

JOHN GRENVILLE

There's a famous line – "The past is a foreign country. They do things differently there." But the past isn't foreign to John Grenville. He knows it well and is perfectly at home there. Plain spoken, low-key, and unflashy in manner and dress, if John were an actor – which he decidedly isn't – one could picture him playing Matthew in Anne of Green Gables, or donning a black frock coat and standing in the crowd watching the Last Spike being driven. But while keeping one foot firmly planted in the past, he's also a thoroughly modern thinker and activist who's deeply involved with the present and future of the city he loves – and is trying to make even better.

Born and raised in Kingston and still living a few blocks from where he grew up, John's grandmother taught at KCVI and his parents, Joyce and Jack, rest in Cataraqui Cemetery, so he would appear to be a certifiable Old Stone, although he jokingly refers to himself as a "New Stone." But neither term is really apt, because stones are inert, which John decidedly isn't. He's a quiet hive of eclectic activities.

The oldest of five children, John went to Winston Churchill School and KCVI where he played basketball, volleyball and other sports and was dubbed "Stretch" by his classmates. "I guess you'd call me a bit of a jock," he says. He studied geography and math at Queen's, but it was an occurrence the summer he was 18 that had a profound influence on his life's path.

Among several jobs John applied for was as a Fort Henry Guard. "It wasn't a lifelong dream. I just thought it might be an interesting summer job." His second option was

working for his father's commercial laundry and diaper service, so perhaps the choice wasn't all that difficult.

But it wasn't an immediate love affair with the Guard. There was a rigorous selection process involving endless drilling. "A number of fellows didn't make the cut. Marching and drilling came naturally to me, so I did. But that first summer was very difficult," he remembers. "There was a steep learning curve, fitting in as part of a team, doing demanding physical work in the hot sun on a baking parade square. I thought about not going back the next summer, but I didn't get a better job offer so I did. And I'm certainly glad of that. The lessons I learned in the Guard - developing leadership skills, learning how to lead my peers - were all invaluable to me in my working career as a manager and supervisor. Just as importantly, my summers at Fort Henry sparked my lifelong interest in military and local history. Who knows what my life might have become if I hadn't got into the Fort Henry Guard."

John spent eight summers with the Guard, rising to become an officer, while completing a B.A. and M.B.A at Queen's. Upon graduating, he was hired as Curator and Historical Research Officer at the Fort where he oversaw the museum, exhibits and programs. And, at least in spirit, John has never really left Fort Henry. To this day he faithfully attends Guard reunions, and is deeply involved with the Fort Henry Club and the Fort Henry Foundation.

During this time he started taking history courses at Queen's and writing papers on topics such as the Cataraqui wooden swing bridge which was the Eastern entrance to the city since the early 19th century. John isn't overtly political, and sometimes opinions have to be coaxed out of him, but his historical research gives him a perspective on

current issues. "Even back in '75 when I wrote that paper they were talking about a third crossing. They didn't need it then and I don't think they need it now."

In 1982, after seven years as Curator at Fort Henry, John received the proverbial offer he couldn't refuse from Parks Canada to work at the Citadel, the National Historic Site in Halifax. "It was a very stimulating time," he recalls. "Working with historians, archeologists, and conservators on extensive development of the fort and new visitor programs and exhibits. We also started the 78th Highlanders – loosely based on the Fort Henry Guard."

Ever in demand, after seven years at the Citadel, John was invited to be superintendent of Bellevue House in Kingston. "It was a great offer," he says. "There are only a few such positions across Canada, but I was torn. Halifax is a great city. I loved it as much as Kingston – well, almost as much. If the job had been anywhere else I probably wouldn't have taken it."

So in 1989 John was back in Kingston. After a stint running Bellevue House he was appointed Parks Canada National Historic Sites Manager for Eastern Ontario. In this role he received several Awards of Excellence and in 2002 was honoured with the Queen Elizabeth II Golden Jubilee Medal. And call it karma, or coming full circle, but when Parks Canada took over management of National Historic Sites from the federal government, John found himself in charge of, yes – Fort Henry – overseeing the major restoration of the fort where he first set foot as a nervous 18-year-old.

In 2011 John made the decision to retire. "I was only in my early 60's," he says. "I enjoyed my job, its

challenges, its variety, but I wanted to retire while it was still fun. And I had other things I wanted to do."

And he now had someone to do them with.

Over the years, John was a classic workaholic, seemingly too busy for a personal life. But at the annual Sir John A. Macdonald dinner in 2002 he found himself seated next to an "exotic archeologist", Sue Bazely. John and Sue had known each other for years through the Kingston Association of Museums "on a strictly professional basis." But John wore a kilt to the dinner and "there's something about a man in a kilt," laughs Sue. "Wine was also involved," and she readily admits she was the one who took the initiative. "I think John was kind of surprised. And after that the relationship became, well, a little more than professional."

On one of their first trips together to the north of England they undertook a day hike up Hadrian's Wall. "The weather turned vile," remembers Sue. "The rain was coming sideways. All the sensible people turned back until we were alone. But we kept going. On the steepest part of the wall. Soaked to the skin. Without food or water or cell phone. John didn't have proper hiking shoes and kept slipping and falling. I thought we were going to die out there," she says, only half jokingly. "But if we did at least it was at a National Historic Site."

