Just Getting Started

The Edmonton Public Library 1913-2013

"... the contribution made by the Edmonton libraries to the sanity and support of the citizens cannot be estimated. No Annual Report can gauge things of this sort."

Annual Report of the Edmonton Public Library, 1931

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By the time I was old enough for a genuine conversation with him, my grandfather was a dreamy widower. With a glass or two of rye in him he was a constant storyteller. He would talk about growing up in an Edmonton of the imagination, a place he could only see when he closed his eyes.

His wife had died young of cancer and he was not the kind to remarry. He learned to cook and retreated into his memories. The place he most wanted to be on these retreats was somewhere in the 1950s across the street from the Hotel Macdonald, on a bit of grass. He is in his thirties, a young father, married to a tall and sarcastic woman. The kids are with a babysitter.

They have just visited the downtown branch of the Edmonton Public Library, the Carnegie Library, in its original location on MacDonald Drive, and my grandmother wants a cigarette. They go down the stairs with the sun on their faces and enter the square park, a bowling green. It's May and warm enough to leave jackets at home. Flowers are up and blooming on the borders of the grass. It smells of lilac and dusk is on its way. My grandfather takes the novel his wife has borrowed, to carry it for her. The limestone of the library, in this light, goes well with the grand hotel behind it. South is the river valley. They walk to the edge and the sun is shining off the water so powerfully my grandfather wishes for his sunglasses. Later they'll go for dinner, maybe dance afterward. But first they'll stand here on MacDonald Drive, in a suit and in a dress, on a patch of pretty grass near the library and the hotel and the shining river, with the book they have borrowed.

"Just before I go to sleep at night," my grandfather once said, after more than two rye and waters, "that's where I am."

In university, one of my professors told us to use something she called the universal present tense when we wrote about literature. Hamlet did not stab Polonius behind the arras at some specific point in history — not when Shakespeare wrote the play and certainly not in the Kingdom of Denmark sometime in the 13th Century. Hamlet is always stabbing Polonius behind the arras. He's doing it right now.

Right now, my grandfather — who is as dead as Shakespeare and, I suppose, Polonius — stands on MacDonald Drive in May, in the late afternoon Edmonton sunshine, with a novel his wife has just borrowed from the Carnegie Library.

Every city is a city of ghosts, even the young ones.

Of course, Edmonton is only young to students of architecture.

For thousands of years we have lived on the banks of the North Saskatchewan, Rossdale Flats, storytellers if not architects. We disturb the bones when we dig holes for our bridges, and we lack the vocabulary for figuring out what to do about it. Anthony Henday, whose name graces our ring road, entered the shining valley of my grandfather's imagination in the middle of the eighteenth century. He began trading with the aboriginal people who passed through this fortunate place, for water and wildlife and wood.

Soon, they were building a fort — Edmonton House or Fort Edmonton, named after a borough east of London. The fort was not a literary society but it was a place of tales; Alberta author Fred Stenson's most beloved novel, *The Trade*, shows how the aboriginal people, the Métis, and the Europeans entertained themselves on the North Saskatchewan. They talked of where they had come from and where they were going, often in angry shouts. There were private libraries and book-lovers among them. Chief Factor John Rowand, who shouted the loudest, may not have been a reader but he collected literature for his massive house on the river — the first in the west to have windows.

Monto, lurking in the middle of Edmonton, is the Cree word for the spirit of the Creator, what First Nations leader Lewis Cardinal calls "the great mystery."[i] He wants to build a story place, at Fort Edmonton, to honour the mystery and its people.

The population remained relatively stable for nearly a hundred years. Then, very quickly, instability arrived. In 1885 the railway came and with it, settlers from all over the world. Land was cheap and fertile, and a growing population meant entrepreneurs could set up easily. This has always been an eerily good place to make something, to prosper. The North Saskatchewan wasn't the most elegant route to the Yukon but the gold rush attracted men and women to the most obvious, most northerly stop on the railway; Dawson City, at the end of the 1890s, was the

most populous city in the west after San Francisco. The route north from Edmonton was marketed as the inside track.[ii] You can see some of them arriving in Edmonton, looking at a map, the 1,600 miles that remained before them, and closing their eyes — imagining themselves into their own dreamy places.

Some of these travelers and farmers and men of commerce who were just passing through decided to stay, setting up a pattern that would continue for the next hundred and twenty years or so. You come to Edmonton to make some money and leave.

But you never leave.

Near the elevators in the Stanley Milner Branch of the Edmonton Public Library, on Sir Winston Churchill Square, is a watercolour painting of the original Carnegie Library on MacDonald Drive — a most attractive ghost. The painting was a gift to the library by its architect, George Heath MacDonald. Elevators tend to be slow and there's nothing else to look at as you wait for a car. There are nine windows in the front of the building and four Doric columns. At the top of the stairs there was a carving of an open book and oak leaves and the words FREE TO ALL, which you can nearly make out in the painting. The Hotel Macdonald looms behind it. The library has a sense of architectural grandeur that has been rare in Edmonton since the great boom in pre-caste concrete towers that started in the 1960s.

One windy afternoon I studied a photo from the archives of the Milner Library and stood at the spot where it would have been taken. It was, in the 1950s, when my grandfather fell in love with it, a leafy and welcoming place. As my grandfather remembered, it was a gentle destination oriented around and toward the river. The little circle of stone buildings had turned its back on the commerce on Jasper Avenue to become a library place. The need for a library, in Edmonton, was predicated on confidence — or a lack of it, another eternal city struggle. A city is not a city

until it has a library, a building worthy of the intellectual and creative aspirations of its people, free to all.

In the spring of 2012, on the day I took the photograph, it was a deserted platform of concrete; cars and SUVs idled on MacDonald Drive while drivers texted, waiting for their husbands and wives to flee the Telus towers.

It is fashionable to mock the city builders of the 1960s and 1970s who felt it necessary to knock down limestone Edmonton to make way for modernity: the miracle of concrete. Today, we're keen to take down all this detestable concrete and replace it with glass. By 2060 it will surely seem as ridiculous as Brutalism seems to most of us in 2013.

We can agree with the builders of 1913 and the builders of Canada's Centennial year, 1967, that a city is not a city without a library. Once it was a cornerstone of the public square. Today, perhaps, as newspapers decline and the internet goes borderless, the city library may be the public square.

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The notion that a people should have a library is not new. We carry romantic notions about the first of these institutions and its marvelous intention: to hold all the wisdom of the world, all the stories and all the poetry, in one building. There are no watercolour paintings of the library of

Alexandria. No one thought to sketch it before it was destroyed, maybe in a fire, maybe not. We're not sure when it was built and when it burned down; the margins of error, for construction and destruction, are hundreds of years. None of the written accounts of the library are particularly trustworthy. But as mythology, as legend, the library of Alexandria is solid. It represents the birth of an idea.[iii]

Reading and writing, studying, concentrating on a problem or a great mystery are solitary and private. The idea that we should share this activity with others, take it into the public realm, sit among the parchments and scrolls and books with other people, alone together, sounds as odd today as it might have in 300 BC. But it doesn't *feel* odd. Any scholar, amateur or obsessive, from the teenager to the PhD on the verge of retirement, knows the feeling of settling into a public library with a pile of books and papers. The sound and the smell of it. We learn better together, even if no one says a word.

Whether it is sharing stories around a fire or sitting in a grand hall at a long table with our fellow citizens, a library is a marker of civilization. To learn, to grow, to change together, to share what would otherwise remain secret is the work of a mature community.

Shortly after the Klondike gold rush ended, at the turn of the century, Edmonton's population was just over 2,000. It incorporated as a city in November, 1904, in the midst of the first of many extraordinary booms. By 1909, 23,000 people lived in Edmonton.[iv]

A year earlier, in 1908, city leaders decided there were enough people of ambition to warrant a library — proof of something. The provincial government had just passed the Public Libraries Act, stipulating that step one was a petition. If one in ten Edmonton men were passionate about a library, they could sign a petition and force city council to enact a bylaw, to start the process. But the petition failed. A lot of the men who had been attracted to the city, to

make their fortunes or change their lives in some other way, were illiterate. They were itinerant, here to make some money and move on, even if they had decided to stay.

Why a library?

More importantly, it was a cause without a leader.

"There were two things I missed when I first came to Edmonton in 1902," said John E. Lundy, who eventually became a city councillor. "One was a good fruit and the other a library. I decided there was no remedy for the first situation, but set out to remedy the library situation."[v]

Lundy and a new Edmontonian, Ethelbert Lincoln Hill, who had just taken the job of inspector of schools for the Strathcona district, schemed up a new petition in 1909. Hill had been on the library board in Guelph and in Calgary. In Calgary, where he had been master of science for high schools, he formed a board, found land for a building, and successfully petitioned the Carnegie Corporation for funds to build the city's first public library — all in the space of a year and a half.

This modest but driven social entrepreneur would come to be an early hero in the Edmonton Public Library story. By the time he arrived in Edmonton, Hill was in his early forties. His hair had receded far from his forehead and what remained was going grey. He wore a trim moustache and looked about in a perpetual squint, as though everything and everyone around him were part of a fascinating research project. He was a curler, a Baptist, and a Liberal.

Hill was born in Oxford County, Ontario, on September 29, 1863. He graduated from the University of Toronto with a B.A. in 1888 and married his wife, Jennie, another U of T graduate, in 1893 in Balfour, Ontario. Jennie was a poet and a fiction writer, under the name Jennie Stork Hill. Their daughter, Esther Marjorie, was born in Guelph in 1895. To prove the Hill family's hunger for self-improvement, he sought a Masters of Science degree from the University of

Alberta many years later; he was one of the first five graduate students at the U of A, in 1911. Jennie graduated with an M.A. and Esther Marjorie would turn out to be a pioneer as well — the first woman in Canada to graduate with an architecture degree.[vi]

Happily for Edmonton, he "proved to be the right man arriving in our midst at the psychological moment for it [sic] was largely due to his influence on both sides of the river that in 1909 a petition was again circulated, and this time with marked success."[vii]

Despite his Ontario birth, Edmonton historian Tony Cashman remembers Hill as "kind of a fussy Englishman. He was very quiet. He sort of kept to himself, despite everything he accomplished. He wasn't much of a joiner and, frankly, I don't think he had much fun. A lot of people wouldn't have recognized or even noticed him, as he was rather self-effacing. I never wrote about him, you know, because I'm always happier to find slightly more dishonourable people to write about."[viii]

The argument for a library in Canada and more broadly in the British Commonwealth, was familiar. It was a symbol of permanence and maturity and pride. What made the petition drive difficult, in Edmonton, was the temporary-ness of the place. The age and sophistication of the settlement, on Rossdale Flats, was not visible to the thousands of men and women arriving every year from Eastern Canada, the United States, and Europe. It looked and smelled and operated as a new city in the midst of invention or, possibly, self-destruction. It was not uncommon for a boomtown — like Dawson City — to explode and disappear in the course of five or ten years.

At the same time, Edmonton was the capital city. The sandstone and granite Beaux-Arts legislature was already under construction. There were plans to build a vast bridge, linking Edmonton with the City of Strathcona on the south side of the river, and rumours about a

majestic railway hotel. The endless rivalry with that city 300 kilometres south had already begun, and Calgary had applied successfully to an American philanthropist to build a library; E.L. Hill had been on the Board of Trustees and he had some experience negotiating with Carnegie.

In 1909 city council passed a by-law to strike a library board. Calgary was already well into the process, so the Edmontonians had to act quickly. The first Edmonton Public Library board was appointed, and included Mayor Robert Lee and Alderman J.E. Lundy, who continued to search for a decent fruit in this northern town. The board purchased a site known as the Wilson Property overlooking the river valley on College Avenue — today known as MacDonald Drive — 100th Avenue and 100th Street.

At the same time, on the south side of the river in the City of Strathcona, a petition was presented to city council: give us a library. The board formed in October, 1910, and E.L. Hill accepted the role of chair. The scheme went back to 1897, when the Strathcona Literary Society determined that any community worth living in had a proper library.

The boards of the Edmonton and Strathcona Public Libraries did what you had to do in 1910 if you wanted a building: they sent a letter to a man named Andrew Carnegie.

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Andrew Carnegie grew up far from Edmonton in a one-room cottage in Dunfermline, Scotland. His father, a handloom weaver, helped start a communal library for his fellows. Young Andrew found books in this little library and through his uncle, who encouraged him to read the heroic

literature of Scotland. When things got even worse for William Carnegie he borrowed money to move to Allegheny, Pennsylvania in 1848 when Andrew was 13.

The boy went straight to work as a weaver's helper.

Two years later he joined the Ohio Telegraph Company. Even though he was not a "bonded" apprentice, he was granted access to a private library a local philanthropist — Colonel James Anderson — had opened to the boys of the city one day a week: the Mechanics and Apprentices Library.

Carnegie borrowed heavily and made up for what he lacked in formal education.

"I became fond of reading," said Carnegie. "I reveled week after week in the books. My toil was light, for I got up at six o'clock in the morning, contented to work until six in the evening if there was then a book for me to read."[ix]

When the Colonel's staff changed the rules of the library so it was no longer free to unbonded apprentices, Carnegie wrote a letter to the editor of the Pittsburgh *Dispatch* questioning the decision. His arguments were clear and forceful, and through his prose Carnegie the unbonded apprentice was operating proof of the library's success. The letter worked. The library was open to him again.

"It was also his first literary success," writes Joseph Frazier Wall, one of Carnegie's many biographers. "[A]nd for Andrew nothing else that he had known in the way of recognition by others had been quite as exhilarating as this experience of seeing his own words in print. It fed his vanity and at the same time increased his appetite for more such food."[x]

Soon, Carnegie was in the railroad business. His communications skills and the wisdom he had gleaned from his informal education, through public libraries, aided him in a career that would make him the richest man in the world. He earned his money in steel and sought friends

and correspondents who happened to be writers and journalists and orators. Instead of holding on to his vast fortune he decided to replicate his own success — financial, literary and spiritual — by building free and public libraries all over the English-speaking world.

Of course, he didn't make his fortune as a soft-hearted pushover. These were ideologically playful times, and some critics complained that Carnegie sought to make greedy little capitalists by building certain kinds of libraries filled with certain kinds of books. But these were silly and baseless critiques. He may not have been the kindest employer, from the point of view of a steel worker, but he did not punish the curious by censoring the collections in his libraries.

The rules for a Carnegie library were simple. A city would buy the land and promise to operate the library. Carnegie's office, in New York, would be involved in the design of the building as he detested faddish extravagance. Smoking rooms for men were not allowed. Greek façades were ridiculous and a waste of money, according to Carnegie, and fireplaces were dangerous. The typical design of a Carnegie library was simple and elegant.

"To his detractors, the libraries he funded were merely stepping-stones to personal glorification," writes Alberto Manguel in *The Library At Night*. "He very rarely gave money for books, only for the building in which they were to be lodged, and even then he stipulated that the town provide the site and the cash to run the library."[xi]

These detractions seem quite feeble from the hyper-logo'd, super-sponsored world of today. Carnegie helped build 3,000 libraries. He inspired people and municipalities all over the world to see value in libraries by his personal example, his advocacy, and his money.

But his office's relations with Edmonton were not altogether smooth.

In the City of Strathcona, Mayor J.J Duggan was on the library board. Across the river, Edmonton Mayor Robert Lee was on the library board.

Duggan, with the experienced E.L. Hill in the room, composed a letter to Carnegie's office in New York City asking for assistance. They asked for $25,000. Carnegie's secretary, James Bertram, thought they were asking for too much. Strathcona had a relatively small population. Why would the city need a grand library? The board responded that the city had grown and would continue to grow exponentially; they sent the architectural drawings, by the firm of Wilson and Herald, to New York.

Bertram didn't like the plans. He offered $15,000 and indicated this was as much as the Carnegie Corporation was interested in providing, for a much smaller building.

This was a significant amount of money for the City of Strathcona — for any city in 1911. The board had a difficult decision to make. They were committed to building a library for their citizens: not a fancy and ostentatious building but the right building for what they believed their growing city needed and deserved. Accepting $15,000 from the Carnegie Corporation meant ceding control of the building to the whims of a wonderful but strict philanthropist who knew nothing of Edmonton. Hill felt it was a poor deal for Strathcona and the mayor supported him.

They declined the money and decided to raise the funds in their community, to build the library they wanted without help from Andrew Carnegie. There was one small problem: the Carnegie Corporation had lost the architectural drawings for the Strathcona library.[xii] Wilson and Herald, the architectural firm, worked from memory to put together another design — English renaissance without any Greek façades and without Carnegie's name on the front of the building

or anywhere else. The local construction firm W. Dietz started work on the library in 1912, using orange brick with limestone details.

On the north side of the river, another mayor and another board negotiated with Andrew Carnegie. Edmonton was by far the larger city and the provincial capital. They had secured land across the street from what would be one of the finest hotels in Canada, the Macdonald Hotel. The provincial legislature was nearing completion. So was the High Level Bridge.

The Carnegie Corporation offered $60,000.

Like the members of the Strathcona board, the Edmontonians were distraught. They wanted a building worth about $200,000 and weren't keen on forgoing control for less than half the price. Again, this wasn't a simple decision. The money wasn't "free" but at the same time Carnegie's conditions weren't onerous. Calgary — already an infamous rival — had opened their Carnegie-funded library in January, 1912. The smaller city across the river would soon have a building. Every month that Edmonton delayed meant another anxious board meeting.

The cities on a river merged in February, 1912: Edmonton, Alberta now had a neighbourhood on the south side called Strathcona.

In the end, the Edmonton Public Library board decided "it is undesirable that the City should accept any sum which it would be necessary for the City to supplement with the consequence that the library erected only partly at Mr. Carnegie's expense should bear his name and be subject to his conditions... therefore this Board is of opinion that further negotiations with Mr. Carnegie be dropped."[xiii]

If they could raise their own money on the south side, certainly central Edmonton could do the same, with more people and more capital. This new feeling of independence was pleasing to the board. And now that the cities were one, there seemed no point in having two literary

fiefdoms, two library systems. The boards merged and E. Lincoln Hill become head librarian of the Edmonton Public Library and the Strathcona Public Library.

Here was a growing city with a university and three colleges, twenty-four public schools, four theatres, forty places of worship and, so far, no finished library.

George M. Hall, in the first annual report of the Edmonton Public Library and the Strathcona Public Library, in 1913, points out the ridiculousness of this idea. Edmonton, he writes, in an admirably long sentence, "is now a city of over 70,000 population, with wide streets, boulevards that stretch, green and grassy, for miles, fine restaurants, substantial buildings and excellent shops and stores, banks, hotels and theatres, parks and public playgrounds, churches, colleges, and an excellent public school system; railroads, streetcars, and automobiles in hundreds; in short a city with all the advantages and conveniences of modern life has burst forth from the trading post that stood on the banks of the Saskatchewan for so many decades, a rendezvous for trappers and Indians, an abiding place in the wilderness of the west for the few white men who lived here and carried on the business of the great trading company into whose hands King Charles II gave the whole country of Western Canada as a thing scarcely worth the while to give or take, and without a thought of the vast capacity for usefulness contained within the grant."[xiv]

The Strathcona Library was set to open March 14, 1913. Chief librarian Hill and the board had invited dignitaries from both sides of the river and had hired a band. It was a spacious and attractive two-storey building that had been built for $30,000 by the community, and that community hummed with excitement for it.

Leaders on the north side of the river weren't so sure. It was miserable enough that Calgary had opened its Carnegie library: now the junior partner in amalgamation, Strathcona,

was going to open a library before the provincial capital. For a lot of powerful people on the north side of the river, this would not do.

So, on March 13, 1913, one day before the party in Strathcona, the Edmonton Public Library opened in temporary quarters above a meat and liquor store in the Chisholm Block at the corner of 104th Street and Jasper Avenue.

"One of the problems," wrote John E. Lundy, city councillor, "we had in starting this library was the purchase of a safe. It was not so much the price, but whether the floors and stairway of the Chisholm Block would stand the weight of the safe and the books."

It was a less-than-dignified solution to a problem of pride and perception. For the sake of history and correctness, downtown Edmonton beat Strathcona by a few hours.

Of course, a temporary space above a meat and liquor store didn't feel like the stately building in Strathcona, on 104th Street at 84th Avenue. It had electric lighting and comfortable seating areas. The building was spacious but not cavernous; it fit.

On March 14, 1913, a small band played upstairs. Mayor William Short made a speech. So did the ex-premier and Strathcona resident Alexander Rutherford. J.J. Duggan, formerly the mayor of what was formerly the City of Strathcona, officially opened the place. He said it might be a lovely idea to have a smoking room for the men, a mild insult to Carnegie-ism that inspired long and rowdy applause — at least from the men.

"The good things said cannot be hinted at in this sketch," wrote Anne Newall, "but one note was sounded again and again, recognizing the fact that while many had done valiantly, the main spring of the library movement centred in the untiring enthusiasm and skilled activity of Librarian Hill."[xv]

On the first floor there was a reading room and a "ladies and children's room," a vestibule. In the basement was the men's reading room and the furnace room. Upstairs, an auditorium.

From the beginning, it was an open-access library system. A borrowers' card was free to all.[xvi] The fine for an overdue book when the two libraries opened was two pennies a day. The inventory was 4,827 books at opening. There were 23 daily newspapers, 37 monthly magazines and 17 weeklies. Circulation figures were, from the first days, astonishing to Hill and his team.

Newall was not modest, reporting all of this. "The success of both libraries has been phenomenal. Only a year old and yet the figures outstrip all but a very few libraries in the Dominion!"

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Carnegie felt the library, more than any other institution, made what we now call The American Dream possible. Without access to a library, his trajectory from a poor and powerless boy to a poor and powerless man would have gone uninterrupted. If everyone had access to knowledge and wisdom, no matter where they were born or what schools they attended, the old-world tyranny of class would be irrelevant.

In Britain, the argument for public libraries was led by an Italian. Antonio Panizzi was a lawyer who, as a young man, joined a secret society in Italy devoted to uniting the country. This did not go well with the authorities and he was forced to flee — first to Switzerland and then to

England, where he found work teaching Italian. He had good luck meeting and helping men who would eventually do quite well in society and government, like fellow-lawyer Henry Brougham, who became Lord Chancellor of England and found a post for Panizzi in the library of the British Museum.

The assistant librarian post led to the contemporary-sounding position, keeper of printed books, in 1837. He was made head librarian in 1856 but by then he had already inspired and led a massive expansion — architecturally and otherwise. It became the largest library in the world at the time.

Like Carnegie, he was a democrat.

"I want a poor student to have the same means of indulging his learned curiosity, of following his rational pursuits, of consulting the same authorities, of fathoming the most intricate inquiry, as the richest man in the Kingdom, as far as books go, and I contend that Government is bound to give him the most liberal and unlimited assistance in this respect."[xvii]

Panizzi, an Italian patriot who became a British patriot, felt it was essential for a library — through its holdings — to build and sustain a national mythology. The largest and most important library in London, he felt, should privilege British writers, British history, British values, and *Britishness.*

Is the Edmonton Public Library, then, a repository for Edmonton-ness?

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The Stanley A. Milner Branch of the Edmonton Public Library faces Winston Churchill Square from the south. It's the core of the core of downtown, facing the pyramid of City Hall and the changing landscape of the concrete plaza before it. The confidence and beauty of City Hall, designed by Edmonton architect Gene Dub, sits next to the whimsical Northern Lights-inspired Art Gallery of Alberta. A few doors south of that, one of the finest concert halls in Canada — the Winspear Centre — leads to the largest theatre complex west of Stratford, the Citadel Theatre.

Only one of these institutions has a crowd on its sidewalk, all day. Walking into the library through its front doors is nearly always a big-city negotiation, weaving through smokers and texters and seniors and schemers and mothers with babies, waiting for a bus or just standing and staring. Young men gather in circles. It's an odd place, sometimes a little threatening if you make eye contact incorrectly. But you don't. To keep the sidewalk free of cigarette butts a sweeper would have to walk it all day long, 100th Street to 99th Street, with a push broom.

Buses stop in front of the library and, soon, a tram will move up and down 102 Avenue. Edmonton has been a place for people to stop and rest or make a bit of money on their way somewhere else, and the front of the downtown branch of the library is a mini-Edmonton — a place of transition.

On a brisk springtime a business woman stands next to a very young new mother in pink sweatpants, bouncing her baby. A teenage girl sits on the concrete, finishing a newspaper crossword. Some have just renewed their library cards and received a knit Edmonton Public Library shopping bag in bright blue or pink. A group of men of a certain age are drunk but harmless: odd shouts and metallic cackles. Seniors on the transit benches read novels plucked from the stacks. New Canadians, from Africa and Asia and the Middle East, speak quietly in the languages they arrived speaking, and I wonder if their accents are already shifting with the

English. They carry full bags, the sort of white plastic sacks now endangered by progress: empty lunch containers, a sweater, a book or two inside. A car pulls up and a woman in a fine black dress and fresh make-up steps out. The hatchback pops and she pulls out a black viola case. One of the security guards comes out of the library and it seems, at first, he wants to escort her into the building — needlessly protect her from something, like a concierge. He says a few words to her and taps on the passenger-side door of the car, a Subaru.

"This isn't a parking lot. A bus is always coming, always. If you want to park there's lots of room under the building. Just continue and turn right. You'll see, on your left, *Library Parkade*."

The driver appears to ignore the security guard. "Break a leg!" he shouts, to his wife or his sister or his friend, and drives east toward Chinatown.

On cold days some of these people wait inside the library, close enough to the doors that they can spot their bus and run if they must. It frustrates the security guard, who wants people coming in or going out to have a route of entrance or exit. No one has told the guard it is against the rules, to kick the people out. All he can do is manage the tension of the place, a busy public institution: managed by someone, owned by everyone. This is the library, free to all, and that spirit extends to the grubby sidewalk and to the vestibule, so narrow that a jangle of people have to negotiate steps and an operating lift for wheelchairs every time someone new enters or exits. Sorry. Excuse me. Sorry. Can I just? Thank you.

Inside, another security guard greets me as I enter. He says hello and gives us all a quick scan as we pass. What are we carrying? Can we walk straight? The check-out is automated now but there are greeters and ambassadors at the customer service desk. A woman with a staff card

on a lanyard, her hands clasped peacefully before her, stands next to the short customer service line-up.

"Can I help you with anything?"

I tell her I am wandering through the library, studying it.

"Anything in particular you're looking for?"

"Everything."

She unclasps her hands and moves her arms like a conductor, just for a moment. "Curiosity! Well then, you've come to the right place."

At the tables and in the comfortable chairs, on each side of the stacks of books, young people tap away on late-model Apple laptops with white earbuds plugged in. A few feet away from them, men and women in layers of clothes sprawl on chairs sleeping, some of them snoring. Readers, regular recreational readers with a paperback in hand, are a minority here. On the other side of the south windows, one of the strangest places in downtown Edmonton: Centennial Plaza. It is a flat expanse of concrete before an outdoor amphitheatre that no one ever seems to use. There is a statue of two men in the process of negotiation, one an aboriginal and the other a fur trader. The men stand side-by-side, posing, as though they are dressed up as an aboriginal and a fur trader and someone is taking their photograph. Not far away, a bust of Gandhi. From time to time, in the warm months, a Zumba class or a basketball game breaks out on the concrete.

A man with an enormous and full backpack wanders about, asks where he might find a computer.

Computers are everywhere. I tell him as gently as I can manage.

"But those computers need a library card number."

"You don't have one? All you have to do is go over to the customer service desk and—"

"I don't want a library card. I just gotta get on Facebook."

"At the customer service desk they'll—"

"Ah, forget it," he says, and sits defeated on his long fat stuffed tube of a backpack. He smells of campfire.

The public computers are busy: YouTube and Facebook, webmail. It is difficult, on the main floor, to find a dedicated researcher with some writing paper and a pile of books. There are, at this moment in the mid-afternoon, precisely none. This is, or has been, a criticism of the urban library: that it has in some way betrayed its purpose. Where it was once a place of scholarship, or at least — according to Carnegie — an institution dedicated to personal transformation, improvement and democracy *through reading*, it is now a wired community centre.

This is not at all a new criticism. When Antonio Panizzi was keeper of printed books in the British Museum Library, he found himself in a feud with the writer Thomas Carlyle. Carlyle did not believe in the sort of social progress most of his literary peers celebrated. Old values were being sluiced away, a byproduct of the industrial revolution. The idea that libraries were engines of democracy was distasteful to him; the mob could not be changed, certainly not by literature.

Not that he was anti-library.

What we become, Carlyle said, in one of his most famous speeches, "depends on what we read after all manner of Professors have done their best for us. The true University of these days is a Collection of Books."[xviii]

Carlyle adored Collections of Books: a private or semi-private library of serious and already well-read men, leaders and captains, heroes. He disliked the notion of the free library where all patrons were equal, that a state-run institution should be in the business of creating

equal opportunity. To a Tory satirist, these progressive ideas were somewhere between hilarious and distasteful.

Even so, Carlyle's issues with Panizzi were not philosophical. They were personal. On more than one occasion, Panizzi had denied special access to books and private rooms for the great essayist and orator. Carlyle spoke for a constituency of thinkers in London at the time, and started a debate that continues today.

"I believe," Thomas Carlyle wrote, "there are several people in a state of imbecility who come to read in the British Museum. I have been informed that there are several in that state who are sent there by their friends to pass away the time."[xix]

It is no longer controversial to consider that some people, in any number of states, would be attracted to the library to "pass away the time." City Hall is an open space, a bright and pleasant one. So is the atrium of the Citadel Theatre, with greenery and water trickling in its fountains. A few Edmontonians will pass away the time in these places but the library is altogether different. Of the three institutions it has the least to offer, architecturally. The light is fluorescent, unnatural. While the main floor of City Hall is empty unless an event is underway, and the Citadel atrium is only busy before a performance and at lunchtime in the winter, it can be difficult to find a seat in the Stanley A. Milner branch of the Edmonton Public Library. It almost never feels crowded but there is always a crowd.

For everyone, whatever state they may be in, the library is a curiously warm and friendly home. The current president and CEO of Edmonton Public Library, calls it the civic living room. It's much more than that.

In November of 2011, a man named Douglas Myers entered the downtown branch to use a computer. Myers had sold his own computer and he was coming off a session of detox for a

crack addiction — the latest in a series of immersions into drugs and crime. He walked into the library, as we all do, past the security guard and up to the customer service desks.

"Basically, my whole life I've been a non-member of society," said Myers. "I wasn't aware of what to do or where to go."[xx]

Two things might have happened here. Myers might have been asked to leave, which often happens to men and women in his situation when they enter a mall or a café. Instead, the librarian referred Myers to Jared Tkachuk, an outreach worker the library hired in the summer of 2011.

Myers told an Edmonton newspaper that the librarian who greeted him and Tkachuk had showed "basic humanity." The outreach program in the library, he said, had helped him stay sober.

"For the first time in my life I have I.D. I have a family doctor. I love this building. Without this building, I don't think I'd be halfway to where I am right now."[xxi]

Is this the business of the library today?

In early 2012, Professor Gavin Renwick of the University of Alberta department of art and design opened his Theory and Research in Design Studies class up to innovative projects.

"When we started working together," his students wrote, "the first thing we did was throw the proposed class outline away. We immediately discovered that we were all from somewhere else and were new to both Alberta and Canada... the class therefore became about 'being here,' being Edmontonian and our evolving collective neo-identities."

There were many ways to express and explore all of this neo-identification. The students in professor Renwick's class considered it and decided the library was a hub for these sorts of

evolutions. So they put up a wide easel in the Stanley A. Milner Branch of the Edmonton Public Library and slapped a board on it.

They asked a simple question: "Why are you here?"

The students furnished patrons with sticky notes and a pen. Responses, by the month of March, made for an unscientific but charming survey:

• *To read Hemingway, eat Kraft Dinner, and nap.*

• *Because I believe in democratic intellectualism.*

• *To browse, play chess, make friends. Maybe find a wife.*

• *I'm here to always learn, and to share the gift of hope. I'm homeless.*

• *To hang with my bestie and nerd out on books.*

• *Poetry, people, chess, books, and all the treasures hidden in plain sight.*

• *Cause Nicole.*

• *It's on the way to Yellowknife.*

• *Romance. Actually, schoolwork, knowledge, community and to pass time.*

• *I'm homeless.*

• *Here in the library? Because I'm a bookworm with no money. Here on the planet? Still trying to figure that out.*

A minority of the respondents spoke of books but nearly all of them referenced learning, growing, expanding and improving their lives in some way. Taken together, this social and cultural function of a city centre library —as a crucible of transformation — would constitute a poignant nightmare for Thomas Carlyle. In the Edmonton Public Library, men and women

sprawl out sleeping on the chairs, a paperback on their chests, as they would at home. Snoring. No one taps them on the shoulder to wake them up, to send them to their home chesterfields.

For more than a week I watched a man in a changing series of business suits sit at a west-facing window alternately reading and napping. His hair was neat, thinning on top and at his temples. Someone took care of the back of his neck. Even in the middle of the morning he looked exhausted; there were dark little sausages under each eye. He read popular business books: *Good to Great* and *7 Habits of Highly Successful People*. Since I was in a library, a story place, and thinking of libraries and its characters, I decided not to interview the man. Instead I imagined him as a character. He has lost his job and he lacks the courage to speak to his wife and family. Every morning he walks out of the house with his briefcase, turns and waves to his children at the window, and sits in the most comfortable place in the city — a place of subtle honour — for men and women who either can't stay at home or don't have one.

A library can fight this natural magnetism, and for a time the Edmonton Public Library did fight it. The *idea* of the library has transformed over the years, according to the prevailing culture, the board, the management, city council and the mayor, whose effects on the primacy and financial health of the library can be either marvelous or devastating.

Despite his fervor for the country of his birth, which actually saw him sentenced to death in absentia, Antonio Panizzi understood the library as a keeper of culture.

"The attention of the emphatically British library ought to be directed most particularly to British works and to works relating to the British Empire," he said, in a report to the House of Commons in 1836. "Its religious, political and literary as well as scientific history; its laws, institutions, descriptions, commerce, arts, etc."[xxii]

While this has not been a stated goal of the Edmonton Public Library, in any of its annual reports or mission statements, it has become a keeper and a reflector of local culture. As a novelist I can say with experience that the library is keen to support books by Edmontonians. It runs a successful writer-in-residence program, sponsors and houses a writer-in-exile, places books by Edmonton authors on display shelves, asks us in to read from our work and speak about our artistic process, our work, our opinions. But more importantly, the library is an engine of local curiosity. It dignifies everyone who comes through its doors. The art and design students were clever to choose the Stanley Milner Branch to document the evolution of the city and its citizens because, more than any other institution in the city, it is Edmonton: the past, the present, the future.

*

Today, downtown Edmonton's healthiest corner is Jasper Avenue and 104th Street. The north side is a meeting of old and new, in rare harmony — the new Sobey's grocery and, across the street, the rounded and stately Birk's Building. Neither are high-rises and together they form a gentle entry point to Edmonton's most successful downtown street; the sidewalks are wide enough to invite safe jaywalking. Walkers are privileged here, not cars. The warehouses and high-rises up the street are full of lofts and apartments. Cafés and restaurants, a wine store, fashion and food mingle with office space that invites new enterprises. Farther up in the Mercer

Block warehouse, Startup Edmonton, a home for early-stage creative and technology companies, is a beehive of young men and women with iPads. In the warm months an outdoor farmers' market crowds 104th Street every Saturday. In the winter this is one of the best places to huddle over a coffee or a glass of wine.

The south side of Jasper Avenue is altogether different. If she isn't standing in front of it, a downtown resident would have trouble recalling what's on the southeast corner. The building is five storeys tall, concrete and glass, stealth architecture with no consideration of beauty or a spirit of invitation: it's all business, drive-in and drive-out. There is a café on the street-level but it's curiously difficult to recall the sign on the door.

On a warm but drizzling afternoon, a Friday, the corner of 104th Street and Jasper is a study of urban planning and development. Coffee drinkers walk out of Transcend, in the building adjacent to the southeast corner, and cross Jasper Avenue. On the north side, in front of the Birk's building and Sobey's, they walk slower. They stop. They walk up 104th to, perhaps, make an impulse purchase in Devine's wine store or the organic living shop, Carbon, farther up the street.

It wasn't always so.

One hundred years ago, the first home of the downtown branch of the Edmonton Public Library was in a modest but welcoming three-storey building owned by A.R. Chisholm, a pioneer who had arrived in Edmonton by Red River Cart in 1880.[xxiii] On the main floor there was a liquor store and a meat shop. The Grand Café was a couple of doors away. The library, up the stairs, consisted of a several shelves in the middle of the long room and, at the front, the circulation desk.

In every way it was a temporary library, and even under the leadership of the unbeatable E. Lincoln Hill the notion of designing and building a new library on 100th Street and 100th Avenue now seemed daunting.

Between city incorporation in 1904 and 1912, the population had grown from 8,000 to more than 50,000. At the end of this astonishing period of population growth and cultural transformation, the High Level Bridge and the Legislative Building neared completion. It was a spiritual and a development boom. It began to move even faster when, on May 13, 1912, the Hudson's Bay Company put its land up for sale. The day itself recalled the gold rush. Real estate speculators knew the land would hit the market at exactly 2:00 p.m. but the Hudson's Bay Company had tried to keep it a secret. This strategy failed. Shortly after lunch, more than 2,000 people were lined up at the Little Gospel Mission Hall. The wild real estate market became even wilder, with 1,543 new lots ready for development.[xxiv]

Shortly after the two branches of the Edmonton Public Library opened, in the Roberts Block downtown and in Strathcona, the first in the city's series of booms ended. Money markets collapsed and speculators who had not sold everything lost everything — or a lot of it. A week and a half after the libraries' birthdays, at the end of March, 1913, Arthur Sifton became Alberta's second premier. This was a third majority government for the Liberals but urban issues could not be among his driving concerns. Rural populism was on the rise even before the recession hit. The City of Edmonton was not at all capable of raising $200,000 on its own and it seemed the library board and the Carnegie Corporation had exchanged their last correspondence.

The temporary library was a success in one vital respect: people came in, signed up, and borrowed books. In his annual report for 1914, E.L. Hill broke down the good news:

"VOLUMES ISSUED FOR HOME USE, 1913

CALGARY (including branch)	181,669
WINNIPEG (Main Library)	232, 866
TORONTO (College Street Library)	131,773
(Church Street Library)	112,353
EDMONTON 1914	
(Central Library)	189,696
(Strathcona Library)	89,696
	279,392

Sure, Calgary had its luxurious downtown library. But even in its dark location above the meat and liquor shops, Edmonton was lending more books. The numbers blended with Strathcona were extraordinary. In the second year of operations, the number of borrowers increased thirty per cent. Between fifty and sixty children showed up for Story Hour at the Strathcona Library. The slogan for the Edmonton Public Library was "Neither books nor bathtubs should be considered as luxuries — both are among the necessities of life."

Still, leaders on the north side of the river wanted a library, a marker of civilization and importance and progress. In a pattern that would remain for the next one hundred years, the city struggled with notions of greatness. The mayor and council wanted to attract business to the city, not just itinerant workers. Architecture and ambition were aligned in 1913, as they would be in 2013; a handsome and busy library was proof of something, in the early years of the 20th Century. The city manager couldn't put circulation figures on giant signs at the city limits.

A confidence problem seems to be in the city's DNA. At best, it is part of Edmonton's charm and a virtual boiler room for its novelists and filmmakers. There is, of course, a significant downside. A city can build a thrilling vision for its future that no one quite believes. In 2013,

whenever a leader uses the phrase "world-class," Edmontonians cringe. At least the Edmontonians who have travelled. The greatness of the city, one hundred years ago and today, lives in the circulation numbers for the library much more than in any building. We were reading and participating at rates that suggested a much larger population. The trouble was — and is, today — how do we see and feel and share and activate that energy?

Fifty-nine years later, the home of the first downtown branch of the Edmonton Public Library was a celebrated candy shop, the Palace of Sweets, "Canada's Outstanding Confectionary Store." Lawrence Herzog, a beloved writer of Edmonton's heritage buildings, recalls February 2, 1966, when a fire started in the basement of the Chisholm Block — under the Palace of Sweets. It was early afternoon on a cold day.

"We figured they would get it out," Herzog's mother recalled, "but in a matter of minutes it spread, and soon we were running for the exits. I grabbed my purse and $200 from the till, and that was it. We were all standing in the freezing air, watching the fire crews rushing in. When they broke through the big front display window with their axes, we knew it was over."[xxv]

Unlike 1913 and 2013, the link between aspiration and architecture was weak in the second half of the 20th Century. A building existed so commerce might happen. Sidewalks were not as relevant as wide roads, as families moved farther from the core of the city and transitioned from having one car to two or more. The winter of 1966, it turned out, was not the best time to design a beautiful and welcoming new building.

World War I started in July, 1914. If there had been any hope of building a library during a recession, with not-entirely-sympathetic municipal and provincial governments, it was now entirely decimated. The downtown branch moved, in October 1914, to slightly larger space in the Roberts Block on 102nd Avenue and 102nd Street. Books were needed desperately, as the stock

was getting low. Librarian Hill told the board, in 1914, the need for French and Scandinavian books was urgent. There was no money to buy a flagpole, to support the war effort emotionally; happily, a wealthy citizen, John Walter esq., provided one as a gift to the library.

There is no trace of the Roberts Block today. Here the City Centre Mall meets the northwest corner of Manulife Place — a Second Cup coffee shop — and the Don Wheaton Family YMCA. The First World War was not a time of growth for the downtown or the Strathcona Branch. Edmontonians borrowed books and the two libraries remained open, but quietly. They were community hubs for women and children whose husbands had gone overseas to fight the war or who had been killed. Young men demanded books on engineering and aircraft, on military strategy and history, for context and perhaps to prepare themselves.

The library provided books to the military camps in Edmonton, during the war, but the stock — all stock — was meagre: 30,000 books in total. Hill used the libraries as a depository for citizens who might donate books of their own to the soldiers at Sarcee Camp. It seemed that *having libraries* was not enough. It was a sensitive time. The Canadian Government had put together a list of books by communists and socialists; RCMP were sent out to remove them from private and then public shelves. It was an uncomfortable time to be a librarian, though this police action did not greatly unnerve Hill — at least not enough to complain. Hill needed friends in politics. He needed a budget, even in times of scarcity, to hire good people and buy good books. The board advised Hill to write a letter to the Calgary librarian; they had to ask the province, together, to allow municipal governments to fund libraries more creatively. The board asked Hill to make "a list of the most necessary books bearing on the present crisis in the Empire and the Allies, and that the finance committee have power to authorize the purchase of such books from this as it may deem expedient..."[xxvi]

In 1916, Ethelbert and Jennie Hill's daughter Marjorie entered the architecture program at the University of Alberta, the first of many courageous and difficult choices in her career. She later transferred to the University of Toronto and became, in 1920, the first female architecture graduate in Canada. She was mocked and jeered from the first day, and she would endure this sort of treatment for much of her career. Her parents, lifelong students and community leaders and writers, had prepared her for this. Esther Marjorie was, for her father, a model Edmontonian: someone who will seek truth and surprise everyone.

Edmonton's Russian population presented a petition to Hill demanding some Russian literature in the library. Hill, as ever, was having trouble buying any literature. But the board found fifty dollars for some Russian books.

To save public money during the increasingly lean war years, Hill was forced to move from the Roberts Block in September 1917 to much smaller ground and second floor space in the Civic Block on 99th Street and 102nd Avenue, in September 1917.

The Civic Block stood where the Francis Winspear Centre for Music is today, on what was then called Market Square. It was not a beautiful building. Since it was designed and built in 1912 for government workers in a city that was already known for finding economic efficiencies wherever possible, there were few touches of beauty in the warehouse-like six-story tower. Of course, if it were still around today we would bow before all this Edwardian-flavoured brick and stone. Unlike many heritage buildings downtown, the one consolation with the Civic Block is that it wasn't replaced with a devastatingly ugly pre-clad concrete business tower in the 1970s. And there were efforts to save it.

In 1989, city administration recommended the new concert hall, which had already received $12 million in funding guarantees by the Winspear family and others, be built behind

the historically significant Civic Block. One alderman, Patricia Mackenzie, argued Sir Winston Churchill Square should be a cultural hub rather than an office ghetto for bureaucrats. One of her colleagues on council, Lillian Staroszik, damned the Civic Block.

"I can't think of anything worse than a world-class concert hall stuck behind this warehouse," she said.

Alderman Jan Reimer, who would eventually become mayor, voted with two others to keep the building — a minority view.

"In other cities, old buildings are preserved, renovated, and restored," she said. "In Edmonton, we rip 'em down." She argued the Civic Block could be something marvellous "if we dream a bit about what we could do."[xxvii]

The timeline for the Winspear Centre, in 1989, was two years. It was completed in 1997.

Rent in the Civic Block, for the Edmonton Public Library, was $4250 per year. The culture of the downtown library and the Strathcona branch began to transform at the end of the war years. Soldiers returning from battle were keen to restart or remake their lives, and the library was a place for it.

"More and more the libraries must become the General Information Bureau for the community," wrote librarian Hill in the 1918 annual report, as he watched the city change. "The cosmopolitan character of our population makes this task more difficult, and at the same time, more important — difficult because of the wide variety of information sought, and important because of the futility of looking elsewhere between Winnipeg and the North Pole, for a source of information."[xxviii]

Money remained tight, so expansion let alone a new building was not an option. Paying staff was barely an option.

The Spanish flu began to spread in January, 1918, and as soldiers returned to their hometowns they carried it with them. Soldiers' living conditions in Europe had been miserable. They were malnourished and it's difficult to sleep in a muddy trench; their immune systems were depressed. The end of the war was also the beginning of the age of travel. It was easier than ever to go overseas. Media blackouts in Canada at the time make it difficult for researchers to determine where early cases originated but the pandemic hit Edmonton in October, 1918.

The flu killed between ten and twenty percent of those who caught it, and it was unusually severe for young people — from teenagers to men and women in their forties. The library closed October 18 and circulation was suspended until early December. The Young People's Department remained closed until January.

The population of the city, at that time, was about 60,000 and over 600 Edmontonians died of Spanish flu in just a couple of months. Undertakers had to hire extra staff, including a small platoon of carpenters to build caskets. All the dead had to be buried, as the city did not yet have a crematorium. All Albertans were ordered by law to wear masks whenever they went outside their homes, "except when it is necessary to partially remove the mask for the purpose of eating."[xxix]

At the eleventh hour on the eleventh day of the eleventh month of 1918, the Allies gathered with German officials at the western front in Compiègne, France, to put an official end to the war. The 49th Batallion, the Loyal Edmonton Regiment, had been part of the capture of Vimy Ridge in 1917 and the Battle of Passchendaele. They returned to their families in Edmonton en masse in March, 1919, and disbanded.

The economy didn't remake itself in a few months. The results of the economic crash of 1913 remained powerful in Edmonton, particularly in real estate. Credit, after the war, remained

difficult to access. But E.L. Hill and his library board, buoyed by the feeling that after the most devastating war in world history and an influenza pandemic the outlook for Edmonton could only improve, returned to their grand plan: an iconic downtown library.

In 1921, librarian E.L. Hill and members of the board wondered if there might be a way to restart a conversation with the Carnegie Corporation. They had been exchanging letters with James Bertram in the Manhattan office since 1917, but the the end of the war had brought illness, confusion and, finally, a new focus. The industrialist had died in 1919, at the age of 83. Officially, the charitable foundation had decided to move on from its original focus. They had stopped building libraries in 1917. Bertram remembered Hill from their negotiations over the Calgary Public Library and from the efforts to build Carnegie Libraries on both sides of the North Saskatchewan River.

The city had grown substantially. It now had a glorious legislature, a great bridge and the limestone, château-style Hotel Macdonald. There were deposit libraries all over the city, in houses and community halls: Westmount, West Edmonton, North Edmonton, H. Allen Gray School, and the Highlands Drugstore. Bertram was not entirely opposed to the idea, despite the fact that it broke the foundation's rules, and in early 1922 mayor David Milwyn Duggan and library board chair L.T. Barclay travelled to New York City to meet — and hopefully charm — him in person.

It worked, or it sort of worked. Bertram had a pot of money to distribute before the end of the 1922 funding season. He could theoretically make a special arrangement for Edmonton, since they had begun negotiations before 1917. There would be no time for the usual process: no quibbling over money for months on end, no arguments over rules and regulations, no architectural competition.

Was Edmonton interested?

*

At Esther Marjorie Hill's graduation from architecture school at the University of Toronto in 1920, the chair of the department — a man named C.H.C. Wright — refused to participate, in protest. No one would hire her in Toronto so she came back to her hometown, where she registered as an architect.

The professional association denied her application.

Edmonton happened to be one of the most progressive cities in Canada at the time, obsessed with reform. New ideas were at work here: the labour movement, protesting farmers, political reform and, of course, the temperance movement. During the war, some of the strongest advocates were women. They had fought for the city to shut down the brothels and gambling houses, as there were more than one hundred of them at the start of the war. The battle ended up in city council, where Mayor William McNamara and Alderman Joseph Clarke — former allies in the fight against temperance — stood up from their chairs and threatened each other over the issue.

"I'll mop the earth with you!" shouted Clarke.

"You haven't the courage of a rat!" said the mayor.

It turned out they both had courage enough to move from words to fists. Their scrap began in council chambers and ended up on the street; both showed up for work the next morning with black eyes.[xxx]

More than 10,000 men, women and children for temperance marched through the city on July 19, 1915. In the ensuring plebiscite, men voted 58,295 to 37,509 for prohibition.[xxxi] Bootleggers would thrive in the city for eight years.

The most enduring and important sign of Edmonton's political uniqueness was in the transformation of its wartime women. They entered the workforce and volunteered. The first female police officer in Canada, Annie Jackson, was an Edmontonian. The first woman elected in municipal politics: Bessie Nichols, school trustee. The Edmonton Grads, a spectacularly good basketball team, rose out of McDougall Commercial High School to become enduring world champions.[xxxii] When a couple hundred women marched into the legislature demanding the right to vote, Premier Arthur Sifton "told them to go home and wash their dishes."[xxxiii] Still, something was happening in Edmonton. The first female magistrate in the British Empire, Emily Murphy, lived and worked and fought in the city. In 1916, women in Alberta were the first to vote in a provincial election. Roberta MacAdams, a nurse from Edmonton serving in the war effort overseas, and Louise McKinney, were elected to the legislature: a first in the British Empire.

By the time the library board was speaking to James Bertram in New York City, Irene Parlby and Nellie McClung had just been elected to the Alberta legislature. Louise McKinney had narrowly lost her seat. These four, with activist Henrietta Edwards, would become the "Famous Five" for ensuring that women were legally considered persons in 1927.

Women continued to have trouble in Edmonton, as Esther Marjorie's early career proves, but politicians in the legislature — including Parlby and McClung — argued that the

Architecture Act was unfair. In response, the government amended the legislation so "any graduate of any school of architecture in His Majesty's Dominion" would be accepted and registered.

Finally, in 1922, the daughter of a librarian and a poet — the first female architecture graduate in Canada — was ready to work. That same year, James Bertram of the Carnegie Corporation offered the library board $75,000. It was a substantial increase from the original offer, years earlier, but still insufficient. Librarian Hill, Mayor Duggan and board chair Barclay continued to lobby Bertram — though there wasn't much time. Convinced that Edmonton was a city with a future, Bertram raised the donation to $122,500. The City of Edmonton, keen to take advantage of the donation before the offer expired, was prepared to contribute $37,500.

The members of the special committee of the library board decided they were "in favour of the erection of a building oblong in form, comprising one storey and high basement, with lantern lighting, to be built in stone and brick and conforming as nearly as may be to the elevations of the Library erected by the City of Washington, D.C."[xxxiv]

Since an architectural competition would take as long as the board had to complete the library, the committee appointed Magoon and MacDonald. This was one of the top architecture firms in the city. They had designed public and commercial buildings, churches and campus halls simply and elegantly. You can still see their work in MacDougall United Church, on the corner of 101st Street and 100th Avenue, the McKenney Building on 104th Street north of Jasper Avenue and the lovely H.V. Shaw Building at 10229-105 Street. But there was another important reason to appoint them: Magoon and MacDonald also happened to be the only architecture firm in the city willing to hire Esther Marjorie Hill.

Herbert Alton Magoon was from Quebec. He had been lured to Alberta, like the Hill family and everyone else, by feelings of hope and expansion. While he was a successful architect, his great skill was networking: meeting and seducing men who wanted to make something. His younger colleague, George Heath MacDonald, had come to Edmonton from Prince Edward Island. His role in the partnership was to design lovely buildings.

MacDonald, 20 years younger than his senior partner, was not a salesman. He was too busy. When he wasn't designing buildings he was writing for pleasure and rolling around with his friends on the football field and baseball diamond. Or perhaps drawing and painting for pleasure; he was a founding member of the Edmonton Art Club. MacDonald took every free moment to travel across the continent, to visit the latest beautiful buildings and art collections. In 1913 he married Dorothea Enid Huestis and, for a wedding present, built her a white colonial home on Connaught Drive in Glenora that is on Edmonton's register of historic resources today.[xxxv]

His work on Edmonton's downtown library was unusual in many ways. All Carnegie libraries had certain rules and regulations attached to them. Some of these, in 1922, remained as crucial as they had been in 1909, when Carnegie was still alive and the board was scheming up the library the first time: no damned Greek façades and no miserable smoking rooms. Other rules were less rigorous, especially since Bertram and the foundation were rushing MacDonald along. It was supposed to be a little like the library in Washington, D.C., a little like the library in Somerville, Massachusetts.

What did that mean?

One of the most difficult aspects of the job, for MacDonald, was the prospect of not only pleasing his client but physically working with him. E.L. Hill had particular ideas about the

library, and insisted — through Marjorie and through his own interventions — they be implemented.

The Edmonton Public Library would be rectangular, as per Carnegie's rules, with a hint of French renaissance about it. The main floor was one large and airy room, with a high ceiling. The loan desk would be on the western wall, to take advantage of natural light in the afternoons and early evenings. MacDonald, like many architects of his generation, had trained in the Beaux-Arts tradition; there would be four Doric columns in the front and Italian details. To meld with its larger cousin on the other side of 100th Street, the library would be built with Indiana limestone and cream, terra cotta brick — the roof with red Spanish tile and copper accents.[xxxvi]

It was normal for the Carnegie Corporation to spend some time with plans, to debate and criticize them, to find errors and outright abominations where designers and library boards found none. Not in this case. Bertram and his team approved and returned the drawings immediately.

Poole Construction, which would become one of Edmonton's most iconic businesses, was appointed general contractor — its first job in Ernest C. Poole's new hometown. Some of the problems that arose were avoidable and, it turned out, philosophical.

They might have selected a local supplier for the decorative face brick, though there was some disagreement at the time over whether or not a local company could produce the quantity and quality MacDonald had envisioned. Then as now, there was a feeling that if something originates in Edmonton it lacks a certain worldliness and sophistication. So the builders went with the Kittaning Brick and Fireclay Company of St. Louis for the brick and soon regretted it. The bricks arrived uneven and ugly.[xxxvii]

In a letter to Kittaning, MacDonald wrote, "[t]hey are emphatically the worst I have ever seen."[xxxviii]

The library was not designed or constructed as a community hub, like its neighbour in Strathcona. It was a library and an administration centre for a library system, a signature piece of architecture in one of the most beautiful spots in the city — Edmonton's acropolis, despite Carnegie's warnings against Greek facades. The grand new building opened on August 30, 1923, fourteen years after its board first met to decide how they might build it. The front page of the program featured an original poem by Jennie Stork Hill:

Here rests the wisdom treasure of mankind:
The stalwart souls who this great wealth amassed
Sought not to bear it with them as they passed
To future worlds, nor gentured it to bind
In tombs of rock as kings of old enshrined
Their valued store, with spells and curses cast
Upon the ravisher, but free at last
From self, they left for men their wealth of mind

So freely take and use and gladly share
The high companionship of those who lead
The upward march of man's dim-seeing host;
With them is found a guild of friendship rare.
Their standard bears a legend plain to read —
To scatter, yet increase is wisdom's boast.

Premier Herbert Greenfield and Mayor David Milwyn Duggan opened the new building, formally, at 3:00 in the afternoon. Duggan was a pro-business mayor desperately if not always charmingly proud of his city. The first radio station in the province started operation when Duggan was in city hall and he was invited to speak for its first broadcast.

"Edmonton leads the way in all Alberta," said Mayor Duggan, into the CJCA microphone. "Calgary and others follow. That is all. Goodnight."[xxxix]

Premier Greenfield was a reluctant leader of a strange political party — the United Farmers of Alberta. He appointed Irene Parlby the first female cabinet member shortly after

taking power but lacked courage in other matters. The death of his wife, in 1922, haunted him and he neither engaged opposition members nor controlled the whims of his own backbenchers. He was comfortable, however, in a library.

Tea was served after the speeches in the assembly room, seared by the sun thanks to the high and wide windows on every side and enormous skylights. A band played all afternoon.

There was a lecture room and a children's library on the high basement level, essentially the ground floor. A set of stairs at the front of the building led to the main floor, one vast room — 120 feet by 60 feet wide — with white classical ionic columns, battleship linoleum, and terrazzo floors over marble. The stairs were marble and terrazzo. Light fixtures were created by Macbeth-Evans glass, one of the finest and dearest lantern-makers before and during the depression. The trim was oak and matched the bookshelves, tables, and chairs.

The evening program included speeches by the chair of the board, L.T. Barclay, who had travelled to New York to press the Carnegie Corporation for funds just a year and a half earlier. E.L. Hill spoke, triumphantly, and the keynote address was by Dr. George H. Locke, Chief Librarian of the Toronto Public Library and a leader of the North American library movement.

"Edmonton is fortunate in having a sculptor of wide experience and varied skill," the program for opening day noted. "A slight recognition of the generous Carnegie gift is the artistic Caen stone panel carved by Major Norbury, showing the profile of the great builder of public libraries and bearing as an inscription this sentence from Mr. Carnegie's address delivered upon the opening of the Carnegie Institute: "The taste of reading is one of the most precious possessions of life."[xl]

The politicians and business leaders and artists came. So did mothers and fathers and children, in great numbers. As much as librarian Hill wanted a building worthy of Edmonton's

ambition, he also wanted a culture of reading and reflection and self-betterment in the city. Then as now, there was only one good reason to leave your life behind in Ireland or Quebec or India or Poland or Somalia or China to come to the northernmost major city on the continent: to change your life. For those without the means or the time to go to university, the city's most powerful instrument for life-changing was the elegant new library on MacDonald Drive.

Not everyone in the city agreed the new library — or any library — was a worthwhile public investment.

Edmonton in 1923 was as conflicted as Edmonton in 1913 and 2013. We want a great city, and great cities are filled with fine architecture and beautiful proportions, pleasing public spaces. At the same time we want a relentlessly frugal city council; we would rather spend our own money than have the government spend it for us. We don't want extravagance yet we know that beauty, in some calculation, is always an extravagance. No one wants to live in an ugly city yet, unchecked, public and private development oriented only around cost-savings and profit will turn out ugly.

The library was at the eastern edge of an elegant circle, just north of MacDonald Drive, that surrounded a pitch of grass where my grandfather and grandmother stood when they were a young couple at sundown. Others lawn-bowled here, and sat with recently borrowed books on a sunny afternoon and entered an adventure.

Today this is Telus Plaza, a platform of concrete at the base of two office towers. On warm days, you can hear but not see children playing in a high-fenced outdoor corridor outside a daycare. Office workers will stand out here and smoke. When they are finished their cigarettes, even on the most beautiful days, they will go back inside the concourse, which is oriented like an indoor mall. There is no street-level retail, no invitation, no gathering places, no integration

between the plaza and the bus stop on 100th Street. If you want to stand in a crowd, you have to go downstairs during the cigarette breaks, where between twenty and forty people will stand together near some underutilized patio furniture.

The Legion was at the top of the circle, where the Telus Towers stand today. Next to the library was the Edmonton Club.

"It really was a beautiful circle," says Edmonton historian Tony Cashman. "The library was on the east side, the legion was on the north and Alberta College was on the west side. The Edmonton Club was right beside the library. It was *the club* at the time, certainly an old boys club. It gradually lost relevance because the younger guns wanted to go to the places where women were allowed."[xli]

Today, the concrete platform at the south end of Telus Plaza meets an underground parkade and then the entrance to a surface parking lot, this one for Alberta College. A few feet away, a man is planting flowers and clipping hedges in the sunshine along the southern wall of MacDougall United Church — built by Magoon and MacDonald. He wears a grey hat and says hello to everyone who passes. Three others stand to talk nearby. It feels human here, away from the concrete and, for the first time along this spectacular thoroughfare, spectacular. To have a conversation about gardens or politics or books or God, with this view of the River Valley, next to a well-preserved building: this is Edmonton, or an Edmonton.

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Ethelbert Lincoln Hill had helped build two libraries in Edmonton. Now he turned his attention to creating a city of readers.

"It is a highly gratifying fact that the demand for literature of the more substantial character has shown a steady increase," he wrote, of the excitement and instigation that grew with the improved Edmonton Public Library. "Books of biography, travel and poetry have been in constant demand. Strachey's *Queen Victoria* has had over 100 issues. *The Life of Roosevelt* has had even more. Browning's poems have been issued scores of times during the year. Our several copies of the poems of Robert Service are very well-worn by constant service."[xlii]

Hill was not a blushing fan of popular novels. What librarian is? For generations, librarians of taste have smuggled smutty crime novels out of the building in their briefcases, careful not to reveal their pop desires. Hill was equally concerned about the dangers — political and social and cultural — of elitism. From the board minutes and from the annual reports it is easy to detect a considerable streak of sensitivity in his writing; Hill constantly argued that libraries are for everyone, not just a highly educated, refined class of Edmontonians with grand houses in the correct neighbourhoods.

He wanted city managers and politicians to understand that this "substantial literature" was moving through every apartment and every house in the city, and changing lives. University graduates were taking books from the library but so were plumbers and bricklayers.

"The proportion of registered borrowers, with regard to occupation, for example, is closely parallel to the proportion as determined from the city directory. For example, the proportion of mechanics on the library register is about the same as the proportion of mechanics in the directory. This distribution ought to be gratifying to the Board as proving the general

usefulness of the institution entrusted to their care. No one class of the community is being favored at the expense of any other class."[xliii]

Carnegie's critics often argued he bought naming rights to libraries without providing the funds to fill them with crucial assets like books and librarians. It was enormously expensive to staff a library and maintain a steady collection of books, magazines, newspapers and reference material. The fact is, James Bertram was rigorous in finding assurances from cities they were willing and financially prepared to operate a library before any money left the Carnegie Corporation. City budgets are difficult beasts to manage, as Edmonton can only raise so much money from property taxes. The problem, then as now, is it can seem a battle between the necessary, the life-and-death, and intellectual extravagance. Children need safe water to drink. Can we trade one drop of it for a book?

More crudely, since the end of the Second World War the argument has been between potholes and books, and there will always be citizens who will fight tirelessly to be sure every pothole is filled before the city spends a nickel on a book. But these core arguments about the role of government, at city hall and in the newspaper letters pages, were as vigorous in the 1920s as they are today. One of Hill's most important jobs was to prepare for and counter this criticism, to align the aspirations of the Edmonton Public Library with the aspirations of Edmontonians.

"It should be strongly emphasized that the relative cost of maintaining the library has been too frequently exaggerated by a few people who are opposed to the principle of a free public library. It should be remembered that out of forty-three dollars and thirty-five cents contributed by the tax-payer the library received only seventy-four cents with which to pay debentures on two libraries and meet all other capital and maintenance charges on the Edmonton

Library, the Strathcona Library and four deposit stations, one at least of which (the North Edmonton unit) is really a branch library."[xliv]

The North Edmonton Community League was moving from a book deposit to a mini-library, at a cost of ten dollars per month. The "cosmopolitan character" of the city was changing anew. The Ukrainian population collected book donations in their language, for the library, and Librarian Hill found a bit of money to buy some more. But, as always in his leadership of the library system, there wasn't much at all.

According to the Library Act, the system received one mill — a fixed sum, dependent on property assessments. In 1925, money was so tight for the library that Ethelbert Hill and his staff had to take pay cuts. When the Strathcona Library required new lighting fixtures, the board asked Hill to sell the old fixtures, including the opalescent globes from the temporary homes of the downtown branch. In 1927, salaries returned to what they had been three years earlier. This was, according to the board minutes, a victory for everyone.

The Strathcona Library was in the process of becoming a horticultural marvel, with trees and shrubs, perennials and seasonal flowers surrounding the building. Inside, it was a meeting place for the neighbourhood and a resource for workers along Edmonton's second main street — Whyte Avenue.

A determined walk from the Stanley A. Milner branch of the Edmonton Public Library to the Strathcona Branch takes about forty minutes. You walk south down 100th Street, past the Westin Hotel and the World Trade Centre to the generous grounds of the Hotel Macdonald. Inevitably, young people and exercisers will be on the vast set of stairs next to the hotel, leading into the North Saskatchewan River Valley. The kids are smoking something-or-other and drinking something-or-other and the men and women in running gear are a generation older,

seeking to undo some of the damage of their youth. Everyone is polite. At the bottom of the stairs you cross one of the oldest pieces of infrastructure in Edmonton — the Low Level Bridge, completed in 1900. The first train into Edmonton crossed this bridge on October 20, 1902. There is a photograph of the event in the provincial archives, with a few spindly and leafless trees along the muddy banks. Men in suits and hats have piled on to the train, to commemorate the occasion. Most of the development was at the top of the hill so it's difficult to imagine — until the High Level Bridge was completed 11 years later — how anything heavier than a man made it downtown.

On the other side of the Low Level Bridge you put your hand out to stop traffic and cross Connors Road. Under the 98th Avenue overpass, an inhospitable place for a pedestrian, you enter its contrary: a calm pocket park with a blooming fruit tree. You say hello to other walkers who have discovered this place, and enter the shadow of one last overpass. The North Saskatchewan River Valley is, today, one of the largest urban parks in the world. One hundred years ago, when the Edmonton Public Library was born, it was the core of city industry.

At that time, writes historian Lawrence Herzog, "Emily Murphy described the buzz of the sawmills in the North Saskatchewan River valley as the typical sound of the Edmonton summer. In Edmonton's formative years, industry – not recreation – was the dominant force that shaped the valley. Coal mining, lumber, brick making, ice harvesting and gold mining all played a role in the development of the valley."[xlv]

Today, Mill Creek moves underground before any of its water enters the river system. In the early years of the last century, the creek flowed along the flats where today we walk on paved trails, and entered the river more naturally. The creek "was named after a grist mill established by William Bird in 1878, making it one of the first flour mills in all of Western

Canada. It operated until 1881 and was closed because there wasn't enough water in the creek to keep the wheel turning."[xlvi]

Today, there are no mills or meat packing plants in the Mill Creek Ravine: only cyclists and dog walkers and skateboarders and lovers and, when there is enough snow, cross-country skiers. We have barbecues and frisbee afternoons in the ravine. One of the finest winter festivals is an evening adventure walk where children carry home-made lanterns and move through pieces of Edmonton history and magic and nature — including men and women dressed as beavers and magpies — culminating in a meeting with the winter fairy Aurora.

Climb out of the ravine at 87th Avenue and walk west through Old Strathcona, between bakeries and cafés, a wine bar and a tattoo parlor. The single family homes, many of them more than one hundred years old, mingle with luxury condominiums and churches and not-so-luxury apartment blocks. North of Whyte Avenue, an industrial area centred on the southside service garage for Edmonton Transit has transformed into a theatre and cultural district — home of the oldest and largest Fringe Theatre Festival in North America. One of the Fringe venues, where I have seen historical plays about Edmonton, nude stand-up comedy, dirty clowns, and British monologues about the transformative power of vegetable gardening, is in the amphitheatre on the second floor of the Strathcona branch of the Edmonton Public Library.

If you stand across the street, when the buds are out and the flowers are up and the children are playing in the park, this is one of the most successful pieces of urban design in Edmonton. The Knox Church, built in 1907, is the library's spiritual sibling. Behind the library, the old bus barns have been rebuilt as Fringe Theatre Adventures. For 10 days in August, over half a million people walk through here to watch buskers from around the world and line up for beautiful, strange and occasionally horrifying theatre. There is a plaque next to the front doors of

the English renaissance library. It reads, in typically Edmonton language, "The Carnegie Foundation offered to build a library of a specified size and shape; this did not meet the requirements of the citizens of Strathcona, who refused the offer and instead financed their own larger building."

Take that, good Mr. Carnegie.

Today we walk into the library and our small children can sit at the bench in the vestibule while we read the bulletins for upcoming literary readings and yoga nights and video games for retired people. This is Edmonton, so we nearly always have coats to remove. Through windows with oak trim, the librarians are working behind and on the other side of the square waist-high circulation desk. They aren't checking out books and DVDs: a computerized radio frequency system does that. Instead, they speak to readers and guide them to the stacks. Gentle period lamps hang from the ceiling, on each side of pretty arches.

"Is there something in particular you're looking for?" a young man asks. It's such a peculiar question, outside a retail setting, I worry that I am ill-dressed for the occasion. There is something so fine about the proportions inside the old library it does feel incorrect to wear anything less than a suit and leather-soled shoes. To the right there is a teen area and that controversial fireplace. Carnegie hated fireplaces in libraries.

I ask at the desk if the fireplace still works.

"Oh, good question." One of the librarians stares at it a moment. "I have no idea."

One of his colleagues turns around. "It does, of course. Would you like me to turn it on?"

There is a sign, part of the library's award-winning marketing campaign, that states "We're bigger than our buildings." While this is evident downtown, where the building serves a number of social functions, the Strathcona branch — thanks to its age and architectural details —

still feels like an old fashioned Canadian library. There are books, of course, but there are also computers. Here in Old Strathcona, where the clientele is different, the computers are not the most popular items in the room. Most of the people on the computers here are parents whose children are in the back of the library, in the 2006 expansion. The former back wall of the library has opened into a rounded new room — large enough for a children's library and a bright and quiet reading area overlooking the park to the south.

There is no one in the Strathcona library in, as Thomas Carlyle so gently put it, "a state of imbecility." No one is sleeping or cackling troublingly to himself. Two little girls sit side-by-side in a wooden train, arguing loudly about snakes instead of reading, and — when they think no adults are looking — terrorizing smaller children by sticking out their tongues and making monster poses. This is all Strathcona can manage for imbecility on a cloudy weekday afternoon. It is quiet and sober apart from the little girls and two others, their cries muffled and tears dried by their parents' legs.

Originally, there was a piece of art on this floor, on the south side of the room at the base of one of the arches. It was dear enough to warrant a paragraph in the first annual report of the fused library system in 1913.

"In the Entrance Hall, facing the loan desk, stands 'The Prayer of Faith,' a beautiful bronze statue by F. Fleming Baxter, presented to the Library by the sculptor as an expression of his interest and faith in this far western metropolis. It was previously exhibited at the International Exhibition, Graffton Galleries, London England, in 1910. Through the interest of J.M. Douglas, M.P., and O. Bush, Esq., the customs charges were refunded, making it possible to obtain this valuable addition to the Library, free of duty. Mr. F. Fleming Baxter has exhibited

several other notable pieces of sculpture, and is now at work on a memorial tablet to be placed in Guy's Hospital, London, England, in honor of Sir Samuel Wilks."[xlvii]

The sculpture was stolen.

Today, on the Edmonton Public Library website, there is an offer of amnesty and immunity for anyone who provides information about "The Prayer of Faith." Photos of the statue, from afar and close up, accompany the plea. Who stole it? Where has it lived since that day? As fascinating as the answers to these questions might be, all the library really wants is a piece of its history back.

"A landmark of the Strathcona Library for many years, 'The Prayer of Faith' seems to have vanished from the face of the earth. Where is it? The statue is out there, somebody knows... Call 496-1855. All we want is the truth."[xlviii]

The Strathcona Branch is our family's local. On cold days and rainy days we have spent hours in the library, hunting for books or reading them on the train or in a chair or on the floor. When we visit the downtown branch, my daughters — six and four as I write this — are more social. They talk at full volume. In the Strathcona Library they whisper and, curiously, ignore the computers. The room is haunted by its past, by the thousands of people who have sat and read and dreamed between its brick walls.

