WILLIAM KAYE LAMB , May 11, 1904 – August 24, 1999¹

Basil Stuart-Stubbs²

Ten months have elapsed since Kaye Lamb left us, and in that interval there have been many tributes extolling his distinguished career as an archivist and librarian. Rather than echo those here, because this is a meeting of the Bibliographical Society of Canada, I would prefer to tell you about his other career, his life with print. It affords us an unusual opportunity to explore the significance of books, reading and writing in the life of one person, over the incredible span of nine decades.

In an unpublished memoir he recalled from about the age of five his first memory of a book. It was that Canadian icon, the Eaton's catalogue, which he was enjoying enormously because he was busy cutting out its pictures with a pair of scissors. This may have been an early manifestation of his substantial editorial talents, destined to bloom later in his life.

Lamb was born in New Westminster into a literate but not a markedly literary household. There was current reading aplenty: the local newspapers as well as subscriptions to the *Family Herald and Weekly Star*, *Country Gentleman*, *Saturday Evening Post*, *Ladies Home Journal*, and, especially for Kaye and his older brother Cecil, *Popular Mechanics*. It may surprise you to know that Kaye, who lived to such a great age, was a very sickly boy, whose infirmity kept him out of school for two years before he was ten, and in bed for months on end. Perhaps this was why the habit of reading was so deeply ingrained in him. At the time there was little else that he could do.

His favorite reading was the *Wonder Book of Ships*,³ and it lit in him an inextinguishable flame. Ships became a lifetime interest and led him to become one of the world's foremost authorities on the

1 This tribute was read at the Annual Conference of the Bibliographical Society of Canada/La Société bibliographique du Canada in Edmonton on 19 June 2000.

2 Basil Stuart Stubbs is Professor and University Librarian Emeritus, University of British Columbia.

3 Golding, Harry, ed. *The Wonder Book of Ships*. 2nd edition. New York: Frederick A. Stokes, [1914] 256 p.

history of maritime exploration and trade, particularly in the Pacific Northwest. Let no one doubt the importance of reading in childhood.

When he was well enough to attend school in New Westminster, he was enrolled at the F.W. Howay Elementary School, named after the already famous and distinguished jurist and historian. As you will hear, this early association with the name of Howay foreshadowed important developments later in life. In 1917, when Kaye was thirteen, the family moved to a farm across the Fraser River in Surrey, and there he attended a single-room school. His teacher at that time, Elva (Buettner)Brown, in her old age recalled him as "...an extremely clever boy with an insatiable appetite for information."⁴ His parents recognized that both he and his brother Cecil were exceptional students whose potential could not be realized in a rural school, so they sent the boys to Vancouver for their last two years of high school, there to live with their Uncle Kaye and Aunt May.

This was no ordinary uncle. Joseph Kaye Henry (after whom our subject had been named) was the son of a minister from Shubenacadie, Nova Scotia, a graduate of Pictou Academy and Dalhousie University, and the first Professor of English at the new University of British Columbia. His waterfront home stood on Beach Avenue at the western entrance to Stanley Park, affording a view of harbour traffic. The house was already full of books, but Henry, taking his new responsibilities as a professor seriously, decided to acquire the 11th edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Kaye Lamb was there when the crate was unpacked, and he immediately sought out the entry for Ship, and then the entries for Architecture and Art ... he had become fascinated by the construction of Gothic cathedrals. He would inherit that set of the Britannica, and upon his retirement a half century later he donated it to the National Library, where it is still in use in the Reference Room. Starting his own library, Kaye acquired *Lloyd's Registry of Shipping*, at age 17 perhaps its youngest subscriber. He now had access to the Vancouver Public Library, and through his uncle, the growing library at U.B.C., from which he borrowed bound volumes of engineering journals so he could study naval architecture.

Although the two brothers leaned heavily toward things factual, it was probably Aunt May as well as their uncle who encouraged their interest in literature of the imagination. Every Sunday evening,

4 Treleavan, G. Fern. *The Surrey Story*. Surrey, B.C.: Surrey Museum and Historical Society, 1978, p. 73.

after dinner, they would repair to the living room to hear Aunt May read to them the novels of Dickens, Thackeray and Austen. As a result Kaye Lamb in later life had high standards for fiction, and if a novel didn't meet those standards in the first couple of chapters, he would set it aside. The same standards he applied to detective fiction, where his preference was for Agatha Christie, whose novels he read repeatedly for relaxation.

