

**The Man Who Saved Vancouver: Major James Skitt Matthews.** DAPHNE SLEIGH. Victoria: Heritage House, 2008. 240 p. ISBN 978-1-894974-39-4.

Major James Skitt Matthews was without question one of the most colourful Canadian archival personalities of the twentieth century. A man for whom the term irascible might well have been invented, Matthews served as Vancouver's archivist – with varying degrees of official status – from his initial “appointment” in 1931 to his death in 1970 at the age of ninety-two. The history of archival development in the City of Vancouver is inextricably linked to his lengthy career, during which he managed to make archives topical and at times very political. Indeed, for many of the city's residents the “Major” personified archives – for better or worse – for literally decades.

In *The Man Who Saved Vancouver: Major James Skitt Matthews*, former librarian and museum curator Daphne Sleigh has produced a very readable biography. She is to be commended for balancing the public and private sides of Matthews' life, drawing in large measure on his memoirs and his voluminous correspondence, in which, in her words, he “reveals himself freely” (p. viii). She recounts the personal triumphs and tragedies that shed light on his larger than life public persona, and describes the various events in his early life in Wales and New Zealand, his service overseas during the Great War, his experience in the business world, and his interest in historical research and writing, which foreshadowed his subsequent archival career. Indeed, she devotes almost half the book to the years leading up to the day in 1929 when Matthews set himself a new goal: preserving the history of his adopted city.

In discussing Matthews' personal life, Sleigh emphasizes the importance of various familial and other close personal relationships, noting that given his often gruff exterior, “few people suspected his inner deep need for a close relationship, nor his profound gratitude to those who offered him warmth and support” (pp. 27–28). A recurrent theme in the book is his need for appreciation, which was often counterbalanced by the ease and speed with which he could take offence at the slightest criticism, whether intended or not. Sleigh also notes the degree to which Matthews was an “unrepentant romantic” who throughout his life maintained a view of Vancouver as the “magic city” (p. 35). It is only when one understands the nature and impact of Matthews' deep and long-lasting affection for Vancouver that one can begin to understand what motivated him throughout his life, not just with respect to archives, but in relation to all aspects of the city's history.

Once Matthews embarked on his newly chosen career, much of the subsequent story of his life, and by extension much of the latter half of Sleigh's book, is taken up with his single-minded focus on collecting and preserving Vancouver's history, a process that soon – and repeatedly – resulted in a series of “battles” with various city officials, including mayors, councillors, head librarians, and others. Documenting what she calls the “love–hate relationship that

was to endure over the next four decades” (p. 104), Sleigh recounts with relish his many struggles for recognition of “his” archives and for adequate funding, space, and assistance, to say nothing of the periodic legal wrangling over the ownership of his “collection,” an issue which was not ultimately resolved until after his death. While Matthews always had the best interests of his beloved archives at heart, she documents the extent to which he was often his – and by extension his archives’ – own worst enemy. Later in life, his “conviction that he himself was the supreme authority and guardian of Vancouver’s history” (p. 172) did little to endear him to those who might otherwise have helped further his cause.

Yet despite his reputation as an outspoken individualist, Sleigh also reveals the extent to which Matthews’ various successes and achievements – at times perhaps even his survival as archivist – must be attributed to the timely intervention and support of others, including key members of the Vancouver establishment and local politicians, many of whom saw the merits of his cause, notwithstanding the manner in which it was often advanced. Of particular importance in this regard were the support, influence, and friendship of Provincial Archivist John Hosie in the early 1930s, when Matthews was still developing his plans and his ideas on the role of the archivist.

