

# **The Main Library at the University of British Columbia**

## **A Link to the Past and a Vision for the Future**

**DOUGLAS GILES**

In the fall of 1925, ten years after the University of British Columbia had ceased to be a college of McGill University and became an independent Provincial institution, the Main Library opened on the Point Grey campus. In an address on “Adult Education” given in Victoria, 1924, University President Klinck stated that “[t]oday all are agreed that it is the function of a University both to extend the boundaries of achieved knowledge and to promote the extension of higher education...” The building of the new library was a significant event in the history of the university: not only was it one of the first permanent buildings on campus to promote the higher education as Klinck suggested, but it also represented a link for British Columbians to the educational traditions of the past, as well as an avenue for the future.

Much about the significance of the Main Library building can be interpreted from the physical evidence presented by the structure itself. The brief description of the Main Library provided in *Buildings and Equipment of the University of British Columbia* (1925) is a good means to introduce the architecture of the building:

“It is a massive structure of two stories and a basement built of British Columbian granite. The style is late Tudor, modernized...The Concourse has a floor space of 100 feet by 50 feet and is 60 feet in height...The interior walls are finished in Caen Stone. The woodwork throughout is of plain oak. Ample light is provided through large, pale, amber-coloured Gothic Windows.”

The Main Library was built with an odd assortment of influences and materials. From the Library archive’s web page, we know that the exterior stone was quarried from

Nelson Island on Pender Harbour, giving the sense that the library building has its foundations here in British Columbia. However, the use of oak for the woodwork, instead of lumber from a more local tree, and Caen stones from northern France suggests that the architects ‘faced’ the building with imported materials. Likewise, we see the late Tudor influence in the interior, and the overtly neo-Gothic influence on the exterior and windows of the building. While these styles may at first confuse the observer, once we recall that both architects Sharp and Thomson came from Britain, we can understand how they were asserting their ‘Britishness’ through the design of the Library, onto a provincial population that largely saw itself as ‘British’ in the early part of the twentieth century.

There was much more to the neo-Gothic design of the Main Library than a mere longing for England, though. According to the authors of the *Scrapbook for a Golden Anniversary*, “Libraries, like cathedrals, exude an almost sacred aura to the uninitiated public. Doubtless this was the intent behind the admittedly lofty design for the present building”. The Main Library was obviously to be a symbol of educational authority on the Point Grey campus. Librarian John Ridington himself stated that “[o]riginally it was intended that the library of the University of British Columbia should form part of the great administration building”. The dominating exterior and the sixty-foot-high interior ceiling certainly commands respect from any that views the library; however, the building also harkens back to an earlier authority of ‘education’ itself.

According to Ridington:

“Universities early recognized the place that books could, and must, occupy in education, and most of the oldest and greatest libraries in the world – the Bodleian in Oxford, and Harvard in America – are university institutions. Indeed, modern universities give to their libraries and library buildings location and recognition commensurate with the importance that the book plays in modern education. The largest university in America is Columbia, in New York, and its buildings are grouped round the stately Grecian pile of its library”.

This again comes from Ridington’s speech on the opening of the Main Library in 1925, and we can clearly see his efforts to link the Main Library of the University of British

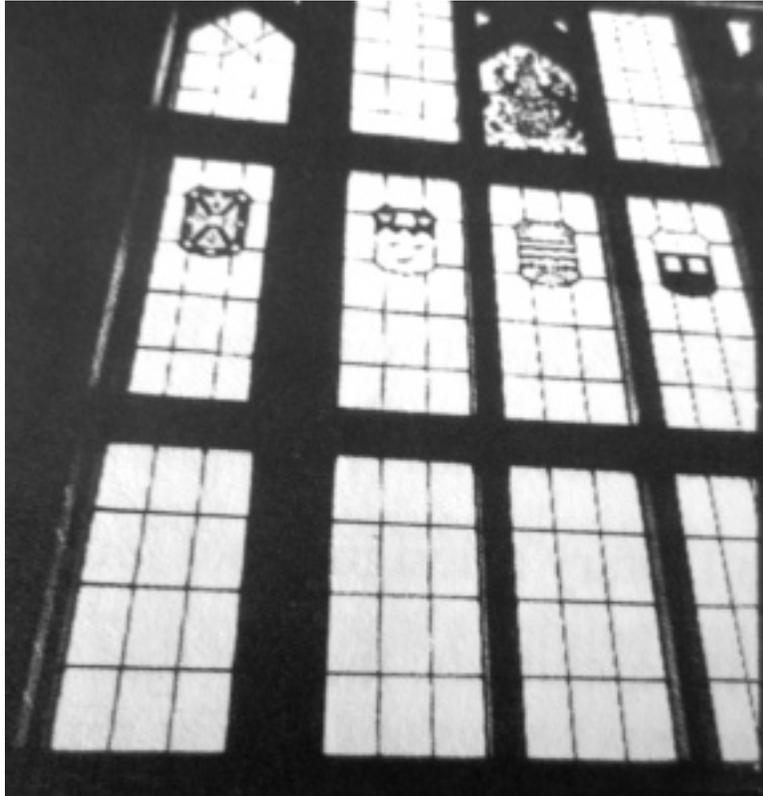
Columbia to the great educational traditions of Britain and America. The neo-Gothic architecture of the building makes this link too – Oxford and Cambridge universities were both established within old medieval towns.



*The Library Concourse interior, showing the Tudor inspired rafters, and the sixty-foot-high ceiling, 1929.*

*Leonard Frank, No. 1.1/1060. UBC Archival Collection.*

Another architectural link with the past can be seen in the stained-glass windows housed inside the library building. Upon the walls of the Reading Room (now the Chapman Learning Commons) are stained-glass windows showing the Coats-of-Arms of over twenty Canadian and British universities. Among the list are McGill, the University of Toronto, St. Francis Xavier, the University of Edinburgh, and McMaster on the west wall, and the University of Montreal, Cambridge, Oxford, the University of London, and Acadia on the east wall. The UBC Coat-of-Arms appears on both walls in the centre: although the library collection was only ten years old in 1925, these stained-glass windows assert that the University of British Columbia is prominent amongst the ‘brotherhood’ of universities.



While the architecture of the Library building leads to many interesting conclusions about the connection of the university to a great educational tradition, it is interesting to note the connection that is purposefully *avoided* as well. The Main Library is designed in a neo-Gothic tradition, which arose in Britain during the early nineteenth century (the Parliament Buildings were reconstructed in a neo-Gothic design following the 1834 fire). However, Sharp and Thomson avoided one prominent aspect of the Gothic style, that of the angular peaks and reaching spires so indicative of European Gothic architecture. In fact, the library building is relatively box-shaped in appearance. The avoidance of this Gothic feature should not be overlooked. Spires and sharp angles are traditionally associated with the great cathedrals, such as those of Canterbury and Salisbury. By evading the use of this architectural feature, perhaps the designers wanted to emphasize that the University of British Columbia had no ecclesiastical connections. The significance of the Main Library's design is not indicative of only the architects: the fact that the Main Library is a public institution, and its

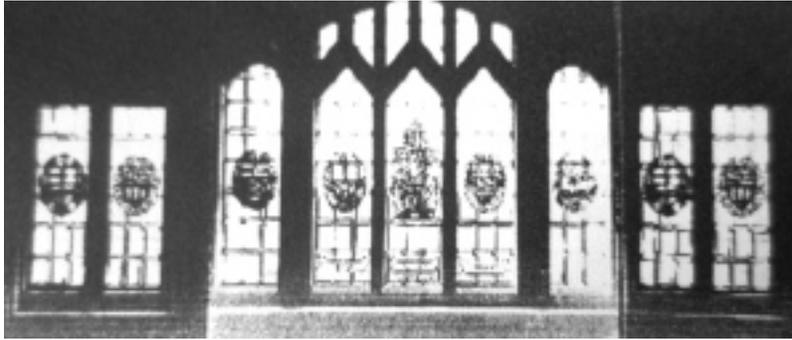
Gothic-revival design was accepted in the 1920s, suggests that many British Columbians shared this sense of 'Britishness' with Sharp and Thomson.



*The Library at Point Grey, 1925. "Scrapbook for a Golden Anniversary".*

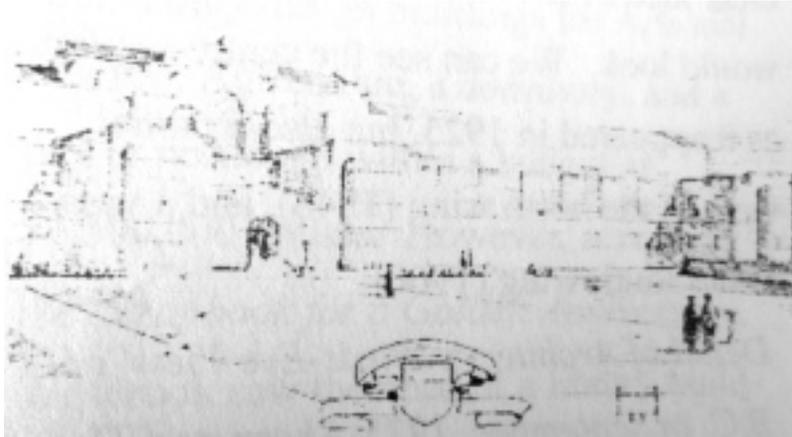
The minute notes from the Library Committee of 14 September 1927 record that “[a]n anonymous friend of the University has offered, and the Board of Governors has accepted, a gift of \$1,500 to install the Arms of the Dominion and Eight Provinces in the lunette window in the inner hall [of the Main Library building]“. This new decorative window, also constructed in the neo-Gothic style, was unveiled on 28 November 1928, as the Canadian Jubilee Memorial Window. For this window to be featured in the Library building as the celebration, the Diamond Jubilee of Confederation suggests that the Library had become the ceremonial centre of the Point Grey campus, and that the university itself was an important location in all of Canada. In his speech from the presentation ceremony, UBC historian D.C. Harvey clearly illustrates this link between nationhood and education:

“It is a great honour to have been asked to discuss the significance of Canada’s Jubilee on such an occasion as this, not only because the window through which I look out on the world is a Canadian window but also because I believe in the educational value of such ceremonial functions, in the necessity of thinking, talking, writing about our past achievements, and of presenting them in pictorial form both as an expression of the faith that is within us and as an incentive to continuity of effort in the future”.



