

What we know about Captain Coote

If you are like most people in the Hamilton-Burlington area you probably never gave much thought to how the name Cootes Paradise originated. There has long been a popular misconception that this 600-acre marshland at the western tip of Lake Ontario derived its name from the coot, a small duck-like bird that no doubt finds parts of the area a superb habitat. Unfortunately for that theory, the spelling is wrong.

Indeed it is a well-established fact that Cootes Paradise was named after Captain Thomas Coote, a soldier who served in the British army during, and after, the American Revolutionary War. The town of Dundas, adjacent to the western end of the marsh, also originally bore his name as the village of Coote's Paradise. The apostrophe was dropped from "Coote's Paradise" decades ago, and consequently Captain Coote is often referred to incorrectly as "Captain Cootes".

So who was this obscure line commander from the red coat army of two centuries ago? Where did he come from? And what did he do while he was here in North America? Most importantly, from a local perspective, how did his name become associated with Cootes Paradise? We don't yet have answers to all these questions but research undertaken by the author in recent years has revealed some interesting facts. What follows is an account of virtually everything we currently know about Captain Thomas Coote.

Early references to Thomas Coote

Many historical accounts of the settlement of Wentworth County, Hamilton and Dundas completely omit reference to Thomas Coote's appearance on the scene. Others, however, refer to Coote with a great variety of conflicting detail, and rarely cite information sources. T. Roy Woodhouse's account from the journal *Ontario History* is typical:

"When Indians occupied the valley, they found it to be a hunter's paradise: a sheltered home for the four-footed wild things, and favoured haunt of wild fowl. Similarly, one of the earliest white visitors, Captain Coote of the 8th Kings Own Regiment, was impressed by the myriads of waterfowl in the marshlands near the mouth of the valley. So much was the Captain impressed that he spent all of his spare moments hunting, amongst the bullrushes [sic] and the beds of wild rice, for the wild ducks and geese that stopped there to feed and rest during their annual migrations.

"Because of Captain Coote's many happy visits, the marsh acquired the name of Coote's Paradise; a name which was also given to the first settlement in the valley." (Woodhouse, 1951)

Despite Woodhouse's reputation as a local historian, his account is inaccurate and/or speculative in several details, and he did not cite references. (To be fair, some of the errors in his paper were corrected through correspondence published in a subsequent issue of the journal.) But this does illustrate



Captain Coote, portrayed by the author, meets with a group of students at Princess Point.

that fancifully-embellished descriptions of Coote's hunting activities are not uncommon in the historical literature.

Coote's early life

Thomas Coote first appeared on the British army lists in 1776 as a Lieutenant with the 8th (King's) Regiment of Foot. His cousin was probably Sir Eyre Coote (1762-1823), who served as Governor of Jamaica from 1805 to 1808. Based on this fact and the date of his enlistment, it is possible that Thomas was born around the year 1760, or perhaps a bit earlier. This would place him in his mid-teens at the time he received his commission. He was born in Ireland and may originally have come from County Limerick, near Kilmallock. His obituary appeared in the *Cork Evening Post*.

Historians at Old Fort Niagara, currently operated by the State of New York, had four references in their archives pertaining to Thomas Coote. Three were from the correspondence of Governor Haldimand and one was from the records of the Forsyth Indian Department. From these and other sources I have been able to

assemble a few details concerning Coote's military service in North America.

The Fort Sackville Campaign

Since the 8th Regiment was stationed at Fort Niagara, Coote was probably there from shortly after he first appeared on the army lists. However, he is first mentioned in the Haldimand papers in a letter dated October 3, 1778, to Governor Haldimand from Lieutenant Colonel Mason Bolton at Fort Niagara. In the letter, Bolton reports that he is sending volunteers from the 8th Regiment to Fort Detroit to assist Lieutenant-Governor Henry Hamilton in a mission "to endeavour at dispossessing the Rebels [of Fort Sackville], or at least stopping those Invaders from penetrating farther". The volunteers, accompanied by an officer, were to join with 400 Indians who had been sent ahead. Bolton recommended that Lieutenant Coote lead the volunteers. Bolton wrote: "I beg leave to inclose you a Memorial from Lieut Cook [sic] - (Nephew to Sir Eyes Cook [sic]) & take the liberty of recommending him to your Excellency as a very active & deserving Officer." The mis-

spelling of both names was no doubt the result of secretarial error and careless proof-reading. "Sir Eyes Cook" was unquestionably General Sir Eyre Coote (1726-1783). Sadly, no copy of Coote's memorial has been located.

