

State of the Art January 16, 2016

The trickiness of the title

A public discussion has begun of what is to be done with the Fredericton exhibition grounds. On CBC an urban planning expert, Gracen Johnson, gave her thoughtful ideas on the subject. One thing she said surprised me, that the grounds were unattractive— just a chain link fence and a parking lot where lines of cars waited at the Tim Hortons. I had never noticed how unattractive it is—it just is what it is. But thinking of it from someone else's point of view, I could see that the area—some 31 acres—is not very pretty. The racetrack is handsome, but you don't see it unless you go to the races.

The original building was spectacular; there is a photo in John Leroux's *Building New Brunswick: An Architectural History* and on the Capital Exhibit Centre website. The second and third buildings were good-looking. They all burned. Someone has tried to spruce up the present building. The new director of the Capital Exhibit Centre would like to make improvements. The city council says that the city needs a performance art centre and can't afford both. The original nineteenth century idea for such exhibitions was to show off not only agricultural products but the arts and crafts.

Some of the city council think it would be a good idea to use the space for residences to get more taxes. That would be a bad idea. We have this wonderful public expanse in a lightly populated area with Wilmot Park and the 600 acre Odell Park. It's a prize that history has given us. None of us were forward thinking enough to secure it—it comes to us just by accident. Because we have been so lucky, we should make the best use of it for the future. To gobble up our open spaces is really immoral. I think of that when the university sells off more of the acres in its woods. Or when we cut down ancient hemlocks so people can play a fad version of Frisbee.

The new Halifax library had 1.9 million visitors in its first year, double its usual number. People came, I suppose, to see the impressive contemporary building, but they also must have liked being there and so came again. A building like that pays for itself, not in direct ways as property taxes do, but in the general well-being of the city. Saint John has the beautiful Imperial Theatre and Moncton has the lovely Capitol Theatre. Our new performance art centre could be as remarkable. I wonder how Fredericton's new Convention Centre is working out. I've never been in its theatre.

Helen Thomas, the widow of Peter Thomas, thanked me for mentioning her husband's book. She wondered if it would have sold more copies with a different title. People might have thought that *Lost Land of Moses* was a book about the Bible. The sub-title is *The Age of Discovery on New Brunswick's Salmon Rivers*. Thomas was a poet among his many other occupations, and the main title is poetic in thought and rhythm. The Moses in question was Moses Perley, the first promoter of angling in the province. Alas, Moses was too good at promotion. "Before 1890, his romantic wilderness dream had metamorphosed into the reality

of leased waters and elaborate permanent camps for the wealthy few, and the reduction of the native guides from respected companions to servants.” How soon the yahoos can ruin things for the rest of us.

Titles are tricky. Novels and poetry books can have unusual, eye-catching titles. But non-fiction has to make sure the prospective buyers know what they are getting. Sometimes they do this with sub-titles. Movies and TV programs try to do both, have a catchy title, but also tell a prospective audience what they might expect. I didn't watch *The Big Bang Theory* for at least a season because I thought it was about physics. I must have been in the minority though because it was hugely popular from the beginning.

I had three topics in mind for this column, but I didn't write the third one down, and it has gone from my memory completely. I have paper and pen in every room of the house, including the bathroom for just this reason. It seems strange that as you grow older, your short-term memory gets worse. Every old person I know complains about it. Some evolutionary reason must exist for this strange phenomenon. Could it be that unimportant dailiness falls away, leaving only what is most essential? Why do old people tell the same anecdotes over and over? Are these the significant anecdotes? Writers and intellectuals often are exasperating because they ignore the unimportant. Their long-term memory is often amazing, but where did they put their car keys? Stories circulate of writers who forgot their completed manuscripts in a taxi.