A Gardener’s Dream

 Ranked among the great ornamental gardens of Canada, Les Jardins de Métis are carved out of the tough terrain of the lower St. Lawrence River

BY GEORGE GALT

There

You might imagine Elsie Reford in a wide-brimmed straw hat and an ankle-length cotton work dress…

ing in one of the floral towers she had wrought out of this tough terrain on Quebeq’s lower St. Lawrence River. Her precise and occasionally eloquent diary suggests that she knew she’d created an extraordinary horticultural haven over the previous 20 years at Eteoum, as her summer house was called. Yet it’s doubtful she ever foresaw that millions of visitors would one day walk her winding paths and gaze on her carefully chosen plants. By the end of the Second World War, her 16-hectare garden and adjoining farm land were still a vast private preserve little known outside her personal circle.

The original property, unoccupied and unseated land at the mouth of the salmon-rich Mérit River, was first bought by George Stephen in 1886. The first president of the Canadian Pacific Railway and a former president of the Bank of Montreal, Stephen – later the Baron Mount Stephen – built a fishing lodge on the land, giving it the telegraph-age name of Eteoum, a confection made up of key letters in his surname and that of his business partner, William Van Horne. Elsie had the good fortune to be Stephen’s favourite niece, and when he returned to England in 1890, he gave her free use of Eteoum. In 1918, when she was 46 and married to Robert Wilson Reford, the son of a shipping tycoon and himself involved in shipping, Elsie assumed legal ownership of Eteoum. Some years later she started a vegetable garden there, and a few years after that began to fashion what would become one of the great ornamental gardens of Canada.

For more than 10 years Elsie worked as an amateur horticulturist, cultivating her magnificent gardens. Then, in 1954, when she was 82 (she would live for another 13 years), she gave Eteoum and the surrounding estate to her son Bruce, a retired army officer. Unwilling to take on her mother’s epic gardens and 37-room summer house, he kept an adjoiner sweetheart farm and put Eteoum up for sale. The director of the Botanical Gardens in Toronto urged the Quebec government to preserve the Reford property as a centre for the propagation of Nordic plants. With this in mind, the government acquired the gardens, but then changed course and opened them to tourist attraction. They became a popular stopping place for travellers visiting the spectacular Gaspé Peninsula, which begins just to the north. By the 1990s, more than 100,000 people a year were buying tickets, an impressive feat for this remote location about 270 kilometres from Quebec City, but not enough for the site to turn a profit. In 1994, Les Jardins de Métis were put on the market.

An Oxford-trained historian, Alexander Reford was working as dean of St. Michael’s College at the University of Toronto and writing for the Dictionary of Canadian Biography when he learned that bids for his great-grandmother’s gardens had been invited. “I’d been preparing an entry for the dictionary on my great-great-grandfather Robert Reford – Elsie’s father-in-law – and I’d gone down to Métis to do some research.” Rumours were circulating of a proposed commercial development that could destroy the gardens. “My first idea was to establish a foundation to preserve the place. But that thought died when I learnt what kind of money would be needed.” He canvassed family members to see if anyone else in his large clan would help save Elsie’s creation. Eventually Alexander, his brother Lewis and Lewis’s wife, Susan McArthur, two investment bankers, joined a partnership with Les Jardins de Métis, the local non-profit group that had been running the

Primroses (left) and crab apple trees (above) are among the many flowers of plant life that grow in the European way at Les Jardins de Métis, which now say they are blessed with a unique microclimate.
The Reford estate was always a place apart. Set back from the road and shielded by a thick curtain of trees, the house and gardens were invisible to the passer-by. There were plenty of spare bedrooms and no shortage of hired help to tend to the family members and friends who often came to stay. A few of the summer residents of Métis Beach were included in parties hosted by the Refords, but most knew not of the front gate until the government purchased the property. Else enjoyed people but guarded her privacy. She opened the gardens to the public only a few times, in the 1940s, to raise money for the war effort.

The Ceremonial Fire Last August was reminiscent of one of Else's family gatherings, except that so many Refords had never before congregated at Etonna all at once. Descendants converged on the gardens from Quebec, Ontario and Nova Scotia; grandchild and great-grandchild and many very small great-grandchildren all ran about the property, scribbled and dressed in their best summer clothes. But in contrast to the old days, you could hear French voices in the crowd.

Alexandre Reford, a fiercely bilingual product of French immersion schooling, now lives in a cottage on the property. He is surely aware of the cultural sensibilities of his new milieu.

"There was some degree of suspicion when the Refords reappeared on the scene here," he says, "but I think I've been well accepted now." He won over the initially resistant former government workers with his passionate commitment to his great-grandmother's horticultural vision. He and his partners are working to revitalize the gardens, replanting some lapsed species and experimenting with new ones. "I don't think Else knew a dalliance from a daisy when she first started here," Alexandre said on a walk through the gardens last July, when they were at their peak. "She was an amateur, but a deeply knowledgeable one by the end of her gardening career. She corresponded with horticulturists in North America and overseas, and planted many varieties of plants that had never been grown in this part of the world before." Among these botanical rarities is the garden's emblematic flower, the blue poppy, Meconopsis himalayica, which flourishes as the stream gardens in midsummer. Originally from Tibet, the blue poppy grows in greater abundance at Les Jardins than anywhere else in North America, although it has been established in the Pacific Northwest and Alaska. "It's also grown in Scotland," Alexandre noted. "People around here buy the seeds from us, but I don't think anyone has succeeded with them."

These understood Himalayan plants, with their four sky blue petals and fluffy, pale green leaves, which have grown so well for decades yet have failed regularly in gardens just down the road, support the claim that Les Jardins are blessed with a unique microclimate. "There's no hard scientific evidence for it," Alexandre acknowledged, but there is no guaranteeing the gardens' extraordinary results, either. The viburnum woods, the birch, the beech—these plants thrive on the floor of firewood. Else, Jean and the others have a knack for creating a garden that will thrive in the entire landscape..."

Herachelor landscape was rich with possibilities, and Else understood how to marry her designs to the natural inclinations of her "deemenes." Frank Lloyd Wright could have done it no better. Else had an architect's eye, but a painter's eye, too.

