

JOHN BY, OTTAWA'S LONG-FORGOTTEN FOUNDER

ANYONE searching for the city of Ottawa on a map of Canada in 1853 would have sought in vain. But he might have found instead what the maps of to-day fail to give—the name of Bytown, the town founded by one John By, an English officer, of whom Sir Richard H. Bonnycastle wrote more than half a century ago, "If ever any man deserved to be immortalized in this utilitarian age, it was Colonel John By." Posterity, however, has not been generous to the Colonel. In 1854 the place was incorporated as the city of Ottawa; and with the adoption of the new name By's claims to recognition seem to have been ignored. Indeed, "but for stray references in the pages of Canadian history and for a tardy proposal to erect a memorial at Ottawa, it might almost be supposed that they had been entirely forgotten." As Mr. Charles S. Blue remarks in the *Canadian Magazine*:

What lends luster to his name and ought to secure for it a permanent place in Canadian history is the fact that he was the founder of the city which to-day occupies the proud position of the capital of the Dominion.

When the late Queen Victoria chose Ottawa to be the chief city of Canada, she merely dedicated what John By had created.

He selected the site, planned its streets and spaces, and supervised the early stages of its construction; he first had the vision of its great destiny, and with rare energy and foresight directed his effort toward the fulfilment of that destiny.

From Mr. Blue's article we learn that By was born in England in 1781, and soon after receiving his commission in the Royal Artillery was transferred to the engineering branch of the service. He first came to Canada in 1802, and was stationed at Quebec for nine years. In 1811 he was hurried to Portugal, took part in the siege of Badajos, was recalled to England, and eventually found himself on the unemployed list. In the spring of 1826 he was still "waiting for something to turn up," when he received orders to proceed a second time to Canada, to superintend the construction of the Rideau Canal. This was a work demanding "skill and resource amounting almost to genius, backed by amazing fortitude and determination." We con-

dense from the *Canadian* article some of the more striking features of the undertaking.

Colonel By had to cut his way through a country where fogs and flood had hitherto reigned undisturbed, a country the seat of ague and fever, of mud, marshes, and reptiles, where the only mode of progress was the bark canoe of the Indian. His surveys rapidly completed, he arrived in the village of Hull in September, 1826. The situation on the southern bank of the Grand River, as the Ottawa was then called, appealed to him, and he decided to form the entrance to the canal there. The hill now crowned by the Government buildings at Ottawa was then a thickly wooded eminence; beneath was a beaver meadow; and beyond stretched a dense cedar swamp. Into this solitude came By with a squad of sappers and miners in May, 1827, and immediately it sprang into life. The cornerstone of the canal locks was laid on Aug. 18, 1827, by the ill-fated Arctic explorer, Sir John Franklin, who was returning from one of his northern trips.

The difficulties and disappointments attending the work would have daunted most men. The first bridge built by Colonel By over the Grand River at the Chaudière Falls was swept away by the spring floods, and at Hog's Back, a few miles distant, a large dam nearly completed was destroyed by an ice jam. The Colonel himself contracted a fever from the effects of which he never fully recovered, while his men suffered greatly from the severity and extremes of the climate.

At last, after five years of the most arduous labor, performed under conditions of extraordinary difficulty, the Rideau Canal was completed, and on May 29th, 1812, amid fitting celebrations, the first steamer, called the *Pumper*, passed through the locks.

It would be gratifying to read that By received in due course suitable honors at



JOHN BY
(Founder of Ottawa, Canada)

the hands of his countrymen. Far from this being the case, no sooner was the Canal opened, than he was called home to stand an investigation on a charge of extravagance in his expenditures. It appears that "the Government of the day had been attacked on the ground of spending public moneys without the constitutional authority of Parliament; a scapegoat had to be found somewhere, and Colonel By was the victim chosen." The blow to his pride plunged him into "low spirits," as he himself wrote, and he died at Sussex, England, in 1833. Ottawa has indeed "a duty to perform to his memory that has been too long delayed."