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Ian McTaggart-Cowan: The legacy of a pioneering biologist, educator and conservationist

By Ronald D. Jakimchuk, R. Wayne Campbell, and Dennis A. Demarchi. 2014. Harbour Publishing, Box 219, Madeira Park, BC, Canada, V0N 2H0 and Biodiversity Centre for Wildlife Studies, 3825 Cadboro Bay Road, PO Box 55053, Victoria, BC, Canada, V8N 6I8. 404 pages, 49.95 CAD, Cloth.

The introduction by first author Ronald D. Jakimchuk correctly states that this volume is “a unique and special tribute to the life and accomplishments of Dr. Ian McTaggart-Cowan. And what a life it has been! Well-lived, productive, innovative, influential, pioneering, seminal are all words that come to mind. However, even in combination these words seem inadequate.”

Ian’s parents, Garry McTaggart Cowan and Laura Alice Mackenzie, were married in 1909 in Edinburgh, Scotland. Ian was born there the next year. Garry, his father, was offered a managerial position at a mine quarrying limestone on Texada Island in the Strait of Georgia so the family moved to Vancouver in 1913.

In 1923, National Parks of Canada offered a book prize to any Boy Scout who achieved his naturalist badge and submitted a bird diary covering a year of observations, for which Ian, one of the winners, received a copy of Gordon Hewitt’s book, *The Conservation of the Wildlife of Canada*. Ian’s diary was read by J.A. Munro, chief federal wildlife officer for Western Canada. Munro pointed out mistaken bird identifications that were based on his single book, Reed’s bird guide. In his final year of high school, Ian attended a lecture about small mammals by Kenneth Racey at the Burrard Field Naturalists’ Club. From that moment, Racey became Ian’s mentor; he accompanied the Racey family on many field trips and to their summer cottage.

In 1927 Ian, now six feet, four inches tall, enrolled in the honours zoology program at the University of British Columbia (UBC). He obtained important summer jobs as a naturalist, beginning in 1930, and graduated with his honours degree in biology in 1932. He went immediately to Berkeley, California to study under Dr Joseph Grinnell of the University of California, obtaining his Ph D degree in 1935. From then until 1940 Ian was on the staff of the British Columbia Provincial Museum, from which he made a number of collecting trips to fill in gaps of knowledge. In April 1936 he married Kenneth Racey’s daughter, Joyce.

In July 1940 Ian became an assistant professor of zoology at UBC, followed by promotions to a full professor in 1945 and head of the department in 1953. He had one notable peculiarity: whenever someone began speaking in a lecture theatre he closed his eyes and appeared to be sleeping. “Yet as soon as the speaker ceased, he would be able to summarize everything that had been said or ask questions that demonstrated his complete grasp of the lecture’s content.”

Ian was a pioneer in using television to educate the public. His first series, *Fur and Feathers*, began in

1955, followed by *The Living Sea* and then *The Web of Life*.

His excellence in teaching, his numerous scientific publications in all branches of zoology, and his public outreach together caused him to become known across Canada. He was appointed as a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada at the unusually early age of 36. His UBC role expanded to become Dean of Graduate Studies from 1964 until his “retirement” in 1975.

As a mammologist Ian named 17 new subspecies of mammal, 15 of which were from British Columbia. Charles Guiguet named a subspecies of vole, *Microtus townsendii cowani* in his honour. Among invertebrates, a chiton in the family *Ischnochitonidae* was named *Tripoplax cowani* and an amphipod in the family Hyalidae was named *Parallorchestes cowani*.

Ian’s wife, Joyce, had been his field partner at the start of their marriage but she quickly morphed into conjoint positions as supporter, skilled adjunct, assistant, and social convenor. When a cougar was deposited at their back door, Joyce had taken all its measurements and sexed it before Ian arrived home to deposit it in the University freezer. Joyce prepared refreshments for “cheerful gatherings at the Cowan household in Point Grey” and took containers of hot soup to Stephen R. Johnson when he conducted all-night experiments in the old UBC vivarium. Ian and Joyce celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary in April 1986. Her health declined in the late 1990s but she was able to stand in a reception line that honoured Ian at Government House in 2000, perhaps her final formal public appearance. She died peacefully at home on February 29, 2001, after 66 years of marriage. She was predeceased by their son Garry 15 January 1997 at age 56, and survived by Garry’s daughter Mariana and son Robert and their daughter Ann Schau.