She had a special passion for lilies, which began early and grew as her garden grew, and for geraniums, which her great-grandson has begun to reintroduce. You can still see lilies in profusion as you wander the looped chain of distinct green compartments Else created. "It had better be explained that nowhere in the Etonna garden are lilies growing in beds," she wrote, "or in anything approaching one. They are always in combination with other plants, in herbaceous borders, among shrubs of all kinds, among species and hybrid Roses, in meadowrock rock gardens and indeed everywhere where there is cultivated ground..."

The gardens have retained this colourful and uncontrived abundance. More than 1,000 varieties thrive in bed, borders and on stream banks. On either side of what the founder called the Long Walk, which is the only highly formal section of the gardens, you'll find lilies, Pinocchio polyanthus roses, Pink Peony hybrid teas roses, primroses, hyacinths, bluebells and musk mallow, to mention only a few. Walk down into the Primula Glade in midsummer and discover red...
and yellow primroses, a weeping Siberian pea tree (planted here long before the tree became fashionable in urban Canadian gardens) and a tree Miniature cypress established by Elsie and now more than three metres tall and wide of girth, with heavy, spidery-leaved leaves. On walk back to the Crab Apple Garden, with its aged flowering trees, and see the splashes of color in the double bed, the glint of holly leaves and the gentle blue of the columbine.

The gardens show a gender, more fluid side to Elsie’s apparently impertinent personality, and yet they also speak of her strength. The soil was as diurnally bad as the other physical properties of Estevan were inspiring the making has been a 3.6-km trenching with 6 inches of large stones in the bottom,” she recorded. Pear and sand were then added along with various combinations of leaf mold, fine gravel, lime and fertilizer.

She and her husband “spent every night for dinner. ‘She was a true woman,” one of her grandchildren recalled gleefully at the family reunion in August, “until you stood up to her.” According to Evelyn Annett, whose father, Ernest Annett, was the butler at Estevan when Elsie owned the property, the Refords employed not only a butler but a cook, a maid, a chauffeur and several maids. Behind a glass in the Reford museum, which now occupies part of the ground floor of the house, sits an English-made, leather-and-wood-carrying case. A label explains that it “was used in Estevan Lodge for more than 50 years. Ernest Annett, the butler, took the mail in this box to the Grand Metis post office each day.”

The atmosphere at Estevan was formal. Some found it severe. “Mr. and Mrs. Reford had a way with her that wouldn’t let you be too friendly,” remembers Annett. “But she was an extraordinary person, very interested in politics and business—not many women were in those days. And, of course, she lived for her garden.”

The gardens show a gentler, more fluid side to Elsie’s apparently impertinent personality, and yet they speak of her strength. The soil was as diurnally bad as the other physical properties of Estevan were inspiring. “Pruning everywhere,” Elsie wrote, “pruning; nothing but six inches of the poorest stuff...” She did, however, possess a red sodden stream in the back of the garden and so was able to have a better fish with her neighbors for marinade and another ingredient in her many confections: woods locked leaves...” The formula for any garden in any of the better American botanical gardens. A Canadian horticulturist from the Maritimes has visited Les Jardins twice since 1985 in even more enthusiastic. Diane McLeod, now a consulting horticulturist in Fredericton and formerly with the Memorial University Botanical Garden in St. John’s, Nfld., has traveled to gardens in Britain, the United States and Canada. “The Métsis gardens are among the best I’ve seen. They have a beautiful, peaceful setting and a lovely, wooded ambience as soon as you enter. One of my favorite plants was there, Primula walli, the so-called red-poke primrose, not that common and not easy to grow. You usually associate primroses with spring, but there they have them right through midsummer. And they had more than the under-the-ground and rare plants, all of them well-placed. You could see someone had chosen well.”

That someone was Elsie Reford, who was growing prunings in her gardens about 60 years ago. “Began digging for new primula garden along the brook,” she wrote in August of 1936. She kept a diary not only to record her gardening joys but to list her mistakes and failures. For the people trying to recreate her vision, these little books are invaluable.

Most visitors to the gardens, though, will not be aware of her horticultural disappointments. If her mistakes are on paper, her successes are in the ground, in the soft, inviting triumph of her open glades and leafy arbours. This, too, is her diary, inscribed in the base of stalks and blossoms, with ink that changes on every summer day. It’s handwriting, and there’s only one copy. For most people, it’s in a fascinating place. But those who make the trip are rarely disappointed.
Learning the Cree Way

An aboriginal-owned college in Alberta teaches students modern skills and ancient values

BY TED BOWER

The sky over Alberta's Kootenay Plains was blue and clear and the air fresh and warm. It was 6:30 in the morning and Roy Steinhauser lay sleeping in his trailer. Suddenly, a voice broke the stillness of that perfect August morning, bringing a quick end to Steinhauser's slumber. "Get your hiking boots on, we're going for a hike before breakfast," someone called from outside the trailer.

Steinhauser, Imperial Oil's Calgary-based manager of aboriginal affairs, and he, along with several colleagues, was participating in a five-day Cree Cultural Camp run by Maskwacis Cultural College, Canada's largest unaffiliated aboriginal-owned college. The first nonaboriginal participants to attend the camp, Steinhauser and his imperial colleagues spent the five days immersed in the Cree culture, talking with elders, taking part in sacred ceremonies and sharing meals and experiences with the 10 aboriginal participants.

Says Steinhauser: "For a few days we were not outside observers of the Cree culture but we were living it. We learnt a great deal, not just about the traditional Cree way of life, which places great emphasis on respecting nature and other people, but about the Cree perspective. It was a remem-
In the college vaults are several hundred audio tapes on which have been recorded the oral histories of Cree elders, tapes described by Camew as "an irreplaceable national treasure." He hadn't realized quite how rich it was. Over the years, aboriginal culture has been frequently misrepresented in the media, he points out. Consequently, a good many non-aboriginals have the impression that the First Nations people of Can-ada did not have, historically, an organized society or sophisticated culture. "But aboriginal society was every bit as organized as European society and the culture just as sophisticated," says Steinbauer. Living before Europeans set foot on this continent, aboriginal people had an intricate structure for governing and there were teachers, spiritual leaders, healers, transportation and trading systems, warriors and laws. "Books discuss these things," he says, "but only when you interact with First Nations people, as we did at the camp, can you begin to get a true feeling for their history and culture."