Always the amateur historian, Matthews proved to be the consummate collector, beginning at age twenty with the purchase of a bird’s-eye view of the city. As Sleigh correctly notes, the value of the collection that he continued to amass throughout his life was often the subject of debate (by other than Matthews himself of course). He was criticized during his lifetime by his opponents and after his death by his successors for the “eclectic” nature of his collection. Acknowledging that in his approach to archival acquisition he was on “very shaky ground,” Sleigh reveals that many of the items he acquired were really “relics” (p. 130) and that it was not without some justification that his collection was criticized, most famously as “junk” by Mayor Gerry McGeer in 1936 (p. 129) and, somewhat more tactfully, as a “hodgepodge” by City Archivist R. Lynn Ogden in 1973 (p. 203). Certainly a stark weakness of his archives was that it contained few city records. Nonetheless, the value of his collection should not be underestimated, particularly when coupled with the seven volumes of *Early Vancouver*, the historical anthology based on his interviews with early residents, which were published periodically throughout his career. As Jean Barman asserts in her introduction to *The Man Who Saved Vancouver*, “those of us who write about the history of Vancouver walk in Major Matthews’ shadow” (p. xi).

If in his early days Matthews “would not have rated himself a true historian ... and certainly not a professional archivist” (p. 47), over time he developed firm views (one wonders if he was capable of any other kind) on the qualities and qualifications required of an archivist. It is when addressing this aspect of the story of Major Matthews that Sleigh’s book is of particular interest and

potential value to the archivist or, perhaps more accurately, the historian of archives. His career certainly provides insight into the motivation of those amateur, often self-taught, historian-cum-collector-cum-semi-professionals whose passion and perseverance during much of the last century laid the foundation for the more recent professionalization of both archives and archivists.

While it is clear that the primary focus of Sleight's book is on the story of Matthews the man and his practical contributions to the history of Vancouver, she nonetheless provides some insight into his views on the role of the archivist and alludes to the extent to which he was increasingly at odds with evolving archival theory and practice. Noting, for example, that for much his life his "concept of an archivist's mandate included taking on a vast number of other roles – interviewer, researcher, public speaker, writer and publicist" (p. 110), she reveals that he had little time for those with formal archival training, most likely, she speculates, because he felt threatened by such individuals. To Matthews, the self-taught archivist was always the best, and throughout his life he maintained that local knowledge, which he contended could only be gained by thirty years or more of residency, was the main prerequisite for an archival career. It was perhaps not surprising, therefore, that when he was well into his eighties, Matthews expressed the view that it would take some five to twenty years to train an archivist to be his successor!

Beyond recounting the events of his life, Sleight also provides an assessment of his legacy, noting that in many ways it was one of his last acts – making provision in his will to offer his "collection" to the province and stipulating that it be sold unless the city provided appropriate housing for the archives within one year – that ultimately moved the city to provide a new direction for its archives. As Sleight correctly concludes, it was only after Matthews' death that for "the first time in its history ... the City had the opportunity to discuss the question [the function of an archives] in a free and open debate" (p. 200). It was in the context of this debate, as well as in belated recognition of the contributions of the man, that Vancouver built a modern, dedicated archives building that was appropriately named in his honour.

*The Man Who Saved Vancouver* is well written in a clear, readable style. It is also well researched, drawing heavily on archival holdings from the City Archives, the British Columbia Archives, and the Matthews' family archives, as well as various unpublished and secondary sources. It does contain a few errors, although whether the result of the research, writing, or editing processes is unclear. In the context of Matthews' experience in the Great War, for example, there is a statement that the Canadian Expeditionary Force did not officially come into being until December 1915 (p. 60), when in fact it was established in August 1914, and, later, a suggestion that the Canadian death toll during the war was only 35,000 (p. 80), rather than the generally accepted figure of approximately 60,000. While somewhat distracting, such errors are minor and incidental to the overall focus of the book.

*The Man Who Saved Vancouver: Major James Skitt Matthews* provides a first rate account of the life and career of “the Major,” and a balanced assessment of his impact on the history of the City of Vancouver and the development of its archives. Daphne Sleight’s book is strongly recommended to anyone interested in this particular topic, as well as to anyone who simply enjoys a good biography.

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