

Holiday Books

# Pick of the Season

## The museum you can hold in your hand

By Peter Schneider

Imagine a museum containing three billion years of history that's small enough to hold in your hand. *The Museum Called Canada: 25 Rooms of Wonder*, is an unprepossessing brick of a book on the outside— its dust jacket is designed to resemble the front of an old filing cabinet — but inside, another story emerges. Through witty layout and design, the book divides Canada's past into 25 chapters, or 'rooms', showcasing both natural and man-made objects as a museum would. Accompanying the parade of illustrations are essays written by celebrated Canadian historian Charlotte Gray, whose earlier books include *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Lives of Susanna Moodie and Catherine Parr Trail* (1999) *Flint & Feather: The Life and Times of E. Pauline Johnson, Tekahionwake* (2002), and *Canada: A Portrait in Letters* (2003). Charlotte Gray spoke with *Embassy* about this latest project over breakfast at the Chateau Laurier last month.

"The person I worked with on this book was Sara Angel, who's credited as the curator. She had done a very successful book a few years back, *Canada: Our Century*, and she realized that Canadians are very hungry to know about our country, but don't know quite where to go. It was Sara's idea that she would put together a book that had pictures of all the neatest stuff in our museums, in our archives — not just manufac-



PHOTOGRAPH BY TOM HILLMAN, EMBASSY

tured artifacts, but prehistoric materials and fossils. She wanted a guide voice, somebody to tell the story, and that's where I came in."

Known for her exhaustively-researched biographies, Charlotte Gray was unfazed by the constraints of this visually-oriented book. She said, "It wasn't as much of a stretch as you might imagine, because I began as a writer in magazines. As a periodical writer, I was used to working within the lengths and limits that magazine layout requires. With this book, what I have to do is get the reader involved. If it spikes their curiosity, that's fabulous. There are further sources for

everything in the back of the book, if that's where readers want to go. But it's designed literally as a virtual museum, and just like a visit to a museum, you can wander around and stare at objects that strike your fancy. If you want to know more about things, you can Google them, or go to the library. You can just as easily say, 'maybe I'll go back to the museum.' This is a way to capture three billion years of history fairly effortlessly."

Commenting on the book's distinctive, chunky format, Ms. Gray said, "I don't know what your experience of coffee table books is, but my experience is that they sit on a coffee

table and you never look at them. Whereas, this one, you can actually carry around. I think the format works really well."

Could there be a demand for this title in diplomatic circles? "I think so," the author said. "It will give them a sense of the extraordinary variety of the different streams in Canadian cultural life and history. Somebody was telling me that Canada's high commissioner in London is very interested in seeing a copy. The standard diplomatic gift is a beautiful photographic book; those books are beautiful, but they don't get underneath."

Summing up her perspective on Canadian history, Ms. Gray said wryly, "I don't know where Canadians get this 'we're dry and boring' stuff. If I have one advantage, maybe it's that I didn't grow up here. I can't believe the gothic byways of Canadian history, and its extraordinary richness. That being said, I didn't realize what I was doing, when I started writing about Canadian history, but all of my books come at history from an oblique or rather unexpected angle. This one is history seen through things."

***The Museum Called Canada: 25 Rooms of Wonder***  
Text by Charlotte Gray  
Design by Sara Angel  
Random House of Canada  
\$65.00, 715 pp.

History seen through things: a typical layout illustrates the War of 1812.