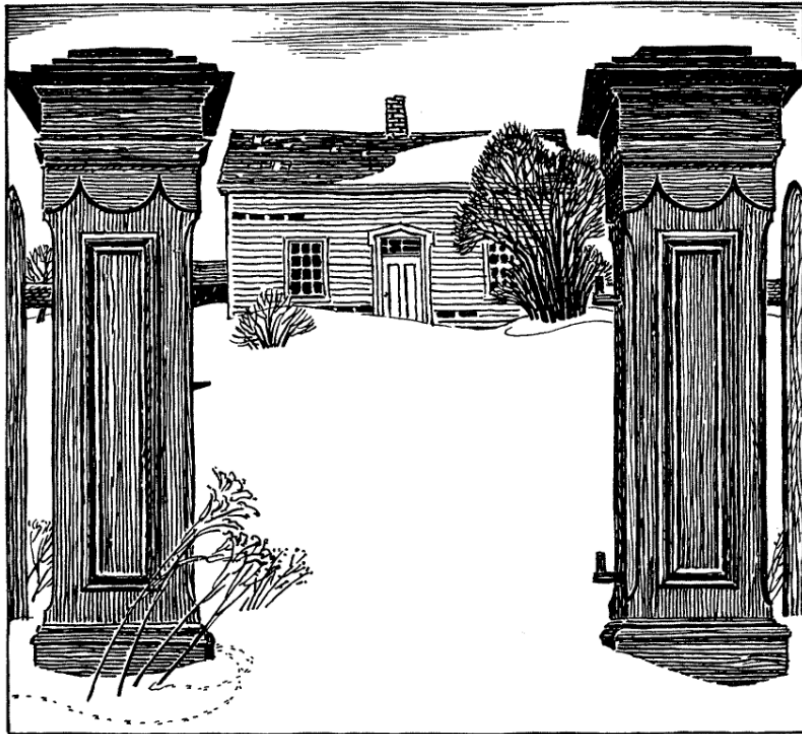


Thoreau MacDonald's

SKETCHES OF RURAL ONTARIO

Second Edition



house deserted

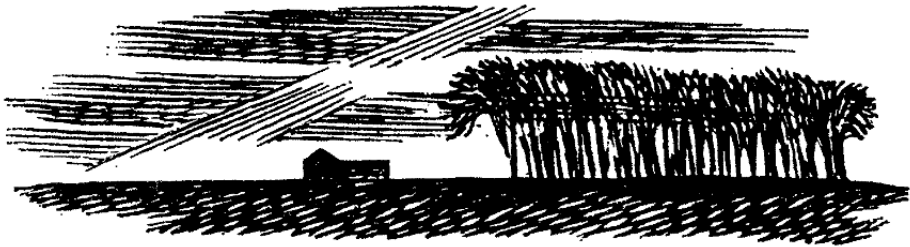
Written by George W. J. Duncan
Illustrated by Thoreau MacDonald

THE ONTARIO HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Thoreau MacDonald's

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THE ONTARIO HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Thoreau MacDonald's Sketches of Rural Ontario

Written by George W. J. Duncan

Illustrated by Thoreau MacDonald

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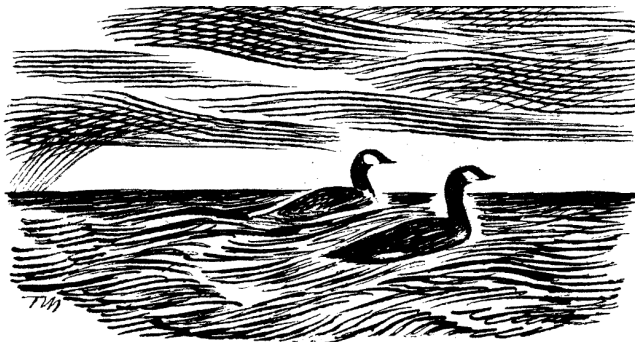
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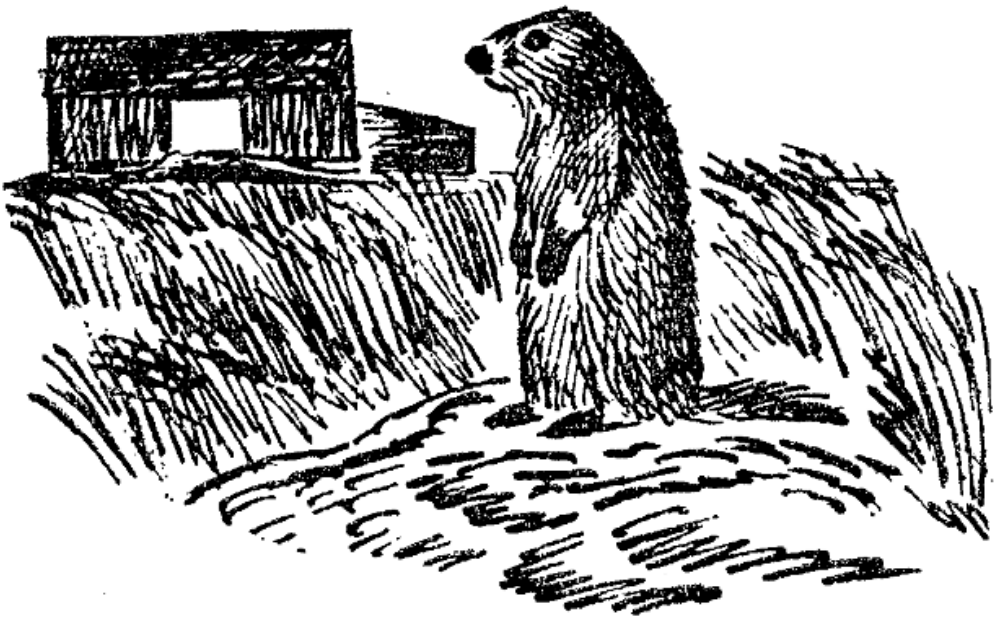
The author very much appreciates the kind words in the foreword (to the first edition) written by Lydia Alexander, Past President of the OHS, and current OHS President Michel S. Beaulieu, who wrote the foreword to this edition. Not enough can be said for the outstanding work of Sheila Creighton, who did the production, layout, and design of the first edition. For this 2020 edition, thanks are extended to Lorne Smith, Official Historian of the City of Markham, who reviewed the new text to ensure accuracy in its depiction of life in rural Ontario. A big thank you to Daniel Dishaw who did the production, layout, editing, and design for the updated, expanded edition.

