

Speech to the Edmonton Historical Society

Strathcona Hall, Edmonton

I am honoured to speak to you here this evening and humbled to follow last-year's speaker Alex Mair, who is so sadly missing from your ranks this year. I commend you for the fine work that you do in preserving our history. We are a band of brothers and sisters, without whom our communities, our schools, our governments would soon forget our past.

I am sure that we all here share the view that knowledge of history is an integral part of our self-awareness, not only our local or national consciousness, but in our individual selves. Since art is always a large part of how I see the world, whenever I reflect on what history means I think of the title of a famous painting by Gaughin, "Who am I? Where did I come from? Where am I going?"

Today, I am going to talk to you about a different kind of "history" – different, that is, from plaques, monuments, celebrations, anecdotes or storytelling. It is a history of the mind, the kind of history that you might say, if you were a follower of Plato, that precedes the material history around us. The history of *The Canadian Encyclopedia* is a history of an idea and it is no less a part of our history here in Edmonton than the York boats that once plied the North Saskatchewan River.

Before I get to that story, perhaps I should tell you a bit about myself and how I gained a passion for all this.

In the spring of 1980 I was having coffee in the cafeteria of the National Library in Ottawa. A friend told me that Mel Hurtig in Edmonton had just advertised in the *Globe and Mail* for an editor to create a new encyclopedia of Canada. He told me that I would be perfect for the job and I applied, along with, apparently some 400 or 500 others. Mel granted me an interview, which took place at breakfast in the Chateau Laurier, Ottawa, a place that Jack McClelland had once told me he thought quintessentially Canadian. I told Mel about my background in editing and writing and recommended to him a book that I had just read, *Caught in a Web of Words*, a biography of James Murray, the editor of the great *Oxford English Dictionary*. Other than the legendary Max Perkins, who edited Hemmingway, Faulkner and others, it is hard to think of someone in my profession who has been considered worthy of a biography. Sam Johnson, who called lexicographers, famously, “harmless drudges,” was so much more. In a recent *New Yorker* review of a biography of that most famous literary arbiter and editor of the Concise Oxford Dictionary, H. W. Fowler, the reviewer wrote “upright people do not make ideal biographical subjects.” I have at times likened our work to that of an electrician, anonymous, hidden, mysterious and noticeable only when things go wrong. (I worked one time as an electrician’s apprentice to earn money to pay for university.) If Mel had misgivings after reading that Murray toiled for most of his life on the great OED and died long before the work was done, he laid them aside and hired me anyway. I moved to Edmonton and set up shop at the University of Alberta.

I should backtrack a bit further to say how I got to the point of being considered for such a great task, not because the story is so intrinsically interesting but because it has its own lessons. I came from a family made poor by an alcoholic father and neglectful mother. I was a rough street kid, a tough hockey player, who nevertheless managed to stay away from the worst excesses of some of my gang-minded friends, one of whom ended up in the Mafia and others who ended up in jail or the asylum (“Queen Street” as we called it in west-end Toronto). In my neighborhood, finishing school was an exception and you needed some kind of external motivation to make it, since none was provided at home. I was very affected one day when one of our former neighbours, George Chualo, came to our local church to tell us to stay in school. He was the kind of guy we could listen to.

My saving grace, I guess, was an abundance that one gift that we are all born with and which in me helped me survive my family and the boredom of school, curiosity. We had a single book in our house, well two in fact. There was a dictionary that my father had carried around with him during the second war, memorizing words. (The one thing that my family prided itself on was its warrior mentality. My grandfather was decorated at Vimy Ridge and my father wounded in Holland.) He would, when drunk, wake me up in the middle of the night and have me choose obscure words for him to define. I feared finding one that he did not know, but he seemed luckily to know them all. The second book was an old, one-volume encyclopedia, which I took to bed with me each night, redrawing the maps of magical

foreign lands and trying to mould the exotic animals that I saw in plasticine. Displaying some of the facts and figures that I learned from that encyclopedia at school gained me the first positive attention that I ever received from anyone in authority. To my mother, any show of knowledge was just “showing off.”