In 1922, at the age of 18, Kaye Lamb commenced his career as a published author. The Cunard Line had announced its intention of establishing a trans-Pacific route, and Kaye composed a report on this development which he submitted to the *Surrey Gazette*, and was delighted to see it published. Subsequently the *Gazette* and then the *Vancouver Province* printed articles on nautical subjects which Kaye had written. One of these, published in 1925 when he was a student at U.B.C., describes the life of crew members on an ocean liner when it was in harbour.⁵ By this time the hallmarks of his literary style were already evident: his writing then and thereafter was lucid, economical, supple and expressive. He owed this, no doubt, to his mentors, primarily his uncle, and also the pioneer faculty members at U.B.C., Garnett Sedgewick in English, Walter Sage in History, Frederick Soward in Political Science, and Frederick Wood in Theatre. By the way, a unique item in his list of publications is a play he wrote, and which was performed by the Players' Club. Despite this early success he did not pursue a career as a playwright, nor as a naval architect. History was his chosen subject, if not his religion.

He was, as has been noted elsewhere, a brilliant student, who upon graduation received a scholarship that would allow him to spend years in graduate study in France and England, with such distinguished mentors as André Siegfried and Harold Laski. In the course of these studies there must have been much writing in the shape of essays, and we do know that his doctoral thesis for the London School of Economics dealt with the history of the Labour Party. He was something of a perpetual student, spending most of his twenties abroad. It was an idyllic existence. Often in the company of his future wife, he was visiting galleries, attending plays and concerts, travelling to castles, cathedrals and chateaux.

5 Lamb, W. Kaye. «Busy Times for Crews When Big Passenger Liners Are In Port.» *Vancouver Province*, September 6, 1925.

In 1934, at the age of thirty, he was suddenly catapulted into the position of British Columbia's Provincial Archivist and Librarian, due in part to the unexpected death of the incumbent and in part to the government's determination to fill such positions with the best qualified candidates. His reputation as a student plus the doctorate did the trick, and he started his professional career at the top.

The prodigious energy and zest which characterized his approach to his work was evident from the beginning. The Archives and Library were revitalized, and many projects were launched, including in 1937 a new periodical: *The British Columbia Historical Quarterly*, which he edited for a decade, thereby refining his skills as a commentator on the writings of other authors. It also rekindled Lamb's own propensity for research and writing, and the first volume of the *Quarterly* contained two of his articles. A pattern was thus established. For the rest of his working career, until his retirement in 1968, he produced between one and seven articles per year, mainly related to British Columbia and its maritime history. Almost the same statistic applies to book reviews, of which he wrote between one and five per year in the same time period.⁶ We have no record of the number of speeches he composed and delivered, but they were numerous, given his positions of responsibility, including his presidencies of virtually every organization to which he ever belonged.

But this was not all. He was not just an exceptional text editor but also a publications editor par excellence. He was the chief editorial consultant for the *Encyclopedia Canadiana*, to which he himself contributed ten articles. As an editor of primary sources he published the journals and letters of Daniel Williams Harmon, Simon Fraser, Gabriel Franchère, and Alexander Mackenzie, all landmarks in Canadian historiography.

Prolific though he was, his responsibilities as Dominion Archivist and National Librarian detracted from his career as a historian and made it difficult for him to produce entire monographs. Retirement liberated him in this respect, and in the following decade he made up for lost time: in 1971,⁷ *Canada's Five Centuries: From Discovery to the Present Day*; in 1974, *The Princess Story: A Century and a Half of*

6 Evans, Gwynneth, Hawkins, Elizabeth and Honeywell, Joan. «Bibliography of Published Works of William Kaye Lamb.» *Archivaria*, no. 15, Winter 1982-83, p. 131-144.

7 Lamb, W. Kaye. *Canada's Five Centuries: From Discovery to the Present Day*. Toronto: McGraw-Hill of Canada, 1971. 326 p.

West Coast Shipping;⁸ in 1977, the *History of the Canadian Pacific Railway*.⁹ During this period he was also the General Editor of the *Prime Ministers of Canada Series* for McGraw Hill Ryerson. And again during this post-retirement period he contributed fifteen entries to the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*.

His writing career culminated in 1984, when at the age of 80 he saw into print his four volume edition for the Hakluyt Society of the *Voyages of Captain George Vancouver*,¹⁰ the first volume of which is mainly taken up with what amounts to the definitive biography of the great navigator. This may have been the culmination, but it was not the end, because he continued to produce articles and reviews until his physical infirmities made it impossible for him to get to his typewriter. An attempt to teach him how to use a laptop computer in bed was a failure, unfortunately; he kept looking for the carriage return. To the best of my knowledge his last publication appeared when he was 94 in the October 1998 issue of the *National Library News*,¹¹ wherein he describes how Mackenzie King was won over to the cause of the National Library by the presentation of a reel of microfilm containing the newspapers published by King's rebel grandfather.

I turn now from Lamb's career as an author and editor to his relationship with books themselves. What kind of a collector was Kaye Lamb? He had two exemplars in his youth. One was Frederick W. Howay, and the other was Robie L. Reid, two lawyers and close personal friends, both of whom befriended Lamb, both of whom contributed articles to his *British Columbia Historical Quarterly*, and both of whom had magnificent personal collections of books pertaining to B.C. and Canadian history. Howay and Reid differed in their approach to collecting. Howay wanted books to support his research and writing. Condition did not carry much weight with him, and he was not above entering marginalia in ink in rare volumes.