Spoiler alert – John and Sue survived. "If we could survive that we could survive anything," says Sue. They were married soon afterwards – "at Fort Henry, of course." So at 55 it seems John finally found his soul mate. "We share all sorts of interests," says Sue. "We're heritage geeks. We go to every fort. We read every historical plaque." On a recent holiday in Malta – famous for sun and

sea – they didn't go to the beach once, happily spending the whole week traipsing up and down the fortifications. "We could easily have spent another week," says John. "You can never see too many forts."

But forts aren't John's only interest. He's still writing papers, usually published by the Kingston Historical Society, on a range of subjects: Kingston's defences in the War of 1812; the development of wartime housing north of Concession Street; the history of Bell Telephone in Kingston. This fascination with the past "is not nostalgia," says John. "I wouldn't have wanted the life of my ancestors, which often meant working hard and dying young. But I'm restlessly curious about it." In 2017 John's "restless curiosity" was recognized by the Kingston Historical Society with its annual award for his "outstanding contribution to the preservation and interpretation of local history."

John's contribution includes serving as president of the Lower Burial Ground Restoration Society. Ontario's oldest Anglican cemetery laid out in 1783 at Queen and Montreal Streets, this is the final resting place of everyone from Kingston's most prominent citizens to black slaves.

John was also instrumental in establishing Jane's Walk in Kingston. "I'd heard of Jane's Walks – inspired by urban activist Jane Jacobs, a bit of a heroine of mine – and I thought they fit perfectly with my idea of the value of people learning about and connecting with their neighbourhoods." In just four years under John's leadership Jane's Walk Kingston has grown to over a dozen walks each May, led by local citizens with a passion for or knowledge of their neighbourhoods. As well as organizing the event,

John leads a walk himself, last year taking an interested group on a tour of Victoria Park as it was in centuries past.

But it was an event in his own backyard that opened another door on John's journey. Some years ago he received notice that a "monster" development was planned next to his house. "Maybe it was just NIMBYISM at first," he admits, "because the development was literally out my back door." But as he familiarized himself with the Official Plan and zoning by-laws in order to challenge the development, John began to look beyond his backyard to his larger neighbourhood, and saw what he considered to be poor planning and inappropriate development proposals in all sorts of places.

He became involved with the group fighting to keep the Memorial Centre land from being sold off for private development. That initiative succeeded and the Memorial Centre was saved and upgraded. "Others deserve far more credit for that than I do," says John. "But that showed me what was possible and really got me going."

John has since become something of a civic watchdog on planning issues. "I've made myself a reluctant expert on arcane issues like community benefits and the vertical plane of buildings," he laughs. He's an active member of the Williamsville Community Association and is vice chair of the Coalition of Kingston Communities. An umbrella organization of community groups, the Coalition is dedicated to improving citizen participation, transparency and accountability in decision-making at City Hall.

In 2011 when the city hired consultants to create the Williamsville Main Street Study, aimed at enhancing the Princess Street corridor, John spent many hours attending

public meetings and workshops, offering input and ideas. When the plan was unveiled in 2012, he was pleased. It presented a dynamic vision of upper Princess Street as a vibrant, people-friendly gateway to the historic centre of the city, featuring an attractive streetscape of store fronts, public art, wide sidewalks, trees – and one of John's pet issues – parkettes.

"But now it's six years later and the vision of the Main Street Plan hasn't come close to being realized," says John. He doesn't own a car and walks everywhere. So how does he feel when he strolls down Princess Street and sees garbage-strewn lots and abandoned buildings where there was supposed to be a beautiful new streetscape? "Of course it's frustrating," he says. "Why hasn't it happened?"

In spite of what some developers may think, "I'm not anti-development," says John. "I'd far rather see new buildings than empty lots - but appropriate buildings. In fact, not one of the buildings built since 2012 has actually adhered to the Main Street Plan." With others, John has fought hard to convince City Council to undertake a review of the plan to get it back on track.

Although community activism has become a second (or third) career for John, he's reluctant to apply the term to himself. "Really I'm just someone who wants good neighbourhoods for people to live in. I don't march or wave placards or pound the table. I'm analytical, not aggressive. I always approach politicians and city staff respectfully. I believe facts and logic and quiet persuasion will carry the day. Of course, that's not always the case." John seems remarkably patient, but doesn't he ever get discouraged? "Either you give up or you double

down," he says. "Maybe I'm just not smart enough to give up yet."

So, does he consider running for office himself? "I ask myself that sometimes," John admits. "But I don't think I have the politician personality. Maybe it's selfish. Working behind the scenes I can focus on things I feel deeply about, and don't have to deal with the myriad issues a politician faces. I'm not sure I'd actually get more done as a sitting politician."

Asked for one word to describe John, Sue doesn't hesitate. "Dedicated," she says. "When he commits to something he commits totally; he carries through to the end." Can't that occasionally be problematic – when it means, say, climbing Hadrian's Wall in a rain storm? "Oh, yes. But that's who he is."

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By Doug Bowie

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