

Canada's Upstart Child

Alberta was founded by mavericks – men and women who were adventurous, tenacious and unorthodox. To understand the province, you need only look to its past

BY BRIAN BERGMAN

WITHIN THE CANADIAN family, Alberta is the upstart child. Yes, Quebec is probably the more spirited – as two separation referendums, and counting, quickly attest – and Newfoundland is certainly the more flamboyant. But for sheer chutzpah (in reality, a curious mixture of cockiness and ingrained insecurity), it's hard to match the Wild Rose province.

Alberta is the place where political movements and leaders are nurtured and then exported (think of the Reform Party of Canada and our current prime minister) in an attempt to shake up the status quo. Its oil wealth is also transforming the country's economic and social dynamics. Thousands of newcomers arrive in the province each year – people who, in many cases, become Alberta's most fervent boosters.

In Alberta, as elsewhere, the past informs the present and gives us strong clues as to the future. Starting with the early fur traders and explorers, Alberta (then part of the vast Northwest Territories) proved a magnet for those seeking new beginnings and opportunities. The same held true for the ranchers, homesteaders and oil wildcatters who followed in their wake. Here, pedigree mattered less than perseverance, and the possibilities for reinvention seemed endless.

It's the kind of culture that attracts risk-takers and rewards innovation. It's a place that, for good or ill, embraces mavericks.

When Calgary-based novelist Aritha van Herk was invited by Penguin Books (Canada) to write a popular history of

Alberta, she thought long and hard about how to best explain her native province to the rest of Canada. As she trolled through the lives and exploits of the men and women who founded and fostered Alberta, she kept coming back to this theme of dogged independence. The title of her best-selling book says it all – *Mavericks: An Incurable History of Alberta*.

In February 2007, Calgary's Glenbow Museum will open a new 2,160 square metre permanent exhibition of the same name, to which Imperial Oil made a sizable contribution. Building on van Herk's book, and with the author's assistance, the museum's \$12 million showcase tells the history of Alberta through the life stories of 48 Alberta mavericks, from early explorer David Thompson to such modern-day icons as Peter Lougheed.

What follows are the stories of five of these individuals, drawn from a variety of fields including politics, ranching, and the oil and gas industry. At first blush, the populist premier William Aberhart, the determined feminist Henrietta Muir Edwards, the gutsy rancher John Ware, the pioneering geologist Helen Belyea, and the crusading journalist Bob Edwards might appear to have little in common. But they do.

All were outsiders who came to Alberta from other parts of the country or the world, either in middle-age or later. They changed Alberta – but, just as important, they were changed by their experiences here. In Alberta, they found their voice and their vocation. They were free to realize their maverick visions.

THERE ARE CERTAIN POLITICIANS who define their era by embodying all the hopes, aspirations and fears of the voters who put them in office. Newfoundland's Joey Smallwood was such a politician, as were Quebec's René Lévesque and Maurice Duplessis. Alberta,

arguably, has produced more than its share of electoral titans, including premiers Ernest Manning, Peter Lougheed and, of course, Ralph Klein. But at no point in Alberta's history did the times and an individual come together so forcefully – and fatefully – as when William “Bible Bill” Aberhart strode onto the provincial scene in the mid-1930s, at the height of the Great Depression.

By Alberta standards, Aberhart's time in office (from 1935 until his death in 1943) was brief. It was also turbulent, dysfunctional – and endlessly fascinating. Many of Aberhart's major initiatives, including legislation to control the banks and muzzle the media, were struck down by the federal government as unconstitutional. Yet his political footprint was enormous. Aberhart founded the Social Credit Party, which went on to rule Alberta for 36 consecutive years. He also championed a brand of campaigning and governing – charismatic, populist and constantly on guard against those whom Aberhart called “the big shots” of Central Canada – that has defined Alberta politics ever since.