The Ontario Historical Society wishes to acknowledge the support of the Ontario Ministry of Heritage, Sport, Tourism and Culture Industries.



DEDICATION

Dedicated to Susan M. MacDonald. Thank you for awakening the “Woodchuck” from his long hibernation.



THANK YOU NOTE TO THOREAU MACDONALD

Dear Thoreau,

It is important to me that you know how knowing you has affected me in so many ways. It all started with my many childhood visits to your home. I recall entering through the farm gate at the front of your property and lifting the heavy chain to enter. Walking across the wooden bridge over the creek bed was like stepping into another world, transporting me to another time. The beauty of your lot, with so many different trees and other plants took my breath away, not to mention the sounds of the birds singing in the trees. Your home and hospitality always made me feel like I was being greeted with such love. I always felt welcome. What a wonderful experience for a young girl from the city.

Your home was so old-fashioned, with the cook stove and smell of lemon wax on the hardwood floors. You always loaned me slippers that were much too large for someone my age, to keep my feet warm when I visited. I liked going into your parlour with its grandfather clock in the corner, a rocking chair, and a big table in the centre of the room. That table was the special place where you would draw on all sorts of small scraps of paper your pictures of animals, birds, barns, and old houses—the things you liked.

I wondered how someone could make such small sketches seem so alive. I always felt drawn to your sketches. They made me want to step into your world. Everything about those tiny sketches seemed so real to me. Animals came alive, houses looked so inviting, and whenever I saw a sketch of an old barn, I wanted to go inside to see what I would find. All of these memories will stay with me for many years to come and your drawings will live on forever; for me and many others to enjoy. I feel so privileged to be related to you and to have had the experience of stepping back in time at “Four Elms.”

–Your great-niece, Susan



FOREWORD TO THE FIRST EDITION

Thoreau MacDonald's Sketches of Rural Ontario, written by George W. J. Duncan, interprets and expands upon a selection of Thoreau MacDonald's drawings to illustrate common themes in the cultural heritage landscape of rural Ontario. Excerpts taken from Thoreau MacDonald's own journals, as well as renowned writers of Ontario's history, enhance our understanding of the drawings.

George W. J. Duncan, a Heritage Planner for the Town of Markham, brings his expertise in the identification, evaluation, and recording of Ontario's vernacular historical buildings to the drawings of Thoreau MacDonald. Through Duncan's trained eye, the ordinary features of the cultural landscape communicate social meaning. Both George W. J. Duncan and Thoreau MacDonald are "fond observers" of Ontario's rural landscape; both are gentle, caring souls, concerned that Ontario's cultural heritage landscape is fast changing and disappearing.

Thoreau MacDonald's drawings are compressed statements verging on the near side of private symbolism—mnemonic records, complete in themselves. His sparse drawings are saved from nostalgic fluff by a beguiling simplicity, unhampered by colour, and a powerful underlying design sensibility.

Similarly, George Duncan is economical in expression, reverentially placing Thoreau's subjects in an historical and personal context. Duncan's prose is generously imbued with respect for both the subject and the reader. The memory-charged artifacts of Ontario's landscape—the one-room schoolhouse, the water pump, the stump fence—are portrayed verbally and visually with considerable ingenuity, and sufficient detail that we will never look at the rural landscape in quite the same way again. We will look with fresh eyes at the commonplace, and so uncover the character of early Ontario.