I do have a romantic view of certain eras, especially when I'm sitting in a space like the Strathcona Library. But despite what they wore, men and women in the 1920s were still men and women.

Halloween night in 1927 was an unhappy one for the old library. The front of the building, a marvel of beauty especially on a blue sky day, was beginning to win landscape design

awards. It was not only a gathering place but a place of beauty for residents of the near south side, including the Hill family.

"The urns in front of the Strathcona building were thrown down and the bases destroyed by a gang of young men," writes librarian Hill, in that year's otherwise subdued annual report. "The police have made no report as to the culprits. It will be necessary to have these structures rebuilt."[xlix]

Hill had them rebuilt in time for the summer of 1929, when the library took second prize from the Horticultural Society in the category of public buildings. The downtown branch, despite all its novelty and grandeur, only managed to snag a special mention.[l]

Indignities were perpetrated downtown as well. In 1929, the board reported a burglary in the Carnegie Building, in the children's department facing the grand Edmonton Club.

> The catch on the window was exposed and released, enabling the miscreant to raise the sash and enter. After ineffectual attempts to break into the safe from the front after breaking off the dial, he turned the safe on its face and proceeded to chisel through the back. After cutting through the back plate, he removed a portion of the fire-proofing composition and exposed the steel lining. He cut through this sufficiently to allow removal of cash boxes, etc. He appears to have brought with him a new hammer and stout wrought steel nail-puller. In order to operate on the back of the safe, he brought up from the basement a chisel, the heavy gate-shaker and a piece of gas pipe. He entered the vestibule at some time during his operations and failed to notice that the vestibule door had the night-latch set. He was thus trapped in the vestibule. In order to get back into the library he broke a pane of plate glass in the partition, apparently using a broom handle for the purpose. It is evident that he must have worked for some hours. He rejected the copper and nickel coins, leaving these on the counter and on the librarian's desk. The librarian's desk was also broken open and drawers rifled but nothing seems to have been stolen from this desk or elsewhere except money. The amounts stolen are calculated to be…$103.75. Fortunately no imprest fund money was on hand as this had been exhausted as per vouchers. The safe is so seriously damaged that repairs for practical use would be too costly to consider seriously. A temporary arrangement has been made with Robertson Safe Co. to have the use of a safe until the Board can take action. In addition to the loss set forth as per foregoing statement, the burglar secured $20.00 belonging to Miss. Dobie, chief assistant, and some $5.50 belonging to the staff's "flower fund"…In December the Board refunded this money.[li]

These problems and competitions would come to seem quaint.

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October 29, 1929 was the final day of an extraordinary transformation in North America and the world — a time of optimism, cultural experimentation, growth and, ultimately, dangerous nonsense. Edmonton was built and had thrived on a foundation of commodities. The agriculture and mining industries that sustained the Alberta economy were caught up in the multi-billion dollar one-day collapse that expanded into the Great Depression. Brokers in Edmonton, as elsewhere, committed suicide. The misery was less immediate for other Edmontonians but every one of the city's 75,000 citizens' lives would change over the coming decade. More than 10,000 new Edmontonians, most of them economic refugees from devastated rural communities, would struggle with established city families.

Almost twenty percent of Edmontonians would come to rely on direct government relief as a combination of high unemployment and low wages affected everyone from shop owners to banks. Companies that had entered the depression with cash swooped in to buy up land and businesses at a discount. Small retailers along main streets like Jasper Avenue and Whyte Avenue were forced to close, including grocers who had helped local families. At the same time,

Safeway, based in California, opened its first Edmonton store in Edmonton on 124th Street and 102 Avenue, with lower prices and, of course, a rather distant sense of community.[lii]

If it was difficult to argue for better funding in 1928 and 1929, it was impossible during the Depression. The debate had little connection to books versus potholes. This was, quite visibly, books versus starving children.

Still, librarian Hill made his point. Even during hard economic times, perhaps especially during economic times, the library is our best hope for individual and social change. Education was the key to making it through these hard years.

*"*Any sane library policy must take cognizance of the fact that the public library is practically the only institution that provides educational material and opportunity and opportunities for the people at large," Hill wrote. "Once more it should be emphasized that, 'The Public Library is an integral part of Public Education.'

"The men and women being displaced by machines and mergers are being displaced faster than our economic structure can absorb them. These surplus unemployed will have to 'learn or perish.' There must be some provision for alternative training. The public library is a most important factor in this re-education."[liii]

If there was a way out of the Depression, it was through re-education.

Still, there were staff shortages and fewer book orders, fewer programs, fewer hours. One of the chief assistants of the Edmonton Public Library and, for a few years, acting chief librarian, Grace Dobie, looked back on the 1930s as a time of surprise and wonder.

"Our greatest circulation and our highest point in purchases were reached during the Depression years, particularly in 1932. It is remarkable how closely our circulation follows prosperity, in an inverse ratio."[liv]

There was little evidence this was numerically true. Spiritually true, surely.

The Depression forced Edmontonians to live differently: backyards that had been devoted to leisure were now gardens and chicken coops. With less money to spend on recreation, free public spaces were more popular than ever, especially in the river valley. It was also a time of intellectual inspiration. The status quo was no longer in need of protection, as it had turned out so poorly for everyone.

Not all of the intellectual playfulness was positive. In 1929, a handsome and well-spoken man named John J. Maloney arrived in Edmonton. He had grown up Irish Catholic in Ontario and had studied to be a priest in Montreal. The vow of celibacy and other rules did not agree with him, in the end, so he took a less priestly vocation within the church. When that failed him, he sued. The church counter-sued and Maloney turned both Presbyterian and ferociously anti-Catholic.

When he arrived in Edmonton, Maloney was not impressed by the cultural diversity of the city. Too many people from other places, too much immigration in general, too much racial intermarriage, too much French, too many Catholics. His reading and his recent experiences had drawn him to become a member of an American organization called the Ku Klux Klan — based on Anglo-Saxon purity and moral virtue.[lv] At a time of high unemployment, the idea that immigrants were both muddying up the ethnic mix and taking jobs from the Edmonton's accent-less, British royalty-supporting, not-at-all-swarthy population was an abomination to him.

Dim economic times, and a boom in literature supporting the supremacy of the white race and the conspiracies against it, helped the charismatic new Edmontonian gain a following. The peak arrived in March, 1932, when hundreds gathered in Memorial Hall to hear Imperial Wizard Maloney call them to "study the Klan's 'wholesome teaching and to morally profit thereby.'"[lvi]

This was not the sort of re-education librarian Hill had imagined. Edmonton was a small market for the Klan, who had a membership in mostly rural Alberta of almost 7,000 in the early years of the Depression. The Klan's progress in the city was halted, some months after the rally in Memorial Hall, when the latest in Maloney's troubles with the law made the newspapers.

On New Year's Eve, Maloney drove his car into a snowbank at the Mayfair Golf and Country Club. In his efforts to extract the car, he broke into the toolshed and started a fire. Once he freed the car, he realized it had been damaged and filed an insurance claim — stating it had been damaged by thieves who had stolen the car. He went to court on fraud charges and arrived for sentencing January 31, 1933.

"Please, please give me one more chance, just one more chance," the philosopher pleaded, tearfully. "I'll show the world what I can do. I was trapped. My parents are sick in Hamilton. Please give me a chance. I have Bright's disease."[lvii] He ended up in prison, and this was not the end of his legal woes. Even the Klan ended up pressing the Crown to charge him with theft, for misappropriating funds.

Of course, none of this was Maloney's fault. He noted in his biography, *Darkness, Dawn, and Daybreak* that he was up against the Liberal Machine in Edmonton. He had no chance.

"In his autobiography, Maloney asserted that his court cases in Edmonton were 'pure frame-ups activated by forces whose wrath I had incurred through fighting for principle and right.' He claimed that new evidence was surfacing but that he would not disclose it prematurely and allow his enemies to turn it to their advantage. Claiming that he had suffered personally as a result of the litigation, Maloney characteristically added: 'But that's nothing; I knew what to expect when I entered Edmonton, the Rome of the West."[lviii]

As Maloney transformed in the public imagination from orator and leader to liar and criminal, another European intellectual movement was gaining supporters in and out of libraries, halls, and dining rooms.

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The good news in the early 1930s, from a librarian's perspective, surrounded children. It was warm in the library and safe, and while there may not have been food there was a sense of community. E.L. Hill was more than just a keeper of books and buildings. His ambition was to transform young Edmontonians into thoughtful, reflective, empathetic adults through reading.

In 1932, "116,767 volumes were loaned to the boys and girls of Edmonton. Much of this reading has been done in line with judicious (but not officious) advice by library attendants in the Department. Gratifying results have been obtained in developing a taste for reading. Once more it should be stated that the child borrower displays remarkable judgment in the selection of books. It may be easily conceded that the average child makes better use of biography, travel and history than the average adult does in the adult department."[lix]

A *fin-de-siècle* philosophical movement had helped take the idea of a natural ruling class, of racial and national superiority, of heroism into political parties and factions in Europe, the

Middle East, Asia and South America. Italy, Spain and Lithuania had fascist regimes and Hitler's Nazi Party would rise to power in Germany in 1933. There was a spirit of intellectual playfulness in the air, especially in the early years of the Great Depression when a new idea, a way out of this mess, was so welcome. Everything that was happening in Europe, the birth of so many ideologies, had sprung from writers and, ultimately, libraries. Maloney was, it turned out, a simple racist and a coward and a crook. But in a short time he had been able to court a number of desperate and curious Edmontonians. His methods of conversion, which never quite worked out, were supposed to be books.

Of the thousands of refugees who arrived in Edmonton from the rural west, few found jobs. The municipal and provincial governments lacked the money to intervene in the economy in any meaningful way, with capital projects or even a bit of cash for destitute families to secure shelter and food. Shortly before Imperial Wizard Maloney crashed his car into a snowbank at the Mayfair Golf and Country Club, the Communist League had organized a parade in downtown Edmonton to plead the cause of the proletariat.

Fascism, like the political career of John J. Maloney, was a messy affair. But there was a direct link between *The Communist Manifesto* by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels and the 1917 October Revolution in Russia. Intellectually, communism was far more attractive to families in Edmonton in 1932 than whatever Maloney was preaching. The Edmonton Public Library was a place to discover these ideas and to debate them. The current Stanley A. Milner branch of the Edmonton Public Library is on land that, in December, 1932, was called Market Square. The Hunger March committee had several demands: "Non-contributory unemployment insurance (there was at this time no unemployment insurance of any kind); the closing of the 20-cents-a-

day relief camps called "slave" camps by their inmates; cash relief instead of bags of groceries or scrip; relief for farmers; and an end to evictions and foreclosures in both city and country."[lx]

The RCMP had warned farmers not to come into Edmonton for the march. They had raided the organizers' headquarters, the Ukrainian Labour Temple, the night before the Hunger March. Mayor Dan Knott, who had run as a labour candidate, and Premier John Edward Brownlee of the United Farmers of Alberta, might have been expected to be ideologically supportive of the march. But together they denied a parade permit. Thousands arrived at market square on the afternoon of December 20, 1932. So did hundreds of RCMP on horseback and city police on foot, clubs drawn.

It started peacefully, with a dozen speakers. A committee ran across downtown to ask the premier, one last time, for permission to march. The premier denied permission. Still, the speakers and the marchers convinced themselves they had a constitutional right to protest and to petition the legislature. Just as they prepared to march, the police rushed in. Hundreds of heads were bonked. Men tried to hide under a canopy of Christmas trees, and to defend themselves with branches. They received the worst beatings. The crowd dispersed without any march on the legislature and, the following day, known communist gathering places were raided. Police loaded organizers and leaders into paddy wagons, charged them with unlawful assembly, and took them to jail in Fort Saskatchewan.[lxi]

A third economic and political philosophy sprung from the libraries of Edmonton in the early 1930s. A British engineer and Cambridge University dropout named C.H. Douglas noticed, during World War One, that the total cost of what workers produced was more than what they were being paid. This meant, fundamentally, that workers could not actually buy back what they had created. He studied British corporations and found it was consistent: the economic system

was designed to make owners rich at the expense of workers. Marx and Engels might have told him the same thing, but his analysis was based on contemporary data and his conclusions were far less radical. There had to be some way to bring powers of consumption, for workers, in line with the value of what they created. It would increase personal liberty and flatten economic shocks.

Fundamentally, Douglas felt profits should be distributed more equally across society. He called his theory, which flirted occasionally with anti-semitism, Social Credit. It was curiously popular in the literary world. Poets like Ezra Pound, William Carlos Williams, T.S. Eliot, Aldous Huxley and G.K. Chesterton were attracted to social credit philosophies.

One of the people reading Douglas, in Alberta, was a Calgary preacher and radio announcer named William Aberhart. Aberhart infused social credit with a fiery dose of religion instead of poetry, and promoted it on CFCN radio. Premier Brownlee was forced to resign in 1934, for seducing one of his clerks, and Aberhart was eloquent on the matter. Not only were the economic policies of the UFA government unfair; the government itself was morally bankrupt. Social Credit study groups had popped up all over the province, in and out of libraries.

The extremely young Alberta Social Credit Party ran in the August 1935 provincial election and took over fifty per cent of the popular vote. They won a majority government without a leader. Aberhart, who had not run in the election, agreed to take the job as premier in September.

Europe had its ideologies and so did Alberta, the social credit testing ground for the world. It was radically populist, especially in its early years, when they issued Prosperity Certificates to help battle the effects of the Depression. Critics called the certificates, worth one

dollar each and requiring one hundred stamps, "funny money." The glue on the stamps would dry up and the stamps would fall off.

"In Edmonton, the money could be cashed in only a few places — the ATB, Alberta liquor stores, the University of Alberta Tuck Shop and the Army and Navy Department Store. Nobody wanted cracked money, that had to be carried in a shoe box, or to give change in good Canadian coin. Finally the Supreme Court declared the monetary system illegal."[lxii]

These and other faintly ridiculous policies were attacked daily in the press. To counter the bad publicity, Premier Aberhart and his government created legislation called the *Accurate News and Information Act* — which would create an office of censorship. Aberhart had special access to the hearts and minds of regular Albertans, through his radio show, and often attacked newspapers like the *Edmonton Journal*. The idea that his good government could correct the malicious liberalism of the press was not broadly unpopular.

It was, of course, unpopular with librarians. If it can happen in newspapers it can and will happen in libraries: the wrong sorts of books, magazines and papers would go along with the freedom of the editorial department of the *Journal*.

"The *Journal* responded with a front-page editorial and fought the bill all the way to the Supreme Court, which ruled the bill invalid on March 4, 1938. 'If this bill should pass and stand where then would freedom of speech and liberty of the press — proud boasts of Britons for two centuries?' the *Journal* wrote. 'Where then would be the liberty of the citizen to free expression of opinion? The press bill now before the legislature is a dictatorial challenge to every freedom-loving Canadian whose home is in Alberta.'"[lxiii]

Today, a block away from the original home of the downtown branch of the Edmonton Public Library, there is a bronze plaque in the atrium of the *Journal* building. On May 2, 1938, the newspaper won the first Pulitzer Prize citation outside the U.S.

The premier was not hunting the stacks of the Edmonton Public Library for offensive material, but as the middle of a decade of depression came and went, E. Lincoln Hill was having trouble making his plea for support. The staff was thin and thinning and the budget for new books was minuscule.

"There was very little controversy," says historian Tony Cashman. "When Ethelbert Hill was running the library it did not get involved in molding public opinion. The library, then, was very solemn. A bit more quiet than the church down the street. They were sort of like temples, which is maybe why so many were designed like temples."

Still, books and ideas were fuelling disquiet all over the world. Nazism was battling communism and communism was battling capitalism. In Alberta, all manner of populist silliness was bursting from the legislature. Hill had wanted a lively reading culture in Edmonton, where citizens decided these issues for themselves, democratically and ambitiously, where they transformed their lives — fulfilling the promise of this northern, "far western metropolis."

His arguments weren't so much unsuccessful as ignored. Neither the City of Edmonton nor the Government of Alberta had money to spend on books, and philanthropists in the city were actively supporting hunger initiatives. The libraries also lacked the political leadership he was looking for, abstract and emotional and certainly financial. Aberhart felt there was really only one book worth reading, so libraries were not on his list of key assets. Mayor Joseph Clarke, who ran for nearly every election during his adult life, losing most and winning a few, was more inclined to athleticism than reading. He built a football stadium that was named after him, and

after his council chambers fistfight with his old friend Mayor McNamara his fisticuffs continued. He was often connected to gambling and prostitution rings, the original inspiration for his famous and very public fistfight, and historical documents show scant, if any, connection to the Edmonton Public Library or its chief and founder — E.L. Hill. It was, in short, a frustrating time to be a librarian and a miserable way to exit 24 years of service to Edmontonians.

Circulation plummeted in the middle of the 1930s. The public was tiring of the same old books, it seems, and Hill didn't know what to do about it. He mentioned infantile paralysis, which swept through the city in the middle of the decade and inspired occasional closures. But in his reports, he hardly mentioned the steep drop in figures. The board had asked him to raise the profile of the library in the city, in the manner of the flamboyant chief librarian in Calgary. Perhaps he could host a radio broadcast.

Hill was not the sort to host a radio broadcast. He requested funds, in 1934, to attend the American Library Association annual general meeting in Montreal and the board — unsettled by the quality of his leadership — turned him down.

Elizabeth Sterling Haynes, a theatre director from Toronto who had lived in Edmonton since the early 1920s, was founding theatre companies, groups and schools in and out of the city during the Depression. The first mosque in Canada, the Al-Rashid, opened on 101st Street and 108th Avenue. Something in the intellectual and cultural spirit of the city had changed. Instead of leading and instigating this change, the library remained a couple of pretty buildings full of books.

It was Hill's protégé and second-in-command, Grace Dobie, who first mentioned the circulation problems in the 1937 annual report, a problem that went back to 1934. Between Hill's retirement and the arrival of the new chief, Dobie ran the library. She blamed broader cultural

forces for the decline, rather than anything the Edmonton Public Library had done or had not done: the rise of dread populism.

"There seems no doubt but that the sophistication of much of the current popular writings which most libraries do not countenance, even though it means a lessening of popularity, makes a difference," Dobie wrote. "Another reason may well be the great output of sensational magazines flooding the country, from some sixty varieties of the Digest type for the more thoughtful readers to the even greater number of the pulp magazines of the trigger-finger type for our youth."[lxiv]

In two of his annual reports before retiring, in 1934 and 1935, Hill quoted an American state governor — not by name — in a bid to convince his funders that libraries were more important than ever.

"'The richest asset and the final support of the state is the citizen. The best conservation is his continual growth in mental power, character and civic spirit. Public libraries are essential to a democratic state because reading and study promote these great ends. Libraries provide generous opportunities for all for richer understanding of contemporary life, for mastery of circumstance, and for greater social and civic usefulness."[lxv]

On November 1, 1936, Ethelbert Lincoln Hill retired. He and his wife Jenny moved to Victoria with their ambitious daughter, Esther Marjorie, where she set up an architecture and design practice. Edmonton's founding librarian died in 1960, in Guelph, at the age of 96, largely forgotten in the city of his life's work.

There is a small park in Old Strathcona, near the railroad tracks where the festival streetcar runs in the summertime. It's at 105th Street and 86th Avenue, adjacent to the community garden. There's nothing about the park that suggests reading or self-improvement,

and unless you've convinced yourself to be creative it doesn't feel much like a park. There aren't any benches. Tony Cashman, who likes to tour Edmonton's parks with his son Paul, a retired *Edmonton Journal* editor, suggests bringing a folding chair to E.L. Hill Park if you would like to visit.

On a warm but windy spring day in 2012 I visited E.L. Hill Park with my daughters. We didn't bring folding chairs but we did bring a soccer ball so we might play, and we played, and I told them what I had learned about the chief librarian. I showed them a photo of him on my iPhone and we talked about his great achievements: the libraries, of course, and in collaboration with his wife Jenny the raising and nurturing of a courageous and accomplished daughter — the first woman to graduate from architecture school in Canadian history.

Alexander Calhoun, Calgary's founding librarian, had a branch named after him in 1954. The University of Alberta gave him an honourary doctor of laws, calling him "a pioneer in a pioneering province."

In 2006 the municipal affairs department of the Alberta Government compiled a list of "100 Legends in Alberta's Public Library Service." Eighteen Edmontonians made the list but E.L. Hill was not one of them. He remains mysterious, the quiet man Cashman describes, a slow-motion advocate. A kind of sadness lives in his final reports as chief librarian. It was as though he had tried and failed to create, for all Edmontonians, the spirit of intellectual curiosity and attainment his daughter had carried so well.

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For new arrivals to Edmonton, in the 1930s, the library system would have seemed a dusty and appealing bit of northern antebellum. Neither Hill nor his staff were educated in the latest theories. When Ethelbert and his wife Jenny Stork Hill went to graduate school, library science was not a science at all. A library was a place for books, where citizens gathered to read and borrow them.

What was so complicated about that?

Hill was not an aggressive lobbyist or fundraiser. His political skills were weak. By the time of his retirement the city's two libraries had settled into a period of nostalgia. There was no money to hire a replacement but the board wasn't concerned about that. Grace Dobie, the assistant librarian, had worked closely with Ethelbert Hill. Books were on the shelves and the doors were open.

Of course, some members of the library board travelled. They had seen libraries in New York and Boston and Toronto and San Francisco. Libraries in these cities seemed different somehow. Shinier and with more and better books, but they were bigger cities. It was a library chair's business trip to Calgary in 1938 that changed everything. The Calgary Public Library was not bigger than Edmonton's. But it felt different: there was more energy, better signs, new furniture and bookshelves and *books*, more people, a proper reference library. This was embarrassing. It would not do.

Instead of becoming defensive, the Edmonton Public Library Board gathered its courage and asked Alexander Calhoun, of the Calgary Public Library, to come a few hours north and

make a frank assessment. Calhoun had been everything Hill was not. When the federal government removed books by communist and socialist writers from the shelves, Calhoun — out of the country at the time — wrote back sickened to a a Calgary newspaper: "Soon we will have no liberties left."

From his arrival in Calgary, at 31, he had been a vocal booster, a community organizer, a volunteer city planner and advocate for beautification. The Calgary Public Library was distinct because Calhoun had designed it to be a lively intellectual meeting place: "Silence" signs were forbidden in his building. He was a mountain climber and a debater. In 1925, he co-founded a group of learned men called Knights of the Round Table and, in 1932, the Current Events Club. He was in the outreach business before most of his peers in the library world. The Calgary Public Library did not pretend that having books on shelves was enough to transform a population; he organized adult education classes in the humanities and social sciences. The federal government had a dossier on him and considered him a subversive, though he was always rather open about his socialist sympathies. Calhoun helped start the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation which would eventually become the New Democratic Party.[lxvi]

Calhoun was loud when Hill was quiet. Calhoun was creative when Hill was careful. Worse yet, he was a Calgarian. With the invitation, the Edmonton Public Library was admitting that Calhoun had done a better job of leading his institution and stirring his community.

The Calgarian was not shy. In his report, he used words like obsolete and inefficient, and phrases like "genteel shabbiness" and "pitiably inadequate from whatever angle."[lxvii]

Edmonton in 1939 shared certain insecurities with Edmonton in 2013. If you want to see action, compare the city unfavourably to Calgary. Stomachs and brains and wallets will stir. Invite a Calgarian to town and ask him to look over a failed institution.

"In this hasty review, I have merely touched the fringes of your problem," Calhoun wrote, to the board. "What is the cure?"

> The answer is obvious, a directing head. A good librarian can iron out a great many of these problems in a very short time. If you can find the right person, he can save his salary in the second, if not the first year.
> What I have outlined should surely demonstrate that only a man thoroughly familiar with the best library practice is competent to reorganize your library. He must be able to re-organize but also to revitalize the library. To achieve this he must have the ability to rouse this community, to win its respect and support for the library. The day is gone when a library can depend entirely upon a good collection of books. It must be publicized. Your task is to find that man.[lxviii]

For years, city council and the board had kept funds from E.L. Hill, even asking him to take a large pay cut for three years in the middle of an economic boom in the city. If only he had visited Calgary with a camera and a notepad.

The library board placed a job advertisement in national newspapers. They received fifty applications from qualified candidates and from that list created a shortlist of seven. There were many librarians looking for work, but the board wanted precisely what Calhoun had advised them to want: a firecracker of a man.

Of the applicants, one was a more likely specimen than the others. He was young, just 36, and he had trained in all the latest methods. The board offered the job to Hugh Cameron Gourlay, a man with rounded glasses and a crooked smile, on June 28, 1939. At the time, Gourlay was head librarian at McMaster University; he had also worked for the Carnegie Corporation in Ann Arbor and as chief of circulation at the University of Missouri, one of the three universities in the education portion of his resume. The salary, starting at $3,000 with an eventual ceiling of $3,800 was a pay cut from what he had received at McMaster. But, he said at

the time, he wanted an opportunity to transform something. Not only a library system but a city.[lxix]

Gourlay arrived "somewhat unpressed in appearance and with a ready sense of humour," which fit well with Edmonton's business culture.[lxx] He set to work immediately, rearranging and redecorating the library according to the latest concepts and methods. Soon there were clear signs and large labels, telling patrons where to go. He created more open space, better lighting, and more adequate bookshelves. He made the children's library more fun and the adult areas more welcoming. The newspapers wrote glowing features about him and his entrepreneurial approach to the library. Gourlay set up a three year plan to address the problems Calhoun had identified in his report — problems the board and city council had accepted with shame and resignation. Suddenly, business language like "realizing organizational objectives" appeared in library reports.

The new chief was not without philosophical flourish. "The recognition of the library's place in public education, second in importance only to the school, is the main reason for public support," he wrote, in the 1939 annual report, to help the board understand ways to better advocate for funds. "The library has always been a leader in adult education. It is often called the people's university — a university without formal courses, without a stadium or a campus but providing voluntary individual instruction."[lxxi]

In a memo to the chair of the library board, Gourlay criticized the book buying policy. It didn't make sense, he wrote, keen to differentiate himself from his predecessor. This was not entirely fair. "Almost since the beginning the library had gone from financial crisis to financial crisis," writes James Pilton, Gourlay's biographer, who would be inspired thirty years later to

celebrate, apologize for, and figure out one of the most complex figures in the history of the Edmonton Public Library.

"Ethelbert Hill had operated on the philosophy that something on the shelves was better than nothing. He had been forced to bind and re-bind and put patches on top of patches in order to maintain a reasonable number of books on the shelves. It is ironic that Hugh Gourlay was to face a similar situation only a few years later, but in 1940 he was still the new broom."

The new broom was not an apt metaphor. Gourlay dealt quickly with the past and set about focusing on the future: he was an idea machine in his early years and, possibly, the inventor of a culture that remains in the library today.

Reporters liked his sense of humour and his ambition. Ethelbert Hill, who only showed up in the newspapers in lists of the library's new arrivals, was not a personality. Gourlay courted community leaders and, especially, the *Edmonton Journal*. "Circulation was increasing. In every way the library was moving forward. The city was very pleased with its new chief librarian."[lxxii]

For years, Hill and Grace Dobie had expressed regret in annual reports and board minutes that children and adults in far-off corners of the city like Calder and North Edmonton found it difficult to borrow books and participate in the life of the library and the life of the city. What bound all three of them, Hill and Dobie and Gourlay, was the sincere belief that a healthy democracy requires an engaged and knowledgable citizenry. The example in Europe, and the reason so many young Edmontonians were rushing overseas to fight, demonstrated that ignorance is not only unfortunate — it is dangerous, deadly. Then as now, some children did not have attentive parents. Some adults had missed an opportunity to stay more than a few years in school.

For families living in industrial North Edmonton and Calder, with neither the time nor the means to travel to the core, there was — in 1940 — no option. The board did not have the funds to build a new branch in these neighbourhoods or any other. The Carnegie library downtown couldn't go to them.

Or could it?

In 2013, after over fifty years of car-based transportation and planning, the City of Edmonton is becoming a city of light rail transit and trams. This harkens back to the early 1940s, when this was a streetcar city. Most families could not afford a car, let alone two. They relied on cheap and efficient public transportation. Streetcars were so popular they wore out.

In 1938, one of those streetcars retired. No one else in the world had thought of turning an old streetcar into a moving library. To Gourlay and his increasingly enthusiastic Edmonton Public Library board, this only made the idea more appealing.

The Christian Science Monitor was one of the international media outlets that covered one of the city's first library innovations.

> This streetcar first went into service on Edmonton's municipally-owned street railway in 1909, and was 'put out to pasture,' or wherever honorably retired streetcars ultimately go, in 1938 after running 897,130 miles. Now this surprised old trolley car has had its seats removed, a new roof and ceiling added, and an excellent lighting system from 40 electrical lamps, and natural wood shelves, five rows high, installed to hold some 2,000 books.
>
> The streetcar is visiting the outlying districts, such as Calder and North Edmonton, once a week, where it is parked on new spur tracks our of the way of regular street-railway traffic from 3 p.m. to 9 p.m. This brings the library service within reach of many families who would not be able to come into town regularly to the two public libraries.
>
> And how this rejuvenated old trolley must pinch itself with surprise and say: "Surely this is none of I!" For inside, the walls are completely filled with shelves containing a well chosen selection of novels, travel, biography, and non-fiction. Nor are the juvenile readers forgotten. A clever arrangement of 'knee-high' sloping shelves have been filled

> with the gay and absorbing illustrated books guaranteed to be of interest to the children of grades 1, 2 and 3.[lxxiii]

Newspapers carried the syndicated stories of the strange city in Western Canada that made a travelling library out of an old streetcar. It inspired library buses, even library burros, in cities around the world. In 1941, when the royal blue and cream streetcar library launched, short features preceded Hollywood films in the theatres. A film crew arrived in Edmonton to shoot a vignette about the street car library for a series called "Unusual Occupations" and the short was soon broadcast around the world.

A former Edmontonian named W.H. Porter, writing from Cairo, Egypt, sent a letter to the library board. "I had a real touch of home last night," he wrote. "I went to the movies and one of the shorts was entitled 'Unusual Occupations' and there on the screen was the library street car rolling down Jasper Avenue and out to the edge of town. Boy! Was I tickled. It didn't last long enough to suit me."[lxxiv]

For a city with a confidence problem, Gourlay and his reimagined Edmonton Public Library was a solution. Suddenly, the city was associated with new-ness, with charming and creative solutions, with youth and vigour and education. It was rare to show up in the international press, and rarer still to appear an innovator.

In his 1941 annual report, Gourlay coolly presented the street car library statistics and began pressing for his ultimate goal: true expansion. "The response to this service is indicated by 1,563 borrowers joining the library and through the circulation of 17,000 books in the first two and a half months of operation. The car has demonstrated the need of extending library facilities within the city. To provide adequate library service, some branch or other agency should be within one mile of every resident."[lxxv]

The world continued to discover and rediscover the street car library, and Gourlay did not let his board or city council forget it. By 1945, the moving library served Calder and North Edmonton, Westglen and Parkdale. The library "continues to get publicity for the City of Edmonton throughout the world in magazines, newspapers and newsreels," Gourlay wrote in his 1945 annual report. "The publicity value of the car to the city has never been fully recognized. It is estimated that 45 million people saw the pictures of the car in the Paramount Short Coloured Feature alone."[lxxvi]

Unlike his predecessor, Gourlay did not resent or fight populism. As long as Edmontonians were reading something — anything — he was happy. The war overseas was often the main topic of conversation in this military town so he tried to facilitate those conversations.

> Naturally the demand for technical books in relation to war time activities is very prominent in these days. Airmen, soldiers, sailors, students at the Youth Training Schools — all want books on navigation, aircraft engines, machine tools, radio, sheet metal work and kindred topics... geography, history, biography.... Although the main trend is toward more serious reading, the library must meet the need for relaxing in troubled times. Others keep themselves well balanced by some hobby or avocation. The requests for something 'humourous' are legion... Through its educational as well as recreational features, we feel that the Public Library is making a direct and valuable contribution to the war effort.[lxxvii]

By the end of the war, popular topics had shifted to reconstruction and rehabilitation, roughing it in the bush, beekeeping and rabbit breeding, housing, the United Nations and strikes. Soon, as a prosperous sort of calm settled over the growing city, these interests shifted to hobbies and houseplants. Of course the library, for Gourlay and his board, for the mayor and city council, and for a growing number of Edmontonians, was not just a place to find books. In a city of ambition and progress, librarians weren't just keepers of books. They were community leaders,

sociologists, producers. When Gourlay arrived he discovered his staff, like their former chief, had loved their jobs without demonstrating a lot of curiosity about the field of library science.

Fresh out of college, as a student and as a librarian, Gourlay encouraged his staff in methods of professional development: tours of libraries in other cities, first. He restarted the defunct Alberta Library Association and served as its president. He published articles for his staff and in library journals — even in *Maclean's* Magazine — in an effort to advance the conversation about libraries in Edmonton, in Alberta, and in Canada. He became the first treasurer of the Canadian Library Association.

Gourlay met senior administrators at McGill University and convinced them to launch a program in Alberta to serve Western Canadian librarians who had not benefitted from a degree in library science. It was called the McGill University Library School Summer Institute and it ran for three weeks in August, 1941. Several of his staff attended and returned full of vigor and new ideas.

In every way, it seemed, the Edmonton Public Library had "found its man."

Writing in 1971, only a few years after the opening of Edmonton's state-of-the-art centennial library, Gourlay's biographer was overwhelmed by both nostalgia and admiration for his subject.

"In retrospect, the 1940s, especially the war years, were the golden age of the Edmonton Public Library," writes James Pilton. "Cultural and recreational facilities were limited in the prairie town that was Edmonton in those days. The public library filled the need to the best of its ability and with its limited financial resources. Both the chief librarian and the library board were especially responsive to the needs and requests of the community."[lxxviii]

Of course, enthusiasm and ambition — coupled with a dose of naivety — could also be dangerous qualities in the prairie town that was Edmonton in those days.

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Hugh Gourlay was not always complimentary toward his staff, particularly those who had not been trained in the latest methods of library science. During the war years, he struggled to find men and women of the right calibre.

"Considerable planning had to be done to be sure that the library could be kept open due to the unusual situation then prevailing when all available help was being absorbed by American firms in the city," he wrote in 1943. "Since the majority of the positions in the library require professional training, and all demand a professional attitude, the problem of securing even part time help became acute."[lxxix]

He spoke often of his struggles to maintain a proper library in conditions of scarcity: human resources, money, even sophistication. The job of making Edmonton more cosmopolitan, it seemed, had fallen to Hugh Gourlay — librarian and civic modernizer. "In spite of carrying on the daily work of the library under these conditions" is a phrase Gourlay repeats, in multiple forms, in his written reports.

Not everyone appreciates a cosmopolitan. Some of the long-time staff, who had been through salary cuts and the Great Depression with Chief Librarian Hill, resented all of the

changes Gourlay brought to the workplace. Not everyone was bursting with new ideas, or felt comfortable in an atmosphere of risk, change, competition, and snide remarks. What had been so terrible, after all, about the quiet and comfortable library of the 1930s?

Still, Gourlay was a curious man. He wanted to know as much as he could about his staff members, and not just the librarians. Shortly after he arrived in Edmonton, Gourlay met the janitor, a man named Nicholas Alexeef. Not every leader, caught up in the business of utterly transforming an institution and the intellectual spirit of the city that surrounds it, has time to develop a relationship with the janitor.

The janitor had joined the library as a permanent staff member in 1928. There is no evidence that anyone had even noticed him until Gourlay arrived eleven years later. Oddly, in a place of stories, few people had asked Alexeef for his story.

He was born in the capital of the Tatar people in Central Russia, Kazan, where the Volga meets the Kazanka River. It's a 1,000-year-old city, unique for a peaceful history between large Christian and Muslim populations. The city was progressive and diverse and relatively autonomous when Alexeef was a boy. He was talented on the violin and his parents had the means to see him trained by a professor from the Paris Conservatory. He was sent away to study and take the examinations at the Petrograd Conservatory. Finally, for one winter he lived with one of the greatest teachers of the century, the Hungarian violinist Leopold Auer, in Saint Petersburg. His career seemed set: he would be one of the greatest musicians of his generation.

