



Want to take a virtual tour of Dundurn? Come along and listen in....

collecting museums



This platter is on loan to the museum from a private collector. It's part of a double dinner set (24 of everything), likely made by Masons.

looking over the overlooking Dundurn Castle

by Guylaine Spencer

WHenever I have visitors from out of town, I take them to a favourite local museum, Dundurn Castle National Historic Site. Overlooking the Bay in Hamilton, Ontario, this former “showcase” home with the millionaire’s view was designed and built in the 1830s by English architect Robert Wetherell.

Inside the Castle, more than forty of the original seventy-two rooms have been beautifully restored for visitors to reflect the fashion of the 1850s, when Dundurn’s original owner, the railway and real estate tycoon Sir Allan MacNab (1798-1862), was at the height of his political power as Premier of the United Canadas. The tours, given by guides in period costume, never fail to impress and delight guests. Everyone enjoys the drawing room and dining room where wheeling and dealing took place, MacNab’s snug little tartan office where matters were sealed in private, and the kitchens and workrooms downstairs where dozens toiled to keep the great ship upstairs afloat (at least for a while).

Want to take a virtual tour of Dundurn? Come along and listen in while Dundurn’s curator, Ken Heaman, points out a few of the most interesting artifacts in the castle.

One of the newest acquisitions, Heaman says, is a four poster bed and matching cheval glass long mirror (circa 1840s). Just installed in 2013 in MacNab’s bedroom, this set is “was originally owned by Peter Patterson, a lumber baron and politician in Montmorency, Québec. Like MacNab, Patterson was a Scottish Canadian and MacNab may have even known him. Patterson died in 1851. What was exciting was that the assemblage came with the original bed key or bed wrench that allows you to unscrew the bolts to disassemble the bed.” The cheval glass features a full-length swivel; like the bed, the glass has rope turnings.

Because MacNab died bankrupt, his family auctioned off the furniture to help pay his debts, so most of the items in the house are from the period but not original to the home. However, some gems have returned to the castle, including a side chair that sports MacNab’s family crest – “a severed head, the head of the ancient beast,” says Heaman. The crest rail on the top of the back of the chair features the crest and two figures on each side wearing Scottish regalia. “Many chairs have a crest rail but very few actually support a crest,” remarks Heaman. “It appears rather odd.” The chair was likely a stock item that MacNab had customized. “He probably had twenty of them,” says Heaman, and “my hunch is that more of these chairs are out there, and I wish we could find them. They may still have the crest on them but they may have been taken off and filled in. The museum is also in the process of acquiring a sideboard which has the MacNab crest carved on the back of it.”

That gory crest shows up again on a silver fork and spoon in the museum’s collection. Judging from the silverware markings and knowing that MacNab died in 1862, Heaman concludes that they were probably made for the household between 1859 and 1862. This raises the question: “How did he acquire them

You can visit Dundurn Castle at 610 York Blvd., Hamilton, Ontario. Photographs by Guylaine Spencer.



Sir Allan MacNab’s imposing 19th century Regency Italianate mansion crowns Burlington Heights. When you visit the museum, be sure to tour the kitchen garden and outbuildings, as well as the Hamilton Military Museum. Today’s peaceful and gracious grounds were occupied by soldiers during the War of 1812.

when he was in debt then? Did he buy them on credit? Perhaps it was for the lunch with Prince of Wales September 1860.” The son of Queen Victoria visited the colonies that year and MacNab had the honour of escorting him and hosting him at Dundurn.

Even when royalty wasn’t at the table, dinner was very grand at Dundurn. The platter shown comes from a “double dinner set”, which Heaman tells me means “24 of everything”. The set is on loan to the museum from a private collector and is normally out on display at Christmas. It was once owned by the Youngs, another prominent Hamilton family, and may have come from Dundurn originally, Heaman suggests. “The 1861 inventory mentions a double dinner set,” he says, “and it’s possible that the Youngs purchased it at the auction here in 1862.”

One of the things I love about Dundurn is the large collection of paintings on

display. Heaman points out two works by Robert Whale, an early Canadian professional landscape and portrait artist. One of the landscapes shows the city from the Niagara Escarpment (or, as locals call it, The Mountain) around 1854-55, shortly after Whale emigrated from England. "We can see Dundurn Castle in the upper left. It's a view that anyone can experience themselves by going to Sam Lawrence Park today," says Heaman. Both paintings are among the first artifacts ever accessioned into the collection. They hang in the entrance hall, along with a portrait of the "laird of the manor", MacNab himself.

A bed-set fit for a king. The majestic four poster, circa 1840s, is the focal point of MacNab's luxurious bedroom. The cheval glass is the long mirror mounted on swivels in a frame in the right hand side of the photograph. ("Cheval" means horse in French; the phrase "clothes horse" is similarly used in English to reference a frame on which to hang clothing.)

This unusual-looking antique tool (left) came with the bed (right). It's used for loosening the bolts and taking a bed apart so it can be moved to another room or house. The different ends are sized to open different types of bolts. (A precursor of the Ikea's dreaded hex wrench perhaps?)



A side chair/dining room chair carved with a severed head, the MacNab clan crest. The two figures on each side of the crest wear Scottish regalia. "Gun Eagal" means "without fear" or "dread nought" in Scottish Gaelic. A former Dundurn employee acquired the chair at an auction.



This shadowless lamp (also called a *sinumbra* from the Latin "without shadow") dates from the late 1840s. Originally fueled by whale oil, it is now electrified. Made of brass, it has its original cut glass shade. Normally the font which holds the fuel gets in the way of the light, but the height of this lamp and the shape of its font combine to allow the *sinumbra* to cast no shadow. These popular lamps typically sat on a centre table in a drawing room, where families would gather to listen to the Bible being read aloud.

This landscape by Robert Whale shows Hamilton circa 1854-55. Whale, a prolific and full-time professional artist, was English-born and moved to Burford, not far from Hamilton, in 1852. He died in 1887 in Brantford, Ontario.



Sir Allan MacNab commissioned the building of Dundurn. Although he was born in Newark (today's Niagara-on-the-Lake, Ontario), not in Scotland, he had a strong sense of his Scottish heritage and liked to display his clan identity through his family crest. Look for the crest around the castle.



The electroplated silver fork and spoon were acquired from a descendant of MacNab. The elaborate Victorian pattern, made by silversmith Francis Higgins, has elaborate roses on one side and the MacNab crest on the back.