

# **William Hamilton Merritt: Businessman, Politician, and Muse**

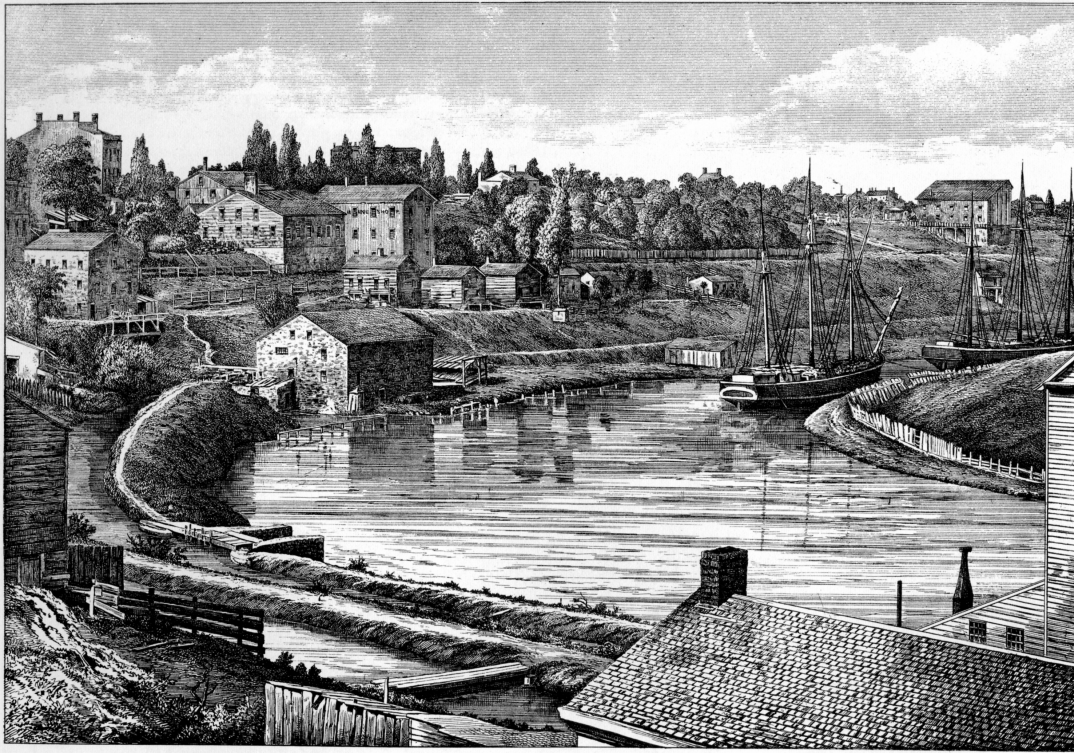
**by Robert R. Taylor**

The instigator of the First Welland Canal, William Hamilton Merritt, was an efficient businessman, an able politician and even a visionary — with his sense of how the Welland could become part of an international waterway. He was not a great speaker, but was an effective persuader and a mover and shaker, knowing how to make the right connections and develop them. Unlike most prominent Canadians, however, this relatively dour, no-nonsense capitalist has inspired poetry and song over almost two centuries.

Much dry prose has been written about the Welland's history. Poems and songs, however, often capture better the sweaty reality of real life digging the canal trench, working in a muddy lock pit or sailing on a storm-beset schooner. In fact, the mind of the poet is similar to that of the historian insofar as they both involve getting inside the heads of other people long ago. Of course, you may not find these poems studied in English 101. It is in the occasional clumsiness especially of the early ones, however, that their value lies. Poems and songs may not always be factually accurate but they help to flesh out the figure of Merritt as we are invited to imagine what he was like and what it was like to live in his time..



**William Hamilton Merritt**  
(*Illustrated Historical Atlas of the Counties of Haldimand and Norfolk*, 1997; "Page's Atlas", 1889)



## **St. Catharines**

1871 with the Second Canal  
(*Canadian Illustrated News*)

*A contemporary of Merritt, the poet **George Coventry** (1793-1870) was also a historian and document collector in Upper Canada (Ontario).*

### **Tribute to Merritt (1862)**

If, in thy wanderings o'er this beauteous earth,  
A solemn thought should contemplate doom,  
Of minds inheriting intrinsic worth,  
Go mark the spot where Merritt lies entombed.

An active life, the path he sought aright  
For his adopted country — through each change  
He watched its progress with intense delight,  
His mind capacious to expansive range.

A wilderness around his boyish days,  
When first he strolled through woods so dense, so green,  
He lived to see vast schemes matured and gazed  
With pride and admiration o'er the scene.

The Lakes' bold shores, the anger waters stayed,  
Were altered in their course by one grand plan;  
After comingling, opened wide a trade  
And commerce vast to high-aspiring man.

Still incomplete to meet his restless eye  
Which ever beamed with generous emotion,  
He soared beyond a bright Canadian sky  
To carry on our commerce o'er the ocean.

