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**RICHARD THOMPSON**  
the Scarf, and the  
Chelsea Pioneer Cemetery

by Bob Phillips

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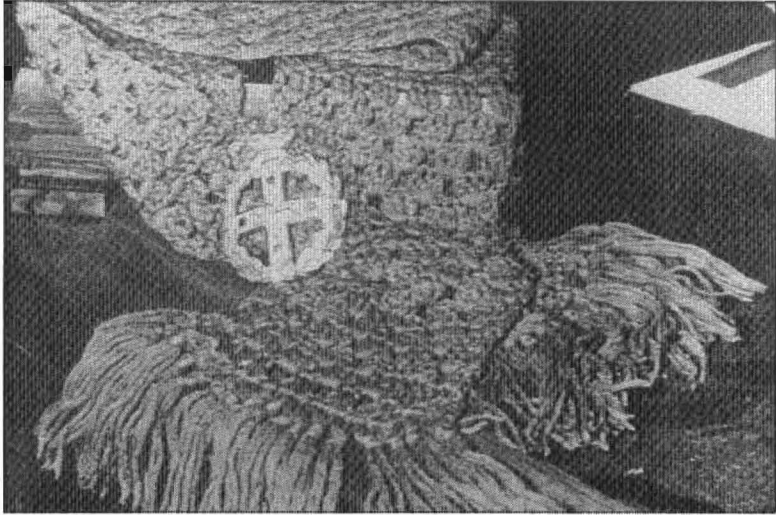
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## THE QUEEN'S SCARF OF HONOUR

Crocheted by Queen Victoria to recognise extreme gallantry in a personal way. It is the only one awarded to a Canadian.

## The Cemetery

A kilometre north of the junction of the Old Chelsea Road and Route 105 — just twenty minutes drive from Ottawa — the Chelsea Pioneer Cemetery is identified by a simple sign: CHELSEA PIONEER CEMETERY. From it a cedar-lined avenue leads to limestone entrance posts and, just beyond, an imposing cairn whose bronze plaque honours Chelsea's most famous grave.

Chelsea's most famous grave would be a modest tribute to Private Richard Rowland Thompson. His place in Canadian history deserves far more. If judged by the honours he received from his Queen and from the people of the Dominion, he ranks among Canada's greatest military heroes.

The fame of this hero, and of the cemetery containing his remains, has been marked by highs and lows. The burial ground itself, like so many in the region, started as a corner of a farm owned by the Church family. By the turn of the century it had fifteen graves dating from 1837. There was no endowment for perpetual care, and maintenance of the graves here, as presumably in other private cemeteries was, for the most part, casual.

The names on those fifteen graves belonged to leading pioneers of the district. One can only guess why their families chose burial plots here rather than in the older and more prominent Protestant Burial Ground in the heart of Old Chelsea, about three kilometres away. Perhaps it was because there was no Protestant church in Old Chelsea while, within a few hundred metres of the Pioneer Cemetery there were so many places of worship the area was nicknamed Gospel Hill.

Of all the graveside rites conducted here, none was memorable than for Richard Thompson in April 1908. Following a funeral service with full military honours in

the Ottawa Armouries, a funeral cortege wound its way to the corner of that field in the Gatineau. Fifty-four years later, the body of his widow, Bertha Alexander, was interred alongside. The graves were marked by simple stones, but Thompson's death was large and sad news in newspapers of the day.

## Richard Rowland Thompson

**Thirty-one years earlier**, Thompson was born in Cork, Ireland, the youngest of eight children of candy manufacturer Samuel N. Thompson and his wife Francis Henry. Besides his five brothers and two sisters, he had five half-brothers and a half-sister. He completed his secondary schooling in Cork's Royal University of Ireland in 1892. From 1895 to 1897 he studied physics, chemistry, botany, zoology and anatomy at Queen's College of Cork, but there is no record that he wrote a single examination, apparently preferring to play football. College authorities referred to his very bad attendance at lectures. On leaving university he emigrated to Canada.

He was living in Ottawa in 1899 at the outbreak of the Boer War, with which he presumably felt especially identified because of relatives living in Cape Town. He promptly joined the Ottawa and Carleton Rifles, and served as a medical assistant with the second Battalion of the Royal Canadian Regiment. At the battle of Paardeberg on February 18, 1900, where Canadian troops helped win a spectacular victory, he remained exposed for seven hours to maintain pressure on the jugular vein of an injured comrade, James L. Bradshaw. Just twelve days later at Paardeberg he again rendered outstanding service to wounded comrades.

For this outstanding heroism, Thompson was recommended for the Victoria Cross. Instead, he was awarded the Queen's Scarf of Honour.

