

Lost classic finds a home

After what she wryly calls a "50-year pregnancy" Helen Meilleur's Pour of Rain is published - again. By Peggy Stortz

Once words are committed to paper and sent out into the world, the writer no longer has any control over them. The piece of writing, be it a memo, a report or a book, is fair game now for the interpretation of the reader, and it may not be appreciated as the writer had intended.

When Helen Meilleur wrote *A Pour of Rain* she spent years reading Hudson's Bay Company journals and log books to ensure the completeness and accuracy of her account of the early days of Fort Simpson on the northern coast of British Columbia. She traveled to Winnipeg twice to visit the company's archives. She took great care to copy down log entries exactly as they had been written. She double-checked dates of events and the authenticity of the data she used to recreate the history of this important fur-trading centre. And what feedback did she get for all her years of research?

"I loved reading about your own childhood experiences," was the refrain she heard over and over again.

"At first I was devastated. I worked so hard, I dug for so long, to get all that stuff," Meilleur laments. She admits that she was aware that some readers would find the historical data tedious and she put in her personal anecdotes to liven it up. But she didn't realize that most of her readers wouldn't be history buffs.

The contents of *A Pour of Rain* are three-fold. First there are the many verbatim

excerpts from the Hudson's Bay Company log books on subjects as diverse as the numbers of furs purchased, sickness and death, visitors to the fort, food rationing, war amongst the First Nations peoples, and the fate of the ships up and down the coast. Meilleur then skillfully used her research data to recreate events that occurred during the early years of the fort and to paint pictures of the fort's residents and its physical appearance. Lastly there are her own personal recollections and impressions - her childhood adventures, the customers in her father's store, the social life, the struggles, even the weather, seen through the eyes of a little girl in the early years of the twentieth century. These proved to be the most popular aspect of the book.

Helen Young was born in 1910 in the village of Port Simpson, formerly Fort Simpson. The town of Prince Rupert was born that same year, an instant town blasted out of the rock. It became the terminus for the railway and it marked the beginning of the end for the village of Port Simpson. But the Youngs stayed on for 22 more years serving the people, native and white, in the busy general store. Meilleur says of her family, "We were ordinary people doing extraordinary things."

Meilleur claims that *A Pour of Rain* had a 50-year pregnancy. When she was about ten years old, her father returned from a business trip to Vancouver filled with stories he had learned about the early days of Fort Simpson. They were tales about the company boats

and their crews, about the native people who came to trade furs, about the characters who had been part of the trading post's colourful past. Even as a child, she knew that there was a book to be written but it would take her almost fifty years to get down to writing it and ten more before it reached the public. In the meantime, all that history lay hidden in the dusty old archives.

A history buff herself, Meilleur was passionate about bringing the history of her childhood home to the world. The ideas rattled around in her mind throughout high school and university, during the years she taught school, and then, while raised her five children. But she couldn't find the time to write until she was almost 60 years old. She tried to sell her idea but no one in Toronto or Montreal could see the value in a history of some obscure outpost in the northwest. Finally J.J. Douglas in Vancouver (now Douglas and McIntyre) accepted the project based on one chapter. Meilleur was assigned an editor who told her to go home and write the book. She took him at his word and six years later she returned with her manuscript. The editor was gone and the company was no longer interested in her book. She tried other publishing houses until Sono Nis picked her up and the book finally came out in 1980.

Last year, passages appeared in an anthology entitled *Genius of Place: Writing About British Columbia*. Through this,

Dinah



"Dinah walked Port Simpson's roads and pathways alone. She walked in men's boots, steadying her steps with a driftwood cane and turning aside the rain with a gunny sack across her shoulders. Little Indian boys, romping along in a pack, fell silent and decorous as they overtook and passed her in an arc through the grass at the side of the road, their faces averted to protect them from the evil eye, for Dinah was a witch.

"Dinah would have been an outcast even if she had never cast a spell nor hurled a curse. In her old age she had come from another village to live with relatives on the Port Simpson Reserve. The loneliest people were the few Haidas, Tlingits and Kitimats who were fated to dwell among the Tsimshians; whether they had been slaves or descended from slaves, or whether they arrived through mishap or disapproved marriage, they were fiercely scorned. In Dinah's case the scorn was tinged with fear and horror."

A Pour of Rain