The cultural camp is one of several "off-campus" programs run by Maskwachises Cultural College, whose name means "bear hills" in Cree. Located in Hobbenau, Alta., a major First Nations community about 120 kilometres south of Edmonton, the college offers a slate of programs similar to that of other community colleges. What makes it special is that the Cree culture is woven into the very fabric of every activity at the institution, and while taking courses in computer programming or nutrition, for example, students must also study the Cree culture and language. The facility includes a number of elders, or kítsîwîtkw in Cree, with whom students talk about, among other things, ancient values to the modern world.

Fred Camew, the college's executive director, is not aboriginal himself but has returned to his alma mater to assist with the instruction for First Nations cultures. Born in Ireland, educated there and in Canada, Camew has worked in the education field for more than 30 years, spending two decades in the Northeast Territories, where he served as assistant deputy minister of education. At the age of 42, he enrolled at the University of Calgary, where he embarked on a PhD in educational and developmental psychology with a cross-cultural emphasis. On completion, Camew naturally gravitated, as he says, to Maskwachises. "I hope I can make a valuable contribution to connecting the skills taught here to the modern-day world."

In all, half a dozen Imperial employees whose work in some way touches the aboriginal community attended the August cultural camp. The weather was sublime, the setting exquisite. At night, a full moon bathed the plains and the mountain peaks that rose around them in a silver glow. "Freedom," a word often used by the elders at the camp, took on new meaning for those used to the rigidity of life in urban Canada.

In Cree culture, learning is woven into everyday life. At the camp, as much as possible, this too was the case. "When you want to know something, you sought out an elder," explains Steinbauer. "You spent time with that elder, listening to what he or she had to say and asking questions. At other times, an elder might seek you out because he or she felt you would benefit from some particular knowledge. It's an excellent way to learn and, if you think about it, a way that many educators today are suggesting the best way -- learning geared to the individual, working in small groups, constant assessment of a student by caring teachers, the freedom to ask questions and so on. The Camps have been teaching this way for thousands of years."

Winston R להב, a cultural resources instructor at Fox Creek, Alta., shared his knowledge of medicinal plants with Steinbauer during quiet walks she took in the hills. "As we were walking along, he would point to a plant and explain its use," says Steinbauer, who felt particularly honoured on the last day of the camp when Rיהב suggested he join him as he gathered the plants he'd later use for healing. "The manner in which Winston gathered the plants emphasized for me the tremendous respect Cree have for nature. The experience reminded me of how much we owe nature for its many gifts to us."

One hot afternoon, Amanda Fors, an elder and faculty member of Maskwachises, sat in the shade sipping a magnificent beard root. She had made a three-day journey in the snowshoeing heat to be at the camp for just one afternoon. Participants gathered about her, and for nearly two hours she told her life story, lacing it with high good humour. Thirty years ago, feeling the need to escape from a modern urban life style, she moved with her late husband and children and a number of other aboriginal families to the Kooyen Plains, where the group lived according to traditional Cree ways. "I missed the washing machine at first," she said, smiling, "but my children were healthier and happier."

In all, she spent two years on the plains and ranks them as some of her happiest. An elegant woman, she radiates pride in her aboriginal heritage.
Every day in the camp was rich in learning. Time moved fluidly and life was not governed by watches or by sense. Friendships were forged among the participants, who included teachers, pharmacists and counselors. Days generally began with peaceful hikes.

The most stirring destination was a cluster of sun dance lodges built by the nearby Stoney First Nation. These lodges are large structures made of materials gathered on the Plains. Each is used only once. Extremely sacred, the sun dance ceremony was banned by Canadian authorities in 1885; the government tolerated shortly after the turn of the century, however, and today sun dances are widely held across western North America. Located between Buffalo and Jasper, in the North Saskatchewan River valley, the Kootenay Plains are the warmest and driest region in the Canadian Rockies and are named after the Kootenay Indian tribe. Mary Schiffer, a famed Kootenai explorer, traveled across the Plains.

“Here the air is sweeter, drier, and softer than anywhere I know, and here the world could easily be forgotten and life pass by in a dream.”

Split by the North Saskatchewan River, which swells out of a mountain glacier to the west, the Plains are a critical wildlife water ring. Bison once thrived here. One afternoon, Richard Simango, a Cree elder who holds a degree in social work from the University of Calgary and is a member of the Maskwacis faculty, talked of his youth as a young boy on the plains and of listening to elders speak about hunting bison and the tremendous skill that was required to kill them. “I remember how ridiculous television shows are in their portrayal of ‘buffalo hunting,'” says Steinbauer, who was one of several participants who had gathered around the elder at that point. “He explained that you can’t shoot bison in the side— they would simply get mad and turn on you. He told us that you have to come at them at an angle from the side so you can shoot them in the chest and hit the vital organs directly.” As Simango talked, Steinbauer visualized the days when bison were a common sight on the plains and provided food and warmth for the Cree.

Maskwacis’ Executive Director, Fred Carnow, seems to gain stamina from just visiting this region. Often when a cultural camp is taking place here, he will travel the three hours from his office in Hobbema to join the group for an overnight stay. As he drives along the winding road into the Rockies, he draws inspiration from the mountains and mulls over college issues. And he has much to mull over.

The college was established in the early 1970s as an institution for the development and preservation of the culture of the Plains Cree, one of the branches of the populous and powerful Cree Nation. Guided by a Senate of Cree elders and community leaders of the Four Nations of Hobbema (the Samson, Ermineskin, Montana and Louis Bull bands), the institution gradually became an integral part of the life of nearby Cree communities. By 1986, the year Carnow came to the college, the pressing need for greater opportunities for First Nations people to pursue formal higher education was clear. In response, Maskwacis broadened its mandate and services and within two years earned the status of a private college from the Alberta Legislative Assembly. Although Maskwacis holds legal college status, as a private institution it is not eligible for government funding.

Nevertheless, Maskwacis has leapt ahead. Cree language and cultural studies are undertaken at all levels. There is a wide array of academic and technical programmes, and there are links with the Universities of Alberta, Calgary and Lethbridge and other Alberta colleges and technical institutions such as the Southern Alberta Institute of Technology in Calgary. But Maskwacis still operates from a ramshackle building that once was, ironically, part of a residential school for Aboriginal people and can’t begin to accommodate everyone who wants to attend (the college is open to all, but Aboriginal students are given priority).

