
From Ashes to Steel: Rebuilding the Legislative Library of Ontario

by Susanne Hynes

*On September 1, 1909 the Legislative Library of Ontario was destroyed when a fire gutted the West Wing of the Legislative Building. In the fall of 2009, the Legislative Library published a book, *From Ashes to Steel: Rebuilding the Library and its Collection*, commemorating the 100th anniversary of the fire. The book tells the story of the fire and its legacy and features reproductions of selected letters and photographs from the time of the fire. It is available for purchase at the Legislative Assembly's Gift Shop <http://www.ontla.on.ca>.*

The Library moved into the newly-built Legislative Building at Queen's Park in Toronto in 1893. A short fifteen years later, in his 1908 *Annual Report*, Avern Pardoe, the Legislative Librarian, complained that the Library was short of space and that its rooms were "about as ill adapted for their purposes as it is possible to have them." Books, shelved around the periphery near windows, were being damaged by sunlight when the windows were closed, and by rain and snow when storms blew them open. Leaking steam pipes were a problem. Fear of fire was ever present: the shelves, books, chairs and tables were all flammable and the large open room would allow a draft to spread fire with "terrible effect".

In December 1908 Pardoe wrote the architect for the planned North Wing, George W. Gouinlock, about his ideas for a new Library: about shelving, layout, fixtures, windows and lighting, and about ensuring as fireproof a facility as possible. Nine months later, just as the foundation of the new Wing was being laid, fire swept through the Library.

On the day of the fire Avern Pardoe was vacationing in Muskoka. Marmaduke Wilson, his assistant, working in the Library, was alarmed by loud noises at around 11 a.m. and rushed out to the hall where he

saw the beginning of the fire in the attic. By afternoon the West Wing of the Legislative Building had been engulfed in flames, the roof had collapsed, and most of the Library's collection had been turned to ash or was charred and soaked beyond salvage.

While the fire was still burning, the University of Toronto offered No. 4 Queen's Park as temporary quarters for the Library, quarters it was to occupy for three years. Pardoe, back in the city on the third of September, soon had moved what remained of his collection and begun the massive job of planning and rebuilding. Many details of this work are preserved in letters in the Archives of Ontario.¹

Avern Pardoe's correspondence is a fascinating source of information about the day-to-day business of running the Library while planning the new facilities. In his letters we see Pardoe dealing with details large and small; he specified how he wanted books packaged; he dealt with missing books and reference questions, with standing orders for journals and with getting a key for the Sergeant at Arms; and, at the insistence of Sir James Pliny Whitney, Prime Minister of Ontario, he arranged to have a telephone installed to allow for easier communications with his clients, now housed across the street rather than down the hall.

On September 15 Pardoe began the job of responding to offers of materials that came pouring in from hopeful vendors and sympathetic donors. Always seeking

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Hundreds of people turned out to see the fire in 1909. Water hoses were aimed at the windows of the Legislative Library. This photo was taken from across the street where the present day Canadiana Building stands on the west side of Queen's Park Crescent.

ways to save the taxpayer's money, he launched a campaign of appeals for donations from parliaments, libraries, publishers and associations. He sent letters to Sir Wilfrid Laurier, Prime Minister of Canada, and premiers of the other provinces, and to state legislatures, historical societies and others, seeking replacements for the lost collection. He haggled with book dealers and contacted the Toronto Postmaster in an effort to redeem stamps that had been damaged by the fire.

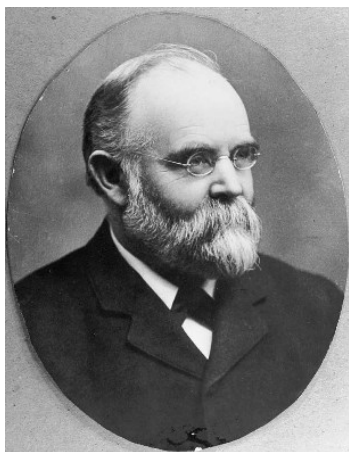
Not surprisingly, building a fireproof Library was a recurrent theme of the letters Pardoe wrote and received. John Ross Robertson, publisher of the *Toronto Telegram*, who wrote Pardoe on September 5, 1909 while crossing the Atlantic aboard the *RMS Carmania* and William Folger Nickle, MPP for Kingston, both expressed the hope that the new Library that would rise from the ashes of the old would be as fireproof as possible.

Snead & Company Iron Works of Jersey City, N.J. was contracted to provide the fittings and the book stacks for the new library. Snead had installed book stacks in many Canadian and American libraries, among them the Library of Congress and the Widener Memorial Library at Harvard. Many of Snead's standards for stacks (adjustable shelving, fireproof materials, easy access and good illumination) must have seemed like the road to salvation for a Library that had been overcrowded, threatened by dust, sunlight and bursting pipes, and then was destroyed by fire.

The move to the new location in the North Wing took place over five weeks in September and October of 1912. According to Pardoe's 1912 *Annual Report* the new Legislative Library was the only one in existence using a central stack with offices and reading rooms on the perimeter. This configuration allowed controlled



The main elements of fireproofing in the Legislative Library are steel shelving, metal furniture, marble floors, and steel and copper railings. The North Wing is separated from the main building by a long corridor, shown above, with fireproof doors at both ends.



"As the new north block of the Parliament Buildings in which the Library is now housed is of fireproof construction and the Library furnishings are almost wholly of steel, it may reasonably be hoped that, with ordinary care and luck, the Library will not be burned for a sixth time."

*Avern Pardoe,
Legislative Librarian, 1898 – 1921*

access to the collection and protected it from damaging natural light and dust while keeping it conveniently close to the work areas. Pardoe described the Library, rebuilt in steel and stone, as the "only one in Canada housed in a fireproof building."

On October 11, 2009 fire again broke out in the Ontario Legislative Building. An air conditioning unit housed in the attic of the North Wing burned in the night. But this time the fire was expeditiously put out and the Legislative Library was not damaged by the fire, or by the water used to douse the flames.

In 2010 the Library still occupies the space it moved into in 1912 and its collection continues to be housed on the steel shelving that was considered state-of-the-art at that time. The legacy of the fire is a well-planned fireproof Library that continues to serve the Members of the Legislative Assembly of Ontario.

Notes

1. A selection of these letters was viewed and photographed at the Archives of Ontario on June 9, 2009. Many of Pardoe's letters, carbon copies bound in "Letter Books", have deteriorated and some are now barely legible. Incoming letters, which are originals, are not so compromised.