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ENGINEERING HISTORY PAPER #70

“William Kingsford – Pioneer Engineer-Historian”

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(produced as Cedargrove Series #44/2016 – Dec 2016)

EIC HISTORY AND ARCHIVES

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Abstract

This paper tells briefly the story of London-born William Kingsford, soldier, surveyor and civil engineer, in Canada from the 1840s until the 1880s, and a historian thereafter who, in his later years, wrote a ten-volume history of his adopted country.

About this Series

Principally, the Cedargrove Series is intended to preserve some of the research, writing and oral presentations that the author has completed over the past half-century or so but has not yet published. It is, therefore, the modern-day variant of the privately-published books and pamphlets written by his forebears, such as his paternal grandfather and grandmother and his grandfather's brother John.

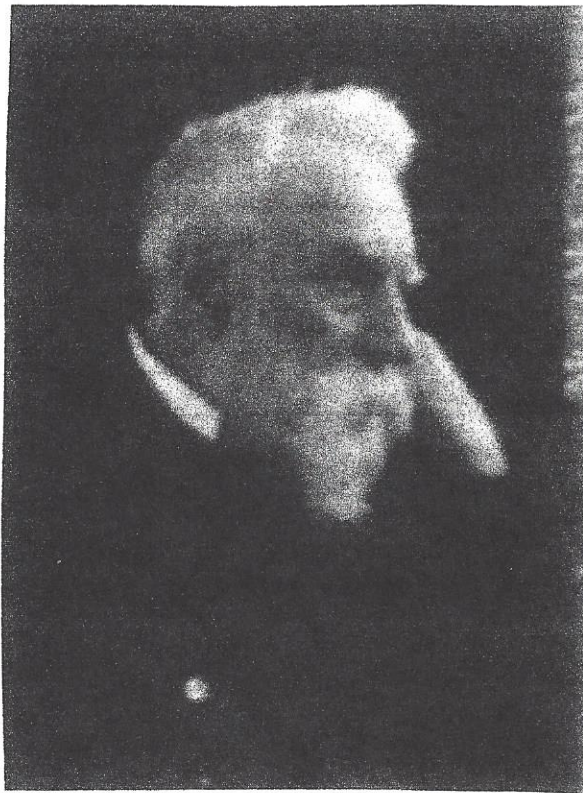
About the Author

He is a graduate in mechanical engineering and the liberal arts and has held technical, administrative, research and management positions in industry in the United Kingdom and the public service of Canada, from which he retired 30 years ago.

He became actively interested in the history of engineering on his appointment to chair the first history committee of the Canadian Society for Mechanical Engineering in 1975 and served both CSME and the Engineering Institute of Canada in this capacity for varying periods until 2003. He has since then researched, written and edited historical material for both organizations and for the Canadian Society of Senior Engineers. He is a past president of both CSME and EIC.

Preamble

The author first became aware of the historical work of William Kingsford - a member of the original Canadian Society of Civil Engineers - during his research some years ago and realized that he was, most likely, Canada's pioneer engineer-historian. There have been very, very few others since Kingsford's time, perhaps the best-known being Robert Legget - like Kingsford, born in England - who contributed books and articles in more recent years. With the imminent arrival of Canada's Sesquicentennial year, and the 130th year since the founding of the CSCE, it seems appropriate to remind Canadian engineers and others that Engineer Kingsford contributed to the engineering and the history of this country.



William Kingsford

The Story

William Kingsford was the son of innkeeper William Kingsford and his wife Elizabeth, and was born in the parish of St. Lawrence Jewry in London, England, on 23 December 1819.

As a boy, he attended the school run by Nicholas Wanostrocht but preferred physical activity to education. This lasted a lifetime, including the years he later spent writing Canadian history. On leaving school, he was apprenticed briefly to an architect. A tall, robust lad, he enlisted as a private soldier in the 1st Dragoon Guards early in 1838. Shortly thereafter, the battalion left for Canada to reinforce the British military units dealing with the later stages of the rebellion of 1837 in Lower Canada. The Dragoons, under Lt. Col. George Cathcart, helped end the uprising late in 1838. Somewhat upset by the treatment of the former rebels, and losing interest in being a cavalryman, even with an offer of a procured commission, Sergeant Kingsford purchased his release from the Army in 1840.

Under Cathcart's supervision, and while stationed at Chambly, Kingsford had learned the rudiments of land surveying. After his discharge, and on the strength of this experience, he joined the staff of the city surveyor of Montréal as his deputy in 1841. Two years later, he was a registered land surveyor.

Coincidentally with surveying, in 1844 Kingsford began work as a journalist and a founder, with Murdo McIver, of the *Montréal Times*. As Taylor writes in his *DCB* article:

Never a reflective writer, Kingsford wielded the pen like a bludgeon on behalf of the Constitutional Party and Governor Charles Theopolis Metcalfe. He wielded a bludgeon of a more literal kind on the streets of Montréal during the election riots of 1844; captain in Saint-Laurent riding of his party's vigilantes,.....Kingsford won the battle for control of the local polling station. His Reform enemies took revenge two years

later, assaulting and almost killing him; two wounds to the head marked his appearance thereafter.