Doug Baldwin, senior vice-president of Imperial’s resources division and a director of the company, notes that Maskwacis can accommodate only 350 students a year. “It concerns me that several hundred students remain on the waiting list,” he says, “especially when you consider the disparities in formal educational attainment between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Canada.” Currently, according to college literature, 63 percent of status Indians have a grade 9 education, compared with 83 percent of nonaboriginal Canadians. Fifteen percent of the latter group have a high school diploma, while only 28 percent of status Indians have one. And 27 percent of nonaboriginal Canadians ages 18 to 24 pursue postsecondary education, while for status Indians in this age group the figure is only four percent.

Baldwin says that it was such discrepancies that convinced him to become an honorary chair of the Maskwacis Cultural College’s fund raising committee. “Our goal,” says Baldwin, “is to raise the $9 million needed for construction of a new building. The new facility will be situated on a prominent hillside overlooking Hobbema—the land has already been cleared and construction is expected to begin shortly. In the shape of an eagle with outstretched wings, the building has been designed with guidance from elders. Among other things, the new college will include a ceremonial room. Renowned of a large tepee, the room will serve as both the site of spiritual ceremonies and a place for elders to counsel and teach students. Imperial, which produces oil and gas from beneath Four Nations lands in Alberta’s Ronnie Glen region, several kilometers southwest of Hobbema, has contributed $230,000 for the construction of science laboratories and a further $40,000 for a trust to provide scholarships.

The Four Nations of Hobbema have also committed substantial amounts and have embarked on aggressive fund-raising campaigns of their own. Says Baldwin, “Canada is a country of vast potential, but to realize that potential we need to be a leader in education. We need to provide opportunities for all people to gain the education they need and want. It is my hope that Maskwacis will be one of many colleges owned, run by and geared to First Nations people.”

It is the morning of the last day of camp. As Roy Steinbauer enjoys a quiet mug of tea, his eyes rest on a group of children playing nearby. Among them is his 12-year-old son, David (in keeping with Cree culture, participants are invited to bring their families to the camp). As he listens to the children’s soft chatter, Steinbauer thinks what a valuable experience these past few days have been not only for himself but for his family. “A week ago, my son had had no interaction with Aboriginal people,” he says. “Their paths just didn’t cross. Now David has an understanding of and respect for Cree culture and, perhaps most important, has come to realize that despite cultural differences, people are people and have much in common. How valuable if we could all realize that.”
Island Legacy

Once home to one of Nova Scotia’s best-loved writers and her light-keeper husband, Bon Portage Island, with its wealth of wildlife and social history, has become a living laboratory

By Harry Thurston

It is to visit Bon Portage Island that I find myself driving along the southwestern shore of Nova Scotia. I follow the jigsaw pattern of the coast, past snugly cut harbours. The road winds between the great glacial boulders that litter the landscape, receding, in some cases, the bulk of the fishers’ houses. Offshore, like pieces of a puzzle waiting to be snapped into place, are the islands to which I am heading, dark, low-lying silhouettes jaggedly outlined by wind-swept evergreens.

Except for Cape Sable Island (which is joined to the mainland by a causeway), these islands are now inhabited year round. Once, however, it was a different story. In the days of sail, they were home to many fishermen and their families. The motorboat, however, made the rich offshore fishing grounds easily accessible from the mainland, and over the years the fishers moved their homes there, abandoning the islands to the sheep and the lighthouse keepers. Today, even the lighthouse keepers have gone, their presence made unnecessary by technology.

Dock hunters, bird-watching gatherings, boater trappers, picnickers, sheep farmers and birdwatchers still visit the islands on occasion. And each summer Bon Portage plays host to a number of university students and teachers, for it is here that Nova Scotia’s Acadia University runs a biological field station and offers a summer course in natural history and field biology.

But it is not the field-station alone that sets the island apart from the others. Bon Portage was once home to one of Nova Scotia’s best-loved writers, Evelyn Richardson, who, with her light-keeper husband, Mervil, bought the island, save for the government land on which the lighthouse sat. Their 35 years on the island instilled such a deep love for its natural history that they wished to conserve it for future generations to enjoy. When they retired to the mainland in 1964, Acadia University – with financial help from friends of the Richardson’s – acquired the land for its fledgling programme in ecology and wildlife management. Today, the Evelyn and Mervil Richardson Field Station in Biology is a valuable research resource. As well, it helps hundreds of students gain an understanding of nature such as they could never gain at a university campus.

We keep a light, Evelyn Richardson’s touching but untimely record of her years on the island, is a literary landmark. Her first book, it won the Governor General’s Award for Creative Non-fiction in 1945 and has subsequently been published in both the United States and Britain. Today, more than half a century later, it is still in print.

“Once I was,” Evelyn wrote, “a light-keeper’s wife on a small island three miles from the mainland, isolated much of the year, and living under conditions that most of the country outgrew fifty years or more ago.”

It was a hard life of self-sufficiency in which the Richardsons had to juggle the around-the-clock duties of light-keeping, raising a family and tending a farm. “Mervil was tremendously busy, with new tasks and demands for time and efforts facing him every time he turned around,” wrote Evelyn. “For my part, I learned to make bread, to churn and make butter, care for milk pails and separators, fill and clean oil-lamps, and do the many extra things that never enter housekeeping in a town or city.”

“I learned, too, to clean and fill and care for the Light; in case Mervil should be detained or absent at lighting time.”

But We Keep a Light is much more than a record of a heroic way of life, impressive as it does the back-to-the-land and environmental movements of the late 1960s. “I’m really glad my mother wrote the book, because I think it helped people to understand that you didn’t have to live in suburbia or downtown to enjoy life,” says the Richardsons’ youngest daughter, Betty June.
Smith, who, as an adult, kept a light with her husband, Sidney, on nearby Cape Sable. The book also served as an inspiration to other women, including female writers striving in the 1950s for a more independent lifestyle.

If independent, Evelyn's life was unstrainingly busy. Despite duties as mother, teacher, homemaker and, often, lighthouse keeper, she managed to write eight books, including an award-winning historical novel, Desdemona Heron, and a celebration of the island's natural history, Living Island. Where My Roots Go Deep: The Collected Writings of Evelyn Richardson appeared posthumously in 1996. In each work, the joy of a life shared with loved ones and her beloved birds shines through.