## The Queen's Scarf

**It was a simple khaki scarf** that bestowed upon Private Thompson a fame that has outlived his lifetime by nearly a century, and made his place of burial an historic point of pilgrimage. In the second half of the last century, the highest military honour in the British Empire was, of course, the Victoria Cross. Still, the aging Queen wanted a further honour for privates in the colonial forces, from Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and Canada. It would certainly be more personal than the Victoria Cross and, in the view of many, an even higher tribute.

The scarf itself was the size of the normal red sash then worn by sergeants on ceremonial occasions. It was to be worn under the shoulder straps of the uniform, across the chest, and buckled on the right hip. Each was personally crocheted in Berlin wool by the Queen herself, with the initials V.R.I. embroidered in silk. Originally the Queen, at the age of 82, made four, all for colonial soldiers. Four more were later crafted and awarded to members of English regiments.

The qualifications for receiving the scarf were unusual in Victorian England. Only candidates already recommended for the Victoria Cross were considered. (None of the Scarf winners received the Victoria Cross.) The recommendation was to be made by a senior officer, then voted upon by the candidate's comrades in the field, excluding ranks above non-commissioned officer. The final advice to the Queen was given by the War Office.

Some, if not all, the scarves were presented to the winners by representatives of the Queen rather than by the Queen herself.

In addition to the Scarf, Thompson won the Queen's Medal and three clasps.

## After the War

**After surviving** the terrible perils of the bloody Battle of Paardeberg, it was sunstroke that caused Richard Thompson to be invalided to Canada. He did not long remain before returning to serve as a lieutenant in the South African Constabulary for a year. Then he joined the DeBeers Diamond Corporation at Kimberley in Cape Colony.

In South Africa on June 25, 1904, he married Bertha Alexander, then a 28-year old nurse, whom he had met in Canada six years before. She was a member of a well-known family which lived near Meech Lake. They had no children. They did not stay long in South Africa before returning to North America. Thompson was in Buffalo, New York, when he died of appendicitis on April 6, 1908.

## The Scarf: lost and found

**Today some of the Scarves** are in private hands; the whereabouts of two are unknown (at least to Canadian researchers). The Scarf presented to Trooper Alfred Henry Du Frayer is treasured in the Australian War Memorial. The only Queen's Scarf awarded to a soldier in a Canadian regiment was long a mystery.



There are differing versions of the rekindling of interest in its whereabouts. A western journalist in 1956 raised the question, but no one took up the search. It has also been recorded that the publisher of the Toronto Globe and Mail became interested in the mystery of the scarf upon reading a newspaper article during a visit to England, and raised the matter with the Department of National Defence on his return.

There is, however, no question that it was Bombardier Ken Richardson of the Historical Section of National Defence who, in 1960, conducted the 8-month, painstaking and eventually successful, search for the Scarf given to Private Thompson. At first, not even the site of Thompson's grave was known. Richardson's investigation put him in correspondence with Boer War veterans and their families on five continents. He travelled extensively, interviewing possible sources of information. At some stage, it was presumably a surprise to learn that the graveyard was almost within sight of his Ottawa office, but the whereabouts of the Scarf was a deeper mystery.

With the clue that Thompson's family had been in the catering or candy business in Ireland, the help of the Canadian Embassy in Dublin was solicited. One of the many letters of inquiry sent to such establishments throughout the country paid off. Still in the family business, Thompson's nephew, Samuel, had preserved the scarf in a case in the front office.

The Thompson family was gratified by the interest of the Canadian Government, and offered the Scarf on per-manent loan to the people of Canada. The not very demanding conditions of the transaction included defraying the travel expenses of the Thompsons to present the Scarf, and a guarantee that it would be permanently preserved and honoured with access to the public.

On Victoria Day, 1965, an impressive ceremony took place on Parliament Hill in the presence of the Governor-General, cabinet ministers, senior military including representatives of the Royal Canadian Regiment, and a public intrigued by the newly awakened story of Canada's overlooked war hero.

## Enter the Historical Society of the Gatineau

**When the ceremony** took place on Parliament Hill, the Historical Society of the Gatineau was a small and dedicated band, just three years old. It was fortunate that it had come into existence, for it was to play an important continuing part in preserving the memory of Richard Thompson and of the historic Queen's Scarf. Otherwise both might have retreated into the oblivion they had suffered for half a century.

In 1965, there was more than a ceremony to jog the memory. The Government of Canada erected a stone cairn with appropriate bronze plaque at the cemetery where Thompson was buried. The Thompson family generously gave stone markers at its entrance. The cemetery was still on private land, belonging to the Meredith family. They presented the land to the Historical Society of the Gatineau for its continuing care. The gift, alas, did not include the access from Highway 105 - still in the family's hands. It being desirable to be able to reach its cemetery, the Society raised funds to buy the right-of-way.

