
A Forest of Poles

By Judy Hall



... we had a splendid passage over to Queen Charlotte's Islands. I suppose this is the wildest place I shall ever be at. It is solely inhabited by Indians, and as yet there is no missionary amongst them... We anchored opposite a village which, in the distance, looked like a forest of bare poles. These poles are heraldic, and are the monuments to chiefs... Every house seems to have one — and, as I think I said, they are highly valued — as symbols of rank. Some are carved the whole way up with grotesque figures and faces, some are painted; and in many houses the door is a part of the pattern of the pillar...

These poles at the village of Skidegate on the Queen Charlotte Islands in British Columbia made a lasting impression on the author, Lady Dufferin, wife of the third Governor General of Canada. Written on Thursday, 31 August 1876, half-way through a month-long vice-regal tour of British Columbia, this passage appears as an entry in Lady Dufferin's personal diary, *My Canadian Journal*, published in 1891. The trip included stops at many native communities along the coast including Metlakatla, Alert Bay, Fort Simpson as well as Skidegate.

The Grand Tour, as the Dufferins called it, started on the morning of Monday, 31 July 1876, when a train pulled out of the station in Ottawa. The travelling party was headed by Lord Dufferin, Frederick Temple Hamilton Blackwood, who had been Canada's third Governor General for the previous four years. Born in June 1826 in Florence, Italy, Dufferin was the son of a wealthy British landowner and his wife, the granddaughter of the playwright and parliamentarian, Richard Brinsley Sheridan. Educated at Eton and Oxford, Dufferin travelled widely in his youth, then accepted a peerage in 1850 and an earldom in 1871. After the rejection of his application for the position of Viceroy of India, the following year he readily accepted the appointment of Governor General of Canada.

During their six years in Canada, the Dufferins travelled to Quebec, the Maritime provinces, extensively through Ontario and to the Red River in Manitoba — giving Lord Dufferin the distinction of being the most widely travelled Governor General to that date. That last day in July 1876 marked the beginning of his most ambitious tour.

Lord Dufferin's main purpose for undertaking this journey was linked to the conflict surrounding the building of the transcontinental railway. As Governor General, he was eager to take a personal role in understanding the bitter controversy that had developed

between British Columbia and the Dominion government concerning the terms of its construction and its final route. These political dealings, however, have overshadowed his travels to native communities — one of the first such visits by a prominent national figure.

During the 1860s and 1870s, the British Columbia government maintained a consistent policy of reducing the size allocations of reserves to make way for the settlement of European colonists. From the mid 1860s, concern was actively expressed by the Indian people that their interests in the land be acknowledged and adequately addressed. After British Columbia entered Confederation in 1871, jurisdiction over Indian lands became a federal affair and the two governments attempted to settle the land disputes with a joint reserve commission. Tensions rose, however, between the Indians and the settlers, petitions were made to the Indian agents on behalf of the Indian people, and the settlers became apprehensive that more direct measures would be taken.

As Governor General, Dufferin was aware of these problems. Two years before his Grand Tour, in November 1874, he stated his concerns over the inadequacy of the native land policy and the plight of the native people in the province. In a private letter to Lord Carnarvon at the Colonial Office, which was followed by an Official Dispatch dated 4 December 1874, Dufferin detailed in great length the "unsatisfactory" position of the Indian people and suggested that the Colonial Office give it their "serious attention".

Once Dufferin's official duties in Victoria were over, the vice-regal party boarded the *HMS Amethyst*, a British ship, and on the morning of Thursday, 24 August, steamed out of Esquimalt harbour on their way up the coast. Accompanying the Governor General was a former Hudson's Bay Company officer who acted as interpreter. It took eight hours to reach their first stop at Nanaimo and another five days travelling 400 miles northward "through narrow channels and most beautiful scenery" before they arrived at the Skeena River. On the foggy evening of 29 August, the *Amethyst* anchored at Metlakatla.

