

didn't use footnotes), the book is more in the nature of an extended essay than a work of research. It is very much written with the attitude of the 1990s and the author often seems to select historical facts to accord with his observations of late twentieth century people

rather than letting the facts dictate his conclusions. Nevertheless, testing his conclusions against historical evidence, both documentary and material, can give one a fresh perspective on the past.

**Peter Corley-Smith,  
*The Ring of Time:  
The Story of the British Columbia Provincial Museum and  
White Bears and Other Curiosities:  
The First 100 Years of the Royal British Columbia Museum***

DAVID RICHESON

Corley-Smith, Peter. *The Ring of Time: The Story of the British Columbia Provincial Museum*. Victoria: Special Publication No. 8, British Columbia Provincial Museum, 1985. 106 pp., 58 illus. Paper \$12.95, ISBN 0-7718-8428-1. *White Bears and Other Curiosities: The First 100 Years of the Royal British Columbia Museum*. Victoria: Royal British Columbia Museum, 1989. 148 pp., 143 illus. Paper \$12.95, ISBN 0-7718-8740-X.

The two books by Peter Corley-Smith deal in tandem with the history of the first 100 years of the British Columbia Provincial Museum (now the Royal British Columbia Museum). *White Bears and Other Curiosities: The First 100 Years of the Royal British Columbia Museum* covers the history of the museum between 1886 and 1968 as seen through a selection of incidents from the professional lives of the museum's first three curators and directors. *The Ring of Time: The Story of the British Columbia Provincial Museum* describes the 1968-1985 exhibit creation process that led to the impressive galleries in the new building. It also describes in lesser detail various aspects of the museum in and around the Heritage Court. Both books are gracefully written and lavishly illustrated with contemporary photographs or interesting illustrations. *The Ring of Time* concludes with a two-page chronology of the museum's history, but it lacks the index added to *White Bears*. Neither book includes a bibliography or citations of sources for the fre-

quent quotations from original documents used to illustrate the books' major premises.

Despite the combined presentation of a 100-year period the two books are based on entirely different approaches. *White Bears* presents the history of the evolution of the museum as a function of the personalities of the earliest curators and directors. It highlights their relationships with special interest groups, and the Provincial Government and details conflicts with other staff, while focusing on a few colourful episodes such as the pursuit of the illusive white bears of British Columbia from which the book's title is drawn. The author departs from this approach at the end of the 1950s because "the staff had grown to 14 and a separate book would be required to record all their activities." *The Ring of Time* differs entirely in that it describes the intellectual process within the museum that led to the selection and creation of exhibit themes and final exhibit gallery layout. References are made to personalities involved only by position title, and not a single individual is mentioned by name. The result is an abrupt contrast between two books linked in time and in general subject, but not in approach.

Assessed independently, one book has appeal for bringing into focus the human side of museum work, and the other for attempting to provide insight into the process through which museum collections, museum research, artistic creativity and funds are brought together to produce museum galleries. Museum curators,

exhibit designers and administrators of today will be reminded that most of the problems that occupy so much of their time are not unique to our generation: finding time and funds for collecting and research; finding proper space for storage of collections; presentation of exhibits and programmes; and getting along on a day-to-day basis within a community of talented, often temperamental, individuals who make up any museum.

Readers should also keep in mind that this is primarily the history of the British Columbia Museum of Natural History and Anthropology. Although the Provincial Library collected some artifacts related to economic and social history in British Columbia, it was not until another Provincial Museum Act was passed in 1967 that "modern history" became a significant part of the museum structure. The overwhelming success and public popularity of Modern History's chronological "street scene" exhibits, within which buildings and artifacts were used to reflect the economic changes and their impact on the social and political life of the province, resulted in this exhibit approach either being the inspiration for or used as a standard of comparison to many Canadian museum exhibits which came after.

The great success that the Modern History exhibits have enjoyed over the years appears to be based on several fundamental factors. Of prime importance was the curator's success in providing a concise conceptual framework for the exhibits.

*British Columbia developed through a series of major steps, each of which began as a fundamental shift in the regional economy, followed by demographic, politico-administrative, and socio-cultural upheavals which, when completed, allowed for yet another major economic step.<sup>1</sup>*

This framework was compatible with the museum's overall ecological emphasis. It also permitted the inclusion of a broad range of subjective issues such as politics, ethnicity and institutional growth to be included. The artifacts and the reproduction architecture

selected to represent the historical units within the overall concept were then utilized by the exhibit designer successfully to create colourful evocative exhibits that stimulated interest in the subject and enticed visitors to search out more information for themselves. Efforts were made of course through publications and education programmes to take advantage of the interest aroused and thus reinforce the overall impact of the exhibits.

Many other museums attempted the same approach, but none have been quite so successful within the limits imposed by gallery space, curatorial resources and funds available. The moral is that provision of vast funds and monumental buildings will not ensure museum exhibit success if the original conception of story and design cannot be given a unity which respects the integrity of each.

The environmentally based Natural History galleries and the First Peoples galleries which followed also set high standards for other museums to meet. The descriptions in *The Ring of Time* of the creation of the arresting introductory Woolly Mammoth and the forest and coastal dioramas provide fascinating insight into the creation of two of the most memorable exhibits in Canada. Problems, flaws and weaknesses in the *Ring of Time* exhibits are also alluded to in an effort to balance the treatment.

In summary the two books provide a glimpse into the growth of a dominant Canadian museum that will appeal to both museum professional and general reader. The author argues successfully that the Royal British Columbia Museum has a personality that has been formed from its collective experience. At times it has been both professional and eccentric. It has been outspoken at times on environmental issues and at times defensive in the face of political pressure. It has been at all times reflective of both British Columbia and of the Canadian museum community. It remains a museum that on the basis of maturity, expertise and proven success deserves the recognition that Peter Corley-Smith has successfully attempted to give in his two books.

#### NOTES

1. Daniel Gallacher, "Exhibits as Overviews: The Case of British Columbian Modern History," *Western Canadian History: Museum Interpretations*, ed. D. R. Richeson, National Museum of Man Mercury Series: History Division Paper no. 27 (Ottawa, 1979), pp. 15-16.

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