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TURNING UP THE VOLUMES

Douglas Coupland has added “Generation X” to the English lexicon. W.P. Kinsella gave us “Build it and they will come.” Malcolm Lowry wrote his classic novel *Under the Volcano* in a squatter’s shack in North Vancouver. Pauline Johnson led the way for aboriginal writers. Alice Munro, of West Vancouver, Victoria and Comox, is often regarded as the world’s best short story writer.

But the vast majority of B.C. authors remain unknown.

For more than a century, the most significant writing from British Columbia was etched on a rock in Elcho Harbour, near the mouth of the Bella Coola River, by the first European to cross the North American continent, an intrepid Scottish businessman who used a mixture of grease and vermilion paint to leave his inadvertently haiku-like message:

*Alex Mackenzie
From Canada by land
22nd July 1793*

Thereafter, most British Columbians who wanted their words viewed in a book were dependent on literary gatekeepers in faraway places, mainly London, New York or Toronto.

There were few bookstores and no British Columbia-based publishing houses with national distribution. Self-publishing evolved as a necessary B.C. tradition. During the 1960s, most books from B.C. were printed for independent authors by Mitchell Press in Vancouver or Morriss Printing in Victoria.

The dividing point between literary famine and literary feast

was the formation of the Association of Book Publishers of British Columbia in 1974, exactly 200 years after Juan Pérez became the first European to make contact with Haida in B.C. waters in 1774.

By the 1980s, there were approximately 25 publishing houses. Like the Picts in Scotland behind Hadrian's Wall, B.C.'s independent booksellers developed a series of fortresses on the west side of the Rockies, unconquered by the invading chain stores owned from afar. A splendid outpouring ensued. By the early 1990s, federal surveys revealed B.C. had the highest book-reading rate per capita in Canada.

British Columbia has been a literary hotspot of North America ever since.

The Essentials is an invitation to visit 150 literary markers for a journey—or pilgrimage—to discover the nature of our collective story as British Columbians.

To prevent this book from turning into a doorstopper, authors who have mainly achieved prominence elsewhere, such as Milton Acorn, Margaret Atwood, Pierre Berton, James Clavell, Raymond Chandler, Margaret Laurence, Al Purdy, Sinclair Ross, Robert Service and Carol Shields, have been excluded—along with about 9,000 others.

Where is my good friend and colleague Jean Barman, the historian who gave us *The West Beyond the West*, the standard history of our province? Where is Edith Iglauer, who wrote *Fishing with John*?



Carol Shields



Robert Service



Margaret Laurence

Where are Robin Skelton and George Fetherling, who have written almost 50 books each?

Where is Andreas Schroeder, who almost single-handedly gave us Public Lending Right legislation in Canada? Where are Michael Turner, Robert Bateman, Patrick Lane, Lorna Crozier, Morris Panych, Bill New, Marilyn Bowering, John Gray, Terry Glavin, L.R. Wright, Peter Trower, P.K. Page, Phyllis Webb, Robert Harlow, R.M. Patterson and all the others whose names would fill two pages?

A panoramic approach, in a wide variety of genres, from 1774 to 2010, necessarily omits hundreds of books and authors. The remarkable outpouring of recent decades will appear under-represented to those who wish to see their reflections in this mirror. But public usefulness takes precedence: people must know they have a literary past.



British Columbia has a collective story, seldom told or understood. In an attempt to give an over-arching impression of what it means to be a British Columbian, the broad spectrum of literature has been illuminated.

Originality and historical significance are two criteria for inclusion. I have also selected authors whose overall bodies of work and personal lives are significant, rather than restrict this collection of entries to specific titles.

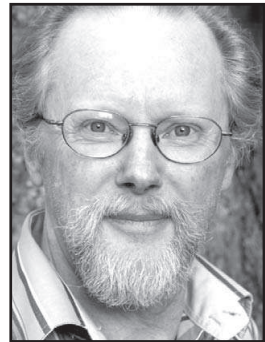
The Essentials is for those who care about British Columbia, whether they are self-styled literati or not. It is also for people who



Jean Barman



Edith Iglauer



Andreas Schroeder

know little about literary activity west of the Rockies. It is my hope that *The Essentials* will contribute to the knowledge of those who feel qualified to decide on the “best” books or authors in Canada. I strongly believe B.C. deserves more attention in this regard.