No money was provided for the care of this historic place. Historian-genealogist Patrick Evans performed his usual painstaking record of the gravestones. While

volunteers helped keep the bush from overtaking the graves again, it fell largely to Arthur Davison, president of the Society from 1964 to 1984, to cut enough grass periodically to make the graves safely accessible. Over the years, that became an increasing physical burden to him. Few people outside the executive of the Society were aware of the cemetery and its importance.

In 1984, the Historical Society faced the future of the cemetery. On the one hand it could try to raise money to landscape the forlorn and overgrown site; to maintain it to the standard it merited, and to undertake a program of public education about the Queen's Scarf and about the sixteen graves. Or it could ask the federal Department of Veterans Affairs to assume responsibility for the care of the Thompson graves. The executive opted for the first course.

The support of the membership became quickly evident in the warm response to the appeal to funds for an endowment fund. About \$2,000 was raised. At the same time, the National Capital Commission was approached for (1), a landscaping Master Plan appropriate to the history of the site; and (2), money to implement the plan. The Historical Society promised to take full responsibility for perpetual maintenance and never to request operating funds again. The NCC agreed.

The Historical Society had a valued and powerful ally when Jean Pigott became Chairman of the NCC in 1985. Not only did she have a keen sense of history, but one of her own ancestors, John Chamberlin, was the first person to be buried here. Another ally was Judy Grant, Mayor of Chelsea, who backed her strong support for the municipality's historic cemeteries with funds and civic help in maintenance. She also sponsored the creation of a Cultural Property Committee which advised on both historic cemeteries and on other heritage assets of the

community. Its members have been also members of the Historical Society of the Gatineau, and its chairman has been the chairman of the cemetery committee of the Society.

The municipality accepted the recommendation of the Cultural Property Committee that the cemetery be named the "Chelsea Pioneer Cemetery," to recognize all the pioneers buried there. A bilingual sign was duly put in place at the turnoff from the highway; within a year the English words were spray painted out by vigilantes.

A far more complex and time-consuming - but ultimately successful — process was the designation as an historic site under the Cultural Property Act of Quebec.

An NCC landscape architect prepared the Master Plan which was wholeheartedly accepted by the Historical Society. The intent was to preserve the site in its rustic character, but to add a path making it safe and easy for visitors to reach all the graves. Trees and ground cover would be cut back only as necessary to preserve the graves and give access to them, while keeping the atmosphere of a casual private cemetery in a corner of a farm of Victorian times.

At the farthest corner of the cemetery was a crater-like formation filled with enormous rocks. Presumably these had been dragged there by sweating horses when the cemetery was first laid out. Now they were painstakingly shifted with hand winches to let nature grow a small oasis of wild plants. Some years later, the unmistakable markings of a mysterious new grave were found here. Though theories were eagerly exchanged on what is buried there, everyone was a little too busy to dig and find out. The mystery persists.

Volunteers from the Society did most of the heavy work required to implement the landscape plan. Thus

most of the \$8,500 allotted by NCC for implementation of the Master Plan could be put into the endowment fund. Volunteers planted a cedar hedge lining both sides of the entrance road and parking area. It has flourished to its planned height of just over two metres. About three years later a professional stonemason, the late Albert Kuhns, was engaged to repoint and repair the stonework in the cairn and entrance posts.

Most of the work foreseen in the Master Plan was advanced far enough to justify a rededication ceremony on Victoria Day, 1986. It had been the wettest spring in memory, but half an hour before the ceremony the long-lost sun appeared.

It was a memorable occasion. Besides a large local crowd and Society members, there were representatives of the Royal Canadian Regiment and of the National War Museum. As a great (and hard-won!) privilege, the latter brought to the cemetery the Queen's Scarf in a protective glass case. The gathering was addressed by Jean Pigott, NCC Chairman. Afterwards the assembly was received in the MacDougall's historic home (the Pritchard House), about a kilometre down the highway.

The Historical Society caught the interest of the media through that ceremony, and the story of Richard Thompson and the scarf began to be retold. A new momentum had begun. It was decided to hold a Remembrance Day six months later, in November 1986.

Meanwhile, a happy alliance had been forged between the Royal Canadian Regiment, stationed at the Battle School in Petawawa, and the Society. The RCR had not forgotten Pte. Thompson. In Petawawa stands one of the two buildings named after him. The Commanding Officer was delighted by the work of the Society. To be a visible part of it, he readily agreed to a Society suggestion that the regiment might donate two

benches, with the regimental insignia, in front of the Thompson graves where people could pay peaceful tribute. The regiment would be represented at the ceremony by a busload of its members.

