

# The Queen's Winter Reps

From Lord Dufferin in the 1870s to David Johnston today, the Governors General of Canada have celebrated winter and promoted snowsports.

**BY AMY TECTOR**

**O**n a cloudy January afternoon last year, in Canada's capital city of Ottawa, the grounds of Rideau Hall rang out with the laughter of children and the bark of sled dogs, as Their Excellencies the Right Honourable David Johnston, the Governor General of Canada, and his wife Sharon Johnston hosted a winter celebration. A variety of activities were organized, including skating, dog sledding, snowshoeing, and, of course, skiing. It's not surprising that Johnston, Canada's newest governor general, has made the celebration of winter sports one of his priorities since accepting the post in October 2010. He is an avid alpine skier, a former principal of Montreal's McGill University, and a friend of many members of the Red Bird Ski Club, the oldest alpine skiing club in North America. He's also following a long tradition: One of the reasons for skiing's eventual popularity in Canada was the way that successive governors general have enthusiastically embraced the art of "Norwegian skating."

As a constitutional monarchy and parliamentary democracy, the king or queen of the United Kingdom is Canada's king or queen and head of state, and the governor general is his or her representative. Until 1952, when the first Canadian, Vincent Massey, was appointed governor general, these men (in 1984, Jeanne Sauvé became the first female governor general) were typically British aristocrats, military officers or often relatives or personal friends of the sovereign. Terms of service were five years and there was thus a con-

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Top: David Johnston, the current governor general, enjoying a ski day at Owl's Head in Quebec. Above: Rideau Hall, the Ottawa residence of the governor general, under a blanket of snow circa 1882.



Lord Frederick Dufferin, who served from 1872 to 1878 as the third governor general, installed a curling rink at Rideau Hall.

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Dufferin and his spirited Irish wife helped to popularize winter sports in Canada, including the installation of skating rinks and a toboggan run (left) at their residence. They were not yet aware of the sport of skiing.

stant rotation of blooded nobility, ex-generals and British public-school alumni through Ottawa's Government House (as Rideau Hall was officially known). In those early years, the viceroy was at the top of the social pecking order and his actions were incredibly influential, especially to Canada's ruling elite.

Most governors general arrived in Canada believing that climate played a key role in national identity. It was a deliberately cultivated idea, intended to define Canada as a strong, snow-swept nation proudly playing a key role in the Empire. Many governors general made a concerted effort to embrace the winter in order to foster that sense of patriotism and pride.

Lord Frederick Dufferin (who served from 1872 to 1878 as the third governor general of Canada) and his spirited Irish wife, the Marchioness of Ava and Dufferin, did much to popularize Rideau Hall as a site of winter activity, including the installation of curling and skating rinks and a toboggan run. The couple didn't encourage skiing, from ignorance

of its existence. But they exulted in tobogganing, curling and ice skating. Outside Rideau Hall on January 17, 1874, the Marchioness described "a lovely day for our skating party. The tobogganing hill in perfect condition. I skated the whole time, only stopping to watch the toboggans come down." It was after an ice storm, inspiring her to write about "ropes of beautiful clear ice hanging from the telegraph wires, while the trees seemed...to be made of silver with dazzling jewels on every branch."

After the Dufferins' departure, skiing became better known in Canada. William Anthony Schwartz, the consul general for Sweden and Norway, skied in Quebec City as early as 1879. That same year newspapers reported on a mysterious Mr. Birch, a "Norwegian gentleman," who successfully skied from Montreal to Quebec City on what one paper described as "13-foot-long snowshoes."

Ignorance of this Scandinavian tradition explains the remarks of Frederick Hamilton, aide-de-camp to Governor General Henry Lans-

downe (1883 to 1888). Hamilton boasted of being a skiing innovator in his memoir: "I can claim to be the absolute pioneer of ski on the American continent, for in January 1887, I brought my Russian skis to Ottawa, the very first pair that had ever been seen in the New World. I coasted down hills on them amidst universal jeers; every one declared that they were quite unsuited to Canadian conditions." While Hamilton's assertion that he brought the sport to Canada is wrong, one thing is most likely: He introduced skiing to Rideau Hall.

In May 1888, when Lansdowne finished his term in Canada, he was eulogized by *The Ottawa Citizen*, which along with noting his contributions to education, literature, the arts and science, praised, "his efforts to promote among the youth and manhood of the country, healthful out-door Sports and Amusements." The *Citizen* approved of Lansdowne's support of physical fitness, depicting it as just as important to a robust national identity as the arts and sciences.

