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**ON THE COVER**
"Hyacinth" by Jeanette Sirois, 47 by 35 inches, coloured pencil on paper on cradled board. See story on page 30.

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# Money still skewing local elections

LESLIE CAMPBELL

Holes in the new local elections financing act give an advantage to incumbents. That's not necessarily in the public interest.

Soon after the BC NDP formed the government in 2017, they delivered on some promises around election financing for both provincial and municipal elections. On the announcement regarding local elections, everyone seemed happy. News reports from that fall quote multiple politicians and organizations like the Union of BC Municipalities, not to mention Minister of Municipal Affairs Selina Robinson, saying it's about time to get money out of politics, to end the Wild West reputation we'd earned, and level the playing field.

Chief among the new rules were, first, a ban on donations from corporations and unions, donations that in the past often fuelled many campaigns; and, second, a cap of $1,200 per year for individual donations.

I assumed such regulations would rein in the campaigns of higher-spending candidates and level out the playing field somewhat.

I was wrong. And it appears the government knows that more needs to be done. Even before last October's civic elections, when it became clear there were some big holes that money could still flow through, Minister Robinson was already promising to review the rules.

All candidates had to submit their disclosure reports on their campaign donations and expenditures by January 18. They were posted at Elections BC soon thereafter. Somewhat surprisingly, there has been no analysis in local media, at least that I could find.

I suppose the new regulations have helped, but seasoned political operatives have, by the looks of it, found ways to play by the new rules while still drumming up lots of money to promote their candidates.

Let's look at Mayor Helps' campaign as an example of what can be done within the rules.

The new formula upon which campaign expense limits are based resulted in Helps being limited to $54,121.50. (The formula is $1 for each resident in the municipality up to 15,000 and then $.55 for each additional person.) Helps spent $52,611 during the campaign period, so was within the limit.

*However*, the "campaign period" only covers the month before voting day. During the "election period," which runs from January 1 to "the 29th day prior to voting day" (nine months), she spent an additional $51,359. Or $103,970 in total—quite a bit more than the $88,564 she spent in the 2014 election. There is no limit on how much a candidate can spend during the "election period."

Elections BC Communications Coordinator Melanie Hall told *Focus*, "The expense limits apply to campaign period expenses only." Candidates had to record their donations starting January 1 of the election year, but spending limits didn't take effect until the official campaign period began on September 22.

This timing loophole favours incumbents who know they will run in the next election. Hypothetically, the new rules would allow unlimited lobbying for donations during the period an incumbent was still in office and making decisions. That incumbency could attract potential donors. Money raised early on could be spent, for example, on staff dedicated to fundraising and/or on a long-term social media campaign. Based on the description of Helps' heavy spending during the "election period" in her disclosure form, she could have had a fundraiser and robust social media campaign well ahead of the campaign period. These days, that's a big advantage.

As it turned out, Helps' spent a surprising amount of money for each vote she received. Her nearest competitor, for instance, was Stephen Hammond. He got 8,717 votes, compared to Helps' 12,642 votes. So Helps spent $8.22 per vote, while Hammond spent $2.20 (he spent a total of $19,143, including $3,716 for his own campaign and $15,427 from newcouncil.ca, an electoral organization). On a per-vote basis, Helps spent about four times what Hammond did.

Other mayoral candidates in Victoria also spent far less than Helps. In a weird sort of way, it's reassuring that even with all the funds at her disposal, all her experience and name recognition, she still earned only 44 percent of the votes for mayor. While the money strengthens a campaign, and definitely makes for an uneven playing field, spending a lot more money may have diminishing returns.

It's also interesting to look at other municipalities of roughly the same size to see what their per-mayoralty-vote expenditures are.

Maple Ridge, whose politics I know nothing about, has a population close to that of the City of Victoria. As a result, the campaign period spending limit for mayoralty candidates was similar: $54,992. The successful candidate, also an incumbent, spent a total of $43,604, far less than Helps. Michael Mordon received 11,287 votes, which works out to $3.86 per vote. Again, much lower than Helps.

Closer to home, Fred Haynes in Saanich spent $70,436 and harvested 15,312 votes, at a cost of $4.60 per vote.

In Kelowna, incumbent Colin Basran won the mayoral race at a cost of $4.22 per vote.

Even in the City of Vancouver, where campaigns had been raising and spending millions in previous elections, the new Mayor Kennedy Stewart spent only $6.23 per vote for the 50,000 votes he received. (His total expenses were $310,337 over the two periods.)

It's actually pretty hard to find any mayoral candidate in BC who spent more per vote than Mayor Helps. But persistence with the two relevant websites pays off: a close race in North Van saw Linda Buchanan win with 3,800 votes, at $17.47 per vote due to her $66,408 expenditure. And in neighbouring Oak Bay, incumbent Nils Jensen spent $9.95 per vote, only to lose to Kevin Murdoch, who handily won while spending only $3.76 per vote received. Jensen's costly votes seem more a reflection of his dramatic trouncing than of relative campaign expenses. (Murdoch got 5,042 votes to Jensen's 2,138.) Incumbents may be favoured, there are no guarantees.

ANOTHER LOOPHOLE THAT I HOPE MINISTER ROBINSON looks at is around corporate and union donations. While corporations cannot donate, their owners, employees, and associates certainly can. And unions have other ways of helping candidates they prefer.

An astute reader emailed me right after the posting of the disclosure statements to show me how nine people who worked in some capacity with Abstract Developments had given donations totalling $23,400 to various Oak Bay, Saanich, and Victoria candidates. All perfectly legal. Helps' campaign got a total of seven $1,200 donations from Abstract employees and associates, so $8,400.

She also received donations, usually of $1,200, from others in the

WHILE CORPORATIONS CANNOT DONATE, their owners, employees, and associates certainly can. And unions have other ways of helping candidates they prefer.

real estate and development field, including Jon Stovell (Reliance), Fraser McColl (Mosaic Properties), Leonard Cole (Urban Core Ventures), Steven Cox (Rize Alliance Properties), Ken Mariash (Bayview), and Mohan Jawl (Atrium etc). A conservative estimate—without googling every single name on Helps' lengthy donors list—of donations from developers and their teams amounted to $23,000, thereby fuelling over 22 percent of her campaign's total expenses (i.e. from January through October 20).

In some ways, the ban on corporate donations just hides them. Sarah Henderson gave $1,200 to each of five candidates' campaigns; in all, $6,000. She is Abstract's sales manager. As an individual donor, her civic generosity is totally legit. But I bet the candidates she donated to in Victoria, Saanich and Oak Bay know she works for Abstract.

I am not sure how the Minister could address this particular issue. Maybe some readers have suggestions?

AND THEN THERE'S "THIRD PARTY ADVERTISING." In Victoria, so-called third parties could spend $2,706 on advertising directly endorsing candidates for mayor and council *during the campaign period* (such bodies can also spend up to $150,000 advertising about issues in the campaign period). There is no cap on contributions to these groups. There is also a transparency issue as they don't need to identify themselves or where the money comes from in advance of the campaign period.

A good example of how this can play out in unintended ways is probably the businessman in Vancouver who ponied up $85,000 to plaster billboards with ads for a mayoral candidate prior to the official one-month-long campaign period.

Another area the Minister will likely review relates to "elector organizations," for which there are no expense limits other than the $1,200 per individual donor per year. So we see situations like the Burnaby Citizens Association spending over $500,000 on its slate of nine candidates, seven of whom got elected.

In Victoria, the relatively new group Together Victoria, which endorsed three new candidates, all of whom got elected, shows how effective such organizations *can* be. It raised over $45,000, though it spent only about $25,000 divided amongst the three candidates, all of whom also raised additional small amounts on their own. On the other hand, newcouncil.ca raised a total of $62,000, most of which it split between five candidates, none of whom got elected. These groups are in their infancy in Victoria, but over time could become like political parties in our civic arena.

If money is allowed to sway the citizenry through high-priced promotional campaigns, many of us grow more cynical and less trusting of our government and its processes. We need people to feel the system is fair, and that if they decide to run for council, money will not be the deciding factor. The new limits get us only partway there.

Leslie Campbell's eyes took a beating exploring many candidate disclosure statements and voting results; perhaps the Minister can figure out a streamlined way to report the numbers. P.S. Many readers will miss Briony Penn in this edition; she will be back in Focus come May.


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- "Prior to starting Iyengar yoga, my mind was consumed by thoughts related to work. I was working in a corporate environment in a job that was demanding and stressful. After a few weeks of Iyengar yoga, I was developing a stillness I hadn't experienced before."
- "Just those few hours every week in yoga class was enough to start breaking the cycle of incessant thinking that I was trapped in."
- "For the first time I felt I was in the right studio. I had done yoga for years but I started to gain more than flexibility with Iyengar yoga—my attitude actually changed. I feel lighter and happier and able to take what life throws at me."

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**Victoria's diminishing urban forest**

"Trees," wrote Emily Carr, "are so much more sensible than people."

In her brief foray as a cartoonist, the young Carr created a piece of visual satire (right) that has a bite in our own time.

Titled "The Inartistic Alderman and the Realistic Nightmare," the cartoon she created for a Victoria newspaper depicts a terrified old man lying abed as several trees stand around menacing him. Why are the trees haunting the old man? Because he, a public official, had them chopped down. It includes these words:

*Ye ghosts of all the dear old trees,*
*The oak, the elm, the ash,*
*Nightly those gentlemen go tease,*
*Who hew you down like trash.*

IMAGE B-08163 COURTESY OF THE ROYAL BC MUSEUM AND ARCHIVES

Two pieces of recent news about the fate of trees in Victoria brought this cartoon to mind.

I had just finished reading and pondering Leslie Campbell's "Victoria's Diminishing Forest," which underscores the deficit between trees removed in this town (too often for luxury developments which are oddly dissonant with City Hall's professed credo), and trees replaced, when I was made aware that the former Innovation Tree, a lovely birch of some 40 years located on Humboldt Street at the Inner Harbour, was to be chopped down to make way for some campaign promises City Hall did decide to keep. This tree was feted as recently as 2016 as the Innovation Tree, selected to bear on its branches a series of lights that reacted to sound. There was even a launch party at which Mayor Lisa Helps displayed some dance moves.

The tree was much loved—some called it the heart of the city—and it had become a friendly natural figure in the increased concrete density of Victoria. Yet despite a petition drive that gained 1,200 signatures and raised a public outcry that must have been audible even at 1 Centennial Square, Helps and council remained unmoved. The Innovation Tree was deemed an obstruction to progress, uprooted and sawed into pieces early on the morning of January 28.

Trees and gardens and respect for nature are part of our city's heritage—or they should be. But where heritage of any kind is concerned, with this City Hall I suggest we have far too many inartistic aldermen, whose decisions have become our realistic nightmare. And as such what they offer is a failure in creative leadership. Mayor and council lurch from scene to scene in what can only be described as a melodrama of maladministration, lecturing and hectoring us all from the footlights about what is for our own good.

Artistic aldermen would have listened to the public—their employers, after all—worked all this out a long time ago, and ultimately shown such positive, productive leadership as Emily Carr's cartoon suggests is possible. For if her cartoon sends up the dilemma of a politician trembling before the victims of his ill-considered decisions, it also demonstrates what it might look like for a tree-chopping inartistic alderman who maybe, just maybe, has grown him or herself a conscience. And maybe a way to save a tree *and* put in a bike lane. Now wouldn't that be sensible?

*Grant Hayter-Menzies*

I read with interest your Editor's Letter about the urban forest which mentioned the property at 1201 Fort Street, which was originally the site of "Pentrelew," the family home of Sarah Lindley and Henry Pering Pellew Crease (who was Victoria's first barrister, then Attorney-General for the Colony of British Columbia, and by 1870 a Justice of the Supreme Court). Their home was a centre of hospitality and a unique heritage building.

Unfortunately, the Truth Centre acquired the property and got permission to tear down the old home so that they could erect a new church building. At the time of the request, I remember speaking to City council about the importance of preserving the building, but permission was granted to demolish it, though my understanding was that they would preserve the garden and trees. So it is with sadness that I see the last of a once notable historic site disappear.

*Christina Johnson-Dean*

I thought Leslie Campbell's article on the urban forest was excellent, but took an unfair swipe at Abstract's development at 1201 Fort. The majority of interested Rockland residents who attended the public hearings supported the development. All of us were made more than aware of the impact on the trees. In fact Abstract went to great lengths to protect the main grove of Garry oaks on the eastern corner, beside which will be a dedicated path as a piece of the Pemberton Trail. I'm not aware of any other local owner allowing public access through their private property; and through what will be a park-like setting connecting Fort with the Art Gallery. It's a gift. They could have built ugly four-storey buildings along Fort with above-ground parking in the rear, wiping out *all* of the trees.

On another note, I doubt we would allow the planting of any non-native species in a Garry oak meadow. One look at the magnificent sequoias that are to be removed, and you may realize their dominance in this fragile ecosystem. The Garry oaks at 1201 Fort have had to compete for light, for water, for nutrients, etc. It's an unfair fight.

*Ken Milbrath*

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### Urban forest logged for cycling

Two hundred trees in Langford are slated to be removed to create a one-kilometre stretch of bike infrastructure known as the E&N Humpback Connector. This route runs between Atkins Avenue and Savory School. Many who live in the area have been speaking out against the mass destruction of mature Garry oak, big leaf maple and Douglas fir in an ecologically sensitive corridor near Millstream Creek. In August of 2018 when the CRD trotted this project out into the light, there was nothing to indicate how many trees were going to be sacrificed on the altar of high-tech bike lanes. In the pretense of consultation, the people in CRD Parks and Planning did some minor re-tweaking.

I visited the site on Saturday, February 2 and met the wonderful Leslie King, professor and director of the Canadian Centre for Environmental Education, School of Environment and Sustainability at Royal Roads University. This woman is the true embodiment of her job title. She has worked tirelessly to save these trees. All of her valiant efforts have fallen on deaf ears. Some who live in the area have resigned themselves to the destruction of this corridor of beauty right in their backyard—all in the guise of "green infrastructure."

The full 17-kilometre E&N Rail Trail is slated to cost $36,000,000—if you can believe the figures put out by the CRD. I suspect the cost overruns will drive that cost considerably higher. I predict mudslides as they construct not one, but two culverts under the rail bed. That, plus the removal of so many mature trees will destabilize the embankments on either side of the rail bed even more. I just cannot fathom how anybody who is an engineer (or environmentalist) could ever have signed off on this project. I am not a qualified engineer, but I can see trouble ahead. Millstream Creek is going to be vulnerable to huge amounts of sediment, as trees are ripped out and heavy machinery begins its work. And this creek has just undergone a salmon enhancement project.

I have to ask myself what/who is driving this expensive project? Trees do not have an agenda. However, someone has an agenda here, and it has very little to do with getting people out of their cars. This one-kilometre stretch is *not* a commuter route. It is a recreational route. This bike infrastructure is going to have *minimal* impact on the number of cars driving around Langford. More kids might get to school via this bike route, but the loss of so many iconic trees is tragic. This area is key bird habitat. Ravens greeted me on both my visits. I saw northern flickers, juncos, hummingbirds and turkey vultures (these birds live here year round). In order to mitigate the impact of this project, the trees are being removed before the migratory birds return to nest.

The CRD recently declared a climate emergency. A climate emergency would require radical and effective action, not the destruction of so many trees in the guise of getting people out of their cars. And where is the media coverage of what is going on? They show up to do a two-minute sound bite and that's that, story covered. There is no in-depth reporting, no digging deep to find out what the hell is really going on.

What will make a difference? Maybe speaking truth to power will shake things up a little. It likely won't change anything. Perhaps it's time to take a stand for trees by standing up for them in a literal sense. And I don't expect everyone to have the courage to do that. That's OK. I'm a crazy moth-to-the-flame kind of girl. However, even I have to be mindful of my mental wellbeing in light of all that is happening in our world on so many levels. So, maybe instead of getting myself arrested, I'll just retreat to my garden where I know I can do something good. Or focus on my art, and my job working with the toddlers at UVic Childcare.

I don't hold out much hope for our future as a species on this planet. A First Nations man named Thomas who I ran into among the trees on Dallas Road was so calm about the coming destruction. I felt a deep sense of peace in his presence. A friend of mine keeps telling me "be a proton." It is getting harder and harder to keep my positive charge. My 93-year-old mother told me that I might be here to bear witness. I somehow have to find the courage to keep doing that.

*Verna Stone*

Up to 300 trees in one sensitive ecosystem are due to be removed in the municipality of Langford—before birds have a chance to nest. Volunteers started working to salvage native plants in late January, before the destruction begins.

Many tree advocates are also cyclists and pedestrians, who say they welcome bike lanes. But they want local governments to find ways to build them without killing an increasing number of mature trees.

In nearby Saanich, six mature Garry oak trees on Finnerty Road just came down. An "all ages, all abilities" bike path is planned for the street. Local tree advocates and neighbourhood groups worked to convince Saanich council to reconsider, to no avail. Garry oak trees can live up to 500 years, and are considered a "protected" native species.

Finnerty Road is just the beginning of bike path construction in Saanich. A *Times-Colonist* article mentioned the planned Shelbourne Valley Project will remove another 70 trees along Shelbourne Street over the next few years.

And in Victoria, tree advocates have been requesting more information about how many mature trees will be cut down to run a planned new bike lane along Vancouver Street and Dallas Road.

Several trees have already been cut down to create the bike path on Pandora Street. The recent removal of a Downtown tree sparked outrage, despite 1,200 signatures gathered on its behalf in less than four days.

Many of us want to see bike lanes, but feel municipalities should explore ways to build them without losing more mature trees. If bike lanes will reduce cars on the road, for instance, why not make some of the roads one-way, or install bike lanes in place of a parking lane?

Mature trees are priceless and provide benefits—such as storing carbon and producing oxygen, among others—at an exponentially higher rate than saplings can. They can take a human lifetime or longer to replace.

While planners may find tree removal the cheapest and most expedient way to make room for bike lanes, some of us feel it is really much too expensive.

*Grace Wyatt*

### Location of Victoria's #1 Firehall

I always enjoy what Ross Crockford has to say about various projects around the City of Victoria, and especially those he writes about in *Focus*' March/April issue.

Regarding a new Crystal Pool I think a new location on the SE corner of Topaz Park would be a good location. This facility would tie in nicely with all the other sports fields and a multi-level parking garage could be incorporated.

The idea of a new #1 Fire Hall at the corner of Yates and Cook Street is puzzling. One of the primary reasons for a new hall is for better seismic survival in the case of a strong earthquake. Upon checking some seismic maps of the area, I find a high level of amplification in a zone centred a block away at the corner

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of View and Vancouver Streets. The new design suggests that there are plans to build 10 storeys or more *on top* of the fire hall. How crazy is that if the building collapses in an earthquake or enough debris falls blocking the emergency equipment from leaving the building?

I think there is a better location for a new hall on land that is similar in area, with a few minor changes. Build a replacement hall in the present location on Yates and expand the land available by closing a section of Camosun Street between Yates and Johnson. A couple of levels of underground parking below the hall would open up more land for the new facility. The new hall could be built in stages while keeping part of the present building open. Staff parking could be made available by making the street parking on Yates across from the hall for emergency personnel only. Perhaps some of the emergency equipment could be spread out among the other Victoria fire halls during construction. Moving to a new location to the west would also increase travel time to other emergencies to the east.

I agree with the neighbours of the new firehall. As stated in the *Focus* story: "Ninety-three residents turned up, and they were peeved—not with the developer, but with the City for letting the project get this far before consulting the public."

*Dennis Robinson*

**Editor's Note:** Victoria City council has voted to proceed to a public hearing for the new development housing the firehall, though the date hasn't been announced as of press-time.

### Bridge journalism

I just want to commend you on the terrific series of articles *Focus* has published over the years related to the Johnson Street Bridge project.

I was employed with Walsh Construction as a manager and participated in the pursuit of the Johnson Street Bridge project. As the pursuit and design progressed, it became glaringly apparent this was a terrible project and we would be better off if we were not selected.

After stumbling across one of your earliest articles on the subject, I have religiously followed your series to this day. Your dogged journalistic efforts have not only confirmed my early apprehensions and fears, but also provided me a healthy dose of *schadenfreude*. I have shared many of your articles with my colleagues from the pursuit.

Your efforts exemplify true journalism and provide an incalculable value to our community. Thank you for all of your effort!

*Reed Ehinger*

### Wither Victoria's public realm?

Gene Miller deftly and eloquently describes a fear many of us share about the rapidly changing face of Downtown Victoria ("Downtown has it all-ish," March/April); namely, that it is becoming "hard, unsmiling." Those two words are code for a larger and more urgent topic: the path Victoria is travelling through time and the fate of the City's public realm.

The words "public realm" are not highbrow rhetoric or public policy babble; rather, they speak to something very tangible: the external places that are accessible to all; the places that we move through and linger within; the places where we live, work and play. Done well, the public realm evokes a powerful emotional experience of place that we all know and value when we experience it. Sadly, as Downtown is transformed, the public realm is actually being diminished, not enlarged—and certainly not enhanced. Other than the obligatory public art that attends new construction, and some institutional landscaping, what has been created that truly makes the public realm better for everyone?

Beyond the platitudes of the City's "strategic plan," there is no coherent vision, much less an analytical framework that would put the various development projects completed or underway into context. In the absence of such a vision, we suffer a form of civic vivisection in which a building is cut away in one place and replaced with something new. Increasingly, these new buildings are hard-edged, steel and concrete blocks—not unlike the "Lego-land" of steel and glass structures that now dominate the skyline of Vancouver, blocking the view that is the single greatest attribute of that city, and ours too.

I fear it won't be long before the very essence of Downtown is changed irrevocably, and not in a good way. We are a coastal city, a port city; imagine what it will feel like when you can't see or connect to the water while walking around Downtown? Or worse, when you can't distinguish our Downtown from another urban centre. Michael Von Hausen, one of the leading urban designers and planners in Canada, notes that the free expression and exploration in Western modernist architecture, the "design hearth" that informs much of the construction taking place here, could be at the cost of the public interest and the higher orders that have historically been seen as sacred in architecture.

So, how to move forward in a way that not only respects Victoria's public realm, but actually does something to enrich it? This, ultimately, is the question raised by Miller—and the expectation that all citizens should have of their mayor and council. Herewith, a modest proposal consisting of five simple, yet powerful principles:

(1) We will re-imagine and re-use/re-purpose existing infrastructure on all new development as a minimum design requirement; (2) We will provide a rich diversity and choice of residential options in Downtown; (3) We will provide vibrant indoor and outdoor public gathering places for use through all four seasons; (4) We will provide work hives and lifelong learning centres in Downtown to continually refresh and renew the cultural, creative and intellectual capital of Downtown residents; (5) We will connect everyone living and working Downtown to multi-modal transit within a five-minute walk of every door.

The money to pay for my proposal will come from a development cost charge, to be implemented immediately, that is dedicated to one purpose: making Victoria's public realm the envy of every small city in the world.

Another way of looking at the issue Miller raises is to confront a rather stark choice. On the one hand, continued investment in the status quo will result in private luxury or wealth enjoyed by a few (who, after all, is buying those fancy new condominiums?), with an ever-diminishing public realm for the rest of us. In contrast, there is a future, made possible if we committed to the proposal I've outlined above, that results in a future in which private wealth is sufficient, and is complemented by a flourishing public realm that ultimately makes Downtown something of which we can all be proud.

*Rob Abbott*

### Gonzales Hill: have the CRD & City given up?

The issue regarding 1980 Fairfield Place continues. The undeveloped property is a beautiful, calming, treed, mossy, and rocky lot adjacent to Gonzales Hill Regional Park.

Most people recognize that the lot is private and therefore the owners have a right to build on it. But regrettably the owners wanted to build beyond what the zoning permits. Consequently, they have sought changes from the Victoria Board of Variance (BOV) four times, twice asking for the same change and being turned down. A setback variance of 23 feet to site the house on the top of the rocky hill was first denied by the BOV, but then approved 4 months later, ostensibly to avoid cutting trees where a driveway was proposed. The community feels strongly that the development is inappropriate and excessive for this greenfield site.

The owners want to increase the size of the house by 769 square feet. After the BOV denied their request for a second time on October 11, 2019, they submitted plans to Victoria city planners for a 600-square-foot garden suite. Unfortunately, this structure as planned would sit two feet from the property lines shared both with the park and the adjacent neighbours. Furthermore, it would tower over the neighbours' home, shading it and overlooking their living areas and a bedroom.

At one hearing, a member of the BOV effectively told the owners that they had the wrong lot for their plans.

The CRD and the City have both spoken with the owners more than once about purchasing the lot and adding it to the park. Unfortunately these conversations went nowhere.

Having the CRD buy the lot with the City's support would be a strong move in proving the validity of the CRD's professed environmental concerns. Saving this lot from overdevelopment would set an example for other municipalities to follow in preserving trees and green spaces within their urban areas. And yes, the construction process factors significantly in contributing to climate change, notably for this project with extensive blasting and resulting damage to tree roots and other growth.

Keeping this property intact would save many of the precious and endangered Garry oaks, preserve a refuge for wildlife, and maintain the beautiful and peaceful ambience of the park for the many park users as a walking, cycling, and driving destination.

At the time of writing, the surveyors have worked on the property and preliminary site preparation has begun. The matter is now urgent! We exhort the CRD and the City to do everything possible to ensure that this property becomes part of the wonderful CRD parks system.

*Scott Chapman, Mary Doody-Jones, Catherine Doré, Philippe Doré, Virginia Errick, Janya Freer, Anita Myers, Danny Myers, Arlene Lonergan, Steve Lonergan, Sheila Protti, Cheryl Shoji*

### What to do with toxic sewage sludge?

Greater Victoria is getting one big honking secondary sewage treatment plant at McLoughlin Point at the entrance to our beautiful harbour, but with no backup system in case something like an earthquake damages it.

Why build such a treatment plant right on the shore? To make it easier to pump the dirty secondary treatment effluent right back into the ocean. This is not good news for the salmon and, in turn, the orcas that eat the salmon.