I discovered Canadian history when it was first taught to us in grade 7, by one Mr. Byers, a fastidious, constantly worried man who had set up a small museum at the back of his classroom. It was an odd collection that included a beaver pelt and a stuffed crocodile. While I fidgeted in all other classes and collected demerits towards numerous painful strappings, I paid full attention to Mr. Byers. I felt very sorry for him when a group of rowdies gleefully vandalized his museum, led by one George Lefebvre, who since he had failed several times, was bigger than the teachers. Our Canadian textbook was called *Breastplate and Buckskin*, and that view of history suited me fine: explorers, *coureurs de bois*, reformers, rebels, and of course those heroes, Isaac Brock and James Wolfe. (At the end of grade eight, our school took a field trip across Lake Ontario aboard the *Cayuga* to Queenston and I first climbed Brock’s monument, marvelling that he died their repulsing Americans!)

I know that a different history was being taught at the other (“lower” though it is higher on the map) end of the St Lawrence River, but I don’t remember thinking anything but positive thoughts about the French and their magnificent riverine empire. I despaired that it was frittered away by negligent royals and bureaucrats, and still regret that

Montcalm was stupid enough to leave the security of the citadel walls to confront the British on the open plain. I had a Davey Crocket lunch pail and loved the TV show “Radisson”. Sadly, there was absolutely no chance to follow this early interest in history as the only Canadian history found in my high school at Oakwood Collegiate was an optional course offered in grade 13.

At university I studied philosophy and art history. After two years I got a summer job at a publishing company as a proof reader for a new dictionary. I spent the summer in the mind-numbing job of converting words into phonetic symbols, so leapt at the offer to assist an editor who had been hired from Montréal to edit the company’s centre piece for the Centennial, a history of Canada. The book had three French-Canadian authors and had run afoul of several editors, all of whom had been fired. This editor got along fine with the French authors but when he returned the company Polaroid camera with some images of his nude girlfriend still in the case, he too was forced to leave.

The militaristic editor in chief, Dave Harris, asked me if I had studied Canadian history. I said that I had (implying something beyond grade 8) and was given the grave responsibility to bring out the book in a mere three months. It was good that I knew so little because without preconceptions I learned a great deal about Canadian history from the manuscript. Harris and the others hated it because it did not tell “our stories.” It made little of Confederation and responsible government. It focused rather on social and economic underpinnings and regional, rather than national identities. Harris and the readers hated that it

spent more time on the price of furs and timber than on the Conquest, saw Louis Riel as a tragic figure rather than a traitor and discussed Henri Bourassa at greater length than Wilfrid Laurier. I saw my role in helping the authors explain their views in clear English and I had a minor triumph when I devised a title that everyone could agree on, *Canada: Unity in Diversity*. Harris was pleased that I got the book published on time and he allowed me to go to the first-ministers' conference, chaired by Premier John Robarts, and present the book to the ten premiers and prime minister. The most difficult thing that I had to do that day was to get on the elevator to the top of the Toronto Dominion Centre, for I have a real fear of heights.

That was 1967 and the following year I had the opportunity to write my first book of Canadian history, the story of Lunenburg, Nova Scotia. I filled in for an author who had pulled out of the project and spent some 6 weeks in Lunenburg, during which I fell in love with the place and learned to love to eat fish. You can imagine how I felt recently when I heard that vandals had burned down the magnificent St John's Anglican wooden church at Halloween.

I later spent 10 years at the Institute of Canadian Studies at Carleton University, where I edited some 70 books on Canadian history and social science. I finished a degree there, switching to history and art history and I developed a real interest in the study of history itself, particularly the history of the Annales School and of the new social historians, the ones who are now blamed by the likes of Jack Granatstein for the sad state of Canadian history. I argued in a review

of that book for the Ottawa Citizen that Canada's historians have little understood and certainly had underused these most important trends in 20th century historiography.

Story of Encyclopedia

The story of how the encyclopedia was created can be told from a number of different angles. There is an internal story, the kind that you take home to your family after work, as we grew from a staff of two or three to some 40 in the space of a few months. Inevitably, unpredictable intrigues, competitions, bickering and conflicts smoldered. One senior editor, who joined the staff a few years later, said that the encyclopedia inspired her to want to write a crime novel, which she was going to call "The Encyclopedia Murders." Alas, these stories are not for public consumption, though they are a part of "history."

