

## Mysteries of Eaton Hall unearthed by author

By Mark Pavilons

The history of Canada's power elite is as colourful as you can get.

The legendary Eaton family's contributions to history are well documented. There's no denying their role in the shaping of the province and the nation.

One woman's contribution to Canadiana rivals that of the Eaton family itself.

Kelly Mathews has explored the mystique surrounding one of Canada's most famous castles - Eaton Hall in King Township. Her first book, *Eaton Hall - Pride of King Township*, is the definitive, compelling account of this iconic residence. Mathews, like a modern-day Sherlock Holmes, has come up with an accurate historical account of the property, dispelling myths and laying to rest all the urban legends surrounding this idyllic getaway on Lake Seneca, on the Seneca College King Campus.

Mathews didn't set out to become an author, researcher and historian, but her journey of discovery has made her all three, and perhaps a little bit more. Her twin sister Kim has referred to her as an 'artist'.

Her passion and enthusiasm for this project is obvious, almost contagious. And her's is the 'most unique author story'.

After posting information on line about Eaton Hall, a Michigan author came up for a visit and tour of the estate. He was so engaged by Mathews's interest and knowledge of the place, that he urged her to write a book. The History Press of the U.S. approached her with the proposal and embraced the book. With that came a very aggressive timeline - Mathews had less than six months to create a book, complete with photos.

There was a surprising lack of background information on the estate. Mathews took hold of this herculean task with both hands and scoured local, provincial and national archives to obtain as much material as she could about the building and the family matriarch, Lady Eaton. She spent countless hours and thousands of dollars obtaining the rights to historic photographs to complement the history.

'It was an unbelievable undertaking,' she said. 'I would have paid 10 times the amount to have answers to the questions I had.'

She had to sift through the fiction, the anecdotes and tales, to decipher the truth. But all of those myths are what made it all the more interesting.

'These things speak highly to the degree of interest in the property and the family itself,' she said.

The project was not about selling a book. Mathews was sparked by a thirst for knowledge and finding answers to the multitude of questions she had.



Kelly Mathews stands outside Eaton Hall.

'I turned over a great many stones,' she admitted.

Mathews is a testament to tenacity. If you have a passion for something, you simply have to follow it through to fruition, she said.

Just for the record, there were no tragedies and there are no ghosts haunting the estate. 'But that's not to say the past doesn't speak to you from time to time.'

She had to abide by strict guidelines set out by the publishers in terms of word length and number of images.

She found she was often distracted by dozens of unrelated stories and tales. These, she said, could have kept her going forever.

'It was a ton of fun,' she said with a smile.

Mathews is the manager of community recreation, camps and Outdoor Education Centre at Seneca College on Lake Seneca.

She had nothing but praise for Seneca College administration for supporting her project.

‘They exceeded my expectations’ providing a flexible work schedule and boosting her along the way. ‘This college promotes its people,’ she observed.

There are many buildings on the 700-acre property that is home to the 35,000-square-foot mansion. It was designed to be the Eaton family country estate and was also a working farm, producing things like butter, milk and flowers for the Eaton stores. The Eatons had planned to retire in King.

Lady Eaton was 60 and a grandmother when the estate was completed by 1940.

Lady Eaton and her husband, Sir John Craig Eaton, acquired their first parcels of land in King Township in 1920 on recommendation from their friend Sir Henry Pellatt, who owned the nearby Mary Lake property. It took two years to assemble the entire 700 acres. Lady Eaton moved into Eaton Hall three years after demolishing her city mansion, Ardwold. Eaton Hall is adjacent to a body of water named Lake Seneca today, formerly Lake Jonda (a combination of the first three letters of her son John David Eaton's first and middle names). According to Mathews's records, the lake has been known by six names in the past 100 years. Upon completion, it contained 72 rooms and it became a beloved gathering place for the Eaton family, owners of the Eaton's department stores based in Toronto.

Design was started in 1932 by architects from the firm of Peter Allward and George Gouinlock. Construction was completed in 1939 and was supervised by John W. Bowser of the Aurora Building Company. Bowser had just worked on the Empire State Building and his Aurora gravesite contains a marker in the shape of that New York landmark.

Eaton Hall, parts of which are still used by Seneca College students and for special events, has undergone two major renovations. Considering it's marking its 75th year, that's not bad. Mathews calls it the ‘cat of landmarks’ because it has enjoyed so many lives. She was thrilled to come across the original blueprints for the house during her research. ‘That was a great pleasure and it's a great treasure,’ she noted.

She also came across the ledger books that contained all the original construction costs.

Mathews recently joined both the King Township Heritage Advisory Committee and Historical Society, to share her passion.

Advanced sales are available online with Amazon, Chapters/Indigo and some other online sites. It won't be available in store until June 27. If you could like to contact Mathews directly, email her at [kellymathews@hotmail.com](mailto:kellymathews@hotmail.com). Follow the Twitter page for the book @EatonHallEstate or Kelly's personal Twitter account @AllThingsRegal.

The building is getting a new set of windows so Mathews is optimistic it ‘has a next chapter.’

In fact, Seneca president David Agnew has said ‘we're open to all possibilities . . . we aren't putting any defined parameters on its use.’

That means some exciting prospects could be in the offing. Private and public partnerships could very well bring Eaton Hall back to life.

Maybe? Mathews will write a sequel!