The settlement of Metlakatla was established by William Duncan, a Protestant lay missionary, in May 1862 on the site of a former Tsimshian village. Duncan had originally gone to Fort Simpson in 1857 with the vision of eradicating the "abominations" of the natives and thus "saving the perishing heathen". His goal was the acculturation of the native people by producing a complete cultural change to a new Christian way of life. He attempted to point out the "evilness" and "corruption" of Tsimshian culture and preached the Christian path to salvation. He built a school in which the Indians were taught to read and write and were daily indoctrinated into Christian religious knowledge and "civilized" European ways. Although Duncan met



Lord Dufferin.

with some success in Fort Simpson, he found that the conditions at the fort formed a barrier to this acculturation process. By 1860, the Tsimshian had all but abandoned trading at the fort. During the summer months, they took their furs to Victoria where they traded for alcohol and tobacco. In the winter, they returned to Fort Simpson bringing these goods back to the community. They also brought with them many diseases, particularly smallpox. The growing violence and social deterioration of Tsimshian society convinced Duncan that he should "move the mission to get away from the tide of disipation and vice I saw around me". So, in May 1862, Duncan, with fifty Tsimshian followers, left Fort Simpson to establish a model, self-sufficient community. The new mission was founded at Metlakatla, a few miles to the south.

At Metlakatla, Duncan adhered to his doctrine of bringing Christian civilization to the Tsimshian and regenerating their society in accordance with European ideals. He planned the physical layout of the village based on European models. The land was divided into lots, houses were built on carefully laid out streets using native labour, an enormous church was erected as well as a store, courthouse, saw-mill, blacksmith shop, carpenter shop and a school.

It was at this community situated on a large, well-protected bay that the Dufferins disembarked on the "lovely morning" of Wednesday, 30 August. Duncan conducted them on a tour of the village showing them through one of the houses, eventually arriving at the prison and the church. In her diary, Lady Dufferin describes their impressions of the village:

Wednesday, 30th — The Prison stands opposite; it is a funny little tower, painted black below and white above. It is divided into two rooms, the "black" prison being more disgraceful than the "white." On the top of this building there is a stand for the band! The Church comes next, and is quite new, having been built entirely by Mr. Duncan and the Indians. It is 120 feet long by 60, and is 50 feet high; it is made of cedar and cypress, and is, I suppose, the only building of the kind to be seen anywhere made by people so lately savage. It holds 1,200 people, and is very handsome inside. Of course it is made of wood, and is perfectly simple, but the proportions and the simplicity together give quite a grand effect.

The School is another very good building, and round its walls there are texts and pictures. The pupils all learn to read English, which they prefer for reading to their native tongue — their own words are so very long. They translate what they read into Tschimchyau.