In 1890 Fridtjof Nansen, one of Norway's greatest explorers, published his international bestseller, *On Skis Across Greenland*, about his ski expedition across that country. Despite increasing enthusiasm for the sport, by 1893, six years after Hamilton's "introduction," skiing was still somewhat of a novelty—so much so that yet another tenant of Government House claims to have introduced Ottawa to skiing. In their memoir, *We Two*, Lord John and Lady Aberdeen (1893 to 1898) write: "Our children's



Above: Lord Frederick Hamilton, an aide-de-camp to Lord Henry Lansdowne, introduced skiing to Rideau Hall. He's shown here with a skiing party at Ottawa's Rockcliffe Park. Right: Swedish governess Ebba Wetterman (center) taught the children of Lord John and Lady Aberdeen to ski. "[They] took up the sport with wild enthusiasm," wrote Lady Aderdeen.



delightful Swedish governess, Miss Wetterman, introduced not only to our children, but to Ottawa society in general, the use of the skis, now so popular, but then scarcely known in Canada. She arrived from her holiday one year with some pairs from Sweden for our children, who took up the sport with wild enthusiasm. Members of the staff soon followed suit, and skiing parties were ere long an institution."

The Aberdeens' claim to ski history is more nuanced than Lord Hamilton's; they say only that their governess taught Ottawa society the sport. Such a distinction is important, because the governors general were hugely influential in the upper reaches of society, which in Ottawa consisted of the highest-ranking military officers, bureaucrats and politicians. The Honourable J.D. Edgar, speaker of the House of Commons, mentions the arrival of skiing during Aberdeen's term in his book, *Canada and its Capital*. Writing in 1898, he stated that "the use of ski or *skilobning* has been recently introduced by the occupants of Government House and has become so popular that the ski are now made in town." Indeed, such was the Aberdeen's influence that the sport's profile increased dramatically in Ottawa. As Tom Everson wrote in a letter dated 1899, "it is as common a sight here now to see people with a pair of skis over their shoulder as to see them carrying an umbrella." Thanks to the influence of Rideau Hall, the Anglophone elite began embracing the sport.

Yet skiing had not gained mass acceptance when the Aberdeens left

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office in 1898. According to an estimate by prominent architect Percy Nobbs, by 1902 there were probably only 100 skiers in Montreal. Since so few people had mastered it, the sport was often viewed as ludicrous and awkward. The lack of technical knowledge did not deter Lord Gilbert Minto (1899 to 1904) from taking up skiing when he assumed office. John Buchan (Lord Tweedsmuir, the governor general from 1935 to 1940) writes of Minto's dubious skills, describing how one could often see Minto and his family "careering over the snow clad hills at Fairy Lake."

Lord Minto was instrumental in promoting skiing. When admirers wrote to him asking for his autograph he frequently sent back photo postcards, with a composite image of he and his family snowshoeing and skiing. There was an imperial motive behind Minto's love of skiing; like his predecessors, he believed that "manly sports" encouraged positive virtues, such as "courage, self-restraint, health, patriotism and national character."

Minto's successor, Earl Charles Grey (1904 to 1911), was a strong proponent of Canada's identity as a northern country. In a letter to Prime Minister Wilfrid Laurier

about Montreal's winter carnival, he wrote, "It appears to me that it is mistaken tactics to be ashamed of your winter, and try to conceal it. To glorify it, and to pity those unfortunate countries which are not blessed with our winter sports and exhilarating winter weather is I believe the right, and in the long run, the winning attitude."

Grey might have also embraced the sport out of sheer proximity. Hans and Sigurd Lockeberg's ski jump, which the Norwegian immigrant brothers built in 1909 at Rockcliffe Park, was practically in Rideau Hall's backyard. Thanks in part to Grey's encouragement, skiing grew in popularity over the ensuing decade.

In 1911, Swiss-born ski instructor Emile Cochand started to organize ski events in the Laurentian hills north of Montreal. Cochand had been recruited from Europe by the Montreal Ski Club to help improve skiing techniques and encourage the sport. Once in Canada, he quickly divined the social influence the governor general held and realized that if he wanted to get Montreal and Ottawa's powerful and wealthy Anglophone families to embrace skiing, he needed vice-regal support. In 1912 he cannily invited the Duke of



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Lord and Lady Aberdeen and a winter party at Rideau Hall. After governess Wetterman taught her children to ski, Lady Aberdeen wrote that “members of the staff soon followed suit, and skiing parties were ere long an institution.”

