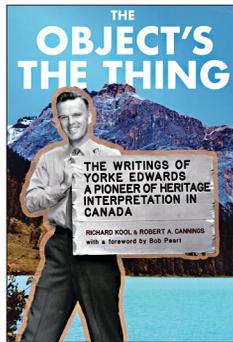


The Object's the Thing: the Writings of Yorke Edwards, a Pioneer of Heritage Interpretation in Canada

By Richard Kool and Robert A. Cannings. 2021. Royal BC Museum. 336 pages, 24.95 CAD, Paper.

As the title suggests, this volume introduces a prominent figure in the 'Golden Age' (1960s and 1970s) of Canadian natural environment interpretation. Simply put, particularly in regards to parks, interpretation programs are springboards for visitors' understanding and appreciation of the landscape. Done well, they not only enhance visitor experiences but greatly assist in the conservation and management of the natural environment. I began my own career in park interpretation in the late 1960s and worked in various capacities in interpretive programming, planning, and facility design both in Ontario and Alberta parks over the following decade and a half. I looked forward to reading this book both for its potential documentary value and as a trip down memory lane.

The Object's the Thing extolls the achievements and writings of Roger Yorke Edwards (1924–2011). It was coauthored by one of the authors of the comprehensive obituary (and bibliography) that appeared in this publication (Canning *et al.* 2020). The book's intention is to show why Edwards was, in the view of the foreword's author Bob Peart, "widely accepted as 'the father of nature interpretation in Canada'" (p. xvii). Edwards himself would disagree with this assessment, noting that "There is really nothing new about interpretation" (p. 192). He was correct—it was over a century old in Canada when he started his interpretive career in 1957. The foreword statement is but the first of a series of startling exaggerations (further discussed below) that undermine this otherwise thorough documentation of Edwards's long and



productive career.

Edwards initiated the British Columbia (BC) park interpretive program in 1959 and was its senior administrator for almost a decade. Subsequently with the Canadian Wildlife Service (CWS) in Ottawa for five years (until 1972), he oversaw the development of several regional interpretive centres before moving back to BC, where he served for over a decade as assistant director and then director of the Royal British Columbia Museum. *The Object's the Thing* (a phrase taken from a speech [pp. 264–275] on the importance and use of artefacts in interpretation) chronicles his thoughts and activities during his career, mostly through extracts from his speeches, annual reports, and popular articles.

One of the best parts of *The Object's the Thing* is the biographical first chapter. It describes Edwards's naturalist beginnings and biological-interpretive career, commencing at the University of Toronto where he studied forestry. The chapter is full of solid information and context, although I would have liked to see more about his time (1945–1947) in Ontario's Algonquin Park associating with the biologists who were developing the interpretive program there. That surely is where Edwards's first thoughts on park interpretation developed.

The following chapter describing Edwards's interpretive insights as being exceptional, if not nationally unique, is less successful. The chapter's overall impact is lessened by overly-grand claims or simply incorrect assertions, including that his work in BC parks "conceptualized and created park interpretation in Canada" (p. 27). Such a program had been running in Ontario's Algonquin Park for 15 years before the first fledgling BC effort began. Indeed, Edwards acknowledged that fact himself (p. 285). Simply put, Algonquin Park is the birthplace of park interpretation in Canada. Virtually every insight presented in

this chapter as representing new interpretive thinking by Edwards was, in fact, already in practice elsewhere in Canada (in the Ontario parks program, at least).

Similarly, the assertion in the first chapter that by the late 1960s the BC program was considered “a standard for park education across the country” (p. 10) is dubious. We in the Algonquin Park interpretive naturalist program at that time (the largest such program in Canada) knew nothing of the BC program. In the mid-1970s, the rapidly expanding and comparable Alberta park program also did not recognize the previously established BC program as being especially significant either (pers. obs.). That’s not to say that the BC program was not excellent, but that’s far from it being a recognized national standard.

The rest of the book—over 250 pages—consists of short essays, speeches, and reports arranged in chronological order and detailing (rather repetitively) Edwards’s thinking and activities concerning park and museum interpretation and natural environment conservation. The essays are typically well-expressed summations of established interpretive theory and practice from that time. It’s almost entirely familiar and well-established ‘how-to-do-it’ stuff, with few or no new guiding principles for Canadian park interpretation being offered.

Oddly, there is not a word by either the authors or Edwards concerning the rich and diverse origins of natural history interpretation in Canada. Nothing is said, for example, of the groundbreaking and innovative work by Philip Henry Gosse, who wrote the first Canadian interpretive publication (*The Canadian Naturalist: a Series of Conversations on the Natural History of Lower Canada*) in 1840. Similarly, no mention is made of the contribution to 19th- and early 20th-century interpretive literature by Catharine Parr Traill and Ernest Thompson Seton. Nor is there recognition of the interpretive value or suitable parks application of the eloquently crafted early to mid-20th-century environmental and conservational insights of people like Grey Owl (Archie Belaney) and Farley Mowat. For a reader looking for an overview of how the BC parks or the short-lived CWS interpretive programs developed, or an understanding of Edwards’s important roles in shaping them, however, *The Object’s the Thing* is informative.

While Edwards was indeed an important inter-

pretive pioneer in BC, his perspective on natural environment conservation was more passive than many of his naturalist contemporaries, particularly during the environmentally turbulent late 1960s and 1970s. During his brief term (1969) on the Ottawa Field Naturalists’ Club’s (OFNC) Board of Directors and as Chairman of the OFNC Natural Areas Committee, for example, he argued that naturalists’ clubs should primarily study nature, gather data, and encourage established authorities to improve ecological management of natural lands under their control (e.g., the federal government regarding Gatineau Park in the National Capital Region), but should not forcefully advocate for conservation action (Edwards 1970). Also, the philosophical perspectives he expressed concerning BC’s controversial 1960s hydroelectric dam construction and forestry practices (pp. 171 and 179–182, respectively) seem to condone those massively impactful resource exploitation initiatives. We are all creatures of our times, of course. Just the same, some of these expositions seem shocking not just looking back from today, but probably in his day as well.

There are few interpretive revelations to be had in *The Object’s the Thing* for those who have read widely on the subject. Or, like this reviewer, are old enough (!) to have directly participated in that aptly described ‘Golden Age’ of Canadian park interpretation. Still, this is a useful review and compilation of achievement for any readers interested in how environmental messaging developed in Canada (especially western Canada) in the mid to later part of the 20th century. Accordingly, Yorke Edwards deserves the accolades he has received (including election as an Honorary Member of the OFNC in 1980) for his promotion of natural environment interpretation in Canada, especially in British Columbia.

Literature Cited

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