

VICTORIA—CITY OF MANY FACETS

MARY WEEKES

STRANGE as it may seem, Victoria is not to me the playground of the Pacific, the city of winter golf, seascapes, yellow broom and roses, but a city with a half-caste personality. In composition, it is neither here nor there, as Canadian cities go. Victoria is a thousand unrelated things; a city of many facets, which will never coalesce into a unified whole. That is her charm.

The Empress Hotel is the pivot of life there. It is a magnet to which the world gravitates. This grey old dowager sits with her feet in James Bay, accepting the homage of the great, the mildly curious, streams of tourists and the laborers that prune her famous rose vines and roll her velvet lawns. But she deceives no one. She has her uneasy moments—moments when the ghosts that she shelters stir themselves to action. James Douglas himself steps forth, as he did a hundred years ago to the sob of Indian drum or the glare of torch that threatens the log hut he has thrown up, to trade with the Indians. The Empress of Victoria is conscious of his restless spirit.

A curious pattern now overlays the Fort Camousan of Governor Douglas's day. Despite her lure, there are things about Victoria that sadden the sensitive spirit. She is peopled largely by outsiders; those who have been drawn to her salubrious climate—the ambitious, fortune-seekers, drifters, the old. One meets in this mild-mannered city many who have withdrawn from the Orient and are now striving to live in imitation of former affluence. Even now, their sympathies with foreign ways and culture are so convincing that one wonders why they were tempted from the glamorous lands where the days were effortless and where the very act of picking up one's shoes caused one to "lose face".

In easy-going Victoria, shops stand on trails once trod by Indian chiefs, and in many of them young Chinamen, dapper and confident, carry on trade with the assurance that Victoria is their Victoria. In their bright shops, they supply Victorians with flowers and fruit and vegetables, as well as many other commodities. Young Chinese couples and their offspring are plentiful in Victoria, they live there in contentment, increasing the population and expanding their businesses. Formerly, the

Japanese immigrants emphasized the foreign touch. It is only a hundred years since officers of old Fort Camousan had knife and rifle close by, when they opened their trading-shop in the Indian land.

In March and April, when I saw the blue water of the Pacific lapping the shores of Oak Bay and purple and crimson arbis clothing the rocks, I thought of the wheat-bearing land—the endless prairie that is the life artery of Canada. I thought of the fishermen off Newfoundland, of miners in the belly of the earth, of lumbermen, of trappers. And above all, I thought of the cities that supported these men. Vigorous cities, streamlined and unified, of one pattern. Very gentle is Canada's Pacific Island city.

Huge totem poles attract the travellers that are wooed to sea-green Victoria; weird poles that attest Victoria's primitive vigor—Victoria when it was Fort Camousan. It is hard to reconcile this mild-mannered, temperate city on the Pacific with Cartier's Montreal, Champlain's Quebec, the Port Royal of De La Tour. Strange to think of a half-caste city guarding a nation as vigorous as Canada.

Flowers were garlanding Victoria in March, when in the Rockies mushrooms of snow exposed every tree trunk. Only a few days earlier, my train, coming up out of the coulee that encloses Moose Jaw, had headed into a hard crimson wall; a sky that sent crimson shafts across the white-frosted prairie. In Montreal, snow and ice held the city bound. The Laurentian Hills were white and still; yet, violets fanned by soft winds perfumed the Victoria air. Laurels and rhododendrums were an everlasting green.

From the houses that cling like barnacles to the rocks above the sea, to the daffodils that fight the mists, suburban Victoria must always be a bit of England. The immigrant Englishman in Victoria builds himself aloof where he can overlook the blue Pacific. The Englishman in Canada is seldom a part of Canada. He fences his bit of England about him—and moulds.

The eerie houses of Victoria perched on grey-green rocks do not harmonize with the symmetry and sobriety of Ontario farm houses, the storey-and-a-half house of Nova Scotia, the gambrel-roofed house of old Quebec. They look not only lonely and frightening, but temporary, to the Canadian eye that is used to homesteads standing four-square and solid on the ground. They create the illusion of "not belonging". They are as aloof

as the seagulls that skim their roofs, as remote as the out-going tides.

Victorians in general disturb the all-Canadian pattern; a pattern as rough-hewn and uncompromising as the good Canadian earth itself. The people, the foreign design, the Scottish gorse, the transcontinental travellers, the repatriated—all combine to make Victoria a city of many facets and to extinguish that adamant quality which marks other Canadian cities. Victoria has lost the vigor of its young days; the days when Maquinna of the Nootkas first saw white men's ships rocking on the sparkling waters of the Pacific; the days when the fierce old Indian Chief, tired of dancing and feasting, laid his head upon his pillow—a sack of bones—and slept.

And yet, Victoria, half-caste city caressed by the sea, soft winds and grey mists and perfumed by flowers, will forever stand with sentinels—the ghosts of old Fort Camousan.
