GLENDON HALL AND THE CANADIAN ROSE SOCIETY

by John P.M. Court

When Toronto's York University arrived to take up residence at its first permanent campus, at the beginning of the Fall, 1961 term, students and staff alike were awestruck. They had been furnished with a formerly private, 82-acre estate in a posh, residential neighbourhood just north-east of the city, bequeathed a decade earlier to the University of Toronto for establishing a botanical garden. Named Glendon Hall from its beginnings in the early 1920s, the gardens, grounds and elegant exteriors of the estate's structures now appeared as though they were surely little-changed by the previous few years of scientific nurturing, under the older university's botanists and foresters. Amid the novelty of the site for the York newcomers, and the usual confusion of settling in, only two or three staff members and planners were aware that the Canadian Rose Society's Old Rose Garden of historic varieties had just been removed, earlier that Spring, for future re-propagation at the Royal Botanical Gardens.

The Glendon campus then and today appears as one of the larger and more distinctive among an imposing boulevard of former private estates, discretely converted over recent years into institutional settings. Along the Bayview frontage the property is distinguished from its neighbours in a number of ways. Approaching from the south, particularly striking is one of the region's most elegant, iron-rail fences, interspersed by broad, stone pillars and adjoining two majestic gateways as formal "carriage" entrances, out of sight from each other along Bayview's outward curve. They are enhanced by complementary features in the Beaux Arts style such as classical planter urns surmounting the main gate piers, and an arched, pedestrian gateway nearby. The sumptuous, even triumphal effect of these ornate gateways and fencing is reinforced by a mature woodlot of tall, native hardwoods. A picturesque backdrop in its own right, it also accents both the vertical and horizontal scales of the property's dimensions. Moreover the woodlot screens the interior areas -- of which more below -- without resorting to an unwelcoming or apparently impenetrable barrier.

Not unexpectedly, the personal interests and tastes of the estate's private founders, Edward Rogers Wood (1866-1941, usually called "E.R.") and Agnes Euphemia (Smart) Wood (1868-1950, called "Pheme"), were among the foremost influences on the design and conception of the Glendon landscape and gardens -- most of which have survived and are flourishing. The Woods were among the very early members of the Rose Society of Ontario, joining just after its 1914 founding. The membership roll in the Society's second Yearbook (delayed during World War One until 1918) records the beginning of their enduring affiliation, for the most part as Sustaining Members. Although there is no indication of their having participated as exhibitors in the regular competitions, they generously supported that aspect of the Society's activities; Mr. Wood was frequently acknowledged among the contributors of "Special Donations to the Prize Fund."
In those early years before building Glendon Hall, the Woods' home was located alongside the University of Toronto at 84 Queen's Park, where it still sits handsomely next to the former mansion of Sir Joseph and Lady Flavelle. In the 1913-15 period the Woods' interest in gardening gave rise to a series of ambitious plans and concept drawings for an elaborate formal garden and tea house, commissioned from the recently established Dunington-Grubb firm of landscape architects.2 Lorrie Dunington-Grubb was among the 1914 founding members of the Rose Society,3 and soon after became a Vice President and member of the Executive Committee and the Test Garden Committee. Her husband and partner, Howard, contributed an illustrated article on *The Design of the Rose Garden* for the 1918 Yearbook.4 The Dunington-Grubbs had an obvious professional interest in the Society's aims and activities, both through their pioneering (for Canada) landscape architecture practice and, almost simultaneously, as the founders and lifelong principals of Sheridan Nurseries. But their support was also deeply personal, even mission-oriented, as "a genuine wish to educate the public not only in the pleasures of gardening, but in the enriched quality of life that design can bring. Both volunteered time and energy, and later H.B. donated considerable money to this cause."5

Another Rose Society charter member of significance to the Glendon Hall story was Robert Boyd Thomson, a botany professor in the University of Toronto from 1906 to 1941 and Head of that department from 1928.6 In the World War One era there were nine Botany courses offered, in five areas of major study: morphology of cryptograms, morphology of phanerograms, plant pathology, plant ecology and plant physiology. Although botany was taught from the university's earliest days, for various reasons a botanical garden had not materialized from the sporadic planning for one and identification of potential sites on campus that began in 1850. Professor Thomson and his colleagues knew that a botanical garden would provide a much-needed research facility, while also enhancing the limited supply from their (insufficient) greenhouses of living plant materials needed for teaching.

