

Views of Craigdarroch Castle,
today and circa 1895, top right



king coal's castle

CRAIGDARROCH IS A MONUMENT
TO THE UNHAPPY DUNSMUIRS AND THEIR
RAGS-TO-RICHES STORY by Sheri Radford

had Bill Gates lived in the 1880s, Craigdarroch Castle is the type of house he would have inhabited. It cost Robert and Joan Dunsmuir \$500,000 to construct, at a time when starter homes in the area went for \$600. Like many Victorian houses of the era, the castle (now a museum) was outfitted with indoor plumbing, electricity, central heating and a phone. It also had a speaking tube (intercom) and a burglar-alarm system that connected to each door and window. Life in Craigdarroch Castle wasn't much different from today — if you discount the half-dozen servants required to run the place, or the 17 impressive but superfluous fireplaces, or trendy Victorian artwork such as the wreath made from human hair.

In a rags-to-riches story worthy of a Victorian-era *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous* — a tale rife with untimely deaths, alcoholism and family feuds — the Dunsmuir family left Scotland in 1850 to embark upon an arduous

courtesy Craigdarroch Castle

214-day voyage to Vancouver Island, where Robert worked for the Hudson's Bay Company. In 1869, Robert found a seam of coal near Nanaimo, which was as lucky and profitable as discovering oil today. A shrewd business team, Robert and Joan soon parlayed their windfall into one of the most powerful companies in North America.

Newly rich, Robert contracted for the construction of Craigdarroch (which means "rocky oak place" in Gaelic), a 2,415-square-metre (26,000-square-foot) mansion on an 11-hectare (28-acre) estate in Victoria. The city in the 1880s was booming. According to Robert Rathwell, visitor services manager for Craigdarroch Castle, "This town...had public works infrastructure decades ahead of most places. It was young, it was hip, it was happenin'. This was the London, Shanghai or Tokyo of its time."

From 1887 to 1890, the Dunsmuirs spared no expense building their ostentatious house. Most of the 39 rooms boast lavish furnish-



The main hall at Christmas

ings, exquisite stained glass and intricate woodwork and flooring made from expensive Spanish mahogany, walnut, jarra, rosewood and Hawaiian koa. Craigdarroch's Richardsonian Romanesque style was intended to invoke the sense of a long family lineage, to impress Victoria's old, established families — some of whom owned real castles in Europe. Despite its turrets, Craigdarroch is "no more a castle than I'm the king of Spain," says Rathwell with a grin.

Ironically, Robert never became king of his castle: he died in 1889, mere months before its completion. Joan moved into Craigdarroch and, to her sons' consternation, took over as CEO of the company.

After a bitter family feud, she eventually passed control to her sons James and Alex on the understanding that shares would revert to her if either predeceased her. Two years later Alex, an alcoholic, died while on his honeymoon. Contrary to his promise, he left his shares to James. Another battle ensued in which Joan sued James, who was

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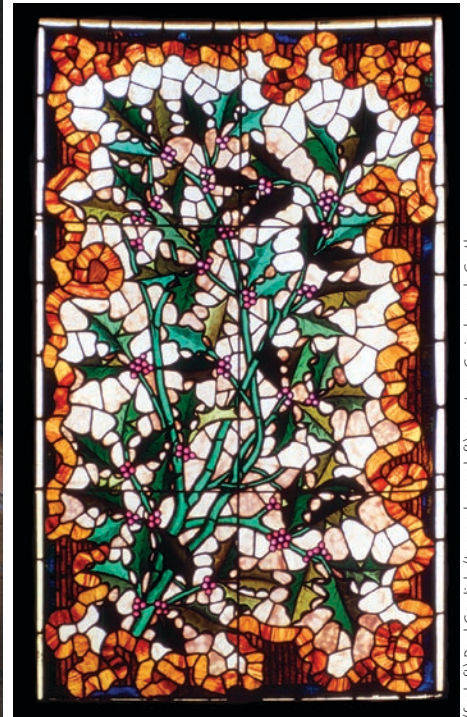
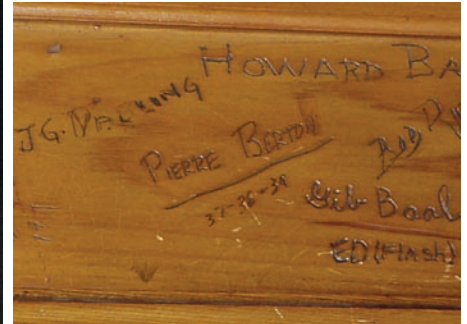


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The castle boasts many stained-glass windows and two places where a young Pierre Berton carved his name, below



(far left) Paul Cordick, (top and near left) courtesy Craigdarroch Castle

premier of BC at the time. The family made headlines around the world. Mother and son never reconciled, and Joan died in 1908.

The Dunsmuirs sold Craigdarroch, which became a military hospital after World War One, then a college, then school-board offices. Says Rathwell, “It took a beating: linoleum glued to all the hardwood flooring inside, woodwork painted over, walls moved, stained-glass windows busted.” College students — including a naughty young Pierre Berton — carved their names in the fancy woodwork. Someone spray-painted all of the beautiful stonework bright pink. In 1968 the Victoria Conservatory of Music took over the building and the Craigdarroch

Castle Historical Museum Society began painstakingly restoring each element, from the red-slate roof to the extravagant furnishings. In a process akin to an archaeological dig, conservators carefully strip back layers using tools as small as a Q-Tip. “You’ve got all the time in the world,” says Rathwell, “so you might as well do it right.”

The aim of the museum is to make history both interesting and alive. Says Rathwell, “We tend to think of historical figures like characters in a movie, rather two-dimensional. But they were people.” He continues, “Too often when you come to a museum, it’s presented like a library. There’s a whole bunch of, *don’t do this! Don’t do that!* We’ve just got one rule

here, which is *don’t touch things*.” Visitors are free to explore at their own pace. Rathwell has seen a visitor race through in eight minutes (“literally with a cab outside with the engine running”), and he’s seen people wander for hours. An architect from Germany took four hours, even crawling around on his hands and knees to examine the woodwork, exclaiming with glee over his discoveries.

Glee? The dour Dunsmuirs would pirouette in their graves.

1050 Joan Crescent. Entry costs between \$3.50 (child) and \$11.50 (adult). Self-guided tour brochures are available. The castle’s four floors are not wheelchair accessible. Call 250-592-5323 or visit www.craigdarrochcastle.com **lw**