

# Niagara woman was an important early historian

by TONIA DESIATO

Janet Carnochan was a woman most people took for granted.

She didn't live life in the fast lane. Instead, she was a spinner who devoted much of her life to preserving Niagara's history.

She was the founder, in 1895, of the Niagara Historical Society and the driving force behind establishment of the Niagara Historical Society Museum in 1907.

Last Thursday, members of the Jordan Historical Museum became more familiar with the life of Janet Carnochan through the animated speech of John Field, author of a biography on the Niagara woman.

Mr. Field hadn't heard of Janet Carnochan until 10 years ago, when he decided to "put a little thought" into making her a better-known person. His book was published in 1985 by publishers Fitzhenry and Whiteside.

Mr. Field said plaques commemorating the historian and photographs of Miss Carnochan are somewhat overlooked and not enough people know about all her historical work.

Mr. Field discussed many of the interesting details and accomplishments of Miss Carnochan's life.

Miss Carnochan was born in Scotland in 1839, and her family soon after emigrated and settled at Niagara-on-the-Lake.

At 16 she received, from her local Presbyterian minister, a teaching certificate based on her good moral character. However, the certificate wasn't good enough for Miss Carnochan; she wanted to be better qualified and trained. So, she went to Toronto and got her teaching certificate.

Miss Carnochan was a teacher and principal at several schools before acquiring the position of assistant at a Niagara-on-the Lake high school, where she remained for 22 years.

She had always been interested in history and kept herself educated through reading, studying and meeting new people. Her interest in history may have been sparked in 1893 when, while rummaging through the cupboards at St. Andrew's church, she found a library record book dated 1800 to 1820.

She bought the book for \$5 and thought of how to display it for other people to enjoy. It was at this point that, Mr. Field be-

lieves, the idea of a museum began.

But it wasn't until two years later, when she placed an ad in the local paper asking interested people to join her in starting a historical society, that things started to move. The Niagara Historical Society began with 15 people and exists to this day.

Miss Carnochan was the society's president for 30 years, and within those 30 years much was accomplished. For example, once a year the local paper would publish between one and three speeches of the society's guest speakers.

The society also began marking historical points of interest within Niagara long before the provincial or federal governments got involved. The low, grey markers with their eroded printing can still be seen today.

Miss Carnochan's second major accomplishment began in 1899 but was not fully established until 1907. She began raising funds to build the Niagara Historical Society Museum in 1899. But, when she appealed to the provincial government for funding, she was told she would have to raise money to show that the town was behind the idea.

This wasn't a problem for Miss Carnochan; she had a talent for getting people to do what she wanted them to, said Mr. Field.

She not only got funding from private donations and the provincial government, but also from Ministry of Public Works and the Ontario Historical Society. So, on June 4, 1907, the Niagara Historical Society museum was opened.

She also wrote two books: one entitled "A Documented History of Education in Niagara" and the other entitled, "The History of Niagara."