FROM THE SHAD HARBOR wharf, the saddleback shape of Bon Portage, known locally as Outer Island, dominates the western horizon. My 12-year-old daughter, Meghan, and I see the full tidal wake of a boat closing the distance between the island and ourselves. At its helm is Dr. Peter Smith, a professor of biology at Acadia University and director of the field station.

Minutes later, Smith expertly maneuvers the bow of the boat into the lee of a rough timber-and-rock wharf. Only then does the calm deepen such that it is possible to scramble dry-footted onto the well-named "slip," a 40-meter-long wooden ramp that connects the natural sea wall of beach stone at a steep angle.

Once ashore, I discover that to explore Bon Portage is to encounter a literary landscape: everywhere I am reminded of Richardson's words. On the back of an all-terrain vehicle, the kilometer-long road to the field station is a rough introduction to what she called Bon Portage's "unexpected share of island charm." The road cuts through dense thickets of fir before opening to a prospect of the ocean.

The shaws is a rag-and-bone shop of everything lost at sea. On our arrival, there is a particularly rich collection of flotsam and jetsam, the legacy of tropical storm Felix, which had swept the coast the week before. The mangled green wire coiled in modern lobster traps lie beside the weathered laths of the traditional traps.

Hurling above the tide line, on the woodland side of the beach-stone road, is an arresting monument to the sea's treachery and power - the skull of a fin whale. This 20-meter-long giant was washed ashore in 1993. The great head bone, with its projecting rostrum, looks like a giant sundial. It is surrounded by an aromatic wreath of bayberry and wild rose bushes, diminishing its melancholy look. As Richardson observed in Living Island, "When the island wears summer's rich copulation, its brave opposition looks not altogether hopeless, for then many deep wounds are hidden under green leaves and bright blossoms."

We continue on our way beside the sea to the light station, which stands at the island's south end. The view from here is limitless, the Atlantic rolling away to New England.

ALTHOUGH THE VIEW IS UN- changed, little else remains from the Richardson's time. At low tide, however, two wondrously preserved artefacts, the boilers of the Clyde-side-built steamer Exquisit, are exposed at the foot of the lighthouse. "Sneakfast and undaunted," as Richardson wrote, they are all that survive of the steamship that went aground here in September 1898 - fortunately, with no loss of life. Today they serve as strong reminders of the lighthouse's enduring purpose of warning mariners of the treacherous currents and shoals that surround the island.

The original lighthouse, a tapered wooden tower with an attached dwelling, has been replaced by a squat square tower with a flat-roofed addition to house the generators. Nearby stand a radio tower and two light-keepers' houses. Neither has been occupied full time since 1994, when the light was automated, to save the demuring bureaucrats. In summer, however, they serve as the residence and laboratory for the Acadia staff and students.

Dr. Harrison Lewis, the first chief of the Can- dias Wildlife Service, was a "treasured friend" of the Richardson's. He introduced Evelyn to the joys of bird-watching and was the first person to recognize Bon Portage's potential as a biological study site. Lying off the southernmost tip of Nova Scotia, the island attracts unusual numbers of birds on their migratory flights. "The trees and bushes seemed alive with birds, the bright coats of the Yellow Warblers predominating over the more sober hues of the others..." Richardson wrote of her early days on the island. "I had never seen so many birds in so small a space, and the numerous birds on the Island have continued to be one of our chief joys."

THE SEASONAL FLUSH of feath- ered visitors to Bon Portage is the basis for an ambitious band- ing programme and the postgraduate research of students like Andrew Davis, who, as part of his work, strings nets along lanes cut through the dense forest. I follow him on one early morning, hoping to band a northern water thrush.

As soon as I set foot on the island, I wanted to spend a lot of time here," says Davis, who, when collecting data on the nesting and fledging habits and the age and sex ratios of the migrating bird populations, spends weeks alone at a rustic cabin in the woods.

For two decades, the island has also been the centre of the field station director's ongoing investigation of one of the sea's most mysterious crea- tures, the Leiua's storm petrel. Birds of the open ocean, they come to land only at night and only in breeding season, announcing their arrival with
Peter Smith's association with Bon Portage began at an early age. As a child he visited the island with his father, the late Chalmers Smith, who was also a biology professor at Acadia. "As a kid I was just marvellous feeling here," he recalls. "It really thrilled me. I hadn't decided what I wanted to do at that point. But since then, I've always loved it.”

A boat tour around the island reveals Smith's inspiration. A wonderful diversity of shorebirds—sandpipers, sandpipers, puffins and divers—work the food-rich wrack at the ride line. Grey seals cavort by the boat with the grace of synchronized swimmers.

Whereas island wildlife is, and always has been, abundant, evidence of the long human presence on Bon Portage is now scarce. The first European contact with the island was in 1604 by the French explorer Samuel de Champlain, who called it "Iles aux Canons" for the nesting seabirds, known locally as shags (thus Shag Harbour). He collected wild duck and gull eggs on the island and then moved on to establish New France's first settlement at Port Royal. The island was named Bon Portage sometime later, although the rationale for the name remains obscure. It was not until about 1840 that the first families settled on the island.

I observe that Smith is as sensitive to and protective of the island's human culture as he is of its ecology. When walking around the island, he is always aware of what he calls its "living history." "Half the people who come on the islands walk these beaches and think it's the first time they have been walked," he says with incredulity. "But, my God, no. There have been births and deaths here and living things for many, many years.

"Part of what I try to do with the students is get them not only to look at the island's natural history but to think about its historical and human aspects." Smith welcomes the use of the island for traditional purposes. As in the richardsons' time, local people are still welcome to come ashore to hunt ducks, salvage wrecked lobster traps or have a picnic. Smith's generosity is returned. There are always mainlanders willing to lend a helping hand with projects, such as what remains, or to respond to an emergency. Says Anthony Smith, a local fisherman: "Pete knows that no matter what time of day or kind of weather, I'll be there if he needs me."

"We couldn't have a field station here," admits Smith, "unless we had the full cooperation of the local people."

Ironically, fears and superstitions about island ghosts made it difficult for the Richardsons to hire local people for any duration. Smith, who has spent long periods alone on the island, admits that he has had experiences on Bon Portage that have been almost mystical. "There are times when I'm out at night on the petrel paths or walking on the beach and I sense the Richardsons or a presence of some sort—I really do."

