

# From fossils to fuel cells, new history book forms virtual museum of Canada

## This Country



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**O**n Thanksgiving weekend, Sara Angel is scheduled to give birth — twice.

They should weigh pretty much the same.

One already has a name; the other a title.

One may, one day, make a mark on the country, but for the first while, that will be handled by diapers.

The other, with a bit of luck, will have instant impact, and leave a lasting impression.

Sara Angel, soon-to-be-mother of Charlie, is in her working life a “creator” of books, a person who trusts in coming up with a single ingenious idea for a new book in a world in which far, far too many books are published each fall.

She puts together authors and artists and illustrators and designers and editors, oversees the production from first notion to first print run.

And once all that is done, she prays that enough buyers are willing to line up and pay, in this case \$65, for a look at what was dancing freely in her head a few months, or even years, ago.

Angel, who came up with *Canada: Our Century* five years ago — a bestseller that sold an impressive 60,000 copies — is this fall staking her growing publishing reputation on a 705-page opus entitled *The Museum Called Canada*.

It is, to put it mildly, a rather brassy idea: to take a concept that might fill, at minimum, the province of Prince Edward Island if the various artifacts were on actual display, and reduce it all to a thick, rectangular package that weighs about as much as . . . a newborn babe.

It is a book that opens as a museum — complete with a sign telling visitors where the elevator is to be found — and then takes the reader through 25 different “rooms.” The rooms run all the way from discoveries of fossil bones dating back millions of years to a discovery from far more recent years, Geoff Ballard’s hydrogen-powered fuel cell that may one day end our dependence on fossil fuels.

There are rooms covering everything from water to war, from the early martyrs of Central Canada to the early settlers of Western Canada, from the clothing style of 16th-century Basque sailors to the pop-culture styles of the sixties, seventies, eighties and nineties.

There is even the perfect guide: Charlotte Gray, who has become to popular Canadian history what Pierre Berton meant to our sense of country in previous years.

Angel went to a talk Gray was giving at the University of Toronto about poet E. Pauline Johnson, also known by her Mohawk name Te-kahionwake. And Angel felt instantly that Gray

would understand what such a book might accomplish.

“She *had* to be the guide,” Angel says.

Despite having another massive project on the go — a full biography of Alexander Graham Bell — Gray liked what she heard from Angel and agreed to join in on the unusual project.

This book, Gray says in her introduction, is a “virtual museum for [the 21st century] — a way of looking at Canada’s vast sweep of history that no physical building could ever accommodate. When I wandered through the Trap Room, I understood the powerful grasp of the Hudson’s Bay Company on our land. In the Global Village Square, I began to appreciate how each post-war generation has redefined for itself Canada’s role in the world.”

While Angel and her staff chose the materials that would appear in each room — hardly a page in the massive book is without a photograph or illustration — Gray was asked to contribute an essay on each room on any matter that caught her fancy.

The essays are gems: from an astonishing story on the “afterlife” of Jean de Brébeuf’s skull — “a story more Gothic than I could have imagined,” Gray writes — to a loving retracing of what became of General James Wolfe’s treasured copy of *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard*.

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The doomed Wolfe is said to have quoted from the sentimental poem just as the battle began for the Plains of Abraham and then added, “Gentlemen, I would sooner have written that poem than take Quebec.” Romantic, perhaps, but once Gray deals with the realities of the battle, highly, highly unlikely that he said any such thing.

“This is a book no museum could create,” Angel says.

“There are just too many politics involved, too much concern about rights, too much difficulty with permissions, too much cost for insurance, not to mention the availability of so many of these artifacts.

“But our country deserves to have stories told like this. Canadian history is, to me, 100 per cent compelling and fascinating.

“I thought if we played with the metaphor of Canada as a museum, then there was no doubt in my mind that it could work as a book — and I was convinced that people would be enormously amazed so long as it was done right.” It has been done right indeed.

And it is a work of amazement.

Almost as much as the birth of a child.

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