

What Evil Felled the Duke? A Followup Comment

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Volume 109, Number 2, Fall 2017

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1041298ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1041298ar>

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Publisher(s)

The Ontario Historical Society

ISSN

0030-2953 (print)

2371-4654 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

Whitney, H. (2017). What Evil Felled the Duke? A Followup Comment. *Ontario History*, 109(2), 290–290. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1041298ar>

What Evil Felled the Duke? A Followup Comment

In the Spring 2013 edition of *Ontario History*, I wrote a story on the death of Charles Lennox, 4th Duke of Richmond and Governor-in-Chief of British Canada from 1818-1819 (“What Evil Felled the Duke? A Re-examination of the Death of the 4th Duke of Richmond”). The Duke died on 28 August 1819, in Richmond (Upper Canada) with the conventional cause being rabies contracted from a tame fox in Sorel, Québec (Fort William Henry, Lower Canada) on 28 June of that year.

In my article I suggested that he died rather from the accumulated effects of a life of alcohol abuse, not rabies, admitting that there is difficulty in getting objective, credited information at this distance.

One of the anonymous voices in this history, and quoted in my article, was echoed in the work of Herbert F. Gardiner, *Nothing But Names* (George N. Morang and Company, Ltd., Toronto, 1899, p. 75) where it is stated that “There are old residents in Perth who maintain the tradition that it was delirium tremens and not hydrophobia that cut short the career of the Duke of Richmond.”

Further information has surfaced on this point. William Kingsford published in multiple volumes, *The History of Canada*, in 1897 (Rowell and Hutchison, Toronto). Vol. IX (p. 182) refers to a lengthy interview conducted by a Walter Shanly, C.E., on 12 June 1881, with Maria Hill, who, with her husband Sgt. Andrew Hill, operated the Masonic Arms in Richmond, where the Duke slept the night before his death. Maria, experienced with the ravages of war, having acted as a surgeon’s assistant in the War of 1812, dressed his body after his death in preparation for the long journey back to its eventual burial in Quebec City. In Kingsford’s book the conventional rabies story is retold, but in the original handwritten notes by Walter Shanly (McCord Museum archives, fonds P210, folder, C002/A,196), he records that which was left out of Kingsford’s account, “There was a story the old woman [Maria Hill] proceeded to say, about his Grace having been bitten by a pet fox at Sorel a short time before and that hydrophobia ensuing was the cause of his death. She was pronouncedly sceptical of that theory and believed hard drinking to have been the real cause. Delirium tremens in fact. At Perth two nights previous to the death, she learned from those who were with him, there had been a ‘big rout.’” A big rout being an old expression for a big drunk.

This comment, by one who was so close to the 1819 event, and directly involved in its aftermath, adds credence to this theory that it was not, in fact, the biter that caused the death of the Duke, but rather the liquor.

Thanks are extended to Dr. Ian Furst, a descendant of Maria Hill, and Kurt Johnson, an Ottawa historian, whose shared interest in this story, uncovered this first person account of the Duke’s tragic end.

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