The storm petrels themselves are a ghostly presence. Richardsons called them "queer black birds...that walk the watery waste." This illusory behaviour has earned them their common name, petrels, from St. Peter, who also is reputed to have walked on water.

After dark, the petrels' eerie calls electrify the damp air of Bon Portage. The woods resound with their excited discourse—like the bubble of a synthesizer or the animated chattering of a rainforest. Our last night on the island, Meagan and I follow Ian Patterson, a graduate student, as he monitors the elbow-deep burrows dug into the island's mossy turf. Attracted to our flashlight beam, the spooky-coloured birds flutter harmlessly against our chests as they zigzag through the dense underbrushs.
Fostering Canadian Culture

For 40 years the Canada Council has directed federal funds to support this country's cultural community and to encourage new artists. Despite budget cuts, it continues to do a vital job

BY ROBERT FULFORD

At the heart of the Canada Council, now four decades old and the main cultural agency of Canada, there lies a question of the kind that makes relations between government and culture fascinating: how should money be divided among the arts? It's relatively easy to say which theatre company should get a grant, once you decide how much goes to theatre companies. And if certain funds are available for grants to painters and sculptors, there are people who can figure out which artists should receive them. But what in the world makes one art form deserve more money than another? Should fiction get as much help as opera, or more? Is dance more important, and therefore more deserving of government funds, than painting?

Of the $84.3 million that the Canada Council handed out last year, theatre and music organizations received roughly the same amounts, about $14.8 million each. But either of those communities could plausibly claim that it deserves more than the other. Theatre people could point out that they focus much of their work on developing original plays by Canadians, arguably a more creative act than playing the music of dead foreigners, which remains the principal occupation of the 34 orchestras that receive $8 million a year in council funds. But the musicians could argue, with equal force, that their art has a long, noble tradition in this country and reaches much deeper than theatre into the homes, schools and lives of the citizens, and therefore, keeping it healthy is more important. Who among us is competent to choose between those arguments, and how will the choice be explained?

A couple of years ago, that question occurred to Donna Scott, the founder and former publisher of Flare magazine, who now chairs the Canada Council. She asked members of the staff how such matters were worked out, what formula was followed. Nobody knew. The answer was usually a thing: People said, "Who knows? It's history. Over the years, things have developed, and..." Says Scott: "I was totally exasperated." She wanted to know. She set up a large committee, which she chairs. The committee has held meetings, named the problem this way and that, and after a year decided... nothing much. "We are all a bit wiser," she said recently as her committee prepared to deliver its progress report, but with some minor exceptions—a $3 million increase in support for media arts, means music, film, video, etc., and $900,000 to cover touring costs—the relative doses of the pie haven't changed. In 1982, Timothy Pettee, who served the council as associate director and then director, admitted that this issue baffled him, although he was responsible for making the choices. "It's terrifying, but somebody has to do it," Pettee said. "The heart of my job is to decide how many dancers are worth a post, I've never figured out how to do it. I don't see how to rationalize it."

It's clear that luck plays a large part. If the council hires two arts officers with similar qualifications to handle two different art forms, one officer may turn out to be an aggressive tiger in the budget process, the other relatively diffident. Inevitably, the art form represented by the tiger will get more money—and continue to get it, long after the tiger moves to another job. Like most granting agencies, the council works partly by precedent: if it supports a symphony 15 years in a row, that commitment becomes a vested interest and can't be lightly abandoned. So the council of 1997 will often find itself echoing, or merely modifying, decisions made in 1987 or 1977 or even earlier. An Ontario dance company, Le Groupe de La Place Royale, for example, has been getting council grants since 1976. Roch Carrier, the Quebec author and teacher who is now director of the council, is also fascinated by the question of how money is divided among the arts. Like Scott, he admits that he deferred him. "What prevails is the weight of history," he says.

The enervateness of this issue illustrates the exquisite delicacy of running a national institution devoted to the nurturing of the arts. In most government-supported agencies, clear and logical reasons for crucial actions can be formulated and explained to officials from the Treasury Board and other departments responsible for supervising the use of public money. But the council, in its most fundamental actions, deals every day with the unknowable. No matter how hard it tries to apply reason, it must in the end, like the artists who are its clients, rely on imagination, intuition and— as Carrier says—history.

In answer to a reporter's question, Mayor Moore, one-time chair of the Canada Council, looked back from 1995 and named the last half-century's most important event in Canadian culture: the appearance in 1951 of the report of the Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences, chaired by Vincent Massey. That report made many recommendations (creation of a national library, for instance), but it's best remembered for urging the government to create an independent arts-support organization to help satisfy what Massey and his colleagues saw as a "hunger existing throughout the country for a fuller measure of what the writer, the artist and the musician could give."

The Liberal government of Prime Minister Jean Chretien, in 1957, announced a new body: the Canada Council for the Arts. Initially, the council got $1.5 million from the government. It was in 1987 that the council got the $84.3 million it doled out in 1997. Its first executive director, Peter Seng, managed to attract a number of sponsors, and now 40 per cent of the council's budget comes from the private sector. The council has new goals, new initiatives and new problems. In 1997, its budget was $84.3 million; in 1998, it will be $100 million. It has 215 employees in Ottawa and Victoria, and 34 offices in major cities across the country.
modest grant made all the difference. I had children, I had a mortgage, and I needed help. Without the council, some of the books wouldn't have been written.
That was in 1989, and it marked the beginning of a relationship that continues today. The Queen Mother never did acquire Summer Morning, but after some years of correspondence—Corbet offering her another painting for her 95th birthday. It was an impressionistic oil portrait of herself as a chub, unshorn-haired child wearing a hair ribbon. Not only did she accept it, but Corbet received a private tour of Clarence House, her residence in London, where Elizabeth Holding Her Ribbon now hangs in the company of works by Degas, Renoir and Millais.

Corbet’s work attained further fame last winter when the U.S. news network CNN reported that the work was one of only four paintings in the vast royal collection requested by the Princess of Wales as part of her divorce settlement from Prince Charles. (The other three were by Claude Monet, Franz Winterthurer and Paul Nash.) Diana’s request was denied.

Most recently Corbet, who may use the official title “Artist to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother,” designed her royal patron’s 1996 Christmas cards, which featured an angel raising the Christmas star into the sky. Now she is sought after portrait painter living in North Vancouver, Corbet, 31, says he owes his entire career to the Queen Mother. “There’s almost nothing I wouldn’t do for that woman.”

