

SIR THOMAS AND LADY RODDICK,
THEIR GATES AND CLOCK TOWER

*“THESE GATES WERE ERECTED
IN MEMORY OF
SIR THOMAS GEORGE RODDICK
M.D. LL.D. F.R.C.S. L.M.C.C.
MCMXXIV”*

For 90 years, the Roddick Gates and Clock Tower on Sherbrooke Street West, at the top of McGill College Avenue, have served as the University’s main entrance. Along with the Arts Building façade directly behind the gates at the end of Graduates’ Drive, the Roddick Gates, flanked by sweeping curved colonnades, have iconically represented McGill. The clock—with its mechanical problems—housed in the tower at the colonnade’s western end, has been the only contentious element in the ensemble. How the Roddick Gates and clock tower came to McGill provides unique insight into the University’s history and personalities.

When Sir John William Dawson arrived as Principal in 1855, the entrance to McGill was from University Street through what are now the Milton Street gates. Within a year, Dawson had cleared a driveway through the lower campus—then a cow pasture—from Sherbrooke to the Arts building.

Before the present gates were installed in 1925 McGill experimented with several entranceways to the Drive. To mark the 1860 visit of the Prince of Wales (later King Edward VII), a ceremonial arched hedge was constructed, connected on either side to a picket fence. Contemporary views show pillars on each side of the entrance covered with greenery holding enlarged replicas of the symbols of the Prince of Wales on the left and McGill University on the right hand side.

By 1865 the gates had been reconstructed with three 5.4 metre high carved stone pillars on each side. These same gates appear in a well-known panoramic view of McGill in the 1875 *Canadian Illustrated News*. In 1887, the intrepid photographer William Notman produced a composite photograph of a Montreal snowshoe club meeting at night in front of the McGill gates, with the 1865 pillars in clear view. Two years later in 1889, Notman’s portraits of families in horse-drawn sleighs in front of the McGill gates indicate that the entrance had changed dramatically and that the original stone pillars had been taken down. The gates were now 1.5 metre high with cast iron posts. To the west of the gates stands the gateman’s cottage, which was badly damaged by underground dynamite explosions in 1910 during construction of the railroad tunnel under Mount Royal, linking downtown to the northern part of the Island.

The decision to build the entrance as we know it today occurred in 1923 with the death of one of the most distinguished figures ever associated with the Faculty of Medicine, Sir Thomas George Roddick. Born in Harbor Grace, Newfoundland, in 1846,

he graduated, MDCM (*Medicinæ Doctorem et Chirurgiæ Magistrum*), in 1868 as class valedictorian¹. After training at the Montreal General Hospital, he joined McGill's Faculty of Medicine in 1874.

As a surgeon, Sir Roddick became a leading Canadian proponent of antiseptic surgical techniques^{2*}. During the second Riel Rebellion in the Northwest in 1885, as Deputy Surgeon General of Canada, Roddick led the medical team with great distinction³. From 1901 to 1908 he served as a highly effective Dean of the Faculty. His term concluded with the disastrous 1907 fire that destroyed half the Medical School, which led fortunately to Lord Strathcona constructing a new building for the Faculty at the corner of University Street and Pine Avenue.

In addition, from 1896 to 1904 Sir Roddick served as the Conservative MP in Ottawa for the Montreal riding of St. Antoine, where he played a prominent role in passing the Canadian Medical Act⁴. In 1890 he served as President of the Canadian Medical Association and in 1896 as President of the British Medical Association. In 1914 he was knighted (Knight Bachelor) by King George V⁵.

On June 13, 1901, Ada Redpath (1842-1901) and her son (Jocelyn) Clifford (1876-1901) were found dead of gunshot wounds in Ada's locked bedroom on the second floor of their Sherbrooke Street mansion. As the family physician, Roddick was called immediately and served as a key witness at the inquest held the next day. His opinion that young Clifford must have shot his mother and then himself was accepted by the jury. Five years later he married Amy (1868-1954), daughter of Ada and sister of Clifford. They had no children and continued living in Amy's family mansion. Mystery continues to swirl around this apparent murder-suicide and its many unanswered questions.

Amy (or Lady Roddick as she became known upon her husband's knighthood,) was a major heir to the Redpath fortune, author of a dozen volumes of poetry and drama, an advocate of native culture and an important benefactor of McGill University. Upon Sir Thomas's death (1923), she offered McGill \$50,000 to build an entrance to the University that would include a clock with bells to help students know the time, as a memorial to her late husband⁶. The Principal, Sir Arthur Currie, accepted and convened immediately a blue ribbon committee chaired by Sir Herbert Holt to judge the submissions and arrange for construction⁷. The Montreal architect, Grattan Thompson (1895-1971) to whom Lady Roddick was related by marriage, received the commission⁸.