8 Lamb, W. Kaye. *The Princess Story: A Century and a Half of West Coast Shipping*. Vancouver: Mitchell Press, 1974. 360 p.

9 Lamb, W. Kaye. *History of the Canadian Pacific Railway*. New York: Macmillan, 1977. 491 p.

10 Vancouver, George. *A Voyage of Discovery to the North Pacific Ocean and Round the World, 1791-1795*. With an introduction and appendices edited by W. Kaye Lamb. London: Hakluyt Society, 1984. (Hakluyt Society Ser.2, v. 163-166)

11 Lamb, W. Kaye. «Reel of Honour.» *National Library News*, v. 30 no. 10, October 1998, p. 13.

Reid was more of an antiquarian collector, an accumulator who wanted everything, and in all editions; he painstakingly affixed in every book he purchased a tiny label recording its source, date of acquisition and cost. Kaye Lamb was in the school of F.W. Howay. His was a practical, working collection; in his apartment den one wall was covered by shelves from ceiling to floor, and it contained virtually everything he needed for his current work. If he lacked something, that was what libraries were for. To support his reading habit, he bought new books that caught his attention, and then passed them on to others or donated them to libraries, rather than retaining them.

At an institutional level, though, his attitude was different, and he was, in a sense, a collector of collectors. Both Howay and Reid willed their collections to U.B.C. at the time that Lamb was its University Librarian. His annual reports faithfully record the donations of collection after collection, major building blocks in the development of a research library. I believe an examination of his activities at the Dominion Archives and National Library would reveal a similar talent for attracting significant donations, and for acquiring collections en bloc.

Again, because this is a meeting of the Bibliographical Society of Canada, it is essential to examine Kaye Lamb's relationship to Canadian bibliography. That he knew the subject thoroughly you can determine for yourself by reading his paper on the subject in volume 51 of the *Royal Society of Canada's Transactions*.¹² It is not easy to make what is essentially a list of titles interesting, but he succeeds. He was not himself a bibliographer, unless a bibliography was needed to support his writing. But he was a great admirer of bibliographers, and in particular of Bruce Peel and Marie Tremain. They in turn acknowledged his assistance and support in their respective prefaces. Armed with their works, Lamb arranged for the microfilming of the books they listed, beginning a process of simultaneously preserving and disseminating copies of rare Canadiana, now carried on by the Canadian Institute for Historical Micro-reproductions.

If he was not a bibliographer of the ilk of Tremain and Peel, we should not forget that he had a brief but important career as a classifier. In 1941 he decided that the Library of Congress classification

12 Lamb, W. Kaye. "Seventy-Five Years of Canadian Bibliography." *Royal Society of Canada Transactions*, vol. 51, ser. III, June 1957, p. 1-11.

needed improvement where Canadian history was concerned, so he devised the original F5000 classification.¹³ This was revised and expanded in 1952 by Bruce Peel, and further developed in 1960 under Kaye Lamb's watchful eye by the Public Archives and National Library. Eventually, in the seventies, it would serve as the basis for the FC classification, the work of the retired librarian of the Glenbow Institute, T.R. (Pat) McCloy, with whom Lamb had a long association, starting with his employment at U.B.C. as a cataloguer in 1947.

At the end of his days, Kaye Lamb's situation was much the same as it had been in his childhood: he was confined to bed, where he was sustained by a steady diet of print. His input was amazing, and he read day and night, relying on his one good eye. Regular fare consisted of the *Times Literary Supplement*, *Manchester Guardian Weekly*, *The Economist*, *The New Yorker*, and of course *Maclean's* and *Saturday Night*. Every day he scanned the *Vancouver Sun* and the *Globe & Mail*, though late in the day he expressed a preference for the *National Post*, based on layout as much as content. There would also be two or three books in process, at least one of which would be a mystery. Large print proved to be a boon, and served to increase his rate of reading. In that format among the last books he enjoyed were the autobiography of Agatha Christie,¹⁴ and her biography by Janet Morgan.¹⁵ He also maintained a lively interest in his two professions, and received and read professional literature.

Finally, let us not forget that Kaye Lamb, as the first National Librarian, was also the founder of *Canadiana*, the national bibliography, already a half century in production. That alone would suffice to ensure him a place in the Pantheon of Canadian bibliography. But, as you have seen, there was so much more.

13 Lamb, W.Kaye. "A Library Classification for Canadian History." *Canadian Historical Review*, vol. 27, no. 3, September 1946, p. 275-282.

14 Christie, Agatha. *An Autobiography*. Leicester: Ulverscroft, 1979. 2 vols.

15 Morgan, Janet P. *Agatha Christie, a Biography*. Leicester: Charnwood, 1985.