Growing up in Ajax, Ont., Corbet was a pudgy, ambitious child who didn’t have the stamina for sports but who enjoyed sketching anything that caught his eye. When his grandmother—the proud owner of Summer Morning—gave him a tiny picture book of birds that had been hers and then his father’s, he added his own drawings in the margins. “He often drew little people,” recalls Alice Corbet, who still receives a daily phone call from her grandmother, whom she calls “Sunny.”

His father, a lawyer, arranged for the boy to study privately with the artist Andre Beier. By age 16, Corbet had got himself a commission to paint Christmas masts to decorate the local burger outlet and went on to do graphic design for Tilley Endurables Inc. But then he decided to dabble in other careers. At age 21, having outgrown his earlier childhoodiness, he tried modelling and in 1988 appeared in a highly successful international hard-core advertising campaign for Calvin Klein. He then studied theatre at the University of Guelph, bringing the house down with his adaptations of I Love Lucy scripts. But he always returned to his art.

His inspiration for the now-famous portrait came out of the blue one evening when he jumped up from a dinner party, raced into his studio, grabbed an old brush and, by the light of a single bulb, completed most of the painting in 45 minutes without benefit of a model or even a photograph. “Something like that probably only happens once in a lifetime,” Corbet says.

Since then, the artist’s work has been acquired by the CBC in Vancouver, the University of British Columbia, the City of Hamilton, the Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery, and several schools and private collectors. Limited-edition lithographs of Elizabeth Holding Her Ribbon can be found at Glamis Castle in Scotland, the Canadian High Commission in London and the National Gallery in Ottawa.

Last fall Corbet founded the Royal Canadian Portrait Society, which will have its first exhibition this year, and he is busily building up a collection of art and archival documents on Canadian female artists, including Emily Carr, Laura Martz Lytell, Isabel McMullin and a close friend and mentor, 78-year-old Elizabeth Smily. “Promoting women this way honours my grandmother’s teachings to me,” Corbet says.

One of his lessons involved the importance of humility, says Corbet’s wife, Louise Belmont. “Christian has never had a swelled head,” says Belmont, 23, an occupational therapist, “it’s very important for him to remain accessible to people who are interested in his work.”

Among those interested is yet another member of the royal family. Corbet heads through the Royal Society of Arts that when the Queen first saw Corbet’s portrait of her mother, she demanded, “Now, who did this painting?” When told, she replied, “Well, I hope someone doesn’t want a portrait like that of me someday.” Christian Corbet is working on it, along with a portrait of her best-friend, the Duke of Edinburgh.

—Marine Kaye
Caring for Our Kids

Is Canada failing its children? An Imperial-sponsored conference highlights some disturbing evidence that suggests that, as a country, we need to do more to ensure that our young people can develop useful and rewarding lives.

BY SHONA MCKAY

The young girl was dying and her doctors believed that her only chance of survival was a blood transfusion. Almost immediately, it was discovered that the child’s five-year-old brother was a perfect match. The child’s parents, as well as the doctor who would perform the procedure, told the boy the good news and asked him if he would be willing to give his blood to save his sister. The child replied that he would think about it. Several days later, the young boy gave his consent, and soon after that, the little boy found himself in a hospital bed next to his sister’s. A few minutes after the procedure had begun, the boy called the doctor over to ask a question. “Will I begin to die right away?” he whispered.

Last November, Bob Gloosop, executive director of programs and research at the Ontario-based Viner Institute of the Family, told this story to 1,100 participants attending Canada’s Children...Canada’s Future. Co-sponsored by the Child Welfare League of Canada and the Ontario Association of Children’s Aid Societies, this national symposium was dedicated to exploring the issues concerning Canada’s young people and their place in society. At the conclusion of the talk, Gloosop invited conference participants to ponder the image of a small child willing to die so that his sister might live. What a profoundly better world we would have, he suggested, if all of us cared about children this way.

Judging from the charged silence that met his words, it was a message that hit home. But that’s not surprising. To a person, the child-care workers, teachers, child advocates, volunteers and politicians who had journeyed from across the country to attend the symposium were united by a passionate desire to better the lot of Canada’s children, the people who will inherit our country’s future.

It is a desire that Imperial Oil shares, which is why the company offered to become the major corporate sponsor of the conference. “I truly believe that the most meaningful, effective way Imperial can make a difference in this country,” says Doug Baldwin, senior vice-president of Imperial’s Calgary-based resources division, a director of Imperial and a keynote speaker at the symposium, “is by supporting initiatives that create and foster healthier life styles for our children.”

Through the Essa Kids Program, Imperial donates two-thirds of its annual charitable contributions budget— which is $7 million for 1997— to scores of organizations whose work focuses on young Canadians, including the Kids Help Phone, youth orchestras and camps for children with cancer. “We as a nation must take responsibility for our children,” says Baldwin. “They are the future. We cannot expect this country to be healthy and prosperous in the future if we don’t nurture our children properly today.”

But what of Canada’s children? Should we be concerned? The Canadian Council on Social
They are the future. We cannot expect this country to be healthy and prosperous in the future if we don’t nurture our children properly today.

In many respects, real progress has been achieved,” says Senator Landon Pearson, a longtime children’s advocate and honorary chair of the Canada’s Children conference. “Most of our children are doing well. And many of the programmes we have introduced to support disadvantaged young people are working. Most important, I sense that the public and politicians are now more genuinely concerned about our children’s wellbeing.”

But for the most part, “The Progress of Canada’s Children 1996” does not tell a good story. As Stephen Lewis, Canada’s former ambassador to the United Nations and now deputy executive director of UNICEF, writes, the findings of this report “is a critical eye inside the borders of our wealthy nation... to grade Canada on just how responsibly, how equitably, and how conscientiously we are using what we have to guarantee the rights of our children... The conclusion... is clear: in several important respects we are failing our children.”

It’s a disturbing observation. Unfortunately, it is also accurate. In November 1989, the House of Commons passed a resolution to “seek to achieve the goal of eliminating poverty among Canadian children by the year 2000.” A child is defined by the United Nations as someone under the age of 18. In Canada, the average annual income of a family living in poverty—a couple under 65 with children under 18—is $10,023. However, last November, 2002, coalition of 18 national organizations and 11 community groups concerned about child welfare, reported that the number of poor children in Canada had not declined but rather grown by a horrifying 46 percent between 1999 and 1994. Today, 2.8 million children (one in five) in Canada live in poverty.