One year before he could finish at the conservatory, a Bosnian-Serb student assassinated Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Austria. Soon, like all young Russian men, he was drawn into military service. In 1917, the October Revolution split the army in half. Alexeeff joined the anti-communist, counter-revolutionary White Russian army in Siberia, fighting under Admiral

Alexander Kolchak — the Supreme Ruler of Russia. It was the right side, for Alexeeff, but history was not with him. Kolchak was captured and assassinated by firing squad. Alexeeff fled to Harbin, Manchuria, where his skills as a musician helped him find a position in an opera company.

In 1924, he arrived in Canada and started on his way to Edmonton.[lxxx]

Gourlay was enchanted to discover a violinist and adventurer on staff, someone who had trained with the great Leopold Auer. Auer had taught Jascha Heifetz. He had played at Carnegie Hall. One of Gourlay's plans was to build a music department, to bring the Edmonton Public Library in line with what was happening in New York and San Francisco. This had thrilled some of the librarians on staff, who had an interest in music and hoped to lead the new department. One of them, Evelyn Baker, had also trained as a musician. She had been granted a leave of absence to train further, for two months in Los Angeles, to prepare for a career in music and in music education — that is, the director of the music department of a city library system.

Instead of encouraging Baker, Gourlay sent Alexeeff — the janitor! — on a buying tour of the west coast to begin building a viable music collection for the library.

"There are indications that some members of the staff did not approve of this appointment and perhaps never forgave their chief librarian for having made the recommendation to the library board," writes Pilton.[lxxxi]

Evelyn Baker quit, humiliated. In 1944, Gourlay made things official: Nicholas Alexeeff became director of music at an annual salary of $1,700, a significant raise from what he had made as janitor. Another librarian, the only other person on staff with a degree in library science, Mary Donaldson, also resigned.

The media adored the story of Nicholas Alexeeff, janitor turned music director. He was immediately popular. To help Edmontonians make it through the war in more-or-less jolly and exalted fashion, Alexeeff inaugurated a program called Music at Nine. At nine o'clock on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturday nights, Alexeeff would lead a live or recorded evening of chamber, symphonic, and operatic selections.

Humilation and transformation have a way of leading to resentment — and worse. Rumours about Gourlay slithered from the libraries and through the city.

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In the 1940s, the public library was the people's Google. If they had a question no one nearby could answer, Edmontonians would visit the reference desk downtown or in Strathcona. In 1943, chief librarian Gourlay reported, certain topics of inquiry came up again and again.

> Curing nervous tension.
> Should refugees be admitted to Canada
> Youth in the post-war world
> Diseases and internal parasites of wild animals injurious to man if their flesh is used as food.
> How to cook food to avoid loss of vitamin C and minerals
> The relation of Canada's transportation system to economics
> Dehydration of foods
> Japanese problem in Canada
> Fads and fancies as factors in demand for goods
> How to live off the country up north
> Discovery and development of the sulfa drugs

Will war decimate the middle class
Are Great Britain's colonies essential to her future
Juvenile delinquency and its prevention
Rehabilitation of service men
Recreation for war workers
Problems of a country school teacher
Use of propaganda in wartime
History of social insurance[lxxxii]

The library was useful, but usefulness was not a word Gourlay would have used. Library science was still a new discipline, and its leading academics were not shy about its importance in civic life. One of Gourley's favourite quotations, and one he internalized, was from his mentor at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor: professor C. B. Joeckel.

> In the library the community has a force potent enough to render more good to the populace than any single force or body I know. Unlike the church, it serves people of all creeds; unlike the school, its doors are open to people of all ages; its shelves are open to one and all regardless of race or worldly possessions. It can do more to educate the people, young and old, to help keep a democratic, representative government alive and destroy hates and narrow thoughts more than any other means known.[lxxxiii]

Gourlay was in the life-changing business and in the city-changing business. Every problem could be solved on MacDonald Drive.

Hugh Cameron Gourlay had arrived in Edmonton in 1939 with his wife, Catherine Margaret Fraser and their two sons: Hugh Cameron Jr. and Gordon Fraser. He had solid Ontario roots, international experience, and enough enthusiasm for ten libraries. He was both a golfer and a United Church man, highly acceptable things to be in 1940s Edmonton. The Carnegie Library was conveniently located next to the preferred gathering place of the city's political and financial élite — the Edmonton Club.

"The Edmonton Public Library is not a building filled with musty books, read in an atmosphere bordering on graveyard silence," wrote the *Edmonton Journal* on August 31, 1946. "Under the progressive-minded Hugh C. Gourlay, with Nicholas Alexeeff, director of music, the library is rapidly becoming one of the city's cultural centres."[lxxxiv]

It had been difficult for Edmontonians to accept that Calgary, in its early years, had profited from a more dynamic library and librarian — a man who seemed to capture the city's spirit in the operation of one of its most important institutions. Hill had been a fine and fair manager but he had not been led or challenged the city beyond the borders of the downtown and Strathcona buildings.

Gourlay was different.

He declared, in his 1946 and 1947 annual reports, that they were the most successful years in the history of the Edmonton Public Library: this was a time of hope and expansion. The "university of the people" was doing precisely what he had hoped, and the media were lauding him for it. Study groups, music clubs, schools and colleges and associations used the space and requested speakers from the library. On mild evenings from spring to autumn, the library burst out its doors to deliver musical performances, lectures, debates and story hours on the lawn. Expansion and more partnerships were inevitable, if only there was a way to find more money.

When the new music room at the downtown branch opened in June, 1947, seven hundred people showed up to celebrate. The band of the Northwest Air Command performed on the main floor for the adults while kids watched movies. Following the success of the streetcar library, the Edmonton Transit System agreed to repurpose an old bus as a travelling bookmobile. The librarian was popular on the golf course, in the club, and in the media. In the history of the Edmonton Public Library, the most successful directors have been the ones who have read most

carefully the aspirations of Edmontonians. The dream of the library is the dream of the city, and who better to articulate it? Gourlay, with his knack for media attention, his courage and imagination, aligned the library's development with the development of the city after the Second World War.

On February 13, 1947, a massive oilfield was discovered south of Edmonton. That discovery, Leduc No. 1, had an immediate effect on the city: billions of dollars in new investments and thousands of enterprising young people were on their way to Alberta.

What could go wrong?

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The library suddenly had more ideas and more energy than it could fund. Since the opening ceremonies, in 1913, Hill had politely argued for a fairer funding arrangement. According to the most recent Library Act, from 1922, library boards could request one mill from the municipal tax assessment. While this ensured steady funding, it also ensured steadily meagre funding. It was never enough; the library could not grow with the city. The boards could beg for one-off grants from the provincial government, but they couldn't plan for the future with any feeling of certainty.

As every Albertan knows, economic booms are both exciting and absurd. No government ever seems prepared for a boom or the inevitable bust that follows. In 1947, as more and more people arrived in the city from rural communities, from the rest of Canada and the world, there

weren't enough houses for them. Edmonton didn't even have a full-time city planner and wouldn't have one until 1949.

Gourlay called the newspaper and, as always, they printed his story: "The Edmonton Public Library Board will seek the support of other library boards in the province to obtain minor amendments to the present act passed in 1922 which would allow cities and towns to budget for library expenditures according to the wishes of their governing aldermanic boards."[lxxxv]

The city had reached a certain distinction, by the latter years of the 1940s, as a liberal and lively place, an unlikely cultural centre in the west. Gourlay took credit for much of this, and felt the library deserved a fairer investment. He had already achieved so much on the banks of the North Saskatchewan. If he were to have a free conversation with the mayor and city council, without being bound by the provincial act, he could make the case for more ideas, more progress, more publicity. That is, more money.

His partnership with the Calgary Public Library was only half successful. The province did not trust city governments to make these decisions entirely on their own. The ceiling for library funding would go up to one and a half mills, but not immediately.

Gourlay's needs were immediate, and his pleas were not subtle. "The library had somehow survived a depression and the war years," writes his biographer, James Pulton, "but its future was now in doubt."

In 1948 as in 2013, municipal governments in Alberta have only one stable source of funding. Cities cannot tax income so as their needs expand with the economy all they can do is raise property taxes. Edmonton's housing and infrastructure needs were expanding with the economy and the population, and as chief librarian Gourlay was right to anticipate his own shortages.

The board asked the city for $103,000 in 1948. What actually happened to this request will always be impossible to figure out, but it appeared to Gourlay that city council had only approved $93,000. His budget for books and for binding and repairing current books had been cut from $30,000 to $20,000.[lxxxvi]

Gourlay was a star: young, intelligent, well-spoken, well-connected. In less than ten years he had read the city as well as any book, and he had helped give Edmontonians — ever lacking in confidence — a sense of pride and sophistication. This was an insult and he would not stand for it. He deserved better.

Another director might have requested a private audience with the mayor or key aldermen. He might have schemed with his board to find a solution. This was, historically, how government relations worked in Edmonton. The chief librarian has many roles: lobbyist is among the most sensitive and important of them.

Instead, Gourlay went out into the community that so adored him.

He started with the *Edmonton Journal* in the middle of September, 1948, to set the scene.

"[The] main financial problem confronting the board is that of a fund for purchase of books," a reporter wrote. "The amount of $20,000 for books and binding has been spent. If funds are not obtained, a period of book scarcity will develop during the winter, which is the busiest library season, the officials said."[lxxxvii]

Gourlay was "the officials," the anonymous source in the story. Emboldened, he told his board he needed an extra $15,000 for books — not $10,000. Then, before the next meeting on September 20th, Gourlay contacted the principal of Forest Heights School and one of the best community organizers in the city, Stanley Churchill. Representatives from more than ninety groups, who believed in Gourlay and his plea, came to the meeting. When it was his turn to

speak he said, “About $10,000 for new books is needed immediately, if the supply is to be procured before the winter season... the absolute minimum required for immediate use is $13,000 with an additional $2,000 to operate on.”[lxxxviii]

The board did not make a decision at the meeting. Some board members were incensed that Gourlay would invite or at least tip-off other organizations about the desperate, seemingly life-or-death plea for $15,000. There was a feeling of entitlement and arrogance, to some board members, and they were not prepared to forgive Gourlay for making a private library matter so public. His response, of course, would have been that a public library is public. The $10,000 cut in his book budget would affect every one of the ninety organizations represented that night.

A couple of days later, the library board’s finance committee met. Then they met with Gourlay. They came to some agreement and, together, they revised their official request to the city from the $14,000-$15,000 that had already been published in the *Edmonton Journal* as the precise minimum to... $5,000.

It had been clear enough, to his community supporters and to the readers of the newspaper, that the library needed $15,000. Now, according to the tamed chief librarian, the figure had always been $5,000. Trying to clarify to the press, he said “the $15,000 estimate would have carried beyond the fiscal year.”[lxxxix]

Stanley Churchill, who had organized so much support for Gourlay, felt tricked. “I wish to go on record that I acted in good faith in contacting and calling together the delegation of prominent citizens representing the major organizations of this city, which met the board on Monday, September 20. I believed the librarian’s assessment of library needs to be accurate... This is chaotic.”[xc]

In the political life of a city, there are always controversies. In Edmonton, there were plenty of them. But none of the controversies were library controversies. Front-page newspaper stories about an unfeeling city council gouging the library into ruin, followed up by a bizarre recanting by the head librarian, also in the *Journal*, would not do. The mayor and aldermen were accustomed to unhappy civil servants, who wanted robust budgets. Negotiations, in the coziness and privacy of council chambers, was perfectly fine. Civilized. But ninety community organizations? High-profile media coverage?

Members of the library board and members of city council did what they had to do. They isolated Gourley.

"Alderman Bissett reported that while the board had stated to the press that its 1948 estimates had been sliced by $10,000, this was not so," the *Journal* reported. "He claimed that the board, along with the finance committee had agreed to the budget slice earlier in the year on the understanding that if the library found itself short of funds later, it could ask for more money."[xci]

City council shrugged its collective shoulders, feigned confusion. If the library needs extra money, they ought to ask for it. Properly, of course.

Gourlay, who had done so much to transform the library and build a new sense of self in the city, who had earned the right to a fair budget, now seemed an imbecile. His friends in the Edmonton Club and on the golf course, in the community and in the media, now looked askance at him. The library board, who had been so supportive, were not planning to forgive Gourlay any time soon for his antics. What didn't make the *Journal* story, about relations between city hall and the library, was a stern warning, what James Pilton calls a slap on the wrist: keep your librarian in line, play by the rules.

The most damaging aspect of the story was that it made the Edmonton Public Library, a media sensation and an example of innovation to institutions around the world, seem fragile and mismanaged. In 1948, $10,000 was a lot of money. An immediate budgetary need that was off by $10,000 did not look good. The 1948 version of the Canadian Taxpayers Federation, angry writers of letters to the editor, attacked the library and city council in the press. When there were so many other needs in the booming city, all those grand arguments about education and democracy were torn up and forgotten. If a city institution is off by $10,000, it could easily be off by $50,000 — and who's to say it hasn't been going on for years, this flushing-away of public funds?

Board meetings of the Edmonton Public Library, in the autumn of 1948, were not happy affairs. The great leader of the library revolution was ruined, and in a relatively small town this misery was compounded and echoed by staff who had felt slighted by Gourlay in the past. A new member of the library board, Allan McTavish, knew how to make all of the negative publicity and nasty rumours go away: an official inquiry, an audit. If it seemed the library was being mismanaged, it probably was.

Gourlay, at this time only 45 years old, had a stroke.

Even as the librarian recovered, McTavish called his policies "ridiculous" in the newspaper and questioned his leadership.[xcii] This inspired more letters to the editor, of course. Another board member, who sympathized with Gourlay, defended him in the press, claiming the numbers show that "on a per-book-put-out, the Edmonton Public Library was operating on a more economical basis than any other in Canada."[xciii]

It would take a lot more than that to change the narrative of Hugh Cameron Gourlay's management of the Edmonton Public Library. Annie Joyce, who ran the library as Gourlay

recovered, asked the city commissioner to sell a car, quietly and cheaply, to her chief — to help speed up his recovery. He was under the care of the Baker Clinic in February, March, April and May. The board paid his salary until the end of May and then cut it in half, until his return.

"Those who knew him say that Hugh Gourley never fully recovered his health," writes James Pilton. "During the remaining five years that he was chief librarian, the going appears to have been up-hill all the way for him. His absences from the library were frequent."[xciv]

Gourlay did return to his post. As it had been ten years ago, at the start of the war, the city was at the beginning of a moment of dramatic transformation. Gourlay had neither the confidence nor the imaginative power to be a part of it. His great achievements, in his last few years as director, include launching the Bookmobile fleet of under-utilized buses. The city was tearing up and paving over its streetcar tracks and, at the same time, the city was expanding beyond the limits of the streetcars. Between 1948 and 1958, the population of the city would double — from 126,000 to 252,000.[xcv] Two libraries were not enough. Gourlay's last great appearance in the media would be for the opening of the first branch library, Sprucewood, in 1953. But by this time, his leadership of the library system was overshadowed by the most dynamic, strangest mayor in Edmonton's history.

All the verve was sucked out of his writing style in the annual reports and his participation in library board meetings, once aggressively positive, a burst of new initiatives, went dull and silent. Media coverage of the library changed from ideas to photo ops of retirements and lists of new book arrivals. One of his former staff members, the head of the circulation department who had resigned under Gourlay's leadership, was invited to join the board in 1951 — another humiliation and a sign of his diminished power. Two years later his

greatest friend Nicholas Alexeeff, janitor turned music director, left the library and the city for a post in San Francisco.[xcvi]

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Shortly after chief librarian Hugh Cameron Gourlay returned to work, another man entered the public service in Edmonton. William Hawrelak — call him Bill — tried for his second time for a seat on city council.

On November 2, 1949, he became an alderman.

Hawrelak had grown up northeast of the city, near Smoky Lake, where hundreds of other Ukrainian immigrants had set up farms. His father, Wasyl Hawrelak, had expected his son Bill would take over the farm and that one day his grandchildren would inherit the land. But Bill was, at heart, a city boy. After high school, in the late 1930s, he had written letters to politicians and bureaucrats until one day he was rewarded with a job offer at the liquor control board in Edmonton. He started behind the counter and moved into the accounting department. And he might have remained a lifelong bureaucrat if his father had not developed a heart condition during the Depression. Hawrelak went back to the family farm.

Even on the farm he wasn't much of a farmer. Pearl, his wife, wasn't remotely interested in Ukrainian country life. He organized the Alberta Farmer's Union in the district, served as a school trustee and, during the war, sold bonds.[xcvii] The war ended and the Hawrelaks decided to rent out the farm. They borrowed a truck, loaded it with everything they owned, and in November 1945 found a little house a few doors from where I live today, on 86th Avenue east of 99th Street.[xcviii] They put a $1,500 down payment on it. There was one bedroom for them and another for their seven-year-old daughter Jeannette.

At the time, Ukrainian-Canadians remained exotic figures. They weren't political material. Hawrelak wasn't deterred. He bought a large share of Prairie Rose Manufacturing, a soft drink company that bottled Orange Crush in the city. He was an unusually active community league president, lobbying successfully for garbage collection and sewer lines. Politics came naturally to him, and his neighbours noticed. They urged him to run for council. He did, and failed. He did again, and this time he succeeded.[xcix]

In 1949, Hawrelak was 34.

There was a housing shortage in Edmonton. The oil strike in Leduc had opened the city to the world, and Hawrelak represented a brash new generation of hustlers — many of them with unpronounceable names — showing up to build new lives. The Edmonton Public Library helped them integrate. Certain phrases smell old fashioned in the annual reports of this period, between 1949 and 1955, as a chastened Hugh Gourlay tried to adapt to a city in the midst of startling growth. But one phrase, a generous one, repeats itself throughout the board minutes and the annual reports: New Canadians.

Not foreigners but New Canadians. They didn't often understand how a library worked. They were awkward and occasionally impolite. Many of them couldn't speak English. But the

library published with pride the number of people they had helped from around the world: Europe mostly but also Asia, Africa and the Middle East.

It's unclear whether Hawrelak had a genuine interest in libraries or if he was just constantly on the hunt for more supporters, more photo opportunities. New Canadians, after all, were voters-in-training, and if they spent time at the library he would spend time at the library. Edmonton had never seen a politician like him: he was loud, he was shameless, he was a populist and an elitist at once — transitioning quickly out of his little house in Mill Creek into a big house in Windsor Park west of the University of Alberta.

By the time he ran for mayor in 1951, he had become one of the most famous men in the city. In a pattern that would continue for the rest of his political and business careers, which were linked in unsavoury ways, Edmontonians either loved him or hated him. He was impossible to ignore.

"In some parts of Canada, his name would have been against him," said a Calgary editorial writer after Hawrelak had been elected mayor. "But in fast-growing, forward-looking and progressive Edmonton all that mattered was his ability."[c]

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Since the early 1940s, Hugh Gourley, board members, and library staff had been begging — with statistics, quotations from the learned, and nods toward Calgary — for expansion. Every

Edmonton family deserved a library "within one mile" of its house and Edmonton, a city of communities, was falling behind. New subdivisions were spreading in every direction by the early 1950s and the public transit system couldn't keep up.

How could a child living in the far south or the far north participate in the library?

Gourlay was no longer an effective advocate. He was too humiliated to walk down MacDonald Drive to the *Edmonton Journal* or to speak forcefully and poetically in front of city council. The board was not as connected to the animated new mayor, the thirty-something Bill Hawrelak. As an alderman, his interests had been difficult to sum up. He had worked with the federal government to bring a Trans-Canada highway through the city. Yet he had also served, while in office, as director of the Federation of Edmonton Community Leagues.

Economic booms are thrilling. If we're not prepared for them, they're also astonishingly ugly and expensive. In the early 1950s, there was so much infrastructure to create — roads and bridges and sewer and power — the city found it couldn't keep up. Property developers were becoming immensely wealthy; Hawrelak himself, who had moved from soft drinks into real estate, was already rich.

Edmonton was going broke. In 1952, the city had the highest per-capita debt in the country.[ci]

Pressing for new branches was not going to be a simple affair. In 1947, before his error and fall, a confident and popular Hugh Gourlay had created a comprehensive list of branch libraries to build all over what we now know as Central Edmonton: from Bonnie Doon to King Edward Park and Garneau on the southside to Calder, Westmount, and Glenora in the north. At the time, mayor Harry Ainley was on the board and encouraged the chief librarian.

Pressing for a new branch in 1952 was something else altogether. The city didn't have a spare nickel but its communities, growing exponentially, needed services. Hawrelak and much of city council at the time were susceptible to certain kinds of arguments, despite their inability to fund projects. Did Edmontonians want their city to be great? Yes. What do all great cities have? Libraries. What is the best way to integrate new Canadians and civilize the wild youth? Books and reading.

Oh and how many libraries did Calgary have, by the early 1950s? Five, with another one set to open in 1954.

The plan had always been to build new branch libraries. No other building is quite like it, with its need for open space and an atmosphere of meditation. Except, perhaps, a church. Edmonton's post-war movement away from places of worship was well underway, and though it wasn't ideally located in the centre of the neighbourhood the board found a compromise on Alberta Avenue.

St. Alphonsus church, on 118th Avenue and 85th Street, had more space than the parish needed at the time. The library board decided, in the spring of 1953, to inspect the building. They imagined a space without pews: solid, one-storey, natural light. They took over the lease of a portion of the church in June and set to work renovating and redecorating. They bought what they had to buy and borrowed shelves and books from the Carnegie building downtown and the Strathcona branch.

Four months later, the first non-locomotive extension of the Edmonton Public Library — the Sprucewood Branch — opened with a big community party. Mayor Hawrelak, who had approved the project, showed up for the photos and the handshakes. It was a mild October day

and hundreds of people from the neighbourhood walked through the building and signed up for library cards.

The process from taking over the lease to opening the library was so short, and funds were so difficult to find, that the actual stock of books and periodicals was meagre. For the first few months there were severe restrictions on borrowing. The busy core of the Sprucewood Branch, in its first months and in its early years, was the children's department. The reference librarians, without a lot of material for adults, became a community hub for helping kids with their homework.

Today, walk east from the Stanley A. Milner library, past the Citadel Theatre and Canada Place. On your left, the Winspear Centre — where the ghosts of the Civic Building and therefore the Edmonton Public Library still hover. Eventually a tram will run down this stretch of pavement, 102nd Avenue, harkening back to the days of the streetcar library. Walk past the lions and under the ornate Harbin Gate, one of the finest pieces of street decoration in the city. Here we enter the third largest Chinatown in Canada, or at least what remains of it.

The original borders of Edmonton's Chinatown were closer to the library, but it was destroyed to create Canada Place. The community was founded by the railway workers who arrived in Canada in the 19th Century and endured years of racism and underemployment before becoming part of the city's leadership class. This same community invested nearly $100 million in Chinatown after Canada Place was built. Today, many of these same people are disappointed that a tram will run through the middle of it, in front of the Seniors' Centre on 102nd Avenue and 96th Street.[cii]

Today, what remains of Chinatown is haunted by more contemporary ghosts: the east side of downtown Edmonton, one of the city's most historic neighbourhood, is full of gravel

parking lots, filthy taverns, and empty buildings. Now that almost all of its historical bones have been knocked down and carted away, it is one of the saddest and most desolate corners in Edmonton. The Hung Fung Athletic Club, next to the old and unloved Mount Royal Hotel, doesn't have a chance to be anything but sad, dusty, and dangerous. And everyone knows it. The Quarters, a master-planned solution to the problem, is a mixture of expensive and affordable housing, retail strips and parks, hotels and arts habitats.

Moving north past the police station, a concrete bunker, and past more parking lots and a few brick warehouses that demand to be repurposed, we move through the inner city of Edmonton's inner city. Here, a bright agency called the Bissell Centre does what it has been doing since 1910, three years before the two branches of the Edmonton Public Library opened: it helps people who need help.

It started as All People's Mission, by Reverend William Pike and his wife Florence. A few thousand "New Canadians," most of them Ukrainian, had landed poorly in Edmonton's inner city. The Methodist mission helped integrate them for twenty years, until the Great Depression hit. By this time, New Canadians were from all over the world and old Canadians, too, were in desperate need. The Methodists had merged into the United Church and the outreach mission moved into a new building here in 1936. The mission was renamed the Bissell Institute, after founding philanthropist Torrence Edward Bissell. Today its simple vision in this community and the city that surrounds it is to eliminate poverty.

The Boyle McCauley neighbourhood, to the north, is in the midst of transformation from one of the poorest in the city to one of the most hopeful. Young families are buying up historic homes at low prices and fixing them up. Old churches are shining. The Edmonton Homeless Commission, implementing a bold plan to put thousands of people in housing, has been more

successful than its original targets. All three levels of government team up with agencies and businesses to bring food, accommodation, and dignity to all Edmontonians. One of these partners is the Edmonton Public Library — providing computers, education and, of course, books.

Moving north we pass through immigration movements past and present, from Italian and Eastern European to Vietnamese and, more recently, some of the city's newest citizens from East Africa. Ethiopian and Eritrean restaurants and Halal meat shops co-exist with Vietnamese storefronts, old Eastern Orthodox churches and Little Italy.

Stop at one of the best pizza parlours in town, Tony's, on 111th Avenue and continue north through lovely Norwood. Architecturally, it is one of the best-preserved neighbourhoods in Edmonton. In its era, sameness and blandness were not mandated by property developers and city regulators. Craftsman and California bungalows sit next to barn-like houses infused with Dutch colonial influence or even Spanish revival. Mature elm trees line the boulevards. For many years these beautiful Norwood homes were either neglected or ruined by bizarre updates from the seventies and eighties. Today, the neighbourhood is reclaiming its grandeur as a family paradise twenty minutes — on foot — from the core of downtown.

My grandfather and grandmother, who so loved the Carnegie Library, moved to what was then the western suburbs — Rio Terrace — in the late-1950s. I could hear the Fort Edmonton steam train from across the river, while I played in their backyard. But my grandparents lived for most of their young adulthood in Norwood, north of 111th Avenue. The black-and-white photos of my mother as a child, before a white American foursquare house, rarely involved books. But her local library was a few blocks north on Alberta Avenue, 118th, first in an annex of St. Alphonsus Church.

Alberta Avenue was once a vibrant main street, with a frontier spirit. Small businesses lined the avenue: supermarkets and hairdressers, theatres, restaurants and cafés, shoe and clothing stores.

“Back in the 1930s, Alberta Avenue was a bit like Whyte Avenue is today," says Tony Cashman. "Athletic clubs were set up to keep young men away from a life of crime, and the Maple Leaf Athletic Club sort of defined Alberta Avenue. In the winter, the community rink was one of the social centres of town. It was very lively, full of young people. Skating was a great way to make yourself an introduction.”[ciii]

The neighbourhood was a social centre in the city. Jazz star and future senator Tommy Banks would play The Paddock, a horse-themed club, in the early 1960s. But by then, families had already started moving out to the bigger houses of the inner suburbs in the late 1950s and 1960s, and the neighbourhood began to decay. The latter years of the twentieth century were devastating for Alberta Avenue: the area gained a reputation for being poor and dangerous. It became one of the city’s drug-and-prostitution playgrounds.

Some families and businesses never gave up on the neighbourhood, and quiet pockets of dignity and beauty remained north and south of Alberta Avenue. The City of Edmonton, without any real consideration of the soul and history of the area, called it “Avenue of Champions” and affixed sports cut-outs to light standards. It did lead to the hockey arena on 75th Street — Wayne Gretzky Boulevard — but this seemed the thinnest of strategies. Avenue of Champions, much like City of Champions, didn’t have any lasting resonance.

In the last few years of the 1990s and into the 2000s, artists seeking bargains began moving into the Alberta Avenue neighbourhoods. They started calling it Alberta Avenue again.

Some bright, unstoppable men and women, led by theatre artist and community organizer Christy Morin thought culture — rather than nostalgia for the Oilers good years — might be a better strategy.

In 2006, she launched Arts on the Ave, a modest first step. The new mayor, Stephen Mandel, heartily approved of arts-based revitalization. By the end of the decade, thanks to Morin and her team of volunteers and entrepreneurs, Alberta Avenue was an exciting intersection of ethnic grocers and restaurants, theatre companies, new developments like the Nina Haggerty Centre for the Arts, and a community café called The Carrot. There is a quotation on the wall by Paul Cézanne: "The day is coming when a single carrot, freshly observed, will set off a revolution."

Today, Arts on the Ave runs several arts-related festivals all year, including Deep Freeze in the winter and the Kaleido Family Arts Festival in the fall. By the summer of 2012, Kaleido was enormous. During the Fringe Theatre Festival every August, the neighbourhood hosts a mini-Fringe of its own, with two or three venues including the historic Avenue Theatre.

St. Alphonsus, with its maroon brick and blue doors, is a community hub. It's the street-facing property in front of a park and a community hall, and an ideal location for Sprucewood Library even thought the quarters were cramped and purpose-built for a small chapel. Thousands of kids moved through it, to borrow a book or to find the right dates for First and Second World War battles, the founding of Canada.

The Sprucewood Branch would not be in an annex of St. Alphonsus for long. Five years after the grand opening, on another mild day in October, a purpose-built single-storey Sprucewood Library would open on 95th Street a few blocks south of Alberta Avenue, on a

corner lot. It was opened with a dedication tea sponsored by the East End Businessman's Association. Today the branch is a five-minute walk from The Carrot Community Arts Coffeehouse and its spiritual sister: The Carrot has a bookshelf of its own, full of paperbacks and games.

On a rainy Saturday in 2012, the Sprucewood Branch was full of parents and children from the neighbourhood. There is an aboriginal section, to reflect one of Alberta Avenue's dominant communities. For years, this has also been a destination for new immigrants. It's reflected in the streetfronts, from the Ethiopian and Eritrean café to Paraiso Tropical, one of the city's best Latin American groceries. It's also reflected on the shelves of the library and in its clientele on a Saturday: books in Somali and Portuguese, Arabic and Russian and Spanish and Chinese.

"Libraries do a lot for the city and they've changed a lot, in the way we think of them," says Edmonton's three-term mayor Stephen Mandel. "Today it's a community centre. New immigrants learn to read in their own language, in English, and they learn about our culture. Kids get used to the look and feel of books. We're a city of immigrants and the Edmonton Public Library plays an incredible role in integrating new Canadians. We want them to be comfortable here, to feel welcome. A big recreation centre, imagine: that can be confusing to someone from another country, another part of the world. No one is intimidated by a library."[civ]

Sprucewood Library, on a grey and wet day, feels like an extension of Alberta Avenue's living room — The Carrot only quieter, and without the smell of coffee. It was renovated and updated in 2004, and feels today like a careful negotiation of past and present.

Back in 1953, when this neighbourhood first opened a library, director Hugh Gourlay helped choose the site and, to the best of his abilities, he helped start operations at the Sprucewood Branch. The board signed a three-year lease with St. Alphonsus and put up a sign. There weren't many books or other resources to fill the space, and no hope of them coming any time soon. The library, in the early 1950s, lacked a full-time advocate. Gourlay missed a lot of work for health reasons and, it seems, a lack of energy and affection for what had seemed his grandest ambition: to build a vibrant culture in the city using the library has its foundation. One spectacularly humiliating autumn had stretched into six years of cautious leadership. If not for the board and for a sympathetic mayor, Sprucewood likely would not have happened and the second extension, into the growing west of the city, would have stalled as well.

"It must have been discouraging for Hugh Gourlay to look at the book collection and realize that for lack of funds, it could be described as worn-out and obsolete, exactly as he had found it when he had arrived fifteen years before."[cv]

In an emergency meeting on New Year's Eve, 1955, the board of the Edmonton Public Library board met to receive what many Edmontonians had been expecting for years: a letter of resignation from Hugh Cameron Gourlay.

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Ethel Sylvia Wilson was in her fiftieth year when she ran for city council in Edmonton. To support her three children she had found work as a seamstress after her husband died in the

middle of the Depression. In the 1950s, gaining a seat on city council did not mean quitting your job. After her election in 1952, Wilson was both an Alderman and a seamstress. Like a lot of Edmontonians, her roots were rural. She was a tough woman who spoke the truth as she saw it, and entered politics through the labour movement. Mayor William Hawrelak, the young mayor approved by a coalition of business leaders called the Citizens Committee and therefore no blushing fan of the labour movement, would come to trust Alderman Wilson like no one else on city council: she never said a word to please him.

In 1955, when the second director of the Edmonton Public Library retired, Wilson was the city council representative on the board, and the chair. Applications came in from across Canada and the United States. Wilson was sent out to screen candidates and create a shortlist. In Detroit she met a Canadian PhD, then working in the United States, and another candidate: a young man who had spent most of his time in university libraries.

"I was working at the military library in Alabama," says Morton Coburn. "Being a northerner, I wasn't particularly interested in staying much longer in the south at that time. When I saw the advertisement for the job in Edmonton I thought, 'Why not?'"

Coburn was born and raised in Chicago, so cold weather wasn't a deterrent. Something about the northern character appealed to him. He was certainly not of an overly sensitive character. He had graduated from a prestigious high school in 1941, the Lane Technical Institute; it has produced more PhDs than any other school in the United States. In 1942, after some work for the military, he was drafted. Coburn went to Camp Stewart in Georgia, where he was chosen to train on the Bofors anti-aircraft gun. Before the end of the year, he and his unit were shipped to Australia. His role, for the rest of the war, was to guard American airfields in New Guinea and

in the Philippines. Just before he was set to ship out for the invasion of Japan, the atomic bombs brought his military career to an end.

With his twin brother, Coburn enrolled in the University of Illinois. He brought malaria with him, and he often suffered attacks as he worked his way to a Masters in Librarianship. He worked in university libraries in Kansas and Ohio before finding a job in Alabama. He was 34 when he met Ethel Wilson in Detroit for an interview.

"Something happened between us, I guess," he says. "We had a long and wonderful discussion about libraries and about Edmonton, and I remembered her saying, 'Mr. Coburn I believe we will continue this conversation.'"

The board of trustees invited Coburn to Edmonton, for a fuller interview. After the conversation, Wilson asked him to wait outside after the interview. Coburn found it unsettling and strange, to be asked to wait outside the door as they discussed him. A few minutes later, they opened the door.

"'You are the new librarian,' they said. And I was thrilled."

Today, Coburn lives in an apartment on Canal Street, in the South Loop neighbourhood of his hometown, Chicago. His birthday is December 28 and his birth year is 1921, making him the oldest full-time librarian in the United States. He is director of library building programs with Chicago Public Libraries, a job he has held for over thirty-eight years. Everything he knows about building libraries he learned in Edmonton, where as a young man he built a pile of them.

Late in the summer of 1956 he arrived, not long after rock and roll arrived in Edmonton. I asked him about first impressions. Coburn paused, careful not to offend me. I begged him to be honest.

"Well, I remember looking at that tiny Carnegie library on the hill, where my office would be, and I thought: 'If my friends could see me now they would think I am a failure.'"

He was young for the job and only somewhat experienced in administration. He says, in the mid-1950s, the library world — like the political world — was managed in the east. Almost no one, educated as a librarian in Montreal or Toronto or New York, would have seen Western Canada as a destination.

"For me, I loved it. The city was wide open. It was a chance for me to see what I could do, as an administrator, and to build. To build something. That's what I really wanted to do."

When I look at photographs of the Carnegie Library on that gentle circle on MacDonald Drive I am stricken with romantic notions. I see my grandparents all dressed up, and beams of sunlight passing through the columns, the dark wood and ornamental windows, the chandeliers, the limestone and marble.

In 1956, Coburn saw only littleness and inefficiency.

Tony Cashman, who is about the same age, remembers the arrival of Morton Coburn as something altogether novel in Edmonton.