Accordingly in 1920 the university "launched a project for the establishment of Botanic Gardens in cooperation with the city and Provincial Government." Professor Thomson outlined at that time the need for such a facility which, along with the pure science and applied scientific-professional aspects, clearly encompassed the aims and interests of the Rose Society, and popular horticulture generally: "The word [Botanic Gardens] is used in the plural since different gardens are included, e.g., wild gardens, rose gardens, iris gardens, rock gardens, water gardens [and] the oldest type -- the Physick Garden of the Herbalists of the Middle Ages..." Moreover, along with the various fields of scientific and professional study, students would have the opportunity to "learn practical gardening and the culture and history of cultivated plants, as well as their economic and decorative value."8
Thomson spearheaded that drive from then until his death in 1947, a much longer period than anyone had imagined would be necessary. The roadblocks, familiar before and since, lay in obtaining the requisite quantity of suitable land, finding other start-up capital, and securing commitments from different levels of government and institutions for ongoing, operating funding. By 1936 Professor Thomson had enlisted initial interest from Mr. and Mrs. Wood. He was assisted in this by an enthusiastic committee of university board members and prominent citizens, chaired by retired U. of T. President, Sir Robert Falconer (an earlier Queen's Park neighbour of the Woods), and their near neighbour on Bayview (and a Flavelle relative), J.S. McLean. In the mid-1940s, the latter gentleman supported Professor Thomson's proposal to secure the permanent site location on a major sector of Sunnybrook Park, to be supplemented by later bequests of McLean's own, and other neighbouring estates.9

Having begun in 1920 with an 85-acre farm, the Woods had soon transformed it into the elegant Glendon Hall estate. They fast-tracked a great many person-years of landscaping work, so that the gardens and parkland by the mid-1920s appeared polished, lush, permanent and substantial. The garden showpieces -- initially created without the Dunington-Grubbs' involvement but clearly respectful of their design precepts -- were an enclosed, formal garden and a terrace garden adjacent to the main house, with a separate cutting garden and a hillside rock garden just beyond. The formal garden, rectangular and sunken to a single level, displayed densely-bedded but harmonizing annuals and perennials in the manner of Gertrude Jekyll. The beds were laid out between a central lawn and a pair of flanking brick walls which were banked inside by Peonies, and surmounted by regularly-spaced, stone urns overflowing with greenery. At the end of the formal garden opposite the house were sturdy, twin tea houses of carved trelliswork framing "a semi-circle of complementary pillars of roses. These enclose a gorgeous group of Cedars which make a bower for the Rose garden between the two pergolas."10

Sweet Briar Roses were planted at the upper edge of the rock garden, laid out with winding stone steps over three steeply-sloped acres. It had been built with the aid of horse-drawn stone boats, and sleds for transplanting mature trees, and was described by Canadian Homes and Gardens in 1926 as "undoubtedly the chef d'oeuvre of Glendon Hall." The estate's supporting buildings, each deferring modestly to the main residence's architecture, included a centrally-heated, double greenhouse with potting shed (alongside a lilac grove and orchard), a two-storey garage and heavy-equipment building with chauffeur's apartment, and a gate cottage for the groundskeeping superintendent. Additional amenities included a paved, interior roads system with storm drainage, a limited irrigation system, and a self-contained dairy farm operation, hiking trails and recreational areas throughout the valley.
Going by the scale, thoroughness and intensity of these projects, it is not surprising that *Saturday Night* magazine would conjecture, in 1911 and again in 1929, that E.R. Wood was "spoken of as Toronto's wealthiest citizen."\(^{11}\) His later circumstances seem not to have been noticeably altered by the Great Depression, perhaps because of his specialty in bonds as a broker (the first President of Dominion Securities Inc.), or generally having invested conservatively for retirement. In 1931 the Woods added property to the west (Bayview) boundary for additional buffer-land, and commissioned their structural architects to execute the elaborate fencing and gateways, as described above and still largely surviving. Evidently at about this time they also commissioned the Dunington-Grubbs to carry out an extensive remodeling of the gardens and advise on tree planting for the emerging parkland-arboretum. The resulting garden architecture in particular has also happily survived, including the parterre selected about a quarter-century later for the Rose Society's garden of historic shrub roses.

As reflected in the photograph accompanying this article, the formal garden's modifications were based on decorative architectural stonework:- terrace retaining walls, walkways, greater vertical scale through creating three internal parterres, and installation of the central lily pool, with its whimsical, frog-and-turtle fountain sculpture. The brick wall with classical urns originally enclosing the garden on the north side was removed altogether (although not from the opposite side), and replaced by elegant terracing down the upper slope. This has greatly enlarged the formal garden's area while opening it up to magnificent contrasting vistas overlooking the thickly-wooded valley. The twin tea houses were retained, although the rose treillage between them gave way to stone-bordered beds of a lower height, so the tea houses now stand out more visibly. Around at the entrance to the residence, by the *porte-cochere* -- awarded an architectural citation when the house was built -- the entranceway gardens were stylistically linked with the formal garden. An oval, sunken garden was created inside the driving circle, enclosed with the same classical style of balustrade and surmounting planter urns, and centred with a garden sculpture.

Through the 1930s and 40s, the Woods enjoyed Glendon Hall and periodically discussed options for its disposition after their eventual passing. For his part, Professor Thomson was working diligently for the emergence of a botanical garden, evaluating a range of site possibilities in the process. He maintained contacts of a related, professional nature such as by serving on T.B. McQuesten's Advisory Committee for organizing the Royal Botanical Gardens. During the two decades preceding the enactment of its legislation in 1942, the RBG's development process provided inspiration and some experience. "McQuesten surrounded himself with the best professionals available... A Toronto-based firm of landscape architects, H.B. and L.A. Dunington-Grubb, was retained to devise a plan for Gage Park."\(^{12}\) They and Thomson remained active as well in the Rose Society. The 1934 Summer Programme included the "generous hospitality" of Sheridan Nurseries
during a Society outing to its Clarkson field operations. Professor Thomson was regularly thanked for making U. of T.'s new (1932) Botany Building available for the Society's annual meetings, and in 1935 became an Honorary Life Member.\textsuperscript{13}

Almost from the beginning the Rose Society's most active field program was its series of test gardens, for propagating and gauging the hardiness and disease-resistance of newly-introduced varieties. Like much of the aforementioned activity this was drastically curtailed during World War Two, but then there was difficulty in resuming it afterwards. By 1950 the Rose Test Garden at the Ontario Agricultural College (now University of Guelph) had declined in both space available to it and new varieties, such that the Society reluctantly decided to abandon it. Other cooperation had been offered by "two responsible organizations at Hamilton and Niagara Falls," as well as by at least one overseas grower offering new varieties for testing, but the Society's Board felt that its own resources should first be improved.\textsuperscript{14} In the meantime they re-established a U. of T. Botany Department contact to succeed the late Professor Thomson, in the person of the equally helpful and enthusiastic Prof. George H. Duff.

After Mrs. Wood's death in 1950 Glendon Hall passed to the University of Toronto, with considerable latitude permitted through her will but with the wish expressed that it be used "in connection with the work of the Department of Botany..." Interested staff and graduate students from that department and the closely-allied Faculty of Forestry were soon established on most of the site, except for the main residence (leased to the Ontario Art College to raise operating funds) and the Head Groundskeeper's cottage (J.R. Mackintosh remained a fixture from 1932 to the mid-1960s). In the first year or so the Glendon Botanists "accepted a gift of roses from the Rose Society,"\textsuperscript{15} quite possibly relocated from the former Test Garden at Guelph.

In June, 1952 Professor Duff arranged for Hart House to be made available for the Society's Annual Rose Exhibition, and "in a brief but inspiring ceremony," he opened the show "and cordially welcomed all who attended."\textsuperscript{16} A year later, in outlining various proposals to the University President, Duff supported the Rose Society's request to establish its test garden at Glendon Hall. President Smith replied that, although the faculty members could count on a continuing use of Glendon to establish long-term research undertakings, he felt that until they had "completed several laps in the scientific field," with well-established graduate studies' programs, it would be premature to begin joint ventures with the public horticultural societies.\textsuperscript{17}

The Glendon facility progressed within those confines over the next several years. Although George Duff died suddenly in 1958, his last several years were marked by productive leadership for the Botany and Forestry activities at Glendon. In his June, 1957 official opening of the Society's Annual Rose Show, now routinely ensconced in
the Great Hall of Hart House, Duff announced the creation, jointly by the Society and the University's Glendon Hall Botanical Garden Committee, of a Rose Garden (not a test garden) with planting to begin the following Spring. The Society established its own Glendon Hall Project Committee that year, chaired by Mr. A.M. Anderson and including among the members Mr. J.V. Stensson of the firm of Dunnington-Grubb and Stensson. In a fitting obituary to Professor Duff in the 1959 Yearbook, member A.J. Webster reported:

As a result of the negotiations which [Professor Duff] initiated, progress was accelerated to the point where the first Rose plantings, consisting of a large and representative collection of the species rosae and of old Hybrids of Shrub habit, were completed in the Spring of 1958. A further substantial planting, comprising chiefly Floribundas, will be added in April, 1959, with Hybrid Teas, Hybrid Perpetuals and Climbers to follow in succeeding years as funds permit.