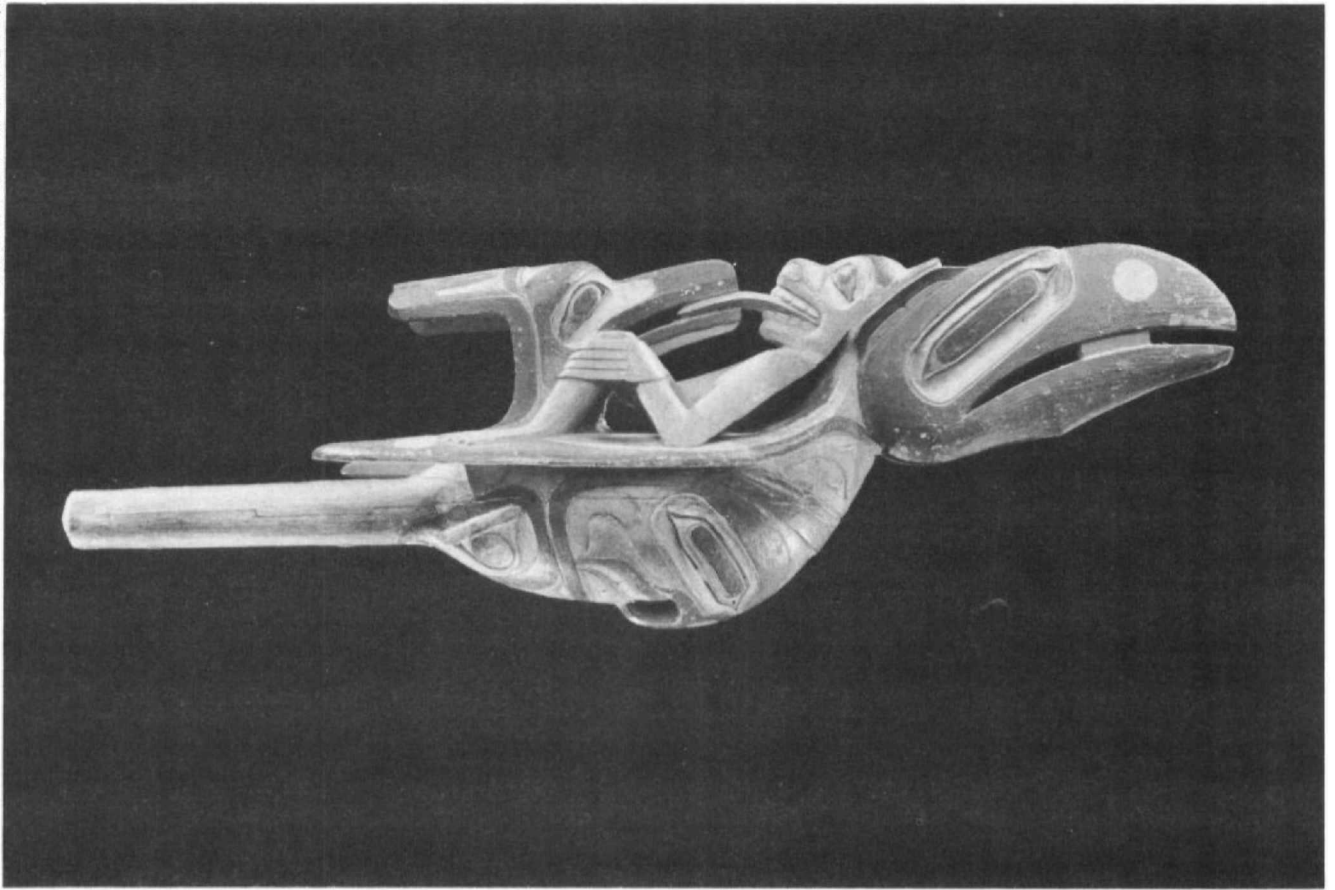
Mr. Duncan has succeeded in educating them up to the idea of having separate bedrooms, and houses to themselves, instead of living five or six families together in one room; and the first of his new houses has just been put up. We went into it, and were received by the master and mistress; the former presented me with one of the masks they used to wear in their dances.

Lady Dufferin's reference to receiving objects of native manufacture is one that is constantly repeated in her journal. At Metlakatla, she is given a silver bracelet "made for me by the Indians" and she is so impressed with it that she tries to buy or commission similar items. She is also presented with "some spoons carved out of horn, Indian rattles, and a carved box with a set of teeth, and green eyes staring out of a face on its side". The Dufferins were to collect quite a "cargo" of Indian objects which returned with them to Ireland in 1878. These objects remain in the private collection of the present Marquess of Dufferin & Ava, except for 15 which are now in the National Museum of Man in Ottawa. Two of these, a rattle and a frontlet, were probably collected at Metlakatla.

The Dufferins were to spend only the morning at Metlakatla, for by one o'clock in the afternoon they left in the vessel *Douglas* for Fort Simpson, a community 24 miles to the north. Their arrival was unexpected and most of the inhabitants were away from the village, but they were greeted by the missionary's wife, Mrs. Crosby. It was here that the Dufferins first saw "some extraordinary monuments put up to Indian chiefs".

