

# BRIAN PORTER

## First Minister of Living History

By Russ Disotell

“I’m still teaching history, just to a new audience, and I’m still learning as well,” says Brian Porter, recent inductee to the Brockville & Area Music and Arts Hall of Fame. “It’s made my retirement years interesting.” His efforts have also enriched the community’s understanding of history. You may know Brian for his portrayal of Sir John A. MacDonald and Major James Walsh. His booklets on Walsh, the Brockville Infantry Company and the Brockville Briscoe, his championing of the Brockville Museum, where he is currently Chairman of the Board of Directors, as well as a myriad of other work he does in a tireless effort to promote history and heritage in Brockville and the area. It has been a lifelong passion. Our story begins in 1966.

That was the year Brian came to Brockville to take up a position at Commonwealth Public School. He did have a prior connection to the city as it was his mother’s birthplace. At that time there were subject specialists and Brian taught history, geography and physical education to grades 7 and 8. Eventually he would migrate to grade 3 and 4 and “teach everything but French”. Brian remembers, “I always tried to involve my students in the community, taking them cross-country skiing at Mac Johnson, on visits to the R&T (Recorder & Times Newspaper) and always had newspapers in the classroom. We always started the day with a history moment.”

His role as a founding member of the Brockville Infantry Company in 1990 launched him on his avocation of what he calls “first person interpretation.” He did extensive research into the background of the Company. Then in 1998 the Company held an encampment at the Brockville Museum.

Sir John A MacDonald was the Minister of Militia at the time of the Company’s establishment, so Brian found a swallowtail coat and top hat and reviewed the troops

*Top to Bottom: At Dickinson House Manotick; With Don Cherry at his grandfather’s grave St.Mary’s Cemetery Kingston; At St. George’s Cathedral Kingston; At RMC Kingston*

as Sir John Brian. He gave a speech as Sir John. Brian and as he was coming up to retirement he realized he could build on this type of first person interpretation.

As well, during a visit by the Infantry Company for Upper Canada Village’s opening weekend, he was impressed by the Village’s particular attention to authenticity. “It is very important to maintain the accuracy of living history.” He studied old photos to ensure authenticity and searched thrift shops and yard sales for material for costumes. Brian remembers his wife Renee and Cheryl Trussell working on the costumes.

Brian is particularly happy to be able to pursue his interpretation with wife Renee now playing Lady Agnes MacDonald. “It introduces the female factor and draws the ladies into the conversation.” MacDonald’s domestic life included his mother, two sisters and two wives. Renee reads excerpts from Lady Agnes’ diary, which adds a new dimension to an understanding of the man and his times.

Brian’s alter egos have taken him to a lot of unexpected and interesting events and places. He has been piped down King St. in Toronto, to Fort Henry and Bellevue House (John A’s home) for photo shoots for marketing campaigns, and last summer to Fort Walsh, Saskatchewan. For the last ten years, Brian and Renee have been head table guests at the annual MacDonald dinner, held by the Kingston Historical Society.

Brian has enjoyed it all thoroughly. “I get to tell very Canadian stories, life stories about very interesting human beings.” LH

