

## WILLIAM KAYE LAMB: A EULOGY

*W. Kaye Lamb (May 11, 1904 - August 24, 1999) was Provincial Archivist and Librarian of British Columbia (1934-40), University Librarian of the University of British Columbia (1940-48), Dominion Archivist of Canada (1948-68), and National Librarian of Canada (1953-67).*

*This eulogy was delivered at Lamb's memorial service in Vancouver on 31 August 1999 by Basil Stuart-Stubbs (University Librarian Emeritus, and former Director, UBC School of Library, Archival and Information Studies), and is reprinted with permission.*

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"The childhood shows the man  
As morning shows the day."

John Milton said that over three hundred years ago, and today I will prove it to you.

When they brought Kaye Lamb home from the Royal Columbian Hospital in May 1904, numerous admiring relatives peering into his crib observed that he was a very busy baby. And so he was, then and for the rest of his days.

In retrospect it is easy for us to see how throughout his long life events and developments at one stage foreshadowed those that would occur at a later stage. Significant changes appear to have been the result of accident, or fate, or strange coincidence.

For example, when the busy baby was ready to enter Grade 1, the school he attended in New Westminster was the F.W. Howay School, named after the distinguished judge, historian and collector who would later become one of Kaye's great friends and benefactors.

He was living on the family farm in Surrey when it was time for him to enter high school, and his parents decided that it would be in Kaye's best interests to move to Vancouver, so he was turned over to the care of his uncle and aunt. This was not just any uncle, but the one after whom he was named, Joseph Kaye Henry, who was on the faculty of McGill College in its English Department, and later on the faculty of the new successor institution, the University of British Columbia. At McGill College Henry had an additional assignment: he was the custodian of its library, which was eventually incorporated into U.B.C.'s library. Thus Kaye was suddenly immersed in an academic environment, with access to Uncle Henry's books, and through him to books in U.B.C. Library; and in common with other city residents, he could also borrow books from the Vancouver Public Library. The Henry home, by the way, was located on the west side of Beach Avenue near Stanley Park. In other words, waterfront property, which afforded Kaye an ideal view of harbour traffic, for already he had become enthralled by seagoing vessels. The home, demolished long ago, was in the immediate proximity of the apartment on Pendrell Street where he spent his years in retirement; and both were close to King George School on Barclay Street, which he attended. When he returned from Ottawa in 1969, he was certainly coming back to his roots.

The habit of reading was already deeply ingrained. It may surprise you to know that during his student years, continuing through to his years of graduate study, Kaye was several times afflicted with illnesses so severe that they would keep him in bed for months and cause him to miss entire academic sessions. This was not wasted time, however. I don't think he knew how to waste time. While he was bed-ridden he would read one book after another. As we all know, he had a phenomenal memory, and in his old age could recall the titles of some of the books he had read eighty years ago, including children's books dealing with ships.

In the fall of 1923 Kaye enrolled at U.B.C. in the Faculty of Arts. There the major influences on his intellectual life were Walter Sage, Frederick Soward, Garnett Sedgewick, Harry Ashton, and Frederick Wood. Working as a student assistant in the library, where he often sat in the Main Concourse keeping the Library open on weekends, he also came to know U.B.C.'s first librarian, John Ridington, who would later be one of his many champions. Kaye's academic record was, of course, flawless, and when he graduated in 1927 it was with first class honours in history. He was described in the student annual as brilliant, on two accounts. His peers recognized in him a superior intellect, as have all of us. The other respect in which he was brilliant was tonsorial: he had a shock of red hair. It didn't last long. Kaye was also involved in extra-curricular activities, and even won a prize from the Players' Club for a one act comedy he wrote, with the title "The Usual Thing." Five and six decades later he was still meeting over lunch with friends he had made during these university years, enduring friendships being one of his specialties.

His outstanding performance as a student earned him a Nichol Scholarship which provided for three years of post-graduate study in France. By 1928 he was in Paris, attending courses at the Sorbonne and the Ecole Libre des Sciences Politiques, and there he remained until 1932. However, he interrupted his stay, due again to ill health, to return to Vancouver in 1929/30, where while recuperating he completed the requirements for a M.A. in history, the subject of his thesis being "The Genesis of the British Labour Party." Again, no time wasted. Following his return to Paris, and acting on the advice of his former mentors at U.B.C., he conceived of a plan for working on a Ph.D. at the London School of Economics, while carrying out part of his research in Paris. The LSE accepted his proposal, and Kaye found himself working with a most eminent thesis supervisor: Harold Laski, who signed off his Ph.D. in 1933. His research was carried out mainly in two great national libraries, the Bibliotheque nationale and the British Museum; experiences there would be of use later, for he took note of the strengths and shortcomings in the services provided by both institutions. And despite all the work, he had immersed himself in the cultural life of two major capitals and cultures, becoming comfortably bilingual in the process. He led a thoroughly enjoyable life as a student, frequently in the company of his future wife, Wessie Tipping, a Vancouver native and a student scholar of French literature in her own right.

He was now almost thirty years old, and in retrospect we can see that the busy baby syndrome had manifested itself in ways that had prepared him well for the distinguished career that lay ahead. You will recognize the characteristics: the acute intelligence, the boundless energy, the probing curiosity, the ability to work long, hard and efficiently, the appetite for life, the aptitude for friendship.