A second important storyline is that of how Mel Hurtig dreamed of publishing this encyclopedia, his failures to interest federal institutions such as the Canada Council, his eventual partnership with the Conservative government of Peter Lougheed, his struggles to get the production financed by reluctant banks and his triumph of marketing. CBC host Hanna Gartner once asked me on camera, "Tell me Jim, is Mel Hurtig the greatest encyclopedia salesman of all time?" All of this is better left for Mel to tell and I highly recommend to you his own memoir: *At Twilight in the Country*.

Each historical event is carried along by currents and undertows that shape it in unpredictable ways. Who could have predicted that, as I began my work with the encyclopedia in 1980, a technological revolution was underway. The personal computer was unheard of in 1980 and today it is used to actually deliver the encyclopedia. I literally lived the digital revolution and was lucky that I had the kind of curiosity and love of technology that at least allowed me to embrace the changes, if not always understand them.

Finally, there is the story of the encyclopedia as an intellectual event, as a potent idea. I was determined that it be a work that was expert, but not “academic,” that it be an intellectual portrait as well as a compendium of facts. To accomplish this, I took the difficult decision that we would include as many authors from as many places in Canada as possible. This choice, over having a smaller team of writers, made life incredibly difficult, but it was the only way, I believed, to make the encyclopedia representative of the whole country. There is of course a strong editorial influence, mine, over the whole work, but in the end, the encyclopedia is the work of its contributors – that in many ways, I believe, is the secret of its success. This is the history that I propose to share with you.

When the encyclopedia was first launched in 1985, Peter Lougheed was kind enough to invite me to a lunch with the then governor general Jeanne Sauvé. The lunch took place on the lawn of Rideau Hall in Ottawa – the food had to be brought some distance past the gardens and the hidden RCMP security, at one point a number of

officers leapt out of the bushes and chased an interloper on a bicycle - and the waiters forgot to bring Peter Lougheed his meal. He made a gracious comment that perhaps they were ashamed to bring him Ontario beef. There followed a long discussion at the table about who should run to the house and tell them to bring Mr. Lougheed's plate. Finally, Madame Sauvé's husband reluctantly agreed to do it. In the course of the meal, Madame Suavé asked Peter Lougheed how it was that he agreed to finance Mel Hurtig, that radical critic of government, to produce the encyclopedia. Mr. Lougheed explained that he liked and respected Mel and all agreed that at heart Mel was really a small "l" liberal. When I told Mel this story later, he was not amused by the characterization. Nevertheless it was an interesting partnership, and the kind, really, that has produced great works in Canada, from the CPR to the CBC.

The encyclopedia was thus begat from the nationalism of Mel Hurtig and from the celebration of Canada by Peter Lougheed. When I arrived in Edmonton in June of 1980, it was left to me to figure out how to make it.

It goes without saying that any reference work, no matter what its approach, must be objective and factual. To achieve this, we put in place a system of outside readers, fact checkers and proof readers. The co-ordination of this was the responsibility of the senior editors, who really were at the centre of the maelstrom, drawing up lists of entries in their subject areas, commissioning entries, editing and co-ordinating the readers' comments. While I charged them with the

ideals of a scholarly work, worthy of the ages, I often frustrated them when I was forced to cut or rewrite the entries that they had spent so long generating in order to make them accessible to the general public. Only two of them, Adriana Davies and James Ogilvy, survived the first edition from beginning to end.

While neither Mel Hurtig nor the Alberta government tried to influence the content of the encyclopedia, the right-wing *Alberta Report* was not shy in criticizing me. After getting hold of some of our internal documents, they wrote an article accusing me of being a left-wing pinko. In particular, they seem to be enraged that Chief Justice Berger, the author of a report not favourable to the energy industry, would not only be the subject of a biography, but that he would write an entry as well. Against my wishes, Mel Hurtig persuaded me to write a letter of rebuttal, which of course only left me open to further abuse -- the *Report* only publishes letters critical of its doctrines in order to ridicule their authors. The article caused enough consternation among some members of the Lougheed cabinet that we received a demand to send them sensitive entries. My refusal to do this no doubt threatened our funding. A compromise was reached when another member of our staff sent a number of entries to a prominent academic at the University of Alberta who had sufficiently conservative credentials to allay the government's concerns.

