



Visitors and a costumed interpreter view the bedroom at Laurier House.

## For King – and Laurier – and country

Historic Ottawa mansion was home to two of Canada's most important prime ministers. *By Chris Mallinos*

**ALMOST IMMEDIATELY AFTER I TAKE MY** seat at the table, I'm read a long list of rules. Use two hands at all times. Remove all rings. Absolutely no standing. It doesn't take long to realize that this is serious business.

Then, after I don a pair of white protective gloves, I'm carefully handed the first object — a teapot. Admittedly, I'm a little nervous. With its ornate, intricate design and delicate ivory handle, this is no ordinary teapot. It looks fit for a king — or, to be more precise, William Lyon Mackenzie King.

I'm on a tour of Laurier House, the long-time home of Canada's longest serving prime minister. As a National Historic Site, the house has long welcomed visitors. Now guests can also book a "white

glove experience" in some of King's most private rooms, where they are allowed to handle some of his prized possessions. It's history like you've never known it.

Laurier House is located in Ottawa's Sandy Hill neighbourhood, just east of Parliament Hill. It's actually the home of two former prime ministers — Wilfrid Laurier lived there as well. But it's King's presence that stands out most.

Originally built for an Ottawa jeweller, the Second Empire-style house was purchased by the Liberal Party in 1897 as a home for Laurier. Long before 24 Sussex Drive was the official residence, prime ministers of the day were expected to find their own accommodation.

After some extensive renovations, King took over the residence in 1923. He immediately fell in love with the place. On his first night, King wrote in his diary that the home was "quiet and peaceful." He described his new library as "wonderfully beautiful."

It's easy to see why. As soon as I enter, I'm struck by the grandiose foyer, perfectly suitable for such an important residence. The walls are panelled in gorgeous stained white oak from the Ottawa Valley. My guide, Natalie, tells me that the wood was sent to Scotland to be processed before being shipped back to Ottawa.

To the right of the foyer is the drawing room, which is bright and airy thanks to the large bay window. Here I find some of

the priceless gifts given to King over the years — a seventeenth-century Japanese silkscreen and a beautiful fifteenth-century Flemish painting.

Upstairs is where King's personality really begins to reveal itself. While the Lauriers reserved the second-floor rooms for guests, King rarely had people stay overnight. He was a solitary man who hated social functions. In fact, journalist Bruce Hutchison — who covered politics during King's time — once called him "the loneliest man in Canada."

It's here where I get my first chance to enter the home's inner sanctum. Natalie invites me past the barrier that blocks the bedroom used by both King and Laurier — but, of course, not before I remove my shoes and put on protective cotton slippers.

The first thing that strikes me is how plain the room is. The beautiful stained oak gives way to bland white walls. King's bed is tiny. Only the furniture — comprised of gifts from prominent Liberals — is fancy. In the corner is a prayer bench thought to have been used by Mary Queen of Scots.

As I walk around, I think about how sad it feels compared to the rest of the house. There are pictures of King's family near the fireplace. His sister, father, and beloved mother all died in the span of just two years, something that devastated King. Above the bed are two paintings by Homer Watson — one of the prime minister's few close friends — and next to it is a typed list of phone numbers. King's barber and doctor make the list.

The third floor is where King spent most of his time. He often took refuge here from the bustle of Parliament, preferring to work long hours alone in his library. It's here that King guided Canada through the Second World War. And it's here that he met with world leaders, including British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and American President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

The library, as you might expect, is lined with books — nearly three thousand of them. King's desk is set underneath a row of windows. Next to it is a portrait of his mother, Isabel. King loved this portrait and would place fresh flowers underneath it every morning.



Clockwise from top: A front view of Laurier House National Historic Site. Prime ministers William Lyon Mackenzie King and Wilfrid Laurier both lived at Laurier House.

My guide Natalie tells me about the influence Isabel had over her son. She says that when he was twenty-two King fell in love with a nurse. But his mother disapproved of her, so he ended the relationship. King remained a lifelong bachelor. Underneath Isabel's portrait is a small silver box containing her wedding ring and a lock of her hair.

The library also reveals a hobby that King went to great lengths to hide from the public: talking to the dead. Placed on his mother's piano is his crystal ball, which he received as a gift in 1937. King was a big believer in spiritualism and used seances to reconnect with his loved ones — and with his mentor, Laurier.

Not only did King believe in talking to the dead, he also expressed an interest in communicating with the living after he died. So, in 1977, the CBC hosted a seance in King's library to try to reach out

to him. Sure enough, there he was, eager to give his advice to Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau on the brewing separatist movement in Quebec. Or so said the psychic.

I ask Natalie about all of this. Not surprisingly, she's skeptical. Still, she does point to some strange occurrences in the house — like the time a portrait of Laurier mysteriously fell to the ground without a trace of damage. It was as if someone picked it up and placed it on the floor. Natalie tells me that the house is a frequent stop for ghost hunters.

Spirits or no spirits, I'm fascinated by Laurier House. As my tour comes to an end, I begin to think about King's legacy and the incredible impact he had on Canada. And I think about how important this house was to him. As I step back out the front door, I feel like I've gotten to know the former prime minister just a little bit better. 🐾  
Chris Mallinos is an Ottawa-based writer.