

“Surveyor’s Description of the Lower Tay River ca 1828 (from Port Elmsley to Perth)”

The following description of the lower Tay River, from the Rideau to Perth, is a verbatim excerpt from the book, ‘*Three Years in Canada*’, by John McTaggart, based on his observations on the early surveys of the Rideau system, including the Tay. It is copied from a September 11, 1829 article in the *Independent Examiner newspaper*, kindly provided by the Perth Courier.

The article begins after a description of the route between Smiths Falls and the present Lower Rideau Lake:

“Having now climbed up by a great succession of dams and locks to the noble summit pond of the Rideau Lake, I digress a little, and give an account of a survey made of the Perth River. About five miles from Oliver’s Ferry, the mouth of the Tay opens into the Rideau; for two miles up, it may be easily made navigable, requiring only a little mud scraping, and rushy matters taken out of the way.

After this distance, we come to the Fishing Falls, so named by the inhabitants for the fishing-nets placed there. These rapids are about a mile and a half in length, with limestone horizontal rock, but shelving, and fall about 19 feet throughout the rapids. The banks of the river are generally low. At one place, however, about 2000 yards below, where the waters make a sudden fall of four feet at once, a dam of 12 feet and a lock may be obtained; the dam about 140 feet sufficient to lull the rapids above. The remainder of the rapids below can only be overcome either by deepening the channel, or quitting the river, and digging about half a mile through loamy wilderness. These rapids or Fishing Falls surmounted we come to McVittie’s still-water, of three feet in depth, for two miles, and passing it to the upper rapids, there are only 550 feet in length, with a fall of four feet to overcome, when the river must be left again, and the country cut thro’ for the above distance, putting in the lock where it falls into the still water below.

We next gained the Perth still-water [*E.N.: now known as Tay Marsh*], a sheet of about five miles long, average depth three feet, banks swampy, and river choked with sedge-grass, bulrush, and wild rice, which being cleared away, a navigation of three feet in depth is open to Perth; to go one foot deeper, would require much money and labour [*Note.: this was eventually accomplished in the first canal by a lock where the narrow River meets the present Tay Marsh – and, in the second canal, by the present dam on the lower Tay River*].

Between the Fishing Falls and upper rapids, a creek runs out of the south side of the river, called Jebb’s Creek, after the intelligent man of that name, who first explored it.

This creek flows from Otty Lake, which is about a mile from Rideau Lake; perhaps a route might be found up this creek.

There are also good accounts of swamp snie which leaves McVittie's still-water, and falls into the Rideau lake. All these, snies and creeks, I would have searched, had there not been much more important service on my hands; but I regret they are not thoroughly examined. Had the Tay, like the Jacque, fallen into the Rideau, beneath some of the Rideau Falls, the dams and locks on these rapids of the Rideau would have opened to the Perth navigation, whereas it is only aided two feet, which are thrown into it by the last dam, as already mentioned.

The land around Perth is tolerably fertile, but the situation of the town is unhealthy, from its surrounding swamps. It is about 30 feet above the level of the Rideau Lake, and nearly 400 feet above the City of Montreal; it is almost on a level with the Mississippi Lake, and it seems to me, that if the navigation of Cockburn Creek, which falls into the Rideau at First Rapids, was opened to the above-mentioned lake, (an object, by all reports, of an easy nature to perform), then a navigation through Perth Settlement, by way of creek and lake, might become an advantageous concern [*Note: this reference to Cockburn Creek appears geographically out of place and far from where it is located – probably indicating that this is not a first hand account*].”

[Excerpt from ‘*Three Years in Canada*’, by John McTaggart, obtained from the *Perth Courier*, from a September 11, 1829 edition of the *Independent Examiner*.]

This article goes on to describe in some detail Oliver's Ferry (Rideau Ferry), Upper Narrows, Mud (Newboro) Lake, Clear lake, Indian Lake, Chaffey's Rapids, Davis Rapids, and Jone's Falls.

FOOTNOTE ON JOHN McTAGGART'S VISIT TO CANADA

In an unpublished article, Susan Code, Perth historian, describes McTaggart's Canadian mission as follows:

“John McTaggart arrived at Colonel By's headquarters at Entrance Valley in late fall 1826 to take up the civilian position of Clerk of Works. Although only twenty-six years old, he had been highly recommended to By, by John Rennie, a leading civil engineer back in England. McTaggart's primary duties included expanding on the preliminary surveys completed by Samuel Clowes two years previously to determine the canal's ultimate route. The work proved physically demanding and McTaggart, like many who worked on the Rideau, fell ill with “swamp fever.” He returned to England at the end of 1828, either as a result of poor health or drinking on the job.

Colonel By also noted on several occasions his displeasure with McTaggart's tendency to take unauthorized action. Regardless, McTaggart never recovered and passed away at his parents' home in Kirkudbright, Scotland, 8 January 1830, but not before publishing his observations in a sweeping two-volume work, *Three Years in Canada: An Account of the Actual State of the Country in 1826–7–8 Comprehending Its Resources, Productions, Improvements, and Capabilities; and Including Sketches of the State of the Society, Advice to Emigrants, &c.* '.

The *Montreal Herald* published the following obituary, which was reprinted in Perth's *Bathurst Independent Examiner*:

“He possessed great abilities in the line of his profession; and on many matters unconnected with it, he was shrewd and discriminating. His eccentricities both of thought and expression were obvious alike in his conversations and his writings, but they were those of the head, not of the heart—it was in the right place. His peculiarities were never able to conceal the rich vein of good sense which ran thro' all his conversation but only gave it a picturesqueness which, all but the most fastidious must have been pleased with.” [end of quote].