Focus presents: iHealth's Liz Hargreaves

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## Helping you find your personal path to recovery

Kinesiology is the science of human movement. While kinesiologists' main role is to assist patients with exercise therapy, Liz Hargreaves' varied background in rehabilitation over the past 20 years has provided her with a well-rounded, multi-perspective understanding of the issues at play when a person suffers a physical injury—whether from a car accident, or in the workplace or on the sports field—or has a neurological condition like Parkinson's and MS.

Following studies and certification at UVic in the late 1990s, Liz worked as a kinesiologist in multi-disciplinary rehab programs alongside other highly-skilled professionals. From there, she went on to do coaching, ergonomic assessments, and for a number of years, worked for Fraser Health on the mainland as a disability consultant. She has also worked in program development for Safe BC and in labour relations with the BC Nurses Union.

She has now, very happily, come full circle, going back to her kinesiology roots, working directly with patients. Now, of course, she brings a much fuller appreciation of the complexity of rehabilitation issues and the many paths to healing. She views her approach as holistic and is thrilled to be surrounded by a team of other talented professionals at iHealth, who all put patients first.

Besides customizing an exercise program, and adapting it as time goes on, Liz acts as a personal coach to help patients understand their new reality and discover their own path to healing. "Each person needs to figure out what feels right," she says. "I've seen so many different things people can do that empower themselves to heal."

She has been teaching Pilates for three years, an exercise modality that she has found helps many people suffering after an injury. She is also training to be a yoga teacher. She knows Pilates—or yoga—is not for everyone, and she can readily introduce them to other forms of movement therapy. "When I work with a person, they and I both learn so much. By making slight adjustments in a movement, they'll say, 'Oh my goodness, what did you do?—the pain went away!'"

Liz recognizes the significant emotional aspect of injuries. "When a person has a traumatic injury, there's a loss, including a loss of identity," says Liz. "There is a grieving process that must be gone through." A serious injury or condition often affects one's ability to do one's job, to interact with one's children, or participate in activities that have been central to one's identity. Naturally there are times when people get stuck, says Liz; they don't know how to function. Fortunately, movement is the key to both the physical and spiritual injury.

Many of those she sees have been injured in a car accident. The good news is that BC's new rules have expanded the funds available for "care and recovery" to address such injuries.

Kinesiologist Liz Hargreaves

The acute phase of a traumatic injury is usually the first six weeks, when there's too much pain and swelling for exercise. It is during the following six to twelve weeks that it's important to get active rehabilitation started. "It makes a positive difference to your long-term recovery," says Liz. Initially, she notes, people need to be reassured that movement is not going to make anything worse, even if there's some pain when moving.

Positive changes can usually be seen after two weeks of starting a well-designed program. If you aren't progressing, she'll suggest next steps, which in some cases may mean sending you back to your doctor for further tests or to other forms of therapy. Her many years as a rehab consultant, helping people get back to work by using a wide variety of tools and therapies, and knowing the ropes around employee benefit programs, Work Safe BC, ICBC, labour law, and longterm disability, means Liz can help you get—and stay—on the road to recovery.

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However the dirty effluent from secondary sewage treatment is only one problem. Another more serious problem is that the treatment generates sewage sludge—otherwise called "biosolids"—and the CRD, which is building the treatment plant, has a disposal plan for only half of the toxic sewage sludge produced. I am calling it "toxic sludge" because it contains all the industrial and domestic waste that goes into our sewers—which includes approximately 85,000 chemicals in circulation today, plus superbugs (multi-drug-resistant bacteria that multiply in all sewage treatment plants) and their drug-resistance genes, microplastics, microfibres, and scores of other pathogenic organisms.

The CRD is going to pump this toxic soup 18 kilometres uphill to Hartland where it will be treated in anaerobic digesters at the cost, roughly, of $200 million; methane will be generated from only one half of the sludge. The other half, that one that contains all the chemicals, microplastics, microfibres and pathogenic organisms, including the superbugs, will remain after the anaerobic digestion. And the CRD does not know what to do with it and how to safely dispose of it.

Most Canadian and US municipalities choose the cheapest (and most environmentally damaging) way to get rid of this toxic soup (unwisely allowed by both the federal and provincial governments)—spreading it on the land under the guise of "beneficial reuse" where it is most often misleadingly called "fertilizer" or "compost."

Once applied to the land, it is there forever except for the part that gets washed away by rains into streams, rivers and the ocean where it pollutes every body of water that it comes into contact with. Sadly it also pollutes the air during drier seasons when winds pick it up and spread it around. Once the land is polluted with these sewage residuals or "biosolids," crops grown on it take up varying amounts of the tens of thousands of chemicals, and we end up eating them and polluting our bodies with these toxins.

There are much safer and environmentally friendlier ways of getting rid of this toxic sludge. A gasifier or pyrolysis unit could generate syngas that can in turn be converted into electricity. Municipal solid waste including all plastics, scrap wood and even kitchen scraps could be used along with the sludge to generate electricity. Why all three levels of government are ignoring this sustainable and truly green option escapes me.

For a much more comprehensive and up-to-date review see "Polluting for Profit—the 'biosolids' business model" at http://biosolids-battleblog.blogspot.com.

*Thomas Maler, PhD*

### Sewage cost overruns

It appears that our waste treatment plant is on the verge of slipping into cost overruns. If I recall correctly, when Mayor Helps was asked at the beginning of her first term about the huge cost overruns of the Johnson Street Bridge replacement, she answered essentially by saying it was before she became mayor and the best we could "take away" from that debacle is to ensure that similar "mistakes" were not made on other projects.

Well, we now have a project that is many hundreds of millions more than the bridge. I wonder how Mayor Helps will defend the (alleged) cost overruns on the waste treatment plant, a project that is definitely being constructed during her tenure?

*Richard Weatherill*

### Here's the real energy scandal

The provincial government has reported that BC Hydro is paying a premium of approximately $800 million per year to Independent Power Producers (IPP) for sustainable electricity. It's a large number which is hard to put into perspective. To help us do this, consider: the International Monetary Fund's latest report "How Large Are Global Energy Subsidies?" It values Canada's carbon-based fuel subsidies at $46.4 billion per year. Fossil fuels are jeopardizing human society. Clean power is not. BC's fossil fuel subsidy, as defined by the IMF, is five times the annual cost of the IPP premium.

IPP contracts were let competitively in the 1990s when Hydro's electricity demand projections were very high. The load did not materialize. Renewables were significantly more expensive at that time, so innovative low-carbon power needed support. I do not agree that billions were "wasted."

Gordon Campbell took principled and risky action to address climate change. Subsequently, Christie Clark's Liberals reversed course. The current NDP government approved Site C. Will inexpensive renewables paint it as a boondoggle in 20 years?

NDP support for LNG is incomprehensible to those alarmed by global warming, and we'll soon see if they "use every tool in the toolbox" to oppose the Trans Mountain pipeline expansion.

Rather than waste time on second-guessing the past, I hope that policy-makers keep an eye on the future. BC's CleanBC climate plan needs buildings to convert from natural gas to electricity. It's not clear how the plan will overcome the fact that gas is much cheaper. It will take risks similar to the IPP experiment to make greenhouse gas reductions real in BC.

*Bob Landell*

### Everything we do counts

You really do wonderful work for us in Victoria. Thank you.

I was prompted to write after reading "Everything We Do Counts" by Trudy Duivenvoorden Mitic in the November/December edition. That's an appealing sentiment, but I was really captured by the original style of her writing. *Salut*!

Over the year, thank you especially for tracking The Bridge and The Sewer Plant (David Broadland). And I always look for the views and provocative thinking of Gene Miller.

To all those at *Focus* who think and write, who are the heart and soul of *Focus*, on the great issues of our time, this reader is very grateful.

*Dave Rodenhuis*

### Logging hurts fish & tourism

Our local rivers flood regularly during winter and then dry up in the summer, which has resulted in the destruction of healthy spawning habitat for salmon. The reason? I asked an oldtimer who had worked for Comox Logging & Railway Co. Back in the early years of the last century, the company was dropping huge first-growth trees right into the Tsolum River and then booming them up. There was plenty of water. He told me that back then the valley was entirely untouched Douglas fir forest and the humic layer was very deep and intact. These soils acted like a huge sponge that soaked up winter rainfall and then gradually released it throughout the year. Today? "There's little water in all our rivers during the summertime…and they can flood like the bejeez'us during the winter, now that all the old timber is gone," he told me.

This colossal disaster is all thanks to the former Liberal government's rewriting of the *Private Managed Forest Land Act*, which threw the door open to rampant, out-of-control timber harvesting by Island Timberlands and TimberWest thanks to the Liberal's model of "Professional Reliance." The fox was left in charge of the chicken house and there's been absolutely no government oversight of private forest lands since the early 1990s.

*Rick James, Royston, BC*

**LETTERS**
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# Authentic off-the-grid kayaking adventures

With youthful energy and a love of wilderness, Ralph and Lannie Keller moved to the outer Discovery Islands and began to live their dream. At an old homestead near the top of a sheltered bay, they built a house and a lodge, and created one of Canada's first kayak touring companies. Fast forward 40 years, and the family-operated company continues to offer unique kayaking adventures for both new and experienced paddlers.

Forgoing opportunities for growth, the Kellers have kept their operation small and laid-back. "Homestead hospitality is what we're about," says Lannie. "When folks arrive, we're on the dock, we enjoy time at the table and fun on the water—and we love sharing stories and the beauty of this place!" At Coast Mountain every guest is a real person and many become friends when they return for other trips to different places.

The small-is-beautiful approach of Coast Mountain Expeditions is also reflected in the food that's served to guests. Lannie's large garden provides fresh fruit and vegetables, and the kitchen specializes in delicious slow-food and wholesome baked goods. The vegetarian menu is augmented with locally harvested seafoods, including wild salmon and shellfish from nearby beaches.

With all that they offer, the Kellers recognize that nature really provides the Coast Mountain experience. They've learned that a backcountry kayak trip is as nourishing for mind as it is for body, a sentiment echoed by son Albert, an experienced kayak guide who, along with wife Kate, has a lead role in the family business. He sees first-hand how being in wilderness provides opportunities to de-stress and recharge, and appreciates the thrills and the quiet that are part of every paddling day. "A kayak journey can be a humbling experience that reconnects us with what's really important. And being disconnected is great too: time with friends and nobody's staring at their phone—seriously, how often does that happen these days?"

An expedition explores Toba Inlet's numerous waterfalls

The large garden provides fruit and vegetables

Living with a small environmental footprint is a theme that runs deep in the Kellers' lifestyle and the philosophy of Coast Mountain Expeditions. Entirely off-grid, the family homestead is a comfortable blend of ingenuity and low-impact technologies. The timber-frame lodge is hand-built from salvaged beach logs, electricity is from small hydro and solar power systems, and the wood-fired hot tub and creek-side sauna are delightfully rustic comforts.

Appreciation for their wild surroundings has made advocating for the environment a high priority for the Kellers. "We're fortunate to live and work in this amazing place," says Ralph. "Protecting the beauty and biodiversity is how we give back to this place that sustains us."

Sharing that sentiment as well as great natural adventures is the business of Coast Mountain Expeditions. With an enthusiastic crew of friendly, professional guides, this little company offers a variety of kayak tours exploring the Discovery Islands, Desolation Sound, and mainland fjords.

Coast Mountain's 2019 kayak tours range from easy to challenging with a trip for everyone's abilities. If you're ready to unwind and explore, check out their many opportunities for kayaking—and enjoy an unplugged, close-to-home holiday!

The Kellers on Read Island: Ralph, Lannie, Albert and Kate (with Cedar and Luna)

Coast Mountain Expeditions
& Discovery Islands Lodge
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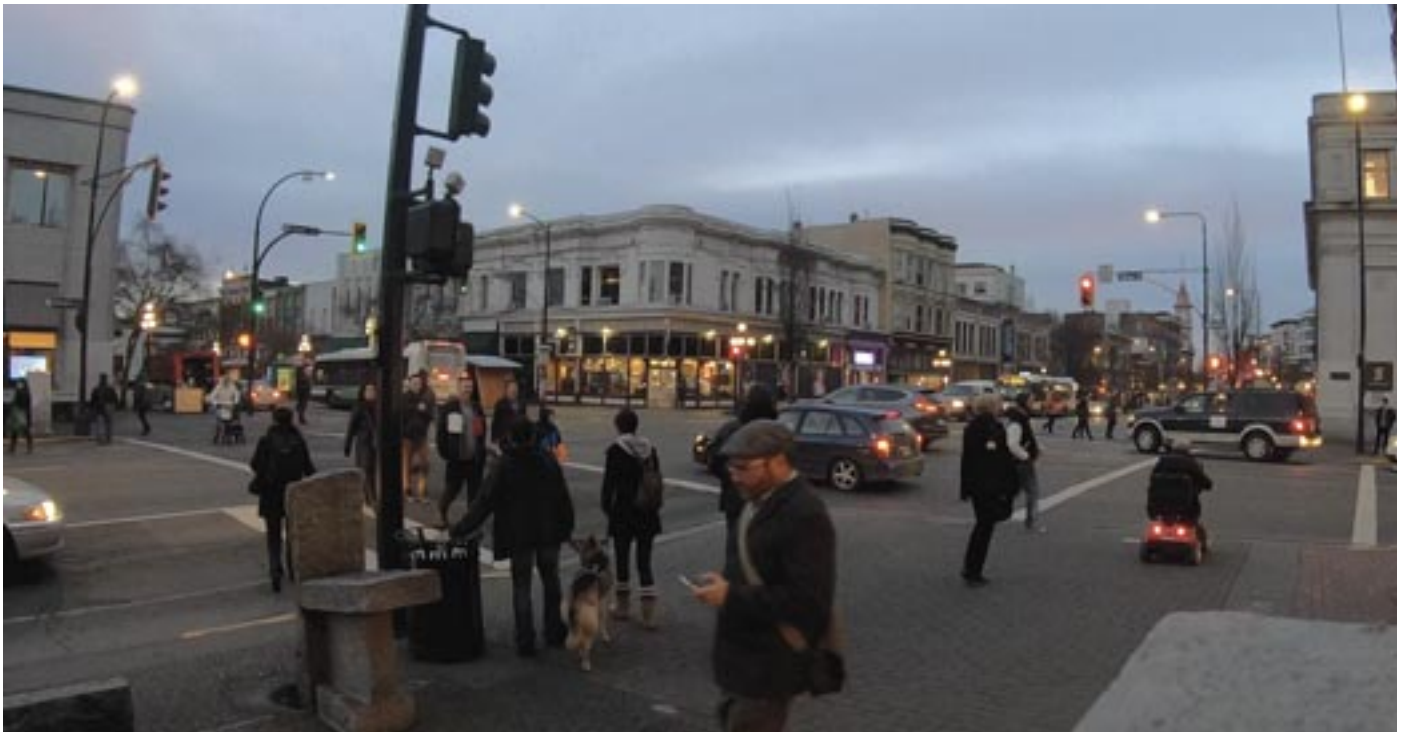
Ross Crockford 18 Judith Lavoie 20 Russ Francis 22 Stephen Hume 26

# Are "climate crisis" decision-makers making things better? Or worse?

DAVID BROADLAND

*Focus Magazine* is undertaking a multi-year project to determine whether initiatives to move passenger cars off the streets are working.



During January, *Focus* video-recorded everything that moved through 14 different Downtown intersections during "rush hour."

As the politics of "climate crisis" in Victoria becomes increasingly shouty and stressed, it strikes me that my community could benefit from something similar to the Keeling Curve to help guide it through the coming years of fractious debate about initiatives to reduce carbon emissions.

What's the Keeling Curve? According to Wikipedia it's "a graph of the accumulation of carbon dioxide in the Earth's atmosphere based on continuous measurements taken at the Mauna Loa Observatory on the island of Hawaii from 1958 to the present day."

Scientist David Keeling's first year of measurements averaged out to 318 parts per million (PPM). In early February 2019, the observatory was measuring 411 PPM.

Because of its elevation and location far out in the Pacific, measurements of carbon dioxide at Mauna Loa are considered representative of global concentration.

Thanks to the measurements Keeling started, we now know that the current rate of annual increase in carbon dioxide is about 2.75 PPM. We also know that increase is accelerating at the rate of about 0.5 PPM per decade. The arithmetic suggests that by 2060 it will have reached 550 parts per million, double that of the pre-industrial era. At that point, scientists tell us, the planet will be committed to a temperature rise of between 1.5° and 4.5° Celsius. The time frame over which that full temperature increase would occur could take hundreds of years to play out—perhaps more than a thousand—according to scientists. But they also say that by the time $CO_2$ has doubled, average temperature will have increased between 1° and 2.5° Celsius.

This increase will disrupt climate, diminish biodiversity, and raise sea level. That's the "climate crisis" in a nutshell. Another effect of all that additional carbon is ocean acidification.

So my idea is to create something like the Keeling Curve: a series of measurements made four times each year that, over a period of years, graphically indicate how well we are doing as a community at reducing our emissions. Globally, we're not doing so well. After nearly 30 years of international talks and endless expression of good intentions about reducing emissions, the global account of emissions, itself likely a carefully massaged undercount of actual annual emissions, shows they rose to a record level in 2018.

While many elected officials in Western democracies say they want to do something about reducing emissions, they're all riding on the same global economic machine that runs almost entirely on fossil fuels and requires positive annual growth to remain "healthy." That means higher emissions.

The Keeling Curve tells us, at a glance, where carbon dioxide is at and where it's going. Like a map, it's simple and verifiable. Indirectly, it tells us whether humanity is succeeding or failing at reducing emissions. It serves as a measure of the effectiveness of the steps the global family has undertaken in response to the climate crisis.

I'm not suggesting we need to measure carbon dioxide concentration in Victoria. What *Focus* is undertaking to measure is the

ARE LOCAL GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES to reduce carbon emissions working? We won't know if we don't measure the results.

Blanshard at Caledonia and Chatham: *Focus'* counts capture all modes of transport

change, from season to season and from year to year, in the use of automobiles on the streets of downtown Victoria and immediately adjacent neighbourhoods. The project *Focus* has begun will provide an annual measure of the number of cars, buses, pedestrians, cyclists and other forms of mobility passing through 14 City of Victoria intersections. Over time, these measurements will allow us to guage the effectiveness of the steps the City of Victoria and the CRD have undertaken to avert what they are now both calling a "climate crisis." Our measurements will produce what we're calling the City Auto Reduction Effectiveness Index—or the CARE Index. If we find enough funding—can media apply to the Gas Tax Fund?—we will extend this project to the region and call it the RARE Index (no pun intended).

Later, I'll describe the project in a little more detail. But first, to illustrate why such an index would be useful, let's consider a slice of the current state of local politics around the "climate crisis."

In February, City of Victoria council voted to explore taking legal action against fossil fuel companies for costs the City might incur as a result of impacts like sea level rise and climate change caused by increased carbon in the atmosphere. The motion was presented by Councillor Ben Isitt and follows up on a campaign started last year by West Coast Environmental Law. The only councillor to vote against the motion was Geoff Young. Young has called the initiative "ridiculous." (Judith Lavoie has a story on page 20 that's focussed on the proposed lawsuit.)

If Isitt's motion was intended to generate hostile media attention, he was successful. Alberta Premier Rachel Notley quickly issued a statement (covered by media across Canada) that noted: "The hypocrisy of this proposed lawsuit is astounding." While Notley attacked Victoria for its ocean-based sewage treatment system—a system long endorsed by local marine scientists and public health officials—she could have chosen a more obvious target to demonstrate Victoria council's "hypocrisy": the City's reliance on fossil fuels to conduct its own operations. While councillors were condemning fossil fuel companies, fossil fuel was keeping the councillors from freezing to death—City Hall is heated by a gas-fired boiler. Twenty-five major City-owned buildings and operational facilities are heated with natural gas, including: The Arcade Building, VicPD headquaters, Crystal Pool, the Victoria Conference Centre, Crystal Gardens, all three fire stations, four community centres, the City's asphalt plant, Royal Athletic Park, the public works yard and several other facilities. As well, the City depends on a fleet of 125 fossil-fuelled cars and light trucks to conduct its operations.

The apparently low level of emissions awareness demonstrated by the councillors who voted for the motion was highlighted by Victoria Mayor Lisa Helps' subsequent announcement that she would be flying off to Calgary and then on to the oil sands projects in northern Alberta. Why? She told the *Times Colonist*: "I am really curious to know what are the innovative approaches that they are

taking. What are the sustainability measures that they are putting in place? I think it's important I know these things."

Helps might want to weigh the value of enlightenment at the hands of Alberta fossil-fuel-PR specialists against the emissions associated with her own air travel.

Her round trip by fossil-fuelled airplanes will be at least 3,000 kilometres long. The emissions per passenger per kilometre for a commercial jet are similar to the emissions of the average passenger car. A Honda Fit with just a driver emits 168 grams per kilometre. A domestic long-distance flight (Calgary qualifies) averages 177 grams per kilometre per passenger. But because commercial jets emit climate-warming gases at high altitude, the impact associated with aviation emissions is, scientists say, about 2.7 times higher per kilometre per passenger than for those emitted at ground level by cars. So Helps' flight to the oil sands will produce the equivalent emissions of a Honda Fit and its driver travelling 8,100 kilometres.

The mayor's desire to broaden her mind, as she put it, will result in more transportation-related emissions over a couple of days than many of us more careful, narrow-minded car drivers will produce in a couple of years.

Meanwhile, back on the ground in Victoria, numerous council-approved developments over the past few years, including highrise housing, street-widening, sewage treatment and bicycle lanes, are all significant sources of new emissions and, controversially, the cause of a loss of hundreds of trees that store carbon and remove pollutants from the air.

There is apprehension amongst the citizenry that the slow-progress, sylvan character of the City is under assault by green-washed construction projects even while politically-ambitious councillors spend their efforts attacking imaginary enemies and fast-tracking theoretical solutions to rising emissions. Councillors' solutions feel more like another problem than a solution.

That's why we need the CARE Index for Victoria.

On January 1, we began video recording traffic through the 14 selected intersections mentioned above. We made 22 recordings, all shot in 4K high-resolution format on a waterproof GoPro camera, covering the period between 3:45 and 5:30 pm—the so-called "rush hour" in Victoria.

Our analysts then played the videos at normal speed on a large screen and counted every pedestrian, cyclist and automobile that transited the intersections. We are still processing the data obtained during our first round of counting.

PASSENGER CARS, according to Environment Canada, are responsible for only five percent of Canada's total emissions. So local governments' long-term plans for encouraging car drivers to move to walking, biking and busing will only address a tiny fraction of Canada's total emissions. Yet these initiatives involve spending hundreds of millions of dollars on new infrastructure, which will also have an emissions burden.

For the sake of transparency we have uploaded full length versions of each video to YouTube. YouTube's 15-minute limit on video length meant we had to create, in effect, time lapse videos. Run at eight times normal speed, the videos visually demonstrate the enormous amount of energy being expended to transport people and goods through the city. You can view these videos at YouTube.com; search for "Victoria Mapping Project."

In April, we will repeat this process at the same intersections and same time of day. We'll do it all again in July and October. In 2020, we'll do it all over again. And in 2021 and 2022.

How will this help us measure the effectiveness of local government initiatives to reduce emissions?

We will be able to report, with a high degree of certainty, whether, from year to year, there are more cars or less cars on the road in the Downtown core and surrounding neighbourhoods; more pedestrians or less pedestrians; more cyclists or less cyclists.

Unless there's a significant reduction in the number of cars on the road—and quickly, since there's a "crisis"—the City's and CRD's efforts to accomplish that won't have been effective.

We'll also be able to assess local governments' claims about mode share. The CRD's 2017 *Origin-Destination Household Travel Survey*, conducted once every five years, does not use direct observation to establish mode share. It uses voluntary surveys conducted in the fall of the survey year to project mode share, rather than measure it with on-the-ground observations. So it's a guesstimate, and misses a large chunk of commercial traffic. As well, there's virtually no public transparency with regards to who actually completes the surveys.

The last study failed to acknowledge that a director of the Greater Victoria Cycling Coalition, a special interest group that lobbies local governments for increased spending of public money for cycling infrastructure, had direct access to the survey's data and provided analysis. Does anyone think a director of the New Car Dealers Association of British Columbia would be given access to the inner workings of the CRD's survey?

Thus we will be able to report whether any initiative that the City of Victoria or CRD dream up that's intended to reduce transportation emissions is actually having the intended effect. Unfortunately, governments occasionally make blunders and produce unintended consequences. For example, the City of Victoria's well-intentioned ban on plastic bags appears to have created an unintended consequence. A survey of garbage bins in my neighbourhood shows that many households are simply replacing the no-longer-available thin plastic bags their groceries were packed in with heavier, brand-new plastic garbage bags. In trying to eliminate single-use bags, the City appears to have eliminated two-use bags and replaced them with heavier, single-use bags.

So far, in its efforts to reduce carbon emissions, the only significant target of CRD and City of Victoria initiatives has been the private passenger car. The governors want car drivers to move to either walking, biking or busing.

While this policy is considered to be one of the low-hanging fruits in any jurisdiction's broader plan to reduce carbon emissions, it seems doomed to be inconsequential in Canada.

Passenger cars, according to Environment Canada, are responsible for only *five percent* of Canada's total emissions.

So local governments' long-term plans for encouraging car drivers to move to walking, biking and busing will only address a tiny fraction of Canada's total emissions. Yet these initiatives involve spending hundreds of millions of dollars on new infrastructure, all of which will itself have a significant carbon emissions burden associated with it. If the City and CRD build the infrastructure but few people use it, they will have made matters worse, not better.

Why wouldn't Victoria's passenger car drivers get out of their vehicles and find a

less carbon-intensive way to get from point A to point B? Besides all of the reasons that made private passenger cars such a successful form of transport in the first place, there's the fact that the federal government has made it abundantly clear it has no credible plan for reducing national emissions.

When Prime Minister Trudeau gave a green light to the Trans Mountain Pipeline Expansion Project in 2016, he agreed to allow Alberta's annual emissions to rise from 68 to 100 megatonnes. That 32-megatonne increase is roughly equivalent to the 36 megatonnes emitted annually by all passenger cars in our country, according to Environment Canada.

