

## Zorra: Telling Our Story

Zorra Township can boast of an unusual number of local histories published in the early 1900s:

- [Pioneer life in Zorra](#) / by Rev. W. A. MacKay (Toronto: William Briggs, 1899)
- [Zorra Boys at Home and Abroad : or, How to Succeed](#) / by Rev. W. A. MacKay (Toronto: William Briggs, 1900)
- [History of Zorra and Embro : Pioneer Sketches of Sixty Years Ago](#) / W.A.Ross (Embro: Embro Courier, 1909)
- [One Hundred Years in the Zorra Church](#) / by W.D. McIntosh (Toronto: United Church Publishing House, 1930)

This prolific output may have been a reflection of the predominantly Scottish nature of Zorra at the time. Zorra's early roots were in the highlands.

"Four Highlanders started the Zorra settlement in 1820, a year after the township's survey. Group migrations [from the Scottish Highlands] followed in 1829, 1832, and 1849-50. The first settlers were largely from Sutherland-Shire." (Emery, George. [Elections in Oxford County, 1837-1875: A Case Study of Democracy in Canada West and Early Ontario](#) (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), p.28)

A teacher who grew up near Harrington and taught English in Oxford County high schools for 34 years has drawn attention to a point made by a Gaelic speaker named Agnes Rennie in Madeleine Bunting's book [Love of Country: A Hebridean Journey](#) (2016). Rennie points out that the Gaelic greeting translates as "*Where are you from?*" or "*Who do you come from?*". It is easy to imagine this everyday sense of self evolving in some individuals into a fascination with roots. Storytelling was a much-appreciated pastime amongst pioneers and these books could simply represent the oral tradition finding permanence in print.

The most acclaimed storyteller to come out of Zorra is surely Ralph Connor, which was the pen name of [Rev. Charles W. Gordon \(1860-1937\)](#). This man of the manse moved to Harrington in 1871, attending school in Harrington and high school in St. Marys. He is described by the Canadian Encyclopedia as "*The most successful Canadian novelist in the early 20th century*". Connor's first three novels sold over five million copies.

Connor's novels were not about Zorra, however. *"These early novels are fast-paced, sentimental melodramas, with stereotyped characters dramatizing the conflict between good and evil in frontier settings presided over by exemplary churchmen."* (ibid)

Charles Gordon describes in his autobiography how his skill at storytelling may have become masterly. Charles W. Gordon [Postscript to Adventure: The autobiography of Ralph Connor](#) (New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1938), p.96

The man who had hoed turnips in fields around Harrington, recalls that he had been a member of the Toronto University Student Quintet which, not only provided a program of music remarkable in variety but also, featured a *comique* (comedian) in the person of Bob Haddow. He goes on to write about visiting a noted minister in Edinburgh:

*... "with Henry Drummond as the only guest beside myself, we were sitting in friendly chat after dinner when some imp within me moved to ask Drummond, who was sitting next to me on a sofa, 'Have you ever heard the story of The Two Orphans?' intending to get his psychological explanation [of what made it funny].*

*"No", said Drummond, and then cried out, "Gordon has a story! Come on, Gordon, let's have it."*

*In vain I protested that there was no story, just a bit of fool nonsense I had had from my friend Haddow. But Drummond would have it, and greatly fearing, I went at it.*

*The effect was amazing. In five minutes the whole company were utterly paralyzed. [The host] was half lying, quite helpless on the sofa, his wife in her chair, equally helpless, with her handkerchief pressed to her eyes. Drummond walked about the room, rocking back and forth, and at each new development of the fool yarn uttering faint moans of agonized distress and begging, 'Oh, Gordon! Stop! Stop! For heaven's sake, stop!' till finally he was compelled to leave the room*

*When the idiotic tale was finished I went out and found him leaning on his stomach over the banister rail groaning."*

*"Gordon, you nearly killed me! I've got a most frightful pain!" he said.*

Gordon describes why he wrote his first novel, *"My sole purpose was to awaken my church in Eastern Canada to the splendor of the mighty religious adventure*

*being attempted by the missionary pioneers in the Canada beyond the Great Lakes” (ibid, p.148)*

Storytelling continued to have an influence on people of accomplishment who were raised in and around Harrington. Noted heart surgeon Dr. Gordon Murray (1894-1976) wrote his autobiography (in two volumes: Medicine in the making and Quest in Medicine (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1960 & 1963)

Eddie McKay went from childhood in Harrington to the University of Western Ontario where he became *“known to the thousands of Londoners who followed local sports. As an outstanding hockey, rugby, and lacrosse player, he became a fixture in the sports pages in the two years before the First World War, playing on several local teams and in a number of leagues.”* Graham Broad [One in a Thousand: The Life and Death of Captain Eddie McKay, Royal Flying Corps](#) (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2017).

Eddie became a fighter pilot for the Royal Flying Corps and earned an illustrious record that included surviving a duel with a notoriously dreaded German ace, Oswald Boelcke. The London press celebrated Eddie’s career frequently and flamboyantly until his death on December 28, 1917. His biographer records, however, that his accomplishments failed to earn him a decoration, possibly because of his storytelling:

He and officers of several squadrons were invited for a dinner intended to boost morale. *“After dinner, McKay was entreated to tell the story of the duel with Boelcke. This he did, much to the delight of all assembled. Then the ‘very amusing’ Canadian apparently went too far. He recounted the story of his ... audience with Douglas Haig, but could not resist what historian Stewart Taylor called an ‘irreverently humorous’ impersonation of the general. The joke went over poorly with the senior officers, and Taylor believes that this incautious gag may have cost McKay a decoration.”* (ibid, p. 86)

The Gaelic-founded urge to capture the moment, especially moments past, by storytelling found expression with two men in the mid-twentieth century. One, Robert (Bert) Conway, near Harrington, and the other, Donald Seaton, not far distant in Lakeside. Both writers, although exhibiting quite different writing styles, approached the past in a similar fashion. They wrote “fictionalized memoirs” that

spoke of the past as they had learned of it, through oral history, but with sufficient story to make reading more interesting.

[Memoirs of the 1880's](#) - Robert A. Conway (1896-1976)

“This collection of memoirs of the 1880's was written by Robert Conway on the invitation of some local lovers of rural history to describe an imaginary trip through Zorra Township in the 1880's. This is not intended to be a history but rather a collection of incidents and folklore from which one could form a picture of the life and spirit of the early settlers of this area.”

[Lakeside Memories](#) - Donald Sutherland Seaton (1895-1977)

1971 – “I write mainly such as I was told by my elders, and maybe I reached into the hall of dreams as well.”