Ironically enough, Aberhart was himself a son of the Canadian heartland, born and raised on a farm in Perth County, Ontario, and later trained as a teacher in Hamilton. He moved to Calgary in 1910, at the age of 32, and five years later became principal of Crescent Heights High School, then the city's largest public school.

An active fundamentalist lay preacher, Aberhart founded his own religious training school, the Calgary Prophetic Bible Institute, in 1927. Two years earlier, he'd begun to use the new medium of radio to broadcast his weekly religious lectures across Alberta. By 1935, his *Back to the Bible Hour* had a radio audience of more than 350,000.

By 1932, Aberhart had come under the sway of “social credit” economic theories espoused by a British engineer, Major C.H. Douglas. These called for the creation of “new money” to combat the power of the few financiers who were said to control the world's monetary system. Aberhart brought these theories to the airwaves

William Aberhart

William “Bible Bill” Aberhart was the first of Alberta's electoral titans

and his listeners embraced them as a possible solution to the ravages of the Depression. His crusade soon turned into a political movement, with the newly minted Social Credit Party capturing 56 of 63 ridings in the 1935 provincial election.

The chief promise made by Aberhart during that election was a \$25-per-month dividend for every Albertan to buy basic necessities. It never materialized. Instead, he was faced with a \$150 million provincial debt and the prospect of being unable to meet the civil service payrolls. Aberhart announced a scheme to sell “prosperity certificates” – a version of credit that could be exchanged for goods. Albertans were asked to sign loyalty pledges to the Social Credit government to receive the certificates. The proposal, widely derided as “funny money,” never got off the ground.

The worst was yet to come. The Alberta legislature passed legislation to seize control of the banks, only to see it struck down by Ottawa. A similar fate awaited Aberhart's Accurate News and Information Act, which would have required newspapers to reveal their sources and to print government statements verbatim.

Aberhart, in power, was a polarizing figure. The elites – the media, the courts, academia – universally derided him. The people, though, never lost faith and he won a second majority government in 1940. Only his death, three years later, finally unseated him.

Ernest Manning, Aberhart's protege and father of future Reform Party leader Preston Manning, served as Alberta's premier for the next 25 years. But the populist revolt Aberhart had led was largely over; Manning scrapped the more radical precepts of Social Credit and allied the party increasingly with big business interests, especially the province's emerging oil industry.

So what to make of the Aberhart phenomenon? University of Calgary historian Douglas Francis, who has studied and written extensively

about the history of Western Canada, takes a nuanced approach. “He founded a party that stayed in power longer than any in Alberta's history,” says Francis. “He could be very authoritarian, yet he knew how to appeal to the people to make sure he had strong grassroots support. And he capitalized on this belief that the West has always been victimized by eastern interests. He identified the characteristics of Alberta politics that allowed leaders who followed his example to remain in power for a very long period of time.”



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IT'S ONE OF THOSE EXQUISITE ironies of history. Born in 1849 into a merchant-class Montreal family, Henrietta Muir Edwards, by the fact of her gender and the temper of her times, was excluded from a career in law. Yet, over the course of her long life, Edwards became one of Canada's foremost experts on women and the law, so much so that at the age of 80, and living in Alberta, she helped spearhead the 1929 Persons Case, a legal challenge that finally established the right of Canadian women to be considered full and equal "persons" under the law.

By the time she achieved celebrity as a member of the "Famous Five" – the name given to the five Alberta-based women who launched the Persons Case – Edwards had decades of social activism to her credit. She grew up in a large evangelical Baptist household where women were encouraged to take on leadership roles. As early as 1871, Henrietta joined her mother, Jane Muir, and her sisters in lobbying for the establishment of a women's college at McGill University, then an all-male institution. Over the next few years, Henrietta and her sister, Amelia, opened

a boarding house for women and established the Montreal Women's Printing Office, which published a monthly paper, *Women's Work in Canada*, and hired only female labour.

In 1876, Henrietta married a young physician, Oliver Edwards, with whom she had three children. She became active with the Woman's Christian Temperance Union and two of its favourite causes: the prohibition of alcohol and the right of women to vote. She also campaigned for legislation to protect working women and children.

Shortly after the turn of the century, Edwards followed her husband to Fort McLeod in what would soon become the Province of Alberta. In 1915, Alberta voters approved Prohibition in a referendum. A few months later, Alberta women secured the right to vote and hold office, and the federal franchise followed in 1918. Under pressure from Edwards and other activists, the Alberta government appointed Emily Murphy and Alice Jamieson as magistrates in 1916 – a first for the British

Henrietta Muir Edwards

Henrietta Muir Edwards was Canada's foremost expert on women and the law



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Empire. The following year came legislation that recognized property rights for widowed women and established a minimum wage for working women.

But the biggest battle lay ahead. In 1927, Edwards joined four other Alberta women –

Emily Murphy, Nellie McClung, Louise McKinney and Irene Parlby – in using a little-known section of the Supreme Court of Canada Act that allowed any five individuals to petition for clarification of the British North America Act. The Alberta five challenged a section of the BNA Act that said women were not persons "in matters of rights and privileges."

The provision was being used to deny women the right to serve in the Senate. In April 1928, the Supreme Court of Canada upheld the BNA wording. The Alberta five then persuaded Prime Minister Mackenzie King to appeal the decision to the judicial committee of England's Privy Council.

On October 18, 1929, the committee overruled the Supreme Court, declaring that "persons" referred to both genders. The exclusion of women from public office, wrote the committee, was a "relic of days more barbarous than ours."

Marilou McPhedran is a lawyer and modern-day women's rights activist who was deeply influenced by the actions of Edwards and the rest of the Famous Five. In the early 1980s, McPhedran participated in the grass-roots campaign that ensured women's equality rights were enshrined in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms – a battle very reminiscent of the Persons Case. And in 1985, she co-founded the Women's Legal Education and Action Fund (LEAF), which has followed the example of the Famous Five by pursuing what McPhedran calls "high-impact" litigation.

"The Persons Case was the earliest example of successful, high-impact litigation on women's rights in the Western world," says McPhedran, who is currently co-director of the International Women's Rights Project at the University of Victoria. "Edwards grasped very early on that making a change in a single piece of legislation could have a direct impact on the lives of millions of women. What she and the other members of the Famous Five did was an absolutely crucial first step in a struggle that just never ends."

THE GOLDEN ERA OF RANCHING in Alberta actually predates the birth of the province. The great cattle drives of the late 19th century, across a frontier extending from Texas to what was then the Northwest Territories, produced no end of legends and folk

heroes. But perhaps the most intriguing figure of all was John Ware, a black man who was born a slave on a small cattle and horse ranch in northern Texas and who first crossed the border into Canada in 1882 at the age of 32.

Ware worked on two of the largest corporate ranches of the day, the Bar U and the Quorn, both nestled in the Rocky Mountain foothills west of Calgary. He went on to establish his own cattle brand and ranch while earning a reputation as a first-rate horseman. Ware was genuinely loved and respected within the ranching community – and this at a time when racism was an ugly fact of life on both sides of the border.

Black cowboys were actually quite common in the American Southwest, many of them having gained valuable experience working with horses and livestock prior to the Civil War. On the Canadian plains, though, they were a rarity. For Ware, this might easily have made him a target of scorn, and there are, in fact, accounts of him being refused accommodation and taunted because of his race.

But Ware's talent and good nature stood him in good stead among his peers. After working with Ware during the 1887 roundup, A.E. Cross, a prominent rancher who went on to help found the Calgary Stampede, described him as "a splendid cowhand and the greatest bronco rider in the West." And in 1892, when Ware married Mildred Lewis, a young black woman who had recently moved west from Toronto, an announcement in the *Calgary Tribune* observed that "probably no man in the district has a greater number of warm personal friends than the groom, Mr. John Ware."

John and Mildred had six children in quick succession. The family grew in lockstep with Ware's ranching operation, which at its height included 100 horses and 1,000 cattle – sizable numbers for the times.

At 190 centimetres (6'3") and 90 kilograms (200 pounds), the man who could wrestle a 675-kilogram (1,500-pound) steer in less than a minute must have struck many as indestructible. But he wasn't. The loss of his youngest son, Daniel, at the age of two in 1904, followed a year later by Mildred's death from typhoid and pneumonia, devastated Ware. On September 12, 1905, less than two weeks after Alberta became a province, Ware was crushed

John Ware

Legend John Ware was first known as a skilled horseman and cattle rancher

to death in a freak riding accident on his ranch. George Lane, owner of the famed Bar U ranch, took charge of Ware's funeral arrangements, declaring that "the best for this man is not good enough."

Lorain Lounsberry, senior curator of cultural history at the Glenbow Museum, has closely studied those early ranching years. She says that when men like Lane and Cross sang your praises, people took notice. "The ranching community looked at a person's skills, and that's what made John stand out first and foremost," says Lounsberry. "He also built a good life for himself and his family and did it at a time when colour was something that could have been held against him. John overcame all that and is still looked upon as one of the greatest cattlemen and horsemen of the era."



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GEOLOGIST HELEN BELYEA WAS always ahead of her time. She was born in Saint John, N.B., in 1913, and her childhood exploration of the rugged Maritime shoreline fostered an early interest in rock formations. While still in her teens, Belyea moved to Halifax, where she earned a bachelor of arts degree and a master's in geology from Dalhousie University, before heading to the United States to complete her PhD in geology. She did all this at a time when very few women pursued advanced degrees, and fewer still specialized in the sciences.

Despite her impeccable credentials, Belyea had difficulty finding work after graduating from Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, in 1939. She taught high school science in Toronto and Victoria before serving as an intelligence officer with the Women's

Helen Belyea

A courageous woman and geologist, Belyea was well ahead of her time

event that propelled Canada's oil industry into the modern era. When the GSC opened an office in Calgary in 1950, Belyea was one of two geologists transferred to the city. For the next 20 years, she worked as the sole female geologist in the Calgary office and became an international authority on the Devonian, the major subsurface formation containing Alberta's conventional petroleum resources.

For all her expertise, Belyea faced career obstacles because of her gender. A crucial part of geology is fieldwork in remote locations. But it was considered inappropriate in the 1950s to send a woman on such expeditions.

Calgary geologist Brian Norford, who as a young man worked with Belyea, recalls that she bridled at these restrictions. "But she also realized that it's hard to move a mountain," says Norford. That's one reason Belyea specialized in subsurface interpretation, work she could do largely in the lab. As it turned out, her detailed studies of the Devonian reefs laid the foundation for extensive oil and gas exploration and the industry that remains Alberta's economic lifeblood.

Eventually, Belyea was allowed to go into the field, where she proved the match of any man. Although only 145 centimetres (4'9") and 45 kilograms (100 pounds), Belyea was extremely fit, the result of her many athletic hobbies, including hiking, horseback riding, swimming and skiing. By all accounts, Belyea proved a friendly, feisty and down-to-earth companion who worked hard during the day and had a bottle of Scotch at the ready for the evenings.

In 1962, Belyea was elected a fellow of the Royal Society of Canada. Prior to her death in 1986, at the age of 73, she amassed several honorary degrees and citations, including being appointed an Officer of the Order of Canada. When asked by a writer in 1976 why she never married, Belyea replied, "Perhaps

it's because I didn't meet a man who could accept my independence."

Belyea served as a role model and mentor to younger women. "She was a leader in the acceptance and prominence of women in the sciences," says Norford, who notes that 40 percent of geology graduates these days are female. "Helen's uniqueness was that she did all these things when women were discouraged from being part of the profession."