So even if you and all other Canadians give up your fossil-fuelled passenger cars, the resulting emissions reduction will be cancelled out by Alberta bitumen producers exporting dilbit to the US and Asia so that drivers in those countries can put cheaper gas in their cars. Are Canadian car drivers really going to be that, uh…generous?

By the way, the latest numbers from Alberta bitumen producers show their output will increase by 50 percent above 2016's production level by 2027. The mining, transporting and refining of oil and gas accounted for 26 percent of Canada's emissions in 2015, but that share is rising rapidly.

So while *Focus* is going to great lengths to use a transparent and verifiable process for determining whether Victorians are actually reducing their use of passenger cars, we're not kidding ourselves about what we're likely to find. But we're open to surprise.

For those people who object to our recording their passage through a public intersection, objection noted. However, the act of an individual making a video recording in a public place is protected by the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*. It applies equally to recording police officers at work and recording vehicles and people moving through an intersection. We exercise this right respectfully, believing it to be in the public interest to do so.

What we have found so far is not surprising, but it is only the first reading of a moving number. We will provide a full analysis of our first year of counting cars, bicycles, buses and pedestrians in our January 2020 edition. At that point we will have established one point on the CARE Index. Unless our photographer gets run over by a car.

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David Broadland is the publisher of *Focus*.

# Unfinished business

ROSS CROCKFORD

What has Victoria learned in the 10 years since it first discussed replacing the Johnson Street Bridge?

The engineers said it would cost $35 million to $40 million. But that was for a standard structure, they warned. An "iconic," "architecturally significant" bridge would cost more.

Nearly all the councillors wanted to replace the old bridge anyway. "While we are losing a piece of existing heritage," said John Luton, leading the motion for replacement, "it is an opportunity to create something that is art as well as architecture that will become classic, or new heritage years down the road."

But a few also saw they might be approving a project they couldn't control, and they were nervous. "There's an interest in more than a standard cookie-cutter bridge," said Sonya Chandler. "So I'm worried—can we afford this?"

That was on April 23, 2009, and 10 years later, it's still a valid question. The new Johnson Street Bridge has already cost us $105 million, and the work isn't done.

What's left?

Landscaping and pathways. Crews will soon start developing the boulevards on the west side of the bridge, and paving a pedestrian underpass below the east side that will form part of the David Foster Harbour Pathway. The underpass is needed because the City couldn't get the over-water rights to continue a path through the bridge's "wheels"—which have been fortified with a new security gate (often locked, cost unknown) after a skateboarder was photographed on the wheels last September.

Public art. This month, City staff will provide a report on reusing steel from the old Blue Bridge for public art. The $250,000 "surfboard orca," planned for the triangle island in the vast sea of asphalt east of the bridge, has yet to go out to tender for fabrication.

Fendering. The bridge still lacks fenders on its north side, to protect it from ship collisions. In 2015, project director Jonathan Huggett claimed that PCL's construction contract didn't include this fendering, and said it would cost "upwards of $4 million" to install. At nearly every quarterly update after that, he told councillors he'd provide the potential costs and options "soon"—including at his last update, in April 2018.

Work on a pathway under the bridge is underway

The fendering is complicated, partly because of earlier screwups. In 2009 the City hired the engineering firm MMM (now WSP) to oversee the bridge project, and one of its early tasks was relocating a submerged telecom duct, at a cost of $2 million; WSP has since proposed anchoring fenders by drilling into the harbour floor, but the duct is now in the way. In 2014, the City sold some land immediately north of the bridge at 203 Harbour Road, and now the fendering might impede the owner's access to the water.

Tug and barge operators also have concerns. "We had requested that the fendering be considered to take a five-knot hit, and through our discussions back and forth with the City, they indicated that they were intending to continue their design on the north-side fendering for a speed of 3.5 knots," says Paul Hilder, Seaspan's VP of marine operations. "And since then we've heard nothing. That was two years ago. So as far as [there] not being any fendering in, I don't know—it's a pretty expensive piece of infrastructure to build and not have any bumpering. Ultimately it'll be the lawyers and the courts, if something should happen, that'll hammer out who is liable."

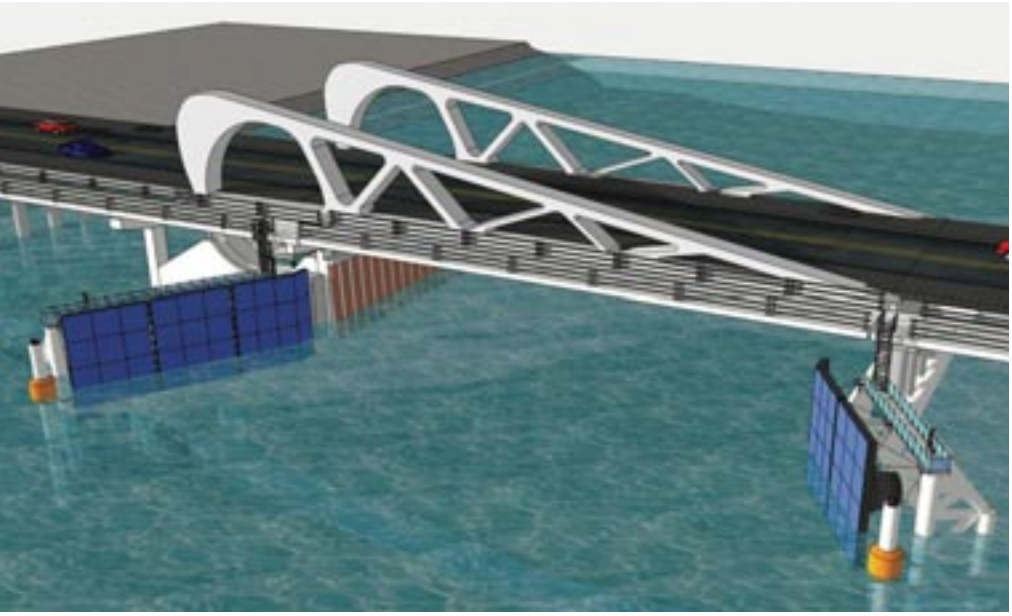
In 2017, Huggett told councillors that the dispute with Seaspan over impact speed was "irrelevant," and the City was only legally required to do what a "prudent owner" would do, which entailed hiring experts and building a "probability design." It didn't need to be overly robust, Huggett suggested, because "to our knowlege, in the past 80 years, nobody has ever hit that bridge head-on." (Wrong: on April 3, 1959, the tug *Salvage King* slammed into the old bridge, nearly severing its main girder. Victoria Machinery Depot fabricated a replacement, City engineers spliced it into place, and the old bridge was open again after two weeks.)

But how "prudent" is it to have no fendering at all? Last June, the City paid $112,200 for a $110-million, 18-month, multi-peril insurance policy on the bridge, which does cover "vessel impact" ($250,000 deductible). One suspects that if a ship hit the unfendered north side, though, the insurer might claim contributory negligence by the City and reduce its payout, in the same way that ICBC takes 25 percent off your injury claim if you aren't wearing a seat belt.

Legal Actions. As mentioned in the January/February issue of *Focus*, the City is named in a trio of bridge lawsuits, including one by MMM/WSP—which has already soaked the City for $15 million in fees since 2009—claiming a further $300,000 for fendering design. Since then, Karen Martin of Dentons LLP, the construction lawyer representing the City, has filed a response and counterclaim against WSP, seeking unspecified damages "on the basis of breach of contract, negligence, duty to warn, and negligent provision of services."

Reading the City's response is like a trip down memory lane, studded with potholes. Martin points out that MMM insisted it had accurately estimated the cost of the new bridge in 2009, 2010, and 2012, only to blow those estimates months later. Martin claims the pattern repeated with the fendering: at various times, MMM estimated the fendering would cost "$1,327,093.00," said the fendering was included in PCL's contract, and signed a 2013 deal to provide all the remaining design and engineering services to complete the bridge for a fixed fee, but submitted extra invoices anyway. (Why the City continued to use the firm, and didn't file complaints

TAXPAYERS HAVE BEEN WAITING NEARLY FOUR YEARS for a cost estimate for fendering that's critical for protecting the north side of the new bridge. Taxpayers' $105 million investment is currently being protected with a paper insurance policy.



Artist's rendering of proposed fendering for north side of bridge

with the engineers' professional association instead, remains one of the unsolved mysteries of the project.) Martin also says MMM did not provide any "reasonable options" to the City for fendering "until in or about late 2018"—which we are still waiting to see.

It's hard to guess how successful the City's claims might be, or how much we will have to cough up to settle the three lawsuits, but it won't come cheap. In 2016, City taxpayers paid $2.46 million to PCL and MMM in a mediated settlement of some $27 million in change orders they'd filed against the City. Another $1.57 million in legal fees was paid to Dentons in 2015 and 2016 while the settlement was negotiated.

City Hall. Some unfinished business concerns the practices of the City itself.

It's hard to overstate the disruptive effects the bridge has had at Centennial Square. Lisa Helps and Ben Isitt got on council in 2011 by bumping off pro-replacement councillors such as John Luton; Helps won the mayoralty in 2014 largely because Dean Fortin kept insisting the bridge was "on time and on budget" when it clearly wasn't. Every staffer associated with the project between 2009 and 2014 has since been fired, retired, or has jumped ship to government jobs elsewhere. Though they deserved their fates in some cases, they also took years of institutional knowledge out the door (another hidden cost), and left their jobs to newcomers with the potential to commit the same mistakes.

The City has introduced policies to ensure that doesn't happen. When Huggett was hired to trouble-shoot the project in 2014, he said that nobody seemed to be in charge of it; now the City has a Project Management Framework that requires "clear and unambiguous allocation of authority for decision-making." The bridge's costs kept increasing because Council approved a construction contract with a puny allowance for contingencies; now the City has a Capital Cost Estimate Policy, requiring that large contingencies be built into early estimates, and that an independent third party conducts a value-for-money analysis of the project. (This is partly why Victoria's new main fire hall will be part of a private condo development: a 2016 analysis said the City could build the firehall itself, on the site of the old one, for $30 million, but once the policy's required contingencies were added, it seemed cheaper to pay Jawl Residential $34 million to build it instead.)

When one looks at recent events, however, it seems little has changed. Council and staff made crucial early decisions to replace Crystal Pool, like the bridge, based on the belief that most of the cost would be magically covered by federal-provincial infrastructure grants. (Now the mayor is talking about a new central library. How will that be paid for?) The City too often favours shiny new assets instead of fixing what it's got, and staff who allow an existing asset to deteriorate rarely suffer any consequences. Despite all its policies, the City still doesn't appear to have a basic checklist for big projects: there was no analysis of the annual cost of operating a new, vastly larger Crystal Pool, for example, and neighbours weren't asked whether they actually wanted a new pool until the last minute.

The City has been lucky over the past decade. In September 2009, then-Assistant City Manager Mike McCliggott warned that borrowing $63 million for a new bridge would "financially strap the City," forcing it to raise taxes for other projects. We've already paid more than that for the bridge, some $68.1 million, added to the $37.5 million we got from the feds. But the City has grown. It's added millions in new property-tax revenue every year, and saved more, too. In 2009, the City had $34.6 million in its equipment and infrastructure reserve; now it has $131 million. This past year the City increased its property-tax revenue by $3.5 million, and while Council is on track to spend $1.5M of it hiring more employees (34 in total, the *Times Colonist* says) it's also putting $1.8 million into reserves—which will surely get tapped when the bills for the fendering and lawsuits finally arrive.

So it seems Victoria has been able to afford its "iconic" bridge after all. That's the good news. The bad is that in April 2009, when councillors worried about paying more than $40 million for a bridge, the City thought a new Crystal Pool would cost $58 million. How much will it be now?

Ross Crockford is a director of johnsonstreetbridge.org, the group that gathered 9,872 residents' signatures on petitions to force the 2010 referendum on the bridge project.

# Grandstanding? Or grand gesture?

JUDITH LAVOIE

Victoria takes it up a notch with the push for a class action lawsuit against oil and gas companies.

Cue the eye rolls, accusations of grandstanding, and pointed suggestions that City of Victoria council should stick to fixing streets rather than becoming embroiled in a potentially costly lawsuit against the world's oil and gas production giants.

Not a surprising reaction in Victoria, where there are regular rumbles of dissatisfaction about council involving itself in global or provincial issues instead of limiting itself to sewage and sidewalks.

"Taxpayers didn't elect council to get embroiled in a class-action lawsuit, with unknown costs and ramifications, at the other end of the world. Taxpayers hired them to pave the potholes in front of your residence and to revive Downtown business," said Stan Bartlett, chair of the Grumpy Taxpayer$ of Greater Victoria.

"The council has the tendency to try and appear to do everything for everyone all of the time. It would do well to focus on its core mandate of running the city and providing better quality services at a reasonable cost to fatigued taxpayers."

Absolutely, council should restrict itself to dealing with sidewalks, streets, waterfront, parks and trees, agreed Mayor Lisa Helps. "And all of those things are being impacted already by climate change and that's the part of the argument that people don't really understand," she said.

Escalating costs of dealing with climate change are pushing local governments to look for financial help from the root source because municipal budgets would buckle if they had to pay the whole shot. Municipal revenue-raising across Canada has not changed since Confederation, meaning your local government gets eight cents of every tax dollar, noted Helps. "And we are faced with things like climate change, flooding, more public works staff, more trees needing attention because of drought and so on and so on and so on," Helps said. "Eight cents of every tax dollar is not going to be enough."

AN INSURANCE BUREAU OF CANADA report estimates that, last year, insured damage for severe weather events across Canada reached $1.9 billion and, for every dollar paid out for homes and business, Canadian governments paid out $3.00 to recover public infrastructure damaged by severe weather—in all, a staggering $5.7 billion. In the same vein, a 2017 Capital Regional District report estimates that storm surges and sea level rise—predicted to be at least one metre by 2100—could result in business losses of $415,557 a day.

Councillor Ben Isitt

Armed with such figures, Victoria's council has asked staff to crunch numbers on Victoria's climate change costs and then investigate, through the Association of Vancouver Island and Coastal Communities and the Union of BC Municipalities, whether other local governments are willing to work with Victoria on a class-action lawsuit.

The litigation—which would be the first such lawsuit in Canada—would target major carbon producers in an attempt to partially recoup costs such as rebuilding seawalls to deal with sea level rise and strengthening storm sewers to cope with torrential downpours or flash floods that are likely to be among the extreme weather events of the future.

Councillor Ben Isitt categorically dismisses charges that such litigation would be largely symbolic. "It's definitely not that. It's not hollow chest beating. The City council is exercising its responsibility to safeguard our municipal resources," he said.

Victoria, whose ambitious Climate Leadership Plan envisions reaching an 80 percent reduction in greenhouse gas emissions from 2007 levels and transitioning to 100 percent renewable energy by 2050, is doing its due diligence before forging ahead, Isitt said.

"First we will really dig into the details in terms of what the potential financial implications and benefits to the City could be," Isitt said.

Simultaneously, City staff will track potential climate change costs, with a report due in June, in conjunction with a progress report on the Climate Leadership Plan.

"I think it will probably be more than tens of millions of dollars, and I wouldn't be surprised if it exceeds a hundred million dollars depending on how long they project out," Isitt said. Once the figures are in, Victoria can decide how hard to push for a class-action suit. "I think the only way this scenario would go forward," said Isitt, "would be if other municipalities were to work with us and share the cost. " Helps agrees that Victoria would not go it alone. "Let's not be naïve. The City of Victoria alone is not going to take on big oil. That would be ridiculous," she said.

In the meantime, expenses are already accumulating, with capital projects underway that are directly related to climate change, ranging from rebuilding and strengthening sections of the sea wall along Dallas Road to working with BC Transit to improve public transportation, Isitt pointed out.

However, that rings hollow to Bartlett, who believes Greater Victoria municipalities have lagged in taking necessary actions to address climate change. "For goodness sake, why isn't there a regional transportation plan for 400,000 people on the South Island? Why weren't dedicated bus lanes in place 20 years ago? Why hasn't the City led the charge for an LRT system or alternatives years ago?" he asked. "Dysfunction-by-the-sea itself—with its 13 municipalities, three electoral districts and one CRD—is a very carbon-intensive governance construct. If we were serious about climate change, consolidating five or 10 jurisdictions would make the greatest difference," he said.

> "IF I WAS AN OIL COMPANY shipping oil to Vancouver Island and I was being sued by people on Vancouver Island because of damage being done by my product, the first thing I would say is I had better turn off the tap."
>
> —*Councillor Geoff Young*

A CASUAL GLANCE AROUND ANY Victoria neighbourhood shows vehicles powered by gasoline, products that have been brought to Vancouver Island by air or ferry, fuel-guzzling cruise ships, and homes heated with oil or natural gas, all spewing greenhouse gases.

So, why go after global corporations rather than the end user of fossil fuels?

It is a question that Councillor Geoff Young—the only member of council to vote against pursuing a class action lawsuit—has been mulling over.

Usually, if someone sues for damages, the aim is to not only get compensation for damage they have done, but also to get the other person to stop doing that damage. It could get extremely awkward if oil companies stopped shipping fuel to Vancouver Island, Young said. "We would be put in quite a pickle," he said. "If I was an oil company shipping oil to Vancouver Island and I was being sued by people on Vancouver Island because of damage being done by my product, the first thing I would say is I had better turn off the tap."

Young emphasizes that climate change action is needed, but, as an economist, he believes carbon taxes and road user charges—both provincial responsibilities—are the best ways to reduce emissions. "Those are the biggest and best tools and they are out of our hands," said Young.

Helps acknowledges that the responsibility for climate action extends well beyond oil and gas producers and said she would feel hypocritical about a potential lawsuit if the City hadn't such an ambitious program to wean itself off oil by 2050.

And that date could be even earlier. On February 13, the Capital Regional District board voted unanimously in favour of declaring a climate emergency, and working towards carbon neutrality by 2030. (Vancouver and Halifax have passed similar resolutions.)

With a growing body of information about the effect of fossil fuels on climate change—such as a 2017 report by the Carbon Majors Database showing that, since 1988, more than half of global industrial greenhouse gas emissions can be traced to just 25 corporate and state producers—there are also indications that multinational companies are taking threats of lawsuits seriously.

In the US, climate liability suits by New York City, San Francisco and Oakland were dismissed by federal judges because of jurisdiction, but the cases are being appealed and other communities are filing suits in state courts.

Andrew Gage, West Coast Environmental Law staff lawyer, who has advocated for municipalities to launch class-action lawsuits, is hoping other regions will join Victoria, and he believes the major oil and gas companies are keeping a nervous eye on such campaigns.

The cost of launching a lawsuit might be significant, but it is dwarfed by the cost of dealing with climate change, he said. "I think this type of litigation is inevitable because you can't have these types of massive costs that communities are facing. At some point there has to be a conversation about whether taxpayers can afford to pay 100 percent of that or whether companies who have made hundreds of millions of dollars profit should pay some of it," he said. "It's an active discussion, not only in BC, but increasingly around the world."

Gage believes that climate change litigation will evolve in a similar way to lawsuits against big tobacco, which were spearheaded by BC in 1998. Every province has now followed suit, with claims amounting to about $120 billion, and the first cost-recovery hearing due in New Brunswick this fall.

Tobacco litigation gained steam with increasing evidence that tobacco companies were well aware of health problems caused by smoking and, in the US, tobacco manufacturers rapidly signed out-of-court settlements to pay back more than $200 billion to public health insurance companies.

The similarity between tobacco and climate change lawsuits is underlined by a 1998 internal Royal Dutch Shell memo predicting that, as the impacts of climate change get worse, fossil fuel companies might face class-action lawsuits. Then, a 1988 Shell report, unearthed by a reporter at the Dutch news website *De Correspondent*, showed the company was aware of the threats of climate change and its own role in creating conditions for a warming world. "By the time global warming becomes detectable, it could be too late to take effective countermeasures to reduce the effects or even stabilize the situation," the Shell report warned.

At that time, Shell estimated that it contributed four percent of global carbon dioxide emissions through its products.

"Fossil fuel companies know they are causing this sort of impact—it's not a surprise—and they are expecting this type of action," Helps said.

Osler Law, a business law firm with offices in Victoria, Toronto and Calgary, in a February update to clients, referred to the Victoria case and warned that companies should be prepared for such lawsuits.

"Climate litigation has arrived in Canada. Oil and gas producers may soon be faced with climate litigation. Further, the pressure created by litigation, regardless of its success or failure, may also affect the regulatory and operating environment for Canadian companies," says the briefing note.

The Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers (CAPP), in an emailed response to questions from *Focus*, said the organization does not usually comment on legal matters, but the Canadian industry can play an important role in reducing global greenhouse gas emissions by displacing less responsible sources of supply. "Climate change is a complex global issue that cannot be solved through lawsuits, but should be addressed through collaborative action by every citizen, business and city," says the statement.

For Gage, there is little doubt that, at some point, the litigation will be successful, but the big question is whether settlements will come in time to help with the expensive and alarming realities of climate change. He feels the Victoria stance is less about grandstanding and more about taking a lead to help address a serious crisis.

Judith Lavoie is an award-winning journalist specializing in the environment, First Nations, and social issues. Twitter @LavoieJudith

# At the legislative trough

RUSS FRANCIS

Baseball games, $258,000 "retirement" allowances for the unretired, and truckloads of alcohol: How did it come to this?

Earlier this year, we learned that highly paid officers of the legislature have been picking taxpayers' pockets over the years to the tune of millions of dollars. At least, that's the claim made by Speaker Darryl Plecas in his January 21 report focusing on unusual activities by Legislature Clerk Craig James and Sergeant at Arms Gary Lenz.

On November 20, 2018, before details of the alleged shenanigans were made public, Lenz and James were suspended with pay and banned from the legislative precinct. One need have no fear about the pair's immediate financial situation. James takes home $347,000—approximately $1,400 per day, while Lenz scrapes by on $218,000, or a trifling $850 per day. (Figures are from the 2017-18 fiscal year.) But these impressive salaries—both of which exceed the $205,000 paid to the BC premier—may be just the start of their emoluments.

The BC Parliament Buildings at dusk

In his report, Plecas alleged flagrant overspending on luxurious overseas trips, tens of thousands of dollars in personal purchases charged to taxpayers, using work time to make trips for other than legitimate work purposes, as well as thousands of dollars in alcohol and equipment that may have been misappropriated from the BC Legislative Assembly. On top of this, Plecas alleged that steps had been taken to conceal the inappropriate spending. Plecas turned over his findings to the RCMP, which is investigating. Two special prosecutors are on the case, along with the BC auditor general, and in late February an internal inquiry was due to begin.

James and Lenz have denied any wrongdoing. Neither have been charged with any crime.

HOW COULD ALL THIS HAPPEN, in an era of purportedly enhanced public transparency? Why did the press gallery—to which I belonged for 12 years—not pick up on this funny business sooner?

MLAs' own spending, and that of their employees, which include the officers of the legislature such as the clerk and the sergeant at arms, is supposedly governed by the Legislative Assembly Management Committee (LAMC), made up of—you guessed it—MLAs. My experiences attending the committee's meetings as a journalist during the 1990s soon became highly predictable. After a few formalities, the committee would go *in camera*, forcing me to leave. No Hansard, and no real minutes: only those select MLAs and attending officers of the legislature had any idea what happened behind those closed doors. The committee has an infamous history of secrecy, even though it oversees annual public spending that has now grown to more than $83 million in 2019-20. Following a scathing report by then-Auditor General John Doyle in July 2012, Hansard now produces transcripts of the public portion of the LAMC meetings, and MLAs are required to file quarterly reports of their expenses, including even photocopies of their ferry tickets.

In keeping with this historic secrecy, the Old Guard among the officers of the legislature were perhaps the most paranoid group of overpaid one-percenters I have met, and through "Vote 1"—the legislature's own budget—they exert overwhelming control over not just the legislature, but over the press gallery, which numbers about 30 members. In exchange, press gallery members received more than a few perks. During my time in the gallery, we got free 24-hour parking directly behind the legislature, year-round use of the invaluable legislative library, free office space, free long distance calls, and most important of all, virtually unfettered access to the legislature building.

Stepping into some of the legislative officers' dens was like being transported into the Dark Ages. One day, as I was entering the building via the back steps next to the library, one of the officers leaned out of an open window above, and beckoned to me. We sat down in his plush office, and he rang a little bell to summon a female assistant. Coffee please, he said, and she dutifully complied, closing the door as she left. The officer told me he'd heard I'd been asking about an aspect of Vote 1 spending, and was clearly unhappy about it. "There's no need to do this story," he said, in a firm, condescending tone. Thanks to the secrecy of the legislature's finances, I could not have published the story anyway without the co-operation of his gagged staff, so it died.

Another time, a legislature staffer invited me into his office, and closed the door. He didn't waste time on the niceties. "YOU WRITE ONE FUCKING WORD ABOUT THIS AND YOU'LL NEVER SET FOOT IN MY OFFICE AGAIN!" he yelled. It took a few seconds for me to even cotton on to which story he had in mind—and it was one which, until his outburst, I had not connected with any missteps by the officers. Now I knew there was a connection. The story ran in *Monday Magazine*. On one occasion, another *Monday* story apparently annoyed the clerks. Wrongly thinking I had gained information for the story by rifling through the garbage cans placed along the Speaker's Corridor, within hours of the story appearing, somebody ordered all of the cans removed.

After 12 years in the press gallery, I stopped working as a reporter and, in 2007, entered UVic's public administration program, beginning work as a BC government analyst the following year. In all, I worked for more than a decade in a number of positions in various ministries. Among the dozens of courses provided free to public servants are those in ethics and financial management.

If James and Lenz ever attended such courses, it seems to me that they could have done with a refresher.