Ian earned a reputation as a scientist and conservationist but his role was that of a statesman rather than of an activist demanding change and action. His speech, “Wild values for the future” to the annual convention of the BC Wildlife Federation in May 1969, reproduced in its 12-page entirety in this book, offers an ideal understanding of his ethos.

In 1972, Ian invited Wayne Campbell to his home to join with him in planning what became the magnificent, fact-filled, beautifully illustrated four volumes, *The Birds of British Columbia*. The first two volumes were published in 1990, with four additional authors listed; information was contributed by biologists and amateurs throughout the province.

Ian retired from UBC in 1975 and moved to Saanich on Vancouver Island in 1976. The next year, UBC awarded him the title and degree of Doctor of Science *honoris causa*. In 1979 at the age of 69, he was appointed Chancellor of the University of Victoria for a five-year term, chairing convocation, conferring degrees and serving on the board of governors and the senate.

Ian at this time learned computer skills, to participate more intensively in Volume 3 of *Birds of British Columbia* (with a seventh author, John Smith) in 1997 and volume 4 in 2001 (with Andrew Stewart as the substitute seventh author). By volume 4, Ian was 91 and in his twenty-sixth year of retirement.

Among his many honours I would single out the Aldo Leopold Award and Officer of the Order of Canada, both in 1970, the latter in only the third year of this award! He was named Officer of the Order of British Columbia (OBC) in 1991.

When awarded the Doris Huestis Speirs Award in 1998, the highest honour of the Society of Canadian Ornithologists, his acceptance speech demonstrated the problems in bird management that are unique to British Columbia. He noted, "The objective of most conservation measures seems to be to stop the clock; this we cannot do."

In his retirement years Ian was active in his other hobbies: gardening, growing prize rhododendrons, and philately, winning gold medals for Law Stamps and Federal Revenue Stamps.

"Ian had a very strong aesthetic response to the natural world. He lived a charmed life, being able to experience so much pristine or near pristine wilderness areas and habitats rich in wildlife, and his concern for such areas carried through in his efforts to preserve them and their values... He was a lifelong supporter of the Royal British Columbia Museum. He enjoyed symphonic and choral music and was a supporter of the Sydney Classical Orchestra where he attended concerts even into his 98th year. He was a shining example of good citizenship, having spent his entire life as a learner and educator. Ian contracted pneumonia and died April 18, 2010, just over two months short of his 100th birthday. He had remained active, attending Finnerty Gardens only a week before his death.

Ian was awarded a Doctorate of Environmental Studies by the University of Waterloo (1976), an honorary D.Sc. degree by the University of Victoria (1985) and the University of Northern British Columbia (1997), and LL.D. degrees by the University of Alberta (1971) and Simon Fraser University (1981). In 1988, the Association of Professional Biologists of British Columbia established the Ian McTaggart-Cowan Award of Excellence in Biology. His name is also associated with three permanent post-secondary scholarships to assist students: the Ian and Joyce McTaggart-Cowan scholarship and the Dr. Ian McTaggart-Cowan Scholarship in Environmental Studies at the University of Victoria and the Ian McTaggart-Cowan scholarship in Wild-

life Management at the University of Northern British Columbia. In addition, the University of Northern British Columbia created the Ian McTaggart-Cowan Muskwa-Kechika Research Chair and the University of Victoria, the Ian McTaggart-Cowan Professorship of Biodiversity Conservation and Ecological Restoration in its School of Environmental Studies. The University of Victoria named a student residence at its Commonwealth Village in his honour. An invertebrate, a septibranch bivalve, *Cuspidaria cowani* and a mammal, *Microtus townsendi cowani*, were named in his honour.