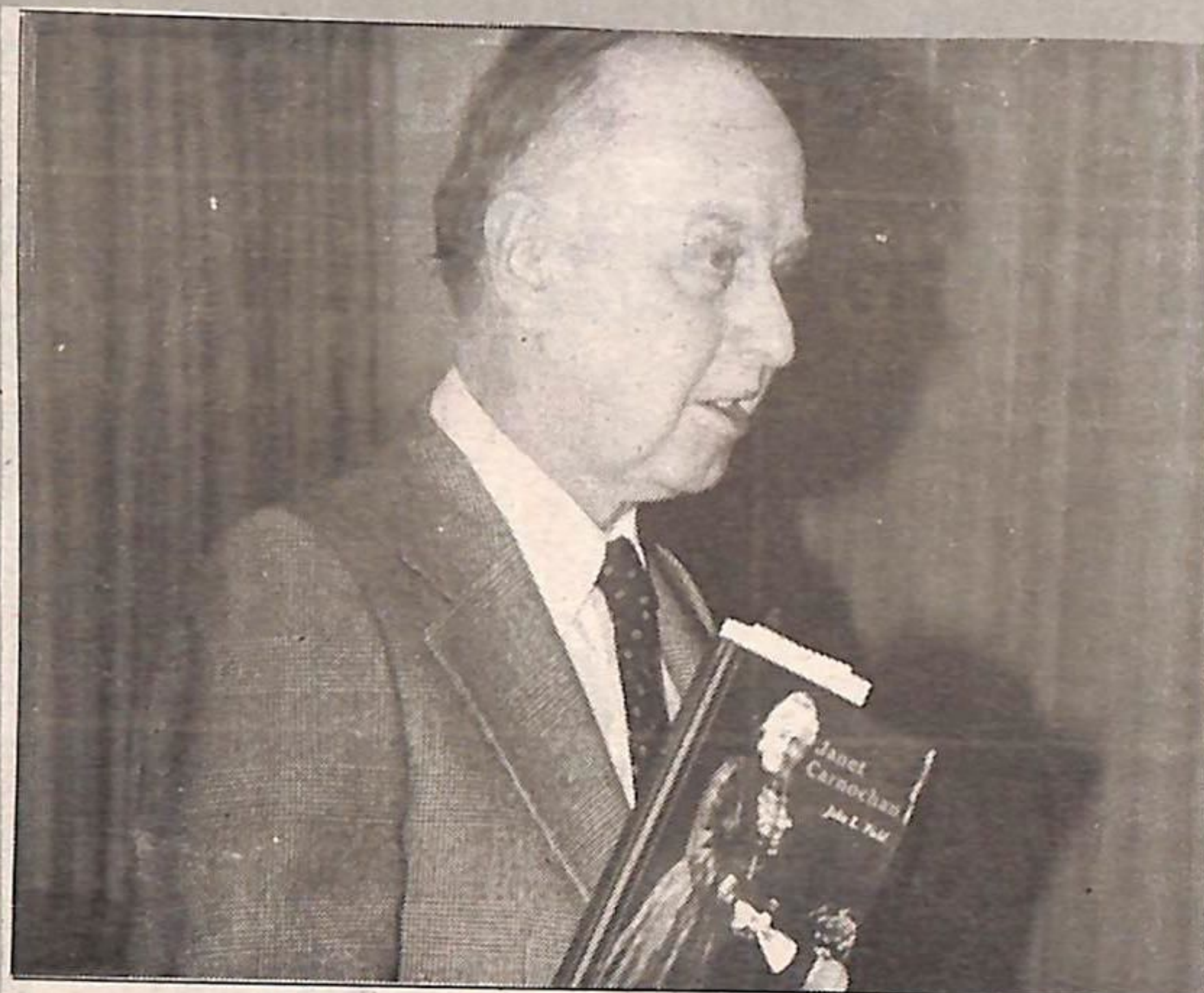
Miss Carnochan died in 1926, a year after she resigned from her 30-year reign as the society's president. She was also the secretary of the Niagara Public Library for 35 years and was still writing meeting minutes a week before her death.

Janet Carnochan Day is celebrated each June 4 at the Niagara Historical Society Museum and she is remembered with an oil painting on display at the museum. Miss Carnochan also has an Imperial Order Daughters of the Empire (IODE) chapter named after her in Toronto. The members are known as Janets.



**HISTORY IN THE MAKING**

The Jordan Historical Museum of the Twenty held its annual meeting on February 23 and announced its new board members. Standing, from left to right, are: Tom Platts, Don Campbell, Violet Thrower, treasurer John Hill, Fran Herbert, Brian Romagnoli and Al Teather. Seated, from left to right, are: secretary Veronika Reiser, chairman Jean Phillips, curator Sandra Overstrum and Elinor Hodgson.



**THE LIFE OF JANET CARNOCHAN**

John Field spoke on the life of Janet Carnochan, an important woman in Niagara's history, during the Jordan Historical Museum's annual meeting on February 23. Mr. Field wrote a biography on Miss Carnochan, who founded the Niagara Historical Society in 1895 and was the leading force in establishing the Niagara Historical Society Museum in 1907.