ON FEBRUARY 7, JAMES AND LENZ PROVIDED what they said was a rebuttal of many of the Plecas claims. At the heart of some of those rebuttals were statements to the effect that Plecas either signed

> "WHENEVER THERE'S POWER without transparency, it's human nature to empire-build and get what you can."
>
> —*FOI expert Darrell Evans*

off on the questionable purchases, or condoned them at the time. For instance, Plecas said that in March or April, 2018, James came into his office asking the speaker to sign off on a $300,000-plus "retirement allowance," to be paid to James upon his retirement. As Plecas wrote, there was no apparent justification for the allowance. After all, James already had what Plecas called a sizable pension. Nor had the payment been approved, or even discussed, by LAMC, nor by the finance and audit committee. Not only that, but in 2012, James had already received a $258,000 benefit that was also classed as a "retirement benefit"—even though James did not retire. Despite serious concerns, Plecas signed the document approving the additional $300,000. Plecas stated, "In the moment, I thought that if I declined the request, Mr James would leave with the piece of paper and I would lose any evidence that this inappropriate request had been made. As a result, I decided to sign it so that Mr James would not dispose of the draft, and I resolved to later rescind the benefit, which is what I did…."

In his February reply to the charges, James said that the "retirement benefit" was Plecas' idea. "If the Speaker had concerns regarding benefits payable to executive employees…he could and should have asked a question. If he wanted to keep the piece of paper as 'evidence,' all he had to do was ask me to leave it on his desk so he could think about it," wrote James.

The issue has turned into a war of words. In his February 21 statement, Plecas said that James' claim that the idea for retirement benefits came from him was "simply a lie. If I had proposed it, why would I have called [then deputy clerk] Ms Ryan-Lloyd immediately afterward in disbelief about the request? It was she who informed me about the earlier payout that Mr James had taken of $257,000, and that caused me to inquire into that issue further and learn a great deal more about it."

Having once worked undercover for a US non-profit organization, I fully concur with Plecas' decision to withhold objections at the time. For me, the undercover role was justified for results unobtainable in any other way. In my view, Plecas' acting as a quasi-undercover agent was entirely appropriate. If he had instead done what Liberal House Leader Mary Polak and James suggested, you can be sure that documents could have been shredded, emails deleted, and tracks covered as fast as you can say, "What expenses?"

Purchases by Lenz and James are detailed in Plecas' January 21 report, and enhanced in a second report released February 21. Over the years, I had dozens of conversations with James in his former position as clerk of committees, as well as in his role as editorial board member of the *Canadian Parliamentary Review*, while I was writing an article for the periodical. I struggle to understand how James, a friendly, quiet-spoken man, could possibly think it acceptable to hit up taxpayers for subscriptions to *Arizona Highways*, *Sunset*, *Wired*, *Flightradar24*, *Palm Springs Life*, *Bicycling*, *India Today*, *Popular Mechanics*, and a host of other publications (or find time during off-hours to read them all). Many of the subscriptions were digital, and were set up to renew automatically each month. Plecas reports that James filed claims for digital subscriptions totalling more than $5,000 for the period from April 2017 to December 2018.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At nearly 77, Triangle Healing Products owner Diane Regan not only looks much younger than she is, but she has maintained a youthful flexibility and strength. With four decades in the health business as well as personal experience to share, Diane says, "We don't treat the symptoms, we address the cause." Her advice is simple: drink clean water, avoid processed food, and keep your body moving.

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Triangle Healing Products, its owner, and its employees do not provide medical advice or treatment. They provide information and products that you may choose after evaluating your health needs and in consultation with health professionals of your choosing.

In his response to the Plecas claims about subscriptions, James said: "I accept that I did not take the care I should have in reviewing these invoices before they were processed for reimbursement to segregate out personal subscriptions (i.e., a *Bicycling* magazine) from subscriptions that were for business use."

This is utterly unconvincing. I do not understand how even the busiest of well-paid officials could be so sloppy in submitting reimbursement claims, which any school kid would know to be little short of attempted theft.

And $500 for a pair of Bose noise-cancelling headphones in 2017—on top of the ones expensed in 2011 for $447? James explains them this way: "I suffer from a condition which causes ear problems when flying, arising from a combination of sound and cabin pressure. The noise-cancelling headphones were purchased to alleviate that condition."

What a crock. Noise-cancelling headphones do not form an hermetic seal around the ears: they have no effect at all on cabin pressure. Moreover, good quality noise-cancelling headphones can be had for a lot less. On February 11, a pair of Sony noise-cancelling headphones was listed at Best Buy for $59.99.

The list of questionable financial misdeeds keeps growing. Besides the first-round of allegations involving woodsplitters, travel, pricey suitcases, alcohol and more, in his follow-up report released February 21, Plecas said that in August 2017, British Columbians coughed up more than $1,000 for eight people to take a whale-watching trip—billed as "Tsunami Watch." Three days later, ever-generous BC taxpayers kindly donated more than US$1,000 for 13 tickets to a Seattle Mariners baseball game—billed as "Safe passages: Large-Scale Evacuations." Evacuations from where? Why, Safeco Field, Seattle, of course, where the Mariners just happened to be playing at the time. Among the 12 people taking part in the trip were James, Lenz and their spouses.

During my ten years in public service, neither I nor my colleagues ever dreamed of asking taxpayers to cough up for such absurdities, no matter how much our ears rang from flying on government business nor how desperate we were to watch overpaid, expectorating men chuck balls around. And none of us pulled in anything close to the $347,000 that James collects annually—not counting the $51,000 he stuck taxpayers with for travel in 2017-18.

Again, neither James nor Lenz have been charged with a crime, and both deny they have done anything wrong.

Darrell Evans

Sara Neuert

IN READING THROUGH THE allegations of over-the-top expensing, one overriding impression is that James and Lenz were thinking: *We're entitled.* In an email to *Focus*, prominent UVic political scientist Michael Prince summed up the issue neatly: "The pressing need is to instill a culture and practice that this is the people's house—not some private club."

Darrell Evans has been involved with information access for more than 25 years. Now president of the Vancouver-based Canadian Institute for Information and Privacy Studies, Evans is familiar with the genesis and evolution of cultures of entitlement. "It starts with some little thing," Evans said in an interview. "Then it gets looser and looser." When financial details of an organization like the legislature remain secret, members of the club can be tempted to test the limits of what they can get away with, he said.

Starting in the early 1990s, Evans was among the first to call for the legislature's administrative functions to be covered by the *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act* (FOIPPA). "Whenever there's power without transparency, it's human nature to empire-build and get what you can," Evans added. "The legislature is the last bastion of imperial privilege."

On February 5, BC Information and Privacy Commissioner Michael McEvoy, Ombudsperson Jay Chalke, and Merit Commissioner Fiona Spencer called for the administrative functions and operations of the legislature to be subject to FOIPPA. As McEvoy told *Focus*: "It's fair to say that when public bodies know their actions will be fully transparent, people tend to act accordingly."

Attorney General and NDP House Leader Mike Farnworth said the government intends to implement the recommendations.

Will the proposal from McEvoy *et al* work to turn around the culture that seems to have led to an abuse of power by officers of the legislature?

Sara Neuert, executive director of the BC Freedom of Information and Privacy Association, thinks more is needed. "I don't think it will solve the problems," she said in an interview. "The act is old enough that we need to discuss what is working and what is not working. They need to quit tinkering with it." Neuert noted that this is hardly the first time anybody has proposed bringing the legislature under FOIPPA. "How many commissioners have we heard say the same thing?"

Among the other changes that Neuert would like to see are requirements that public servants have an enforceable "duty to document." Though public servants are currently supposed to create a digital record of any substantial policy-related phone conversations and instant messages, it is rarely done. Neuert joins others in calling for penalties for violating the rule.

Is there anything else which might help open up the secretive club that is LAMC?

New Democrat Tom Perry, who was minister of advanced education, training and technology during the 1990s, is also a physician. "Whenever there are entitlements, most people will push them to the limits," he said. "But wealthier people tend to feel more entitled than poorer people who can't afford to be fired."

His medical background hints at an intriguing suggestion that might finally bring the legislature's drunken sailors under control: appoint lay people to LAMC, who would be untainted by any possibility of conflict. Their role would be solely to ensure that the public's interests are protected.

Michael McEvoy

Could that work? To judge from another regulatory body, yes. The Board of the College of Physicians and Surgeons of British Columbia oversees the protection and safety of patients, ensuring that physicians meet expected standards of practice and conduct—something that some officers of the legislature and MLAs appear to have violated. The college's board consists of ten peer-elected members and six members of the public, appointed by the health ministry.

Did all of the legislative officers drink the Kool Aid, somehow becoming bereft of moral scruples? Fortunately, no. There is at least one standout among them, according to the January 21 Plecas report. Kate Ryan-Lloyd, who at the time was deputy clerk and clerk of committees, initially accepted a "retirement allowance" similar to that paid to James, but later returned it because, suggested Plecas, she did not believe it to be a legitimate benefit. Not an easy thing to do in a highly controlling environment when other officers, all very much her senior, willingly accepted it.

By actually adhering to some basic moral principles, Ryan-Lloyd has done BC taxpayers past, present, and future a sterling service. At the time of *Focus'* deadline, Ryan-Lloyd was the acting clerk; maybe she should be made permanent clerk of the legislature.

While a member of the BC press gallery from 1995 to 2007, Russ Francis campaigned extensively in *Monday Magazine* and other news media outlets against the secrecy surrounding the administrative functions of the Legislative Assembly.


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Ben Smillie

Ben Smillie started the Victoria-based SureWork Solutions 10 years ago and understands the importance of consistent care—from the same worker(s)—for his clients. Whether your loved one needs part-time, full-time or live-in care you get the same worker. All SureWork employees are skilled in elder care, including dementia care and mobility issues, and willing to go the extra mile. They recognize the need for stimulation, taking their clients on outings, engaging them in conversation and exercise, and making tasty, nutritious meals.

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Ben is a certified immigration consultant, which is ideal if you are looking for live-in care, as it opens up more options for care. He can help clients through all the federal government regulations around hiring overseas workers. Families can expect to pay around $3500 per month for full-time care during the day along with overnight peace of mind.

"It's one person to help you stay in your own home," says Ben. Though families are technically the employer, SureWorks can offer services like payroll, scheduling, and relief care as needed. "We're here to help look after things even after the worker arrives."

Of course, getting someone approved to work in the country doesn't happen overnight, warns Ben. It can take up to several months. In the meantime, SureWork provides a bridge caregiver—someone who can step in within a few days and provide full-time or part-time care until the more permanent caregiver arrives in Canada.

Sheila is another happy client. Her mother can't walk so needs help with everything, including getting to the bathroom in the night. Since her "kind, generous, fantastic" live-in careworker started two years ago, her mother has transformed from anxiety-ridden into a calm, content person. Her presence allows Sheila's parents to remain together in their home.

See the website for more information, or call Ben..

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# The case for ending the herring fishery

STEPHEN HUME

The commercial herring roe fishery in the Salish Sea may be the final nail in the coffin of chinook, resident orca and seabirds.

PHOTO: JUDY SINCLAIR

Seining Pacific herring in the Salish Sea near Parksville

In June of 1893, a small steam tug thumped past Nanaimo. Abruptly, the sea began to seethe. It was a herring school so vast it took three hours to traverse. The school was 70 kilometres across.

A century earlier, Captain George Vancouver's log for June 1792 recorded another astonishing sight—whale spouts at every point of the compass. They were humpback whales. Herring provide up to half a humpback's daily energy requirements.

The herring school reported 125 years ago was only one of many spawning in the Salish Sea. From February to mid-summer, milt turned the water milky. Each female laid up to 134,000 eggs upon eelgrass, kelp fronds and the hemlock and cedar boughs that First Nations have been placing in the water since time immemorial to harvest the sticky masses they called "skoe."

Herring spawned in Brentwood Bay, Esquimalt Harbour, Long Harbour, Plumper Sound, Kuleet Bay, Baynes Sound, Lambert Channel, Fulford Harbour, Squamish, Semiahoo Bay, Nanaimo Harbour, Sansum Narrows, around Puget Sound and at an unknown number of smaller locations. Even today the occasional remnant of a herring run through Greater Victoria's Gorge Narrows draws crowds.

First Nations herring camps were everywhere. Herring bones represent the single most abundant species found in excavations of coastal First Nations sites.

Yet we know of that immense herring school witnessed off Nanaimo only because the tugboat crew thought it so remarkable, they told a federal official. And in 1906, he mentioned it in one of those dry reports to Parliament that gather dust.

Today, although fisheries experts doggedly insist that herring in the Salish Sea are sufficient to sustain a roe harvest, some data are worrisome. One survey from 2009 shows 53 percent of major historic herring spawning areas in the Salish Sea now in serious decline.

Courtenay-Alberni's NDP Member of Parliament Gord Johns asked at the end of January for a moratorium on harvesting roe herring. Jonathan Wilkinson, the Liberal fisheries minister from North Vancouver, responded by recommending a commercial harvest quota of 25,760 tonnes from the Salish Sea (with a 30,000 tonne cap).

Of five herring fisheries areas off the BC coast, three are closed and one is restricted to traditional roe-on-kelp harvests. Only the one in the Salish Sea is deemed to have sufficient stock to support a commercial fishery. "As I said, we make our decisions based on science," Wilkinson said. The uninvited question, however, is this: If science is so good at predicting abundance, why are 80 percent of herring sites now closed?

The chorus of reassurance should not surprise. We've fished stocks to collapse before, amid repeated assurances that the fisheries science shows harvests to be sustainable. Tony Pitcher, a scientist at the University of British Columbia specializing in aquatic ecosystems, noted the irony 20 years ago. "The failure of fisheries science, paradoxically one of the most sophisticated mathematical fields within the discipline of applied ecology, is creating both trauma and denial among its practitioners…These failures are chronic and well-documented and are commonly responded to by many of our colleagues in a range of voices that seek to deflect and deny," he wrote.

In the 1950s, overfishing of Japan's herring led to a collapse. In the 1960s, the California sardine fishery collapsed. Herring fisheries in Alaska and BC were closed in the 1960s after overfished stocks collapsed. Overfishing destroyed herring stocks off Iceland, Norway and Russia around the same time. In 1972, the overfished Peruvian

THE EPICENTRE of surviving Salish Sea herring spawn is now off the East Coast of Vancouver Island. Since early February, seals, sea lions, porpoises and seabirds have been congregating for the feast. The predator species put on a raucous wildlife show. It brings tourists, sparks local festivals and, of course, attracts the ruthlessly efficient commercial harvesters.

anchovy fishery collapsed. In 1992, Canada's Atlantic cod went the way of the herring, sardines and anchovies. Cod stocks that had supported Newfoundland fisheries for 500 years suddenly fell to one percent of what it had been at its maximum biomass.

Fisheries managers frequently blame predictive failures upon oceanic changes they can't forecast. The North Pacific is often referred to as a "black box" in which mysterious things happen which affect salmon, herring, tuna and other fish. An anthropologist might describe this as magical rationalization—when the emperor of science turns out to wear no clothes, blame unseen, unknowable forces after the fact.

Pitcher had another observation regarding colleagues who blamed environmental changes for fishery collapses: "Remember that these supposedly delicate fishes have survived 100 million years of sweeping and cyclic environmental changes, including a global catastrophe that wiped out the dinosaurs…!"

What fish stocks apparently don't survive is hubris.

One common factor in these serial fisheries disasters is that regulators were convinced harvests were sustainable—until they suddenly weren't.

If that doesn't set alarm bells ringing for British Columbians, perhaps this will. A global survey by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization concludes that 85 percent of all wild fish stocks are now overexploited, depleted, or recovering from severe depletion—and current science suggests recovery, while possible, is far from certain. "Many species have been hunted to fractions of their original populations. More than half of global fisheries are exhausted and a further third are depleted," the UN agency reported in 2012. It suggests that our next generation may inherit barren oceans. At current rates of harvest, it notes, the world faces collapse of all wild seafood species currently being fished. Think herring. Then think chinook, coho, ling cod, rock fish, halibut, and so on.

THIS SHOULDN'T BE NEWS. Twenty years ago, a team of eminent fisheries scientists at the University of BC offered a similar caution. Daniel Pauly and Johanne Dalsgaard, in a paper published in the prestigious journal *Science* entitled "Fishing Down the Food Webs," wrote: "Marine fisheries are in a global crisis, mainly due to open access policies and subsidy-driven over-capitalization…The global crisis is mainly one of economics or of governance."

They warned that shifts in fish harvests from large predators to smaller fish, especially in the Northern Hemisphere, implies "major changes in the structure of marine food webs." And, "It is likely that continuation of present trends will lead to wide spread fisheries collapses…"

They argued that instead of focusing on catch—the doctrine of maximum sustained yield—fisheries management must recalibrate for aggressive rebuilding of fish populations within functional food webs left alone inside large "no-take" marine protected areas.

Since 1935, with the full sanction of federal authorities, we've done the opposite with herring. Industry extracted six million tons of herring from BC waters, at first for human consumption but then mostly for reduction into fish oil and fertilizer and, for the last 50 years or so, purportedly to sell herring roe in Japan. I say "purportedly" because critics claim most herring caught in the roe fishery—100 percent of the males and about 90 percent of the females—actually wind up as feed for pets and farmed fish.

This creates another ethical conundrum. Critics complain that federal law bans the use of wild fish for non-human consumption. Section 31, sub-section 1 of the federal *Fisheries Act* prohibits converting wild fish into "fish meal, manure, guano or fertilizer, or for the manufacture or conversion of the fish into oil, fish meal or manure or other fertilizing product."

Of course, there's a loophole in sub-section 2. It gives the fisheries minister discretion to exempt any wild fish from the requirements of sub-section 1.

Just to put the total herring harvest into big picture-perspective, we've now prevented more than 43 billion herring from spawning. That number represents about 2.8 quadrillion—yes, that's quadrillion—herring by eggs never laid. Of course, not all herring eggs hatch, and not all that do will survive to spawn in adulthood. But herring killed as eggs have zero chance of survival. Their genes are erased from the reproductive pool. They are not even potential forage.

Thus we forego future herring to provide tidbits for Japanese gourmands who destroyed their own herring stocks. Meanwhile, First Nations foragers in BC are denied their own ancient traditions. This raises ethical questions about the sincerity of promises to First Nations.

The Douglas Treaties, which govern half a dozen Coast Salish tribal groups on southern Vancouver Island, are clear. In exchange for access to First Nations lands, those nations are guaranteed the right to hunt, fish and forage "as formerly." If access to herring and chinook are denied because the resource has been commercially over-exploited by non-First Nations, we abrogate solemn treaty promises. How does that square with the official rhetoric of reconciliation?

AUTHORITIES SAY SALISH SEA HERRING POPULATIONS have returned to historic levels of abundance. Not everyone agrees. Herring activist David Ellis is a former commercial fisherman, biologist, and one-time member of the federal government's gold-standard Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada (COSEWIC).

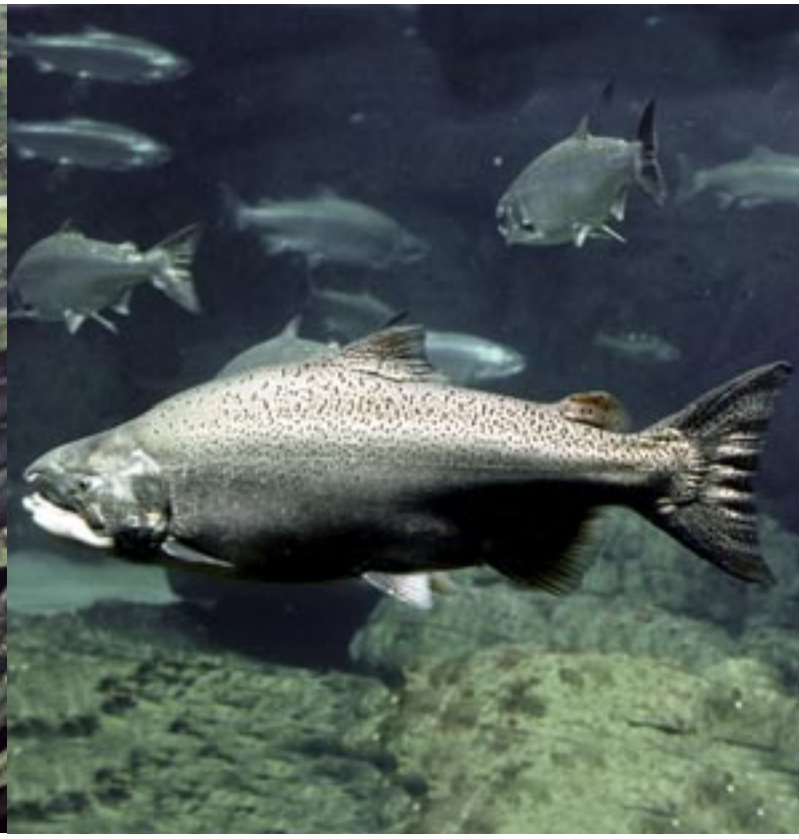
Ellis says the estimated biomass for today's so-called "historic" level of abundance is about the equivalent of one season's catch 50 years ago.

He thinks the roe herring fishery should be stopped. "Yes. And banned forever. You have to look to Japan to see how destructive it is over time. And for First Nations it means cultural genocide as they lose herring eggs which are as key to their culture as salmon are."

"Massive overharvests in the reduction fishery era are documented. This was a massacre that we are still paying for. The roe herring fishery has knocked out [local] population after population and interviews with First Nations elders best illustrate this."

Ellis points to an enduring conflict within the management system—our emphasis on science at the expense of traditional knowledge.

On the one hand, he argues, we have 10,000 years of intimate use-based First Nations knowledge regarding the herring resource. On the other, 100 years of "official" knowledge from government experts



A school of Pacific herring (left), which are preyed upon by chinook salmon (right), which in turn are the main food of southern resident orca

who presided over the extirpation of baleen whales from the Salish Sea, serial collapses of herring fisheries, endangered species status for eulachon and now for a dozen chinook populations. Fisheries regulators, remember, once identified orcas as threats to industry to be eradicated with .50-calibre machine guns, put a bounty on seals until they were almost exterminated, and oversaw the indiscriminate slaughter of the harmless, plankton-feeding basking shark, now listed by COSEWIC as an endangered species.

The epicentre of surviving Salish Sea herring spawn is now off the East Coast of Vancouver Island. Since early February, seals, sea lions, porpoises and seabirds have been congregating for the feast. The predator species put on a raucous wildlife show. It brings tourists, sparks local festivals and, of course, attracts the ruthlessly efficient commercial harvesters.

Grant Scott, a former commercial fisherman, is now an advocate for herring as president of Conservancy Hornby Island, a local organization which is leading a campaign to close the herring fishery outright. Scott urges thinking about herring as components in an ecological web that's so important we shouldn't fish herring stocks at all. (See their online petition.)

Increasingly, environmentalists, First Nations, conservationists like Scott, sports anglers, and tourist-dependant communities that rely on other species for which herring is forage—chinook salmon, southern resident orcas, at least 40 species of sea birds, and, of course, the humans who make a living from whale watching and recreational sports fishing—want the Salish Sea herring fishery closed. Many argue herring's value as forage far outweighs its value as industrial feedstock.

BC's tourism sector, much of it associated with outdoor recreation and wildlife viewing, generated $17 billion in 2016 revenue. Tidal sports angling, most of it directed at fishing for chinook which are dependent on herring, generated $3.2 billion. Whale watching of orcas, which rely on chinook, and humpbacks which eat herring, generates about $200 million a year in BC. The roe herring fishery was worth $33 million in 2016. On the jobs front too, the numbers are worth comparing. While commercial fishing employs about 1,100 people, saltwater sports fishing employs 5,000 and tourism on Vancouver Island employs more than 20,000. In fact, tourism in BC contributed five times more to provincial GDP than the entire agriculture and fisheries sectors combined.

SINCE HERRING IS A KEY COMPONENT IN THE SALISH SEA food chain, and since so many species which rely on herring are now either in steep decline or have begun disrupting other parts of the ecological web by switching predation patterns, the case for ending the herring fishery seems reasonable.

Chinook, which prey on herring stocks, are now in such serious trouble that extinction for many Salish Sea populations seems possible. In its latest report, the federal science committee evaluating species at risk lists nine chinook populations as endangered, four as threatened, and one as being of special concern. About half of BC's 28 chinook populations are now threatened with extirpation.

This is not a management crisis, it's a looming catastrophe. It raises profound ethical dilemmas for politicians setting management policy.

Southern resident orcas, which feed predominantly upon the now-vanishing chinook salmon, are also listed as an endangered population. It has dwindled to 74, a 35-year low, and biologists say two more are expected to starve to death by summer.

It gets worse. A 2012 study of seabirds in the Salish Sea found that almost 40 percent—22 species—showed "significantly declining trends." One group of seabirds, the forage fish feeders

PHOTO: MARKMALLESONPHOTOGRAPHY.COM

Southern resident killer whales. The herring fishery is damaging both the orca's and chinook's chances of survival.

for whom herring are the most important food source, deserve special concern because of the steepness of the population declines, the researchers warned.

The seabirds that deserve most attention (some have lost almost 20 percent of their populations)—the western grebe, the common loon, the horned grebe and the rhinoceros auklet—"feed largely on small, mid-water schooling bait (or forage) fish when in the Salish Sea. Pacific herring and Pacific sand lance (needlefish) are the two most important forage fish prey, particularly now that some species such as eulachon have collapsed." The report says herring eggs and larvae are the two most important prey types for marine birds in the Salish Sea.

So, is a declining abundance of herring a key in this large-scale unravelling of Salish Sea food chains?

Ellis thinks so.

"I believe that the loss of the local, non-migratory herring leaves the vast Salish Sea pasturage unused by large herring in the summer, and this has contributed very significantly to the decline of the orca and chinook," he says.

"Orcas need big chinook and chinook need big herring—and lots of both migratory and resident herring so they can use all areas [of the Salish Sea] as herring pastures."

One recent major study of the Salish Sea food web concludes that not enough chinook now remain to sustain orcas, seals, sea lions, sport fishing, and commercial harvests. Predictably, there's now a clamour to cull seals and sea lions, although one study of 1,000 samples of seal scat in the San Juan Islands found that 60 percent of seals' diet was herring. The question arises, why are seals increasing predation on dwindling chinook stocks if herring stocks, which historically provided more than half their diet, are at historic levels of abundance?