Lady Dufferin with album.





Rattle made of cedar.

Wednesday, 30th — The most curious one we saw was an enormous bare pole, on the top of which was carved and painted in gigantic size a grinning head. The body was that of a bird with its wings spread out, and on each wing and on its breast a naked baby or imp; underneath was nailed a long cloth apron ornamented with buttons. Another pole had a dog at the top and a queer face carved below. These poles are said to cost the Indians about £300 apiece — that is to say, they will give away blankets to that amount for the privilege of putting one up.

Late that afternoon, the vice-regal party was on its way back to Metlakatla where they were met by canoes full of chanting Tsimshians who escorted the ship into the harbour.

The following morning after a thick fog had lifted, the *Amethyst* weighed anchor and headed for the Queen Charlotte Islands stopping at Skidegate Bay that evening. In his book, *The Sea of Mountains*, Molyneux St. John, a Toronto reporter accompanying the Dufferins, wrote:

... as we returned round the rocky point which we had before passed, we came upon a scene unlike anything that can be found elsewhere upon the coast.

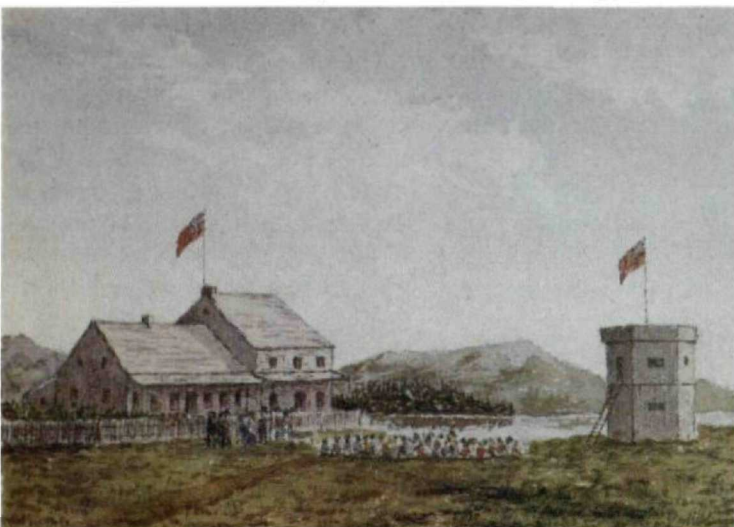
The moon had risen while we stayed in the farther bay, and was now at the full, casting its rays across the water upon the Indian village. This concourse of houses, built almost in single line, stretched for some distance round the edge of the bay, the waters of which broke in silvery ripples, making a gentle splash from headland to headland. From the centre of every house, and also at a little distance out in front and in rear of many of them, rose heavy carved pillars ranging from thirty to sixty feet high standing out in relief against the sky high above the houses of which they were part, or to which they appertained. The houses themselves were particularly lost to view in the shadow of the hills, but the ascending columns in their varying heights rose clear above them into the moonlight . . . The village consists of about forty houses, each of which contains several families, as we found to be the case in most of these Indian settlements, and these houses are built in one continuous line, some little distance above high water mark. There are a few smaller houses — or store-houses — behind the others, but that which attracts the eye and rivets the attention at once is the array of carved cedar pillars and crested monuments that rise in profusion throughout the length of the village. In the centre of the front face of every house was



Metlakatla, British Columbia. Watercolour by Lord Dufferin.

It was at Fort Simpson that the Dufferins saw “some extraordinary monuments put up to Indian chiefs”

“Metlah Catlah” — 30 Aug. 1876. Watercolour by Lord Dufferin.





