuit of that goal.

But Mr. Pond had a dark side, having been implicated in the deaths of two rivals. He returned to Connecticut under a cloud.

At some point, Alex's cousin Roderick, brother of his cousin Henry of Montreal, came forward and arranged for money and supplies for Alex's first expedition in 1789. Unfortunately, the expedition determined that the great river did not flow to the Pacific, but to the Arctic.

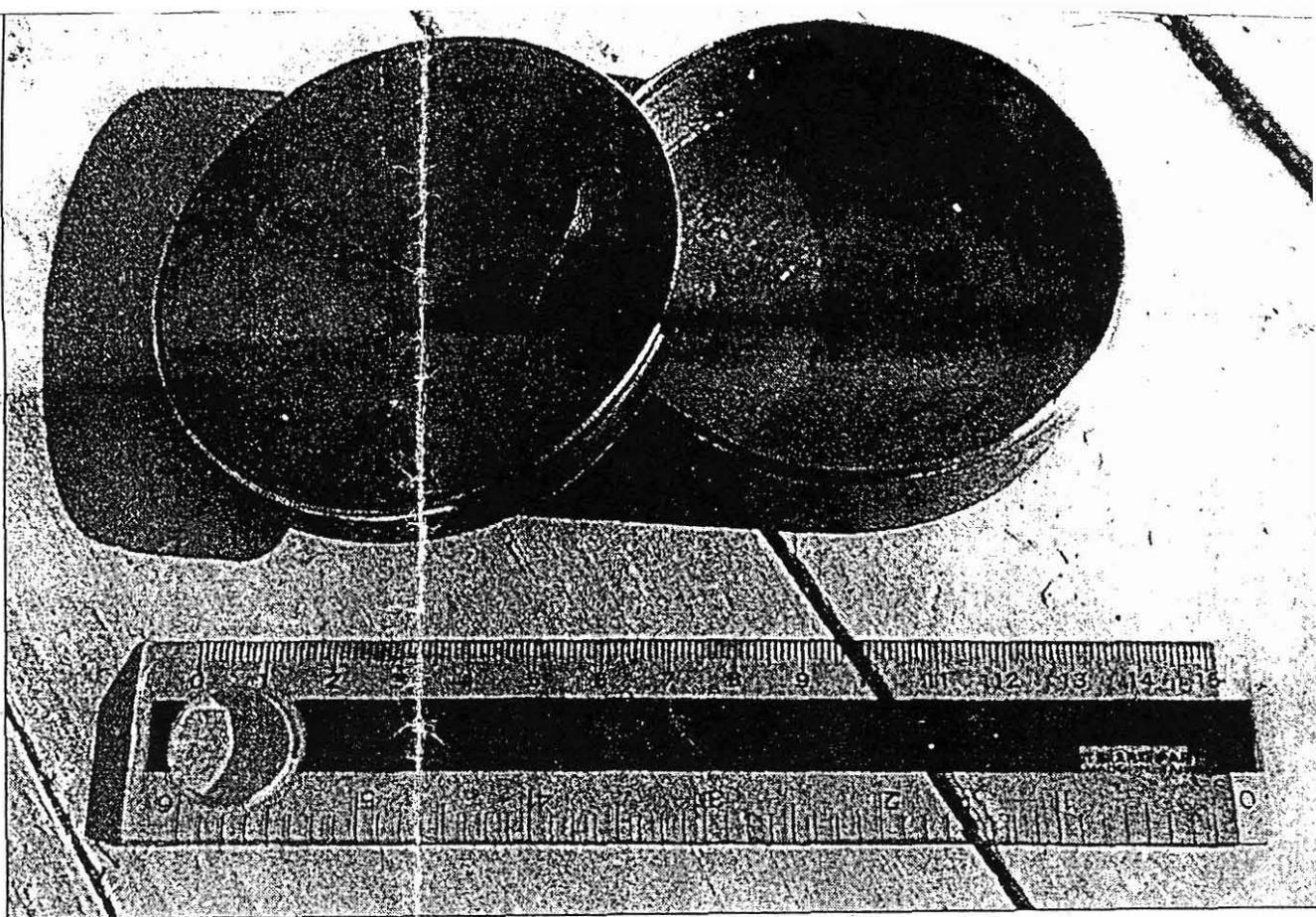
But on his second attempt, in 1793, Alexander Mackenzie reached the Pacific, and brought his men back to Fort Chipewyan on Lake Athabaska without loss of life, nor even, if the records are correct, engaging in a violent clash

with the local inhabitants or with any competitors.