The longest Chapter (8) in this book is 148 pages. It correctly identifies Ian as the leading teacher of wildlife management in Canada. Ninety biologists, nine of them women, submitted their memories.

Jakimchuk, Campbell and Demarchi introduce the Memories section by explaining that these people (including nine women: Mary Agnes Bryant, Joyce Lanko Elliott, Pat Johnston, Deb Kennedy, Wini Kessler, Briony Penn, Mary Taylor, Nancy Wilkin, and Robin Wilson), had done their research before the days of GPS, radio-collars, and computers. They had "little more than notebooks, pencils and binoculars." Gore-Tex rain gear, lightweight down outerwear, and motel accommodations were unknown. They thought they had "the best jobs in the world"—and they did. The following are a few selected reminiscences:

"We are not lost. We have not crossed any ocean." "Hindsight is better than foresight by a damn sight." (James F. Bendell). "Passion and enthusiasm will get the job done." (Wayne Campbell). "There are no silly questions when asked honestly." (Valerius Geist).

"I was asked for a professional opinion, not my personal opinion." (David Francis Hatler). Grizzly Bears hunted ground squirrels "like swatting mosquitoes with a sledge hammer." (Lindsay Jones). "Tell me what you want to do and I will find the money." (Charles J. Krebs). "Wildlife management is 95% people management." "I judge a person's interest in their profession by the size of their bookcase." (Peter Ommundsen). "Choose your parents carefully. Find yourself an excellent partner. Eat lots of venison. Maintain enthusiasm." (Rod Silver). "Students would be better served by purchasing a good book rather than a bottle." (Tom Sterling).

Longer memories include the following. On a bet with a 20-minute limit, "Cowan took out his [pocket] knife and proceeded to skin out the ptarmigan in near perfect condition." (Tom J. Cade). "Dr Cowan set the bar high for his graduate students. He expected logical data, sound interpretation and good science. Implicitly he promised his support, his honesty and integrity and always the inferred hope of a lifetime adventure in the fresh air. He showed a deep respect for all living things as a necessary component of life on this planet. ... As a West Coast protégé of Aldo Leopold, he was an authentic icon who taught his personal values of self-

reliance, high ideals and the need for evidence-based knowledge.” (Alexander Dzubin).

“After leaving UBC ... I learned that about two-thirds of the scientists then in CWS had earned their first degrees, and then their masters, at UBC after Dr Cowan had come.” (Tony Erskine). At “Exploding Humanity, the Crisis of Numbers” in 1968, we invited Ian Cowan to speak at the closing session. “It was a carefully reasoned argument that was well received by the audience.” (Bruce Falls). “We raced to find a seat in the first year zoology lectures given by Ian McTaggart-Cowan. An overflow squeezed in each week to hear ‘his ability to communicate and educate with facts, illustrations and a wealth of knowledge, most of it obtained through his own field explorations’.” (Bryan R. Gates).

A great number of his students obtained employment as government biologists. “Many got frustrated and essentially gave up and left, but the ones he worried about most were those that gave up and stayed.” (Douglas Heard). “He shared [his] fascinations with an infectious enthusiasm and ready smile.” (Ron Jakim-

chuk). “The word ‘spry’ best conveys my impression of this extraordinary person, [with] boundless energy, sharpness of mind and keen wit.” (Wini Kessler).

“He was incredibly accessible to students, always listened to their ideas and was completely unstinting in his encouragement of anyone who was genuinely interested ... the work ethic he modelled was inspirational.” (Ian Stirling). “He remained loyal to graduate students – Canada’s last enslaved people.” (Robert Weeden). Chapter 11 summarizes the main findings of 123 theses and dissertations and also presents “A student’s appreciation” by David Hatler.

This compendium is marvellous. It will remind every biologist of “the good old days” of hardship, privation and low remuneration. It should act as a stimulus to every grad student in zoology or wildlife management. How fortunate that Howard White once took a class from Ian McTaggart-Cowan, became the president of Harbour Books, and has made this sumptuous, well-illustrated book his firm’s biography of the year!

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