



SOUL OF THE CITY

An expat Calgarian peers into the past

Essay by Lily MacKenzie

Calgary eludes definition, the name itself as well as the city. Though sophisticated and modern on the surface, the past doesn't seem far away. Images of cowboys riding bucking broncos, flailing at the air with their Stetsons, remind visitors and residents alike that wildness still stalks the city, threatening any and all attempts at order.

Like a cowboy trying to keep his seat, current residents have many forces to contend with, some external, others internal. When I talked recently on the phone with my son who lives in Calgary, he reported that three bears had just appeared on a golf course in the southern part of town. One was a three-year-old grizzly; the other two were black bears.

Skyscrapers dominate the skyline, but the prairies still press on the city limits, a reminder that Calgary started out dependent on farmers and ranchers. The city served them. And while it now has other masters, it continues to feel the power of its environment. The city will continue to grow, but it will never take over the prairie grasses, nor the weeds or the wild rose. The wilderness looms on the fringes, reminding everyone just how tenuous civilization is.

WHEN I LEFT CALGARY IN 1963, the population was less than 250,000. None of the skyscrapers that define today's skyline had been built. Now they compete in grandeur with the Rockies. Elveden House—where I once worked for Peter Loughheed, then an attorney for Mannix Construction—was the tallest structure. It no longer is, but at least it hasn't disappeared like so many other downtown landmarks.

Gone is the Prince's Island that I knew. Grown over with grass, weeds, trees and shrubs, it was a wild place in the heart of the city. It seemed like an island for princes back then, its thickets and thorns conjuring fairytales. As a young girl I ran through the trees at night, lungs burning, heart pounding in my ears, chased by older boys. It was terrifying and exhilarating. (I thought then that the name was Princess Island. I imagined mermaids surfacing from the Bow River in the dark and frolicking. I wanted to be one of them.)

Gone too is the old Greyhound bus depot, the *Calgary Herald* building, the Canadian Pacific Railway station, the Variety and Strand theatres, and much of the east

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end. They've been replaced by a convention centre, a new city hall, the Glenbow Museum, the Calgary Centre for the Performing Arts and Olympic Plaza. Before, the area attracted people down on their luck and drunken cowboys in town for a few nights—uncontrolled, unpredictable.

But drunks showed up elsewhere too, not just in the east end. Beer parlours were the meeting place, men and women separated until a new law was passed that allowed them to drink together, but only if a man was accompanied by a woman. "Ladies and Escorts," the sign read.

My friends and I hung out in the Royal Hotel's beer parlour, a huge room filled with tiny circular tables that looked like they belonged in an ice cream parlour. A few of us women would start out together at one table. One by one the doorman would page us as the guys turned up, needing an escort into this female world. The one table expanded to many, clustered together, beer glasses covering every inch of the shiny black surfaces. The decibel level of talking and laughing rose to a feverish pitch and the waiters couldn't keep up with our thirst. We were being primed, our animal nature unleashed.

On weekends, a rumble always broke out after the beer parlours closed, the younger men fighting at the slightest provocation, making Calgary feel like a frontier town. Of course, I'm sure places still exist in the city where fights break out, but the beer parlours I'm thinking of weren't just in the east end of town where you might expect such things to happen. The Royal Hotel and the Wales on 2nd

Street West, the heart of today's booming financial area, were popular watering holes. It's difficult to imagine the young professional men I've seen on downtown streets in recent years punching each other after a night of partying, their Hathaways spotted with blood.

Feelings seemed much closer to the surface then; people weren't as well behaved. Or perhaps I'm describing an entirely different class, there being a shift in recent years so that the upwardly mobile young professionals have become more dominant, determining the city's values. The rougher crowd from the oil fields and surrounding farms has found new grazing grounds.

When I was eight years old, I lived in the east end of town for one year with my mother, stepfather and young brother. We stayed in the bridal suite of the Imperial Hotel, between 8th and 9th Avenues. I saw plenty of fights then, hanging out our window, watching the street action.

The hotel no longer exists, except in memory. The Black Knight in the Wales Hotel (one of Calgary's first cocktail lounges and a favourite hangout of the young crowd when I was in my early twenties), the Royal Hotel, the Capital theatre, the Petroleum Building where I worked for Sinclair Canada Oil—all of these structures have been replaced by shiny new palaces, towering creations whose exteriors resemble slick ice. From a distance, the Petro Canada building appears to be a sophisticated grain elevator. Somehow the city can't shake its heritage.

DESTRUCTION AND CONSTRUCTION are both part of growth, whether in an individual or a city. Transformation involves death and loss. The places of my youth don't fit easily with the new, upbeat, sophisticated city Calgary has become. The image of an unsophisticated cowtown no longer fits. Calgary has grown up, and like the parent who wants her child forever young, I'm having trouble adjusting.

I watched the 1988 Winter Olympics on TV in my California cottage. I had just turned on the set for a minute, hoping to catch the news, not expecting I'd be seeing Calgary broadcast to the world. I didn't stop watching for two hours. I was stunned that my hometown was hosting this important event, televised around the world. The humble place where I'd been raised, a relatively unknown prairie town, now was an internationally recognized city. It had grown up, forcing me to stop clinging to a past that no longer exists. Calgary had come of age.