"Mort brought a new way of thinking with him from Chicago," says Cashman. "He was a new age librarian. He had these very sad expressions. He used to call the library at the top of the hill 'Tragic.' Tragic was his favourite word! He had all kinds of sad adjectives. He was often before city council. City Council in those days operated as a board of directors, so it was not a full-time job. Everybody thought the library was fine but Mort was new age."[cvi]

There is, even in Cashman's remembrance of librarian Coburn this vague feeling that he was an outsider who didn't really understand Edmonton or its culture. But when I spoke to

Coburn, a 91-year-old man with an ironic sense of humour and a fighting spirit, his summing-up of the city was similar to what I have always thought.

Edmonton is wide open. Edmonton is a place for builders.

The former director, Hugh Gourlay, was both respected and despised by the time Coburn arrived in Edmonton. His glory years, when the streetcar library was a sensation, were well-remembered. But the unionized staff, much of the board, and the *Edmonton Journal* were critical. The dinner party circuit, in the mid-1950s, were not kind to librarian Gourlay. They were glad to see this young man from Chicago — or so it seemed.

"What happened to Gourlay is the trustees took against him at some point," says Coburn. "He had his supporters and then, for whatever reason, he lost them. When that happens, you're finished. Members of the staff start talking to the trustees, behind your back. Your job, at that point, is finished."[cvii]

Coburn doesn't dispute the core of Cashman's criticism: he did not think the Carnegie library at the top of the hill was big enough or modern enough for a city with a population of a quarter of a million people in the late 1950s. In his first memos and presentations to the board, and in his first annual report, he had three main goals: to reorganize the administration of a growing library system, to create branches, and to design a new, modern library in downtown Edmonton.

The bookmobiles were doing an admirable job of extending library services to those communities without ready access to downtown, Strathcona, or the small Sprucewood branch in St. Alphonsus Church. Old buses had been retired and the city had retained the services of the Wells Corporation, a car manufacturer in Windsor, to put together purpose-built bookmobiles. Even so, Edmonton clearly needed new libraries.

The Woodcroft Branch in the new west end, which had been planned before Coburn's arrival, opened in 1956 at 134th Street and 114th Avenue. It was a classic modernist design: a rectangular one-and-a-half storeys with large windows in the front. The adult library was on the main floor and the children's library was upstairs. As much as the Sprucewood Branch expanded the reach of the library, the space was so small and so ill-fitted for the demands of a library that 1956 — the year of Coburn's arrival — was really year one for the spirit of expansion that would see seven branch libraries before Edmonton's centennial project — a new downtown library and the fulfillment of Coburn's dream — opened in 1967.

Another one of Coburn's projects, and one that would devil him, was to realize another one of the previous director's goals. Gourlay wanted to build branches but lacked the political savvy and the support of his board. From his first annual report, in 1939, Gourlay had tried to imagine a way to professionalize his staff.

Coburn had the support of Alderman Wilson and he always would. In 1959, she ran as a Social Credit candidate in the Alberta election and won a seat in Edmonton North. Now she was, at the same time, an MLA, an alderman, library board member, and a seamstress; it wasn't until 1962, when Premier Ernest Manning made her the second woman cabinet minister in the history of Alberta, that Wilson gave up the seamstress gig.

Thanks to Wilson, Coburn also had the support of Mayor Hawrelak. In the 1950s and, oddly, for much of his strange political career, Hawrelak was able to achieve many of his ambitions in Edmonton. Depending on your memory and your politics, this was either through charm and skill or graft and nepotism. For the library director, little of this mattered as long as they mayor supported you. And Mayor Hawrelak supported Coburn.

New libraries meant new librarians, and they were hard to find. In the late 1950s, departments of library science were rare in Canada's universities and utterly scarce in the west. The first school to offer any sort of program was the University of British Columbia in 1961.

"I'm sure I was hired because they were having trouble finding anyone else," says Coburn. "Back then, there were so few librarians in the west and no real way to lure them out here. They said about me, 'Oh, Coburn, he doesn't like librarians' and 'He doesn't believe in a professional staff,' because we had devised a training program for people who had no formal training. But it wasn't that. It wasn't that at all! We were expanding the system and I needed staff. If I could have lured people from the east to come out to this isolated place in the west I certainly would have. But I couldn't!"[cviii]

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Librarians were rare commodities in the late 1950s. The economic expansion demanded researchers: corporations needed librarians, law practices needed them, all three layers of government wanted librarians. With a handful of graduates coming out of Canadian library science programs every year, the promise of luring a bright young man or woman from Toronto or Montreal to an actual library on the west side of Edmonton was somewhere in the range of faint to non-existent.

One fall day, director Morton Coburn walked on to the University of Alberta campus for the first time to meet Bruce Peel, who had become the school's chief librarian in 1955. Peel was

an early version of what is today a growing breed in the west: men and women who resist the urge to live in a mega-metropolis because they have fallen in love with this strange place. As a librarian, scholar, and bibliographer, Peel's great ambition was to inspire more literature about Edmonton and the west — particularly the prairies.

Coburn stood in front of what was then the central library on campus. It was a miniature version of a library he knew well, from his home state: the one at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Peel confirmed it: his predecessor had been an admirer of that library but had been unable to secure the funds to build an exact replica. So they had just made it a little bit smaller.

Like Coburn, Peel was devoted to building a cadre of librarians in the west. In the 1950s, "[p]rairie students were recruited and sent elsewhere for professional education, only to be lured by the libraries and 'fleshpots' of the East."[cix]

Coburn and Peel were immediate friends and allies. The first library school in Western Canada opened in 1961, at the University of British Columbia. It was closer to home for young people in the prairie provinces, keen to train as librarians. Unfortunately, spending time in Vancouver was somewhat detrimental to library systems that desperately needed them in Edmonton and Calgary, Regina and Saskatoon, and Winnipeg. By the time they were ready to graduate from UBC, they refused to leave the ocean. Those who did come were, Coburn says, problematic.

"They arrived in Edmonton because their husbands had taken positions in our city. Some of our B.C. librarians turned out to be rather serious problems."[cx]

Aleta Vikse, who had served as interim librarian in between the departure of Hugh Gourlay and the arrival of Morton Coburn, had done a marvelous job of creating a sense of

family among the librarians. With a third librarian, James Pilton — who would eventually write a short biography of Hugh Gourlay — Coburn and Vikse devised a training program for Edmontonians without formal library education.

It was rigorous and potentially brutal.

"We were given an opportunity to hire staff on a three-month probation period," says Coburn. "Recruits were brought through an intensive program of learning how to handle library jobs of various kinds. We usually sought applicants who had university backgrounds or held advanced positions in private industry. Written tests and evaluations by their peers either brought their stay with us to an end, or they were taken on the permanent staff."

This strategy worked, for a while, but it wouldn't work forever. Coburn, new to town, was developing a false reputation as someone who didn't value library science degrees.

"Oh that isn't true at all," says Heather-Belle Dowling, an Edmonton girl who received a $250 scholarship to attend McGill University in Montreal as long as she promised to come back for at least two years. "He was a true librarian and a fine manager. For my part, it was easy: I had fully intended to come back and work at the Edmonton Public Library. I was so fond of that Carnegie building and genuinely loved working there."[cxi]

Not everyone was as devoted to the city as Dowling. And the library wasn't downsizing. The only long-term solution, according to Edmontonians and their colleagues across the prairies was to establish another library school. "The question was where. Winnipeg, Saskatoon, and Edmonton were all interested contenders."[cxii]

It may have been a rigged process, but the committee to find a solution to this problem was chaired by Morton Coburn. Bruce Peel represented U of A. Coburn wrote a report and presented it to the presidents of the western universities. "The brief indicated the extent of, and

anticipated need for professional librarians in the area, and evaluated the relative merits of the cities of Edmonton, Saskatoon and Winnipeg as 'library bases' for the projected school."[cxiii]

The presidents chose Edmonton. It took some time to get it running, as even then the processes of approval and government funding were labyrinthine. The campus was designated in 1965 and the first intake for the Bachelor of Library Science was in 1968.

It would take some time to get there. Coburn was poetic on the subject in his opening remarks for the 1963 annual report.

> It is sometimes said that there are no more frontiers and that the day of the pioneer is over. It isn't true. The librarians and their assistants who keep the doors of the libraries on the Canadian prairies open are pioneers in every sense of the word, just as were the earlier arrivals who crossed in Red River carts. It requires courage and dedication to labour far beyond one's pay cheque simply because of the knowledge that the job is important and that one is building something good. The story is the same in every prairie province; the burden is heavy and too few are available to carry it.
> One of the facts of life is that not everyone is constituted to break new ground, to be a pioneer or a missionary. Perhaps to many, because of economic necessity, the dollar sign is of greatest importance. The emergency situation that exists in almost every prairie library can be resolved only if premium salaries are offered to lure librarians here from what they may consider more favourable geographical and intellectual climates, and to retain those that we already have who may be looking with longing toward the bright lights of Toronto, Montreal, or New York.[cxiv]

It would take a few years to realize Coburn's dream of a legitimate, made-in-the-prairies training system. In the meantime, there were more capital projects to consider.

For the moment, Coburn and the library board had the attention of Edmonton's mayor and aldermen. The occasionally ridiculous William Hawrelak years brought division and rancor, but they also came with a spirit of ambition.

There were now two branches apart from the founding libraries, in Sprucewood and Woodcroft. In the twenty years after the oil discovery in Leduc in 1947, the city's population and

its land mass would more than double. More fundamentally, Edmontonians were in the midst of changing the way they lived their lives. The Sprucewood Branch, first in the church on Alberta Avenue and then on a corner lot in an old residential neighbourhood, spoke of pre-war living: main streets and pedestrian-oriented development. Woodcroft, when it opened in 1956, represented the future.

An economy based on oil and gas, when prices are rising, is a glorious thing. From entry-level workers to chief executive officers, everyone is making more money than they would in a regular city. There is, always, the threat of a bust at any time. But the particular psychology of a petroleum economy is magical: we live for the moment.

And, in 1956, Edmontonians were living in a moment of consumption.

The city's first shopping mall, Westmount Shoppers' Park, opened in August, 1955. Looking back, this was probably the most fundamental before-and-after project in Edmonton's history. It was explosively successful, with major brands like Kresge's and Woodward's anchoring another forty shops.

"Young families needed new appliances," writes historian Lawrence Herzog, "washers, driers, electric refrigerators, gas stoves and furniture. Land was plentiful and cheap and Westmount was the right idea at the right time. Huge newspaper ads proclaimed the new shopping complex as another first in Edmonton's phenomenal march of progress."[cxv]

Before the war, Edmontonians would walk to their main street to purchase their food, appliances, and clothing. They consulted their local shopkeepers; they knew each other's names. After the war, gas was cheap and cars were suddenly affordable for just about everyone. Edmonton wasn't hemmed in by mountains or water. It could go on forever. The magic of Westmount was simple and delicious: three thousand parking stalls.

Members of the library board understood instinctively that if they wanted to capture Edmontonians, if they wanted citizens to mix a bit of reading into all of that buying, there was really only one place to build a library: in or very near a shopping mall.

Like the two previous directors, Coburn emphasized in his presentations to council the vital role of libraries in a democracy. With new immigrants arriving daily, from around the world, a strong city-wide library system was the smoothest way to integrate them into Edmonton and Canada. It seemed the quickest and smoothest transformation, for new Canadians, was from people who didn't understand malls to people who spent as much time as possible in malls. Building new libraries deep into neighbourhoods, where parking is scarce, made no sense after 1955.

Today, Edmonton is in the midst of becoming a hybrid. In the inner-city, families are choosing to live the way we lived before the grand opening of Westmount Shoppers' Park. Downtown, the city is tearing up Jasper Avenue to widen the sidewalks. This will make outdoor, street-level shopping and recreation more comfortable and more fun. West of 109th Street, condominium towers and inner-city redevelopments like Railtown and Oliver Square are helping to create pockets of pedestrian-driven life. On the west side of 124th Street, the last main street and one of the borders of old Edmonton, we enter car city. Westmount Centre, the evolution of Shoppers' Park, is on the other side of several subdivisions: the mansions and glories of Glenora, the boulevards of North Glenora and Westmount itself. While this had once seemed the outer limits of suburban Edmonton, today Westmount counts as mature — part of the city's core.

The Woodcroft Library is at 13420-114th Avenue, across the street from the north parking lot of Westmount Centre. It has always been at this location, though the actual building has changed. In the 1990s, the library board decided the 1950s structure no longer worked. It had

to come down. Since they were destroying the place, they decided to look at three options: remain in the current location, give up on compromise and go right inside the mall, or attach the library to the Edmonton Space and Science Centre down the road. Of the three options, the cheapest was to re-locate to the Space and Science Centre; a private donor had expressed an interest in supporting the project financially if it were moved there. Apart from an expanded Woodcroft library, this building would include a special science-themed room as well. It fit with a long-held philosophy, to create multi-use facilities that serve a number of functions rather than stand-alone buildings.

Brian Mason, then a city councillor and a board member, said in October, 1996, that the city was in danger of abandoning the actual point of a library if it moved to a science centre. "We need to be careful that, in our search for innovation, we don't lose sight of the fundamentals," he told the *Edmonton Journal*.[cxvi]

Of course, whether a library attaches itself to a shopping mall or a science centre, the fundamentals are another conversation altogether. The members of the board had already decided that the 1950s rectangle no longer served its citizens. In the end, they chose to listen to the citizens.

Some people were excited by the idea of a library at a science centre, the potential for packaged activities. And it wasn't so far away from the original site: across a vast field surrounding a school and a swimming pool. Statistics showed a well over forty percent of Woodcroft library users, in the 1990s, either walked or used public transit to get there. Moving farther away from them, over a park or down the freeway, was not popular in the community.

In January 1997 the board voted to build a new building at the original location. An *Edmonton Journal* editorial praised them for it. Library users in Westmount had "rightly pointed

out to the Edmonton Public Library board that whatever the advantages of moving the library branch to the Edmonton Space and Science Centre, they were outweighed by the less-convenient location... Getting a science library is not worth the price of alienating patrons of the Woodcroft branch."[cxvii]

The grand opening was at the end of June, 1998. Mayor Bill Smith and Justice Minister Anne McLellan of the Government of Canada were there to launch the new branch. There isn't much of a local feel about the area today. The mall, across the street, has been repackaged as a combination of an indoor mall and a power centre. There is a Home Depot. The ubiquitous Boston Pizza launched in Edmonton, long ago, but there is little of Edmonton about it today. From the front lawn or looking out the windows of the Woodcroft branch, the view is of a concrete box with discount jeans inside and a parking lot that launched the city's love affair with the mall.

Woodcroft is a light brick and beige building with a leafy adolescent tree in the front. Inside, it is bright and clean and busy. Its rounded front is a clear contrast from the sharp angles of the modernist original. It is single-storey and wheelchair accessible, and sings out: "functional.'

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There is a handsome pen set into a marble base on Morton Coburn's desk in Chicago. It reads "Awarded to Morton Coburn by the Jasper Place Library Board."

Jasper Place, in the 1950s, was a separate town on the western border of Edmonton — between 149th Street and 170th Street. At the time it enticed people from the big city for two reasons, one more permanent and the other temporary: municipal taxes were lower than in the big city and, in 1953, town council had passed a clever law to entice shoppers. In Edmonton, stores closed at 6 p.m. In Jasper Place they stayed open until 9 p.m. six days a week.

Before World War II, Jasper Place was for mavericks. Unlike the city next door, services weren't centralized. Residents had a bit of land and raised chickens, grew food in their gardens, did their quiet business in outhouses. World War II had changed life in Jasper Place as much as it had changed life in Edmonton. The oil strike in Leduc brought in many more residents: new families interested in buying a large house without paying large taxes, while still working in downtown Edmonton.[cxviii] Sewers were for wimps, but also quite handy. These new Jasper Placians bumped against old-timers who saw the inevitable amalgamation with the big city as something like starting a construction business with Satan.

Morton Colburn, the young director of the Edmonton Public Library, had a main branch and three others to manage. The board was scheming up a way to open the second branch on the south side of the river, Idylwylde, in the expanding Bonnie Doon neighbourhood. As with anything in Edmonton, these sorts of decisions took years. Layers of managers and experts were consulted. Most decisions ended up as compromises.

Woodcroft was a success. For the Idyldwylde branch, the board decided it didn't want to be across the street from a mall. If you really want to capture the modern, shopping-crazy Edmontonian, asking them to cross the street was perhaps too much. Idylwylde would share a

parking lot with Bonnie Doon Shopping Centre, a 22-acre island of shops surrounded by friendly asphalt that opened in 1958. The library itself would be the western half of a building that housed a medical clinic.

If you walk south from downtown, through the evolving river valley and into the Mill Creek Ravine, you will arrive at a crosspath. Turn right and climb westward toward the Strathcona Branch. Turn left and pass one of the houses that remains in the ravine, surrounded at night by skunks and coyotes, the occasional deer, and groups of illegal campers taking shelter in the urban forest.

The only French-language university west of Manitoba is at the top of the hill, Campus Saint-Jean of the University of Alberta. On a warm day, students toss frisbees and flop on the grass, reading books — all in French. In the winter they build snowmen. Across rue Marie-Anne Gaboury is la cité francophone, a complex devoted to French-language businesses and services, a dance school, a bookstore, a theatre and a dance studio. This is, historically, Edmonton's French quarter.

In the early twentieth century, Father Giroux led a group of Quebec homesteaders across the country to northern Alberta, not far from the Peace River — *Rivière de la Paix*. Not all of these Franco-Albertans, who developed their own unique traditions and their own accent, remained in the north. Like other rural Albertans, they were drawn to the city — and this is where they tended to cluster, replicating in an urban neighbourhood the feeling of a village.

Bonnie Doon Shopping Centre is ten blocks east. When my daughters were infants, this is where we took them to be immunized. It's one of the most miserable experiences in the life of a young parent, holding your baby's hand and looking in her eyes as a nurse pokes her with a needle. Today, as in 1960, the clinic is attached to a library. To calm ourselves down after the

mini-horror of vaccination day we would walk through the entrance and into the Idylwylde branch.

Its bones remain the same today, mostly because the clinic and the buildings west of it remain as they were in 1960, when the branch opened. Across the parking lot, well-populated with seagulls, is a Sears and a Kal-Tire. On a recent visit to the library I stopped in first to look at vacuum cleaners at Sears: the cavernous department store was nearly empty. But the library, originally built in a shopping mall parking lot to ensure its relevance, was full of people.

The branch was renovated in the 1990s and again in 2007. The latest renovation was finished in autumn, 2008. The glass exterior is now decorated with the word "library" in several languages, and the interior is bright and busy with light wood accent and curves where, in 1960, all had been corners and rectangles. On a recent trip to Idylwylde I returned a John le Carré novel using the new 3M radio frequency system that identifies a book and whisks it away on a conveyor belt.

Adults were sitting in the south east corner of the space, at single desks and at shared tables, some with books and others with laptops. Women browsed the fiction stacks. Parents were at the back, where kids climbed on a boat attached to a large aquarium. All the computer stations were taken, just as they are downtown. You can imagine this aspect or some future manifestation of it growing as the bookshelves slowly disappear; it's only depressing if you allow it to be.

I watched an adolescent boy with messy red hair on a computer and thought of Andrew Carnegie: "There is not such a cradle of democracy upon the earth as the Free Public Library, this republic of letters, where neither rank, office, nor wealth receives the slightest consideration."

The boy was playing an Internet-based computer game called *Happy Wheels* on a website called Total Jerkface. It seemed the hero was in a wheelchair. The boy moved his avatar on a wheelchair around on the roof of an office tower and then plunged off. On the way down, the man in a wheelchair tried to wipe out as many other people as possible — from other office towers. The more people who fell to their death the better.

Of course, it's probably the modern version of a tension that has always existed in libraries: literature versus entertainment. As interim chief librarian Grace Dobie had put it in her 1937 annual report, no one concerned with a republic of letters is overjoyed with "the pulp magazines of the trigger-finger type for our youth."

It's a tension that remains on the display shelves of the library, where Michael Ondaatje shares a rack with John Grisham, Margaret Atwood with Nora Roberts. The Ondaatje and Atwood of video games are in the midst of creation on the south side of Edmonton, where the writing team at BioWare build complex characters and storylines that make *Happy Wheels* seem utterly ridiculous.

Morton Coburn was involved in the Idylwylde branch, in the late 1950s, but it was difficult for a man of ambition to see the personal challenge in attaching a library to a health clinic. It was a process of accommodation and compromise more than anything, as successful as the finished library was and has always been at Idylwylde.

The Town of Jasper Place was more nimble. "Then an independent community, its citizens knew it was only a matter of time before Jasper Place would be a part of the City of Edmonton," says Coburn.

The nascent library board in Jasper Place also knew the moment their town was amalgamated, they would be placed on a long list of Edmonton's suburban communities that

needed a building. They would ended up waiting years, if not decades. The board contacted Coburn and he attended a meeting. Instead of lobbying politicians, climbing through layers of bureaucracy, and trying to insinuate himself into someone else's domain, the board offered Coburn an opportunity to do something extraordinary. It would change the course of his life. They asked him to work with an architect and design a brand new building, taking everything he had learned and everything he would like to see in a library of the future.

Under budget, of course.

The Idylwylde branch would open a year before the Jasper Place Public Library, but the contrast between the two experiences was enormous. Building something in Edmonton required committees and approvals and, ultimately, political maneuvering. Jasper Place simply wanted a damn fine library. They told Coburn how much money they had and said, "Go build it." Of course, Coburn had to ask his bosses: at that time, the Edmonton Public Library Board were thrilled with their ambitious young director and granted him the time to work with Jasper Place. "From its opening day," says Coburn, "it was designed to operate as another branch of the EPL system. The Jasper Place community funded its operation."

Most importantly, for Coburn, they didn't get in his way. He wanted a contemporary design, with as much zest and experimentation as he could afford. He didn't have to blend the library into a health clinic or any other public institution, so he studied libraries in the United States to find the latest fusions of library science and architectural design. "It was hailed at the time," writes historian Lawrence Herzog, "for its cutting-edge design, bright reading spaces, and undulating roof line."[cxix]

What I remember of the old building is the effect of the undulating roof lines at night. The building was a long, low rectangle with four arches in the front. My grandparents, who

moved to Rio Terrace in the late 1950s, drove past the library almost every day. When I visited them as a boy, I would often stay in the library looking at books while they shopped for dinner: while Jasper Place library wasn't attached to anything, the board wasn't crazy. No one, in 1961, opened a suburban library far from a mall: in this case, Meadowlark, which had the saddest shopping mall Santas in the world from the late seventies to the early eighties.

It was one of the last pieces of public infrastructure Jasper Place would build. Three years later, the glorious library and everything else became the property of the City of Edmonton — who also assumed its budgetary issues. The headline on the front page of the *Journal* on August 17, 1964 wasn't a piece of subtlety: "38,000 people, $8,177,000 in Debt and 'The Damndest Mud in the World' Becomes Part of Edmonton."[cxx]

In 1988, the modernism was swallowed up by brick. A major renovation closed off the windows, adding fluorescence to make up for the loss of natural light. The age of computers had made much of what was happening in the Jasper Place branch obsolete, and the building itself was failing. The new design, unfortunately, made the place feel like a bunker — as though medical experiments, not storytelling, were happening inside the building.

It takes an hour and a half to walk from the Stanley A. Milner branch of the Edmonton Public Library to Jasper Place — if you're willing to jaywalk from time to time. West of leafy Glenora, past the current location of the Royal Alberta Museum, 102 Avenue widens into a commuter road. Soon, if all goes well, the LRT will stop here and again, farther along Stony Plain Road, at the strip mall nexus and the old Jasper Place border: 149th Street.

Here, Stony Plain Road begins to mirror Alberta Avenue. It's an old main street calling out for a central theme: more local shops selling something people in this part of the city actually need and fewer pawn shops and quick-cash outlets and dodgy massage parlors and dim bars full

of video lottery terminals. The road is punctuated at 156th Street with the strange orange arts building. For years it has been the western campus of Grant MacEwan, where actors and writers trained. Soon it will be a city arts institution of some definition and, potentially, an anchor for something new on Stony Plain Road. Ten or eleven blocks south, past more strip malls and some rectangular apartments, a few houses, we reach a curious place of transition.

Linda Cook, the current CEO of Edmonton Public Libraries, is like Coburn in 1961: a risk-taker. No one wept, in 2011, when the 1988 makeover of the Jasper Place branch was demolished. The latest thinking on libraries and Cook's current obsession is contained in the question: "What is a library?"

"We don't know if there will be books in the library of the future," says Cook. "This is what we're preparing for today."[cxxi]

Edmonton's best-known architect, Gene Dub, worked with Hughes Condon Marler, from Vancouver, to design the new Jasper Place branch of the Edmonton Public Library. It is the opposite of what it replaces: highly energy efficient and draped with glass. The design harkens back whimsically to Coburn's work on the original library, with undulating roof lines.

It's obvious Dub listened carefully to Linda Cook before sitting down to sketch the library of the future. Cook herself has been the architect of a new role for libraries, where they operate as community hubs. This is the place we go, in some sense, to become Edmontonians.

"No one knows exactly where libraries are going in the future, so they require that flexibility," Dub, most famous for his pyramid design of Edmonton's city hall, told the *Journal* in 2010. "They're now looked at as being a focal point for community communication and not necessarily just for books... The library people really pushed us along and encouraged us to do something which was extraordinary in its spatial quality. The openness is far greater than the

typical library — the openness of the common area. We were looking for a special quality of space and we think we've achieved something that we haven't seen before with the undulating concrete ceiling, so we're pretty excited by that."[cxxii]

The new building opened in winter, 2013, in time for Edmonton Public Library's centennial. It is the first project in a new building boom for city libraries, a mirror of Coburn's time as leader in the 1960s. Today, instead of attaching libraries to malls Cook is imagining them as companions to community and recreation centres.

No one was thinking, in 1961, about libraries without books. Coburn, fresh off a thrilling experience building a modernist beauty in Jasper Place, turned his attention to "that little Carnegie library at the top of the hill" that he found just a little bit humiliating, as a librarian and as an Edmontonian.

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Before he could build any more libraries, Coburn addressed himself to a more central concern: books. Books, the quality of books, was a problem in his adopted hometown. The chief librarian wanted statistical proof he was improving the intellectual and cultural lives of Edmontonians. This was rather difficult when few of the books on the "new releases" stacks were worth reading.

Once the staff had grown accustomed to him, Coburn began asking about the ordering system in the main library and in the branches. There were gaps. The latest and many of the greatest were missing.

"To my inquiry as to why we were not selecting materials in this or that area the staff response was the same: 'no one asks for such books.' My response was that our public already knew how meagre our coverage was in so many areas that they no longer asked for books treating such subjects."[cxxiii]

Besides, librarians were leaders. The reading public does not always know what it wants until someone tells them. All the great marketers do one thing very well: they make you want something you did not know you wanted.

Librarian Coburn established a book selection committee. He could already tell the librarians and assistants under his command were prone to disputes with management. His early successes were not universally celebrated. The union was strong. So instead of imperiously taking over the book ordering functions at the library he formed a committee. Aleta Vikse, the interim chief, and James Pilton, the brilliant Torontonian, joined him as revolving chairs of the committee. He made sure all librarians participated.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, popular literature was changing. The post-World War II writers were altogether different from the post-World War I writers. Jack Kerouac, who published *On the Road* in 1957, was no Ernest Hemingway or F. Scott Fitzgerald. Norman Mailer and others were publishing a new subjective sort of journalism that echoed a sense of aimlessness and alienation, of distrust. In London, Colin Wilson had published *The Outsider* in 1956, initiating a British version of French existentialism. Some of this literature and the writers it inspired, like Tom Wolfe and Hunter Thompson, would crash into the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the Vietnam War and the coming-of-age of the baby boomer to create a huge cultural shift. Canada was, as always, some years behind all of this. But Coburn wanted to make sure Edmontonians had the reading list.

Growing up in Edmonton, at the time, Nicholas Spillios was interested in books on various subjects. One subject was particularly interesting: sex. And under Coburn, sex was more likely than ever to be on the shelves.

"I attended McKay Avenue School, which was only six blocks away from the library, so I was there a lot," he says, on a hot summer day in a West End coffee shop. From the café we can hear construction on the new Jasper Place branch. "In those days, there were R-rated books but they were under lock and key. I was in high school and I wanted a book on sex. I had to go to this very imposing librarian, to me she was six feet tall, and somehow gather the courage to ask permission. She had to open the collection to get me the book. I was scared to death of her. But I *needed information*. It was a question of literary perseverance."[cxxiv]

Spillios was sufficiently moved to fall in love with libraries. By the early 1990s, he was chair of the board of the Edmonton Public Library and he was one of the founders of Friends of the Edmonton Public Library in 1993; at a time of rather dispiriting funding for the library system, this not-for-profit society of volunteers started to build support and awareness for the library in Edmonton, to defend it publicly, and to raise money for activities the library might not be able to afford on its own. Spillios has served as president of the Friends of the Edmonton Public Library and today he sits on the board.[cxxv]

She was not tall and imposing, but one of the librarians with the key to the R-rated shelf was Heather-Belle Dowling. "We were just as embarrassed as those kids, I'll tell you," she says, with a sustained laugh. "We dreaded it whenever someone would ask us to open it up. Oh it was such a lively time to be a librarian, in that wonderful Carnegie building. We would go across the street, to the Hotel Macdonald, for coffee. Sometimes, because of split shifts, we would have a

two-hour lunch break. We would drink wine, plenty of wine, and come back on the job. I don't know why someone didn't talk to us about that. No one ever did!"[cxxvi]

It was a question of relevance. Coburn wanted contemporary books, contemporary architecture, contemporary librarians, and a contemporary system. One of the least contemporary aspects of the Edmonton Public Library was the building on MacDonald Drive, with its obstructive pillars and its old fashioned layout. It was too small and could not be sufficiently expanded to handle the needs of a population that had more than doubled since the end of the war and threatened to double again.

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Stanley Milner was born in Calgary in 1930 and grew up in Turner Valley. Before it was supplanted by Leduc after the Second World War, this was known as the birthplace of Alberta oil. Milner's family didn't stay in any one place for long, as his father was in the Canadian forces. By the time he was ready to graduate from high school in Winnipeg he had lived all over the west.

Few of these places were terribly peaceful for little boys.

"It was pretty much a given," says Milner on a warm March day at the Mayfair Golf and Country Club. "If you were a kid anywhere near an oilfield, back then, you were going to be beaten up. I moved around a lot and didn't have a lot of friends, a lot of protection. I realized the

safest place to be, during a recess or after school, was in a classroom. I did a lot of reading. I came to love books."[cxxvii]

Even so, Milner did not grow up to avoid confrontation. In his summer jobs, as a young man, he developed a reputation for counting bags of concrete at building sites and walking around with a tape measure. Unethical property developers, at the time, would skimp on concrete and add too much gravel — raising their profits but also ensuring weak foundations. Some people were in on these schemes and some people weren't. When Milner called them on it, the people who were in on it were often displeased. He was a troublemaker who, quite soon, gained the confidence of genuine leaders. His bosses knew what they had, in Milner, and gave him a lot of responsibility at a young age.

Milner took a science degree at the University of Alberta and graduated into an oil boom. All of that reading in his youth had helped create an uncommonly good mind for business. He went into oil and gas and, in 1964, he founded what would become a spectacularly successful corporation — Chieftain Development. By then, his energy and the quality of his thinking was already well known.

In the 1950s, Mayor William Hawrelak had achieved two feats. He had led Edmonton through a period of stunning growth and he had also become fabulously rich. His personal business involvements in land deals did not strike everyone as fair. "He had the ambition, energy and ability to become a wealthy businessman and an effective mayor," wrote a *Journal* city hall columnist, Olive Elliott, who covered Hawrelak. But, she said, "he never understood that serving his own interests didn't necessarily serve the city's interests."[cxxviii]

One of the alderman who watched Hawrelak give contracts and positions to his friends, family members, and allies, Ed Leger, began scrutinizing the mayor's real estate transactions. In

1958, he presented a bold petition to city council claiming that Hawrelak had used the office of mayor to enrich himself. According to Justice Marshall Potter, the alderman was entirely correct. He found Hawrelak guilty of gross misconduct and the mayor resigned in September 1959 — claiming he was being unfairly attacked by his political opponents.[cxxix]

One of these political opponents was that young counter of concrete. When an election was called to replace Hawrelak, the man who won the election — Ernest Roper — was an admirer of Stanley Milner's. In 1961, he helped convince Milner to run for city council, which was then a part-time position for leaders in other spheres.

An alderman's life is a busy. Milner was on four boards and running a successful business on the side when Mayor Roper asked him to sit on the library board. He didn't have the time for it and didn't feel he knew enough about libraries but he agreed — because of one man.

"We all grew up with this idea that Carnegie was a robber baron," says Milner, handsome and spry and well-spoken in his early 80s. "Then you see he had this whole other side to him. He had come from nothing and he built libraries to help other people do the same. You have to remember, in the early sixties and before that libraries were the poor cousin. My plan, once I was put on the board, was to borrow Carnegie's philosophy — to get libraries linked to the education system."[cxxx]

In 1963, Milner's first year as chair of the Edmonton Public Library board, outgoing mayor Roper and others convinced Milner to run against William Hawrelak, who had already grown tired of life outside the spotlight. To become eligible to run for mayor again, Hawrelak paid over $100,000 to settle a lawsuit with the city.

In true Hawrelak fashion it would turn out to be one of the wildest and most upsetting municipal elections in Edmonton history. Student protesters, horrified that Hawrelak could

become mayor again, clashed with hundreds of Hawrelak supporters in Market Square, punching and shoving and spitting. The same supporters, some might say thugs, travelled from debate to debate to shout down Hawrelak's opponents. There were death threats against Milner, so — at the suggestion of the police — he sent his family out of town for the mayoral race and carried a gun. These threats didn't stop until Milner confronted Hawrelak personally. One the eve of the election, in a community hall that was supposed to be the site of the final debate, hundreds of fiery Hawrelak supporters threatened to transform from merely belligerent to violent. A police officer helped Milner escape out a window.[cxxxi]

Hawrelak, ever-fascinating to the people of Edmonton, won the close race and ended Milner's political career. His public service did not end here, as he remained chair of the Edmonton Public Library board.

Milner's first job on the board, after a dirty election, was to clean up a mess. One of the trustees, Philip Cox, the head of the Alberta Teachers Association, was not keen on Morton Coburn's leadership. Coburn was still a young man at the time, learning how to manage people. He would have made errors, any leader would. But Cox did not like him. It was not standard behaviour for a board member to seek information and even rumours from staff inside the library, finding his own inner networks, but that is precisely how Cox operated. He found staff members in the library union who were not an all enamoured with Coburn and his second-in-command Aleta Vikse. The fact that he was an American, an import from another culture, often came up. Coburn and Cox argued, sometimes in person and sometimes through the newspapers. Cox went to the *Journal* from time to time, with stories about Coburn and about the library. Who was really in charge? The young, American chief librarian? Or the board of trustees?

One of the ways Milner solved this problem was to distract everyone. For years, Coburn and others had been talking about a new building.

"I realized the centennial was coming up and I knew, as a former alderman, that the city was thinking of ways to commemorate it in some way. So as chair of the board I decided we'd make a big push to get a new library. I spent a lot of time trying to get everyone on-side. I had to convince them it would be a good gift to the city — as Carnegie would have done. The chair of the board is always in the business of finding money. But even then, Edmonton was a bit of a cultural centre compared to other cities of its size. If we really want to prove we're made of something, that we're unique, art and culture is the way to do it. And libraries are a big part of that. There was a bit of a boom in the city back then and we had quite a few head offices. We kept them until the city decided it didn't want them anymore but that's another story. What we had to do, back then, was tap into this new spirit."[cxxxii]

And find some land. The real estate on MacDonald Drive was not vast enough to support the kind of building the board envisioned. What the city wanted to do, at the time, was develop all of that land at the top of the hill — to build what are now the Telus Towers. Milner found himself in the middle of negotiations, knowing that if it went poorly the city would not only lose its Carnegie Library but end up with no library at all. As much as Morton Coburn disliked the building, he lacked the power to knock it down and build something new. The city desperately wanted to knock it down and build something new — an office tower and a concrete pedestal. The question was whether or not Edmonton would get a new library.

At "a mill and a half" of municipal taxes, the library didn't have the money to buy its own land — even if in some way it were to sell the real estate on MacDonald Drive.

