



Saving Canada's Literary Heritage Sites

A modest bungalow in South Vancouver and a Belleville, Ontario, A-frame are among the structures with major literary significance worth preserving.

By Richard Hopkins



WHEN THE HOUSE IN VANCOUVER'S upscale Kerrisdale neighbourhood formerly occupied by George and Inge Woodcock was demolished after Inge's death in 2003, an important opportunity to save a site significant to Vancouver's literary heritage was lost. Woodcock was a prolific and accomplished writer of both prose and poetry, and an instrumental player in the founding and editing of *Canadian Literature*, an influential literary journal that remains important 50 years after its creation in 1959. In addition, the Woodcocks established the Woodcock Fund in 1989, an important source of financial support for Canadian writers. Backed by an endowment of \$2 million, the fund provides financial assistance to authors whose book projects are jeopardized by a lack of financial resources.

The fate of the Woodcock house is not unusual, however. Just a few sites exist in Vancouver where Canada's literary heritage is publicly honoured. Perhaps the only example is the memorial erected in Pauline Johnson's honour in Stanley Park at her burial site. True, a statue to Robbie Burns in Stanley Park honours the high esteem in which he's held by many Canadians, but by no stretch of the imagination could he be considered a Canadian writer. The same might be said for British writer Malcolm Lowry, who lived with his second wife in a shack on the Dollarton Flats from 1939 to 1954. But no one thought to save the Dollarton shack where he wrote *Under the Volcano* and other works. All that remains as a tribute to Lowry's writing is Malcolm Lowry Walk, a beachfront path through the forests he once called home.

Vancouver was much more fortunate when it came to the former home of Joy Kogawa

in Marpole, a house lovingly portrayed in Kogawa's award-winning novel *Obasan* (1981). Its offshore owners were totally unaware of its literary significance and had already made extensive changes to the house before applying to Vancouver city staff for permission to demolish the house in 2006 with a view to redeveloping the site.

A group that called itself the Kogawa Homestead Committee quickly assembled to intercede with Vancouver city council on behalf of the house. A stay of execution was granted as the group's members (including myself) started to raise funds in the hope of purchasing the house and turning it into a writer's retreat. The original, informal group became the Save the Kogawa House Committee and joined forces with the Land Conservancy of B.C. to raise \$250,000 in a relatively short time. It was just a fraction of the \$750,000 required to purchase and save the house, but then an angel stepped in with needed funds. Kogawa's close friend Senator Nancy Ruth contributed some \$500,000 of her own to achieve the grand total required to purchase and save the house.

Still, ongoing funds are needed to maintain the house and preserve it as a living part of Canada's literary heritage. Cash is needed to restore the house to its original condition and configuration, which was altered in the years after the Kogawas left it. Second, the long-term objective is to establish a writer-in-residence program for writers of conscience. The first writer-in-residence, John Asfour from Montreal, began his residency in March 2009. Asfour did a number of poetry readings both at the house and at community venues such as the local offices of the Canadian

National Institute for the Blind and the Vancouver Public Library. He also met with young writers to offer them guidance and assistance with their writing projects. In addition Asfour was able to advance several writing projects of his own while in residence.

The success of efforts to save Kogawa House bodes well for the current campaign to save the A-frame poets Al Purdy and Milton Acorn built in Belleville, Ontario. Spearheaded by local literary activist Jean Baird, the Purdy campaign—like the Kogawa effort—seeks to preserve the house, create an endowment for its ongoing preservation and establish a residency program.

What makes the Purdy home so special, according to Baird, is that Purdy wrote many of his famous literary works in that very place. It was also a frequent meeting place for many of the great names in Canadian letters: poets, novelists, short story writers, critics, etc. Margaret Laurence and Margaret Atwood are only two of the famous names associated with the cabin. Also Purdy himself is clearly one of Canada's literary giants. When he died in 2000, he was recognized as one of the finest Canadian poets of the 20th century. He received numerous literary awards during his lifetime, including two Governor General's Awards for poetry. In May of 2008 a large bronze statue to commemorate his life and achievements was erected in Toronto.

Are all houses associated with Canadian literary figures worth saving? No, of course; only those with major significance to the history of writing in Canada. George Woodcock in his time, for example, was called "B.C.'s most distinguished man of letters." He wrote many of his works while living in the McCleery Street house and his visitors' log is a veritable who's who of the notables of Canadian literature. Similarly, the Kogawa bungalow in Marpole differs from other homes in B.C. because of its place in *Obasan*. The significance of these homes would not exist without their significant literary connections.

~ Richard Hopkins is Assistant Professor Emeritus at UBC's School of Library, Archival and Information Studies, where he also served as Admissions Coordinator. He is a director of the Alcuin Society and a former editor of *Amphora*.

A few other writers' houses

Haig-Brown House in Campbell River, B.C.

This 1923 riverside farmhouse is the former residence of Ann and Roderick Haig-Brown, noted conservationists, community activists and thinkers. Roderick was a noted writer, conservationist and fly fisherman. His writing was pivotal in the preservation of salmon on the West Coast and has influenced a generation of conservationists. The Haig-Brown House is a B&B, museum and seminar centre with the goal of preserving and telling the Haig-Brown story. For further information, see www.haig-brown.bc.ca

Pierre Berton House, Dawson City, Y.T.

The Berton House sponsors a writer-in-residence program for professional Canadian writers who have one published book in any creative literary discipline: fiction, non-fiction, poetry, playwriting or journalism. Part of the writer-in-residence's responsibility is to give public lectures and hold writing workshops for locally based writers. For further information, see www.berthonhouse.ca

La Maison Gabrielle Roy, St. Boniface, M.B.

Described by its administrators as "a literary historical museum of international literary importance," La Maison Gabrielle Roy opened its doors to visitors on June 23, 2003. Museum officials note that Gabrielle Roy's childhood home, built in 1905, is an important symbol that often finds its way into the great Franco-Canadian author's works. For further information, see maisongabrielleroy.mb.ca

Stephen Leacock Museum, Orillia, O.N.

Designated a National Historic Museum site, the Leacock House, built by the famous humourist in 1928, hosts numerous visitors each year as well as thousands of schoolchildren to participate in curriculum-linked cultural and natural heritage programs. For further information, see www.leacockmuseum.com