SOME OF US ARE OLD ENOUGH to remember the kind of abundance that astonished Captain Vancouver 226 years ago and mesmerized that tugboat crew 125 years ago. That was before our Garden of Eden was laid to waste by greed and ignorance, scientific hubris, over-capitalization, corporate concentration, exoticized public tastes, and colonialist racism that marginalized Indigenous knowledge and Aboriginal fishing rights.

Old-timers would advise anglers to watch for squabbling masses of gulls hovering and plunge diving. That would signal a herring ball, forced up by large chinook and coho feeding from below. Troll your cut herring strip, Lucky Louie plug, wobbly Tom Mack spoon or bucktail fly past that, the lure emulating a stunned or wounded bait fish, and you'd be pretty sure to get a strike.

Herring in the Salish Sea were once so abundant that you didn't have to buy bait. You took out a herring rake, a long paddle-like implement with teeth set into it like a comb, and simply swept live bait up and into the bottom of your boat.

My father-in-law, who caught his first chinook from a dugout canoe in Cowichan Bay shortly after the First World War, used a herring rake. His is now an artifact in a museum, just as those recollections of the immense herring schools sweeping in and out of the Salish Sea to spawn each spring have been consigned to mostly-forgotten archives.

Stephen Hume spent half a century as a journalist writing about Western Canada, the Far North, BC and the Island. His byline has appeared in most major Canadian newspapers. The author of nine books of poetry, natural history, history and literary essays, he lives on the Saanich Peninsula.

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# Up close and personal floral portraits

KATE CINO

Jeanette Sirois' large-scale works are done with patience and precision in pencil crayon.

"Ranunculus Against Black" by Jeanette Sirois, 34 x 47 inches, coloured pencil on paper on cradled board

Visual artist Jeanette Sirois lives at the north end of Salt Spring Island. When I visit her studio in early January 2019, signs of damage from a recent windstorm are everywhere. Heading north on the narrow winding road, roots and stumps of trees litter the ditches, remnants of trees blown down by the devastating storm. The toppled trees took down hydro and cable lines, isolating islanders in their cold, dark homes.

Today, on North End Road, repair vehicles are abundant and flaggers slow the traffic. Cars creep past workers elevated in buckets, trimming tangled branches with chain saws. Giant wooden spools wrapped in black wire dot the ditches. Cascades of hydro wires drape from newly installed poles. An ominous "Road Flooded Ahead" sign leads to a low-lying area, now passable, thanks to a freshly dug trench. Staring into the trench is a tired-looking labourer, checking the water level as if pondering what to do next.

When I finally arrive at Studio 22 FortyNine, both Sirois and I are relieved and happy. "It was a disaster zone," Sirois explains. "Many of the roads were impassable, and trees and branches littered every pathway." Her main memory of the power outage was "it was very boring." Boring because of the difficulty of working in a cold, dark studio. This industrious artist thrives on 10-hour days, six days a week.

"My heart is art," she says. Creating bountiful botanicals takes her to a place of calmness, like taking a deep breath.

Standing one foot away from her drawings, she interprets all the fine markings the pencil crayons produce, creating more or less texture with her drawing tools.

Visitors to West End Gallery this spring and summer can share in the visual wonder of her artworks. Sirois has completed a series of large-scale botanicals to delight the eye and inspire the imagination. We all marvel at the soft beauty of blossoms. But rarely do we get a chance to investigate their subtle flowing planes and frilly textures at close range. Works like "Bearded Alcazar Iris," at 47 by 35 inches, are monumental in size. The gradations of luscious colour and meticulous detail make the blossoms appear freshly alive and three-dimensional.

“WORKING IN SUCH LARGE FORMATS is not for the faint-hearted.” —*Jeanette Sirois*

“Tulips” (detail) by Jeanette Sirois, 26 x 57 inches, coloured pencil on paper on cradled board

Self-portrait of Jeanette Sirois: “Bad hair day” 20 x 30 inches, mixed media

Each petal is clearly defined by a myriad of tiny lines. Colour tones evolve slowly from deep purple tinged with cerulean blue to a golden mauve. Each fold and wrinkle on the blossoms are clearly articulated with repetitive strokes of coloured pencil. Coloured pencil? Yes!

Sirois received her BFA from Concordia University in Montreal. She has art teacher certification and a Masters of Education from the University of British Columbia. At university, the artist experimented with many media including painting, print-making, and ceramics. Nowhere along her education journey did Sirois complete assignments in coloured pencil. “Coloured pencil is not a traditional medium used in fine art production,” she admits. The artist now belongs to a small group of artists worldwide who are changing that tradition. She appreciates the precision and control offered by the fine-tipped pencils.

The coloured pencils and paper she uses are very high quality. Her Swiss-made pencils, called Luminance, are guaranteed light-fast for 100 years. One pencil costs six dollars. Another brand called Polychromos has a range of 120 vibrant colours, and promises break-resistant tips

Above: "Crystal Vase and Orchid" 20 x 29 inches. Below: "Bearded Alcazar Iris #2" (detail) 21 x 29 inches.

and non-smudge dependability. The pencils have an oil-and-wax base which assists with the blending of colours. "I go over each section about 10 times," explains the artist. A paint brush with solvents is sometimes used to push the pigments into the tooth of the paper. The 100 percent cotton, acid-free paper absorbs the pigment, giving a smooth finish.

"Working in such large formats is not for the faint hearted," Sirois cautions. Each floral drawing takes 250-300 hours to complete.

Sometimes one aspect of the drawing just isn't working, and nothing can be done. In a moment of exasperation, she'll grab her purple pen and scribble wildly across the artwork. At times like these, the frustration of losing so much time and costly materials can be overwhelming. "But I don't stay upset for long," says the determined artist. "The next day I'm back at the easel, ready to move on."

In fact, the work helps keep her calm in this crazy world. Sirois believes we are all affected by global warming and the pace of life. She uses her art practice to focus and address these concerns. Being mindful offers her awareness, insights and balance. These days, finding balance in her life means expanding her clientele. She is happy to be represented in Victoria by West End Gallery.

As well as fantastic florals, Sirois draws portraits of people, often focusing on faces. Several of these award-winning portraits reside in the collection of the Surrey Art Gallery.

In 2014, the artist received two public art awards: one from Vancouver and one from Seattle. Vancouver's public installation featured four oversize (4x6 feet) posters mounted on the exteriors of 20 bus shelters. The four mixed-race faces have tattoo-like writing focusing on issues of reconciliation. In Seattle, the artist used the same faces re-designed with bright colour blocks and multi-directional arrows. Mounted on the inside of a bus shelter, "Going Places" will be visible for ten years.

Sirois finds similarities between her botanical drawings and people portraits. Both are ambitious in scale and offer a richly complex landscape. However, there is one difference: "Not everyone wants to look at a well-lived human face," she says, "but we all love flowers, colour and texture."

Before beginning a floral portrait, the artist completes many hours of research. She takes hundreds of photos of the subject, then selects according to clarity and composition. Sometimes she alters or intensifies colours with a computer program. Two images can be amalgamated, or parts removed and enhanced. Sirois uses a digital camera device secured at eye level to ensure accurate reproduction of details.

To connect with community, Sirois teaches botanical drawing at the Salt Spring Island Parks and Recreation Centre in Ganges. She knows that rendering a bird or animal in three dimensions requires careful observation. "Many people are born with drawing skills," she says, "but education and practice make them shine." The artist won her first award at age five and hasn't stopped since.

An Interior Architecture degree honed her technical and design skills. Sirois and her partner spent most of 2015 designing and building their house and studio space on Salt Spring Island. After a tour of their lovely home and spacious studio, I wonder if there's anything this talented woman can't do. Probably nothing—as long as the power stays on.

Jeanette Sirois' works can be viewed at the West End Gallery, 1203 Broad Street, 250-388-0009, www.westendgalleryltd.com.

Kate Cino's writing about the arts can also be found at artopenings.ca.

# Victoria Arts Council celebrates 50 years

LESLIE CAMPBELL

A new exhibit of works by Pat Martin Bates is just one of the events planned.

Art-lovers can join in the festivities as the Victoria Arts Council puts on a year-long celebration of its 50 years advocating for the arts and local artists.

There are a number of important events planned for just the next few months—including the annual LOOK show in April and an evening of celebration and performance art in recognition of International Women's Day on March 8.

Kegan McFadden, who took the reins as executive director of the non-profit organization in November, is perhaps most excited to be presenting an exhibit of works by one of Canada's *grande dames* of the arts, Pat Martin Bates. Entitled "Inscape Golden Timeless Threads—Points of Starlight Silence," it will give Victorians a chance to see artworks spanning the last 50 years, including her innovative lightbox art, prints, copperplate etchings and plexiglass work.

Kegan McFadden

The Bates' exhibit provides a great opportunity to recognize such a revered artist and community contributor, says McFadden. Bates—or PMB as she tends to be known—has won many international and national honours, including the Queen's Jubilee Medal and Global Graphics Award, along with fellowships in the Royal Society of Canada and the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts.

She is regarded as an innovator both in terms of techniques and content. PMB, writes her biographer Senator Patricia Bovey, combined "details of reality with abstraction in her art, concentrating simultaneously on detail and wholeness. The carefully executed symbols and objects are perfectly balanced by the precision of her technique. Her compositions are filled with flowing, rhythmic piercings, delicate applications of thin gold and silver threads and meticulous draftmanship and calligraphy."

But it's not just her artistic accomplishments that made PMB a natural choice to honour during VAC's 50th year: "A charter member of [VAC], she worked tirelessly from its inception in 1968 to support emerging and established artists working in all media and engaging audiences of all backgrounds," writes Bovey.

Paul Scrivener, who served as executive director in the 2000s, calls her a "cross-pollinator," always connecting people. He noted, "Her positive impact has been felt in the careers of hundreds of people here. Guiding the Art Council's program development, her greatest contribution has been as an active arts advocate."

It wasn't just VAC she did community work with. As Bovey writes: "PMB felt it was her responsibility to serve community organizations and artists of all generations when asked. She lived up to those self-expectations and never said no." She served on boards of the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, Zonta International (to promote women), CARFAC, Maltwood Gallery, the Bastion Theatre and other groups.

Running throughout March in VAC's Store Street gallery, the exhibit is co-curated by McFadden and art intern Monica Liu who is doing her work study for her art history degree at UVic. Liu's curatorial experience for a show about such a revered Canadian artist is surely an art intern's dream come true.

PHOTO: TONY BOUNSALL

Pat Martin Bates in 1996

Special events in the Store Street gallery during the exhibit include UVic art historian Carolyn Butler-Palmer speaking about her history project on the lives of women artists of the region (March 16, 2pm); and on March 30, 2pm, a talk by Pat Bovey, PMB's biographer, once head of the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria and the Winnipeg Art Gallery, and now Senator.

I VISIT PAT MARTIN BATES AT HER HOME in Oak Bay, a sprawling, century-old home full of art—literally floor to ceiling—along with piles of books and other intriguing things on every surface. I am keen to hear about the Victoria "scene" in the 1960s—when she first came to Victoria, and when the Arts Council was formed.

"ART AND THE DOING OF IT are their own rewards. Art for me is a bridge to another level—a silent communication—a nutrient…"—*Pat Martin Bates*

As anyone who knows PMB will attest, even at 92, she has a magnificent memory and is a practiced raconteur of stories from her fascinating past. Her life has been a great adventure, full of travels, her art, community work, world-wide friendships and a loving family. Despite her super busy life, she enjoyed a healthy 67-year marriage and raised two loving children. Her daughter Jocelyn has moved into the house since husband Al died a few years ago; son Philip is often by her side these days on excursions for openings at the Belfry Theatre and other art events.

Inspired by everything from alchemy, architecture, Persian art and poetry (particularly that of Rumi), Greek myths and world religions, especially Sufism, to Rembrandt and geometry, PMB has sought out and befriended many philosophers, poets and other artists to explore such subjects more deeply. People like Nobel-winning writer Doris Lessing have become friends and visited her here.

Born a fifth generation Maritimer in New Brunswick, PMB married the young man she first set eyes on at age 13 and predicted she would marry. Clyde "Al" Bates was an army man and their early years together were somewhat at the mercy of his postings, though it's clear PMB did not let that—or two children—stop her from pursuing her artistic visions.

Posted to Antwerp in Belgium in the 1950s, PMB earned two fine arts degrees there while her two young children attended school. She did her thesis on Goya. By 1957, the family moved to Ottawa, where PMB held three jobs, yet still found time to immerse herself in that city's cultural scene and develop her art, eventually having a solo exhibit at the prestigious Robertson Galleries.

She loved Ottawa, but Al's career soon forced a move to the backwaters of Wainwright, Alberta where the family lived on an army base. Despite the isolation and sparse vistas, PMB thrived in Alberta, making and teaching art and joining an artists' cooperative in Edmonton. It was there she started using her iconic piercing technique, as well as illustrating sounds and silence, and using a lot of white in her work. She told her biographer Bovey, "I soared like a red-tailed hawk, alive to looking."

Still, at the end of 1963, she was happy to move to seaside Victoria where Al had landed a job as comptroller of the Naden base (now part of CFB Esquimalt).

"This idea of Victoria being 'little olde England' never entered my mind," she tells me. Instead, the artist, then in her mid-thirties, who had met the likes of Chagall and Magritte and many Canadian icons, found Victoria exciting. She was enamored with both the local Chinese community and the First Nations people, and generally found it full of all sorts of talented, interesting people. She already knew some important folks here like Colin Graham at the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, and soon connected with others like PK Page, First Nations carver Tony Hunt, and all the internationally-renowned artists who would form the Limners. A self-described bookaholic, PMB also mentions Alice Munro who had just opened Munro's Books with her husband. She tells me, "Alice had the most wonderful hair then—it seemed electrified like she had all these ideas going on—which she obviously did!"


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A trip to New York City on a scholarship working at the Pratt Institute of Fine Arts in 1966 inspired her to help local artists literally have room to grow. "It was the time of Warhol; a very open time of protests and experimentation," says PMB. New York artists were taking over lofts in warehouses and forming collective studios. She wanted that for Victoria artists, so, with help from Al (who suggested she rent a building recently vacated on the base) and PK Page and others, artist studios and gallery space at Signal Hill became a reality. (That enterprise still continues today at Xchanges on Bay Street.) The exhibit space was important as in those days there was only one commercial gallery.

The Sixties was a time, of course, when many women were making their voices heard. PMB rather gleefully recalls attending meetings where "women were saying the most outrageous things!" She tells me she participated in many peace marches and protests during those years.

In 1964 she was hired as a part-time instructor for University of Victoria's new Fine Arts program. She taught printmaking, lithography, screen-printing, and drawing, using her own press at first.

It was a time, however, when women academics were few and often treated in dismissive or belittling ways. She mentions a couple of women (who went on to very big things) who the university actively tried to get rid of. "The tallest poppies get lopped off first," she says, explaining her relative security by her low status and near invisibility. "They didn't know what I was up to—I was working in the basement of the MacLaurin Building." She often held sessions in her home as well. She still feels dismay over the male dominance of those years, including in her classes. "What about all the other women whose talent was stopped up because they hadn't had the opportunity" due to unsupportive families, demanding children, or lack of finances, she wonders with sadness.

It wasn't until virtually the whole fine arts faculty quit over some internal political skirmishes that she got a full-time appointment. By then it was 1971 and she was far away on a Canada Council-sponsored multi-month trip "following in the steps of Alexander the Great"—with her husband and daughter via Volkswagen van through Iraq, Iran, Syria and Turkey. She and Jocelyn wore chadors when necessary. Being the days before cell phones and internet, she learned of her new job when friend and fellow artist Nita Forrest telegraphed her, saying "Congratulations on your new appointment!" The family hadn't intended to return to Victoria; she and Al had quit everything and put all their belongings in storage. She was looking at job offers from Sir George Williams in Montreal and York in Toronto.

Thankfully for Victoria, PMB *was* lured back here, where she continued to produce her revered art, mentor other artists, and help encourage a vital cultural scene. When she started back at UVic, she says, "The first thing I wanted to do was get another woman in." Soon thereafter, sculptor Ruth S. Beer was hired.

THE VICTORIA ARTS COUNCIL WAS BORN IN 1968 (as the Community Arts Council of Greater Victoria). PMB recalls early meetings held in Dunlop House on Camosun's campus. She mentions Pam Ellis, former Mayor Peter Pollen with his wife Marianne, former Premier Dave Barrett, Shushan and Joseph Egoyan, and Bill West among the supporters.

"The '60s were a very rich time in Victoria for the arts," says PMB. The illustrious Limner Group of artists was beginning to form, with renowned artists like Myfanwy Pavelic, Herbert Siebner, and Robin Skelton. "There was an artist-underground-thing going on—just there waiting to happen. So many things are off-shoots of the people here then who were all for the arts; the arts were the important thing," she tells me.

PHOTO: JOHN TAYLOR

"The Angel of the Blue Sky is Crying Parallax Tears" by Pat Martin Bates (1998). Lightbox with BFK Rives paper, silver threads, oil pastel, printed estampile areas, chine collé, threads, needle perforations, 48 x 32 x 4 inches.

While it has understandably had many changes over its 50 years, VAC has stayed true to its roots. As is stated in VAC's recent strategic plan, through education, civic advocacy, and programs, "We strive to elevate the profile of local artists and performers, while igniting a passion for arts and culture throughout Greater Victoria."

PMB's continuing involvement over the years no doubt has helped carry out that mission. "I was often on the board [of VAC]," says PMB; "I don't know how many times. I would be asked to step in when people had to leave." With Scrivener, she was instrumental in creating VAC's annual LOOK show. The idea was to give all member artists a chance to exhibit that cost very little. "Everybody can exhibit one piece; everyone has a chance, no one is excluded," says PMB. April's LOOK show is in the enormous old Staples building at 747 Fort Street.

It was also during those years under Scrivener's leadership that the Council started having satellite exhibit space in the Downtown library,

PHOTO: JOHN TAYLOR

"Flight Window of the Alchemy Letter from the Sun to the Moon" by Pat Martin Bates (1968); four plexiglass plaques in a plexi holder, blue, black, silver and white laquer paint, 19 x 26 x 12 inches.

the Victoria Airport and other places, which continues in an expanded fashion today—always featuring works by local artists. McFadden says, "I am not familiar with any other city that hosts such [satellite] galleries in libraries; it's a nice way to support working artists."

McFadden, who has an impressive background in the Winnipeg and national arts scenes, feels that so much is already happening here arts-wise that there's no need to reinvent the wheel. Rather the hope is to "find community partners and support what they are doing." An upcoming example takes the form of helping Theatre SKAM fund its bursary program for high school students. VAC is also working with the Victoria Film Festival and the Victoria Festival of Authors. And then there's Artishow Artist-in-Residence Program in which artists are paired with high traffic hotels over the summer where they demonstrate their craft, talk to visitors, and sell their work.

The Arts Council receives funding for particular programs from BC Arts Council, the CRD, Victoria Foundation and also from BC gaming grants. But it relies on fundraising too. Four hundred members indicate its health, but McFadden is "absolutely" keen on getting more. (Memberships are $40/year).

As for PMB? She says she wants to tell younger artists to believe in themselves. In her biography she makes a statement that is encouraging as well: "Art and the doing of it are their own rewards. Art for me is a bridge to another level—a silent communication—a nutrient—and if only one person and one person alone finds some one thing in what I do, don't you think that is important?"

*Visit the Gallery at 1800 Store Street, Tuesday through Saturday, noon-5pm. The Pat Martin Bates exhibit is on all of March, with talks on March 16, 2pm (Carolyn Butler-Palmer) and March 30, 2pm (Senator Patricia Bovey, PMB's biographer).*

Leslie Campbell thanks all the artists who enrich and enliven this magazine and community.


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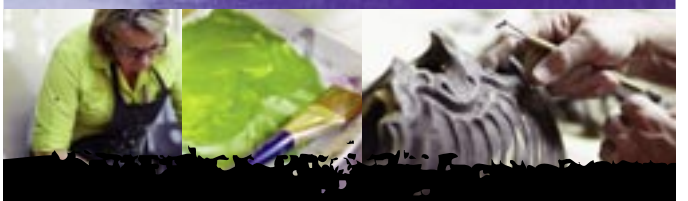

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## Jazz at the Church • Tuesday nights

Here's a loaded syllable: "church." Gordon Miller, director of communication and neighbourhood engagement for James Bay United Church (JBUC), advocates for an interpretation that serves the community as a "sacred space" for transformations of all kinds—including those that occur during a particularly hot jazz riff.

Miller feels that if people aren't engaged and don't know why the church exists, "it's kind of irrelevant. We want to be a seven-day-a-week church, not a Sunday-morning church." So Miller tapped Victoria jazz powerhouse Kelby McNair as curator, and the pair started offering weekly, top-shelf music concerts to the community on a pay-what-you-can basis.

PHOTO: GORDON MILLER

Kelby MacNayr, Peter Dowse, Miguelito Valdes and Tony Genge

"When people gather together, the act of gathering is a sacred activity; when a musician has a conversation with their audience, it's a sacred thing that goes on."

So why jazz? "Kelby and I have collaborated on a number of things," Miller says. A six-week trial run in November and December tested the waters; the neighbours really dug it. Different acclaimed musicians arrive from all corners each week.

"One of the cool things about the audience is that half of them have no connections with jazz whatsoever," Miller says. If someone is already a jazz lover, then Hermann's is a planned destination for them. "Jazz at the church is working the opposite way. People say, 'This is happening around the corner from where I live. I should go check it out. Hey, I like jazz!"

Miller says the concerts at JBUC help support well-being. "What are the signs of a healthy community? Activities happening right around the corner; that's healthy. This is church on Tuesday night, if 'church' is a place for people to have the opportunity to be transformed, if their heart has been touched, if their mind has been engaged in a different way…It's our job on that corner, to make that happen, whether it's Tuesday night, Friday at the thrift shop, or Sunday morning."

Tuesday Night Jazz at the Church is by donation (suggested $10), with doors at 6:30pm, music at 7pm, 511 Michigan St, with street parking available. Search James Bay United on facebook for weekly event listings, but Miller says, "People who are regulars say, 'I have no interest in knowing who's coming up; every time I come in the door, it's a surprise, and that's kinda fun.'" —*Mollie Kaye*

"LOOKING FOR PAYDAY" MEGHAN HILDEBRAND, 30 X 24 INCHES, ACRYLIC ON CANVAS

**March 9–23**

**MEGHAN HILDEBRAND: POCKET ESTATES**

**Madrona Gallery**

Pocket Estates will feature new large-scale works by Powell River artist Meghan Hildebrand. This exhibit further explores the influence of place, mystery and nature in her work. In many works, Hildebrand shifts perspectives from the cellular to topographic. Within these shifts, Hildebrand incorporates symbols of place to lead the viewer through suggestive narratives. Ghosts connect to rainbows, logs, rivers and outer space seamlessly. Opening reception March 9, 1-4pm.606 View St, 250-380-4660, www.madronagallery.com.


## March-April Events

PROGRAMS IN EARTH LITERACIES

**The Interdependent Existence of All Things**
with **Jonathan Taylor, PhD**
4 Tuesdays, 10 am to 12 pm, Mar 5 – 25
$75 or $20 drop-in
Friends Meeting House, 1831 Fern Street.

**A Day of Sacred Circle Dance at Mary Lake**
with **Betsy Nuse**
March 9, 10 am to 4 pm
$65.00. Please bring lunch, refreshments are provided.
Mary Lake Nature Sanctuary, 1772 Millstream Road. (Do you need a ride or can you offer a ride? Please let us know.)

**Grief, Grit, and Gratitude: A Workshop for Resilience**
with **Jan Inglis PhD**
4 Wednesdays, 7 – 9pm, Mar 20 & 27, April 3 & 10
$75 ($20 drop-in Mar 20 only), Friends Meeting House, 1831 Fern Street.

**Harvesting our World Wisdom Traditions**
with **Margaret Walters MA**
April 2 – 23, 10 am – 12 pm
$75 or $20 drop-in, Friends Meeting House, 1831 Fern Street.

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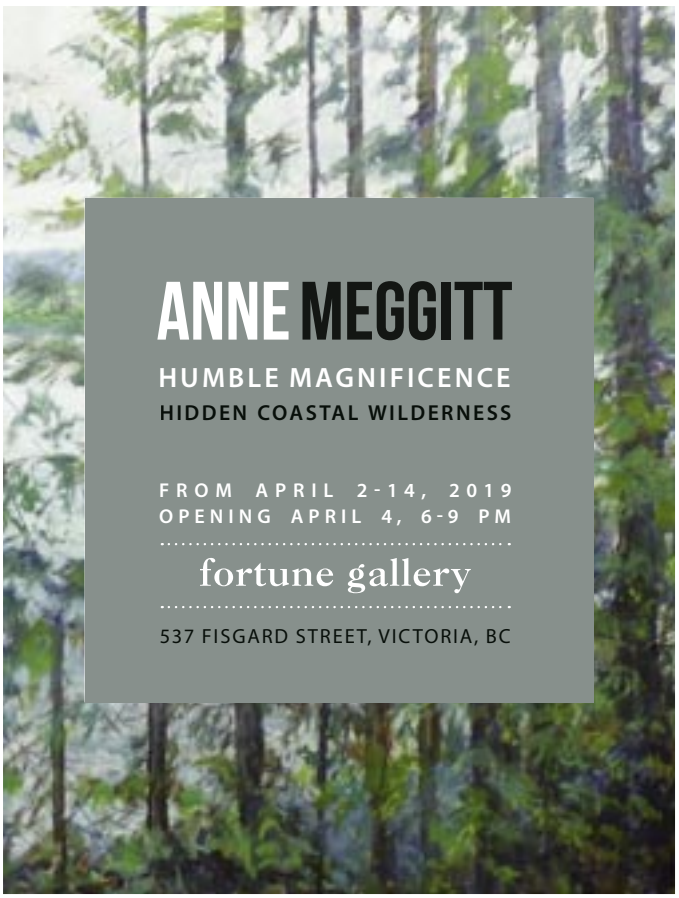

"SMALL GARDEN BOUQUET" TANYA BONE, 6X 8 INCHES, OIL ON LINEN

**April 4–14**

**BLOOM**

**The Avenue Gallery**

Tanya Bone, whose work is above, is part of The Avenue's annual group floral exhibition, *Bloom*. Other artists exhibiting are Shinah Lee, Rachelle Brady, Kimberly Kiel, William Liao and Catherine Moffat. Bone completed art studies at Emily Carr College of Art and Design, Langara College, and the Federation of Canadian Artists in Vancouver, where during her training she received Great Distinction Status recognition. Later, she completed a full term at Watts Atelier of the Arts, San Diego. 2184 Oak Bay Ave, 250-598-2184, www.theavenuegallery.com.