For his valuable work in exploring the West, Mr. Mackenzie was knighted in 1802. He worked without success to unite the Hudson's Bay Company with the North West Company. From 1804 to 1808, he served as a member of the Lower Canada (Quebec) House of Assembly, and then returned to Scotland. The merger of the two companies was finally achieved in 1821, but Sir Alex had died the year before.

As for the sleuths (and the chase), the first, Hugh P. MacMillan, is a longtime resident of the Guelph area. Dr. MacMillan's ancestors came to Glengarry in 1792, and he has always had a great interest in the history of the county. Over 30 years, he has tracked down rare and obscure Canadiana at home and abroad.

David Anderson, the other investigator, is a fur-trade history buff and a skilled researcher and writer. He works closely with Mr. MacMillan on numerous cases involving Glengarry history. Mr. Anderson lives in Glengarry in the historic Bethune-Thompson House, in which the Rev. John Bethune was resident until his death in 1815. David Thompson, the famous North West Company explorer and



Compass case of Sir Alexander Mackenzie has found a happy home in the Nor'Wester and Loyalist Museum in Williamstown, near Cornwall. Two history buffs traced it to a Mackenzie descendant in New Zealand.

map-maker, bought the house at that time and occupied it for over 20 years. It is now owned by the Ontario Heritage Foundation.

As often happens in Mr. MacMillan's searches for relics or papers, "leads" develop through casual conversation. Only a small number of such tips result in the location of a rare relic. The acquisition of the Mackenzie compass case was one such success.

In 1986, Victoria Stewart of the Lake St. Louis Historical Society in Montreal urged Mr. MacMillan to contact a Pipe Major Mercer of that city.

Mr. Mercer knew of a Pipe Major Mackenzie (first name unknown) of New Zealand who claimed descent from Sir Alex and possessed his sextant.

Mr. Macmillan wrote several times to Mr. Mackenzie through Mr. Mercer, but there was no reply. The telephone company could not provide a number. Thus the trail went faint, and owing to other work, the case was frequently set aside.

But in 1995, some nine years later, after exhausting various resources

and hunches, Mr. Macmillan was about to try to locate Mackenzie through a new source, the Pipers Association in New Zealand. And then he considered the communications potential of the Internet. He and Mr. Anderson posted a query, and within days, a reply was received from Sonia Mackenzie, Secretary of the Clan Mackenzie Association in New Zealand.

Ms. Mackenzie put the two blood-hounds in touch with Pipe Major Rolland MacKenzie who owned, not a sextant, but the compass-case (minus the compass). Within weeks, Rolland MacKenzie graciously donated the case on permanent loan to the Nor'Wester and Loyalist Museum, where it remains today.

The two researchers also learned that Rolland MacKenzie was a collateral descendant of Sir Alexander's wife, Geddes, who was also a Mackenzie. They proved beyond doubt the line of descent.

As for the compass case, Duncan Roberts of Mississauga, an international expert on scientific instruments, concludes that the case is definitely of the period 1760 to 1820.

Mackenzie's compass case is of more than passing interest to Heritage Minister Sheila Copps and members of her Parks Canada staff, who have examined it and declared it to be of the right period

The finding and repatriation of the compass case can be compared to the discovery by an Upper Ottawa Valley farmer of the lost astrolabe of another explorer to make an indelible mark on Canadian history, Samuel de Chaplain.

Repatriating the astrolabe from the New-York Historical Society to the National Museums, to its final berth in the Museum of Civilization, took over 50 years. The compass case came home after only 13 years.

Why put it in a local museum? And why not! Sir Alexander Mackenzie was a high-profile personality in the history of the North West Company, and it is therefore only fitting that whatever artifacts survive from his august career should be housed in the institution that commemorates the history of the company to which he was loyal for much of his life.

To paraphrase Sir Winston Churchill's famous line, Mr. MacMillan adds, "Some Case! Some Chase!"