What next? His academic qualifications were complete, and he seemed destined for a career as a professor, but the Depression had hit hard at universities everywhere. Without prospects he returned to Vancouver and to an uncertain future. The History Department at U.B.C. was able to offer him a few chores, marking essays and the like. Then, in 1934, one man's misfortune would change the direction of Kaye's life. The B.C. Provincial Archivist and Librarian, John Hosie, died unexpectedly. There was an urgent search for a successor, and Kaye was invited to apply, undoubtedly with thanks to his several admiring mentors. To his amazement he was appointed to the position, and was transformed in an instant from an indigent post-doctoral student into a civil servant with a secure position and a salary. Many things were now possible, including, eventually, marriage.

Here again we see an example of the foreshadowing that marked his career. He was responsible for both the Provincial Archives and the Provincial Library. He couldn't have suspected it, but it was ideal preparation for the future. However, it appeared that he might have one serious shortcoming: he had never managed an organization or even supervised the work of another person.

Here is a remarkable thing: he knew what to do. He seemed to have an innate understanding of organizational behavior and human nature. His immediate approach to his new position of authority was to place his entire trust in the staff. Trust and delegation were to be the permanent hallmarks of his administrative style. Similarly, he seemed to have an instinctive knowledge of bureaucracies and how to work within them effectively.

Although he undoubtedly had much to learn and much to do, his employers were not beyond giving him more responsibility, and he was appointed Superintendent and Secretary of the Public Library Commission. Thus he became the caretaker of an expanding network of regional libraries. Nor was he beyond creating more work for himself, for in 1936 he founded, and then edited for ten years, the British Columbia Historical Quarterly. It also

marked the beginning of his own career as a productive historian, and he began to write for publication, concentrating on exploration by land and sea, the fur trade, and British Columbia generally. Ultimately it became a puzzle for those who observed him at work: was he a historian who happened to manage libraries and archives, or was he a librarian and archivist who happened to write history? From his own perspective it was probably an integrated whole. I will depart from this chronology briefly to point out that after his retirement in 1969, his scholarship picked up speed, and the next two decades were perhaps the most productive of his life, culminating in 1985 with the publication by the Hakluyt Society of his four volume edition of Vancouver's voyages, the 256 page introduction to which, a book in itself, is the definitive biography of Captain Vancouver.

His tenure as Provincial Archivist and Librarian would not be long. At U.B.C. its first librarian, John Ridington, had finally been obliged to retire at the age of 72. He didn't want to, but if he had to go, he had a successor in mind, whom he recommended in the strongest terms to President Klinck. Thus in 1940 Kaye Lamb received an unexpected invitation to return to U.B.C. as its University Librarian, and he accepted. Once again he found a capable staff in place, Ridington's adjutants in the persons of Mabel and Roland Lanning, Anne Smith, Dorothy Jefferd and Eleanor Mercer. And he trusted them. The library had experienced difficult times during the Depression and conditions were just improving when the war broke out. When it ended veterans inflated the student body from about 2,300 to about 7,300, but the Main Library was designed for 1,500 users. The collection too, now at 300,000 volumes and the second largest in Canada, was overflowing the shelves. Among those volumes now were the merged collections of two great friends of Kaye's: Judge F.W. Howay and Robie E. Reid, constituting Canada's greatest collection of Pacific Northwest Americana and British Columbianana. An addition was urgently needed, and work commenced on the design and construction of the first major addition to the 1925 building, the north wing. The building was barely finished when another opportunity would come his way. For the third time in succession he would be offered a position for which he had not applied. He had been nominated in 1946 without his prior knowledge as Vice-President of the fledgling Canadian Library Association, and in the following year of his presidency events conspired to bring him face to face with the Prime Minister of Canada, Mackenzie King. This is a story I will leave for others to tell. As you know that encounter resulted in his appointment as the Dominion Archivist, but Kaye had negotiated a special provision: that he would be responsible for establishing a National Library. Which he did. Once again that innate talent surfaced. In the case of both institutions, he knew what to do.

Many people have said to me in recent years that for them Kaye Lamb was an inspiration, an example to be followed. He certainly was for me. Recently, as his health declined, I noticed that he was not consuming much hospital food, hospital food being, I guess, an oxymoron. And it occurred to me that his real food, the food that was sustaining his life, was words. His reading list was daunting. Newspapers: the *Vancouver Sun* and the *Globe & Mail*, then the *National Post* because he thought its prose was better. The *Manchester Guardian Weekly*. The *Times Literary Supplement*. The *Economist*. Lighter fare, like *Maclean's* and *Saturday Night*. The *New Yorker*. Followed by books, several at a time. Want a conversation? He could handle any topic, from ancient history to current affairs. It was this constant feeding of his mind and his lively interest in the world, I think, that made it possible for him to almost overlook the countless insults that nature was delivering to his body.

I should mention too that he was a devoted and critical reader also of unpublished works, of those works in progress that I, among many others, would bring to him for a frank appraisal. As an editor he had an incredible advantage: he knew everything, or so it seemed. Did someone overlook an article? I have seen him give a reference over the phone to a specific volume and issue, without getting out of bed. Which he couldn't do in any case.

This brings me to the phenomenon of his capacious memory, which was simply dazzling, the moreso because it was still functioning. He had the rare ability in one so ancient to recall recent events. He would pick up our conversation where we had left it off a week or two previously.

When I last saw him a couple of weeks ago I found him apparently fast asleep but with a book firmly clenched in an open position in his hands. And I thought about the sickly little boy, reading in bed. Then he opened his eyes and gave me a friendly smile. Wordsworth put it even more succinctly than Milton:

"The child is the father of the man."

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