THE COLUMBUS SPIRIT OF LYN HANCOCK

By David Morrison

Last October I was accepted into the Professional Writers Association of Canada. To my delight, one member of the Victoria chapter to kindly send me a welcome message was the renowned Australian-Canadian author, Lyn Hancock. My wife, a bookseller by trade, asked: "Not the Lyn Hancock, who wrote There's a Seal in My Sleeping Bag and all those amazing wildlife books…?" "One and the same!" I confirmed.

Shortly thereafter, I emailed Hancock to ask if she might be interested in my penning an article about her and her work. In the course of her extraordinary response, running into several hundred words, the Lantzville-based writer, photographer, educator and environmentalist mentioned kayaking Norway's Arctic region, a wedding in Belize, a lost set of keys, her Aztec Mayan astrological forecast and, but of course, glow-in-the-dark boats.

I've read her described as a "dynamo," but after five dizzying hours in her inspirational company, the word barely hints at her moxie.

There was obviously a sequential narrative ultimately linking these disparate elements within her email, but wise after the event to Hancock's irrepressible energy for discourse I can attest to the fact that such an effusion of digressive threads is typical of this remarkable woman. Scattershot with randomly recalled, yet relevant memories, stories of Hancock's incredible life pour forth from her in a torrent. just as 45,000,000 gallons of the Niagara River tumble over the Falls every minute. This may seem a dramatic analogy, but such can be the intensity and consequent emotional impact of Hancock's storytelling that one can feel uncontrollably swept along, overwhelmed by her reminiscences. Indeed,

I've read her described as a "dynamo," but after five dizzying hours in her inspirational company, the word barely hints at her moxie.

Hancock moved to Canada in 1961, but hails from Fremantle in Western Australia. I had the good fortune to visit this small, attractive city in 1996, but more pertinently Rottnest Island, a speck of land 12 miles offshore. My reason for visiting was to view quokkas, a rare marsupial that lives there. Describing it in her first book, There's a Seal in My Sleeping Bag, as "my family's favourite stamping ground," Rottnest Island has figured heavily in Hancock's life.

"My grandfather was in charge of the aboriginal convicts there, and it's where I grew up," she says. "My dad went to school on Rottnest, so it's very much in my family history, and features in my first book!"

The book that launched her writing career is considered a West Coast classic

and its creator considers it her "signature piece," but there have been a further nineteen wondrous tomes since Hancock's sparkling debut. Her latest, though first self-published, is *The Ring—Memories of a Métis Grandmother* (subtitled The Pioneer Love Story of Sam and Jane Livingston). It's a departure in that it is Hancock's first work not to recount her own adventures in Nunavut, the Yukon, Northwest Territories, British Columbia or elsewhere. The Ring is a history book, first published as Tell Me, Grandmother, in 1985, and the culmination of a monumental project for the author.

As the full title would suggest, The Ring relates a true love story set during the early days of European settlement in Canada, yet the book follows the families in question up to the present day. It begins with an Irishman, Sam Livingston (1831-1897), and a Métis woman, Jane Howse (1848-1919), westbound souls who met at Fort Victoria, a Hudson's Bay Company trading post near what is today Smoky Lake, Alberta. They married in 1865 and started a family that would eventually number fourteen children. When the family headed south to the Bow and Elbow rivers in 1872, they became the first settlers in the area that would ultimately develop into the city of Calgary. Travellers using Calgary International Airport since 2006 will have seen Albertan sculptor Alan Henderson's nine-foot sculpture of Livingston's head, bearing the legend "Sam Livingston, Calgary's First Citizen."

But what happened next, and what's the significance of the ring in the title? Well, I have no desire to act as a spoiler here, so instead heartily recommend that intrigued readers purchase copies of the riveting historical account Hancock views as "The Forsyte Saga of Canada." But, as if Sam and Jane's story is not fascinating enough in itself, the icing is provided by a remarkable local connection that Hancock says induces "goosebumps" every time she tells it. It certainly affected me this way.

Again, without giving too much away, it concerns the near-miraculous uniting of two of the Livingston's grandchildren after 64 years apart. One of them, a Central Vancouver Island man named Samuel Dorcy Letourneau, happened by chance to read Tell Me, Grandmother in 1985, and it got him thinking. That's all I'm prepared to reveal! Read the book for the extraordinary full story, which, as Hancock rightly insists, would make a powerful movie.

So, how did Hancock come to write the only book not chronicling her own adventures? In the

See yourself in a whole new light.

You have the power to help others while helping your family and yourself!

As a Sun Life Financial advisor, you run your own business, but still benefit from the company's support, established marketing programs and ongoing training and development. If you want the power to control your career where your efforts are rewarded, we should talk.