Dufferin party aboard the Amethyst, 25 September 1876.

an upright pillar of cedar, generally about forty feet high and from two to three feet in diameter. From base to top these pillars had been made to take the forms of animals and birds, and huge grotesque human figures . . . The carvings were in some places elaborate, and in many places coloured. Some of the pillars, a few yards in front of the houses, were surmounted by life-size representations of birds or animals, the token of the family, coloured in a fanciful manner. In one or two instances there were outline carvings on a board surmounting a pillar, as a picture might be set on the top of a post. The main and tallest pillars, however, were those of which one formed the centre of each house, and through which entrance was had to the interior.

It was here that the Dufferins tried, unsuccessfully, to purchase one of the poles and “had great fun” bargaining for silver bracelets and carved bowls.

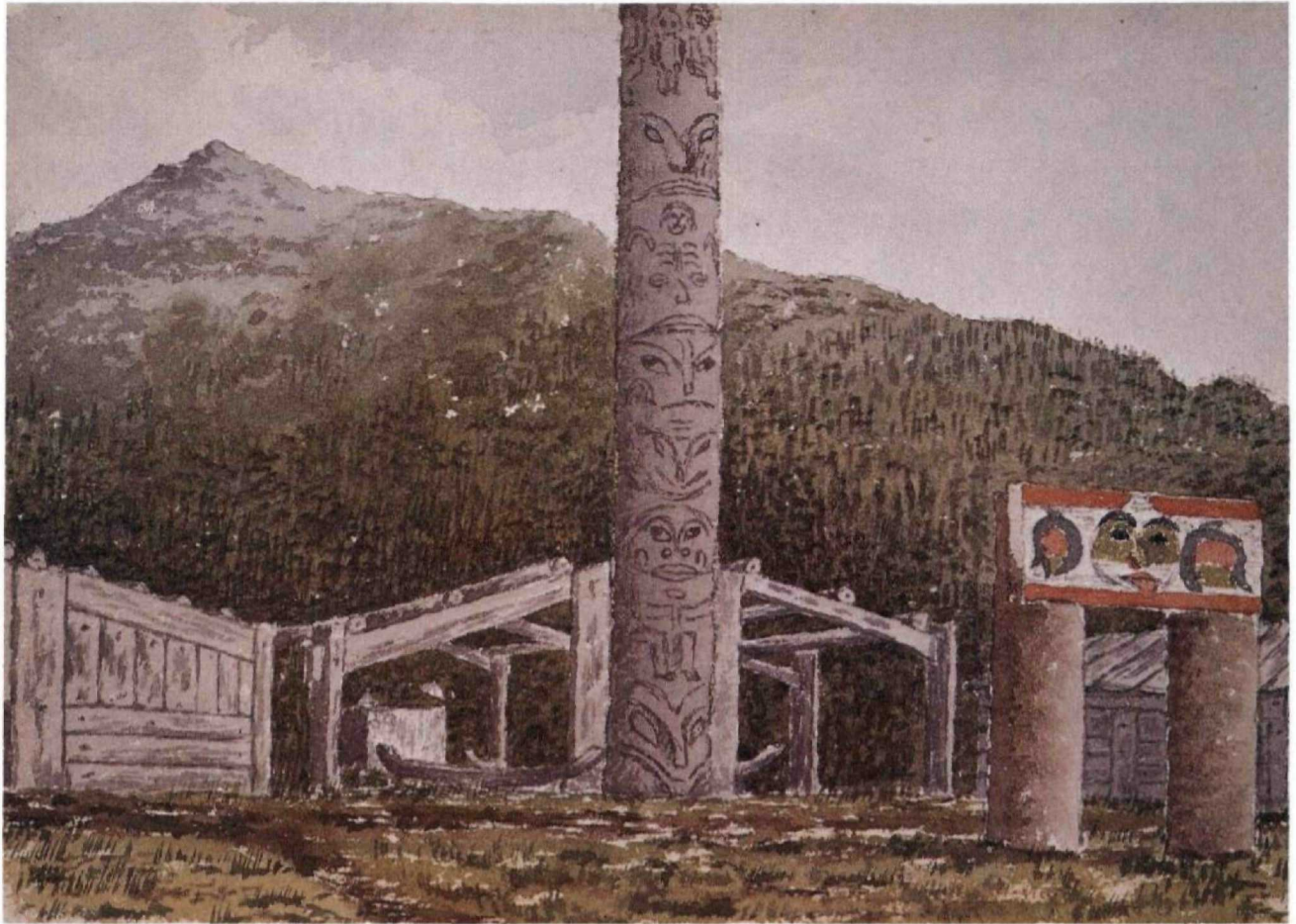
The fog was so heavy on Saturday, 2 September, that the *Amethyst* stopped at the harbour at Alert Bay, off the northeast shore of Vancouver Island, on its way back to New Westminster on the mainland.