Henry Hamilton's campaign was directed at Fort Sackville, near the town of Vincennes, in what is now the state of Indiana, but was then a part of the very extensive colony of Virginia. He intended to seize Fort Sackville from the Americans. The march was accomplished, beginning in November, 1778, during one of the coldest winters on record. The fort was taken without a single shot being fired on December 17 but Hamilton, being somewhat arrogant in underestimating the Americans, sent most of his reinforcements back to Detroit, believing he could hold the fort with a garrison of only 80 men. Lieutenant Coote must have been among those who returned to Detroit, and thence to Niagara, since those who remained at Sackville were captured in late February, 1779, by the Americans under George Rogers Clark.

Off to Fort Erie

The next reference to Coote, chronologically, is a brief entry two years later in an *Account Book of the Forsyth Indian Dept.*, Vol. 1838, dated November 13, 1780, indicating that a barrel of rum had been sent with Lieutenant Coote from Niagara to Fort Erie. Dennis Farmer, Curator and Director of Museum Operations at Old Fort Niagara, unexpectedly read some significance into this item. According to Mr. Farmer, this sort of assignment was typically given to a subordinate who had done something annoying, to "get him out of the way for a while". Farmer suggest-

ed, somewhat facetiously, that it might have been nothing more serious than Coote boasting to the other officers that his uncle was a General. Fort Erie was an even less desirable locale than Fort Niagara and a journey there in November, on such a trivial errand, would not have been very pleasant.

On to the Mohawk Valley

There is, at this point, a 10-month gap before the next reference to Coote, which occurs in a letter dated September 29, 1781, from H. Watson Powell at Niagara to Governor Haldimand. In this letter, Powell outlines plans to send a force comprising Butler's Rangers, a detachment of the King's Regiment and some Indians, to the Mohawk Valley to destroy some mills and to attack an American settlement that had "not yet been molested". Lieutenant Coote was to command the King's Regiment. This force was to leave Fort Niagara on October 5, arriving at Oswego (at the southeastern end of Lake Ontario) on October 8. From there, they were to proceed to the south side of Lake Oneida, where a party would be detached to destroy the mills and, then, rejoin the main body for the attack on the settlement around October 22.

This mission is outlined in considerable detail in Stone's *Life of Joseph Brant*. The complement from Niagara was joined by representatives of other regiments at Oswego to form a total force of 670 men. Although Coote is not mentioned by name in the Stone account, it is recorded that the King's Regiment detachment comprised 25 soldiers.

It is noteworthy that Major John Ross of the 34th Regiment was the officer in charge of this expedition. Ross may have been instrumental in Coote's promotion in rank, and in his transfer to the 34th Regiment. Coote was one of seven or eight officers who would have reported directly to him. Ross may have been sufficiently impressed with his work to recommend him for advancement.

The Captain returns to Niagara

Coote is next mentioned more than a year later in a letter to Haldimand from Brigadier A. MacLean at Fort Niagara dated November 21, 1782. MacLean reports that "Captain Lieutenant Coote" had arrived at Niagara the previous day with one company of the 34th. He had travelled aboard the *Caldwell* from Lachine