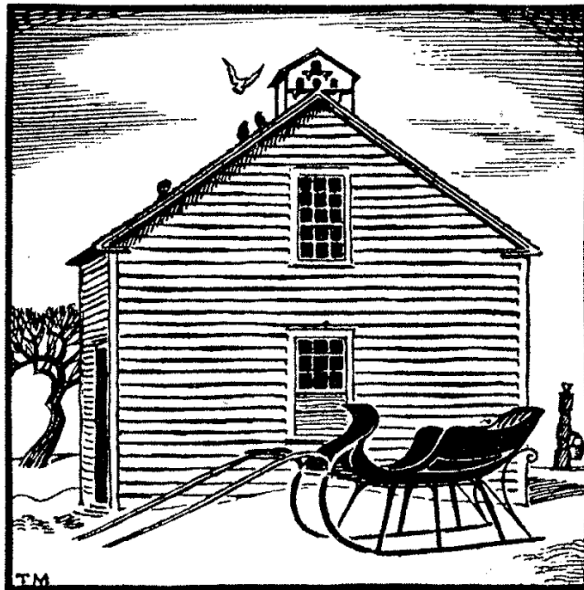
For myself, *Thoreau MacDonald's Sketches of Rural Ontario* awakens memories of early childhood on the family farm: being swarmed by bees in the apple orchard;

visiting “Mrs. Murphy in the back 40” beyond an arcade of giant lilacs; serving mounds of food at noon to farmhands during threshing; coils of flypaper dripping down over the mile-long kitchen table; the rich smell of gasoline in the farm tool shed; the moaning of wind in the trees flanking the family cemetery; the sound of silence; the smell of geraniums.

The Ontario Historical Society proudly presents *Thoreau MacDonald's Sketches of Rural Ontario*. These reminders of the past are the most effective and meaningful connections that we have with our heritage. No, we can't preserve everything. Fortunately, this offering preserves some record of the rural landscape we treasure that is almost forgotten.

—Lydia Alexander

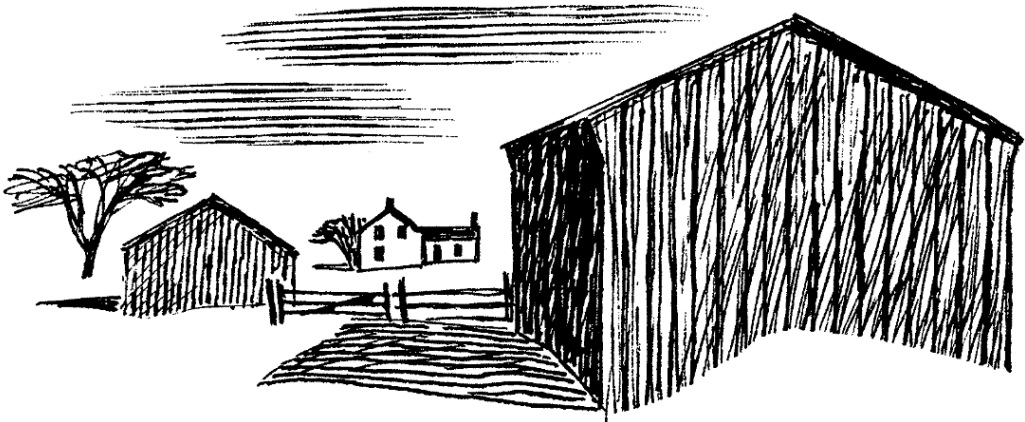
Past President, the Ontario Historical Society
August, 2004



FOREWORD TO THE SECOND EDITION

It has been 16 years since the publication of the first edition of *Thoreau MacDonald's Sketches of Rural Ontario*. I was first introduced to the book while working on a paper exploring aspects of Ontario's history as part of my doctoral studies at Queen's University. In the years since then, it has remained a favourite and has been a frequent gift to colleagues, friends, and visitors.

It was with genuine pleasure then, when only a few copies remained in stock, that The Ontario Historical Society decided that this successful little book warranted a reprint to make it available again to those like me who cherish the historical and natural landscape of our wonderful province. It was also an opportunity for George Duncan to expand the book with additional sketches and themes that express the things we value in the rural landscape.



George Duncan and Thoreau's great-niece, Susan MacDonald have collaborated to highlight a further series of vignettes that will at once be familiar to many who either live here or have travelled though Ontario's rural highways and backroads. Windmills; woodlots; general stores; and forlorn, abandoned houses are just a few of the themes explored in the 2020 edition. These images speak to the heart and soul of rural Ontario.

I welcome you to take a journey to what Thoreau MacDonald once described as "that quiet old way of life" that has fortunately not disappeared entirely from our landscape.

-Michel S. Beaulieu

President, The Ontario Historical Society
October 2020



A FOND OBSERVER:

Thoreau MacDonald and the Landscape of Rural Ontario



Years before most Canadians realized their country had a heritage worth preserving, Thoreau MacDonald, in his quiet but determined way, was busy making a record of rural scenes around and about his Thornhill home. In today's terms, Thoreau was documenting cultural heritage landscapes, but he would not have described his work in that way.¹ He was preserving in drawings elements of the rural landscape of Victorian Ontario that had survived into the twentieth century, while at the same time being mindful of the fact that change was coming, and that much of what he was recording would some day disappear forever.

*Above photograph: Thoreau MacDonald in the 1970s, at the pump outside his kitchen door.
Photo Courtesy of Susan M. MacDonald*