Although the Dufferins were at the end of their trip up the coast, they still had another leg of their journey into the interior of the province.

Leaving New Westminster by steamer they started up the Fraser River on the evening of 6 September passing “lovely” scenery and “beautiful views” to their destinations of Hope and Yale. At Yale, they transferred to a carriage which would be their rather uncomfortable mode of transportation over the rough precipitous roads of the interior. As the road followed the Fraser River, Lady Dufferin commented:

Thursday, 7th — It was very curious to see the little Indian fishing establishments on the way. Wherever there was a rock rising a little above the water, there you were sure to see a scaffolding, upon which were hung rows and rows of dried fish, and near it a sort of spring-board jutting out into the water, upon which a man stood over the stream, and dipped a net, shaped like a snow-shoe, into it; we saw one man bring up a large trout, and cheered him from the carriage. Another curious thing we saw was a sort of house in which the Indians winter. A large hole is cut in the ground, and covered over with a round roof; in the top of this there is a hole, through which a notched pole is stuck, and by this the people go down — and through it the smoke comes up.





Skidegate, Queen Charlotte Islands, 1876. Watercolour on pencil by Lord Dufferin.

The entourage continued through the pouring rain to the small mining town of Lytton, then left the Fraser River valley to follow the Thompson River. On their way they passed some Indian graves.

Friday, 8th — One was a lean-to shed, under which the body or bodies were laid, and in front of the grave were three tin pans; outside the shed, facing the road, stood three wooden figures, a man and two women, dressed up in the clothes of the deceased. On a tree close by hung a quantity of horse-skins. When a man dies, his friends eat a few of his horses, and hang up their skins, so that he may ride upon them to the Happy Land.

The Dufferins spent the next few days travelling by steamer and carriage to Kamloops, then retraced their steps to New Westminster and back to Victoria. It had been an arduous and exhausting journey, each day filled with deputations, speeches and addresses. The rough travelling conditions took their toll and the Dufferins were glad to return to their comfortable accommodations aboard ship.

Before Lord Dufferin left Victoria he spoke for over two hours at Government House on 20 September 1876. In his speech Dufferin outlined his recent travels through the province and gave his impressions of the country and its inhabitants. The bulk of the address dealt with the question of the railway and its Pacific terminus. Dufferin reserved his concluding remarks for the treatment of the Indians regarding their condition and land rights in the province. He admitted an official responsibility as Governor General. Because native rights were not represented in Parliament, "the Governor General is bound to watch over their welfare with especial solicitude". It was only through the office of the Governor General that the Indian people could bring their complaints and grievances to the attention of the Crown. His position on land title, however, was not all concerned with native rights and the Victorian sense of humanity and justice. He also worried about a possible insurrection that would affect the progress of the railway. As well, he didn't want any discredit brought to the reputation of the Dominion Government regarding its dealings with native land disputes.