A Grecian design, to coordinate with the portico of the 1843 Arts Building, was chosen and construction began in 1924. Concrete piles were sunk 9 meters to hard clay with a concrete foundation on top. The base of the colonnade and sidewalk were of Deschambault limestone. The remainder of the structure, spanning 18 meters from side to side, included eight monolithic, fluted Doric columns—four on each side—and tall piers at either end, with the one in the west end being somewhat taller and serving as a bell tower.

The capitals, entablatures, pillars and piers, including the clock tower, were of flawless gray Indiana limestone from a quarry that could supply large pieces. The McGill coat of arms is carved into the east pier, facing the clock tower⁹. The actual gates are 2.4 metres high, of decorative wrought iron, and can open or close the entrance. Decorative wrought iron also decorates the sections between the columns. Of equal

importance, the clock and bell tower (the west pier) has four clock faces and four bronze bells to ring upon the hour.

Not surprisingly, Lady Roddick was particularly concerned with the 6 metre high clock tower because she and her husband had often discussed the idea of providing a central clock for McGill for the students to tell the time.

The clock mechanism in the tower had four spindles to the four faces, each of which were in the center of a grillwork that opened the top of the tower to the elements. There were also four large bronze bells hung on wooden beams. In 1924, Montreal jewelers Henry Birks and Sons agreed to supply the clock. They arranged for Seth Thomas Co. in the United States to provide the clock mechanism, and for a bell foundry in Troy, NY to cast the 1000 pounds of bronze bells in the keys of "D", "G", "A" and "B". The bells were set to play Cambridge Quarters (Westminster Chimes) ringing every 15 minutes and on the hour.

Unfortunately the clock design was poorly conceived. The clock rested on a table exposed to wind, dust, rain, snow and insects. As a result of this environmental assault over five years, by 1930 the rusted and corroded clock and bell mechanism had stopped.

Lady Roddick agreed reluctantly to provide an additional \$2500 to replace the clock. Grattan Thompson, the architect, who had apparently never been up in the tower, assured her that the clock would be encased in waterproof grease and glass put behind the grills to keep out the weather. Although no surviving records in the McGill University Archives, the Birks papers, or National Archives in Ottawa indicate whether these precautions were actually put in place, close inspection failed to reveal mounts or fasteners for glass panels. It is assumed however that the fate of the replacement clock was that of the original¹⁰.

Many years later the clock was replaced by four separate clocks that required manual attention whenever the time changed or power went off. A panel controlling the bell ringing was installed, probably in the 1950s or 60s, as there was an LED (light emitting diode) window. No record of these changes has been found.

As an incoming undergraduate, walking through the Roddick Gates in September 1953, the author was unaware of this history. However, he did notice that all the clock faces had stopped running at different times, and v o w e d to someday investigate this failed mechanism. He did 56 years later in 2009, when he initiated a restoration project.

First, he contacted Birks looking for someone with access to old records, at which point the senior clock master, Helmut Hargassner, became interested in the project. Next, in September 2009, the author contacted the Southwest Sector Supervisor of McGill Facilities Management, Gilles McSween, about access to the tower to determine the condition of the mechanisms. Behind the battered, pitted, outer copper door, a shaft about 1.2 m x 1.2 m and a steel ladder led to a platform at the clock level, under the bells. We found a completely unrepairable, non-functional hodge-podge of wires and open plugs, along with rusted and corroded mechanisms. Lengths of mixed and spliced wires were hanging, loose and taped, coming from open outlets. The bell hammers and springs were rusted.

The entire contents of the tower, except the bells and hammers, had to be replaced with modern wiring to a new electrical station 6 metres north of the tower. The

clocks and the bell-ringing controls also had to be scrapped. Boston's Electrictime Inc., who make and repair clocks worldwide, was contacted and agreed to take on the project. Electrictime president Thomas Erb agreed to come to Montreal in March 2010 to climb the tower and determine what was to be done to the clocks and surrounding grills. Replacing the clocks and restoring the clock faces and grills would be done in Boston.

A proposal was then made to the University Principal Heather Monroe-Blum, by the author and Helmut Hargassner, to restore and modernize the tower with weather-sealed, satellite-controlled clocks requiring no maintenance and a computerized bell-ringing system. McGill offered to fund the entire project. What sold the proposal was a recording with pictures sent to the Principal of a bell ringing—the hammer having been carried up the tower by Dennis Schuller of Montreal's University Club. The Principal then became the project's major supporter.

