

## *Speech for Canadian Club*

*Edmonton March 22, 2005*

Edmonton publisher Mel Hurtig saw something in me that others might not have. Who would be the editor of his encyclopedia? I did not have a PhD, I was not bilingual, I was not a manager of some big publishing company, I was not connected to some political or business elite. He had hundreds of other applicants but something made him take a chance on me. What a life I have had as a result!

Within six months of starting up in June of 1980, in a cramped office in Ring House 5 at the University of Alberta, we had hired some 30 staff; put together an advisory board (whose Quebec members were already demanding a separate encyclopedia for Quebec); and identified over 2000 consultants and authors. In those heady days, at the end of the Lougheed boom, it was the equivalent of a publishing megaproject, the Syncrude of publishing, if you like, without the American ownership.

How did I get there from the back streets of the downtrodden West End of Toronto? “The search for Canada is a personal journey,” wrote Lorraine Monk, and I would like to share a part of my personal journey, part of my search for Canada, with you today.

I spent the first three years of my life on Royce Avenue in Toronto, in Mrs Mitchell’s baby farm for illegitimate kids, and then on Norfolk Street in the loving care of a rescuer who wanted to adopt me. Then my father finally returned from the war in 1947 after two years recuperating from a terrible injury. My mother retrieved me and hauled me back to a poky house on Perth Avenue, with two large Marsh families crammed into six small rooms. My father was in constant pain from his shattered leg and was already well on the way to drinking himself into the asylum.

For some reason my mother’s antipathy fell on me. Her favourite sarcastic epithet, which may have had some inkling of my future life, was “know it all!” There were only two books in the house, a dictionary and a thirty-year old encyclopedia. In a drunken

melancholy, my father would haul me out of bed in the middle of the night and demand that I choose words for him to define and spell, for it seemed that he had committed most of the dictionary to memory while lying in the hospital bed. And so, in those bizarre encounters with my father, I learned the power of words.

That dictionary and a certain athletic ease were my father's only gifts to me, except perhaps one other. Though a broken man, he was proud of his effort in the war and in hearing him talk to his war buddies, I understood a certain incipient nation feeling in his pride in wearing a maple leaf and in his disdain for the arrogant Limeys and Yanks who looked down on "us." (I got this too from my grandfather Marsh who was injured at Vimy Ridge and who, for his whole life thereafter, ended every argument by pointing at his scarred leg and shouting "Vimy (expletive) Ridge!") Is this historical evidence of that tired myth that we "came of age" at Vimy Ridge?

This military tradition was also a powerful influence at my school, Oakwood Collegiate, where the principal, the vice-principal and of all things the guidance teacher were all ex-Army officers. I remember the guidance teacher best, since like some Dr Strangelove he would peer out suspiciously over his wooden leg, which he rested on a stool underneath his desk, and demand why it was that I was constantly being thrown out of classrooms. "You obviously have a brain," he said, "so I won't have you thrown out of the school." I liked the idea that someone thought I had a brain. I stared at the sole of his boot and tried to explain my sleepless nights. At least, being a military man, he understood that every young boy's problem was young girls, but his only remedy seemed to be a stint in the cadets. In the school library my punishment was to copy out pages of the encyclopedia, which was a joy. In biology my punishment was to copy endlessly a diagram of a frog, which was not. (Aside on the importance of school librarians, especially for disadvantaged kids.)

As part of my preparations for an interview with Mr Hurtig at Ottawa's Château Laurier, I managed to read *Caught in a Web of Words*, a marvelous biography of James Murray, the editor in chief of the great *Oxford English Dictionary*. During my interview, I tried to

impress Mel with my diligence in reading this book, only later that evening remembering that Murray spent his whole working life on his dictionary and died seeing only three letters in print. I had only five years for all 26 letters, but Mel hired me anyway!

So, when I arrived in Edmonton in June of 1980 to edit this encyclopedia, I was able to bring a life full of my own reading and thinking, an unnatural love of alphabetical arrangements of knowledge, and a strong feeling that Canada was a unique place. I had already edited some 200 books on Canadian history and social science at the Institute of Canadian Studies at Carleton and had written three of my own books and I was utterly captivated by the challenge of making this encyclopedia.

One of the things that I tried to unravel in planning the encyclopedia was the *purpose* of the thing. It is a magical idea, the gathering of “all the knowledge in the world,” “tous les savoirs du monde,” the power and understanding that might come from “knowing it all.”

I studied the history of encyclopedias, which date back to the ancient Chinese, through medieval scholars such as Vincent de Beauvais and on to Diderot and Britannica. I visited the editors of Britannica, World Book and the Columbia Encyclopedia. I fancied myself one of an exclusive elite, editors of encyclopedias.