There are other alarming statistics. For instance, “The Progress of Canada’s Children 1996” states that the incidence of suicide among Canadian teens has grown dramatically over the past three decades. The situation is particularly horrific among the country’s First Nations teens, whose hospitalization rate is five times the national rate. At any one time, there are 40,000 children being cared for by the child welfare system in Canada—in foster or group homes, for example. As part of a small youth forum at last November’s conference, a number of these young people spoke about their lives. Their words, sometimes angry, sometimes confused, were always poignant. “We want to be treated like parents treat their own kids,” insisted a young man from Ottawa. “Parents don’t throw their children out when the kids turn 18. So why am I expected to leave my foster family when I am 18?”

But serious hardship is also experienced by many young people not in state care. Approximately 255,000 Canadian children live in families that regularly use food banks. Twenty percent of young people under 15 to 24—nearly twice the national average—cannot find jobs. And tens of thousands of Canadian children live on the streets. “Are the adults listening?” asked a young unemployed youth from Toronto at the conference.

Says Dr. Paul Steinhauer, a psychiatrist at the Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto and chair of Voices for Children, an organization that fosters healthy child development, “If we neglect children, we will pay the price later as society undertakes increased costs for remedial education and medical and social services.

Poverty is at the root of many of the problems besetting young Canadians, including ill health and poor academic performance. Colin Hughes, chair of Metro Campaign 2000 in Toronto, insists that child poverty ultimately affects not only Canada’s collective pocketbook but its very being. “When I watch more and more of our children slipping into poverty, I find myself asking what this is doing to Canada, a country known for its compassion and sense of fairness. I suggest we all look closely at what is happening and ask, ‘Is this what we, as a people, want?’

There’s no single reason why many of our children are faring so poorly. Members of the child welfare community often cite the cutbacks in social programming in a significant cause of today’s higher rates of child and family poverty. But dwindling funds alone are not responsible for the difficulties many families face today, says Bob Glouso. Societal attitudes are partly responsible. “I am increasingly concerned about what I call the privatization of the family,” says Glouso. “The message society is giving to parents today is that the burden of raising children is their responsibility. We bear it every day. They have the kids. It’s their problem. Get them off my back.” What we are witnessing is a withdrawal of collective support.

According to Gloso, the isolation of the family is particularly troubling. “There is not much recognition of the contribution families are making,” he says. “People who have children, after all, are laying the foundation for the future of the country.”

Ironically, support is decreasing at the same time as the job of parenting is becoming harder. “Even families that are doing well economically are under pressure,” says Gloso. “Research shows that many working parents — and the majority of Canadian children live in homes where both parents are in the labour force — are finding it difficult to cope with the dual responsibilities of work and family. People are worried about not having enough time for their kids.”

In response to the difficulties families face today, various groups across the country, including branches of government, are making efforts to support them. Most impressive are recent developments in British Columbia. At the conference, Penny Priddy, British Columbia’s first minister for children and families, was given an ovation when she announced that on September 19, 1996, the children of British Columbia had taken their place at the provincial Cabinet table. In a bold initiative, she explained, her government had brought together, under one umbrella, children’s programmes that were previously spread out across five ministries. Said Priddy in announcing the initiative: “We have a tremendous, unique opportunity to do our work differently and better understand and meet the needs of our children.”

At the national level, in its most recent budget, the federal government pledged $600 million in additional funding for a child benefit scheme that will begin in 1998. The federal plan will increase benefits for low-income working families with children.

In 1992, the city of Calgary launched a programme entitled Child Friendly Calgary, whose goals are to make local organizations and businesses aware of and responsive to the needs and rights of children, and to promote youth involvement in the community.

And half a continent away, the news department at Ottawa’s CJOH-TV has declared children a priority: “Consideration of children is now part of our editorial policy in local news programming,” says Max Keesing, vice-president of news...
and public affairs at UCML. "As well as reporting on issues of relevance to young people, we continually ask ourselves how all stories that we cover affect young people. By making children a priority, we have the chance to involve the next generation of leaders in the issues that have an impact on them today.

But much more needs to be done. Throughout the Canada's Children conference, an array of child advocacy organizations and groups from across the country held forums and workshops related to various child welfare issues. From these meetings emerged a number of recommendations for improving the lot of all children in Canada.

A demand that the country's governments do more was a common theme at many sessions. Particularly, child advocates called for a national child care programme. According to "The Progress of Canada's Children 1996," only 27 percent of the 1.5 million Canadian children under the

age of 12 who receive nonpaternal child care are in regulated programmes, which carry with them some assurance of quality. The rest are being cared for in arrangements that are not bound by any standards or, worse, are left to their own devices. Many conference participants also called upon the federal government to index the child tax credit, the income tax benefit designed to assist low- and modest-income families. Currently, annual inflation is reducing the actual amount families are receiving through the programme.

The critical difficulties faced by First Nations children and their families in Canada also received considerable attention at the conference. Participants called upon Canada's governments to resolve outstanding land claim disputes and to speed up the movement towards aboriginal self-government in order to provide the economic base and control needed by Canada's First Nations people to combat the extremely high incidence of poverty among aboriginal citizens.

Rene Lamouche, executive director of the Ben Calf Robe Society in Edmonton, an organization that provides social service programmes to aboriginal Canadians, makes a convincing argument for change. "Certainly, nothing is changing under the present system," he says. "I'll give you an example. In 1981, the dropout rate among aboriginal kids in Edmonton was 98 percent. In spite of everyone's hard work, we are still having significant difficulty getting kids through the school system. Want another example? Recently, Health Canada introduced Aboriginal Head Start, an initiative to help preschool aboriginal children not living on reserves or in Metis settlements. Locally, we had a very low response to this programme. When I conducted an informal survey among parents to find out why, they told me they did not believe that anything would help them or their children. They were beyond hope. The truth is that the lives of aboriginal people will only improve when we have the financial tools and the political means to effect change. No one else can do this for us."

"As a people we need to start talking to one another.

We need to acknowledge that Canada's children belong to all of us"