

# Bowell called the 'neglected' prime minister

By Henry Bury

THE INTELLIGENCER

Sir Mackenzie Bowell — a former Bellevillian who became Canada's fifth prime minister — "has been neglected in history", says Betsy Boyce.

But Boyce has done her part to change that.

She has written a biography of Sir Mackenzie Bowell in her book, *The Accidental Prime Minister*.

The Belleville historian and author spoke about her prime ministerial subject Saturday at the annual Crouse-Wannamaker Lecture held inside the Marilyn Adams Genealogical Research Centre in Ameliasburgh.

Her book, which was issued on compact disc, was launched after the lecture.

"It was hard enough to find out about Sir Mackenzie Bowell," Boyce told the small crowd. "He's the only prime minister who has never had his biography published — until now."

Boyce, a former Hamilton resident, acknowledged how little has been written about Bowell and how little local residents know about one who achieved the highest political office in the land in 1896.

She noted that a Toronto columnist referred to Bowell as this country's worst prime minister, as well as being short, stupid and influential only with the lunatic fringe.

"Yes, he was short in stature," Boyce agreed. "But born in 1823, men of that era were relatively short. As for being stupid, he bought *The Intelligencer* newspaper at the age of 24

and three years later was the sole proprietor of the newspaper. He kept his paper in the black."

She said Bowell was a former minister of customs and trade "and ran a tight ship. He often stood in for the minister of finance because he was very good with numbers."

Bowell was also an Orangeman. "That was the fabric of English-speaking Canada at the time. And that was supposed to be the lunatic fringe?"

Bowell was born in England but emigrated to Belleville when he was nine years old. His dad was a carpenter. His mother died during childbirth two years after settling in Belleville. It was Bowell's father who sent the youngster to apprentice with George Benjamin at *The Intelligencer*.

"A newspaper office was a good place to learn about history, economics and politics. He learned easily and well."

Later, Bowell served on the school board for 11 years, including several as chairman and became "a prominent citizen in this city."

In 1863, he ran for the legislature to represent North Hastings but lost. However, during Confederation in 1867, he won by a landslide majority.

"Sir Mackenzie Bowell made a name for himself in Parliament," Boyce said. "He was a thorn in the side of the Liberal party."

When Conservatives were elected to power, Bowell became a cabinet minister. He was minister of customs for 15 years and then headed up the new department of trade.

At the age of 72, Bowell took over the top political post.

"There was no mystery why he became prime minister," Boyce said. "He was capable, experienced and he got along with most people, including the French and Catholics."

Bowell died in 1917 at the age of 94.

"We can be proud of Sir Mackenzie Bowell who placed principle ahead of popularity," Boyce said.



BETSY BOYCE

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