

Author wins Ontario Speaker's Award for 'Walking into Wilderness'

By Mark Pavilons

The historical significance of one of King Township's features hasn't escaped notice. In fact, a book by a former King resident has just received the Ontario Speakers's Award.

Celebrated author Heather Robertson won the inaugural Ontario Speaker's Award at a ceremony at the Ontario Legislature on March 19.

Published by Winnipeg's Heartland Associates, Robertson's *Walking into Wilderness: The Toronto Carrying Place and Nine Mile Portage*, was chosen over a total of 49 other entries. The 15 books short-listed for the prestigious new award included many by Canada's largest publishers.

Robertson, who lived in King for 17 years and recently moved to Aurora, admitted she felt she was a bit of a 'long shot' for the prize and was both 'flabbergasted' and 'flummoxed' about the award, given the very strong contenders of Canadian authors.

A reception was held at Queen's Park recently and in dramatic fashion, 'the envelop please' announced Robertson as winner.

She received \$1,000, along with an inscribed crystal book and two medals.

The Speaker's Book Award recognizes works by Ontario authors reflecting the diverse culture and rich history of the province and of its residents. Topics include the history of the province and its many communities.

Walking into Wilderness is a soft-cover illustrated history of Ontario's two major portages.

Carrying Place figures prominently in the book, which Robertson wrote in 2008, leading up to the 2010 400th anniversary of the arrival of French explorers in Canada.

'Toronto Carrying Place is part of King's history,' she observed.

Walking into Wilderness is the sweeping tale of the crucial land and water trails between Lake Ontario and Georgian Bay.

Beginning with the region's geological history and early archaeology, Robertson writes about the history of these much-used trails 'roughly 130 kilometres.

Robertson chronicles the ultimate destruction of the Wendat, the coming of the French, the fur trade, the War of 1812, the settlement and railway periods, the transformation of Holland Marsh and the devastation wrought by Hurricane Hazel.

She's woven beautiful portraits of Etienne Brûlé, the first European to tread on Ontario soil; Father Jean de Brébeuf, martyr to his evangelism; Robert Cavalier de La Salle, North America's ceaseless wanderer; Governor John Graves Simcoe, whose brief tenure left a lasting mark; William Lyon Mackenzie, the City of Toronto's first mayor, and many others.

Robertson clearly demonstrates that what might be seen as regional history is, in fact, the history of Ontario, Canada and North America.

She pointed out these portages were very influential among early explorers and literally connect Ontario to the rest of the world.

Robertson, a native of Winnipeg, has more than a dozen books and hundreds of articles to her name. Among them are her 1983 novel, *Willie: A Romance*, which won both the Canadian Authors Association Fiction Prize and the Books in Canada Best First Novel Award, and her 1995 biography, *Driving Force: The McLaughlin Family and the Age of the Car*, which won a National Business Award.

Robertson was also just re-elected as president of the King Township Historical Society.