But Death, that intervenes to mar our hope  
Cut short his measures for the country's weal,  
A funeral dirge at last, in moving tropes,  
Proclaimed at large what all survivors feel.

The loss of one so useful in his day,  
A chasm left that none can e'er supply,  
The mourners walk abroad and wend their way  
Each to respective homes to heave a sigh. . . .



**Stamp commemorating the 150th anniversary of the Welland Canal.**

(Canada Post Stamp #655, William Hamilton Merritt, issued in 1974)

**James McIntyre** (1828-1906) *apprenticed in St. Catharines and became a cabinet-maker, undertaker, and furniture dealer. He read the following poem at a banquet held at the Welland House in St. Catharines.*

## **St. Catharines (1860)**

St. Catharines, famed for mineral waters  
And for the beauty of her daughters,  
For some do worship at the shrine  
Of the fair St. Catharines.

St. Catharines, your greatness you inherit  
From the genius of a Merritt;  
You still would be a village dreary  
But for this canal from Lake Erie.

For on its bosom there doth float  
Full many a ship and steamboat,  
Brings world's commerce to your doors  
And many gifts on you it pours.

Amongst its many great rewards  
It gives you drydocks and ship yards,  
To drive your mills, great water power,  
It doth give you as a dower.



**William Hamilton Merritt home,  
St. Catharines.**

(Dennis Gannon photograph)



*Merritt's achievement in inspiring the First Canal's was acknowledged immediately. The following poem appeared in a Buffalo, New York, newspaper in 1829 and was inserted in a poem by **Howard Engel** in 1978 (see below). Was Handel's "Water Music" actually played at Buffalo's harbour at the ships approached?*

### **The Welland Canal Celebration Song (1829)**

Loud let the thundering cannons roar;  
The *R.H. Boughton* nears our shore:  
Sound the trumpets, rattle all the drums:  
The Britons, *Anne and Jane*, rejoicing comes: [sic ]  
They come from the blue wave of Ontario fair,  
With canvass beaming bright, and streamers waving rare!  
See! the vessels climb the mountain side;  
Anon, they dash into the Welland's tide:  
Ontario's daughters spin Niagara's wave;  
Ontario's daughters in Lake Erie lave.  
Send aloft the glowing strains of Handel;  
Roar away the guns of Captain Randall:  
Tell the world there's *Merritt* in that work,  
By which our pots and pearls, our beef and pork,  
Shall find a ready sale in Montreal.

**Wesley Frank Nunnemaker** (1915-1986), a teacher, lived most of his life in St. Catharines, active in social and church work. He understood how Merritt's accomplishment resonated well into the twentieth century.

### **The Welland Canal (1971)**

William Merritt, do you behold  
The great expansion of our dream;  
Our fourth canal, unlike the old,  
Built non-dependent on a stream?  
Eight massive locks of plated steel  
Control the waters rise and fall;

Ships with seven hundred foot keel  
Can through them pass to ports of call.

No more, except on pleasure craft,  
Is seen the rigged and bulging sail;  
Spinning propellers beneath the aft,  
Engine-driven, new speed avail.  
Ships from the sea enter at its mouth  
At Port Weller to the north,  
Or at Port Colborne to the south  
When from the Lakehead they go forth.

The challenge of the Escarpment,  
The Thorold locks meet with ease,  
A masterpiece of achievement,  
None in the world compares with these.  
Shipping increasing year by year  
In tonnage and variety,  
Ships of the world from far and near  
In our canal we now may see.

William Merritt, man of vision,  
How much of this could you foresee,  
When you made this wise provision  
To strengthen our economy?  
So much Niagara owes you  
Her special son, she loves you well;  
And Canada's much greater too,  
Because you built our first canal.



**William Hamilton Merritt statue,  
St. Catharines, unveiled December 6, 1929.**

(Photo from *Saturday Night*, March 2, 1930)

**Howard Engel** (1931-2019), author of the popular *Benny Cooperman* detective novels (set in Niagara), was inspired by his boyhood experience of playing along the banks of the abandoned Second Canal. He imagines early 19<sup>th</sup> century characters, including both Merritt and his critic William Lyon Machenzie, speaking to us about their experience. (I quote only parts of the work here, beginning with the voice of Merritt himself. )

### **That Meritorious Work: The Welland Canal (1978)**

... VII

If it wasn't for me  
they'd still be dragging wagons  
over the portage trail  
If it wasn't for me  
they'd still be counting the population  
in tens not thousands.  
Talk all you like  
about Isambard Kingdom Brunel  
and Stephenson\* and the rest

the honest people of Lincoln and Welland  
have in their elected Member of Parliament  
one who long has dreamed of the power of water  
who knows well the dread strength of iron  
of shipping of industry and of commerce  
who calls the thrifty agriculturalist, brother.  
The Parliament now may claim to have had  
the canal in mind as far back  
as the end of the war,  
they may claim to have had it in mind  
as far back as the Flood  
but it wasn't Noah of old who made them see sense  
it was William Hamilton Merritt  
of St. Catharines.

## VIII

In the late fall of 1815  
I went down to Mayville,  
Chautauqua County, New York,

Where I heard all about De Witt Clinton's  
modern marvel, the Erie Canal.\*

I saw the workings and could smell a sweet future  
for the merchants already locating along the right of way.

I won't say that at that moment  
I suddenly imagined an all-British waterway  
linking the vast Atlantic to the distant  
waters of Lake Superior  
But I had loosed my fancy from  
its stauntion at the ledger desk.

but in the long haul it paid off

Returning home on horseback  
I took the portage trail around the falls  
here Elijah Phelps' wagons hauled stores

along the rutty road.

as I watched the straining capstan turn  
pulling loaded wagons up the limestone incline

goods for the troops at Niagara  
supplies for the garrison on Grand River

merchandise that would fan out across the province  
I first conceived the plan of a canal  
around the waterfall of Niagara.

IX

It will mark the death of Niagara [-on-the-Lake]  
and the portage trade.

Is it forgotten in the inns of St. Catharines  
by the same Americans who are now  
that less than ten years ago Niagara  
was burned to the ground . . .

That Niagara crowd has been against  
every form of progress  
from the invention of the wheel onward!

If you define progress as what lines  
your pocketbook, I speak out for . . .

You speak sour grapes and bilgewater!  
In your view progress is what puts the canal  
through your acres not mine.

[*William Lyon Mackenzie speaks*]

You admit it then?  
Your misrepresented scheme  
this chimera of a speculative brain  
this great public work



which appropriates private property  
for the benefit of a private stock company  
is nothing more than a public fraud  
a fraud to which the bemused and misled officials  
of this province have been a party.  
Is it only an accident  
that this canal will run through your land?  
Is it only be chance that the water power  
will turn your millstones?

[*Merritt replies*]

Would you have the entrance to the canal  
under the muzzles of American guns  
at Fort Niagara? Would you force  
our commerce to beg a by-your-leave  
from the federated republicans?  
You blockhead, don't you understand  
if we don't act now, the Americans  
will have unseated Montreal as  
the hub of eastern trade  
and the vast riches of the west  
will pass through American hands to New York  
and not through Niagara and down the  
St Lawrence?

X

Now, I'm a man of business  
not a poet  
I can understand a balance sheet  
and tell by the look  
in a man's eyes whether to trust him  
but when it comes to talking about the canal  
I find myself cracking open old words  
like walnuts at Christmas  
and taking out new meanings.  
I was convinced of the soundness of the plan  
and I talked and wrote about it  
wherever I could.

For years I could talk of nothing else  
I was a preacher with one sermon. . . .

*Twenty-first century bards have not neglected the Canals' founder. Although expressing a modern scepticism about men we used to uncritically revere, Alex Sinclair is also impressed by Merritt's practical wisdom.*

### **William Hamilton Merritt (2002)**

William Hamilton Merritt would stare at the water  
as it flowed down the 12 Mile Creek.  
There's enough in the stream to keep the mill wheel turning  
today but there won't be next week.  
The temperature rises, the water level drops  
and the wheel slows down and finally stops.

William Hamilton Merritt would tear at his hair  
and wonder at the whim of his God  
who gave him this grand opportunity for fortune  
and left it so fatally flawed.  
If he could just dig a ditch to bring water from the Welland  
the wheel would keep turning and there'd be flour to sell, and so

William Hamilton Merritt used the carrot and the stick  
to make politics bend his way.  
There were lots of other businessmen who knew if he got  
water power  
they too could find a way to make it pay.  
So he got himself elected to the Family Compact,  
and used a public/private partnership to get the money for his  
contracts.

William Hamilton Merritt wasn't scared to reach farther than  
the average fellow in Niagara.

Just listen to a list of some of the things  
he started and see if it doesn't stagger ya -  
salt mine, flour mill, distillery, and store,  
canal, career at Queen's Park, and a bridge over the gorge.

William Hamilton Merritt used to stare at the water  
as it flowed down the Twelve Mile Creek.



**Merritt Tombstone 1793-1862**  
**Victoria Lawn Cemetery, St. Catharines**

Dennis Gannon photograph

AND FINALLY . . .

We need a modern full-length biography—in prose—of William Hamilton Merritt.

We have the account of his son J.P. Merritt, *Biography of the Hon. W.H. Merritt, M.P.* (1875); that of J.J. Talman in the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*; that of Robert L. Fraser in the *Canadian Encyclopedia*, and that of John M. Bassett and A.

Roy Petrie, *William Hamilton Merritt: Canada's Father of Transportation* (1975) —all honourable contributions. Somewhere, however, there may be a Ph.D. candidate who is looking for a subject . . .

\* \* \*

## Sources

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