There was a feeling, in City Hall, that the city was moving in two directions at once. One was perhaps more dangerous than the other. Elmer Roper, the mayor from 1959 to 1963, was already concerned about urban sprawl, the push deeper and deeper into the farmland surrounding the city. It was expensive to service these areas and it was bad for business, which demanded the collaboration and concentration of a busy downtown.

"He had a vision for the city," says Milner. "He was maybe our first mayor who did. He knew that if your downtown starts to go, you lose your tax base. You lose a lot. He was the first mayor to hire a town planner. There was a feeling, in that moment, that we had to protect the downtown."[cxxxiii]

Roper and his successor, Milner, were out of public office by 1964 when the strong and so far successful lobbying for a new downtown library approached a decisive moment. Milner had found a lot of support but it was still entirely possible the city would choose another project as its centennial legacy. As we now know, downtown boosters in Edmonton were about to begin losing the argument for forty consecutive years. Libraries weren't popular with everyone. The short history of Edmonton has been a test case for what is and is not considered a waste of taxpayers' dollars. Infrastructure for cars is nearly always considered prudent. The mind and heart require tougher arguments.

One thing was certain: the library on MacDonald Drive was coming down. The civic centre, which would be called Winston Churchill Square in 1965, required an anchor institution and it required a lot of parking. There was money available, from the provincial and federal governments, for centennial projects. Milner didn't have much leverage but he had a little.

"My argument was that the biggest investment in that building was by Carnegie," says Milner. "It wasn't ours to sell or give away, not in the normal sense. The city really wanted me to

sign over a land transfer, giving them the property. By then we knew we could build a library [on Winston Churchill Square] but we had no real way to raise funds. It wasn't at all a sure thing. I can't remember the deal we worked out exactly but I wouldn't sign the papers to transfer the land until it was in writing that the proceeds from the land deal would go to our new building, the centennial project. Then we had them. They were stuck."[cxxxiv]

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Two branches opened in 1966 — Calder and Capilano.

In August, Calder opened close to a strip mall, the Kensington Shopping Centre on 127th Street and 133 Avenue. It was a temporary location, in a converted Department of Transport Building. The "temporary" aspect would last some time — almost thirty years. Today, the most handsome building on 127th Street — otherwise concerned with industrial and chain-store strip malls — is a medical spa called External Affairs. It is dark brick with white accents. Inside, men and women undergo Botox and laser treatments where they once read books. Since 1992 the Calder branch has been a few blocks away in another strip mall, on busy 132 Avenue.

If you walk directly north of the Woodcroft branch through the community of Dovercourt, with the transforming City Centre Airport on your right, you will cross Yellowhead Trail and enter a marriage of light industrial buildings and bungalows. This is Athlone, another neighbourhood label borrowed from the United Kingdom. Veer right and you enter Calder, a

leafy mid-century rectangle of houses bordered on all sides by car commerce. The library is on the northern border of Calder, where it meets Kensington.

Every city in Canada has a Kensington market, inspired by the tony high street in London. Unlike others, Edmonton's is not a pedestrian district. It is designed for parking the car and walking to Liquor Lake or H&W Produce, Kensington Flowers, Sofalair, Giant Tiger, Kensington Bingo or — best of all — Edmonton Public Library. The space is bright and spacious, like all current EPL strip mall branches, much larger if less soulful than the old Department of Transport building.

The recent evolution of libraries in Edmonton, and in the rest of the continent's suburban cities, was simple to track. Library scientists first suggested building close to shopping malls, like Woodcroft and Calder. Then they arrived in mall parking lots, like Idylwylde. This was close but not close enough. In October, 1966, Edmonton's first library to open inside a mall — like a small department store — launched in the three-year-old Capilano Shopping Centre at 50th Street and 98th Avenue. In Capilano, as in the modern Calder branch, the library attracts clients by looking and acting like a shopping destination.

Of the two openings in 1966, Capilano was the media event. Like the new building going up on what used to be Market Square, this library was designed for the future. Librarians will debate anything, of course, but there doesn't seem to be any snobbery around slotting a library in the same complex as a bingo hall, liquor store, and sofa emporium.

"Branches in shopping malls help build community by attracting new patrons to the library," a library journalist wrote, not in 1966 but in 2005. "They help libraries offer exciting new venues with a retail-like approach and raise awareness of the work libraries are doing."[cxxxv]

The definition of "build community" will change from person to person, community to community, and this openness would come to define the most recent building boom of the Edmonton Public Library. But in 1966, as in many corners of Edmonton today, there is no larger community than the one at the mall.

The loveliest route to the Capilano branch is through Riverdale and along the North Saskatchewan. Don't climb up until after you pass under the Capilano Bridge, home of Wayne Gretzky Drive. The Capilano neighbourhood, in between the river valley and Refinery Row, is a pleasant and diverse place — the best neighbourhood in the city if you happen to be a cross country skier.

Capilano Shopping Centre, at the southern limit of the neighbourhood, is both an indoor and an outdoor mall. It hasn't aged as well as some of its peers, and today the stores aren't terrific attractions: Your Dollar Store with More, Liquor Barn and Liquor Depot, Ricki's and Payless ShoeSource, Winner's and Vo's Nails. In 1966, the Capilano Branch of the Edmonton Public Library was keen on using the heavy traffic moving into and out of the mall. Today, the Capilano branch is the only attraction.

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There was a bit of time, between saying yes to the project and designing it, to think about the right kind of library for downtown Edmonton. Chief Morton Coburn had worked with an architect to design the Jasper Place building, but he was still a young man and no expert.

Normally in these situations a city would hire an expensive consultant — a globally recognized authority on the latest and greatest new libraries. The new yet old mayor, William Hawrelak, looked at the proposal to hire such a person out of New York or London. He summoned Coburn.

The mayor went over the reasons to hire a library consultant. Then he sat back and fixed his gaze on Coburn.

"So we need an expert, a consultant on building a library."

"Yes," said Coburn.

"You're our chief librarian," said Hawrelak.

"Yes."

"All right, then. You're also our expert. Build the library."

And that was that. Coburn laughs when he recalls his conversations and his dealings with Mayor Hawrelak. "He was a funny man."[cxxxvi]

Coburn went on a 14-city tour of libraries in North America and the United Kingdom. Milner accompanied him on a few of the visits. At the time, expensive consultants felt that even a little bit of sunlight aged and damaged books. The miracles of fluorescence could not be understated. The dominant architectural style of the 1960s and early 1970s, enthusiastically endorsed by designers and builders in Edmonton, was an evolution of modernism called brutalism. The word is not pejorative, or at least its origin wasn't. Le Corbusier, the celebrated French architect, liked the look and the utility of raw concrete or *béton brut.* This evolution of

modernism was cheap and handy. Today, when critics complain about Edmonton architecture they complain about many things. It was a quirk of timing more than anything else: from the end of the Second World War until relatively recently, preserving and protecting heritage buildings was an odd notion. Edmonton was a city of progress, a city of the future, and in the early 1960s the city of the future was made of concrete — not extravagances like limestone and imported tile and panes of glass.

Like president and CEO Linda Cook today, in 1964 Morton Coburn was concerned with the library of the future.

"We knew, back then, that in a few years everything would be computerized," says Coburn. "Even though we didn't have the technology at the time we knew it was coming, and we listened to the best experts about how to prepare for it."[cxxxvii]

In Edmonton today, it is rather common to hear leaders complain about the downtown branch of the library. Mayor Stephen Mandel, a fan of the library system without peer in Edmonton history, is not subtle about it: "It's a huge gap on the square," he says. "It's an ugly building and we're going to do something about it. I want to get it reskinned and to fix the problems in front of the building. The entrance ought to be in the back. Linda [Cook] and I don't agree about that. She wants to keep the entrance in the front. And, as you know, she's a very strong negotiator."[cxxxviii]

I mentioned to Coburn that the City of Edmonton had plans to re-skin the library, to poke holes for windows and to drape it in curtains of mirrors or thick glass, to avoid chunks of falling concrete and to make it more beautiful, more welcoming, and more energy efficient.

"Well, the main floor is all glass," he said. "I visited Edmonton two years ago and I think the building has held up beautifully."

Stanley Milner was also a great lobbyist for the library. Despite being Mayor Hawrelak's least favourite Edmontonian, Milner found support on council, with the provincial and federal governments, and with the business community. In 1965, a new downtown library was officially announced as Edmonton's centennial celebration project. The site of the library was, in 1965, market square — the city's public market. The budget was set at $4,500,000. The design, by Rensea, Minsos & Holland Architects, was for a six-storey building with space for 800 cars in an underground parking lot.

Even though he was one of the most successful businessmen in Edmonton, Milner was still counting bags of concrete in 1965. He was on the job site with a tape measure.

"A contract is a contract, but you have to watch those extras," says Milner. "My big concern was we get a solid proper building with no corners cut. The city said, as part of the deal, that they were building the library and the board was to stay out of it. The architects were a respectful firm but still... they were pretty close to Bill [Hawrelak]."[cxxxix]

Many Edmontonians had come to love Mayor Hawrelak. Others had come to expect he would be personally involved in major projects, skimming a little bit or a lot for himself and for his associates. Sure enough, Hawrelak was kicked out of office yet again. In March 1965, another judge found him guilty of violating conflict of interest laws while in office; he had owned forty percent of a property development company that had sold land — very profitably — to the city.[cxl]

While one of the library's major projects was being planned, some other relatively minor ones were evolving. The library completed an expansion of the Woodcroft branch — tripling its size. Idylwylde was one of the busiest branch libraries on the continent and the old street car library project continued to evolve. In 1962, the first diesel bookmobile, designed and built in

Edmonton, hit the streets. And an old one came back into service. “To meet the demand from the suburbs for bookmobile service a retired bookmobile was renovated and incorporated into an expanded schedule in November,” wrote librarian Coburn.[cxli]

One of the 1960s most important thinkers, Marshall McLuhan, was born in Edmonton in 1911 and spent his childhood in a two-storey home in Highlands, east of downtown. As a boy, McLuhan had wandered to the river and watched a horse on the opposite shore. He always remembered thinking how the horse could fit in his nursery — a memory that informed the media theorist’s thoughts on perspective.

The Highlands Branch of the Edmonton Public Library opened temporarily, in a storefront. The following year it opened at 8606 - 118th Avenue, in what everyone called the “Little House Library.”[cxlii]

This location was altogether too far west to serve the core of Highlands and other east-end neighbourhoods like Beverly. And it was a compromise. “Our sixth branch, the Highlands, opened to the public mid-June in a small renovated bungalow,” Coburn wrote in the 1962 annual report. “The lack of space limits service to the circulation of books. Hand-charging is used. The popularity of the branch indicated the need for proper quarters and in October the City Council granted monies for a new building.”[cxliii]

In August 1964, that new building — 7,500 square feet on the main floor and 3,500 square feet in the basement — opened at 6710-118th Avenue. It was another rectangle, with a glass front and a flat roof. Until recently, the Highlands branch was neither knocked down nor renovated beyond recognition. When you walked into the Highlands branch you were, more or less, walking into 1964.

The best route from the downtown branch is to walk straight south to the riverbank and turn left. You will pass the conference centre and, down below, a re-imagined Louise McKinney Park. In the warm months, the riverboat — the Edmonton Queen — might be floating down or struggling up the North Saskatchewan. South of Chinatown on the downtown east side, The Quarters, is beginning its slow transformation from parking lot neglect to something altogether different. The Singhmar Group, a family who arrived in Edmonton in the 1980s with relatively little and have built a small hotel empire in the region, are building a tilted Hilton designed by Gene Dub. Further along, the development along the river slows and transforms into something more natural. When you take a canoe from west to east, through the city, here is where you begin to imagine what this place looked like in the late 18th Century. Of course, you'll pass kayakers and dragon boat racers training instead of voyageurs.

Jasper Avenue veers away from the river at the pretty corner of Cromdale and you walk north up 82nd Street. A few blocks north you'll see Commonwealth Stadium, another concrete monument — this one to track and field and football instead of books. At the 112th Avenue strip mall turn right and, the moment you can, cross northeast through Borden Park and Northlands. What we once called Northlands Coliseum and now call Rexall Place, for the moment the home of the Edmonton Oilers, is in the distance. If you're lucky it will be late July and Edmonton's oldest party — the ever-transforming exhibition and midway — will be happening. You'll have to pay admission but it will be worth it. Watch a horse race and ride in an old fashioned ride to bring back memories of thrills, first loves, and nausea. The agricultural exhibition transformed into Klondike Days, to celebrate our rather thin connection to the Dawson City gold rush at the end of the 19th Century. Capital Ex, a more incarnation, was a failure. In a 2012 contest, Edmontonians chose to call the fair K-Days. The K? Yours to decipher. The city without a

mythology is, in 2013, searching for an enduring new theme for its annual fair; if an answer is anywhere, it's probably in a library.

The Highlands branch is, like the Jasper Place branch, moving into a new architectural era. The 1964 rectangle was closed in November, 2011 and torn down to make way for a two-story structure with a lot of natural light that pays homage to the original building's roots in modernism while hinting at what comes next for libraries. It is part of a broader civic streetscaping project for 118th Avenue; the idea, proven out around the world, is that building something beautiful instead of another hunk of functional concrete, will help build a spirit of joy and dignity in a neighbourhood that has suffered from a beauty deficit. Like all of the new buildings going up and sprucing up in this library centennial boom season, it will operate as a community centre and arena of ideas as much as a lovely place to borrow a book.

CEO Linda Cook's philosophy is woven into the design. "One of the things I see as I look down the road are libraries turning from places of information to places of culture. It is and will be a place to find content but it will also be a place to develop your own: to self-publish a book, to learn how to make a film, to share ideas, to develop a project with others. I don't think books are going to go away but print books will move toward e-books. We have to be ready for that, provide space for it, and develop a business model that works for us."[cxliv]

In 1965 and 1966, as Edmonton prepared to enter a new era in libraries, there was a sense of pride, anticipation and fear in the city. Again, the conversations were about more than the printed word. We wondered, at the time, if libraries were preparing to read us as much as we read the books inside them.

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This was an era of record-breaking construction in downtown Edmonton, as entire blocks of old buildings were destroyed and new ones conceived. Stone came down and concrete went up. But the plans for the city's centennial project went beyond six-storeys of bare concrete.

In 1964, the Edmonton Public Library controlled the movement of two and a half million books. The circulation department completed an audit of the system in July and discovered a loss of $50,000 worth of books in one year — just at the downtown branch. And that was after the downtown branch had hired its first guards, in 1963, to prevent theft. For the entire system, the figure was $70,000. Circulation control manager G.F. Smythe wrote a response to the *Edmonton Journal* after a library patron complained in a letter to the editor about having her overdue book fines referred to the Credit Bureau.

These were Edmonton's taxpayers' books, wrote Smythe, and serious business. "Library books have been found in garbage pail [sic], laneways, department stores, schools, hospitals, abandoned railway cars in Northern Alberta, in foreign countries such as Mexico, Australia, Africa, and France. One was even kindly returned by an English lady who found it on the beach at Bournemouth."[cxlv]

Heather-Belle Dowling often caught thieves even if she didn't physically tackle them. "I do remember coming into the rare book area, and a man was putting a book in his pants. I said, 'Get out!' and Morton was angry with me. He had wanted me to hold on to him and call the police. How was I supposed to do that? Oh and it wasn't just theft. When we put in the mezzanine there was a bit of a catwalk, see-though. The girls would be up walking on it and

some of the old men, the drifters, would look up under their skirts. Yes, that became an issue. One particular time I did grab a man, actually grab him, and shout at him for that."[cxlvi]

In 1966, Philip Cox, the trustee who had battled with Morton Coburn, was not reappointed. He went straight to the *Journal*. Much of his complaints were personal and staff-related but the newspaper sensed the story in Cox's dismissal from the board.

"Controversy also resulted from his opposition to a proposal that patrons be searched on leaving the library, Mr. Cox said."[cxlvii]

The newspaper had been editorializing about the draconian new measures to prevent theft and recover lost books. If a child were to lose a book and her parents were unable to replace it, the entire family would lose their borrowing privileges. Case after case appeared in the editorial pages of the *Journal*, of the library's aggressive new tactics to prevent more lost and stolen books. Then, even worse, as the plans for the new library became more detailed the newspaper reported closed-circuit televisions and video cameras were to be installed, to prevent theft. Several articles with "Big Brother" and "1984" appeared in the newspaper, as the new library neared completion in 1967.

George Orwell published his novel of political dystopia, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, in 1949. It was about a state called Oceana, ruled by Big Brother, leader of a single-party dictatorship. The hero of the novel works for the Ministry of Truth, in charge of propaganda and constant surveillance of its citizens. It was a bit much to compare a library with a serious loss prevention problem to a totalitarian state; surveillance cameras, now ubiquitous, have not turned out to be tools of subjugation. But in 1966, when they were part of the Edmonton Public Library's plans, citizens were understandably concerned.

The *Journal* had found its narrative and it would dominate the remainder of Morton Coburn's years in Edmonton. The newspaper had no trouble finding sources within the library — a few angry and disgruntled staff members who were keen to have the chief librarian replaced.

For stories about video surveillance, as the opening approached, board chair Stanley Milner spoke to the media.

"The device will not only curtail book thefts but it will also protect the public from undesirables," Milner told the *Journal*. "'I think most people will accept it graciously.'"[cxlviii]

If most people were prepared to accept it graciously, they weren't being published in the *Journal*. Stories about the surveillance system continued to run with references to George Orwell. After several articles and letters, a patron named Shirley Hunter wrote a response. "The critics seem to be conjuring up some horrifying possibilities. Will the camera's eye invade the biffy to make sure we wash our hands? Will it snoop over our shoulders to see whether we're reading Karl Marx or *Flopsy, Mopsy; Cottontail and Peter*?"[cxlix]

It wasn't just book theft. From January to April, 1967, in the run-up to the grand opening of the centennial library, there were eight incidents of indecent exposure in the Carnegie building. "I hope, too, that the cameras will deter those perverts who sometimes haunt public places, waiting for opportunities to shock the young and innocent without getting caught."[cl]

When the library opened, another philosophical patron named D.G. Turnbull offered a counter-argument in the letters pages of the *Journal*:

> I, of course, noticed the television cameras and receivers and was quite intrigued. As I browsed through the shelves, I was struck by the heightened feeling of being watched, and became mildly apprehensive, particularly when looking at specific volumes in the political sciences section.
> Gradually, the novelty of TV cameras began to evolve into something much more sinister than was the intended purpose, and I became acutely aware of the fact that wherever I

> went, and whichever way I turned, I was being observed. The answer was to simply leave the library and not return.
> However, I became very distressed when I noticed there were many younger people in the library, relaxing in some of the excellent facilities, and apparently completely oblivious to the fact that they were being observed. It occurred to me that this type of conditioning in the younger people would leave them wide open to further intrusions of privacy with TV cameras installed in the art gallery, in railway stations, bus depots and airports. Then a camera could be installed in every city block.
> From this stage it would not be far from installing a camera in each home. Lo and behold, we would have arrived at '1984'.[cli]

Turnbull was both correct and incorrect. Today, few of us notice cameras. We expect and, for the most part, ignore video surveillance. Guarding our privacy is little more than an intellectual preoccupation. On the first and second floors of the Edmonton Public Library, and in the branches, the majority of computers connected to the internet are busy. Most of the patrons are on Facebook.

Facebook is a free product. A common saying, in the year of the one hundredth anniversary of the Edmonton Public Library, is that if the product is free, you're the product. George Orwell was right about many things: we are more or less comfortable with constant surveillance. Not government surveillance but corporate surveillance: the data business is one of the fastest-growing sectors of the economy. Social networks like Facebook exist because other companies are enormously interested in where we live and where we work, what we like and dislike, and how we spend money. We give this information away for free and call it leisure. Many of us do it at a library.

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Princess Alexandra of Kent and her husband Sir Angus Ogilvy arrived in Edmonton on a sunny day at the end of May, 1967. Edmonton's business and political leaders dressed up in Klondike outfits and gathered at the Hotel Macdonald to meet the young couple with a Cheechako breakfast and a rousing rendition of *Won't You Come Home, Bill Bailey.* The royals visited the Glenrose Hospital and, due to a couple of bomb threats, attended a concert and dance performance at Victoria Composite High School outdoors. Mayor Vincent Dantzer presented the couple with white okalig fur parkas and bone carvings for their two children. And, on the afternoon of May 27, the princess arrived at Sir Winston Churchill Square.

In his Edmonton Public Library News Notes, chief librarian Morton Coburn described the "blare of band music and the crackle of fireworks."

> They were all here that brilliant, sunny Saturday afternoon when Princess Alexandra dedicated the Edmonton Centennial Library — marching bands, majorettes, City Police Honour Guard, Highland dancers, Gerry Smythe of Circulation Control coordinating the program with a walkie-talkie, the Centennial Voyageurs, Premier E.C. Manning, Bishop Burch, the mayors of Anchorage and Hull, Mr. John Holgerson — the Executive Director of the Edmonton Civic Centennial Committee, Mr. S. Milner — Chairman of the Library Board, and hundreds of excited spectators. The guest list of Federal, Provincial, and Civic Officials and dignitaries resembled a chapter from *The Canadian Who's Who*.[cliii]

Published estimates of the cost of the building varied from $3.7 million to $4.5 million. It was decorated with furnishings that appear straight out of a Stanley Kubrick film, *A Clockwork Orange* or *2001: A Space Odyssey*, with rounded chairs, pod tables, whimsical globe lighting, and a lot of sharp corners and empty space. The chairs in the children's library downstairs were red, orange, and gold toadstools. There were sculptures and art on the walls, and the already-

infamous security apparatus near the front doors. There was a concert in the basement theatre and then librarian Coburn led the princess on a tour of the library.

"Keenly interested and delighted with her surroundings, Her Royal Highness requested to see 'all of it,' much to the consternation of Gerry Smythe and his staff who had worked for days coordinating security with City Police and the R.C.M.P. However, with obvious pride, they arranged that she see the entire building."[cliii]

There were a few problems. The Carnegie library on MacDonald Drive remained open, as they slowly transferred books from one location to another. Odd chemicals dripped into the parkade under the new library and stripped paint from cars. The plaque that went up on May 27, 1967, had an error: the French word "erigée" was misspelled. It had to be redone. Still, the as-yet-unnamed downtown library — Centennial Library? — was a marvel. Delegations from other cities arrived to study it for their own projects and renovations.

"I saw elevators, escalators, television cameras to screen patron activity," wrote an enthusiastic journalist, stunned by all there was in a library of the future *besides books*, "a theatre, kitchens, a classroom for budding librarians — all there in what promises to be the cultural centre of the city."[cliv]

A two-year library card, on opening day, cost five cents. Upstairs in the adult section, the same card was a quarter. Futuristic gadgets abounded: a Xerox 914 copier and I.B.M. punch cards for circulation. There was a Wollensak four-track tape recorder, Kodak and Zeiss projectors and cameras, Recordak Magnaprint Readers and Starmac Readers, a Se-Lin labelling machine. For a while, at least, the negative press about Orwellian security dissipated — replaced by a feeling of progress and big city boosterism. Edmonton had arrived, again.

"1967 was the year when Edmonton's new central library building was completed and because of the almost superhuman effort put forward by the staff, library patrons were not deprived of service for even a single day during the move," wrote Coburn. "Like London's old Windmill Theatre, during the Second World War, their slogan can now be 'We Never Closed!'"[clv]

Staff morale was marvelously high. They had accomplished something amazing together, and the library — not a sports team or a discovery of oil — was again a symbol of the city's pride and ambition. For that summer's Klondike Days parade, every branch in the library participated. They dressed up in 1890 clothes, walked "*mit beer tankards,*" and wrote and performed a song, to the tune of *There is a Tavern*:

There is a library in our town, in our town
Where friends and workers sat them down, sat them down
To eat pancakes, 'mid laughter free
And that's the place we had to be.

*

Outside the downtown branch of the Edmonton Public Library, in the culture at large, what we have come to call "the sixties" was happening. Young men and women were talking differently, dressing differently, reading differently.

Chief librarian Morton Coburn and board chair Stanley Milner were young men. The downtown branch was designed with youth in mind. At the end of the 1960s, there were few places in the city as delightful, for a kid, as the children's library in the basement — with its theatre, its 22,000 books, and its mini-zoo.

"It's gaily coloured," wrote Journal columnist John J. Barr, "with racks, tables and chairs scaled down to kid-size. Along one wall is a line of cages, with budgies, rabbits, Abyssinian guinea pigs, gerbils, garter snakes, hamsters and white mice. Along another wall, there's a wading pool with live turtles. Any parent who doesn't take his children there ought to be shot."[clvi]

Outside the library, there were protests against the Vietnam War and other gaily coloured events in the square. Inside the library, staff had begun to resent the extra work and to twitch under the extra stress and bad publicity. Stories that began circulating years earlier, about book theft and strategies to combat it, transformed in the *Edmonton Journal* to The Man coming down with unnecessary toughness on non-violent people hungry for a good time. The video cameras, the security guards, the searches, the extra rules. To some journalists, the library was becoming a prison.

In 1968, board chair Stanley Milner convened a press conference to put the story to rest. No one likes to be searched by a security guard. No one likes video cameras, even though they weren't able to see books anyone is reading. Security, and bylaws to support security, were

necessary because of more or less rampant indecent exposure, drinking parties in the downstairs washroom, vandalism and theft.

"We must provide the proper atmosphere and protection for patrons from undesirable elements," said Milner, at the press conference. "In any large public building, this is a problem."[clvii]

The solution was not in tune with the culture. In a piece of stunt journalism, an *Edmonton Journal* reporter planned to steal a book — to see if he'd be roughed up by security on his way out. Milner received a tip about the plan and the reporter was gently charged with theft. The mini war between the newspaper and the library was harder on Coburn than Milner. Only one of them, the chief librarian, was prone to excessive anxiety about the issue. Milner, the oil executive and occasional politician, was accustomed to battles.

Ever since Philip Cox had been removed from the board, some staff members waited for opportunities to speak to new board members about Coburn's management style. "I'm not sure what it was, exactly," says Coburn. "It went back to that idea that I didn't like librarians."[clviii]

Apart from the ongoing security issues, which lived mostly in the pages in the *Edmonton Journal*, the transition from an old library to a new one was a sparkling success. Activity in the central building was lively, and the rhythm was becoming regular. The eight branches and three bookmobiles were busier than ever. In 1969, Edmontonians borrowed a total of 2,281,980 books, magazines, pamphlets, pictures, phonographs, records and tapes — 5.4 items per capita.[clix]

Not everyone was happy, internally, but with 134 staff members that is inevitable.

"By the end of the year it could be said that the new central building, opened in the summer of 1967, had completed its breaking-in period and was beginning to feel comfortable," wrote Coburn, in the 1969 annual report. "At peak hours, especially on Sunday afternoons, the

‘standing-room only’ sign was usually up. During the year, despite the longest cold spell on record and the transportation strike during the summer, it is recorded that there were 940,492 admissions to the adult floors and 398,354 to the Children’s Library.”[clx]

The final year of the 1960s contributed to Edmonton Public Library lore, one of the stories every director tells. The animals who had been part of the children’s library since the opening of the new building didn’t always bring delight to the kids. Every year the library celebrated a book week, an invitation to every child in the city to participate in a theme. The end-of-the-week party was in the basement theatre attached to the children’s library. With his typical dry humour, Coburn writes, “there was some excitement on this occasion when one of the monkeys brought to entertain the children climbed the curtains on the stage of the theatre and disappeared into the ceiling. Four days later he was lured out with a dish of fruit salad.”[clxi]

In the end, shenanigans in the children’s library wouldn’t turn out terribly funny for chief librarian Morton Coburn. But no one in Edmonton could tell the monkey story without a smile.

*

No one mentioned, in the 1969 annual report, that the Carnegie Library had come down to make way for the AGT Towers. There are photos of the demolishment, by the same company that had built it back in 1923, as their first local job: Poole Construction Limited. That gentle, rounded place on MacDonald Drive was gone — replaced by a concrete plaza that was, and is, a great place to drop off or pick up an office worker. The *Edmonton Journal*, who seemed intent on

attacking the library and its management at any opportunity, did not mourn the loss of a heritage building.

"I don't remember anyone complaining at the time," says local historian Tony Cashman. "People were quite excited about the new library in the square. It certainly wasn't controversial."[clxii]

Today, of course, it is a test of one's sanity in Edmonton. Look at a photograph of the Carnegie library, with its Doric columns and red tile roof, its big moulded windows and the pocket park before it: a wonderful place to lie down with a book or make a snowman. Now stand in Sir Winston Churchill Square and look south, at the downtown branch of the Edmonton Public Library and to the southwest the concrete towers that replaced the original downtown branch. It is one of the icons of a lost Edmonton, a phantom Edmonton, a victim of the boom-and-bust psychology that has defined the city since its earliest days.

The 1969 annual report was Coburn's last. He would remain at the library for another couple of years, but now that Stanley Milner and other supporters had fulfilled their mandates on the board he knew his time in Edmonton was growing short. The Canadian Union of Public Employees, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, was feisty and powerful.

Grievances were common. Negotiations between the library and the union, over contracts, were so unhappy they required a provincial government mediator. The library board, weak since the departure of Milner, did not know how to respond politically or publicly. The mayor at the time, Ivor Dent, had run federally for the New Democrats. He said, in the press, that he supported the union and the employees in the labour battles — not the board or management.

Three employees were dismissed and the union supported them. One, who had been accused of uttering a racist comment, was reinstated against the wishes of the board chair and Coburn. City council called for a drastic reorganization of the library.

"Some people never liked that an outsider, an American, was in the position. When the board changed there were, unfortunately, trustees who felt that way. You put the trustees and the union together," with bad feelings going back to the Philip Cox era, "with a few nasty people on the staff, well, it doesn't matter that the vast majority was happy. There was a dirty plot to get rid of me."

"Near the end, if a story was coming out the paper wouldn't talk to me," says Coburn. "They certainly wouldn't listen to me. They spoke to the disgruntled staff, union representatives. I knew I wouldn't be in Edmonton much longer. It became impossible to run the library system. Sooner or later my allies were off the board entirely and the new ones didn't like Mr. Coburn. I had no choice."

An iguana escaped from the children's library zoo and spent some time on a very hot electric heating duct. This is not healthy for coldblooded creatures. He went a little nutty. The *Journal* and others called for the zoo to be phased out. Someone new asked to be in charge of the animals in the children's library. Coburn said he granted her wish.

"The final absurdity was she claimed, to the board, that I had forced her to put her hands in a snake pit," says Coburn.

Norbert Berkowitz, the board chair, resigned in exasperation. Coburn held on a little longer and then he resigned as well, along with his closest protégés and collaborators Aleta Vikse and James Pilton.

"The appointment of Mr. Coburn as Director gave our library a new lease on life," Vikse wrote, in her letter of resignation, "for it has been through his guidance and leadership that the Edmonton Public Library has become known as one of the finest in Canada and has achieved international fame. No small part of this achievement was due to the expertise of Mr. Pilton and his assistance in the transition from a mediocre library to one of note."[clxiii]

Heather-Belle Dowling, who moved on to start the library system in Strathcona County, remembers it as a sad and confusing time. "Every staff has disagreements," she says, "but what they did to Morton and the others was cruel. It was very hard on the three of them. I sometimes wonder if the charges against him weren't trumped-up. It was wrong. You don't destroy people."[clxiv]

Sad and a little bit humiliated, Coburn moved to Vancouver for two years. He knew that despite the geographical vastness of the country the library community could fit into a gymnasium.

"I would never find another job in Canada," he said. "I would always be known as the man who was fired from the Edmonton Public Library."

The advantage of a naughty reputation in Canada is that few other places in the world are overly concerned with Canada. A job opened up in his hometown, as director of building programs at the Chicago Public Library.

"I had rare experiences in Edmonton, building the Jasper Place library and then the downtown branch," he says. "When they kicked me out of town, they kind of kicked me upstairs."

Coburn, now 91, has worked with architects on the design of libraries in Chicago for 38 years. He has had a hand in the central library and most of the system's 78 branches. He is still

an employee of the Chicago Public Library and he remains obsessed about libraries and what they ought to be.

Three years ago he visited Edmonton. “It’s changed so much,” he says. “But you still have that river valley and those wonderful cultural programs.”

He visited the library, of course, his library. “That which remained from my time is the exterior of the building’s façade, the escalator to the second floor and the auditorium. Otherwise, the entire interior has been completely changed: and all for the good.”

Our conversation, Coburn said, awakened his memories to his stay in Edmonton, “things I have not thought of in forty years.” He asked me to give his kindest regards to his old friend Stanley Milner. On his last visit to the city, he noticed the plaque that had adorned the outside of the building was missing.

Milner had given me a photograph of the plaque: “THE EDMONTON PUBLIC LIBRARY, A CENTENNIAL GIFT TO ALL SEEKING KNOWLEDGE, INSPIRATION OR RECREATION.” Mayor Vincent M. Dantzer’s name was on it, along with members of the board, including Milner, the city commissioners and aldermen. On the bottom right it said, “M. Coburn: Director of Libraries.”

Coburn wrote to me after we spoke.

“Can you discover what has happened to the building’s original plaque on which appeared my name? Edmonton gave me too much to be pleased and happy about to be disturbed by the disappearance of a piece of metal!”[clxv]

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In the early 1970s, two new branches opened in malls: Southgate in 1971 and Dickinsfield in 1973. The system itself was in so much turmoil it was difficult, for the board and for the city, to properly celebrate the extensions.

Queen Alexandra school, on 106th Street south of Whyte Avenue, opened in 1906 as Duggan Street School. Moving south from Edmonton's oldest continually operating school, down 106th Street, the city becomes newer and newer, into post Second World War suburban communities like Allendale and Pleasantview. This represented, in 1971, some of the city's most rapid growth.

The Southgate library opened below ground, without any unfashionable natural light.

"It's just inside the southeast mall entrance," wrote an *Edmonton Journal* reporter in March, 1971. "As you come down the stairs your eye first rests on high black leather chairs on a red shag carpet grouped around a record rack. Further away, on a grey carpet, green, yellow, blue and orange free form chairs perch about coffee tables."[clxvi]

Given its basement setting, the Southgate branch sounded like it started off as a great place to put on some headphones, close your eyes, and freak out. All it needed was a lava lamp.

Ruth Rendell, the head librarian at Southgate, was "a soft spoken woman with salt-and-pepper coloured hair brown eyes and a conservative taste in dress. She seems an odd choice for a head librarian, having a degree in theology from Trinity College in Toronto."[clxvii]

The reporter never elaborates on why librarians and theologians seem incompatible. In 2002, the dark mall location moved across the freeway to a strip mall called Whitemud Crossing, anchored by a Red Robin and a vast skateboard shop. It's twice the size of the Southgate Branch and much brighter, filling a former cinema multiplex destroyed by the invention of stadium seating. There is a air of business-like efficiency about the clean and open branch. Nothing of its hippie roots remain. Every weekday morning at 9:45, the anteroom between the doors fills with people keen for a computer station or something new to read.

Dickinsfield Shopping Centre, at 144th Avenue and 92nd Street, forty blocks north of downtown, is now called Capital Centre. There is a Shell service station and a food mart, a barber shop and a drug store, a daycare and a car wash that could use its own refreshing splash of water. The branch opened in October, 1973 in a somewhat less-than-imaginative white-washed space after a long and occasionally frustrating search for a northern location. Dickinsfield was a new neighbourhood and a new mall, at the time, so it fit with a feeling of progress and geographical expansion in the city. No one complained, in 1973, about urban sprawl. Still, by the time the branch was opened, city budgets and library budgets were constrained: growth, it turns out, is expensive. It felt like someone had fit a library in a space designed for cereal and canned vegetables, with cold white floors and fluorescent lights and supermarket aisles. There was, for a time, the head of a shark protruding from the upper limits of the circulation desk, but this was not an era of goofiness.