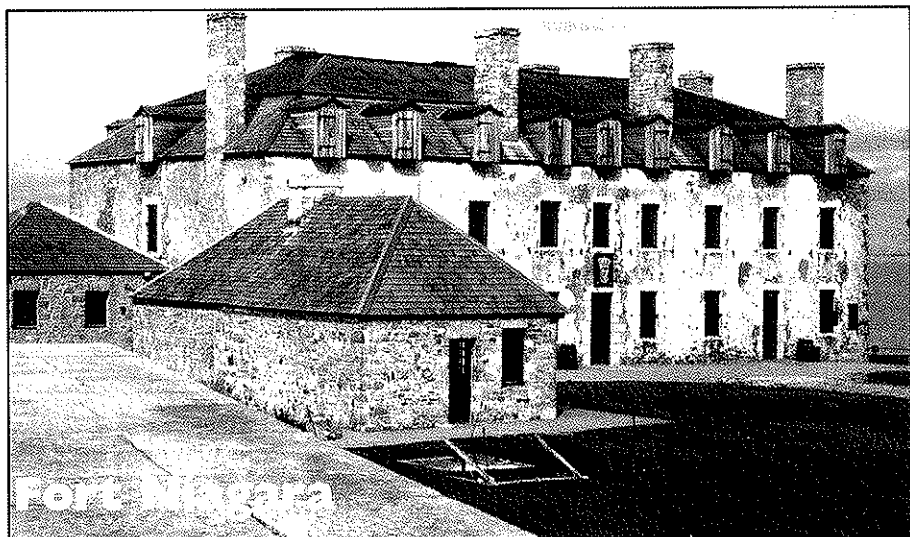
(the site of a fort, and now a suburb of Montreal) on a 12- or 13-day voyage. His arrival appears to have been part of a major troop redeployment. Five companies of the 34th under Captain Noyes had arrived on November 19, and another three companies were still at Carleton Island (in the St. Lawrence River near the present-day city of Kingston) pending the arrival of their transport ship.

At this time, Fort Niagara was suffering shortages of supplies and MacLean commented that he was "greatly distressed at present for quarters to both men & officers." There were no blankets left in the barrack stores and there was no one to cook for the men. MacLean was preparing to borrow blankets from the Indian Department. Two companies had been sent on to Fort Erie and one to nearby Fort Schlosser because of the lack of accommodations.

According to local historians and military re-enactors, the last of the 34th Regiment had left Fort Niagara by early 1783. None of my informants seems to know where they went and retracing their movements would be an interesting project. It is known that Major Ross was in command at Oswego (Fort Ontario) during 1782 and 1783. From 1778 until 1782, Fort Haldimand on Carleton Island had been a military and commercial base of operations for the British forces and, particularly, the Indian allies. However, when construction of Fort Ontario was completed in 1782, that fort largely replaced the functions of Fort Haldimand, which was all but abandoned. It is possible that the 34th was sent to Oswego upon leaving Fort Niagara.

Final years

Coote last appeared on the army lists in 1787. The 34th Regiment



returned to Britain in 1788 and, on May 6, was inspected and declared "vastly well for the time, having just come from abroad." (See *British Military Uniforms, 1768-1796*.) Coote very likely sold his commission and returned to Ireland.

If speculations about his date of birth are correct, Thomas Coote died while still a relatively young man in his mid-thirties. His obituary appeared in the *Cork Evening Post* on Monday, July 13, 1795. The notice was exceedingly brief: "died last week Thomas Coote Esq. late a Captain in the 34th Regt of Foot." Most obituaries in that paper were considerably longer, citing lists of accomplishments and family connections. The absence of such detail is significant; Coote was apparently not married and he does not appear to have done anything of significance after his retirement

from the army. No record has yet been found of a prerogative will.

Origin of "Cootes Paradise"

The question of how Cootes Paradise acquired its name remains. The oldest reference I have found to this name was cited in Johnson, 1967. The context of his report suggests that the name Coote's Paradise was already in use by March 17, 1793, while Coote was still living. But, again, no primary source is cited. The most reliable information, in my opinion, on Coote's hunting activities and the subsequent naming of the site, is in the diary of Lady Simcoe, wife of Governor Simcoe, the first Lieutenant Governor of Upper Canada. Lady Simcoe kept a detailed diary of her travels in Upper Canada. On May 11, 1796, she and her husband visited and dined with Richard Beasley at Dundurn,

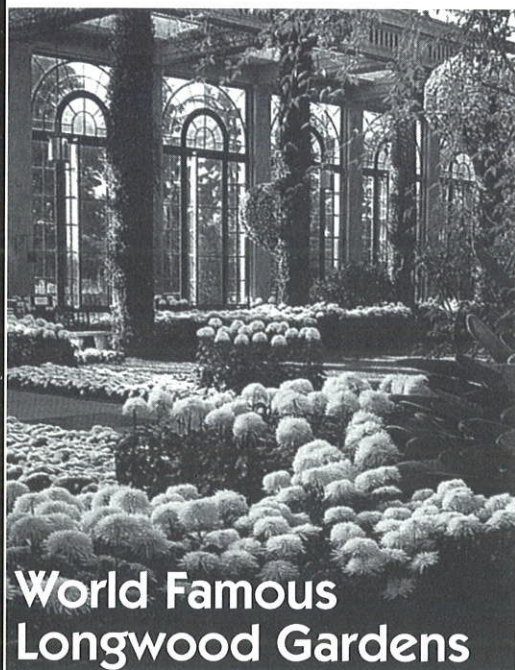
which is located near the present northwest entrance to the city of Hamilton. (Beasley's house was on the site of Dundurn Castle, built later by Sir Allan MacNab, and part of the foundation of the house was incorporated into the castle walls.) After walking two miles along the promontory overlooking the marsh to the west of Dundurn, Lady Simcoe wrote:

"Further west of this terrace we saw Coote's Paradise, so called from a Capt. Coote, who spent a great deal of time in shooting ducks in this marshy tract of land below the hill we are upon. It abounds with wild fowl and tortoises; from hence it appears more like a river or lake than a marsh, and Mordaunt's Point [probably "Morden's Point" after Ann Morden, the first settler in the area] in the distance takes a fine shape.

I was so pleased with this place that the Governor stay'd and

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dined at Beasley's."

In a footnote, she gave further information:

"Captain Coote, formerly of the 8th Regiment of Foot, was so keen a sportsman and spent so much of his time in the marsh shooting ducks that it was called Coote's Paradise. The marsh was between the head of Burlington Bay and Dundas, Ontario."

Curiously, one entry in the diary index reads: "Coote, Captain, an old soldier". I do not know whether she thought Coote was an old man when he hunted in the area, or whether she meant he had been in the area many years earlier.

The Coote connection

Undoubtedly Lady Simcoe got her information directly from Richard Beasley, although she might have misinterpreted some of Beasley's statements. Beasley, a Loyalist, came to Fort Niagara to escape the Americans in 1777 at the age of 16. He became an assistant commissary or storekeeper at the fort and would no doubt have been acquainted with Thomas Coote at that time. It is entirely possible, although this is purely speculation, that Beasley himself named the marsh Cootes Paradise.

Coote may have learned about the hunting ground from the local Indians, who resided at the fort; or, he may have learned of it from sur-

vey crews or scouting parties. Unfortunately, no record has yet been found of any specific visit he made to Cootes Paradise. His best opportunities might have come between 1776 and 1782 while at Niagara, within a long day's journey by canoe or row-boat. One might think that whether he was able, or inclined, to hunt at Cootes Paradise between 1783 and 1788 as some accounts suggest (eg. Johnson, 1967), might in part have depended on where the 34th Regiment was stationed. Yet Mr. Dennis Farmer, mentioned above, assured me that it was a simple matter for officers to obtain lengthy leaves-of-absence (in excess of six months) that would permit extended travel. Had long journeys been necessary, would this marshy tract have been so magnetic a place for Coote that he would spend prolonged leaves there rather than, say, back in Ireland? The answer remains a mystery.

Richard Beasley did not take up residence on the Dundurn land until at least 1790, long after Thomas Coote had returned home, so it is unlikely that Coote ever visited him in the Hamilton area.

More to come?

This is essentially all we know to date about the life of Captain Thomas Coote and his exploits around the lower Great Lakes. The Cootes are a noble Irish family

with a long history of political, religious and military involvement. Richard Coote, the first Earl of Bellomont, was British colonial administrator in America, the Governor of New York, and the official who arrested Captain William Kidd for piracy (1699). General Sir Eyre Coote (1726-1783) captained the first British regiment sent to India (1754) where he became renowned for his battle tactics. His nephew and Thomas Coote's cousin, Sir Eyre Coote, served in the army in America, the West Indies and Egypt before his term as Governor of Jamaica, and was subsequently promoted to General (1814). A direct decendent of Sir Eyre Coote, through a liaison with a Jamaican slave, is Colin Powell, U.S. General (retired), former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in charge of all U.S. forces (1989-1993). Amidst all this eminence, Thomas Coote appears to have been a competent but rather ordinary military officer, never cited for meritorious conduct, but then again never called on the carpet for any serious infraction. In summary, he emerges as a lesser light in a family of luminaries. Perhaps nothing more than being in the right place at the right time led to his name being permanently connected with a significant local landmark.

More information may be forthcoming in the months ahead and, if so, further articles will follow.

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