I wish to thank David Lester for designing another book for me, Noah Moscovitch and Erinna Gilkison for their diligence, and publisher Ron Hatch for having the gumption to publish my ongoing series of titles about the literature of British Columbia.

As well, I wish to acknowledge the collegial friendship of Sheryl MacKay, host of CBC Radio’s *North by Northwest*. My off-the-cuff conversations with Sheryl over the past three years, in a segment we call *Turning Up the Volumes*, have been an important catalyst for this non-Oxford guide to literature west of the Rockies.

I hope *The Essentials* will get more people talking about more B.C. books and authors in much the same spirit as *Turning Up the Volumes*.

— A.T.

EMILY CARR

Emily Carr's reputation as a visual artist has somewhat overshadowed her literary accomplishments, but in 1941, the same year that Victoria-born poet Anne Marriott won a Governor General's Award for Poetry for her collection *Calling Adventurers!*, Emily Carr received the Governor General's Award for her first non-fiction book, *Klee Wyck* (1941). They were the first two B.C. authors to win one of the country's top literary prizes, to be followed soon thereafter by Earle Birney and Dorothy Livesay.

At age 69, having suffered a stroke, Emily Carr began writing 21 vignettes about wildflowers, partly as a tonic while she was bed-ridden. At age 70, Carr published non-fiction pieces based on her visits to First Nations villages, called *Klee Wyck*. She confided in her diary, "I tried to be plain, straight, simple and Indian. I wanted to be true to the places as well as to the people. I put my whole soul into them and tried to avoid sentimentality. I went down deep into myself." Carr had enrolled in a short story writing correspondence course in 1926 and taken a similar course at Humber College in 1934. She also benefited from the friendship of Garnett Sedgewick, head of UBC's English Department, and Ira Dilworth, regional head of the CBC, both of whom read her stories on the radio. Dilworth was her editor and later served as her literary executor. Despite a 20-year-age difference—or perhaps because of it—they were able to sign their many letters to one another "with love." Carr confessed some of her most private feelings to him and sometimes playfully referred to him as "My Beloved Guardian."

Encouraged by critical acclaim for *Klee Wyck*, Carr continued to write memoirs and stories. Her other books include *The Book of Small* (1942), *The House of All Sorts* (1944) and various posthumous titles, such as *Growing Pains* (1946).



Emily Carr's paintings and eccentricity have overshadowed her writing career.

Although she preferred not to discuss her work, it is evident Carr was a more sophisticated writer than she cared to admit. She once commented, “I did not know book rules. I made two for myself. They were about the same as the principles I use in painting—get to the point as directly as you can; never use a big word if a little one will do.” As a philosophical artist, Carr was very quotable on a variety of topics such as Canada, ageing and her own work. She once wrote, “It is wonderful to feel the grandness of Canada in the raw, not because she is Canada but because she’s something sublime that you were born into, some great rugged power that you are a part of.” As for ageing, she wrote, “It is not all bad, this getting old, ripening. After the fruit has got its growth it should juice up and mellow. God forbid I should live long enough to ferment and rot and fall to the ground in a squash.”

Carr’s dual adeptness at writing and painting once prompted George Woodcock to comment, “She would have made a good sister for William Blake.”

CLELLAN S. FORD (WITH) CHARLES NOWELL

Smoke from Their Fires: The Life of a Kwakiutl Chief (1941)
by Clellan S. Ford

Written prior to an era when academics discussing aboriginals were self-censored by political correctness, *Smoke from Their Fires: The Life of a Kwakiutl Chief* (1941) is a refreshingly frank and classic account of the life and times of Kwakwaka'wakw Chief Charles James Nowell, mainly written by Clellan S. Ford, of Yale University, when Nowell was age seventy. Ford received some preliminary guidance for the project from Franz Boas. It is a landmark volume because it is the first full-length biography, presented