Connaught (1911 to 1916) to open the Montreal Ski Club’s jumping meet just outside Ste Agathe. By securing the attendance of the governor general, he ensured the interest of the highest echelons of Anglophone society. According to Chas Maclean Cochand, the ploy was a success and “a good number of spectators from Montreal went back to spread the word of [Cochand’s] expertise and pleasing demeanor.”

In 1926, Viscount Freeman Willingdon became governor general. A memoirist recalls how Willingdon and his wife had so much vim and vigor that their energetic participation in all sport brought aide-de-camps half their age close to collapse. Keen skiers, the Willingdons made good use of the more than 130 kilometers of trails in the Gatineau Hills created by the Ottawa Ski Club. Lady Willingdon, who was described as a “first rate skier,” became the Club’s “lady patroness” in 1927, officially opened the Dome Hill Lodge and offered a trophy for the Lady Willingdon’s Race for City Championship. In appreciation of her efforts, the Club named a trail to the west of Old Chelsea in her honour. The Willingdons also enjoyed skiing in British Columbia. During a 1927 trip to Vancouver they watched a demonstration of the sport on Grouse Mountain. Ever

energetic, they were also patrons of the Revelstoke Ski Club in 1929.

Alpine skiing really began to boom in North America after the 1932 Winter Olympics in Lake Placid, New York. The development of the Laurentians as a ski center furthered the sport’s popularity. Major General the Earl of Athlone (1940 to 1946) was an active skier and one anecdote recalls the Earl’s visit to the Ottawa Ski Club. His large party included his wife Princess Alice, the Grand Duchess of Luxembourg and Prince Bernhard of the Netherlands. As they were about to leave, the first aid patrol brought in a private in the Canadian Women’s Army Corps who had hurt her knee and an officer with a dislocated shoulder. Despite their overcrowded sleigh, the Governor General insisted upon bringing the injured pair back to the city. The young girl shared a blanket with the Princess, while “the officer was laid flat on the sleigh with his head on his Excellency’s lap.”

Viscount Alexander of Tunis (1946 to 1952) was another patron of the Ottawa Ski Club and an active skier. A graduate of Harrow and Sandhurst, Alexander, with Gen. Bernard Montgomery, had led the successful World War II British campaign in North Africa. Both Alexander and “Monty” were keen skiers. Alexander’s contributions to the club

included visiting ski jumpers in the hospital while they healed broken legs, working as a fire fighter and sharing “homely lunches and teas” at the lodge. Alexander’s patronage inspired a 1952 speech from the president of the Ottawa Ski Club. He thanked the governor general for the prestige that his interest in skiing lent to the sport: “Your name, Sir, is becoming a legend in these Gatineau Hills, which are now more widely known in Canada because of your interest and actions in them... Skiing is a wholesome and healthy sport which contributes to the development of Canadian manhood and womanhood.” The President’s words echo *The Ottawa Citizen’s* 1888 praise for Lord Lansdowne’s encouragement of physical activity. So great was the Ottawa Ski Club’s gratitude for Alexander’s patronage that in 1948 the club named a hill after the Viscount.

A passion for winter sport and an interest in skiing did not wane in 1952, when Canadians first began serving as governor general. The first was Vincent Massey, who traveled extensively across the Canadian Arctic, sometimes journeying by dogsled to meet with local Inuit.

In 2002, as part of events marking the 50th anniversary of Canadian-born governors general, Adrienne Clarkson (1999 to 2005) re-instituted the tradition of the winter party. Since then, Canadians can ski across Rideau Hall’s grounds and through its sugar bush, just as they did when the sport was still new.

And so it was fitting that on that cloudy day in January 2011, David Johnston met with Peggy Austin, the granddaughter of one of skiing’s pioneers, Herman Smith “Jackrabbitt” Johannsen, in Rideau Hall’s historic Tent Room. They were there to honour her grandfather’s contribution to the sport, and they stood in front of a display of his artifacts, on loan from the Canadian Ski Museum. The meeting marked the continuation of a long tradition: the governor general’s encouragement of skiing, dating back to the late 19th century, when viceregal families first dared to strap on pairs of “Norwegian skates.” ❄️