UNTITLED, ESTHER PARKER

**April 5-21**

**ESTHER PARKER: MASS MOVEMENT**

**Xchanges Gallery**

Many of us don't give a second thought to the Earth we stand on, its origins, permanence and stability. "Mass Movement" is an exhibit of drawings that challenges our preconceived notions of familiar landscapes, revealing the mysteries beneath our feet. Opening reception with artist, Friday April 5, 7-9pm. Artist Talk: Sunday, April 14, 1pm; otherwise Sats & Suns 11am-4pm. 6E-2333 Government St, 250-382-0442, www. xchangesgallery.org.

PHOTO: SITE PHOTOGRAPHY

"105 CHRYSANTHEMUMS" CINDY MOCHIZUKI

**March 8 & 9**

**CINDY MOCHIZUKI: OTHER FACES OF NIHONGA**

**Legacy Art Gallery Downtown**

Join Vancouver-based artist Cindy Mochizuki in a collective embroidery and listening experience focusing on the historical and contemporary racialized experiences of women of Japanese Canadian and Japanese descent in British Columbia. Mochizuki's project responds to the Legacy Gallery's current exhibition Translations: The Art and Life of Elizabeth Yeend Duer—Gyokusho. Event funded by the BC Arts Council. Friday, March 8, 4-8pm and Saturday, March 9, 11am-3pm. 630 Yates St. 250-721-6562, legacy.uvic.ca.

"STATION XXIII" HEATHER KEENAN, 30 X 24 INCHES, OIL PIGMENT STICK ON CANVAS

**May 4 & 5**

**2019 FAIRFIELD ARTISTS STUDIO TOUR**

**Fairfield/Gonzales area**

This free community event, now in its 18th year, is a celebration of the rich variety of art being created in Victoria. Established and emerging artists open their studio doors to display their fine art including painting, pottery, glass, jewellery, textiles and photography. Maps and more on website. 11am-4pm both days. Shown here is work by Heather Keenan whose work is a narrative on imagined places of gathering; stations, streets and landscapes, with figures at a nexus point, either beginning or ending their journey. www.fairfieldartistsstudiotour.com.

Houselore, Meghan Hildebrand, 48 x 48, Acrylic on Canvas

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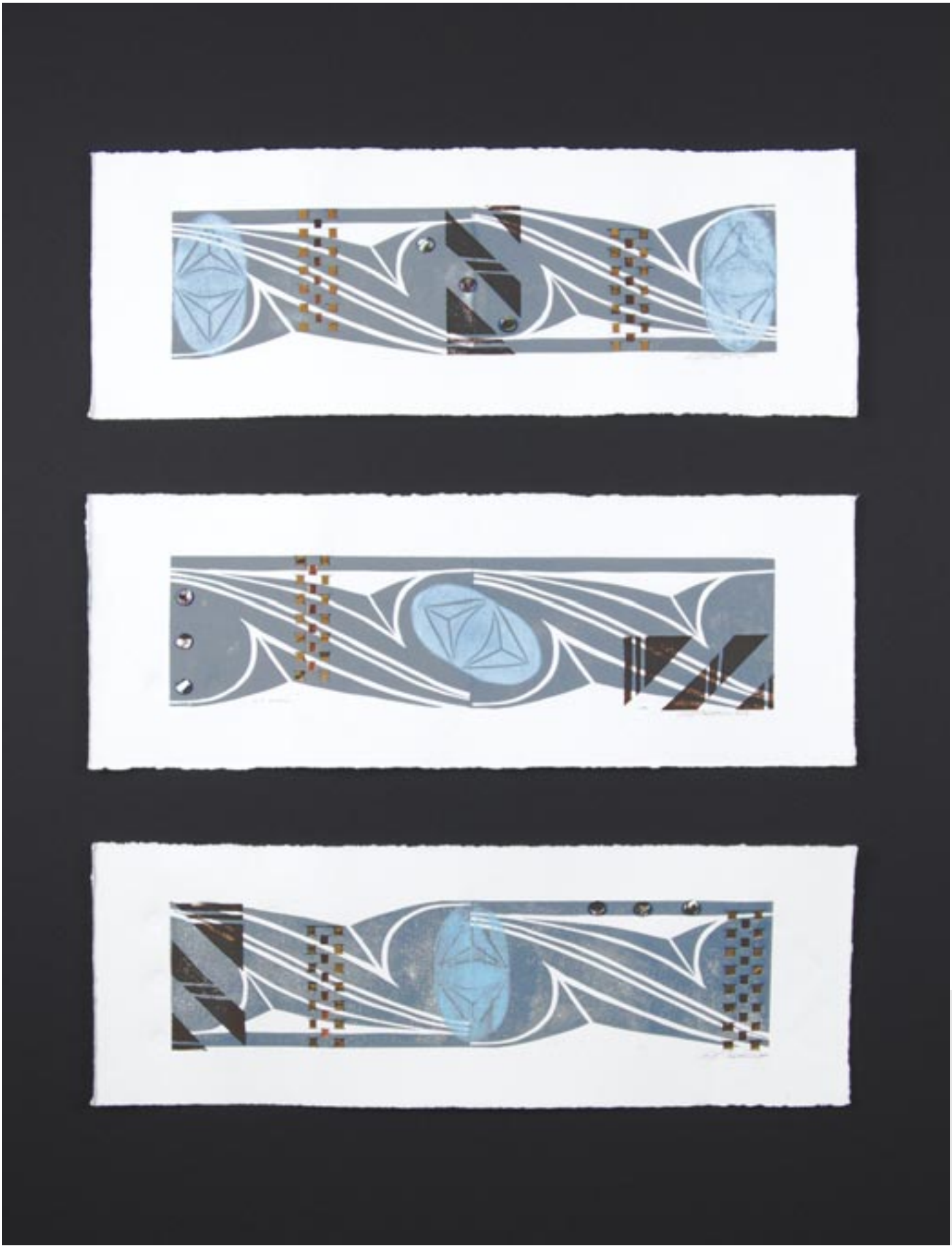

PHOTO: HOLLY CECIL

## Spring Author Events • March 23, April 3, April 9

Bibliophiles: if this past winter saw you gorging on the "introvert's diet"—devouring books by yourself during quiet nights spent at home—perhaps it's time for some spring training. Jessica Paul, assistant manager and events coordinator at Munro's concurs. "These days, where so much of our day-to-day life is conducted online and not in person…I think it's important for people to have that actual human interaction," she says. "We hope people can enjoy that here; it's not just about selling books, it's about gathering people who are interested in literature. It's a balm for the soul."

On April 9, two local authors, M.A.C Farrant and Marita Daschel, will present work that addresses these issues of social isolation in our modern world. Farrant, a "minaturist," is launching *The Great Happiness*, a collection of over 60 works of micro-fiction, which is shorter than a short story. "Some of them aren't even a page long," Paul explains. Daschel, who teaches at UVic, will be presenting her third poetry collection, *There Are Not Enough Sad Songs*, "blending grief and catharsis with raw, carefully-crafted meditations on loss, parenting, and aging."

On March 23, Victoria's new poet laureate John Barton is hosting an evening to hold up—and out—three young, queer Canadian poets. "This is one we're really excited about," Paul says. "John is a queer poet himself, and has said one of his goals as poet laureate is to highlight the really fantastic queer poetry we have in Victoria and across Canada." Local poets Ali Blythe and Kayla Czaga will read work from their new collections, and Ben Ladouceur "flirts with everything from bumblebees to hydraulic triceratopses as he strains to bridge the gap between self and other."

If you're a historical fiction fan, two celebrated Canadian authors, Jennifer Robson and Shelley Wood, are offering treats on April 3. Robson will speak about *The Gown*, her history of the "artistry and intrigue" behind the design and fabrication of Queen Elizabeth II's wedding dress. Wood will talk about her new work, *The Quintland Sisters*, which "explores the home life of Canada's famous Dionne Quintuplets, blending meticulous research and expert storytelling to paint an immersive portrait of Depression-era Ontario."

Encountering the person who wrote the words that inspire you is exciting, Paul says. "You can pay to see someone perform at a concert, see movies where you don't interact with the actors…but with book events, you meet authors. It's one of those great opportunities to meet someone whose work you've admired. That doesn't happen as much in other arts industries."

*All events are 7-8:30pm and are free. See munrobooks.com for calendar or call 250-382-2464.* —*Mollie Kaye*

"CHANGE" ANGELA MARSTON, MONOPRINT WITH CEDAR, ABALONE SHELL AND COPPER

**April 20–June 29**

**WOMEN ARTISTS, CHANGING COLLECTIONS: RECENT ACQUISITIONS**

**Legacy Downtown**

This exhibition is a celebration of works by women that are new to the collection. These artists come from diverse backgrounds, have multiple inspirations, and help viewers to see from unique perspectives. Get acquainted with emerging and established women artists and recent acquisitions changing the Legacy collection. Come to question what more can be done and which artists remain absent. 630 Yates St. 250-721-6562, legacy.uvic.ca.


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"BLUE ROCK, 1985" TONI ONLEY, 30 X 40 INCHES, OIL ON CANVAS, 1985

**April 13–27**

**HISTORIC & POST-WAR CANADIAN ART**

**Madrona Gallery**

In this annual exhibition, Madrona Gallery once again presents a cross-section of important historic Canadian art from many of Canada's most influential and prolific painters. This exhibition will feature works by members of the Group of Seven, Beaver Hall Hill Group, and West Coast masters including E.J. Hughes, Toni Onley, Takao Tanabe and many others. Opening reception April 13, 1-4pm. 606 View St, 250-380-4660, www.madronagallery.com.

"MEET YOU AT THE BISTRO" ALEKSANDRA SAVINA, 40 X 60 INCHES, ACRYLIC ON CANVAS

**April 20–May 2**

**ALEKSANDRA SAVINA, IRENE GENDELMAN AND SABINA**

**West End Gallery**

Toronto-based artists Aleksandra Savina and Sabina, along with Israel-based artist Irene Gendelman, exhibit new works showing the influences of their home country, Ukraine, and their adopted countries. Other meaningful European locales are also represented and show how the sensual language of paint and texture can express a deep sense of place. With scenes full of splendour, romance, colour and personality, the vitality and vibrancy of their paintings are admired by collectors around the globe. 1203 Broad St, 250-388-0009, www.westendgalleryltd.com.

"RELUCTANT FENCE" (DETAIL) PHILIP BUYTENDORP, 24 X 36 INCHES, OIL ON CANVAS

**Throughout March & April**

**PHILIP BUYTENDORP**

**Peninsula Gallery**

Steeped in art from a young age (both his grandfather and father were established artists), and with a skilled appreciation and love of the natural environment, Philip Buytendorp's work is significantly influenced by painters from the Group of Seven, particularly Tom Thompson. Philip's bold brush strokes and vivid colour palettes are reminiscent of the mountain scenes painted by Carl Rungius, an artist whose work he greatly admires. His work is being actively collected in western Canada and the United States. 100-2506 Beacon Ave, Sidney, 250-655-1282, www.pengal.com.

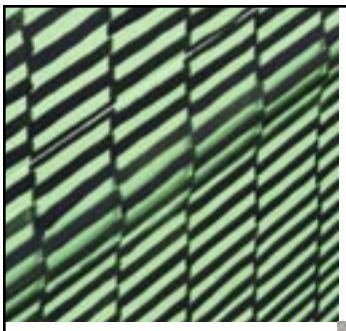
"ROCKY WATERWAY" ANNE MEGGITT, 36 X 48 INCHES, OIL ON CANVAS

**April 2–14**

**ANNE MEGGITT: HUMBLE MAGNIFICENCE**

**Fortune Gallery**

Anne Meggitt presents oil canvases inspired by the spectacular coastal rainforest of Vancouver Island in a new solo exhibition. At a time when the impact of climate change is already on our doorstep, Meggitt believes it's of profound importance to bring nature prominently into the view of people. Meggitt studied fine art at University of Reading in England in the late 1940s, then spent two decades in Africa and Malaysia, followed by a move to Canada in the 1970s. Opening April 4, 6-9pm. 537 Fisgard St. www.annemeggitt.com.



March 2-17
Peter Kohut
"Depth of Field"
Opening reception:
Friday March 1, 7-9pm

April 6-21
Esther Parker
"Mass Movement"
Opening reception:
Friday April 5, 7-9pm
Artist Talk:
Sunday, April 14, 1pm

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www.xchangesgallery.org
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*Right By Your Side* Rachelle Brady oil on canvas 48 x 48

BLOOM April 4-14
Group Floral Exhibition
Tanya Bone, Rachelle Brady, Kimberly Kiel
Shinah Lee, William Liao, Catherine Moffat

2184 OAK BAY AVENUE VICTORIA
www.theavenuegallery.com 250-598-2184

**Exhibition** Jan. 12 - Apr. 6 2019

翻　訳
トランスレーション—玉焦・エリザベス・イーンド・デュア
（1889–1951）の生涯と作品

TRANSLATIONS
The Art and Life of
Elizabeth Yeend Duer - Gyokushō 玉蕉, 1889-1951

Dr. Carolyn Butler Palmer, Legacy Chair, University of Victoria,
Dr. Mikiko Hirayama, University of Cincinnati,
and Ms. Janice Okada, B.A., MMSt.
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fairfieldartistsstudiotour.com
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**April 4–14**
**BLOOM**
**The Avenue Gallery**

The Avenue's group floral exhibition, Bloom, features flowers in all their glory! Spring's fresh energy has inspired six floral artists—Tanya Bone, Rachelle Brady, Kimberly Kiel (pictured here), Shinah Lee, William Liao and Catherine Moffat—and they in turn have worked their magic.

Shown here are works by Kimberly Kiel and Shinah Lee.

In 2003, Kimberly Kiel left a successful financial planning business to devote herself full-time to art. Now her artwork is showcased and sold in galleries from BC to Quebec, as well as in Switzerland. Colour is a major source of inspiration and she greatly enjoys playing around with the surface on the canvas, getting different layers and textures, all with the goal of creating something subjective, intriguing and stimulating.

Shinah Lee begins her work on the floor, using the happy accidents of pigments as a backdrop. Then she rotates her canvas on the wall until she is satisfied with its composition and vitality, then adds colours in fast, instinctive gestures. Not just a flower but a spontaneous emotion by which the artist shares her feelings about life.

2184 Oak Bay Ave, www.theavenuegallery.com, 250-598-2184.

Painting to right: "What Used To Be" by Kimberly Kiel, 60 x 30 inches, oil on canvas. Below: "Compassion" by Shinah Lee, 60 x 30 inches, oil on canvas.

## West Side Story • April 19-27

*There's a place for us / somewhere a place for us / peace and quiet and open air / wait for us somewhere.*

This plea for acceptance, sung by the grieving teenaged Puerto Rican immigrant Maria as she cradles her dying Anglo lover Tony in the final sequences of *West Side Story* is as relevant today as it was in the early 60s, when Stephen Sondheim and Leonard Bernstein sought to combat America's xenophobia and racism with an edgy, jazz-meets-opera "youthquake" of a show.

PHOTO: PETER POKORNY

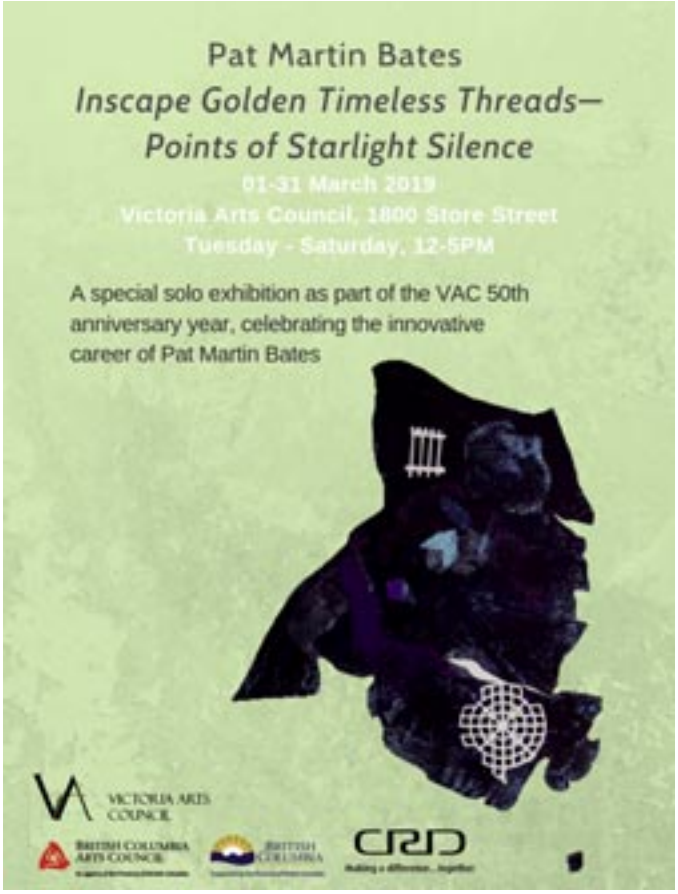
The Canadian College of Performing Arts (CCAP) has scheduled this beloved piece as their year-end student production, and as it's been with so many of our previously canonized "old favourites" now being subjected to closer examination, there's been "quite a bit of blow-back on this one," according to CCAP director Heather Burns. "Is it a racist show? There's certainly some dialogue around it, in the age where our industry is becoming very determined and quite vigilant in how we approach pieces, and how companies approach casting. I think it is an important dialogue about accepted norms and practices; it's time that they were questioned and challenged."

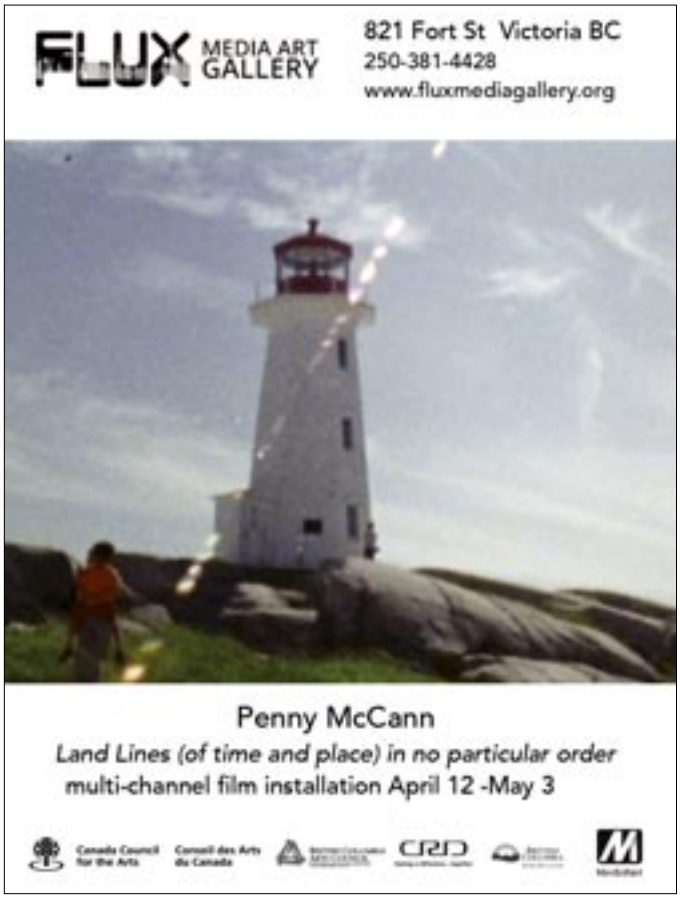
However, Burns says, the relevance of the show's major themes—oppressive and hostile policing, violence toward minorities and immigrants, suspicion and dehumanization of the "other"—are unfortunately right there on the table today, even though we'd hoped that work had been done in the 20th century. "*West Side Story* is so incredibly relevant and true for our generation. If people can walk away…thinking about our own world, and how necessary positive change is in how we treat humanity…I'm hopeful that we can achieve that through this production."

Burns notes that CCAP has a large number of international students right now, many representing Central and South America. "We have a demographic of students who understand Latino culture from a home culture point of view, which is great," she says. "It…helps us break some of the stereotypes of nationality and culture."

As music director of the show, she says all roles will be open to all students, regardless of their cultural background. "At the core of this piece is love and acceptance, and breaking through some of those cultural barriers that I think were very strong in the 1950s and 60s… We're still dealing with a lot of those same conflicts. The people and groups might be different, but the conflicts still remain."

*At McPherson Playhouse. Tickets, $29 - $52.50.*
*ccpacanada.com/west-side-story* —*Mollie Kaye*

# String tension

MOLLIE KAYE

In Syria, Sari Alesh was a professional violinist. War changed all that.

Sari Alesh

Grace, gratitude, and wise pragmatism permeate every word carefully chosen and softly spoken by 34-year-old Sari Alesh. He's on the phone with me after walking home from the bus stop in a wild, mid-February snowstorm. The uncharacteristic weather has put our town in a tailspin, but for Alesh, it's just one minor inconvenience in a life shot through with devastating losses, deadly hazards, and tragic interruptions.

Alesh came to Victoria in 2016, one young man among the hundreds of Syrian refugees who fled an impossible situation thousands of miles away. Most of these new arrivals had little or no ability to speak English. After a year of support from self-organized refugee sponsor groups, they were expected to transition to a more independent existence and make their own way here, in whatever ways they could.

For Alesh, this meant a whole new "career": juggling three low-wage jobs for most hours of the day and night just to keep himself afloat. It's a far cry from his pre-war life as a professional musician in Syria—playing violin for the symphony, touring with mega-star Lebanese singer Fairouz—but he says he is grateful just to be here, and be safe. His brother, sister, and mother remain in Syria; their daily experience is something Alesh would rather not discuss.

He describes growing up in a family where arts were a natural part of life. His father, now deceased, was a fine artist; he and his siblings learned violin as kids. "We all started at the same time," he says in his quiet, accented, fluent English. "They didn't study music at university; they just learned music for fun." Alesh made it his main focus, went on to earn his bachelor's degree in violin from the High Institute of Music in Damascus, and played with the Syrian National Symphony Orchestra for six years. He taught music for nearly a decade in public and private schools. "I used to perform with a lot of bands in Syria and Europe [and] with a lot of orchestras in Germany, Italy, and in the Middle East. I used to play Arabic music as well, but my study was Western classical music."

And then, war. An unfathomable, devastating shift from a life of daily practice, rehearsal, and performance to a daily life of survival. Alesh first ended up in Turkey, where he acquired some basics of the language and found a bit of solace learning Turkish folk music. He eventually applied for refugee status in Canada, and considers himself lucky: he feels that his musical background must have helped him get relatively easier approval. His Victoria sponsor family was well aware of his background, and arranged for him to meet with Ajtony Csaba, music director and conductor of the UVic orchestra.

Csaba evaluated Alesh's playing soon after he arrived, and surmised that the six-year, war-induced hiatus from rigorous orchestral playing had taken its toll on certain foundational physical aspects of his technique, but after a few tune-up coaching sessions, the young Syrian was enthusiastically welcomed to join the violin section of the student orchestra. "He was a fun player to have around," Csaba reports. "He had a great amount of joy… there was nothing obligatory in his approach to orchestra playing. One could sense the free will and positive relation to everything that is music. His approach to everyday human social contacts was very easygoing and carefree, and that was very helpful for everyone, and also for him, in starting to mingle and build social connections."

During that first year in Victoria, Alesh studied English and played in the orchestra at UVic, and was interviewed on CBC radio. Because he had acquired French during his education in Syria, he was invited to be a substitute music teacher at École Victor-Brodeur. He devoted himself to acquiring the English language so he could speak with much more than basic proficiency.

Alesh was encouraged to explore taking a masters degree in violin performance at UVic, but as his first subsidized year in Canada ended, nearly all of his time had to be spent working a conglomeration of low-paying jobs to service the astronomical expenses of living independently in Victoria. Music largely fell by the wayside. Finding a path to financial stability in Canada is now the singular goal for Alesh; he must achieve this before the government will consider allowing his family to reunite with him here.

Dave Conway, a retired elementary teacher and member of a local refugee sponsor group, was introduced to Alesh at a party two years ago, where they jammed a bit together and hit it off. Conway, who has played bass and guitar for decades, says he has been working with a pianist on a demo recording featuring Alesh, but it's not easy to schedule, since

Alesh is "very, very busy. It's hard for him to maintain some of those musical connections. If people aren't reaching out to him all the time and persisting, it doesn't happen. A few weeks ago, he got home at midnight [from one job] and got up at four to work at the restaurant."

Both Conway and Csaba would like to see Alesh using his musical training and talents to earn more of the money required to live in Victoria—teaching violin in people's homes, playing house concerts or restaurant gigs, and introducing people to the beautiful and haunting melodies and culture of the Arabic world. Both agree community networking could make this happen, yet Alesh is too busy rushing from job to job to promote himself or contemplate possibilities. "If he had even one opportunity to play for pay in a week, that would be so much more rewarding than doing prep work in a restaurant for hours and hours," Conway says. Csaba concurs. "When people move across cultures, very often they have to convert their strengths and weaknesses. Sari may not be a 'star' character; he may be an introvert, but it's true he has knowledge [that] is not possible to pass on without playing. He needs to capitalize on his strength and his knowledge."

