

Book of wonders, large and small / HISTORY

A thing for Canada

Gray leads us on a fascinating tour of our past and present

The Museum Called Canada:
25 Rooms of Wonder

by Charlotte Gray
Random House
708 pp., \$65

Review by
MARC HORTON

The binding on this handsome volume, that successfully captures the essence of what it is to be Canadian, is almost boxlike. It's hard-cornered, and the paper is imprinted with a wood-grain pattern.

And once you open this box, you'll find a nation's story ranging from a photograph of the fossilized path taken by a two-billion-year-old microscopic worm called Rhysonetron Bye in Flack Lake, Ont., all the way to a spectacular view of the country's North Atlantic coast taken from Skylab.

It is a box... a book... of wonders, large and small.

Vancouver writer Douglas Coupland attempted much the same thing with his *Souvenir of Canada*. So successful was his first volume that Coupland followed it up with a second in a similar fashion. While Coupland paid homage to this nation, his tongue was occasionally in his cheek.

Not so here, although Gray, famous for biographies like *Flint and Feather: The Life and Times of E. Pauline Johnson*, *Tekahionawake* and *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Lives of Susanna Moodie and Catherine Parr Traill*, is a witty guide as she leads readers through Canada's history.

Gray received assistance from Sara Angel, the book designer who is listed as creator and curator of *The Museum Called Canada*. Angel, who also designed *Fights of Our Lives*, a vivid political history of this country written by John Duffy, outdoes herself with this latest volume.

The Museum Called Canada is beautiful to hold. It is even more beautiful to open.

"There is so much history in things," writes Gray in her introduction, "and not only those that have a personal relevance. Whether they are natural objects, such as pebbles or bones, or artifacts such as teapots, maps, or feather bonnets, things allow us to engage with history in a way that is far more immediate than the abstract connection offered by the written word."

The Museum Called Canada is chockablock with things. There are fossils and hockey cards. There is a mysterious serrated tool more than 3,000 years old that was used by the Taltheilei, the vanished ancestors of the Dene, which was found east of Great Slave Lake. There is a photo of the skull — actually half of the skull — of Jesuit martyr Jean de Brebeuf, who died along with Gabriel Lalemant on a chilly March afternoon in 1649 after being unspeakably tortured by the Huron.

There is also a series of pictures showing a piece of the rope that may have been used in the hanging of Metis patriot Louis Riel, his execution hood, the moccasins, decorated with porcupine quills, that he wore, and a headless statuette of St. Joseph. When the statue fell to the floor its head broke off. Riel took the beheading as a bad omen.

Given Gray's previous book on the poet E. Pauline Johnson, it's not surprising that there is an essay on her, and a photograph of the costume she wore when she recited her Indian poems before thousands in Canada, the U.S. and Britain.

What is surprising is that Johnson's costume came from the Hudson's Bay Company in Winnipeg, and the poet and her sister altered it to resemble the illustration of Minnehaha, wife of Hiawatha, in the copy of Longfellow's epic poem from which their mother had read to her daughters.

The book leads us right up to today, with stops along the way at Rocket Richard and Wayne Gretzky, whose androgynous portrait by Andy Warhol is reproduced. Suint at this picture, and our Wayne

looks just a little bit like Princess Di.

There is, naturally, much here on the wars in which Canada fought. Particularly affecting is the essay dealing with the gas attacks of the First World War.

Alberta is well-represented, with a reproduction of a prosperity certificate issued in 1936 by the government of William Aberhart, as well as a charming, funny essay on the UFO landing pad built in St. Paul as part of Canada's 1967 celebrations. It's a structure that continues to draw tourists to the town.

"Too many other Centennial projects had a short shelf life," Gray writes. "Centennial gardens withered; Centennial statues cracked; Centennial li-

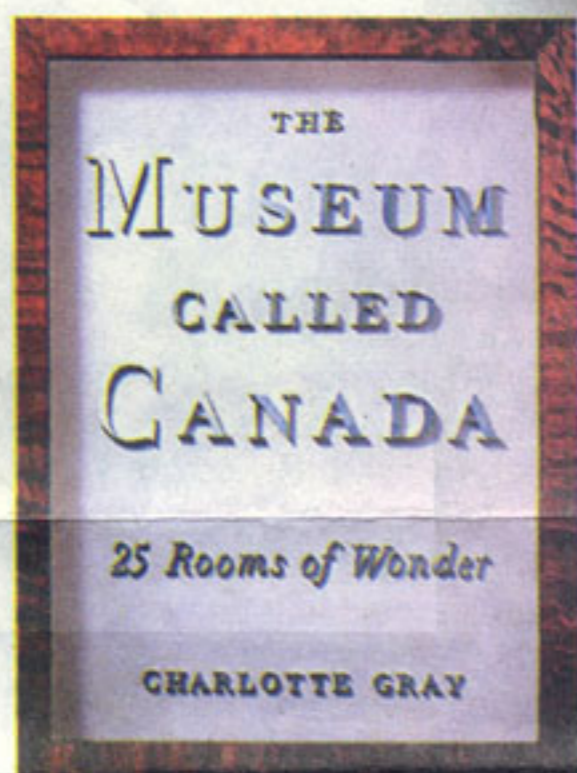
braries have seen their acquisition budgets slashed. But St. Paul's Centennial UFO landing pad has parked a whole industry. Captain Kirk would be proud."

She's right, of course. Centennial projects are now mostly faded memories for many.

This book, however, will not suffer that fate. Because it tells us who we are and how we got here, and pays tribute to the First Nations people and the pioneers, it will have a shelf life as long as Canada's itself.

It is, simply, indispensable.

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Clockwise from above:
Pauline Johnson's performance costume, 1892; curling stone, approx. 1850; half-skull of Jean de Brebeuf, 1649; Wayne Gretzky portrait by Andy Warhol, 1983; tomahawk, approx. 1760; Prelude to Confederation by Rex Woods; Siksika pictograph robe, early 20th century; alligator-like skull fossil, approx. 75 million years old.