The great success of that event, where more than 150 people gathered, made it an annual plan. The next year, through the initiative of General Pierre Morisset, the Armed Forces Medical Service in Ottawa was added. In 1987 over 100 of the participants accepted an invitation to The Grange, 1819 home of the then Historical Society President (present writer; ed.) just across the Gatineau River. The ceremony, and the post-visit have become an annual fixture ever since, except in 1992 when The Grange had just suffered a disastrous fire.

The story of Richard Thompson, the Queen's Scarf and the Pioneer Cemetery has gradual reached a wider audience. November has been the occasion for articles in the local press and, sometimes, *The Ottawa Citizen*. It has been covered often by radio and television, including national radio. The work of public information, like physical maintenance, is never finished.

## The Future of the Scarf

**A sudden burst** of publicity in *The Ottawa Citizen* early on April 24, 1995, was not what anyone had been looking for. Diana Yohannan, daughter of the late Samuel Thompson and grand-niece of Richard Rowland Thompson, had requested return of the Scarf which she proposed to sell at an international auction.

The National War Museum felt unable to accede to this request. Though the permanent loan to the people of Canada was not precise legal terminology, the Museum noted that it had faithfully fulfilled all the conditions the

family asked when they put the Scarf in the hands of the Governor-General in 1965. In its view, there were no grounds for terminating the permanent loan and removing it from the National War Museum where it is on continuing display.

No one can know the commercial value of the Scarf until bidding would end. A Second World War Victoria Cross, which presumably had less scarcity value as well as age, recently changed hands for about \$300,000. Such sums are beyond the capacity of any known Canadian buyer. Severe cutbacks in federal museum budgets have put such an expenditure out of the question for any government agency. Voluntary groups supporting museum activities are committed to fund-raising to finance capital expenditures the government will no longer accept. When the Citizen story appeared, there was an immediate surge of interest, protest and indignation. Whether this would ever translate into dollars to keep the Scarf in Canada if the National War Museum were to surrender it is open to conjecture.

There was an irony in those expressions of public feeling. It was gratifying to know that so many people knew about the Scarf and about Richard Rowland Thompson; the work of public education had not been in vain. On the other hand, the gradual development of a forgotten scarf into a national icon has enhanced its commercial value – and put it further beyond the reach of Canada, if the National War Museum should ever surrender it.

## Requiescat in pace...

*Tread softly, all you who draw near.*

*The vanguard of a nation slumbers here.*

(Inscription at a Loyalist cemetery in Williamstown, Ontario.)

**The highway wanders** up the curving hill beyond New Chelsea, as it did a century ago when a young man from Ireland came here to seek his future; when he found his love for a young woman from Chelsea, which unknowingly set his eternal resting place.

Green letters on a white board mark the lane that leads from today to yesterday. Proud tall cedars, always green, frame the 60-metre straight white lane. At its end the two stone pillars given by the Thompson family mark the entrance. Ahead is the large stone cairn which recalls in bronze Richard Rowland Thompson's seven hours in the hell of Paardeberg, which were his passport to immortality. Flagstaves flank it.

A few paces to the left, down a winding path, is a plot of land, enclosed by a simple iron rail, where the gravestones of Richard Rowland Thompson and Bertha Alexander have weathered the uncertain years. Two pine benches face them. At first there is no sound but the whisper of the wind in the tall white pines and in the impatient rustling of the maples. Then from far away is the rattle of a carriage, the tramp of soldiers' boots, the sudden command, the melancholy notes of the Last Post.

And the echoes of other funerals here: of farmers who, in breaking the land and moving back a frontier, were themselves unheralded heroes and heroines.

More distinct now are the sounds of recent November days, when the flags are flying from their poles, and the military execute their perfect choreography; and wreaths are laid; and people who do not forget sing their a



cappella anthem; and the piping voices of schoolchildren in *Abide With Me* echo across the unchanging hills of the Gatineau.

This is a place of peace. This is a place where it is comfortable to remember heroes, and to be grateful for those who keep their memory green.

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PHOTO CREDIT: DR. DAVID BAIRD

# The Historical Society of Ottawa

The Bytown Pamphlet Series is published by the Historical Society of Ottawa three times a year. Each booklet concentrates on one part of the rich history of Ottawa and the area. They are distributed to members of the Society, local libraries and organizations, and are available for purchase for \$2.00 from the Society (address below), or at the Society's Bytown Museum, located beside the Ottawa Locks of the Rideau Canal near the Parliament buildings.

The Historical Society of Ottawa was founded in 1898 (as the Women's Canadian Historical Society of Ottawa). Its object is to increase public knowledge of the history of Ottawa by its publications, meetings, participation in local heritage events, and chiefly by its operation of the Bytown Museum, a store of artifacts reflecting Ottawa history from Bytown days and into the present century.

New members are welcome (see below for membership rates)

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