



# CITY

## History comes alive

Poet relives the Plains of Abraham. D3

## Incognito

Who was that woman at the Green Door? D6



## Poet brings Plains of Abraham to life at Confederation Square

Ottawa native Jack Mitchell says he was destined to do something weird, so this past summer he read his epic poem across Canada. **Maria Cook reports.**

Even Jack Mitchell admits it's weird. Writing an epic poem and then travelling across the country reciting it. And to whom? On the Halifax docks, his sole audience was a homeless man.

"I've always turned towards the great blue beyond instead of something normal," says Mr. Mitchell, who regaled a hometown crowd at Confederation Square yesterday with two 30-minute recitals of his poem *The Plains of Abraham*.

It all started with Homer, the ancient Greek composer of epic poems. Mr. Mitchell, who is in his final year of history and the classics at McGill University, began reading Homer's *Iliad*, and the *Odyssey* last year. "I became absolutely addicted," he said yesterday. He tried to imagine what it was like in an-

cient Greece when those great works were performed by professional reciters travelling from court to court.

Only one way to find out. Three months ago, he embarked on a journey across Canada travelling by motorcycle and sleeping in a tent at campsites.

Spending \$2,500 of his own money, he started his trip in Louisbourg, N.S., and travelled through Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick and Quebec. He then continued to Thunder Bay, Winnipeg, Saskatoon, Calgary and Vancouver.

He stands before his audience, which has numbered 20 at most, and speaks memorized lines like: "And now immortal goddess, speak of ancient days and bloody war."

The complete poem is 40,000 words, but Mr. Mitchell limits his recital to a 3,300-word section called *Final Battle Episode*.

"Nobody has fallen asleep," he says. "About half of the audience is quite interested. Some people insist on giving me \$10 or something although I haven't passed the hat. I tried busking in Halifax but the police said I couldn't without a licence."

Mr. Mitchell wrote the poem over several months starting last January. His goal is "to cast Canadian history in a mythic light rather than the hum drum, dry way it is treated in history books."

His choice of a subject, the Battle of the Plains of Abraham, brought together his literary ambitions, devotion to high style and patriotism. Besides there's a great cast of characters: the Americans, British troops, native tribes and French settlers.

The toughest part was projecting his voice loud enough. The best was discovering



Poet/historian Jack Mitchell performs his poem, *Plains of Abraham*, at Confederation Square.

Canada.

Mr. Mitchell grew up in Sandy Hill. He attended Lisgar Collegiate, and spent a year in Paris after high school, where he wrote a novel, a murder-mystery set in ancient Rome. When he

was 14, he wrote a small epic poem about a Napoleonic battle.

"It always looked like I would do something weird," he says.

Mr. Mitchell plans to study Homer at a graduate level, possibly at Harvard University. "I want to dedicate my life to epic poetry." After Ottawa, he will give readings in Toronto and Montreal before wrapping up his tour in Quebec City on Sept. 13, the anniversary of the Battle of the Plains of Abraham.

ROD MACHOR, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN