

## OTHER

**“The Real Thing”. The Natural History of Ian McTaggart Cowan**

By Briony Penn. 2015. RMB/Rocky Mountain Books Ltd., 1075 Pendergast Street, Victoria, BC, Canada, V8V 0A1. 640 pages, 30.00 CAD, Paper.

Ian McTaggart Cowan was a big man, both physically and professionally. He lived almost one hundred years, prominent as a naturalist, teacher and conservationist, so a book about him and his doings could not be a ‘slim volume’. *“The Real Thing”* is a big book, and it will not be the last on one of Canada’s major figures in his field. As explained in the Preface, the author originally planned a short biography, but Cowan had prepared his voluminous notes and reports of fauna and flora for ‘educational’ use. The combined result is massive, 460 pages of text, data-rich and small-print, buttressed by over 1700 ‘notes’ (citations and sources) and other appended listings.

The ‘main’ title – short and ‘catchy’, as urged by publishers – may need ‘up-front’ explanation. That name was quoted (pp. 114 & 457) as if referring to Cowan as a person – who knew everything related to his subject and who was expert at everything. That’s reasonable, but after reading the book, I wondered if that title had been intended for the whole field of ‘nature and conservation’, that absorbed Cowan’s life? Most of the content (to p. 437) seemed better described by the sub-title *The Natural History of Ian McTaggart Cowan*. Only the final chapter dealt mainly with his ‘working for wildlife’ as expert and administrator, though various ‘flash-aheads’ scattered throughout the text treated later activities on topics discussed mainly in time-sequence.

The text reads well, and anyone who reads it all will learn a lot about Cowan and the fauna and flora of British Columbia and nearby regions. Assembling the many photographs was a triumph of archiving that will be appreciated. A few more illustrations of major habitats might help readers who haven’t already toured widely in British Columbia. The sheer volume and ‘density’ of the text may deter some interested readers from cover-to-cover reading. That would be a pity, as the ‘big picture’ that emerges – of data collection, interpretation, teaching, conservation – is extremely instructive. The many interactions with people – family, teachers, country-folk, professionals – are punctuated by many (perhaps too many?) quotes from letters, publications, and interviews. One would have to write another book to review the content in detail!

One quote (p. 451) stating that Cowan’s family was ‘always number one’ may have described the situation at that date (1954?). It seemed questionably applicable during the preceding 25 years of travel for data collection and analysis. His having a family devoted to the works that made up his career was indisputably a great – and appreciated – support to him. As noted by the author (p. xiv), “Writing about Ian McTaggart Cowan can border on hagiography at times”.

I had few and minor criticisms:

- (1) Some dates in the Chapters do not follow the dates indicated in the sections of the book. For

example, Part 1 covers the period 1910 – 1920, but Chapter 3 within this section covers the period 1923–1925.

- (2) On p. 141, field work on Mandarte Island (referring to all or perhaps only the Song Sparrow studies) was credited to Tompa and Smith, starting in 1959; however, seabird work begun by Van Tets and Drent in 1957-58 also continued during this time.
- (3) Cowan's field party reached Chezacut 23 July 1931, when "Buffleheads are back in their tree nests" (p.157); all Bufflehead nests should have fledged weeks earlier.

Most of Cowan's work was in British Columbia, with shorter but important periods in other western coastal and mountain habitats. His students later ranged much more widely, and his teaching carried weight in conservation across Canada – but much of the fauna and flora of BC are uniquely distinct from those of most of Canada. That geographic distinction might have deserved some recognition.

Existence and influence of the "B" (see p.xiv, and later) was completely new to this reviewer, though easily believable. My impression – from this book – was that the "B" focussed on (relatively undisturbed)

'wilderness', that by Cowan's time was already limited to far western, boreal, or arctic regions. Had the "B" really written off most of Canada – and USA – as 'beyond saving' by then?

My most serious criticism is of the 'side-bars'. In the copy I received, those were unsatisfactory. Many side-bar images were too faint to be informative – some unidentifiable – and often with too little text to help people who didn't know a species already. Side-bars, common in popular magazines, were perhaps thought 'to enhance the educational value' of the book; if so, they were unsuccessful (in my judgment). Their space (many pages in all) could have been better used.

In summary, "*The Real Thing*" is a very thorough compilation and interpretation of the work of a notable and very long-lived individual. Its completeness may make it difficult to read from start to finish, but dipping into particular chapters should be helpful for those not up to a complete "read". My personal acquaintance with "Dr. Cowan" (as I always thought of him) was limited to 1957-60, but I have no hesitation in recommending this book to those who want to know more of him and his work.

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