I had a similar problem when Mel Hurtig learned that I had commissioned the entry on Peter Lougheed to a prominent historian of Social Credit, John Barr. I fretted a great deal about these matters at

the time, but I was convinced that the procedures that I had set up would minimize, if not eliminate, bias, and that above all, whatever value the encyclopedia had only derived from its editorial integrity. Mel, for his part, never insisted that I make a change or add an entry to satisfy his point of view. He did spend many hours making useful comments on hundreds of entries, using his wide knowledge of Canada. He always ended our phone calls with the assurance that the changes were up to me. Furthermore, almost every one of the over 3000 contributors entered into the spirit of the enterprise, many without pay, to produce objective, readable essays on their areas of expertise.

Some entries proved almost impossible to prepare to anyone's satisfaction. That on abortion was re-commissioned 12 times and we ended up writing it ourselves from the various versions. I got into a heated battle with the author of the entry on Pierre Laporte, who described his death as a "political assassination". I insisted on "murder". Either one could be considered biased I suppose, but as editor I won these battles. I was lobbied hard by scientology and technocracy and fundamentalist groups demanded that I treat creationism with the same weight as evolution. Some of the worst battles took place in seemingly docile territory, such as literature, which was undergoing its unfortunate politicization in the early 1980s.

The editors performed strenuous, even heroic, work, hearing every excuse imaginable for late entries, from vasectomies and "the dog ate the manuscript" to a house burned down. I in turn faced a mini revolt

by the senior editors when I had to trim their sections. I had made them fierce defenders of their subject areas without realizing that they would have to defend them against *me*. I had a major problem, however, when editors brought me lists of single subject areas that would exceed in length the entire amount of space I had for the encyclopedia. One editor tried a palace coup with the support of some staff and a few of her consultants. Oddly, I was sympathetic to her view that one version of *The Canadian Encyclopedia* could have been a grand philosophical work, but I knew that it would have been of little use or interest to the average Canadian we wanted to reach.

The Canadian Encyclopedia was unlike other reference projects, such as the Dictionary of Canadian Biography, funded endlessly by the Canada Council over a period of some 30 years, with no commercial imperative to constrain it. Ours was a commercial enterprise and it had financial constraints. To sell it and to make a profit, Mel Hurtig had to restrain its costs. He also had to predict its selling price, which in turn meant that *The Canadian Encyclopedia* had to be a certain length. This led to the most difficult thing that I ever had to do on the encyclopedia. Within months of the deadline, I discovered that our designer and general manager had miscalculated the number of words that I could fit into the specifications. When the galleys were produced, I found that we had over 300,000 words too many. I had to sit and read the entire encyclopedia in galleys and cut the 300,000 words. I remember late nights, my nose bleeding from the ammonia used in producing the galleys, listening to Sibelius on my headphones, slashing words with my green felt pen.

I then spent a month in Toronto with our designer, helping him to cut repro, wax it and paste it onto pages with the thousands of photographs that we had collected. Most of the captions had to be written at the last minute, and they amounted to some 70,000 words, a small book in themselves.

When the printer in Montréal got the page layouts, they too realized the immensity of the project. I still remember the head of the printing division of Ronalds, who called himself “El”, short he told me under duress for Elzéar, flying all the way to Edmonton to see me. He flung a transparency down on the table and said in frustration, which way does this thing go? It was an abstract painting by Paul-Émile Borduas and it seemed to sum up the difficulty that they were having assembling this massive tome.