Incredibly, after so much time and dedicated laying of various groundwork, this imaginative idea flourished on its elegant hillside parterre with the breathtaking view over the valley, for a scant three years. As Botany's Prof. Dorothy Forward observed, years later: "The [U. of T.] Board of Governors seemed never to have been committed to the continued use of the Glendon Hall estate as a scientific botanical garden. Alternatives kept cropping up." The enduring alternative cropped up in 1959 when, with the Provincial Premier's backing, the U. of T. Board offered the campus as an inaugural gift to its newly-appointed counterparts from York University. The actual handing-over would take place in 1961, except for a two-acre research station combined with the relocated remnants of the greenhouse, reserved for those Botanists and Foresters who chose to remain (as the last of them did until the Spring of 1993).

Notwithstanding, as mentioned in the opening paragraph here, the new university's small mainstream of students and staff had no idea that such a concept as the Old Rose Garden even existed, much less that its existence may have been threatened. Sadly, any such threat may have been more perceived than real. York's master planning consultant had secured priority in principle for preserving most of the formal gardens, including that site. His main report in 1960 specifically recommended that: "It would seem that this [rose garden] might be continued when York University assumes responsibility for the site, and Mr. Anderson of the Rose Society should be approached in this manner." The minutes of the Rose Society's next Board meeting indicate that such an approach may have been made; the Glendon discussion began with planning for the next Spring's plantings, including which aspects of work should be York's responsibility. Before leaving the matter, however, they decided that the site would eventually be lost, and it was duly resolved that the RBG should be approached, "to see if they would be interested in having the garden."
As always, then and now, the RBG was as helpful as it could be -- through their Director, Leslie Laking, and Propagator, Ray Halward. In the Society's last published or minuted mention of it, the 1961 annual meeting was advised that "the rose bushes from... our Old Rose Garden at Glendon Hall were moved last Spring to the Royal Botanical Gardens at Hamilton to become part of their lovely gardens." Since the RBG had not been expecting them, it was obliged to store the roses carefully rather than transplant them directly. Dr. Laking recalled in 1992: "Nearly all of these plants were re-propagated, as we had no place to display them at that time. [Ray Halward] had them planted in the RBG Nursery, and he re-propagated them so that we would have vigorous, younger plants when required a decade later for... the Centennial Rose Garden."

Although the plant material was successfully relocated, due to the circumstances of that time the concept of a distinctive garden of historic varieties was lost, along with the creative idea of a working partnership between a public and a private sector body to share the labour, costs, enthusiasm, scientific knowledge and public enjoyment surrounding it. That is, lost for the time being. Happily, there is a residual legacy at Glendon College, no less than that at the RBG.

Through admiring the historic roses before they left, and some that may have been left behind, the new university from its beginnings came to know this beautiful setting as the Rose Garden -- previously known by the Wood family and U. of T. as simply the Formal Garden. In 1992, to honour a friend who departed too soon from his life of volunteer service to the university, York rededicated it as The Bruce Bryden Rose Garden. New rose plantings and physical restoration have already commenced, with more to follow. York's enthusiasm for its own and its predecessors' heritage of the Glendon site is now being expressed in several ways, and reciprocated. Contributions of expert advice and recollections have been offered by the heirs or professional successors of the Wood family and their employees, the firm of Dunington-Grubb and Stensson, and the dedicated foresters and botanists of the 1950s. As one pertinent example, in 1992-3 Mrs. Janina Stensson, Fellow of the Society of Landscape Architects, generously donated an antique sundial, the stone base for which had been designed by Howard Dunington-Grubb during his early years in this country. The sundial was installed with due ceremony on a Spring day at the central axis of the parterre which had formerly hosted the Old Rose Garden.
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ENDNOTES:

1. For example, *Yearbook of the Rose Society of Ontario (YRSO)*, 1926, p.20.


6. Dorothy F. Forward, *The History of Botany in the University of Toronto* (Toronto: 1977). Prof. Thomson's charter membership is listed with the others in the 1914 *YRSO*, p.50, incorrectly shown as "R.P. Thompson" but with his identity verifiable from the address given for him as 11 Queen's Park -- U. of T.'s Botany Building from 1908 to 1932.

7. Editor's notice, *University of Toronto Monthly*, 20:7, April 1920, p.246; courtesy University of Toronto Archives (UTA).


17. UTA, President's Office corresp., A71-0011/004. Duff also noted the Glendon Hall joint Botany-Forestry faculty committee's desire to see the Rose Society's test garden established there in his article on the overall program and facility in *The Garden Journal*, Nov-Dec. 1954, pp. 175-8.


19. *YCRS*, 1959, p.120.


22. Canadian Rose Society, Board of Directors' Minutes, 24 Nov. 1960; through the courtesy of the CRS, especially Ann and Paul Graber, for kind access to the CRS library & archives.