The "Team of Five" was then formed at the beginning of 2010, and voluntarily donated more than 200 hours to the project. The tower's contents were removed, cleaned and rewired, and the clocks and grills were sent to Boston for restoration. The battered copper door was replaced in a masterly fashion by a Montreal firm.

The first phase went well but the restoration phase required tight scheduling. The much anticipated unveiling of the tower restoration was scheduled for Friday October 10, 2010: Homecoming weekend. The clocks and grills were only delivered in late September, causing some anxiety for the author. The clocks, bell ringing mechanism, small satellite dish (hand-sized and projecting from the north side of the tower above the entablature) and door were installed just a few days before the ceremony. The Team gathered at the tower on the 9th floor to see the final work on the clock instillation; the attachment of the door handle, and to hear the bells rung.

A gathering was held in the lobby of the Arts Building the following day with Chancellor Arnold Steinberg, as Master of Ceremonies to start the celebration. He reviewed the project and introduced speakers. This was followed by a bagpiper leading the parade down Graduate's Drive to the gates and clock tower to the tune of "Scotland the Brave." The Team arrived in time to hear the bells ring at 6 pm on a perfect autumn afternoon¹¹.

A complete file of the correspondence amongst the participants on the project (over 100 pages) in addition to pictures compiled by Helmut Hargassner were presented to the McGill University Archives for the use of future historians.

The project was officially completed 19 months later on May 25, 2012 with the instillation of a bronze plaque, commemorating the restoration project, placed inside the tower on the wall behind the door. The voluntary effort to restore a McGill landmark by "The Team of Five" is a tribute to Sir Thomas and Lady Roddick whose thoughtful gift to Old McGill will be enjoyed by countless generations to come.

References:

1. J. Hanaway, "Sir Thomas George Roddick," *DCB/DBC*, XV, 1920-30. Tom

Roddick was a child prodigy. At McGill he was first of his class in medicine for four years, won the senior exam prize, the Holmes Gold medal and was class valedictorian.

- 2 T.G. Roddick, "Antiseptic Dressing in Surgery," *Can.Med.&Surg.J*, 6, (1877), 483; T. G. Roddick, "Listerism." *Can.Med.& Surg. J.*, 7, (1878), 289, T.G. Roddick, "Remarks on Lister's Antiseptic method as practiced in the Hospital", in *Montreal General Hospital Reports Clinical and Pathological* Ed. By William Osler, Dawson Brothers Publ., v.1, (1880), 243-251
- 3 H.E. MacDermot, *Sir Thomas Roddick* (Toronto: The MacMillan Company of Canada Ltd., 1938), 43-83;
- 4 MacDermot, 84-113
- 5 MacDermot, 106
- 6 MUA, Currie/Morgan/Douglas fonds, Office of the Principal, , Buildings and Grounds, 1923-1931, [Letter] Att. George Foster to Principal Sir Arthur Currie regarding Lady Roddick's wish to give \$50,000 to construct front gates for McGill as a memorial for her husband, RG2 c.53 file 713
7. MUA, Currie/Morgan/Douglas fonds, Office of the Principal, Buildings and Grounds, 1923-1931, Letters between George Foster and Principal Sir Arthur Currie concerning Lady Roddick's offer, 9/24, 9/25, 10/11, and 10/13, 1923, RG2 c.53 file 713.
- 8 Gratton Thompson, "The Roddick Memorial Gates," *The McGill News* Vol6, #3, June, 1925, 21-22. It is a mystery that searching for five years in the Montreal City Municipal archives for building permits, the John Bland Architecture Collection , the MUA, and the Henry Birks archives at the National Archives in Ottawa has failed to reveal a complete set of the Thompson's original plans for the bell tower.
- 9 *Ibid.*
- 10 None of the letters in the Currie/Morgan/Douglas fonds admit to the poor design of the clock works and bell ringing mechanisms in the tower all completely exposed to the elements on four sides. Careful review of all the available letters and records suggests that

none of the people involved in the tower project ever climbed the tower to see what was up there before the unveiling in June 1925. Lady Roddick was upset at the failure of the mechanisms by 1931 that had been under warranty until 6 months before everything stopped. She agreed to pay reluctantly for the replacement which was putting the same works back in the same situation. The file ends 11/15/31 with a letter thanking Lady Roddick for her generosity, again. MUA, Currie/Morgan/Douglas fonds, Office of the Principal, Buildings and Grounds, 1923-1931, RG2 c.53 file 713.

11. Allyson Rowley, "A Timely Upgrade" McGill News, vol.92 #2, (Fall/Winter, 2010), 5