The encyclopedia appeared in 1985 and Mel threw the greatest party I have ever attended, at the Citadel Theatre here in Edmonton. Thanks to his brilliant marketing, the encyclopedia captured the public’s imagination and 150,000 sets were sold in only three months – the greatest success in the history of Canadian publishing to this day. There were anxious moments because of the nature of the bookselling trade. If anyone started discounting the encyclopedia everyone would and the smaller booksellers would start shipping them back. At one point I had a furious Mel on one phone line and a Toronto bookseller, whom I knew personally, on the other, trying to convince the latter not to discount the encyclopedia in a midnight sale with words

considerable edited from what Mel was feeding me from his line. Fortunately, the encyclopedia sold out before the price cutting could have any deleterious effect.

After all I had gone through, my best memory of those days was a phone call that I got shortly after publication. It was from the respected historian John Saywell who had been hired by *Saturday Night* magazine to review the encyclopedia. “I wanted to call and talk to you,” he said. “Who are you that you have done this thing and I don’t even know you.” Whatever else happened I thought, this made it worth while.

Since 1985 we have had a second edition in four volumes in 1988, a Junior edition for young readers in 1990, our first text-only CD-ROM in 1991 – over 300,000 CD-ROMs have been distributed over the years – a single printed volume in 1999 and our first Internet version in 2000. We have remained successful but have never matched the euphoria of those early days. I still ask myself how we were able to tap such a deep vein of nationalistic fervour and whether or not it is just now hidden or if it has ceased to exist.

Such a monster undertaking as an encyclopedia has huge financial implications. We were fortunate that the owner of McClelland and Stewart, Avie Bennett, was willing to undertake these in 1990 and to support the encyclopedia through the 1990s. In 2000 he donated the encyclopedia to Historica, a charitable foundation whose good works include providing forums and materials for our teachers and students

to learn about Canada's past. As custodian of *The Canadian Encyclopedia Historica*, with help from Heritage Canada, is providing the encyclopedia free online to all Canadians.

So what is this "idea" of an encyclopedia. In the Greek sense it is a "circle of knowledge". In fact, more accurately the word translates as a "curriculum for learning." In this sense *The Canadian Encyclopedia* takes its place modestly alongside the endeavours of Chamber's, Britannica and Diderot's great *Encyclopédie*. But it is more than that as a *national* encyclopedia, for it is not only a repository of facts and figures but a portrait of a nation. It can tell you when Anthony Henday first gazed on the Rocky Mountains or when Banting won his Nobel Prize, what an ice worm is or a pingo, but it will also describe the conflicts that we have endured from the racism of the *Komagata Maru* incident to the tragedy of our First Nations.

Best of all the encyclopedia is still in the making as it involves an ever-widening community of contributors and readers. Inevitably, we have omitted something that someone values, for despite its name, an encyclopedia cannot contain everything. Generally, I very much enjoy hearing from anyone about what they think ought to be in the encyclopedia. I found out recently to my surprise that we have no entry on Inukshuk. I have been reviled and even burned in effigy for leaving out important places. I am ultimately thrilled that anyone takes the time to tell me these things, for it means that they think that the encyclopedia is important and by adding their concerns I involve an ever-broader group of people in its making.

As well as a celebration of our accomplishments and a compendium of the trivia of everyday life, it is a national declaration and, certainly, to date the best attempt we have made to describe that most elusive of all intellectual fauna, the Canadian identity. I say these things with humility, but they are buttressed by the great many thousands of letters and emails that I have had over the years from people who love Canada and want to learn about it. We have been cited twice as an authority by the Supreme Court of Canada and even Lucien Bouchard used us to buttress an argument. Recently, I had a phone call from the editor of a proposed encyclopedia of the state of New York asking for advice. He told me that there are many such encyclopedias in the works in the US and that *The Canadian Encyclopedia* is their model.

The Canadian Encyclopedia is living proof of why we need to nurture the idea of Canada. Not just for the clichés of our diversity, our peacefulness, our existence beyond the melting pot. Each of these claims are as much myth as fact. Neither is it just for the accomplishments, small (is any nation as seemingly proud as we of the most trivial pursuits?) or grand – these things should be *expected* of a nation so well blessed as we. But rather, it should be for a deeper idea, one in which we can accept that history is a process, a constant grinding of the plates, and we must accept our failures and see how we can grow from them, an idea in which we can learn to live with paradox and conflict and admit that we need not make everyone see the idea in our way alone.