The mayor, Ivor Dent, had appointed his executive assistant, Allen Rowe, the acting director of the library system. While Rowe knew a lot about bureaucracy and politics, managing a staff of librarians in a hostile union environment and a deteriorating fiscal environment, and keeping the system out of the papers for a while, was an entirely new challenge. The city sent

him on a couple of training courses, to prepare: *principles of supervisory management* and *developing leadership skills, part two*. All of this would come in handy, even as Rowe made the transition from interim director to administrator.

In 1973, the library board hired its fourth official director, Brian Dale, who had served as head librarian in Kitchener. After several dramatic years of political battles, buildings and demolitions, errant monkeys and reptiles, Orwellian hyperbole and union stand-offs, the board and the city was interested in an altogether calmer library system.

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No one mourned the demolition of the Carnegie Library on MacDonald Drive because the past, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, was for forgetting. If a building, no matter how beautiful or historic, was in the way of progress, it could not remain. It's easy to look back on this era and call it ridiculous but it's also unfair. A modern city was a city of concrete towers in its core and kilometre after kilometre of single-family bungalows extending out into the periphery. Edmonton was a modern city.

Of course, none of this was cheap. Remaking a city, in only a few years, meant ending a period of growth for the library system. Director Brian Dale's four years in Edmonton were not nearly as exciting as any two of Morton Coburn's years, even if the system demanded a bit of calm. The transcendental meditation courses in the Central Library matched the atmosphere in board meetings, except when someone brought up the stinginess of the provincial government.

The new Progressive Conservative government, under the dynamic young premier Peter Lougheed, was slow to support libraries despite a natural inclination toward building something called "Alberta culture." The minister of a new department called Alberta Culture, Horst Schmid, was actively involved in events at the library even if he couldn't convince the treasury board to throw any new money its way.

"Drinking beer by the lake in the summer and sprawling before our TV set in the winter," warned Schmid, at a German book exhibition in the Central Library in January 1973, would slowly destroy our heritage. He quoted author Gilbert Highet in his speech at the library: "It is perfectly possible that by the year 2000 the civilized world will have grown so rich and so comfortable, so deeply devoted to simple asinine pleasures... that real education, once available to us through the world of books, will be lacking."[clxviii]

Dale, forty when he arrived, worked to have more art and entertainment in and around the library — with modest success. The *Edmonton Journal* published a glowing profile of him, to introduce him to the community. He said he abhorred libraries that are "dead" and wanted to make it into a place for local artists and thinkers to come together with average citizens.

Not that there was any money.

"The library budget in Edmonton is one of the first city services to be pruned and one of the last to be expanded," wrote Dona Harvey in the *Journal*, shortly after Dale set up his office. "The situation is typical of that in most North American cities... and Brian Dale is worried about the trends he sees. 'The public libraries in many large cities in the United States are going belly-up,' he declares. 'If we don't learn from their mistakes, we're going to be in similar trouble here.'"[clxix]

Dale concentrated on activities and outreach, to compete with the dread television set. He created the first Community Programs Division of the library, which focused on everything but books: theatre and films and public lectures in the Central Branch, exhibitions, dance performances, and concerts. For people who couldn't leave their homes because of an illness or a handicap, Dale launched "shut-in service," bringing books from the library to them.

One day two hearing impaired brothers came into the downtown branch of the Edmonton Public Library, looking for cards. They were in Edmonton on a mission for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, the first two deaf missionaries in the history of the church. There was some confusion over whether they could have cards: they were Americans, after all, and their documentation was unclear.

Bernice Briggs, a library clerk at the time, decided they were Edmontonian enough to become members. It wasn't until later that Briggs and everyone else realized Thomas and Virl Osmond were not just any Osmonds: they were Donnie and Marie's brothers.[clxx]

It was a time of study and reflection, not investment, in the library system. The provincial government wanted an Alberta-wide framework, a network for libraries. They commissioned reports and recommendations while the actual brick-and-mortar and staff and books in Edmonton demanded money. The new building on Churchill Square, despite all its newness, was leaking. Skylights dripped and windows developed buckets of condensation. The heating system was disastrously inefficient. To save money, a system that had been bent on expansion now tried to figure out what to reduce, what to close.

"The idea solution to the 'Strathcona Problem,'" the management and board reasoned, "would be to shut this branch down."[clxxi]

But this new thing was happening in Canada: the protection of heritage buildings. The arguments against knocking down the old building and putting up something new were singularly annoying to everyone. Minister Shmid, of the Alberta Government, was opposed to the idea of knocking down old buildings. But at the same time, he wasn't able to help the library with extra funding to keep an underperforming library open.

The *Edmonton Journal*, no longer attacking the library board and administration, now reported on what funding cuts and budget problems meant for the future of the library system: reduced hours and, possibly, fewer branches.

Patti Meekison, the vice-president of an organization called Friends of the Strathcona Branch Library, presented a long letter to the board in response to comments by director Brian Dale in the *Edmonton Journal*. His comments, printed January 31, 1976, hinted that the old building would have to close sooner than later.

"Has the library done as much as possible to inform its users of the levels of support it obtains from city and province? As evidenced by our appearance here, your patrons will become concerned about their libraries only when they are directly and personally involved in their future operation or when they are faced with the prospect of losing part or all of the library service they value. Perhaps only then will they become a force strong and united enough to exert pressure on governments for an increase in funding."[clxxii]

As Schmid hinted at in his speech, and as the city and province were proving with car-oriented growth, walking to a library of an afternoon to choose and borrow a book seemed an old-fashioned activity. Investing in progress was something else altogether. As though to prove it, Brian Dale submitted a letter of resignation to the board on October 27, 1976.

"The reason for terminating my employment at this time is because I have accepted a position with a commercial enterprise engaged in computer technology," he wrote. "I enjoy new challenges and feel the time is right for me to make a change."[clxxiii]

It's not as though every aspect of 1970s progress in Alberta was detrimental to libraries. There were displays about banned books, instead of banned books. This was not the case everywhere. In South American countries like Argentina and Chile, in the 1970s, owning or carrying a book that contained subversive or revolutionary or counter-revolutionary content could mean arrest, detainment, even murder.[clxxiv]

In Alberta, challenged books have been less likely to be politically subversive. From time to time, we're upset by nudity, violence, or blasphemy. In the 1920s, the Edmonton Public Library board was often petitioned to remove *The Life of Mary Baker G. Eddy and the History of Christian Science* from the shelves. Karl Marx didn't always fare well. But compared to Nazi book burnings, thought control and murder in the Soviet Union under Stalin, the Taliban, Fidel Castro, North Korea, even Canada Customs, the suppression of free expression in Alberta was relatively mild. From 1963, the Edmonton Public Library had posted a statement of intellectual freedom on the walls of every building in the system.

Several books are challenged every year in Alberta. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Jewish groups in Edmonton challenged antisemitic tracts and books of holocaust denial on the shelves like *The International Jew: The World's Foremost Problem* and *The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion* by automaker Henry Ford. Incoming head librarian Penny McKee agreed the books were despicable but refused to remove them. The most famous instance wasn't in Edmonton but it was close. In the middle of the 1990s, then Alberta cabinet minister and future prime ministerial candidate Stockwell Day supported removing *Of Mice and Men*, by John

Steinbeck, from classrooms in Red Deer. “It bothers Christians,” Day said, “when the name of Jesus Christ is used in a blasphemous way.”[clxxv]

While this is probably true, it also strikes us as irrelevant. But we’re never far from this sort of thinking. After the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, D.C. on September 11, 2001, the U.S. government passed the Patriot Act, allowing agents to obtain records of books borrowed at public libraries.[clxxvi]

In the Edmonton Public Library, in the 1970s, teenagers gathered to talk frankly with doctors and police officers about whether it was a bad or merely a morally incorrect idea to try heroin. And, more importantly, it was becoming one of the centres of a growing literary culture.

Robert Kroetsch published *The Studhorse Man* in 1969, which brought the city to literary life. The Edmonton of *The Studhorse Man* is a city of lust and snow and magic. Hazard, the unforgettable hero of the novel, explores an exotic yet familiar Edmonton, hunting for his stallion, visiting the taverns and bedding a curator in the legislature building. It's a boozy, chaotic city of mysteries, a place where a cowboy, a poet or a curator could have a lot of fun.

“It has been argued,” Kroetsch wrote, in *The Studhorse Man*, “that to this day a few wild horses survive in the coulees and ravines of the North Saskatchewan River, there in the heart of the City of Edmonton.”[clxxvii]

Henry Kreisel, a legendary professor at the University of Alberta, had published *The Betrayal*, set in Edmonton, in 1964. But it was concerned with a man who had escaped from the Nazis, frightening European memories, more than the here and now of the city. *The Studhorse Man* was something else, an attempt to capture the spirit and the mythology of the place.

Today at the U of A, in the humanities building, you’ll find the Salter Reading Room. Every year there is a Salter Tea and the F.M. Salter Memorial Prize has honoured him since

1962. Professor Salter arrived as assistant professor of English Literature in 1939 and set the tone of the department, offering the first creative writing class in Canada and pushing students like Rudy Wiebe to write and publish stories set on the prairies — not New York City and London, cities that merely *seemed* more literary.

The longest-running writer-in-residence program of its kind launched at the University of Alberta in 1975. Matt Cohen. Elizabeth Smart, David Adams Richards, Trevor Ferguson and others were lured to Edmonton for a semester or two, and often inspired to write a poem or a story set on the banks of the mighty North Saskatchewan. Rudy Wiebe, whose writing career flourished along with his friend Kroetsch's, lived and still writes near the Strathcona Branch. Margaret Atwood lived and worked in Edmonton. Leonard Cohen wrote about *The Sisters of Mercy*, who lived just off-campus

Today, there are enough books about Edmonton that Heather Zwicker, a professor of English Literature at the U of A, can run a class about it — from *The Studhorse Man* to the poems of Alice Major, the African-Canadian comic book mashups of Minister Faust and a growing number of crime novels set in downtown Edmonton. A city staple, *Edmonton In Our Own Words* by Linda Goyette, was written in a sixth-floor office of the Edmonton Public Library.

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The Edmonton Public Library decommissioned its old bookmobiles and found the third incarnation of its long-ago innovation, the streetcar library: the booktrailer. Three of them,

crafted in Mond, Ontario, arrived in the mid-1970s to reach far-off communities unlikely to have their own libraries for some time.

Sprucewood and Strathcona Branches came close to disappearing, as the provincial government continued to study the situation. Neighbours in both communities fought to keep the libraries open, though public and media support was not always with them. Coverage in the *Edmonton Journal*, about keeping the Strathcona Branch opened, verged on the incredulous. Why would anyone want to keep such an old, drafty building?

One of the newspaper's most popular columnists at the time, Frank Hutton, was not a subtle operator.

"Let's be realistic!" he wrote, in February 1977. "There's a possibility that the Sprucewood Library, serving the Spruce Avenue and Norwood districts, may have to close. And if it does, who cares?"[clxxviii]

Closures were not so much possible as imminent when, in spring 1977, a month after a provincial budget speech with no good news for city libraries, a bit of money showed up. And a plan. When Horst Schmid made the surprise announcement, which raised library grants from $1 per capita to $1.50, Edmonton and Calgary reached the same level as rural Albertans.

"Schmid, long criticised for ignoring the financial plight of Alberta libraries, will be able to act as an off-season Santa Claus by announcing further funding for library services for Albertans, including long-sought grants for the establishment of province-wide regional library systems."[clxxix]

Even after the bump, Edmonton was ranked 27th in Canada for provincial support of the library system. Still, librarians and supporters of the library celebrated. For a few days.

Mayor Terry Cavanagh and others on city council had other ideas. If the City of Edmonton were to receive an extra $436,000 in funding for the library system, then the City of Edmonton would decrease its grant to the Edmonton Public Library by the same amount. The only way the library could advocate for its own money was to propose something new — automation.

"Library officials describe the current mechanization as in the 'horse and buggy' or, at best, the 'Model-T' league," the *Journal* reported. "It is constantly breaking down and requires a high degree of manpower. Automation will reduce the circulation division staff from 54 to 42, allow much greater control of the books in circulation and provide inter-library loans so fewer duplicates of books will be needed."[clxxx]

Vince Richards, a calm Englishman with 27 years of experience as a librarian in England and in Canada, was appointed the fifth director of the Edmonton Public Library that same spring, 1977. He did not have to move far. Richards was, at the time, head librarian at Red Deer College. He declared his intention to computerize the circulation system within a year or two.

In an interview with the *Saint John's Edmonton Report*, the precursor to the *Alberta Report*, the new director said he was prepared to deal with financial challenges — even a little excited about it.

"The soft-spoken Englishman has unconventional views about the future of libraries. 'Libraries have been reticent about beating the drums. But a recent survey shows more people use libraries in the U.S. than attend all sports and entertainment functions.' And he sees the libraries as a defense against the imposition of the values of secular humanism which are stressed in the school system. 'Here, at least, people have a choice,' he said."[clxxxi]

It wasn't choice over books, or even funding, that put the library back in the media again after several years of calm — even neglect. Every now and then Frank Hutton, the *Journal* columnist, would call out the library for allowing ne'er do wells to warm up on cold days. But the Edmonton Public Library had become such a neutral institution in the city that unless there was a funding crisis or a call to close one of the branches, there was little to say — or think — about the library.

This suited city council just fine.

Former alderman Cec Purves won the mayoral election in October, 1978. He had been on council when the library had gone through its union battles in the early 1970s, and board minutes suggest he found the whole thing tiresome. The library itself was not a priority for Purves or for the council; they weren't interested in increasing funding but they weren't bent on cutting budgets either.

Then, in March 1978, the central branch of the Edmonton Public Library became one of the biggest stories of a year that was supposed to be all about the Commonwealth Games.

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Edmonton artist Robert Dmytruk worked with the library to display some of his recent work: twenty nudes. Edmonton architect Gene Dub, then an alderman, described them simply: "Basically," he told the *Saint John's Edmonton Report*, "they are conventional paintings reminiscent of the turn-of-the-century Matisse style, not very earth-shaking."[clxxxii]

This was the view of Vince Richards, the library director, his staff and most of the board. Then, three weeks into the exhibition, acting board chair Terry Laing received complaints from unexpected sources. Letters of complaint had arrived from Alderman Olivia Butti and Mayor Cec Purves.

Purves demanded the board remove the "gross and vulgar" paintings immediately. At his weekly press conference, Purves told the *Journal* he had the power to replace the library board, if necessary.

"If that's what they call art, we're in trouble," Purves said, and declared that he would have no trouble censoring art if it were in the interest of the city.[clxxxiii]

Laing agreed and called a special board meeting. She moved to take the paintings down by noon the following day. One board member, Frank Perry, supported her. The others voted to keep the exhibition up, against the wishes of the mayor, even if it meant he replaced them all.

For weeks the story ran, and not just in Edmonton. The *Journal* did so well with the story it ran essays on censorship and freedom of expression, by authors and essayists like Myrna Kostash, for the next two months. Library director Richards and others were able to plug the issue back into the reason we have libraries — not to push the boundaries of expression, necessarily, but certainly to start and sustain debates.

"Here's a young guy trying to get started," said Alderman Gene Dub. "The mayor's being a little too strict and is cutting off his freedom of expression. These paintings are not even bordering on the obscene. We're too narrow in our moral view, and we may be doing more harm than good calling them pornographic."[clxxxiv]

Business was brisk in the library as long as the nudes were up, and by the end of March Dmytruk had sold several of them.

There were other experiments and bold changes in the late 1970s, but none so colourful. Library director Vince Richards and his team completed the computerization project; in 1979, Edmonton became the first city in Canada with a fully integrated computerized circulation system and catalogue. For the first time in history, the boards of the Edmonton Public Library and the Calgary Public Library met in person to share ideas and scheme up a way to pitch the province for more money. The library set up a "speaker's corner," an opportunity for citizens to stand atop a soapbox in the core of downtown and argue, shout, debate, practice the lost art of oratory. Few people used it, outside the Toastmasters and tabloid newspaper reporters looking for whimsical first-person accounts of failed ideas in action, and it closed. The smoking room in the downtown library shut down, now to the delight of newspaper columnists who had complained about the clientele it attracted.

It wasn't popular to everyone.

Vince Richards, the director, told the newspaper it was the direction all libraries were moving — not because smoking rooms were unhealthy, but because they needed more space for books. The people who used the smoking room felt they understood why it was shut down: to get rid of them. One woman, who did not want to use her name, told the *Journal* it was the only place she could go.

"'I can't stare at the four walls of my room all day,' she said, 'I wish there was someplace else to go but if they shut this place down where will people go to meet other people?'"[clxxxv]

The role of a library in a city was as debatable as ever: educational institution, lecture hall, arts and recreation facility, shelter, meeting place, idea incubator and, of course, that place with books.

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Alberta turned 75 in 1980, and the Edmonton Public Library wanted to celebrate. They might have thrown a cocktail party. The board might have instituted an Alberta writing prize. It seemed natural, at the time, to publish a book.

Who might write such a thing? Grant MacEwan had retired as Lieutenant Governor and he was actively writing histories. Robert Kroetsch always seemed game for a wacky assignment. The Métis author Phyllis Webb was writer-in-residence at the University of Alberta in 1979 and 1980; perhaps she could blend the province's deep and more recent history.

In the end, they decided to ask some of the city's most creative writers — kids — to contribute to a book. It was both arduous and wonderful for library staff to commission art and stories by Edmonton children. The book, called *75 and Growing*, had a print run of 2,000.

On October 9, the board launched "Library Lovers' Day," part of a public relations campaign to convince all three levels of government and citizens to support one of the city's most important institutions. Kids wore pins with a cartoon bookworm. Underneath it said: "certified library lover." The campaign was sweet, goofy, and utterly successful, the first in a continuing series of imaginative public relations strategies for the Edmonton Public Library, up to the cheeky campaign in the run-up to the centennial; on the purple library card I used to borrow many of the materials to write this book, it says, "Chicks dig big brains."

In his 1980 annual report, director Vince Richards wrote about a just-published Statistics Canada readership survey showing that "contrary to popular stereotyping, Edmonton is a very

literate city, using its bookstores and public libraries at a much higher rate than Alberta or Canada as a whole."[clxxxvi]

While Edmonton does suffer from a reputation problem, in 2013, illiteracy is not among the negative stereotypes about the city. Something has changed, at least in the imaginations of Edmontonians, since 1980.

The anniversary year was a high point for cultural investment in Alberta, and all of that scheming and arguing by library boards in Edmonton and Calgary paid off: the per capita provincial grant climbed from $1.00 per Edmontonian to $3.00. Two new branches, waiting patiently for years to launch, moved from idea to genuine planning: Millwoods and Castle Downs.

Today, the site of Castle Downs Town Square is a rather unglamorous strip mall, indistinguishable from others in the city. Nothing remains of the 1981 retail experience but since the launch of the subdivision this has been a crossroads and meeting place — with shopping on one corner and a park on the other side. The library was several blocks but directly north of Blatchford Field, the first airfield licensed in Canada — in 1929. In 2013 the airport is on the verge of transformation, from a small airport to an experiment in northern living; a super energy-efficient home to 30,000 people. Edmontonians are trying to decide whether to name this new community after former mayor Kenny Blatchford or to give it a new moniker altogether, with or without a nod to the area's aviation history. In true Edmonton fashion, much of the conversation around this has been lovingly sarcastic.

Lovingly sarcastic sums up the 1981 Castle Downs branch of the Edmonton Public Library. The posters, inviting Edmontonians to the grand opening, featured three and a half identical knights in armor, each one carrying a sword and a lollipop. The building itself featured

large front windows leaning into a sloped and bubbled glass roof. It was bright, which was lovely, and permeable: not so lovely. The building would endure constant leaks, mold and parking lot floods over its twenty year history.

Millwoods was the 1970s version of what is currently happening at the City Centre Airport, as it transforms into a residential community. One hundred years earlier, it was the Papaschase Indian Reserve; arguments continue to this day over the legality of the treaty that transferred ownership to the provincial government. But Millwoods represented the newest and best thinking in residential master planning, with looping roads that defied Edmonton's grid system when it was approved in 1971. Legends abound about families driving in and never coming out again. The community was built around a town centre and the Grey Nuns Hospital. The Millwoods Branch of the Edmonton Public Library, which opened in September 1982, was not originally at the centre of the centre.

The Millwoods Recreation Centre, with its signature wave pool, was another destination. The library board had debated the issue. Ever since the Second World War they had bet on shopping mall traffic to inject life and relevance into branch libraries. This was altogether different, to package swimming and lifting weights with lifting a book. The recreation centre, like everything else built in Edmonton since the 1960s, was a bunker — short on windows.

Once, the Mill Creek flowed uninterrupted into the southeastern master planned community that took its name. Today if you walk through the ravine as far as it will go you will come up at the border of a light industrial park. Walk south and southeast through the park, past car detailing shops and oilsands service businesses, and you will reach 75th Street. At the border of 75th Street and Whitemud Freeway, if the season is right, you can play a bit of mini golf, hit a few balls in the batting cage, or zip around a go kart track a few times.

Then, in one of the city's great transportation mysteries, you cross the bridge over the freeway and 75th Street becomes 66th Street. Enter Millwoods. There is, on the left, what would seem like the extension of Mill Creek if it had been allowed to flow naturally. It is a golf course. In the summer, the route down 66th Street past the Grey Nuns Hospital and the vast Mill Woods Town Centre is a meeting place of the natural and the artificial, the tree and the strip mall. The recreation centre, in the midst of its own reimagining today, is at 28th Avenue.

New library branches in recreation centres work well today. But in the 1980s the relationship between fitness and books was not nearly as powerful as the relationship between buying things and borrowing books.

It didn't have a terribly detrimental effect on overall circulation figures for the Edmonton Public Library at the time —especially after the recession hit in late 1981. Albertans have not created many enduring mythologies about themselves but they do love a good story. We like to blame the global economic shocks of the early 1980s, which resulted in low oil prices for much of the decade, on one man: Pierre Elliott Trudeau. The National Energy Program, which lasted from 1980 before its cancellation in 1986, didn't help matters. I was a kid at the time and I remember the delight in spelling out PETRO Canada as Pierre Elliott Trudeau Rips Off Canada.

No matter who was responsible for the recession, there was a recession. A vicious one in an economy that ran on oil. Inevitably, the high point of Alberta cultural investment ended up being just that. Edmonton Public Library director Vince Richards, and everyone else in the sector, was soon climbing down.

Still, he had a lot to brag about. "Traditionally, heavy demand is placed on libraries in times of economic hardship," Richards wrote, in the 1982 annual report.[clxxxvii] As we saw during the depression of the 1930s, this isn't always true. But it was certainly true in the 1980s,

especially after the city annexed enough land to double the geographical size of the city and increase the population by 9,000. The Centennial Library, in this era, was the single busiest library building in North America.[clxxxviii] Edmontonians borrowed massively, setting a system-wide 1982 record at 5,362,614 circulated items for a population of just over half a million. Records continued until 1984, when the city topped 7.5 million in circulated items.

"The panic and depression of 1912 gripped Edmonton in 1913," Richards wrote, about global economics, a growing city, and the library. "Downtown Edmonton was dying following an annexation of over fifteen square miles outside of the united Edmonton-Strathcona. This pattern seemed to be repeated in 1983, even in the Library... Nonetheless the Centennial Library remained the busiest single library building in North America, with a circulation of 2.6 million."[clxxxix]

Of course, the trouble with all of this was that Richards, as library director, was the leading advocate for more funding from the municipal and federal governments. If the library was successful despite severe budget cuts, what was the substance of his argument for operational increases? The abstract pitch, that libraries were brilliant educational institutions that transformed the city, meeting places, keepers of mythology... it didn't work so well if City Council or Treasury Board simply shrugged and said, "Yes, we agree, keep those circulation numbers climbing!"

There is little to remember of financial success in the 1980s, in the library system or anywhere else. The Oilers helped the city through those years, winning multiple Stanley Cups and building a sense of pride in Edmonton that would prove to be splendid, superficial. and unsustainable.

Some other pieces of more enduring civic pride were saved. After years of arguments that look charmingly absurd from 2013, the City of Edmonton and the Alberta Government committed to enhancing one of its architectural successes: that dark little Strathcona Library on Calgary Trail. The branch reopened in 1985 as a protected heritage building.

Almost every spare dollar, in the 1980s, went to upgrading every system in the library. Computers were no longer a clever time-saving tool. They were essential, making the difference between a dying library, a functioning library, and a thriving library. Despite the financial challenges, and pesky new systems coming out every few months, Edmonton Public Library was able to stay near or close to the top of automation in North America.

But like the municipal and provincial governments themselves, the Edmonton Public Library decided it could not rely on the direct and indirect effects of oil prices on the economy and government revenue.

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The board of the Edmonton Public Library, growing weary of fluctuating public fortunes, launched an endowment fund so corporations and citizens could contribute. When the provincial grant actually declined, in 1987, this strategy transformed from a lovely idea to an emergency. In 1988 the library would turn 75 and closing down two branches, firing staff, and decreasing services to the public didn't seem a correct way to celebrate.

Edmonton's capital development program helped with funds to renovate the Jasper Place Branch. The book sale brought in some money and a few foundations helped out with program grants. Late fines increased. Friends of the Sprucewood Library, in Norwood and Alberta Avenue, rallied to keep their library open and wrote stinging letters to the *Edmonton Journal* about the Don Getty government.

The letters worked as well as they ever do, and the celebrations started anyway. With 314,000 card-holders, more than half the population of the city, and the busiest main library in North America there was plenty to cheer. In March, 1988, the party started with a homecoming tea for current and past employees and board members. A magical mystery tour in May was a public party with celebrity guests and an exotic, story-book adventure featuring ethnic foods. A special anniversary library card went out to 35,000 people who registered as members and the library launched its first writer-in-residence program, welcoming prolific children's author Monica Hughes. The flawed location of the Mill Woods branch, a recreation centre, was rectified; it moved into Mill Woods Town Centre, a shopping mall down the street. Soviet poets and novelists arrived in the city as part of a cultural exchange called "East West Passage," which may or may not have contributed to glasnost and perestroika all around. Another idea, at the time, was to create a comprehensive and easy-to-access "image bank" that would document every aspect of the library system since its inception in 1913. This way, whoever compiled material for a centennial book, for example, in 2013, would have an easy time of it. Oh dear image bank. How I wish you had materialized.

Vince Richards, director for eleven years and overseer of a dramatic technological revolution in the system, sat back and predicted the future for an *Edmonton Journal* arts reporter.

Edmontonians should expect books in more languages as more people from around the world move to the city.

"Don't, however, anticipate the library will start stocking and lending CDs (compact discs)," wrote James Adams, now an arts reporter with the *Globe and Mail*. "It's sitting tight on the matter right now; although the demise of the LP seems imminent, Richards believes CDs, themselves, will soon be superseded by DAT (digital audio tape) just as videocassettes superseded videodiscs. Ironically, the library made a heavy investment in videodiscs in the early 80s and now has a collection of 8,000!"[cxc]

Nearing the end of his time as director, Richards was not afraid to provide a few statistics to the reporter: a bit of public shame for the library's anniversary year.

"Last year, for instance, the province reduced its assistance to libraries by $300,000, while in terms of per capita expenditure, Edmonton aldermen have allocated 'only' $18.48 — a statistic that puts Canada's fifth-largest city 24th among the country's 32 major libraries."[cxci]

Keith Turnbull, a local boy who had worked for Edmonton Public Library before taking off for Saskatchewan, was lured back to Edmonton in the anniversary year. He became the head of the main branch, and a liaison between the head office and the 13 community branches. His title, in those days, was deputy director of public services.

"It was a tough time for libraries, the eighties and nineties," he says. "People were always saying, 'Public libraries are going to die.' We'd hear it from politicians and bureaucrats, the people we had to rely on, 'You don't need a library! You can put a whole library on a disc. Who needs books?"[cxcii]

Turnbull remembers the system at that time as, not surprisingly, progressive and conservative at once. The library was progressive with technology. Maybe, in matters like

videodiscs, too progressive. Yet the system was not embracing the changing role of libraries in our communities. Not enough, anyway.

"A lot of the people who were there had been there a long time," he says. "You can't blame them. And it was discouraging."[cxciii]

The shelves needed replacing. So did the floors, carpets, roofs and ceilings and lights. But there was little money to do it. The budget for building maintenance was eight per cent less than it had been at the height of the recession. Municipal funding to the library had decreased 13.3 per cent from 1981 to 1989. Provincial funding declined 27.3 per cent. At the same time, use of the system increased 81 per cent.[cxciv]

In the summer of 1989, after 12 years as director, Vince Richards retired.

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The trustees of the Edmonton Public Library had two important jobs in late 1989 and early 1990: find a new director and find more money.

Doug Ross, the chair of board at the time, decided to take a risk. A new director would arrive at a library with a miserably low budget and an overall state summed up by Richards as "shabby." How could they recruit someone fabulous? Even worse, if they did recruit someone fabulous, would they expect this person to begin lobbying the government on day one?

They had frankly given up on the provincial government at the time, as provincial governments across the country had frozen their library budgets, but municipal funding statistics were bleak — even embarrassing.

The *Edmonton Journal* launched the story.

"Ross said between 1982 and 1988 library funding from the City of Edmonton has increased by only 7.2 per cent compared to increases of 61 per cent in Calgary, 118 per cent in Winnipeg, 38 per cent in Regina and 39 per cent in Saskatoon. Across Alberta municipal funding for libraries increased by 42 per cent."[cxcv]

Edmonton was at the bottom of the list.

The strategy worked. It didn't raise Edmonton terribly far up the list but it helped a little bit, raising the budget 8.8 per cent for 1990, or an extra $360,000.[cxcvi]

Job two, the fabulous new director: Penny McKee, chief executive officer of the Peterborough Library, arrived in Edmonton in June, 1990. Immediately, she set about doing precisely what leaders like Keith Turnbull had been calling for: she set about redefining the library and preparing for its future. If funders were apt to question its relevance, McKee and the Edmonton Public Library had to set about redefining relevance.

Its new vision didn't even use the word books.

"The purpose of the Edmonton Public Library is to help the people of Edmonton meet the challenges of the future by providing the widest access to the collective knowledge and culture of the world. The Edmonton Public Library will achieve this by collecting and organizing resources, by cooperating with other institutions and community groups, and through the aggressive use of technology."[cxcvii]

McKee was a bright, and bright-faced, manager. It's difficult to find a photograph of her in the informal Edmonton Public Library "image bank" where she isn't smiling. Before her four years as CEO in Peterborough, she had been chief librarian in Aurora and a branch head in Toronto. She had served as president of the Ontario Library Association and arrived in Edmonton with an air of fate about her. In a small library in Lakefield, Ontario, she had bought a raffle ticket to support the place and won a painting of Wayne Gretzky.

An original, in oils.

"I guess that was the sign that I'd be coming to this city," she told *Ministream* magazine, a couple of months after her arrival. Her plan was to hang The Great One in her office, as a bit of a good luck charm in the fundraising game before her.[cxcviii]

The library appointed a director of development, a full-time fundraiser to increase the $16 million per year budget. Her initial attempts at lobbying the municipal government were not terribly successful. Reluctantly, she retired the bookmobile — a global movement that started in Edmonton in 1941 with the streetcar library — when city council decided it wasn't worth a seven per cent budget increase to keep the service running.

"You know, that's the first memory that pops into my mind, when I think about the library," says Bill Smith, Edmonton mayor from 1995 to 2004. "That old bookmobile rumbling through the neighbourhood. It was a diesel bus and blew this terrible black, smelly smoke everywhere. But you knew it was coming and you wanted to get in there. It got a lot of us kids hooked on books at an early age."[cxcix]

The failure to secure more money from city council did, however, inspire some creativity. In December, 1990, alderman Ken Kozak said if McKee and the library were in such a terrible financial position they ought to start charging user fees: say, 25 cents per item.

"Free to All" was the slogan carved over the front door of the Edmonton Public Library. Within a year of arriving in the city, McKee had to defend a rather sacred principle. The argument, once it started, was difficult to stop. Certain aldermen wanted a better answer than "it's always been this way" or "it wouldn't be right."

Doug Main, the culture minister in the Alberta Government at the time, even threatened to pull back funding as long as libraries bought books simply for entertainment and recreation purposes, like softcover romance novels.

McKee read the Alberta government's own vision statement back to it: that libraries "provide culture, recreation, research opportunities and a bridge between the people of the community and the resources of that community and beyond."

She wondered aloud about Minister Main's ability to discern between information and entertainment.

"Who's to judge what is entertainment to one and intellectual stimulation to another?" McKee said to the *Edmonton Journal*. "Shakespeare was popular in his day, and if he was living today he'd probably be one of those authors not acceptable to Doug Main."[cc]

The 25-cent problem would not go away quite so easily. Petitions went up in the Main Branch and in other branches across the city, opposing Kozak's suggestion. Kozak demanded they come down. When he asked who had drafted the petition, McKee said she had done it when a patron had called in and suggested it.

Kozak was furious that McKee had written it.

"What's more, Kozak said, the drive for signatures was helped by library staff who 'in the absence of a neon sign' were encouraging patrons to 'at least head in that direction.' For McKee to go and actually promote a petition 'in total opposition to what I was doing I found

somewhat offensive, in bad taste, and possibly overexerting one's authority as an administrator.'"[cci]

All of this may have been true but it made McKee an extremely popular boss in an extremely short time, a courageous defender of readers' interests above all else. She was a new sort of manager, an activist and a director and a colleague at once.

The circulation manager during the McKee years, said she was also a tough leader — demanding a lot. "She changed our culture in that we [became] a much more forward-thinking and positive organization," circulation manager Val Solash told the *Edmonton Journal*. "I had 60 staff. She knew all of their names inside of the first two weeks that she was here. She was the kind of leader who stopped and talked to the kids who were putting books on the shelves."[ccii]

What the Kozak and Main episodes showed is that McKee's ambitions, to expand the library system and make sure it keeps up with technological innovations, were impossible to achieve without finding more money. Not annual book sale money but real, sustainable money.

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In 1993, Edmonton was the last city in the province without a user fee in its libraries. It had given up the practice in 1972, when patrons paid $2 per year for the right to borrow. The problem with Kozak's 25-cent suggestion was it added up. Not everyone, and certainly not poor users, carried money. The beauty of a library, as an agent of change, is that it works for everyone, rich or poor. As he often noted, Carnegie would not have become Carnegie if he had not been invited into a free library at a crucial moment in his education.

The mayor in the early 1990s, Jan Reimer, confided in director Penny McKee and then stated publicly that it was unlikely the library would receive the sort of increase it needed, at least from city council. Ralph Klein, the new premier, was certainly not voted in on a "spend more public money on cultural institutions" ticket.

To find an extra $1.4 million a year, McKee and the library board decided to roll out a user fee. Edmontonians on social assistance or who claimed to have a low income signed a declaration to exempt themselves, and children under 18 borrowed for free. Everyone else would pay a $12 annual fee.

"We know our customers very well," McKee said at the time, "and they tell us what they want. They want more services and they're willing to pay for them. Considering what you get at the library, $12 is a bargain."[cciii]

Not everyone liked the idea. There was some debate in city council and the *Edmonton Journal* editorial board suggested closing down a branch or two — Strathcona, again — or maybe cutting out video rentals instead.

But it was a prescient move. Friends of the Edmonton Public Library launched in 1993, as an independent, not-for-profit way to advocate for more money or even abstract political and philanthropic support. But new money was not on its way. The Klein Government tried to remove libraries from "core services" into a cultural industry portfolio, like a theatre or a festival. Provincial funding, from this point, would come from lottery money instead of general revenue. McKee joined the president of the Alberta Library Association at the time, Linda Cook, to denounce the changes.

The Klein Revolution was both popular and unstoppable. But the lobbying worked. Gary Mar, the minister of community development at the time, made a successful pitch to Treasury Board to keep libraries as core services.

"Thanks to Penny, we survived the worst of the Klein years," says Keith Turnbull, deputy director of the library in the 1990s, and the one in charge of finding money. "We did a review when Gary Mar was minister, and he was certainly supportive — morally supportive. But it was hard to go any farther. The funding was relatively poor compared to other libraries in Canada. Jan Reimer and Bill Smith were both supportive, but they were unable to do much. And even though there weren't massive cuts there certainly weren't any increases, provincially."[cciv]

This battle to improve or even lead, in an atmosphere of stagnant revenue, defined McKee's time as director. Many of the expansion plans she schemed up, in the 1990s, would not come to life until the turn of the century.