Her detailed studies of the Devonian reefs laid the foundation for extensive oil and gas exploration in Alberta

IN THE PANTHEON OF COLOURFUL Alberta characters, one name stands out above all the rest. Bob Edwards was the crusading – and hugely entertaining – founder, publisher, editor and sole writer of the Calgary *Eye Opener*, the newspaper that helped define public discourse during Alberta's first two decades. Ostensibly a weekly, the *Eye Opener* rarely appeared two weeks in a row due to Edwards's frequent drinking binges. But whenever the paper did hit the streets, it made quite the splash.

With verve and a rapier wit, Edwards gleefully exposed corporate malfeasance, skewered hypocritical politicians and generally adhered to the notion that journalism should be all about afflicting the comfortable, while comforting the afflicted. His reward was a circulation that peaked at 35,000 in 1912 – equal to almost the entire population of Calgary at the time – and a readership that encompassed the Canadian West and stretched as far afield as New York City and Europe.

Born in Edinburgh, Scotland, in 1860, Edwards landed in New York at the age of 23 and soon lit out for the western frontier. After working as a proofreader at the *Winnipeg Free Press*, he moved in 1895 to what would soon become the Province of Alberta. In between attempts to publish newspapers, he worked as a bartender and ranch hand.

Edwards founded the *Eye Opener* in 1902 and was soon engaged in heated attacks against the Canadian Pacific Railway over its safety record. An unsuccessful libel suit brought against him by the CPR in 1905 only emboldened the publisher. Edwards routinely splashed pictures of train wrecks on his front pages until the CPR finally made much-needed improvements. The company meanwhile refused to carry the *Eye Opener* on its trains.

Edwards also took great delight in lambasting the Liberal governments then in power in Edmonton and Ottawa. A favourite target was Manitoba's Clifford Sifton, the most senior federal cabinet minister from Western Canada. When Sifton mysteriously disappeared to the United States during the debate over Alberta's entry into Confederation, the official reason was ill health. Always a fount of informed gossip, Edwards had heard another explanation: adultery. With typical aplomb, he told his readers that Sifton's absence was because of "misdemeanours...to which Moses made special reference to on one of his justly celebrated tablets of stone."

Bob Edwards

The Eye Opener founder and publisher helped define public discourse in Alberta



He believed that journalism should be about afflicting the comfortable, while comforting the afflicted

neatly sums up his view of the political classes: "Now I know what a statesman is; he's a dead politician. We need more statesmen."

Edwards also poked great fun at the land and building boom that gripped Calgary in the years leading up to the First World War. He lashed out at real estate speculators and declined to accept ads from those he considered shady characters, which included almost everyone. When friends urged him to get in on the good

times by buying property, Edwards replied in print. "Why should I bother to make more money?" he wrote. "I couldn't eat any more and I shouldn't drink any more."

An infamous imbiber, Edwards surprised everyone by supporting Prohibition in 1915. The reason? He disagreed with hoteliers charging the same for beer as they did for hard whiskey, encouraging most patrons to choose the latter. Edwards changed his mind after witnessing the widespread bootlegging that followed Prohibition – and he missed no opportunity to write about the "hootch parties" that Alberta's chattering classes indulged in.

The *Eye Opener* effectively died with Edwards, who was buried along with a copy of the paper and a flask of whiskey after suffering a fatal heart attack in November 1922. But if Aritha van Herk could have her way, she'd resurrect the old curmudgeon. Of the dozens of characters van Herk researched for her book and the Glen-

bow exhibit, Edwards is one of her favourites. "What I love is his fearlessness," she says. "He would take on anyone and do so using the tool that is closest to my heart, the pen. We get so little of that today, especially in our newspapers."

Like all the other great Alberta mavericks, Edwards was an outsider who found his identity, and his calling, after coming to a new land where everything seemed possible. For all that has changed over the past century, that spirit of defiance and discovery lingers on. And as long as it does, Alberta will remain Canada's upstart child. ■

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