At the World’s Edge: Curt Lang’s Vancouver
by Claudia Cornwall

Reviewed by Ronald Charles Epstein

It may be possible to capture Vancouver’s uniqueness by studying one of its representative personalities. A biographer might be tempted to choose a powerful or famous resident, such as controversial 1960s mayor Tom “Terrific” Campbell or iconoclastic broadcaster Jack Webster. Veteran North Vancouver author Claudia Cornwall makes a less obvious, more personal choice. Curt Lang was a friend who worked with her husband Gordon. Lang, like Cornwall’s previous subject Jack Hardman, could be described as one of “the unheralded artists of British Columbia” (back cover flap). He was also an unsuccessful poet, obscure fisherman/log salvager and overlooked software developer, at least outside Vancouver.

Lang is closely identified with Vancouver, but his life and career are not confined to that city. He travelled to Europe, fished off the BC coast, and worked as an orderly in Montreal’s notorious Allan Memorial Institute of Psychiatry. He was unaware that director Donald Ewen Cameron conducted CIA-funded mind control experiments, but sensed their sinister nature. He noted that “when Dr. Cameron entered a room full of patients, their fear was palpable.” He said he’d “never met anyone whose presence had such a chilling effect” (19).

Such perceptiveness may explain why Lang, a high school dropout, became a poet. Of course, the fact that he met literary legend Malcolm Lowry and was friends with titan Al Purdy did not hurt. These connections did not lead Lang to become a successful author, but they gave him an inside view of the Vancouver literary scene and its “West Coast Poets.” He even participated in a University of British Columbia poetry reading that turned into a melee because downtown poets like himself were invited and university poets who were not “showed up anyway and demanded equal time” (58). That incident should surprise those who complain that poetry does not matter.

Cornwall recounts Lang’s career as a visual artist by examining his friendship with fellow artist/Vancouver Eastside high school dropout Fred Douglas. Both brought their marginalized neighbourhood sensibility to the local art scene. In the 1950s, this meant the regionally oriented sensibility championed by local painter Jack Shadbolt. Their audacity is illustrated by their impromptu tag-team debate with Shadbolt, a department head at the Vancouver School of Art, on his own turf. Eventually, the two drifted apart – Fred became an assistant art professor at the University of Victoria, while Curt sought new challenges, some outside the art world.

Lang was a professional photographer in the early 1970s. This book includes a portfolio that showcases his home town, presenting wide vistas and raw views of downtown homes, buildings, and streets. An interview with colleague Rod Gillingham provides a glimpse into his artistry. When he was photographing Tsimshian children in Metlakatla, a native village, for example, he read Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee.

Curt valued adventure over wealth, but he wanted more than buttered rice in condemned abodes. Fishing and log salvaging became profitable careers for a sailor who worked the west coast in boats that he built himself. He is depicted as a 1970s seafarer; after that decade ended, his maritime career was scuttled by debt and the bank’s repossession of his vessel.
The biographer charts her subject’s transformation from young rebel to middle-aged software developer without insinuating that he “sold out” to high-tech 1980s materialism. One might conclude the opposite, since he developed track inspection software for BC Rail. Superior technology improved railroad safety, which meant that Curt was serving the common good. He earned distinction in this field, an effort inspired by his need to support second wife Ruth and founded on his ability to earn new skills. Ironically, this man who avoided the mainstream fell into one of its pitfalls, sinking his marriage due to excessive concentration on his career.

In 1998, Curt experienced double vision while driving, necessitating a medical checkup which resulted in the diagnosis of his fatal sinus malignancy. His final months are presented as a period of closure and courage. His wife returned and he resumed his poetry. He coped with agonizing radiation treatments through visions of English and Irish witches who “lived to grace the world” (188). They were the subjects of his final verse, “A Poem in Praise of Pagan Women.”

It is tautologically true to state that “Curt Lang’s Vancouver” (title page) produced Curt Lang. Actually, the downtown Eastside produced a postmodern-era Renaissance Man. Today, that area is associated with murder.

Lang’s diverse interests inspired a biography that should appeal to an eclectic audience. ♥


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