But what does coming of age mean? For individuals it's more obvious. There's a physical aging and a recognition that the person is fulfilling herself, expressing outwardly what has been moving to fruition all these years. A city has different markers. Perhaps coming of age means rebirth, renewal. The structures that once defined the city must be torn down. They no longer can contain the new life, just as you can't put new wine in old wineskins.

The name Calgary itself reflects some of the city's contradictions. It was chosen in 1876 by a Mountie, Colonel Macleod. "Even in the soft, Gaelic name there was romance," Grant MacEwan says in *Calgary Cavalcade*,

“and some mystery.” My first impressions of the name didn’t suggest romance or mystery. To me it sounded hard, the unyielding “c” and “g” overpowering the weaker “l” and “ry” combination. Neither did the word conjure up romance or mystery. I found it plain, common. The name Edmonton, the city where I was born, had more flair.

After reading MacEwan’s explanations, however, I’ve altered my views. He says at first it was spelled Calgarry, a Gaelic name whose earliest definition means “clear running water.” In Gaelic, it’s spelled Calgearraidh, the last syllable adding a guttural sound to the word, giving it an earthy, rooted quality. A Calgary exists on the Isle of Skye five miles from Colonel Macleod’s grandfather’s farm. (Skye was the ancestral home of the Macleods and MacDonalds.) And there’s a Calgarry House on the Isle of Mull.

Soft and hard, Gaelic versus Anglo-Saxon: these opposites clash, embodying the conflict between sophistication and an earthy, down-home quality. The new focus on commerce forms the visible, tangible images that define Calgary today—downtown skyscrapers penetrating the clouds. But beneath this facade, another dimension coexists, the natural world and its influences.

AS MUCH AS I ADMIRE the new modern structures and the many other changes in the city, I realized how much I missed the old sights and smells when I stopped by the Central United Church recently. Built in 1905, at one time the church boasted one of the biggest congregations in Canada. My older sister and I had taken piano lessons there, from the church’s organist and choir director, P. L. Newcomb. My family also worshipped there at Christmas and Easter. And when I was seven, I went to the gym at Central United to join the Brownies. Shy, alone and a stranger, I became frightened and ran away.

On this visit, I had to ring the office to have the door unlocked, the church vulnerable to theft and vandalism. (According to MacEwan, in 1907 the place was open daily from 10 a.m. until 10 p.m.) Central United, a stable downtown fixture like The Bay, smells old, unlike the glitz that surrounds it. The same dark wood pews that I sat on as a girl face the altar and the stained glass windows—three panels with images of Jesus, the captions beneath reading: “Be strong, fear not. Fight the good fight of faith. Behold I stand at the door and knock.” The church has seen better days, paint peeling off the walls in places, red carpet fraying.

Still, it’s like visiting an elderly uncle or aunt, the interior shabby and somehow more authentic, things basically unchanged. The walls can speak, so much stored there, worshippers from all walks of life and all ages bringing their lives to that altar. Hoping for consolation and renewal.

I sat in the balcony, where we used to worship, usually arriving late because we had to drive in from Langdon. All the memories came rushing back: wandering through the building while my sister took piano lessons, poking into closed rooms, guzzling communion grape juice I found in a cupboard, playing with cutout images of Jesus in a Sunday school area.

The other day I came across this quote while reading a

newsletter from the Dallas Institute: “Every city has a soul-life. The soul of the city has a need to show itself and does, regardless of the powerful forces at work to annihilate it... places that touch us at the deepest core of our being. Each of us longs for such experiences; each of us loves being in such places.”

Central United is one such place, though not because it’s a church—the soul is often left out of many houses of worship. Central has personality and character, its roots in Calgary’s history.

The Bow and Elbow rivers also still carry the city’s soul, arteries snaking through the downtown area and beyond, oblivious to the changes around them, linking civilization and nature. They become renewed regularly, connected to the past and the future.

Unfortunately, the new buildings don’t link us to the past. Newness can fool us into thinking there isn’t a past, which is a great loss. In *The Colour of Canada* Hugh MacLennan says, “But nobody can escape from his past,

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neither can any nation live alone and escape from history.... The effort to be superior to the past, superior to human nature, is more than human nature can bear, no matter how nobly people try to bear it.”

The slick glass that dominates the downtown skyscrapers sometimes reminds me of blind eyes, unable to reflect back the other. Empty. Projecting outward. Denying any inner life. This shiny exterior decorates the buildings, inside and out, surfaces you could slide off of, like ice. The clear running water of the Bow and Elbow rivers, which organize the city’s life, focus it, now can seem frozen in these glossy structures.

Still, I’m impressed with Calgary’s growth and its leaders’ ambitions. No longer a single-industry town, dependent on oil, it attracts corporations and young families who want to build a life there. They like the affordable housing, the recreation and the culture. As predicted by MacEwan, Calgary has become a city with a future: it’s the “Chicago of the West.”

Yet I can’t help but wish the Calgary I knew in my youth were more than a memory. Each visit I make to my hometown shows me another new angle. Every time I think I’ve captured it in words or image, Calgary slips away, constantly revising itself. 🏙️

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