Watching Alesh in a video of a concert he gave at the Duncan Showroom brings visions of a lovely gathering in someone's Victoria home, a small group of music-lovers enjoying the diverse offerings of this young, passionate violinist. "Sari is always so humble and so grateful," Conway says. "He thanks me for playing with him, and I say, 'Oh no, it's really my privilege.' He's such a high level musician, higher than I'll ever play with in any other context."

Csaba thinks Victoria has much to gain from having Sari Alesh woven into Victoria's social fabric. "It's a marvellous opportunity for the community to look at Sari, to look in the mirror in some ways…we all came to this country at some point. Some very early, some very late, and such a career reminds us that we all had to find our place in society in some ways, musically and socially. It teaches humbleness, and reflection, and openness."

Mollie Kaye is a writer, musician, communication specialist and community builder. She performs with The Millies. Contact her at molliek@shaw.ca.

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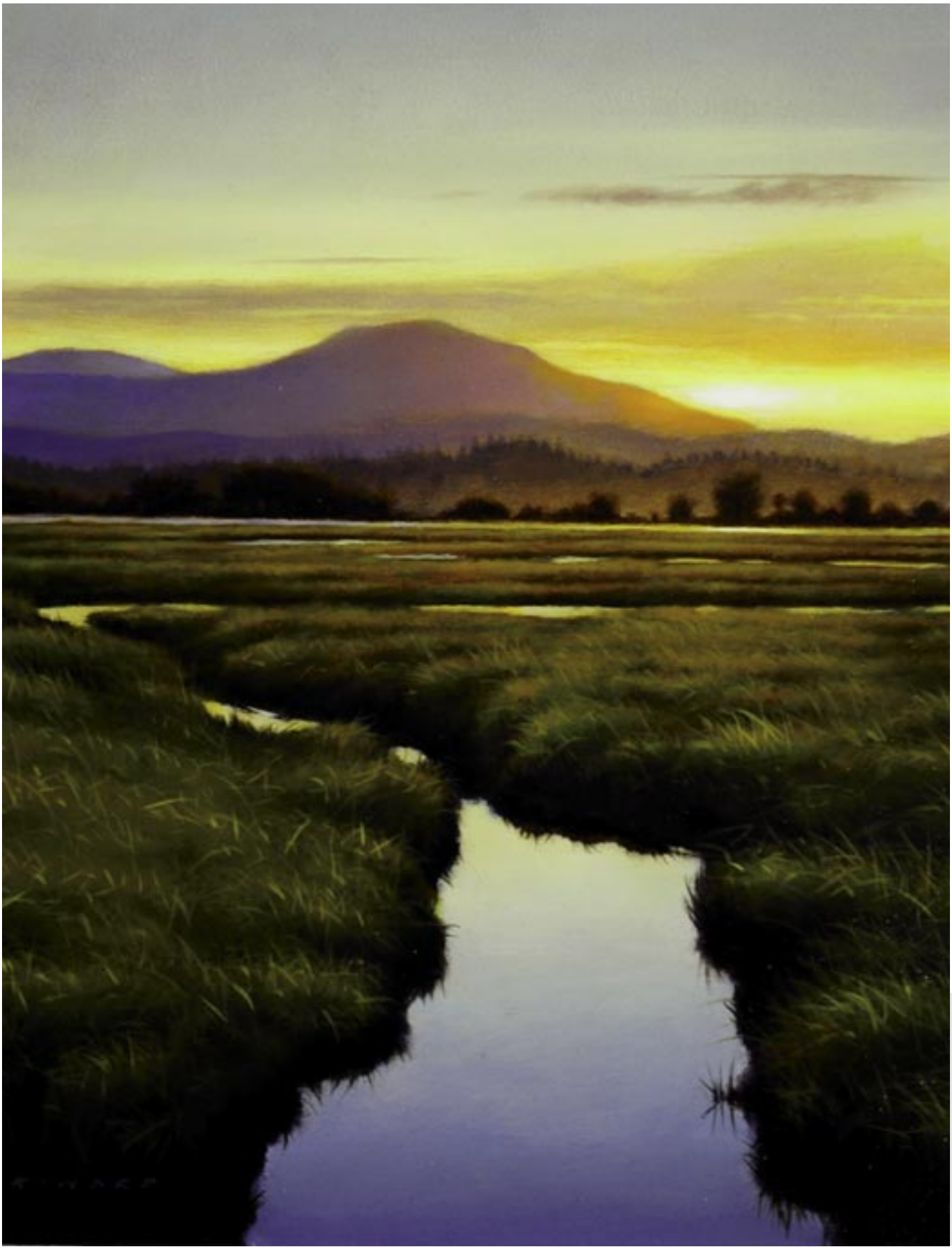

## Maritime Museum Tea & Talks • Thursdays

It's easy to forget about some of the edifying and entertaining opportunities we have right Downtown, especially when we aren't hosting friends or relatives visiting from afar, but there's a new program on at the Maritime Museum (MMBC) that's worth checking out: Tea and Talks.

Rachel Trudeau, public engagement manager for the museum, says the bi-weekly educational teatimes just started this past winter, and were born out of necessity as the museum adjusts to tighter quarters in Nootka Court. "We figured out a way to bring out our collection and make it accessible to a more mature audience—to make it accessible inside our space, and present in a way to give more context and appreciation for the items in our collection."

The MMBC this past month announced they are hoping to return to their original, larger home in Bastion Square, and applied for a grant for capital funding. "The goal is to transform…into a national museum, receive federal support, and move back into the Bastion Square building that has been sitting vacant."

Meanwhile, there's Tea and Talks, presented by knowledgable, skilled museum volunteers. "They're all very passionate about maritime culture and history…[and each has] a special interest in a particular subject, so they talk about what they're passionate about, and share this history," explains Trudeau. The volunteer approaches the curator team with their theme, then works collaboratively with staff to find relevant items within the huge collection of over 35,000 objects and documents to display, handle, and discuss. As a result, says Trudeau, "these Tea and Talk events all feature high-quality museum presentations."

During one recent Tea and Talk given by a naval engineer about Captain Vancouver, "All of our staff learned a lot," Trudeau says. Original journals of Vancouver were accessible, since a more "mature audience" could be given opportunities to interact with such precious archival items. "We talked about why the charts in his journal were so important in bringing other people to the west coast of British Columbia."

Tea and Talks is bi-weekly, every other Thursday, at 2:30pm. They're about an hour long, and sponsored by Cowichan Valley's Westholme Tea. Trudeau says it's a real treat. "We offer 'nautical tea blends' made specifically for the Maritime Museum, and biscuits as well."

In March and April, topics include the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) technology after WWII (March 14), wave climate in the Pacific (March 28), and the Life and Times of a RCN Sailor from 1941-1966 (April 25). (The Museum is closed on April 11).

*Tea and Talks is free with museum admission or membership. 634 Humboldt St, www.mmbc.bc.ca or 250-385-4222. —Mollie Kaye*

"'TIDAL FLATS AT DUSK" RAY WARD, 10 X 8 INCHES, OIL ON BOARD

**Throughout March & April**

**RAY WARD**

**Peninsula Gallery**

Ray Ward is drawn to painting the landscapes and seascapes of the West Coast. He especially enjoys working in unusual weather conditions as well as very particular moments of light. "I prefer the low light of winter sun and dawn and dusk," says Ward. "I also like atmospheric effects of air thick with moisture and changing weather patterns, such as a storm passing through. My approach is quite often centred on creating a mood through light and atmosphere." 100-2506 Beacon Ave, Sidney, 250-655-1282, www.pengal.com.


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# The positive force of theatre

MONICA PRENDERGAST

Generosity and kindness on stage in selfish times.

I have been thinking quite a lot recently about how making theatre and theatregoing can perhaps be a hopeful thing to do in a challenging age. We all seem to be swirling around the toilet bowl these days in terms of selfishness and lack of decency toward one another. Viral videos show acts of simple human kindness as remarkable, rather than what should be expected, in a society that is ever more fractured and distempered. Politically speaking, we are more polarized than ever, even in supposedly polite and civil-minded Canada. But it is the current situation in the United States that is foremost in my mind. There, the President openly insults his perceived enemies via Twitter or in Fox News interviews. The fallout of this bullying and belittling approach to leadership is becoming commonplace: more acts of racism and sexism; more stridency and rigidity; less democracy.

So how can theatre, this quaint art form that cannot be instantly downloaded to your phone, do something positive in this negative climate? Well, to begin with, theatre has had a very long history of talking back to power. Aristophanes in Ancient Greece poked fun at the leaders and philosophers of his day, bringing them down to Earth for his audiences. Comedy has evolved over many centuries since, but often has the capacity to reverse social status on stage. Servants are wiser than their masters in plays by Shakespeare, Goldoni and Molière.

Tragedy can feature this power reversal as well. Think of *King Lear* and *Hamlet*, perhaps Shakespeare's greatest plays. In *Lear*, the Fool tries desperately to get through to his beloved king that his foolishness—in dividing his kingdom and disinheriting his most loving daughter—will be the end of him. The two of them huddled together on the heath in a raging storm during Lear's growing madness is one of the most memorable images in western drama. The Fool tries and fails to save his master.

*Hamlet* has a similar trope in the relationship between Hamlet and his best friend Horatio. I saw a remarkable production titled *Prince Hamlet* in Vancouver in January as part of the PuSH Festival. This Toronto production, directed by Ravi Jain, features a female Hamlet and Horatio. And the role of Horatio is played by a deaf actress, Dawn Jani Birley. She signs in ASL throughout the play, even for scenes where she is not present, and Hamlet signs back his dialogue with her as well. It was a very moving version of the play, in that seeing the play through Horatio's eyes we become closer witnesses to Hamlet's downfall. And the added layer of Horatio's inability to save her friend becomes unbearably moving in her inability to speak, to yell, to howl her fears. Her fierce signing is not enough, and Hamlet waves her concerns away. In the end, Birley signs her final speech ("Now cracks a noble heart. Goodnight sweet prince/And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest!") over Hamlet's body, weeping in heavy grief.

PHOTO: HEIDI KOIVISTO ROBERTSON

Dawn Jani Birley

The generosity of this performance was palpable to me. Birley's tireless signing work on stage, exhausting to witness, allows members of the deaf community access to the play. At the performance I attended, almost half the audience cheered at curtain call in silence, their hands waving over their heads in sign language for applause.

Another example of generosity seen onstage is improvisational performance. Anyone who has taught or practiced improv knows that doing it well requires ample amounts of generosity. The principle of say "Yes" to any offer is a foundation in British-Canadian Keith Johnstone's approaches to improvisation. Making your improv partner look good is another key value. His books, classes and legacy have had an effect on improvisational comedy across Canada.

Improvisational theatre artist Rebecca Northan (who was trained at Calgary's Loose Moose Theatre by Johnstone) has created a number of very successful shows that are rooted in these principles. Her most successful show is called *Blind Date*. Since 2007, this show has had successful runs across Canada (but not Victoria, alas!), and in London and New York. It is set to open in Norway. The setup for *Blind Date* is simplicity itself; on stage at a Parisian café table sits French-accented clown Mimi, with a red nose indicating her clown status. She has been stood up by a blind date, but nothing stops Mimi's optimism. She goes into the audience and invites a man (pre-selected before the show in the lobby) to join her as her new blind date. The rest of the show is based on the dialogue between Mimi and her date. There is also a gay version of the show, where Mimi is played by a man or by a woman who select a same-sex date.

In the wrong hands, this formula could lead to a lot of belittling of this volunteer performer, making him or her look bad on stage. But Johnstone's principles are in full view in *Blind Date*. We see Mimi coach her date in detail before they begin role-playing their date. She tells him (in this case) that if he feels uncomfortable or unsure at any time, he can signal a timeout. They will then go over to the side of the stage and talk about what is happening until the volunteer performer feels okay about carrying on. She also coaches him to not try to be funny; his job is to simply enjoy the date. It is her job to ensure both he and the audience are having a good time.

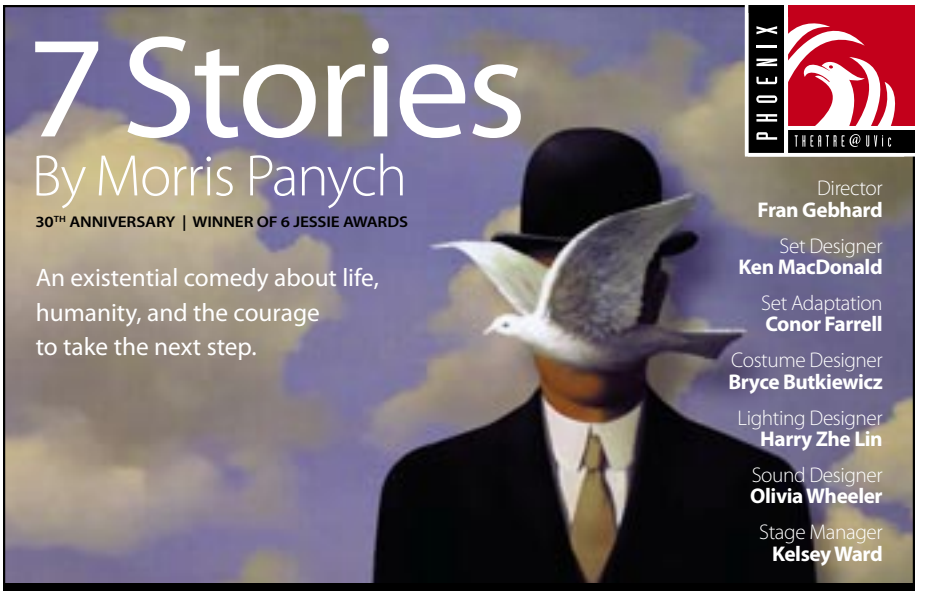
THEATRE has had a very long history of talking back to power.

In the Arts Club Theatre performance I saw in December, Mimi also spoke with her date's partner in the audience. Mimi told her that she also had the right to stop the play at any point. Later on, in what was one of the funniest moments in the show, Mimi and her date were back in her apartment, sitting on the couch, and Mimi was moving in for a kiss. The date's girlfriend called "Stop!" from the audience and then was invited on stage to take Mimi's place at the moment of the kiss, much to the audience's delight. At no time was anyone made fun of in a negative way. Instead, the careful rules set up by Northan and her team of Mimis who perform *Blind Date* ensure that their volunteer stage partner always looks good and is enjoying the experience as much as the audience. A remarkable case study of generosity in performance.

There are many more examples I could offer here of performances I have either witnessed or been part of as an actor that gave me a lived experience of kindness and generosity in action. A generous performance by an actor is one in which we see a giving-over of attention and care to fellow actors and to the audience. Kindness between actors is when we can see actors caring for each other on stage. This is particularly clear for me when I see adult actors working with children. In a production like Hannah Moscovitch's *The Children's Republic* (at the Belfry in the fall of 2017), the two adult professional actors showed such strong care and generous focus toward the less experienced children in the cast. That element of the production has stayed with me in a much clearer way than the content of the play, as valuable as it was.

In these ways, and many more, theatre can model kindness and caring for each other that possibly can help to heal a fractured and fractious world.

Monica appreciates this column giving her the opportunity to rehearse her thinking as she writes a scholarly version of this article for conference presentations this spring.


**March 14 – 23, 2019**

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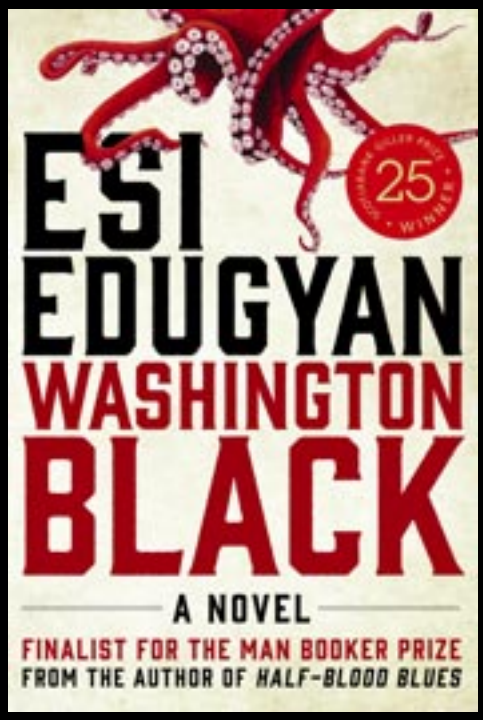
# Esi Edugyan talks about writing fiction

PAULINE HOLDSTOCK

If writers write with empathy and authenticity, it allows them and their readers to cross all sorts of barriers.




Esi Edugyan won her second Scotiabank Giller Prize in November for her novel *Washington Black*. The prestigious literary award comes with $100,000.*Washington Black* was also short-listed for the Man Booker Prize and the Rogers Writers Trust Fiction Prize.

Like her earlier novel *Half-Blood Blues*, *Washington Black* is historically-based fiction. At the start of the novel, set in the 19th century, her 11-year-old protagonist Washington Black is a slave on a Barbados sugar plantation.

He is taken under the wing and tutelage of the plantation master's brother, Chistopher Wilde, a man obsessed with building a flying machine and impressed by Wash's intelligence and talent for drawing.

When a white man dies and it appears that Washington will be blamed for the death, he and his protector Wilde make a highly dramatic escape. Washington's subsequent journey is epic, ranging through Norfolk, Virginia, abandonment in the Arctic, life as a free but haunted man in Nova Scotia, love and exciting work in marine zoology in England, and a long-sought reunion in the desert of Morocco.

> "GOING DEEPLY into another's psychological landscape, into their thought processes—at a very granular level… *that's* the work of fiction."—*Esi Edugyan*

If there's another accolade Esi Edugyan deserves, it's the one for Writer Most Untouched by Success. What a delight, then, to be able to spend time in conversation with her on the pleasures and the pitfalls of writing fiction today.

Esi has said (in a 2018 interview for *Kirkus*) that in the early reception of *Washington Black* she had sensed the unspoken question, "Why are you writing this, where are *we* in this?" I ask if she is irked by the constant craving we have to see ourselves reflected in a work of fiction, to see fiction as a mirror, in other words.

Edugyan is thoughtful, her voice considerate and soft, but she's not hesitant. When she pauses during our conversation, it's only to find the precise words to frame her position most accurately. No, she says. She understands that craving totally. Readers want to engage with the character, to identify with them, and that's easiest to do when the experiences they're reading about most closely reflect their own.

Why, then, is she attracted to historical fiction? What are the special benefits that historical material brings to her as creator?

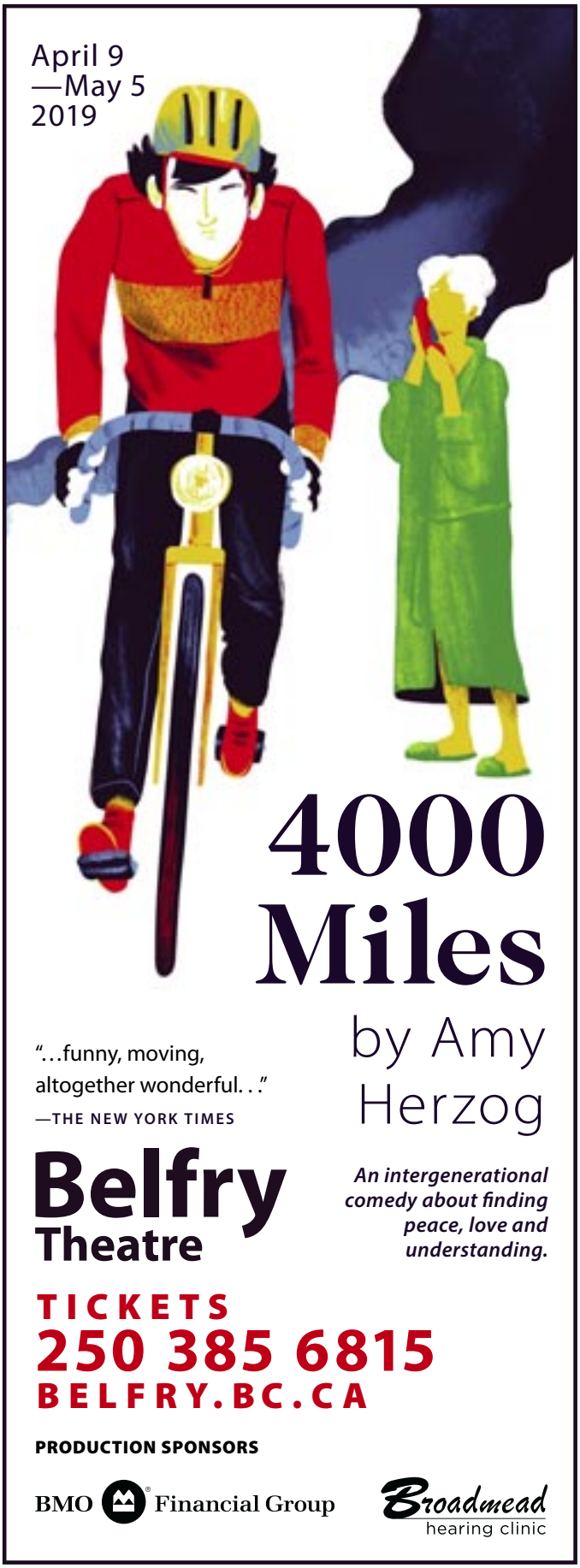
It's the attraction of the unknown story, Edugyan says, the story arising from that unexpected, really compelling nugget you come across by chance, and that you might be able work with. I can hear a trace of the excitement she feels—and that I can relate to—as she describes the moment of discovery, the writer's realization that a whole story is present there in that detail, waiting to be unfolded, and brought into being. She adds, more practically, that working from hindsight simply feels easier and she hints at the difficulties of writing in the present, in these times where we live in such uncertainty.

She believes, though, that historical fiction can be an effective way to raise present-day issues, a vehicle to illuminate the roots of certain aspects of our own culture. There is plenty of opportunity in the course of Washington's travels, for instance, to shine a light on continuing racism in Canadian society today.

It's no accident that each of Edugyan's three novels is historical, though her first, *The Second Life of Samuel Tyne*, set in 1968, almost makes it into her own era. We talk for a while about the attraction of historical fiction for writers less inclined to make creative hay with their own lives, Edugyan suggesting its usefulness is to provide filters or layers, a kind of privacy screen, between the writer's work and the writer's self.

So to write from the point of view of a male protagonist might be, for a woman writer, just such a protective screen? (Edugyan's three novels all involve a male protagonist.) We consider briefly the question of whether a writer need, or should, be confined to writing their own gender—and it's quickly dismissed.

Wash, though male, is the character Edugyan attests to feeling most in tune with in all of her work. She's keenly aware that many women are looking exclusively for women's stories to the extent that they feel short-changed when confronted with a male protagonist. But to be so constrained to a single point of view, she argues, is to take a strangely binary approach to literature, which after all should be reaching for the universal.




So, on the fraught question of identity and authenticity, the growing insistence on it, and current interpretation of it (you can only write, say, about the plight of an addict if you've experienced addiction), I have to ask: does such a stance serve to protect the truth, or does it imperil our attempts to break down barriers? Are we constrained to write only from the position of the group we identify with?

Edugyan, knowing where this line of thought is taking us, considers her reply and phrases it with care, acknowledging the trauma of colonization and its legacy of continuing pain, and showing enormous respect for the reality of that lived pain. And yet, she says after a thoughtful pause, if it's done well, that is, with understanding and empathy and authenticity, then it can allow us to cross barriers. And if it's done with the right motives? I suggest. But Edugyan doesn't commit. She says she has seen both bad and good on both sides of the issue: writers from outside the group telling its story badly, and writers from within telling it well—and also, most importantly, vice-versa.

It seems like a good moment to haul out the American philosopher Richard Rorty and a quote I keep close to my own writing desk. In Rorty's ideal universe, solidarity with others would be achieved "not by inquiry but by imagination." He says we reach solidarity by "coming to see other human beings as 'one of us' rather than as 'them'" and we can foster that ability through detailed description and rediscription. And that is exactly what the novel, as a form, can do so well.

Edugyan agrees with Rorty's characterization—and goes further. She emphasizes the importance of not simply describing but *examining* interior lives in minute, granular detail, exposing the deep psychology of your characters. Even the act of writing about someone who is not you is itself an act of solidarity, she says. And further still, it is an act of solidarity for the reader who is led to *feel* for the character, to feel bad for them, to feel close to them. And those emotions conjured by the work can represent the beginning of empathy, the beginning of coming to see "them" as "us."

All of which seems to answer my next questions in advance. Can we justify this continuing need to make up stories—to invent fiction and to read it—when so many compelling, stirring, shocking or inspiring stories from life are available to us, just a click away? Or, as Peter Whittaker, writing in the *New Internationalist*, once asked, "Is fiction a luxury when there are so many more pressing and urgent needs?" What can it possibly contribute?

Edugyan returns to the ability of fiction to engender empathy—something the world could certainly use more of. In our runaway lives, she says, it can make us stop for a moment to think of others. She likens its effect to being suddenly taken out of ourselves, shaken from all our daily preoccupations and limited concerns, by the sight of someone in desperate need on a busy downtown street.

That fiction and non-fiction share many common elements, Edugyan readily acknowledges, but she sees the ability to enter another consciousness, another experience of the world, the ability to see that you are not so very different from that "other," as the special, the particular work of fiction. "Going deeply into another's psychological landscape, into their thought processes—at a very granular level…*that's* the work of fiction," she says decisively.

We return to craft and process and discuss ways of tackling historical fiction in general and, in particular, her approach in *Washington Black*—one I think of as the flight-of-fancy approach. Edugyan stresses that everything in the novel *could* have taken place. There is, she says,

(with the exception of one minor shift of date for convenience) nothing anachronistic, nothing people in the 1830s might not have thought or said or done, given the contemporary knowledge base, the current social landscape and political climate. Having a single character experience so many of the wonders of his new world—the flying boat, the rescue at sea, the sea voyage, icebergs (!), Arctic travel, the natural sciences, marine biology, graphic art—and express them to us in his own voice, is to give the reader a chance to *experience* his sense of wonder. Conversely—and in a way that makes me think of the visual artist's use of negative space—it also leaves behind the haunting impression of all that he has endured, and escaped.

