

Arguments

The miracle of the Rideau

Power boaters bobbing in the locks of the magnificent Rideau Canal should spare a thought for the bogged wilderness that was once there, and those who tamed it



CHARLOTTE GRAY

Consider the Rideau Canal then and now. Then: A bunch of surveyors and woodsmen employed by Britain's Royal Engineers squirms through the impenetrable bush in 1826. As one of those present recorded, "Meeting with various gullies and huge swamps to get through, which (they being full of water) became almost impossible, we waded, and were often obliged to crawl on our hands and knees under the brushwood, and this in water."

The men deal with mud, mosquitoes and malaria as they subjugate virgin forest, uncharted lakes and roaring waterfalls in an effort to construct an inland route stretching from the little lumber settlement that would become Ottawa to the military centre of Kingston.

Now: Dozens of fibreglass vessels, boasting global positioning systems, beer fridges and enormous engines, effortlessly cruise through a streamlined waterway, in which manually operated locks allow the boats to pass from one stretch of water to the next. As summer sailors wait for massive wooden lock gates to close and water levels to change, they stare idly at the enormous square-cut blocks of granite, limestone or sandstone, tightly mortared, with which the lock walls are constructed.

Then: In 1829, Lt.-Col. John By, superintending engineer, is lost in the infamous 30-kilometre "Cranberry Marsh" north of Kingston, and yells loudly into the wilderness. Only an owl and a loon reply. With only a little cheese and a few drops of brandy as provisions, he laboriously paddles his canoe by moonlight, despairing of escape. He finally meets an Indian hunter who shows him the channel out of the morass of cranberry bushes.

Now: Cranberry Lake is one of the most picturesque lakes in the string of lakes and rivers that are linked by locks and ringed with cottages. Indian hunters have vanished, but the loons are still audible despite the buzz of outboard engines and the shouts of laughter from cottage decks.

Then: In 1832, Colonel By is summoned back to London to explain before a committee of the House of Commons why, during the past five years, he allowed building costs of the Rideau Canal to go so far above budget. "It is impossible," a Treasury official snorted to the Lords of the Treasury, "for My Lords to permit such conduct to be pursued by any public functionary." In the end, the Rideau Canal's builder was exonerated and the accounting procedures faulted. But Col. By dies in obscurity only four years later "after a long and painful illness brought on by his indefatigable zeal and devotion in the service of his King and County, in Upper Canada."

Now: In 2007, the Rideau Canal is declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Operators of marinas, hotels, fishing lodges,



ALEX OLIVER, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN

Pleasure boats cram the busy Merrickville Locks. Nearly two centuries ago, using only materials he found in the area adjacent to the canal, Col. John By built a waterway linking two mighty rivers, the Ottawa and the St. Lawrence.

gift shops and cafés along its 200-kilometre length eagerly await a surge of tourism triggered by a renewed interest in Col. By's extraordinary achievement. Nearly two centuries ago, using only materials he found in the area adjacent to the canal, John By built a waterway linking two mighty rivers—the Ottawa and the St. Lawrence. And he did this with manual labour and the most rudimentary machinery, relying on locks—a way to change water levels first invented (it is said) by Leonardo da Vinci—to circumvent the many rapids along the way.

For the ascent from Ottawa to the key-stone lake in the system, Upper Rideau Lake, he used 33 locks to lift vessels nearly 100 metres. This includes the great water stairway of eight locks below the Parliament Buildings (which they predate by more than 30 years) that provide a lift of 27 metres. For the descent from Upper Rideau Lake to Kingston, he built a further 14 locks to accommodate a drop of more than 50 me-

tres. In addition to the total 47 locks, he and his team built lockmasters' houses, block-houses, and several dams including one at Jones Falls which, at nearly 20 metres, was more than twice as high as any built in North America at that time. Hundreds of British army sappers, Irish labourers and Canadians died of swamp fever and malaria, or in accidents and explosions, during the canal's construction.

I have personally benefited from Col. By's steep and devotion. Our family cottage sits on an island that was still mainland before he started work. Our lake, pre-1832, was called "Mud Lake." But Col. By's ambitious plans involved raising the water level at various points in order to provide a more navigable waterway. And that's how Mud Lake became almost double its original size, to ease the passage from Upper Rideau Lake, to the north of us, to Chaffey's Locks, to the south of us, and then renamed (I suspect by the local real estate agents) Newboro Lake.

As the waters here rose by a total of eight feet, the peninsula on which our cottage would be built in 1907 became Pine Island. In the shallower parts of Newboro Lake, you can still see the perfectly preserved stumps of trees that once grew on dry land. I sit on my dock watching inexperienced fishermen knock the propellers off their boats on these underwater obstacles.

The infamous Cranberry Marsh, in which John By got so lost, was conquered by the same strategy. He transformed it into today's picturesque lake by flooding it.

Every time I think about Col. By slashing his way through the endless forest of pines, maples, birches, junipers and spruce, I am captivated by the man's stamina. Dark-haired, steady and good-tempered, he took everything in his stride. According to a contemporary, he would run rapids that scared his Indian guides, "could sleep soundly anywhere, and eat anything, even raw pork."

Unlike cottagers, he never let winter deter him. We pack up our cottage at Thanksgiving, as the days grow short and the wind assumes an icy edge. In contrast, Col. By paddled this way in an open canoe on Nov. 9, 1829. He and his voyageurs got as far as Mud Lake where they camped on an uninhabited island. The temperature fell so dramatically in the night that, by the following morning, the lake was frozen. With no shelter and little fuel, they had to sit and wait until the weather changed before they were able to get out. Undeterred, he battled on toward Kingston.

Would Col. John By recognize his creation today? Absolutely. Thanks to the superb engineering and masonry skills of his employees (plus regular maintenance by Park Canada), the locks are almost exactly as he left them. The heavy gates pivot on their hinges as lockmasters and their assistants crank them shut on mighty capstans. However, we can barely imagine the impact of Col. By's canal on the Upper Canada of 1832. Imagine Paris's Champs Élysées running through a backwoods tangle of first-growth forest. Back then, that's what the canal must have looked like to the astonished residents.

The original purpose of the Rideau Canal was to ensure a military supply line between Montreal and Kingston that would be protected from American attack. Memories of the War of 1812 were still fresh. By the time the canal was completed in May 1832, however, the danger had receded. But John By was sure that the canal would be a vital asset for the raw young colony, carrying, he predicted, tonnes of commercial goods plus at least 2,000 people and 3,000 cows, horses, sheep and pigs each year.

Indeed, first railways and then roads took over the transport of commercial goods. But there is still plenty of traffic on the Rideau Canal—canoe trippers, holiday-makers, house-boaters, cottagers and fishermen. If you spend a day hanging out at one of the locks, you can welcome visitors from all over the world, including many boaters from the very country the canal was built to exclude: Americans.

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