Still, somehow, she found ways to expand. The last branch library the city had constructed was in 1982 in Mill Woods. Constructing a new branch, in the mid-1990s, seemed an impossible dream.

But in 1996, a new branch opened in the west end of the city — at the Lessard Shopping Mall at 6104-172nd Street. It had long been an underserved part of the city, the expanding western suburbs that now bump against Enoch Cree Nation on the far side of Anthony Henday Drive. Again, the library decided their best bet was in a mall — this time a strip mall. It shared space, at the time, with a Chinese restaurant and a convenience store. Today, the branch and the Chinese restaurant and the convenience store are gone. It is now one of the biggest mosques in the city, a block away from Talmud Torah, Edmonton's 101-year-old Jewish public school, and across the street from a Ukrainian Orthodox Church.

The best route to the Lessard Branch is on foot, through the river valley and up a steep set of stairs into the neighbourhood of Wolf Willow. The houses are large in Wolf Willow, many of them mansions. You pass the orthodox Beth Israel synagogue and turn left on 170th Street, past a strip mall with a Starbucks, a Sorrentino's Restaurant, a Husky gas station, and a bright kosher food store that bounces with Israeli pop music. Walk south along the sidewalk and turn right at the end of the street.

Today, a food store and deli is the entry point to what was once the home of the Lessard Branch. The best Lebanese sandwiches in the city are in this building but the west-end library — the Lois Hole branch — is several blocks north of here, in a stunning building that Penny McKee could not have imagined in her era of financial restraint.

Stanley Milner, one of the greatest champions in the history of the Edmonton Public Library, took McKee and the board up on an offer in 1996. The library he helped build had been called the Main Branch, the Downtown Branch, and the Centennial Library but none of these was definitive. In a hunt for funds, McKee and the board researched other library systems in North America and hit upon naming rights. It had been standard behaviour for years in sports facilities and entertainment complexes — see the Francis Winspear Centre for Music on the corner — but relatively new to libraries.

And this was far more than a cheque for $250,000. Milner the oil executive was just as well known, in the community, for his philanthropy. The tales of his fights with Mayor William Hawrelak were legendary, and the library was one of their battlefields. He grew up with libraries and, as his success in business grew, he chose the library as one of his benefactors — as one of his heroes, Andrew Carnegie, had done. If not for Milner, the pretty old Carnegie Library on

MacDonald Drive would have been torn down for the sake of progress and it would have been replaced by a 1960s version of the room above a liquor store, where the downtown branch began.

Today, a few variations remain but most Edmontonians call it the Stanley Milner Branch or the Milner Library, one of the two. My kids just call it "the Stanley Milner." And in its centennial year, as Mayor Stephen Mandel and city council dance with the library board and the current President and CEO of the Edmonton Public Library, Linda Cook, about the future look and feel of the downtown branch it's certain the name will never change.

Milner wrote the first cheque and headed up the committee to find a million and a half dollars to build three new branches. Despite supporters on city council like Michael Phair and Brian Mason, municipal funding of the Edmonton Public Library had dropped about $700,000 in two years. Since the Mill Woods branch had opened, the population of the city had grown 15 per cent and library use in the city had grown 44 per cent. McKee said, in 1996, that the fourth busiest library system in Canada ran on 20 to 30 per cent less than any other system of similar size.[ccv]

Enough money came in to build one branch, maybe two, beginning with a new Woodcroft library. And it came with plenty of controversy, as residents argued with the library board and city council about whether or not to relocate from the Westmount Mall area to the Edmonton Space and Science Centre.

It was, in short, a tough time to be the director of the Edmonton Public Library. For this reason and others, Penny McKee decided to step down. A columnist at the *Edmonton Journal* at the time, Susan Ruttan, summed up the atmosphere in November, 1996.

> Last week I went looking for a copy of Robert Graves' 1929 book, *Goodbye to All That*. I expected to find this classic in the public library, not a bookstore.

In fact, it wasn't in the downtown library (a branch library has a copy). It was in Audrey's Books.

Maybe Edmonton has great bookstores because it has a threadbare public library. Which is fine for those with money to buy books; those who don't gave it need a good library.

To give you a picture of how we rate, the City of Edmonton ranks 30th out of 35 among Canadian cities in its spending on public libraries. In money spent on reading materials per capita, Edmonton Public Library ranks 28th out of 36 cities. That ranking is unlikely to improve, since the freeze in the library's 1997 grant proposed in the draft city budget will mean a new cut in books and magazines bought.

Edmonton's public library is relatively well-used — it ranks 13th in books circulating per capita — but it's 27th in average salary and benefits.

We are in a time when grand old institutions are being battered. The public library, one of the grandest, is not immune.

Edmonton's public library system has had it rougher than most. Being in a less-than-rich city and a penny-pinching province, it's had cuts in city grants and an unending freeze in provincial grants. Meanwhile, the cost of books and magazines goes up and up.

Think of what a public library is. It's a place where anyone — six-year-old child, immigrant, homeless person — can learn about thousands of things, for free. The creation of public libraries in the last century meant knowledge ceased to be a privilege of the higher-ups and became a right of every citizen.

Now, bit by bit, it's being chipped away.

Edmonton's public library was never one of the fat cats, even before the 1990s cutbacks hit.

Penny McKee, the outgoing director of the library, thinks that gives us an advantage. Edmonton Public Library has long experience with doing with less, she argues, so it's handled the budget cuts of recent years with greater ease than some more used to big budgets.

I'm not so sure. As a relative newcomer to Edmonton I'm shocked by the $12 annual membership fee being charged.

That's a whopping amount, twice the fee in Calgary. And frankly, any fee is objectionable. Reading and learning are a public good, not something which should be taxed.[ccvi]

The future was looking miserable for the Edmonton Public Library, and everyone seemed to be admitting it. Policy-makers, dizzy with excitement over information technology and the internet, publicly questioned the relevance of the institution — and not only in Edmonton.

Keith Turnbull, who was deputy director in the 1990s, still builds up an uncommon growl in his voice when he remembers making the counter-argument, on an almost daily basis, to someone declaring the impending death of the library.

"It's not dying! It's a living, breathing entity and it's always changing. It's one of the last public spaces we have left. It's not a mall. Go to the Milner library at lunch and you'll see a lawyer next to a homeless person. It's a commons."[ccvii]

Penny McKee, the leader who had encouraged a feisty culture in the Edmonton Public Library, retired at the end of 1996. Her replacement was a friend and collaborator, just as feisty. Six years earlier, McKee had survived a bout of breast cancer. When the cancer returned, shortly after her retirement, it was a devastating blow to her friends and colleagues in the library system. She died in the palliative care ward of the Grey Nun's Hospital in May, 1997.

"She really was a woman of vision in terms of library service for Edmonton," Jim Campbell, chair of the library board, said at the time. "She was very strong, very forceful in doing the right thing for the library."[ccviii]

The second branch she helped build, in the expanding community of Abbotsfield opened in September 1997 with her name on it: the Penny McKee Branch of the Edmonton Public Library.

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At about the time Linda Cook was graduating high school, in Bonnie Doon, she won a short story contest. It was prestigious enough that the newspaper covered it. Cook remembers the headline in the *Edmonton Journal*: "Girl wins fiction prize."[ccix]

She wasn't one of those young people who travel the world aimlessly, after graduation, trying to figure out what to do with her life. She entered the University of Alberta for a BA in English literature. From there she took a library science degree and entered the workforce as a librarian: first at the Misericordia Hospital library and then with the Government of Alberta.

Librarians, in the 1970s, were moving out of the traditional library and into government and the corporate world. It was a fascinating time to come of age as a librarian, as institutions — Cook remembers — "were beginning to realize how important it was to have somebody who knew how to process and dispense information."[ccx]

She moved out of government to lead the library system for the Yellowhead region, and worked on her master's degree. She had worked with Penny McKee and other librarian-administrators in the province, to build a united voice for more government funding and to seek other more modern solutions to the old funding problem.

Ask anyone who knows Cook and you hear the same thing: she is and has always been a diplomat in the Canadian tradition, a practitioner of "soft power."

In her introductory interview with the *Edmonton Journal*, after taking the job in January, 1997, said, "I don't have [children], so I was never juggling that type of thing, and I was really able to concentrate on my career."[ccxi]

Her career, since that interview, has been astonishing.

While the Edmonton Public Library could look back and talk about innovations and moments of leadership and success — the streetcar library, technological innovation, heavy

circulation in otherwise troubling years — the system was in miserable shape in 1997. McKee had done a marvelous job, setting up a plan and a vision for the future, but it was difficult for anyone to imagine at that time that any of these plans could make it out of the realm of fairy tale. The system had grown, modestly, even as funding levels had fallen. If the Edmonton Public Library had an advantage in 1997, as McKee noted in her interview with Susan Ruttan, it was in its culture of doing more with less — hardly something to brag about.

Cook had already heard, by 1997, that the internet was going to make libraries irrelevant. Of course, she didn't agree. Early on, she hinted at what she saw a public library becoming in the next fifteen years.

"They are such a viable part of the community, and not just because of the entertainment value and going to the library with your children. I think they are viable economically as well. So many people say: how can they compare to the fire department or to the police department? But if you really look at it and you have a public library and people have access to it, the trite expression is that it's the university of the people. Anybody can use it. I think it provides people with a place they can go and learn about anything they want to. I think it keeps people off the streets; kids, they have a place they can go."[ccxii]

Keith Turnbull remembers the late 1990s, the time of Cook's arrival, as turbulent and hopeful at once.

"Linda came in at a time of radical change," he says. "We really needed someone to consolidate things. Linda wanted to know what was really going on, as soon as she arrived. She didn't want me to be a yes man. Well, that's hard for me anyway."[ccxiii]

It had been some time since Cook had acted, on a day by day basis, as a librarian. So she taught at the University of Alberta and at MacEwan to "keep herself grounded," to stay in touch

with up-and-coming librarians and the latest thinking. A librarian who grew up with Cook, Pat Cavill, who now lives in Calgary, speaks frankly about her.

"Well, just look at the library when she came in," says Cavill, whose father — an immigrant from England — dropped out of school when he was twelve and educated himself in the Idylwylde Branch of the Edmonton Public Library. "It wasn't in the best shape, financially. But Linda is so smart: smart about funding, smart about politics, a smart manager. She basically turned it into the best library system in the country. It has to be! Ask anyone! She's such a good leader, and humble. Of course, it doesn't hurt that she's a beautiful woman."[ccxiv]

Despite all of her talents, little of the Edmonton Public Library's 21st Century successes seemed possible in early 1997 — when most of us had to agree it was "threadbare."

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In 2000, Cook celebrated her first major success: the Riverbend branch of the Edmonton Public Library. Of the $3 million for the project, an unprecedented and fairly astonishing $1 million came from the public — from fundraising outside of government sources.

The library opened in May, with an air of hopefulness. Michael Phair was an eloquent supporter on city council, and Mayor Bill Smith was moved by public support for the library whenever budget cuts were coming down, but Cook hadn't yet made any breakthroughs with the city. By the time the Riverbend branch opened, Edmonton still ranked 31 out of 35 major public libraries in Canada, in support from the municipal government.

"That's been a bit of an issue in the last few elections," city councillor Larry Langley admitted, at the opening of the library. "But the fact remains that there are only a few dollars to go around."[ccxv]

After fourteen stagnant years the three newest branches, in Lessard, in Abbotsfield in the northeast, and now in Riverbend in the southwest, extended the reach of the Edmonton Public Library out into the ever-expanding city. More and more Edmontonians were buying new houses, not yet built, in new neighbourhoods. While schools and other public institutions were difficult to manage, as these communities went up, a new sort of strip mall arrived with them. The new branch was tucked into Riverbend Square, indistinguishable at first from the commercial buildings — a sushi restaurant, a lingerie boutique, cafés, Booster Juice, Safeway and some banks. Its immediate neighbour was Blockbuster Video; at a time when politicians were predicting the demise of the public library, no one foresaw the end of the video store. I walked to the Riverbend Branch inefficiently, by way of the High Level Bridge and across the University of Alberta campus, down into Hawrelak Park, over a footbridge and the Quesnell Bridge, and down into the Whitemud Ravine. There are many transitions, from city to forest to park and city and forest, ending in a neighbourhood built for cars. With all of the generous cul de sacs, I found myself lost several times. Reaching the library was glorious — as it should be. On a late weekday afternoon it was busy and pleasant inside, somehow quiet and loud at once.

Riverbend is a wealthy subdivision. Much of what Cook discussed, when she took the job in early 1997, was about community. In Riverbend, we define community much differently than on Winston Churchill Square, where her office is on the third floor.

Part of Cook's success, as an administrator and as a community leader, is that she perfectly understands the culture of the city. She grew up here. She knows that, based on the

context, she will shake someone's hand one day, hug her the next day, and address her formally on the third day. Edmonton is strange, and delightfully so.

In 2001, Cook went quietly public with a plea for libraries. The last major cut to libraries from the provincial government was in 1994, the same year Edmonton Public Library introduced its $12 annual fee. Since that time, the average price of books had gone up significantly — 27 percent just since 1999. As much as the library tried to put a happy face on the annual fee, memberships had declined since its introduction. Anyone who asked for a free membership received it, but that almost never happened.

"People are proud," Cook told *Edmonton Journal* columnist Ron Chalmers. Some people who might have borrowed in the past, with a library card, only looked at material in the branches. When the Banff Public Library did away with their fees, membership jumped 40 per cent.

"Edmonton could eliminate fees," Chalmers wrote, in February 2001, "update its collection, increase programming and expand its hours — if the provincial government would budget just $12 million to double its library funding across Alberta."[ccxvi]

At the time, the Klein government was working toward retiring the debt. Not the infrastructure debt but the dollars-and-cents debt. The phrase "just $12 million" might have inspired some chuckling around the table at the next Treasury Board meeting. The beauty of Cook's strategy, in 2001, was that a *Journal* columnist asked for the money on behalf of the community — not Linda Cook.

Things started to improve, but not quickly. Cook convinced the city to slowly increase its budget from the tax levy, if only according to inflation. Still, by city budget season in 2002,

Edmonton Public Library was looking at shutting down one of the branches. The city manager had proposed an increase of 4.1 per cent for 2003.

It wasn't enough. The library board debated the issue and made an announcement. With a 4.1 per cent increase, a branch would have to close: Sprucewood, Abbotsfield, Calder or Strathcona. Leaders in those communities mobilized.

"I remember vividly what happened anytime we talked about cutting funding or closing a branch," says Bill Smith, who was mayor at the time. "You just couldn't do it. Not when Linda was in charge."[ccxvii]

Cook made her arguments. City council, presented with the option of putting a bit more money in the pot or closing a branch, added $224,000 to the 2003 library budget.

"We looked at everything," Cook said at the time, utterly relieved. "We looked at raising membership fees. We looked at reducing library materials, closing for a small period of time, but the problem is we need to make the work go away. When you close for a day or a couple of days, (people) just come back in droves on the day that you're open."[ccxviii]

Her pitch, the plea she had made, resonated with council.

Keith Turnbull, who worked with her then, said Cook began to succeed in this realm beyond anyone's imagining.

"She really excels in dealing with political bodies, particularly with city council. She's great at understanding and explaining what the library does for the community. It's hard to say no to her!"[ccxix]

A few months later, it happened again. The provincial government increased its library funding by almost a million dollars, bringing the level back to where it had been in 1993 — before the cuts.

"If you're feeling curmudgeonly, you could point out that in real, adjusted-for-inflation dollars, libraries are still farther behind than they were a decade ago," wrote Paula Simons, who had become city columnist at the *Journal*. "But Linda Cook, Edmonton's director of libraries, isn't feeling churlish. Delighted would be closer to it... she and her board are still figuring out where the money will go."

"'This is good news, and quite frankly we weren't expecting it,' [Cook] says. 'We've been lobbying for 10 years for an increase in the provincial library grant. We're very pleased the government is going in the right direction now.'"[ccxx]

Simons, who has charted the city's growth and ambitions in the *Edmonton Journal* in the last ten years, had noted the fragrance of change in the air. Edmonton was still below the other major Canadian cities in library funding, but not for long. The notion that library spending, cultural spending, was at the bottom of a list of other more important priorities was beginning to crumble. There would be another increase for the library in the 2005 budget, under a new mayor — Stephen Mandel.

When Mandel was elected in October, 2004, he assigned portfolios to the councillors — areas of specialization. One was missing: culture. Arts leader Fil Fraser was horrified that Mandel, who had spoken of culture during his campaign, had forgotten to include it. I was a journalist at the time, and I walked over to City Hall to ask Mayor Mandel about arts and culture, and Fraser's exasperated letter to the editor. How could he have forgotten culture?

"Forgotten it?" he said. "I kept that one for myself."[ccxxi]

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Stephen Mandel, who grew up in Windsor, doesn't pretend he was the world's biggest reader as a kid. He was a maniac for sports. But his mother was a reader, and instilled in him a deep respect for literature and for the arts. He met his future wife, Lynn Mandel, a former professional dancer, at the University of Windsor in the early 1970s. When they moved to Edmonton she taught dance at Grant MacEwan for ten years. Her husband was a developer but she never let him stray terribly far from her world — from those lessons he had learned from his mother — and the sports maniac transitioned into the biggest political champion for arts and culture in Edmonton's history.

When you talk to people close to the Edmonton Public Library, they always say a variation of the phrase, "Mandel changed everything." Of course, he didn't work alone. Edmontonians were ready for this, for a conversation about potholes *and* culture.

"I'll admit it, when I came into office I was quite a bit more conservative about all this stuff," Mandel says. "And I remain conservative. But supporting arts and culture, supporting libraries, it's never a waste of resources. It makes us money: we're a more attractive city, a destination for investment and for people. And the library: we're bringing in people from around the world every day. It makes our city great. The library is the place where they can learn what we're all about, where they can become Canadians and Edmontonians."[ccxxii]

Of course, even with a supportive mayor and city council, if the library doesn't have an eloquent and passionate spokesperson any increases would be unjustifiable.

"Here's the thing," says Mandel. "When Linda comes in, we say: hide your wallets! She is so good at making the case for the library, and she's done such a great job there. It really is a source of pride for the city."[ccxxiii]

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In the summer of 2009 my family moved to France for a year. A year is just long enough to begin feeling like an immigrant instead of a tourist. There are rules and customs to learn. There is paperwork. My wife and I had grown up in a country of newcomers with very little understanding what it was like. We could have isolated ourselves in France, or spent time with ex-pat British and Americans, but we decided instead to live like immigrants. We have two daughters, and they were three and one at the time. In France, school starts at two. Avia, our oldest daughter, was obliged to go to school.

It took her a month and a half to learn French, to develop friendships. While we had spent time at the library in Edmonton, both our local Strathcona Branch and at "Stanley Milner" downtown, it was nearly always to find books. In France, we understood what a library does — or can do. It was different from a high street or a market or a café. It was different from a museum.

The library, in our French city, was a magnet for *les étrangers*. The library was a public institution that turned foreigners into French people: it gave us the language, the resources, the activities, the cultural cues we needed to feel at home in a new city, a new country. Best of all, it

was the only place in Douarnenez where I could ask someone an elemental question about French life without feeling stupid.

Librarians, in France and in Edmonton, long to help people change their lives in some way. Carnegie was right.

Mayor Stephen Mandel goes back to this as the library's most important mission — a cultural gateway. Assimilation isn't the right word. It's more an invitation. The Edmonton Public Library is the best place in the city to learn how to be an Edmontonian.

The 2004 municipal election coincided with a global building and renovation boom, for libraries. It seems strange, considering the number of people who had been questioning their relevancy since the early 1990s, that architectural marvels are going up all over the world with the word "library" on their signs. Inside and out, few of these buildings resemble what Antonio Panizzi had in mind in 1836 when he spoke of the "emphatically British library." Books are only part of the equation. With nearly every one of these projects, certainly the successful ones, it seems cities and countries are building public institutions that sum up or represent their culture.

The little Library and Culture House in Vennesla, Norway, population 12,000, looks and feels like its land and history, the character of its people. The new central branch of the Vancouver Public Library feels like Vancouver's modern aspirations and its glassy sense of self. It's sister city, Seattle, attempts something similar — with funkier design. The Royal Danish Library in Copenhagen, another city of rain and water, tilts and undulates. The Stuttgart City Library is clean and cool, a representation of a modern German man or woman. The National Library in Belarus comes closest to Edmonton's northern spirit. Four young people in Villaneuva, Colombia, all of them in their twenties, won a competition to design a small city library by using local wood and stones. The building sings of its place.

The New York Public Library, which is the image that comes to mind when we think of iconic North American libraries, with its lions out front, is one of the best representations of that city and its ambitions. Today it feels like a museum, with gallery space on the main floor and a constant flow of tourists with cameras. It's not nearly the most beautiful space in a city crammed with them, but if feels like a mini-version of the city — its past and its present and its future. Bryant Park, behind the library, is a leafy sanctuary from the metropolis — a giant outdoor reading room. There is a curated space in Bryant Park, operated by the library, to sit and take a coffee, to browse from a selection of newspapers, magazines, and books. In the 1970s Bryant Park was one of the darkest, dingiest, and most dangerous corners of the city. Today it's an extension of the library — of library-ness. It's open, calm, civilized, yet still essentially New York.

Whatever a library is, today, it is of its place. It cannot be duplicated.

Still, we wonder why. Why go to all the trouble if books — and therefore libraries — are doomed?

Because they aren't doomed.

"The mayor and council understand this is a way to build the city," says Linda Cook, in her third floor office of the Stanley Milner Branch. "That said, we can't rely on traditional arguments, on what's been done in the past, to support the work we're doing today and in the future."

Since Cook took over the leadership of the Edmonton Public Library, its annual budget has more than doubled — less that $20 million to more than $40 million per year. From her first day on the job, she says her focus has been on customer service. That's the quasi-literary trick of

empathy: figuring out the customers and what they want. Giving them what they want before they know they want it.

I have spoken to hundreds of people about the library, putting this book together. We all come to life when someone asks, "What is the role of the library in the age of the internet?" Almost no one, today, several years into the internet age, thinks it's an irrelevant institution.

What Linda Cook and her staff have been doing, since 1997, is redefining customer service as community service. Access to books changed Andrew Carnegie's life. Books remain one of our culture's most essential and enduring resources, but if they aren't central to the lives of most Edmontonians we have to be honest about it and adapt. If we set aside nostalgia, how can the modern library continue to change lives?

The outgoing chair of the Edmonton Public Library board of trustees says community service is flexible. Every branch serves its community differently.

"We have been, in the last ten years at least, cutting-edge in Canada," says Brent McDonough. "One example is RFID [radio frequency identification]. The self check-out. It's freed up our staff, who would otherwise check out books, to spend time with our customers."

Today, when you walk into the Stanley Milner Branch, at least one librarian stands in the central hall on the main floor. It is usually a woman and she is always smiling.

"Can I help you?" she says.

And you are tempted to tell her yes. You are worried about the economy, about your company, your children and the progress of their education, about the environment, the architectural possibilities for this building, about your new novel's prospects, about growing old. She would, with scant hesitation, direct you to the correct reference material — in book or online form — to answer or at least help you explore the question.

Cook remembers the day she presented the idea of RFID to city council. It would require a $6 million investment, half from the City of Edmonton and half from the Government of Alberta. Someone had to commit first. She had made her presentation and it looked like the councillors were unconvinced by this community service idea. What would librarians do, if they weren't checking books in and out? Councillors finished their debate and Cook walked across the square to her office. It was evening by now, dark outside. She continued to listen to the debate by radio even as she put on her coat and turned off the light. And then one of the councillors sighed and said, "Can we have one last look at the library proposal?"[ccxxiv]

The idea bloomed.

Jared Tkachuk, an outreach worker in the library, helps the homeless Edmontonians who congregate in the building. And he isn't alone. Colin Inglis is a retired teacher in Edmonton, roaming downtown to help homeless people off the street. I see him nearly every day in the library, helping someone get identification or just listening.

"Library experts from across the world are watching what we are doing," says city councillor Don Iveson, who has served on the board of trustees, at the Sugarbowl café. "It's absolutely something we should be proud of."[ccxxv]

There isn't another public space in the city quite like the library. We have city hall, and community leagues, but they're simply spaces. No one stops you with a smile and asks how they can help. The community-led services philosophy pioneered at the Edmonton Public Library operates inside and outside the walls of the branches; more and more of the librarians aren't in the library at all. As for the building itself, what it is today is not necessarily what it will be tomorrow. McDonough calls it "Thinkering," allowing the Edmonton Public Library to experiment with its role in the lives of citizens.

"It's a community hub that reinvents itself all the time, and it's active, adaptable," says Iveson. "At 3:00 in the afternoon it can be a place for the Cambodian community coming in to do a workshop on financial literary — led by a reference librarian who's an expert in that. Then at 4:00 a group can come in to reconnect with their Cree language roots. It's versatile, an open space, and it's often a partnership."[ccxxvi]

Both McDonough and Iveson talk about growing up in Edmonton and the role of the library in their early lives. McDonough remembers the futuristic chairs of the Stanley Milner Branch, when it first opened, and the smell of the Bookmobile when it would come through his neighbourhood. Iveson's local was the Southgate Branch, when it was still in the mall's basement. They would go as a family, and not just to take out books. It was a once-a-week destination.

"I took out the space shuttle operator's manual thirty or forty times," he says. "I thought I would be an astronaut. And today, my son goes to Milner once a week, for the programming. Then he stays for the books and the literacy games on the computer. He never wants to leave."

Some of us are counted more than once, of course, but there were fourteen million total visits to the Edmonton Public Library in 2011. With a metro population of one million, it's a clear sign of the library's continued — if evolving — relevance.

"I was enormously lucky," says Iveson. "My parents valued books and education, literacy. That isn't the case for everyone. One in six children in Edmonton grows up in poverty. Where literacy fits into the equation, for some of these families, I don't know. Think about early literacy, pre-kindergarten. There's almost no judgment in libraries and I can imagine any kind of Edmontonian having the same kinds of experiences I had as a kid. Where there is no

encouragement at home, or worse, when there is abuse at home: the library is a refuge. An outlet, a surrogate, a safe space."[ccxxvii]

Iveson talks about libraries as analogous to health care: it is with us from birth to death. We never outgrow our need for libraries, or we shouldn't. Keeping the institution relevant, as a community service and as a repository for a shifting but authentic local culture, is always about changing lives. For Andrew Carnegie and Charles Dickens and Thomas Hardy, whose *Jude the Obscure* is about a working-class boy who longs to be a scholar, the library transported us from one social realm to another. Today the methods may have changed but the dreams have not. Libraries are in the business of making us better people, elevating our possibilities and — through literature — our spirits.

The Edmonton Public Library launches Edmontonians.

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The Strathcona Branch, after surviving innumerable attempts on its life, expanded in 2006. Its gardens were restored and its upstairs auditorium became a Fringe venue, often devoted to historical plays set in Edmonton. On a summer or winter Saturday, the spirit of the place extends into the farmer's market and it's a resonant place year round, attached to McIntyre Park with its well-used gazebo and the theatre district beyond.

In 2008, the Lessard Branch closed and the lovely Lois Hole Library opened in Collingwood. It was the most aesthetically pleasing branch to be built since the Carnegie building, the most thoughtful, the most authentically Edmonton: a model for future projects. Honouring the late lieutenant-governor, author, and super-gardener went beyond name recognition. There is a bronze statue of Lois Hole, set into one of her own benches where she liked to read. Hole was an early environmentalist and the building is fittingly LEED certified for energy efficiency.

Linda Goyette redefined the phrase "writer-in-residence" in 2008, bringing back the position after years of budgetary constraints, and the Milner library exploded with workshops, readings, and outreach activities. Every writer-in-residence since then has taken the position in new, sometimes strange, and always marvelous directions. Also in 2008, Edmonton's first writer-in-exile, Jalal Barzanji, a former Kurdish refugee, set up an office on the sixth floor of the library and began working on his prison memoirs. The library launched the Alberta Readers' Choice Award, at $10,000 the richest literary prize in the province.

"I do like the idea of the library as a place to make things as well," says Cook. "Reading actively, of course, but also building things — creative and intellectual projects."

The seventeenth branch of the Edmonton Public Library opened on the University of Alberta campus, eplGO, in the Cameron Library. Its official launch was in March, 2009. Ernie Ingles, the vice-provost and chief librarian of the U of A, had been collaborating on ideas and projects with Linda Cook for years. They worked on the Alberta Library together and reignited a spirit of collaboration between the Edmonton Public Library and the U of A that had begun almost a century earlier, partnering on projects and schemes. Their relationship began in an

untraditional fashion. Shortly after Ingles arrived in Edmonton, in 1990, he nearly hired Cook to lead the Rutherford Library at the U of A.

"I to'd and fro'd but in the end I hired someone else," he says, in his book-filled office on the third floor of the historic Rutherford South. Postcards with photographs of the old Carnegie Library on Macdonald Drive are propped on his shelf. "I often say it's the best thing I ever did. EPL is the best damn library in Canada, and it all goes back to one reason: Linda. She's an effective manager, which is important, and politically she is very astute — which is even more important. People disbelieve me when I say this but Linda is quite shy. Yet she can work a room like few others I know. No institution just happens. It's leadership. It makes or breaks an organization."[ccxxviii]

There is an uncommonly healthy relationship between the city and its major university, a relationship that has had its highs and lows in the past. Today it's working beautifully, Ingles says, and he hopes it transcends the personalities of its leaders: mayors and presidents, chief librarians and CEOs.

We talk on a rainy and windy fall day on the administrative level of the School of Library and Information Studies, an Edmonton institution because Morton Coburn and Bruce Peel had plotted together to make it happen here instead of Calgary or Winnipeg or Saskatoon. Ingles retires in 2013, the centennial year of the Edmonton Public Library. He'll continue working, in some adventurous fashion, but he's looking forward to reading — a lot. He grew up in rural Manitoba, near the Saskatchewan border, borrowing books from the women's institute in tiny Roblin. His success in Edmonton has come from studying and adopting the school's and the city's cultures, he says, "bleeding green and gold." This came naturally to Cook, he says, because she is "of the city. Her roots are in Bonnie Doon. She grew up with Edmonton and the

city grew up with her. You can't fake that. It comes across in your character and it comes out in the decisions you make."[ccxxix]

Ingles and Cook didn't borrow the model for eplGO, a physical collaboration between a university and its city's public library system, from any other place. It felt normal here, even obvious. With luck, this feeling — more than personalities and relationships — will inspire more collaborations like this one.

"The most obvious reason for eplGO is it's a service. This university is a small city in itself, with 12,000 staff and 40,000 students and various others on any given day. The convenience of a small EPL branch makes a lot of sense, and its focus on popular books gives people a bit of a break from what they might be researching. Just as importantly, studies show we lose readers when they graduate from high school. They go off and train and start their careers and, frankly, they stop reading for pleasure until they're a bit older and they're starting families. Then they come back. Linda and I thought eplGO might be a way to bridge that gap. Once you stop something it's not always easy to start back up again. It's a terrible shame to lose a reader."[ccxxx]

As the 2000s ended, the Edmonton Public Library began to receive national and international recognition for its community-led service philosophy.

Linda Cook is a little embarrassed by the good reviews she receives from city leaders and librarians across the country.

"There are a lot of factors in our success," she says. "We've been blessed with a supportive mayor and council, a new spirit in the city. But it all comes down to the reason a public library exists in the first place. No one does it to become rich. Librarians, our staff, have such a feeling of well-being and accomplishment when they can help someone. Librarians want

to help people live better lives. It takes a special kind of person to be a librarian and, at the moment, we have a lot of extraordinary librarians. That's the most important reason we've been successful."[ccxxxi]

Growth and expansion, in the library system and the city, wasn't always elegant.

The economic boom in the mid-2000s brought more people and more pressures than the city was prepared to handle. Some of the steam was released in front of the Stanley Milner Branch of the library, one of the busiest spots in downtown Edmonton. It's occasionally unpleasant and very occasionally scary. Either way, it has to change.

The mayor wanted to move the entrance to Centennial Plaza, on the south side of the building. Linda Cook argued publicly, lightheartedly, and passionately with him. Wouldn't that mean turning our back on Winston Churchill Square?

They both agreed the building needed help, inside and out.

"We want to take this building from the poor cousin on the block to one of the family," says Cook.

Rather than tear the building down, the library and the city will "re-skin" it in a curtain of glass and replace its inefficient mechanical systems, bring in more natural light and give it a more appealing exterior. The crucial question of "those front doors," physically and imaginatively, making sure the library is as safe, as welcoming, and as beautiful as it can be will be answered this centennial year. People in Edmonton are talking about a new feeling in the city, a sense of honesty about our history, our geography, and our civic personality; all of this will be part of the design.

Talking creatively about design was not something Linda Cook had imagined in 1997, when there was barely enough money to buy books and keep the lights on. In 2008, the board of

the Edmonton Public Library launched a 10-year capital plan worth $330 million, for repairs and renovations to the branches. City council didn't reject the idea. Instead, they directed administrators to come up with a funding strategy.

"I dare say, if we funded more libraries, we wouldn't need as many police officers or social workers," said Councillor Linda Sloan, at the time.

By 2012, there were a set of stunning architectural renderings of what the re-imagined Jasper Place and Highlands branches will look like when they are finished. The Edmonton Public Library is partnering with other organizations and agencies to be part of new buildings in Clareview, Mill Woods and, farther south, The Meadows, which will mix new library space with recreation, seniors services, and multicultural centres.

If we look back to the first downtown branch, we'll remember the words carved above its front doors: "Free to All." We can define free in as many ways as we like. The library represents free access to information and freedom of expression. We're still arguing about whether or not the library is sufficiently free.

Anyone who asks to have a library card without paying a $12 yearly membership fee will receive one. Librarians don't ask to see anyone's tax returns. Perhaps we would be better off making it free and asking for a donation — whatever we can afford. Or perhaps that is more awkward and intrusive than asking people whether or not they can afford $12. Either way, despite an enormous jump in population since 1994, and philosophical certainty that the services of the Edmonton Public Library are well worth $12, we still haven't returned to the record numbers of members we had before the fee.

Alberta and Quebec are the only two provinces that have library fees.

"How do other provinces, struggling with deficits and bigger tax loads, manage to avoid library user fees?" asked an editorialist, in 2005. "They subscribe to the widely accepted theory that reading and access to books and computers are a basic necessity for citizens in a democracy."[ccxxxii]

There is, of course, a good counter-argument. The library always has another program, another innovation, another department, a new set of books, or films, or computers or renovations to fulfill its mandate of launching Edmontonians into a better life.

*

On an unusually hot day in the summer of 2012, parents and their children moved freely from the cold water fountain in front of city hall, through the silliness of the Street Performer's Festival, and into the Stanley Milner Library. I was one of those parents and my two daughters, six and four, were with me.

Like Don Iveson's son, they're drawn to the computers in the children's library. It's difficult to imagine now, in our litigious time, a petting zoo or monkeys swinging from curtains or even an iguana. The library doesn't need a zoo to be thrilling, for a child. That day in July it was bright and cool in the library, and my daughters scrutinized the stacks: one book per week is our limit right now, for no good reason.

I like to pretend I understand my children but I have no idea what they're thinking as they move past the books, pulling one out and scrutinizing it and putting it back. Normally, this takes between ten and twenty minutes, finding the right book. They will occasionally please me by

seeking my counsel. As often as possible, I am either ignorant or I feign ignorance, which gives me an opportunity to introduce one of my daughters to a librarian. Then I back away and watch. My shy daughter asks a question and the librarian either answers it or seeks elaboration. The librarians always seem careful to preserve a sense of magic in the transaction, to let my daughters make their choice — a better choice, surely, than if they had done it on their own or with me.

My grandfather and grandmother, standing in front of the Carnegie Library on MacDonald Drive one evening, novels in their hands. My daughter asking for a book about Amsterdam on the hottest or the coldest day of the year. They are among the millions of memories about the Edmonton Public Library, some real, some imagined, and all of them — taken together — the birth of some new idea about what this place is, has been, will be.

Happy birthday, EPL. Here's to another hundred years of reading Edmonton.

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