

Profile

George Edward Laidlaw*

William C. Noble

This biography had its seeds sown some fifty years ago. I clearly remember trips to the family cottage on Boshkung Lake, north of Minden, Haliburton, traveling along Highway 48 to the Portage Trail and across the north shore road of Balsam Lake to reach Coboconk and Highway 35 (the old Cameron–Algonquin road). This route wound through the beautiful dry stone walls of the Laidlaw “Fort” estate. On one sunny morning in late June 1952, father stopped the car outside what was formerly known as the “Barracks” so that mother could converse with an elderly, white-haired gentleman. He proved to be Mr. Alexander Alcorn MacDonald (1867–1958), who had been in business with Lieut.-Colonel George Edward Laidlaw (1860–1927). Mr. MacDonald briefly told some of the history of the Laidlaw “Fort Ranch” and gave mother a root of the orange-flowered *Helenium* that graced the roadside walls. This event sparked my interest in knowing more about Mr. Laidlaw.

In 1960, I was initiated into the joys and trials of field archaeology by Dr. J. Norman Emerson (1917–1978), Professor and Supervisor of Archaeological Studies at the University of Toronto. In 1950, he excavated at the Hardrock site on southwestern Indian Point, Balsam Lake, as well as at the Benson site near Bexley village in 1951 and 1957. Both sites represented late prehistoric or protohistoric Huron Iroquois components, previously documented by George E. Laidlaw. Professor Emerson showed me the Benson site in 1962, explaining that this place had been one of Laidlaw’s favourite village sites

for collecting artifacts. Not much was known, however, about this early Ontario archaeologist, who documented Native sites in northern Victoria County by traveling to them on horse and buggy. Although a well-known contributor to Ontario and international archaeological circles in his day, Laidlaw was largely forgotten after World War II. His lapse into obscurity can be attributed to a lack of successors trained to carry on his endeavours. Nevertheless, Laidlaw’s remarkable contributions remain fundamental to the development of early local, Ontario, and Canadian archaeology.

George Edward Laidlaw was the eldest son of “railroad George” Laidlaw (1828–1889), a Scottish immigrant who gained fame in Canada as lawyer, enterprising businessman and railroad promoter. His son, born and raised in Toronto, carried the nickname of “Billy” or “Billy George” and was given a privileged education at Upper Canada College, at Dr William Tassie’s (1815–1886) Boys Institute at Galt, and at the Royal Military College at Kingston, Ontario, where he graduated as Cadet No. 71 on 27 June 1882 as a 2nd Lieutenant.

Lieutenant George Edward Laidlaw distinguished himself at Batoche in 1885, where he was wounded with the Midland Battalion. In 1900–1901, he served with distinction as a member of Lord Strathcona’s Horse in South Africa. “Pom–pom Billy” became a trusted colleague and friend of Colonel Samuel Bentfield Steele (1849–1919), and was highly decorated for his actions. After his return from South

***Editor’s Note:** this profile is a shortened and edited version of the prologue to a biography of George E. Laidlaw that is being prepared by William C. Noble, Professor Emeritus of Anthropology at McMaster University. Dr Noble’s long involvement in research on the history of archaeology in this country began with “One Hundred and Twenty-Five Years of Archaeology in the Canadian Provinces,” published in the *Canadian Archaeological Association Bulletin* number 4 in 1972.



Africa, George E. Laidlaw was promoted to the honorary rank of Lieut.-Colonel in the British army, September 1901. Henceforth, he became known as the "Colonel" as well as "Uncle Billy" by his nieces and nephew.

After the death of his father on August 6, 1889, George assumed the chief management of the Balsam Lake "Fort" properties, raising sheep and cattle. His three brothers were also included in this family enterprise as land owners but it fell largely to George and James to see to the everyday running of the estate, which they called the "Fort" Ranch. The business went under the name of Laidlaw Brothers from 1889 to 1904, when George went into a partnership with his brother-in-law Alexander A. MacDonald. By 1889, the Laidlaw holdings at Balsam Lake encompassed nearly 3000 acres. George and his brothers added other parcels and made the last land purchase in 1909, thereby expanding the "Fort" Ranch to its maximum size of 4875 acres.

