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“Forgotten Engineers”

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Abstract

The research for this paper was done as part of my sesquicentennial project on *150 Years of Canadian Engineering*. Some of the material has also been presented orally.

Those who know about the early history of engineering in Canada recall easily names such as Tom Keefer, Fleming, Gzowski and Kennedy, but are less familiar with those such as McTaggart, Gisborne, Schreiber, Haultain...and Tom's older half-brother Sam. This paper provides brief biographies, and some pictures, of a couple of dozen or so of the less well known (forgotten) ones.

Since most of those included were 'engineering' during more than one of the time periods I have used in reporting on the 'sesqui' project, they (with one exception) have been ordered by their dates of birth in this present paper.

About this Series

Principally, the Cedargrove Series is intended to preserve some of the research, writings 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 over 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 researched, written and edited historical material for both organizations and for the Canadian Society of Senior Engineers. He is also a past president of CSME and EIC.

Preamble

During 2016 and 2017, I undertook a 'sesquicentennial' research project that has examined aspects of the history of engineering in Canada from before Confederation in 1867 until the present time. The information so far collected for it has provided material for a number of background papers, of which this present one is the first. Some of its material was used in an oral presentation in June 2017 to the SAGE Kiwanis Group in Ottawa, and some has been 'borrowed' from earlier papers in my CGS Series.

In what follows, brief biographies have been written for more than two dozen engineers who have contributed significantly to Canadian engineering, but whose names are not often included in historical discussions. The list includes several who were born before 1867, but most of them made their main contributions to engineering after Confederation. None is still living. None is from the post-World War II generations, simply because they are not yet old enough to be considered 'forgotten'!

As a group, they represent only a miniscule part of the contribution of engineers to Canadian development over the years. Sometimes they were the boss, sometimes second-in-command but, in contrast to their bosses, have not been so well remembered.

Speaking of remembering, the reader should bear in mind that, before the turn of the 20th century, there were few electrical, chemical or aeronautical engineers in Canada, that most engineers of whatever discipline had no university training, and that many were immigrants.

John MacTaggart served as clerk of works and senior non-military engineer to Colonel John By, when By was building the Rideau Canal. No photographs of him exist - he lived before they were developed. Nor have I been able to find sketches of his likeness.

MacTaggart was born in Kirkcudbrightshire, Scotland, in 1791, one of a farmer's 11 children. He acquired enough early education to enter the University of Edinburgh at the age of 18 to study mathematics and other subjects, but stayed for just a year. He then began to wander around Britain, learning engineering in a haphazard way that apparently included working under renowned engineer John Rennie the Elder. Apparently, also, Rennie the Younger recommended him in 1826 for service with Colonel By on the Rideau Canal.