Before then, in July 1845, Kingsford had resigned as deputy city surveyor. When the newspaper folded the following year, he took a succession of surveying jobs across Lower Canada on the Lachine Canal, at Cap-de-la-Madeleine, and on the Champlain and St. Lawrence Railway which led him into the practice of civil engineering, which meant that his services were in much demand as the roads, railways, canals and harbours of the Province of Canada were being built. It also suited his ubiquitous nature and his growing ambition.

In 1849, in bad economic times, Kingsford moved south to New York State where he surveyed and engineered roads and railways. In 1852 he went further south, to Panama, where he worked for several months, first as an assistant civil engineer on the Panama Railway, and later on water supplies for Panama City. Back in Canada, in better times, he was employed as an engineer on the building of the Montréal and Kingston Railway, under Thomas C. Keefer, and later surveyed the line from Montréal to Ottawa. In 1854, he was involved in the location of the railway across the Victoria Bridge and the St. Lawrence. By 1855 he was briefly city engineer for Toronto, but soon returned to the Grand Trunk Railway as superintendent engineer for construction between Belleville and Stratford and, from 1856 to 1861, was contractor for the running and maintenance of the railway from Toronto to Stratford.

Kingsford's multilingual abilities then secured him a position, briefly, with the British consultants, Peto, Brassey, Jackson and Betts, for work in Central Europe. Back in Canada in 1862, he began several years as an engineering consultant on road and railway projects. In 1866 he went back to Europe for Brassey, then back to Canada after Confederation to work as an independent contractor and consultant on the Intercontinental Railway.

During all of these travels, Kingsford maintained his journalistic activity,

contributing political commentary, reviewing theatre and music performances, writing travel articles, even becoming the Canadian correspondent for a London newspaper and, while back in Europe in 1866, for a Canadian newspaper. He occasionally wrote historical articles on engineering topics.

During the 1870s, and now Ottawa-based, Kingsford used his political connections with the federal government, and both parties, to secure a series of engineering jobs on harbours, rivers, canals and railways for the Department of Public Works and a position in it. By 1880 his office had a staff of ten. However, his political 'muscle' had diminished to the extent that his connection to the Department was terminated by the minister.

By then sixty years old and not content to do lesser jobs, Kingsford turned to writing and research on a full-time basis, and to Canadian history rather than current political or technical matters. A long-time collector of archival material, he began to use the quickly-filling archives of the Capital. He researched and wrote his material as an engineer would, beginning with a survey of the available sources, digging out the relevant material, and moulding it into shape. Following strict work planning and habits, his principal objective was to write a history of the British North American colonies up until 1841 and the legislation that created the Province of Canada.

Incidentally, although his engineering days were over, he joined the new Canadian Society of Civil Engineers as a founding member on January 20, 1887. He was, indeed, among the first practitioners of professional engineering in Canada and had contributed a few articles to the subject's growing literature in addition to his writing for newspapers and to the other material he was writing from time to time.

Taylor has some comments on Kingsford as a historian, for example:

Kingsford wrote as he built, quickly, without qualification or mediation, under pressure of time and budget. Thus, although

he was among the first historians to use the (Ottawa) archives...his researches there were of necessity random and superficial, conducted to flesh out rather than alter received opinion...

...his conventional views were often expressed with the zeal of a revisionist, his most arresting departures from historiographical norms were products less of new scholarship than of personal eccentricity.

The public applauded Kingsford's diligence and self-sacrifice. They admired the fact that he was, like many of his contemporaries, self-taught in engineering and self-taught in history, and that - while irascible - he was ambitious, combative and had stamina. And they admired him for taking on an enormous historical project at his advanced age.

He published his ten-volume *History of Canada* between 1887 and 1898, mortgaging his house to pay the publication costs. Even so, some of his friends had to help him financially. However, with time, it transpired that few people actually read the ten volumes they had bought although, as Taylor comments, the country's first generation of professional historians did. And as still happens, they took him to task for not meeting *their* standards of "comprehensive research and coherent argument." While he struck back at his critics, his reputation became that of an amateur historian. Still, he was honoured with doctorates by Queen's College in 1889 and Dalhousie University in 1896 and was elected a member of the Royal Society of Canada in 1890.

Kingsford died in September 1898, just before the endowment at McGill of the Dr. William Kingsford Chair of History by Sir William Macdonald. In further recognition of his work, Sir William provided an annuity to his widow, to which Queen Victoria added a pension.

Sources

The principal source has been the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* and the entry for Kingsford by M. Brook Taylor in Volume XII (1891-1900). Others have included the Association of Ontario Land Surveyors, the obituary in the CSCE *Transactions*, Volume XIII, Part I, 1899, and Wikipedia.

Photo Credit

It is an enlargement of the one that appeared in Volume XII of the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*.