George participated in the local political arena from 1890 until 1896. Beginning as an appointed auditor, then as an elected councillor, he became Reeve of Bexley Township in Victoria County for four consecutive years, 1893–1896. A staunch Conservative and supporter of Samuel Hughes (1853–1921), the major issues of the day involved construction of the Trent River Canal and the normal problems of maintaining roads, bridges, education, taxes, and medical concerns. George provided excellent representation at the local and county levels but went down to bitter defeat in December, 1896. Turning his energies elsewhere, he never ran for politics again.

Laidlaw's interest and participation in archaeology spanned 50 years. He began collecting Native artifacts in 1877 and remained self-taught until 1889 when he came under the aegis of David Boyle (1842–1911), Provincial Archaeologist in Toronto. Boyle gave Laidlaw considerable encouragement and aid over the next 17 years,

and theirs was a genuine bond. In late 1896, George also formed a working relationship with his counterpart in Simcoe County, Andrew Frederick Hunter (1863–1940) of Barrie. The two archaeologists constantly exchanged notes, books and specimens by mail, Hunter often doing photography for Laidlaw. Both men were bachelors and took their hobby seriously, responding to David Boyle's ministrations.

George E. Laidlaw did not keep personal diaries, logs, or field notes—or at least none seems to have survived. A few family letters survive, including 15 letters written to his younger brother, Charlie, during the Anglo-Boer War in South Africa. By far the largest collection is, however, the 114 letters and 20 post cards he exchanged with Andrew F. Hunter between December 5, 1896 to May 10, 1916. Frequently written weekly, sometimes daily, even twice daily, the correspondence is housed at the Royal Ontario Museum and it details various archaeological matters.

In true late Victorian fashion, G.E. Laidlaw kept scrapbook clippings and his four Mark Twain scrapbooks are today housed in the Anthropology Department at the Royal Ontario Museum. The first volume was given to him on his 17th birthday, November 7, 1877, by his elder sister Elizabeth Laidlaw ("Troot"). The books date to between 1877 and 1912 and contain newspaper articles about Native antiquities. The scrapbooks provide a mine of specialized archaeological and ethnographic information while providing little concerning Laidlaw's accomplishments in local politics, ranching, or military service. The clippings are culled from some 51 different newspapers and 24 magazines, Canadian and foreign. They reflect his growing need for information and the important role that the newspapers played in those days in lieu of accessible public libraries.

The Colonel's own published record is impressive, both in content and length: there are 37 articles published between 1885 and 1927. His five papers on Native smoking pipes reflect one of his collecting passions. They still constitute a classic treatment for this specific artifact class. Laidlaw's record of over 60 sites represents the first archaeological surveys undertaken in Victoria County in

the central part of southern Ontario. The questions he addressed remain germane today. Native informants willingly helped Laidlaw collect and preserve some 500 local Mississauga oral short stories. These he published in a series of seven articles between 1914 and 1927. They complement Charles Marius Barbeau's (1883–1969) compilation of Huron and Wyandot Iroquois mythology, which was published in 1915.

Always an avid collector, the Colonel gave considerable thought to the proper curation of and repositories for his artifacts. He donated his entire archaeological and ethnographic collections, including items sent back from South Africa, to the Provincial Museum located in the Toronto Normal Model School, presided over by David Boyle. This institution was the forerunner for the Royal Ontario Museum, so named in 1912, and legal transfer of artifacts from the old to the new institution occurred in 1927–28. Much of the Colonel's gun and sword collection went to the Toronto Museum and Fort York while his antler collection largely resides with family, as do his medals.

George Edward Laidlaw was a tall, good-looking, moustachioed, robust man, generous and with an infectious sense of humour. When he went off to the Anglo-Boer War in 1900, at nearly age 40, he stood 6 foot 1 inch tall and weighed 220 pounds. He had been lightly wounded in his right leg at Batoche. He was a founding member of the Royal Military College Club of Canada formed in Kingston, 1884, and became a Charter Member of the Royal Canadian Military Institute established in Toronto, 1890, as well as a founding member of the early Ontario Archaeological Association in Toronto, 1919. His last years, however, were most trying. He developed diabetes, which his family physician Dr. John F. Ross (1860–1932) of Kirkfield recognized, directing him to Dr. Frederick Banting (1891–1941) in Toronto. Blindness and gangrene set in, and the Colonel died quietly on Saturday morning, January 15, 1927 in the "Big House" at the "Fort", Balsam Lake. His old friend Andrew F. Hunter published a short obituary in the 1928 *Annual Archaeological Report for Ontario*, Volume 36:84.

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