

Acquisition of the Lord Elgin Collection

BACKGROUND

The Government of Canada is in a fortunate position to patriate important and nationally significant heritage documents and artifacts in order to ensure their safekeeping and availability for future generations. Such has been the case when Library and Archives Canada (LAC) had the opportunity to acquire an exceptional collection of historical materials mainly relating to the 8th Earl of Elgin during his time in office as Governor-in-Chief of the Province of Canada from 1847 to 1854.

Acquisition of the Lord Elgin Collection

In 2003, Rideau Hall sponsored the exhibition *Culture and Democracy*, which focused on the role of Lord Elgin between 1847 – 1854. The exhibition permitted Canadians to see an extraordinary collection of archival and museum artifacts, which have remained in a family collection for the last 150 years.

Following a visit to Ottawa in April 2003, the current Lord of Elgin generously expressed a willingness to discuss the acquisition, by Library and Archives Canada, of the archival material and artifacts relevant to Canada, which were in his possession.

In May 2004, during a visit to Broomhall, Scotland, Librarian and Archivist of Canada, Ian E. Wilson, viewed items in the Elgin Family Archives Collection and consulted with the Canadian Museum of Civilization into the possibility of a joint acquisition. Both national institutions sent experts to examine the collection in detail and the evaluation of the material was completed in March 2006 by the auction house Sotheby's.

A Considerable Community Effort

The Alberta Friends of Elgin, a group of Canadians interested in national history, has come together on behalf of LAC to help make this dream possible. They offered recommendations and organized activities related to the fundraising events. Dr Jennifer Considine, the founding member of the Alberta Friends of Elgin organized dinners at which she, Lord Bruce (Lord Elgin's eldest son and heir) and Mr. Wilson discussed the potential acquisition.

The acquisition will also be enriched by a generous donation by Lord and Lady Elgin.

The Lord Elgin Collection

The Lord Elgin Collection pertains mostly to the 8th Earl of Elgin, James Bruce (1811-1863), who was Governor-in-chief of the Province of Canada (1847-1854) during a critical time in Canada's history.

The documents illustrate Lord Elgin's role in the implementation of "responsible government" in the Province of Canada (now Quebec and Ontario) and his negotiation, on behalf of all colonies of British North America, of the Reciprocity Treaty with the United States in 1854. The collection contains key documents pertaining to Canada's constitutional history.

A very interesting aspect to the collection is that almost a fifth of the material is created by women including letters, diaries, sketches, watercolours and artifacts. These provide an exceptional insight into the role of the vice-regal family, family relationships and the viewpoint of women during this time.

Another cultural institution, the Canadian Museum of Civilization, has acquired items including two pairs of beaded moccasins and two birch bark trays attributed to the Huron-Wendat artist Marguerite Vincent Lawinonkié of Wendake

Significance of the Collection for Canadians

The Lord Elgin Collection is important to Canadians because of the central role the 8th Earl of Elgin played in Canada's early development. Lord Elgin's term in Canada, from 1847 to 1854, was marked by initiatives that forever shaped the history of Canada. The best known initiative was the implementation of "responsible government" in the Province of Canada in 1848.

Lord Elgin encouraged measures to mitigate the consequences of the Rebellions, notably the Amnesty legislation, which permitted the Patriots to return from exile. He promoted the Maple Leaf as a unifying emblem for the county and encouraged economic, scientific, technological developments. He also fostered the negotiation of treaties with Aboriginal peoples and improvements of their living circumstances.

As a family collection of papers, works of art and personal artifacts, the Lord Elgin Collection presents a "behind the scenes" history of our country, a view not found in the official state papers of the time. It also documents the close association the Elgin Family has had with Canada over the past 150 years. It is appropriate that Canadians have ready access to this significant collection of historical documents and artifacts.

The records of the 8th and 9th Earls of Elgin relate to political, economic and scientific developments and Lady Elgin's letters, drawings, paintings and artifacts provide information about cultural developments, the spread of settlement, the environment, and more.

Part of the Elgin Collection is already in the keeping of Library and Archives Canada and the Canadian Museum of Civilization. Arrangements are currently underway to ship the remainder of the Elgin Collection from London, England to Ottawa once the appropriate export licences from the Government of the United Kingdom are granted.

This acquisition allows LAC to build a collection of documentary heritage material that reflects the development of the Canadian democratic tradition.