Kevin Jessup
Sales Manager
250 729 7544 ext **2229**
5800 Turner Road
Suite 202
Nanaimo, BC V9T 6J4

Sun Life Financial

Sun Life Financial advisors are contracted with Sun Life Financial Distributors (Canada) Inc., registered in Quebec as a financial services firm.
© Sun Life Assurance Company of Canada, 2010.

BARTON & LEIER GALLERY
DOWNTOWN

GREAT ART • QUIRKY GIFTS
99 CHAPEL STREET, NANAIMO
MONDAY–SATURDAY 10 to 5 SUNDAY 11 to 4
FRIDAY NIGHTS UNTIL NINE 'TIL CHRISTMAS

early 1980s she was approached by Marion Dowler, the wife of Dennis Dowler - one of Sam and Jane's grandsons – with a view to helping her write a book about her husband's ancestors. The Dowler's daughter, Marilyn, had cared for a gibbon named Gypsy in the classroom of the Victoria school at which Hancock taught in the 1960s, an experience that lead to Hancock's book, An Ape Came Out of My Hatbox.

The collaboration became Tell Me, Grandmother, of which Hancock says: "I did not write the original draft and I didn't do the research for it. It was Marion's idea and her title, but she asked me to come help her write it. But there was a lot more research on top of what she'd done, and it's still going on! She had worked on it for several years, but it was all very encyclopaedic, and not shaped, so I took her material and shaped it."

Considering the important Letourneau development and lots of other unearthed information since the publication of the original book, Hancock and Dowling later thought Tell Me, Grandmother should be updated, and so The Ring was written. Sadly, Dowling did not live to see the fruits of her work with Hancock published last year, as she passed on in 2007.

A trim 72-year-old possessing drive and ardour to shame the rest of us, Hancock has been a natural explorer, of history or otherwise, since childhood.

"I always wanted to be Columbus, to find the world!" she laughs. "I remember going for a walk on a childhood holiday and I thought I was where no other footsteps had ever been. I was so proud of myself that no one had ever been where I was...ten miles out of Fremantle, where it's all built up! I came to this cave, the first person to ever be in this cave, and I was so disappointed to find some graffiti there!"

Capricorns being known for "a purposeful pursuit of their destiny," Hancock considers herself typical of her astrological sign. In her personal pursuit she has filled half a century's worth of diaries, now crammed into cupboards of her busy home office. Yet despite the fact that these detailed records of her life have produced a score of books, including several bestsellers and acknowledged classics of

their genre, the modest Hancock doesn't see herself as a literary force, as the Lyn Hancock to whom my wife referred.

"I still don't think I can write; I just write!" she proclaims. "I write because it's in me and has to come out and I want to communicate it. I write about what I'm fascinated about, whatever it is. I never think I can write; in fact I'm amazed I've written zillions of articles and twenty books that have been published and that people buy my stuff. I'm just talking to people, that's all."

As I left the whirlwind that is Lyn Hancock to her day she had about a hundred plates spinning. On top of dealing with a family bereavement she was deliberating whether or not to pursue a story about an Australian inventor that would take her to London and Rome in the coming days. And she was frantically trying to get her fax machine to work as she reeled off the many potential projects she could or wished to tackle in the years to come.

"There are still countries that I want to visit, and I've still

got that Columbus spirit!" she says. "I want to go back to Africa to see all the changes, and maybe write a book about hitchhiking there in the sixties, and about going back and making that comparison. But what I really want to do is the animal books, about the animals I had in my classroom, and the lives that were changed. And I want to write a book about looking for the ideal man, because that's a part of my life that nobody knows about. But whatever I write about, I'll always be communicating, I'll always tell stories." ■

For more information on Lyn Hancock, including how to order signed copies of The Ring and other titles, please visit www.lynhancock.com. Orders can also be placed directly with the author by emailing Lyn Hancock at lynhancock@shaw.ca or telephoning her on (250) 390 9075. Further information about The Ring can be found by visiting www.grandmotherjanesring.

Welcome to
Aspengrove
School

Aspengrove School aims to create a spirit of inquiry by promoting curiosity, reflection, and critical thinking in every aspect of student life.

At Aspengrove, students become life-long learners who are well prepared to thrive in a university environment and beyond, as caring socially responsible adults.

ASPENGROVE SCHOOL
IB World School
JR Kindergarten – Grade 12
Lantzville, BC

Be an Inquirer, contact us at:
Ph: (250) 390-2201
www.aspengroveschool.ca

Baywood Glass

● Residential ● Auto ● Commercial

•Auto Glass •Safety Glass •Mirrors •Thermo Windows
•Shower Doors •Plate Glass •Fireplace Glass •Screens

Why is this car smiling?

Its windshield was just replaced by the experts at Baywood Glass! Our trained staff can also repair stone chips in as little as 15 minutes!

No need to call your insurance company... most auto glass claims can be processed in our office.

250.390.0326
6400 Hammond Bay Road, Nanaimo (at Applecross)
www.baywoodglass.ca