I find it particularly interesting that Edugyan, evidently such a thorough and meticulous researcher, chooses to work largely with characters of her own invention (something else I can relate to) even though it's clear there's a huge appetite for tales of actual historical figures—think Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall* (Thomas Cromwell), or Annabel Lyon's *The Golden Mean* (Aristotle).

Obligations accompany the choice of a real-life subject. Edugyan privileges the creative freedom an invented character bestows. To use a character from life within a fiction would, in her view, incur too much responsibility. For instance, it would feel unethical, she says, to put words in the mouth of a historical figure. I can't agree more, and can only wish it felt that way for some biographers who take liberties with their subjects.

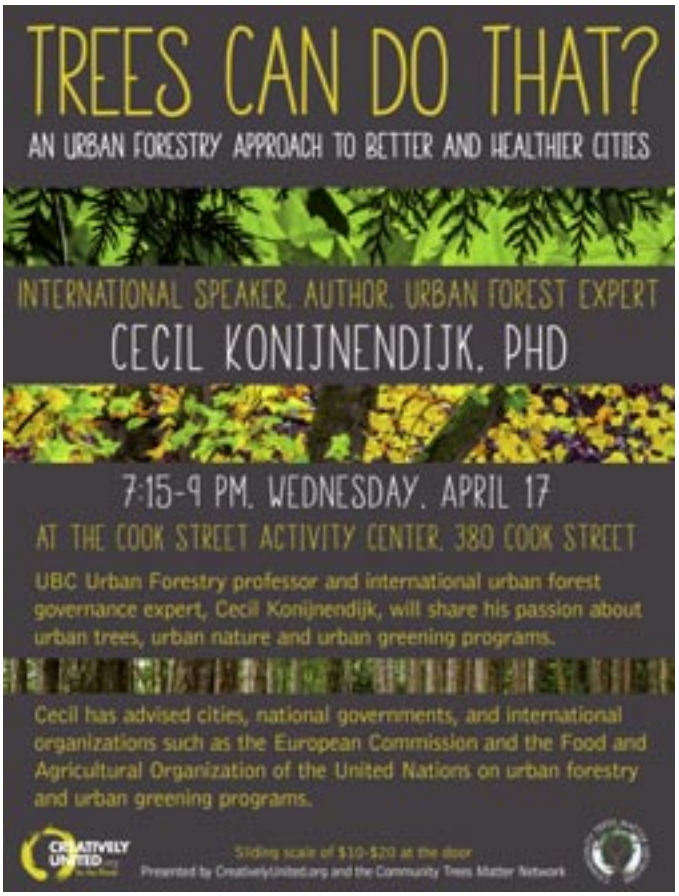
To some readers who simply can't get enough of the inventive gifts of an author like Esi Edugyan, her reservations might seem like needless inhibition, but her sense of obligation to history is entirely justifiable when you consider how our views of a historical figure can be so quickly and dramatically altered—for good or ill—by representation in a novel.

In any event, I'm glad she chose her trademark mix of fiction and history to allow us this wild ride through a world that really did exist in all its fascinating and astonishing detail.

When I ask Esi the question that is to end our conversation I receive an answer entirely in keeping with her thoughtfulness and generosity. What keeps you going, I ask, in this insanely Herculean task of creating a whole factual world for your fiction and then carrying it about with you for five, six—how many?—years, while at the same time making dental appointments and cooking dinner?! (Edugyan has young children.)

"I started with a footnote," she says. "That's what made it possible. If I had tried working with the whole concept, it would have been too heavy, too big. Just too daunting." And then she reiterates, "Yes. You start with the details, the footnotes, and that makes it all possible." She makes it sound so easy.

Pauline Holdstock is an internationally published award-winning novelist. Her most recent novel, *The Hunter and the Wild Girl*, set in the Languedoc region of France, won the 2016 City of Victoria Butler Book Prize. Her new novel will be released in the fall.



# Heaven? Press 35

GENE MILLER

Will new Downtown buildings help our resiliency and community in the face of social upheaval?

Leonard Bernstein announced his retirement from conducting on October 9, 1990, and five days later died of a heart attack at his Manhattan apartment in The Dakota. At his funeral procession through the streets of Manhattan, construction workers removed their hats and waved, calling out "Goodbye, Lenny." A city family big enough to have heroes and small enough to weep at their passing. A *place*, not an *anywhere*.

Cities, communities of people, need identity and are bound by story; they need to be a *who*, and need as an urban culture to share that story, to feel like participants in its abstractions, its history and practices—things that can be seen and felt. I'm so glad I live in "a little bit of old England," a city where everywhere you turn, you're presented with remind—what, that's gone, too?!

Victoria's current Empire State Building frenzy of Downtown highrise development should abate in the early 2020s, the market (temporarily) exhausted, the last cement truck off to its Bay Street home. Then, we may witness our works. It is certain that Downtown's visual identity, personality and place-mood—its qualities, to use that old-fashioned word—will have been transformed; and clear that the city missed (or forewent) the opportunity to try to understand the *why*, the secret sauce, of this (fadingly) singular place, to figure out how to re-fashion Downtown's best qualities within some new urban and social design expression.

Ever visited someone who lives on the upper floors of one of Victoria's Downtown-area highrises or, for that matter, driven or walked to the top of Beacon Hill? It's the breathtaking views, baby! The vista! At even a modest elevation, our surrounding land- and waterscape become legible. You part the living room curtains, you crest the park hill, your eye takes it in, your spirit lights up. The panorama offers perspective, permits context and clarity; you know where you are. Lucky you!

As an upper-storey highrise resident, even if you have not yourself become a god, you mingle with the gods. View confers both social and spiritual status. View delivers something humanly important. You need only consult the imagery and symbolism of Medieval and Renaissance religious art to be fully

Jukebox on View Street

exposed to the meaning and value of such elevation. Higher is liberating. Higher implies supervisory status. In a symbolic act whose meanings can hardly be missed, royalty sits on a throne: authority, author, self-maker, creator. Higher magnifies and places one closer to the energetic source—at a guess, the timeless, essential influence of the sun working on human consciousness, rituals, social protocols…and real estate pricing!

The human roil is, by contrast, in the opposite direction, grounded. Hell is the hard game of the sidewalk. Consider that Christ was down with the people, a real mingler, before God bumped him upstairs. (Miracle explained! You're welcome.)

Enough exegesis; it's my point that highrise and lowrise embody different webs of meaning, different human expressions—the one individuating, self-spotlighting, isolating; the other democratic, compromissory, socially binding, messy.

It isn't that Victoria skipped on the opportunity to stand athwart the Highway to The Future, stern arms held out straight to reject the furies of the highrises as they marched into town. Rather, it skipped on the opportunity to initiate strategies to neutralize and even convert their fortifying and privatizing tendencies and impacts.

The defensive materiality of each new building, palpably projecting a guarded, gated, securitized response to unspecified forms of stranger danger, the impermeability—glass, metal, concrete, gating—of these buildings tells you much: not architectural welcome or community, but defense, privacy, protection, isolation.

And the visual poverty, the shab and physical disrepair, the indifference and lack of aesthetic programming, of the adjacent public realm wordlessly articulates a perverse and unhealthy public/private partnership: public dangerous/private safe, the very opposite of a blueprint for human connection and successful city-making.

In some small way, I cite the absence of social literacy amongst developers. This is not a crowd that sits up nights reading history and philosophy. They don't teach Utopian Urbanism 101 at the School of Developology.

The largest responsibility, though, falls to civic leadership, both elected and managerial, and equally with us so-called citizens who, increasingly bemused by public life and alienated from its meanings, find interaction much beyond the coffee shop patio unsanitary and risky.

I understand: cultures lose sensibility or, to be generous, swap old aptitudes (and attitudes) for new, voluntarily discarding and forgetting the old, in the relentless push for currency. But novelty, which we reflexively celebrate, also disguises or embodies cultural dislocation—a turn too sharp to navigate, a gap too wide to comfortably jump. It takes time (if time's even the cure) for a culture to make meaning of and to integrate various forms and expressions of novelty, to test them for truth and utility…and consequences—the "oracular and critical potencies of the commonplace," as Mike Davis puts it in his book of essays, *Dead Cities*.

Nothing will substitute for a community-wide dialogue, however faltering and argumentative at the start, about the idea of urbanity here, and the various possibilities of its physical expression in buildings and the public realm. If a community, through its municipal structure, can't or won't tell public realm designers and city budgeters about its values and priorities, and tell Downtown newcomer buildings how to behave, nothing else will.

Developers are risk managers, not social rhapsodists. The gleam in their eye is profit and return on investment, not some vision of a better world. Actually, I correct myself: I can think of at least four industry philosophers and/or visual poets in Victoria. First, Max Tomaszewski and partner David Price, (Essencia Verde in Cook Street Village, and the former Medical Arts Building, Cook and

DEVELOPERS ARE RISK MANAGERS, not social rhapsodists. The gleam in their eye is profit and return on investment, not some vision of a better world.

Pandora, now re-branded The Wade). Next, mad artist Don Charity (Mosaic, Jukebox). Third, Chris LeFevre (Railyards, and numerous Downtown heritage renewals). Last, Bijan and Faramir Neyestani, responsible for the Aria, the Paul Merrick-designed masterpiece on Humboldt Street.

Glimpse, imaginatively, a more empowering and citizen-esque Downtown Victoria furnished with useful or whimsical public realm features (including soapboxes), and buildings that meet the street generously in an aesthetic and social partnership; people (including yourself) acting more publicly connected, more owners of the public realm, their behaviour more extroverted, engaging, less wary, estranged and carapace-like.

In his intermittently wise book *Twelve Rules For Life*, Jordan Peterson observes: "Before the Twin Towers fell—that was order. Chaos manifested itself afterward. Everyone felt it. The very air became uncertain. What exactly was it that fell? Wrong question. What exactly remained standing?"

Peterson's clever phrasing begs for local application: "There are compelling economic and land use arguments in support of all the new Downtown residential highrises. Are the buildings generating a new story about Victoria? Wrong question. What's the message?"

Please, don't leave this column thinking I'm just being fussy about "frosting" or decorative trivialities Downtown. There are other, deeper reasons to foster powerful public community Downtown.

Cities concentrate human potential in all its physical and cultural expressions. But remember: with grace comes gravity. Inherent in this, in any, urban concentration, however rich in promise, is an anarchic, explosive, counter-social impulse (people who don't want to play) whose mildest expressions are inertia, social disaffection and petty crime, and most powerful, widespread anomie and serious damage to the urban fabric. ("Violence is a quest for identity. The less identity, the more violence," noted Marshall McLuhan.) Believing these are normal times, we take normal steps to define and patrol social boundaries and identity, and in so doing we take as faith the durability of an invisible, shared public code that transmits and stabilizes the personality and the culture of the city. But social codes wane, lose their potency and relevance, and no amount of authority—or repressive propriety—will compensate for their decline.

It's hardly alarmist to describe these times as a corner-point, a civilizational moment. National politics is in many places shattered and, concurrently, life's becoming a risky technological tomorrowland. Ever the crucible, the US is home to increasing social absenteeism. In American social critic James Kunstler's words: "we can't construct a coherent consensus about what is happening to us, and therefore we can't make any coherent plans about what to do."

Can we in Victoria remain or re-become an identifiable and coherent urban community, not simply a crowd of people to whom the future happens? Healthy urban culture must be authored and constantly renewed. And land use, urban form and urban design—what goes where, and why, and with what consequences—is central to that process. Such concerns address social resilience and the almost painterly conditions required to sustain it. (A powerfully enhanced advisory design process couldn't hurt.)

History's knocking hard everywhere, right now—a moment astutely decoded by architecture critic and writer Nathaniel Popkin: "Ours is an age of loss disguised as plenty."

Despite all urgency, in this vast fog-state of paradox we're lost and immobilized, amorphous, not focused, stupid about history, stupid about the future.

Time to be smart, fellow citizens...before the page turns.

*Jason McLennan, founder and chair of the board of the International Living Future Institute and Cascadia Green Bulding Council will be giving a talk about "The Livable City" on Wednesday, March 20 at 7pm, at the McPherson Theatre. Seats are free.*

Founder of Open Space and co-founder of *Monday Magazine*, Gene Miller is currently promoting ASH, an affordable housing concept.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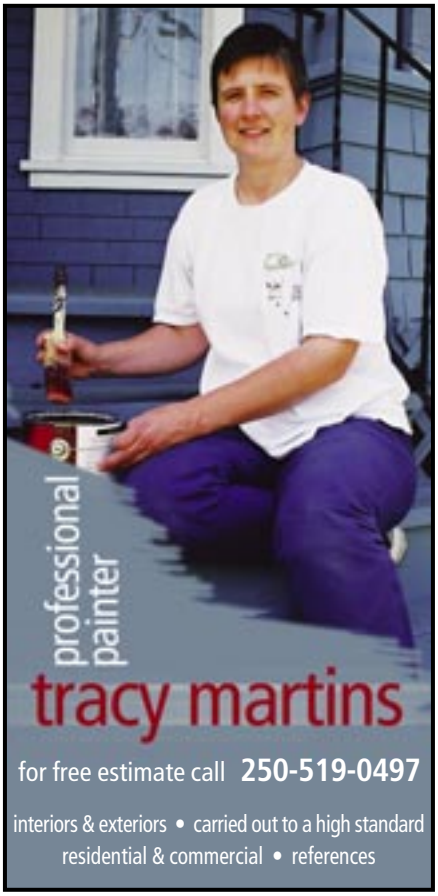


# For the love of bats

Maleea Acker

Combining creative work with research, Estraven Lupino-Smith collaborates with HAT to monitor and celebrate bats.

PHOTO: TONY BOUNSALL

Estraven Lupino-Smith

A few years ago, when Estraven Lupino-Smith was living in Philadelphia, they threw their back out. (Lupino-Smith is non-binary and uses they/them pronouns.) Miserable, between contracts and home-bound in winter, instead of succumbing to depression, they fell back on their long history as an artist. "I'm going to make something," they decided, "I'm going to do a series of prints on nocturnal animals." Many are vilified, they explained, considered dangerous, part of the underworld. Lupino-Smith wanted to change the way we view wolves, bats, barn owls, raccoons. In particular, I learned during our conversation at a local cafe, they love bats. A lot.

Lupino-Smith, a creative researcher with a degree in political science and equity studies, is currently completing an MSc in geography at Concordia, but art has always been a part of their research. "That's how my brain works," says Lupino-Smith. Focusing on bats and other vilified animals seemed an ideal way of combining creative work with research. "I think we don't realize how much social context there is to issues of science and politics. This is a key reason people undervalue creative work." Lupino-Smith's Etsy website offers the artwork as pins, t-shirts and prints, but it was when they moved to Victoria (via Montreal) that things really came together.

When Lupino-Smith arrived here, they emailed Habitat Acquisition Trust (HAT) and offered to volunteer, sending a copy of the linocut bat print they'd made. The HAT staff member who answered the email just happened to be wearing Lupino-Smith's bat design t-shirt that day. A collaboration was born. With funding from a CRD arts development grant, Lupino-Smith gathered sound files on the bats using a heterodyne detector, which allows humans to hear the echolocation bats use to find food and move through space. "We can't normally hear it, but they're actually screaming; they're quite loud!"

BC is home to 16 of the 19 bat species in Canada—the greatest diversity of any province. Bats are the only mammal that can truly fly, and half of BC's bat species (all insectivores) are listed as vulnerable or threatened. Coming from the east, where bat populations have been decimated by White Nose Syndrome fungus (recorded deaths total over six million), Lupino-Smith was eager to see a population that is, relatively speaking, still intact. "It will take 10,000 years, they told me, "to recover the population numbers on the East Coast."

Lupino-Smith counted bats with HAT over the summer, watching over 1,200 bats emerge from the attic of the Metchosin Community Hall, which the bats had chosen as their female maternity colony. That means there are both adults and pups in the groups volunteers count in summer. Some volunteers are retired, Lupino-Smith says, but many just like the work, which is communal and provides a chance to view the world in all its complexity. "You get your blanket out. You bring your dog." Watching the pups learn to fly can also be hilarious. "They're not great fliers yet. They hit things, they do loops to get higher," laughs Lupino-Smith.

White Nose Syndrome wasn't initially found on the west coast of the continent. But in 2016, a sick brown bat was found by hikers near Seattle. The syndrome was confirmed a few days after the bat died. This means the disease has travelled over 1,300 kilometres past its last known western-most appearance. Bats keep mosquito and other insect populations in check, protecting crops from infestation and protecting us from vector-borne diseases. Many also pollinate plants and help with seed dispersal. A fall in bat numbers means diseases like West Nile virus could become a serious problem. If the disease becomes as wide-spread as it has on the east coast, the west coast of North America could lose 90 percent or more of its bat population.

The culmination of Lupino-Smith's summer work with HAT occurred at the Big Bat Bash in October 2018. Combining video files, footage from a slow-motion camera, and a sculptural piece, Lupino-Smith created a multi-media presentation meant to inspire and educate. The event drew more than 300 people and included workshops, dinner and a dance, with donations supporting the Metchosin Community Hall bats. Lupino-Smith's plan, working with CFUV, the University of Victoria's community radio station, is to create a podcast called "Mediated Natures" from the project, integrating science research with art creation.

Lupino-Smith also works in sound, film, and text, providing workshops on the natural world to children, and nature walks with

BC IS HOME TO 16 of the 19 bat species in Canada—the greatest diversity of any province. Bats are the only mammal that can truly fly, and half of BC's bat species (all insectivores) are listed as vulnerable or threatened.

a political ecology component. Their plan is to eventually do a research-creation-based PhD. "Art is in the ideas. That's where you start." The HAT work was great, they explain, "because it was a rural project, not in a gallery. There was a bat cave, a bunch of kids."

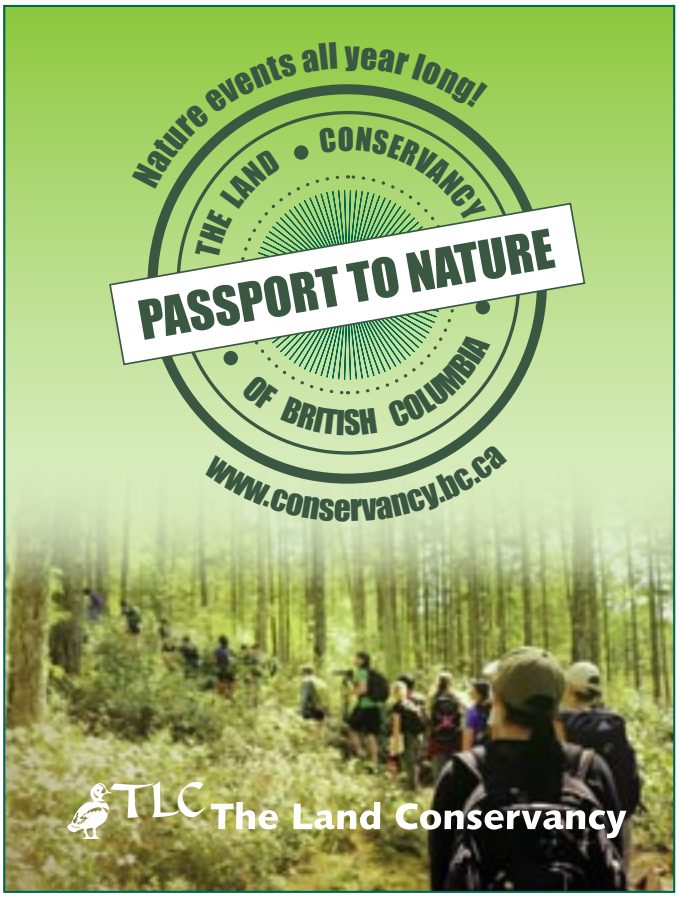
The work made them realize the importance of outreach. Many landowners in the region don't know that it's illegal to remove bats from private property—even if they nest in the eaves of buildings. HAT provided training to Lupino-Smith that included a 14-hour session with other volunteers in Stanley Park, learning about bats, echolocation and data from scientists. "It made me realize that it's all the work of these individual [volunteers] that makes the difference." Lack of resources, social or political will, they argue, means that much of the data gathered by scientists is effectively lost if it's not translated to the public. Lupino-Smith also admires the way HAT liaises with First Nations (with their restoration work on Senanus Island, for example). "I'd like to see more work on the part of settlers to follow Indigenous leadership."

One of the key changes Lupino-Smith would like to see in the non-profit world is a greater openness to art-science collaborations, which they stress are key to developing greater connection to place, and acknowledging humans as just one species in a large, complex ecology. Before HAT said yes to their proposal, Lupino-Smith approached another non-profit in the region. It turned Lupino-Smith down, worried they might compete with the NGO for funding. "There's a funny thing in Victoria. Every organization looks fun, but then there's a board of directors full of ancient white people who [work] to maintain the conservative frameworks that exist." Part of being a queer, non-binary person, they argue, is an inclination to question the dominant power dynamic, which can see art and science as disparate fields. For Lupino-Smith, collaboration between the two is an integral step in dismantling colonialism and finding alternatives to institutionalized power.

"Art is in creatively and critically thinking about things you don't normally get to think about," argues Lupino-Smith. "What excites you? What are your ideas? We'll go from there." This past year, they dreamed up the Artemisia Institute ( see estraven.ca/research), a name that gives authority to the work they're already doing in various guises around the continent. So far, the Institute can only point to a research vehicle (the Research Creation Vessel Putt-Putt) and a business card. But if their track record is any indication, it won't stay that way for long. "If a thing doesn't exist, I do it. I've always had a DIY mentality."

If you have bats in your house or on your property, email HAT: hatmail@hat.bc.ca! They study and monitor bats, and need to know where they live. Bats are shy (and cute) and don't want to harm you.

Maleea Acker recently submitted the first draft of her geography doctoral dissertation on the intersections of art and science. One chapter of the dissertation is a manuscript of poetry.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# As the tipping point nears

TRUDY DUIVENVOORDEN MITIC

There's no end of dire news, so seek out the glimmers of progress.

The haunting choreography of the January eclipse involving Earth, Sun, and super blood wolf moon left me feeling deeply humbled, and then unexpectedly stung by anguish. The beauty of it was immense. There it hung, an antediluvian orb undergoing metamorphosis more than 357,000 kilometres overhead, its feral colours still eons older than the smudged pigments of ancient cave art. Here stood I in a darkened schoolyard, an undeserving spectator fully dependent on, and yet habitually oblivious to, the Earth and its crucial sliver of atmosphere. As the moon began glowing red, I felt the burn of raw contrition for all the short-sighted harm we humans have done here.

The super blood wolf moon on January 20, 2019

We're getting frightfully close to the brink of pandemonium, and still there's no action plan in sight. Only 12 unescapably challenging years remain for getting it all fixed, according to an urgent 2018 report by the UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. That's the equivalent of just three more terms of office, with scarcely a truly committed politician in sight.

It's become a twisted, top-down world that we live in, where corporations seem to rule through beleaguered governments that are not much more than latex gloves on lobbyist hands. Any small policy advancement proposed for the common good is too often thwarted by a business interest intent on safeguarding its market share and profit margin. Throw in constant warnings that jobs will vanish if things change, and it's no wonder that many working people stay entrenched as keepers of the status quo.

The struggling mainstream media has been co-opted too, probably with their eyes wide open. Our local daily paper now puts wrap-around ads where the news once appeared, and prints cheap filler pieces without fully disclosing the writer's affiliation. I'm guessing that's how Gwyn Morgan, a "retired Canadian business leader who has been a director of five global corporations," came to preachify last month in a wildly biased essay that pipelines are Canada's most urgent need. His motives become clear when the internet reveals that his clutch of corporations are steeped in fossil fuel. Besides being the former CEO of Encana, he's the former chairman of the not-so-law-abiding engineering giant SNC-Lavalin, known for its cozy ties to the notorious Ghadafi family of Libya (and perhaps the Trudeau government, which is now the subject of an ethics investigation over its replacing of Justice Minister Jody Wilson-Reybauld).

The World Health Organization recently released a list of the top 10 health threats in 2019. Number one is air pollution, which it bluntly calls "the greatest environmental risk to health." Last month *Times Colonist* columnist Trevor Hancock meticulously pinned almost all ten threats on environmental degradation and concluded that "when we protect the environment, we almost always protect our health." (Hancock's byline does disclose who he really is—a now-retired expert in human health. His views are rooted in science and bring him no financial gain.)

All the stonewalling is enough to make one despair, but despair alone is just more useless idling while the clock ticks on. Better to find glimmers of progress and focus on them. Focus on the wealth of innovation in our town, including Project Zero, a brand-new incubator program that will guide and support entrepreneurs who envision turning waste materials into new products.

The tipping point days are inching closer. Decent sustainable investment opportunities are cropping up quite regularly now—although you won't yet find them at your local bank—and the Supreme Court of Canada has just decreed that energy extraction companies will, in fact, be held financially responsible for all environment damage left in their wake. No more declaring bankruptcy and walking away. Taxpayers are done being the mop-up crew.

Perhaps the biggest indicator of change yet is Canada's new Food Guide, finally based on the best and most current independent evidence instead of industry junk science. Health Canada deserves applause for standing firm where they had previously caved to partisan pressure, for not compromising health in favour of profits, and for resisting the jump into inane entrenched discussion on, among other tired topics, the question of whether bean-eating humans fart more than cows.

Every unaffiliated dietitian has praise for this guide. What's more, the fact that we finally have it provides a telling snapshot of where the government thinks society is now, and where it is headed.

Palpable change is thrumming in the air. Maybe, just maybe we can still fix this. Maybe we're ready to start preparing now. "Yes," says a thoughtful friend, a seasoned psychologist who still feels hopeful. "More and more people are getting pissed off over inaction."

I agree. People love living here, on this protective blue and green Earth. From this perfect vantage point, the moon looks unfailingly beautiful.

While we wait for big change to happen, Trudy recommends checking out www.zerowasteemporium.com for a growing list of local businesses ready to help us become zero-waste shoppers for the stuff that we need.

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