Dufferin believed, as did most ethnocentric Victorians, that native people should be assimilated into the

secular and religious ways of British culture. He judged the degree of native civilization in comparison with British models. He was impressed with Metlakatla and Mr. Duncan's "neat Indian maidens . . . as modest and as well-dressed as any clergyman's daughter in an English parish" and praised the Indian of the interior of British Columbia as being "as proud of his stock-yard and turnip-field as a British squire". His concern for the welfare of his Indian subjects extended to their potential usefulness in alliance with European settlement. He urged the speedy assimilation of the population so that the Indian "raised to the higher level of civilization . . . might be made to contribute to the development of the wealth and resources of the province".

Dufferin maintained this belief throughout his life and his distinguished career in the British diplomatic service. In a speech delivered in England in May 1889, he described the relationship of native people to British imperialism: England, he said, "has learnt the secret of gradually weaving the new material of progress into the outworn tissues of ancient civilisations, and of

reconciling every diversity of barbarous tribe to the discipline of a properly regulated existence". For the Indians of British Columbia, this was his ultimate goal.

Wherever Lord Dufferin went throughout Canada, he interrupted his busy schedule to pursue his hobby as an amateur artist. His trip to British Columbia proved no exception. Six watercolours painted during his Grand Tour are contained in an album which is now in the collection of the Public Archives of Canada in Ottawa. These watercolours provide a first-hand glimpse of the communities he visited, and the events he experienced.

The album was assembled by Lady Dufferin to illustrate her stay in Ottawa and the vice-regal travels from the east to the west coasts of Canada. The album contains about 68 pages of photographs, the six watercolours, postcards and engravings, a significant number of which refer to the couple's western tour.

As with all of Dufferin's work, the paintings executed in British Columbia are undated and unsigned. This, along with their inclusion in the album, has led to their attribution to Lady, rather than Lord Dufferin.

Indians serenading the Governor General at Metlakatla. Grey wash with touches of white gouache from Lord Dufferin's album.



Public Archives of Canada



Chief's House, Alert Bay, 1876.

Throughout the travel accounts and diaries of the Dufferins, however, references are made to Lord Dufferin sketching and painting. During their British Columbian tour, Lady Dufferin writes in her diary that they “lunched at a place called Boston Bar, and D. (Dufferin) took several portraits of Indians there”. The reporter, Molyneux St. John, wrote that at Alert Bay, “the Governor-General (came) ashore to sketch the village and its more picturesque groups of inhabitants”. Following the Dufferins on their inland tour, the *British Columbia Daily Colonist* reported on 15 September 1876 that “the first landing was made at the town of Hope, where the Earl sketched some of the principal points of interest”.

Nowhere is there any reference to Lady Dufferin sketching or painting, even though this was an acceptable activity of her contemporaries. In a recent biography of Lady Dufferin, included in the book *The Embroidered Tent*, Marian Fowler writes that Lord Dufferin “wrote poetry and painted in water-colours. While in Canada, it was Dufferin rather than his wife who always had his sketch-book in hand, and in 1876 he had two water-colours in the annual Ontario Society of Artists exhibit”.

Many of Lord Dufferin’s paintings are still preserved in private and public collections. Ten

watercolours of the Gaspé, Ottawa and scenes of their trips to Manitoba and throughout Ontario are in the collection of the London Regional Art Gallery. Many other pencil sketches and watercolours are in the Public Archives of Canada and in the private collection of the present Marquess of Dufferin & Ava.

Lord Dufferin remained in Canada until October 1878, when his official duties came to an end with the arrival of the Marquess of Lorne to assume the position of Governor General. The Dufferins were not destined to stay in Britain long as Dufferin was given the ambassadorship in St. Petersburg and Constantinople, became High Commissioner in Egypt, was finally honoured with the post of Viceroy of India and ended his diplomatic career as ambassador in Rome and Paris. He died in 1902 at his estate of Clondeboye in Ireland where many of the objects he collected remain. ♦

Judy Hall is Collections Researcher, Canadian Ethnology Service, National Museum of Man, Ottawa.