But what about a *Canadian* encyclopedia? So many people asked me, why do we need that? The answer soon emerged with the growing list of topics. What a piece of work is this country, so much more than any one of us can know. It unfolded in a weekly printout of commissioned articles. I once made a little verse of random article topics that I would like to share with you, a better evocator perhaps of our diversity than the usual pronouncements:

Agawa, Anka, Autumn,  
Bay Bulls, Beautiful Losers  
Big Bear, Bye Boat, Carignan, Chuckwagon  
Dudek, Egoyan, Fogo, Frye

Gimli, Handsome Lake, Hell's Gate  
Iskowitz, Klee Wyck, Loon  
McLuhan, Métis, Nunavut  
Quidi Vidi, Quilico, Safdie, Sarcee  
Sawchuck, Schuster, Skvorecky  
Taiga, Vasssanji, Vimy  
Whoop-up, Zurokowski

The best description of that elusive Sasquatch of the Canadian imagination, our “identity,” is best brought to life for me in the sounds of those words.

Something else that emerged for me, as sheaves of articles blew across my desk, was the awareness of what amazing people have walked among us, and I don't mean just those who made our notable “accomplishments” and I don't mean that trivial list of babies who happened to be born on Canadian soil to make their names in American pop culture. (Jack Warner left the country when he was two years old for heaven's sake.) I mean true originals, people unlike any others: Norman Bethune, Joe Boyle, Crowfoot, David Cronenberg, David Milne, Emily Carr, Glenn Gould, Grey Owl, John Diefenbaker, John Vickers, Leonard Cohen, Margaret Atwood, Milton Acorn, Buffy Sainte-Marie, Stephen Leacock, Tommy Douglas, Northrop Frye, Marshall McLuhan, Peter Gzowski, k.d. lang, Pierre Trudeau, Hubert Reeves, Terry Fox, Antoinine Maillet, Farley Mowat.

The list goes on, but you can see how Canada – a North American consciousness distinct from the US – *can* nurture originality, if it tends its own diversity and tries to avoid the corporate imperatives that destroy the imagination of so much American culture. We need to preserve our separate North American destiny, not least so that perhaps we can keep our heads while our supremely overconfident neighbours are losing theirs.

The pages of our national encyclopedia show that Canada is so much more than even its most ardent promoters and mythmakers make of it, while ignoring what I believe is the real source of our separateness: our *unresolved* conflicts -- English and French, east and

west, Ottawa and the provinces, resident and newcomer, business and workers; and, most enduringly, our failure to find an honourable accommodation with our First Peoples.

I don't share that confidence, so neatly critiqued by Herbert Butterfield in his remarkable book *The Whig Interpretation of History*, that history is just stories in which all forms of progress lead to our current perfection. That's not that useful to our kids in the end. The real character of a society can be gauged, wrote E.H. Carr, in the kind of history that it fails to write. How much stronger I believe our identity would be if we attended more to our conflicts and paradoxes. We are brave enough. We captured Vimy Ridge after the French and Limeys had failed for two years! It is in re-attending to these conflicts that we remake ourselves.

“Human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe,” wrote H. G. Wells. So, it is in this context that the teaching of our young people about our own history becomes imperative. No resource can so well inform them and give them a sense of wonder as our encyclopedia.

So, if I try to tell you what I have learned about Canada from being the editor of its encyclopedia, it is that the broader the knowledge, the less easy it is to trot out the usual myths about the peaceable kingdom, our supposed art of compromise, our embracing of multiculturalism or biculturalism – I wish that we were less smug about these slogans. I wish that we were less concerned with our parochial interests and more curious about the rest of the country.

In all the thousands of letters and emails of complaint or criticism that we have received over the years, there has never been an outcry from anyone that they learned *too much* about other Canadians, only that this or that topic, of concern to *them*, had been ignored. I understand this. “All the knowledge in the world” is just an ideal. It can never exist. Any encyclopedia reflects its time and appears deficient in retrospect. Oh well, even the highly vaunted 1911 edition of *Britannica*, generally considered a masterpiece, is full of what we now call sexism and racism. You wouldn't go to Diderot's *Encyclopédie* to get

an objective description of Geneva. Voltaire continues to have his revenge in that screed against the Calvinists. An encyclopedia is a document of its time and reflects the unconscious weakness as well as the self-conscious, self congratulation.

Over the past ten years, I have undertaken another journey with the encyclopedia in tow, one that would have astonished my predecessors. I have seen the encyclopedia unbound from print and set loose on the Internet, where it is, thanks to the support of the Historica Foundation, available to the whole world, free of charge. If you consider it, the encyclopedia was the perfect metaphor for the World Wide Web. Now, we can add some 500,000 visitors a month to the more than half million people who purchased the books and CD-ROMS. Taken together I imagine that there is some image of Canada in all those readers' minds, hovering in the collective imagination like some dazzling display of Northern Lights.

“Canada needs only to be known in order to be great,” wrote the editor of the very first Canadian encyclopedia, John Castell Hopkins, and I cannot improve on that statement.