*The Canadian Jubilee Memorial Window, unveiled 28 November, 1928. "Building the Main Library 1923 – 1925" <[www.library.ubc.ca/archives](http://www.library.ubc.ca/archives)>*

Harvey focuses on the educational tradition that the window signifies for the country. Further on in his speech, after quoting two prominent Canadian statesmen, he goes on to show how “[t]hey also illustrate the function of a library in preserving the thoughts of one generation to fructify and to revivify the generations yet unborn; and they suggest that a jubilee celebration on a jubilee memorial window [sic] may celebrate or commemorate more than a brief span of years depicted in speech or on glass”. Harvey clearly emphasizes the perpetual function of the university Library and the role it will play in years to come: furthermore, he asserts to the British Columbian public (at least those in attendance) that the memorial window and the Library building are not just material things, but eternal *concepts* of Canada. “...[T]he University of British Columbia took form within these 60 years [since Confederation], that its excellent library has been accumulated in the last two decades, that the present building boasts three years of life, but that this memorial window has been conceived, designed, and executed to bring Canada’s Jubilee into the daily prospect of the faculty and students of the University”. The jubilee window looks out on Canada and forward to the future: a viewer who turned around in the Library building would face the stained-glass Coats-of-Arms of the universities. The faculty and students of UBC, then, are clearly meant to see that the Library is the physical junction point between the old traditions of education and the new vision of Canada.

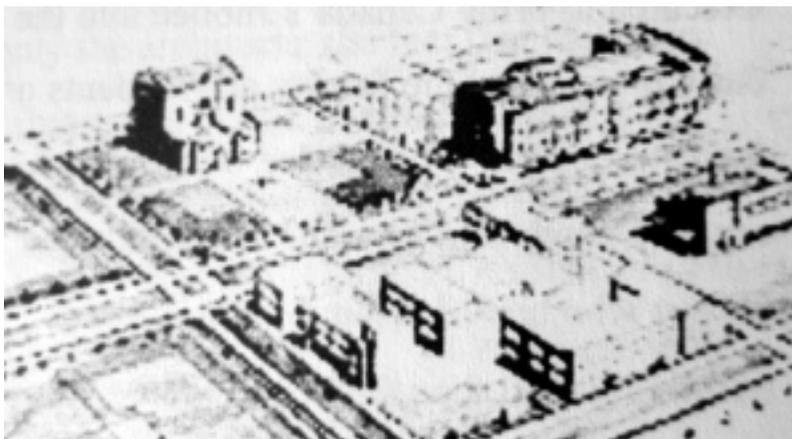


*Plan of the proposed University Library, 1923 (south wing was actually not built until 1960).*

*Sharp and Thomson.*

*"Building the Main Library 1923 – 1925" <[www.library.ubc.ca/archives](http://www.library.ubc.ca/archives)>*

Sketches of the Library building also show the significance of the building to the future of the university and the country. The first image shown below is a sketch made by Sharp and Thomson. Even though construction on the Main Library had barely begun by 1923, the designers already had a clear idea of how the eventual building would look. We can see the centre section as it appeared in 1925, but also a partial view of the north wing (1948), and a view of the south wing (1960).



*Detail of the Architect's 'Birds-eye View' of UBC in September, 1925. Sharp and Thomson.*

*UBC Historical Photograph Collection, No. 1.1/4500.*

A later sketch of 1925 shows a ‘bird’s-eye view’ of the completed campus. However, it is not just an image of the buildings that had by that time been constructed: in faint outline, the architects have drawn in the planned developments for the Library and the Science buildings. John Ridington also conveys the idea that the Library building was looking forward to the future:

“From the very first, architect and librarian have had in mind...that no British Columbian now living can say with certainty to what dimensions the institution may grow in the course of even the next hundred years. This unknown, but vital, factor of expansion was at all times sought to be provided for in designing the library building. It has been accomplished by planning a building to be erected in successive units, as means permit and growth demands.”

Obviously, university planners realized that the Library building would have to expand as the student population grew at the university. In addition, though, Ridington seems to indicate that planners wanted the Main Library to always reflect the tastes and demands of contemporary British Columbians. By erecting the Library in sections, each unit can match the fashionable designs, thus keeping the values of the university up-to-date in the minds of British Columbians. This can perhaps explain the sculptures of ‘FUNDA’ and ‘EVOL’ on the face of the 1925 structure, which David Brock noted: “visitors can tell, even now, that these carvings were made while the Scopes trial in Dayton, Tennessee, was hot news. In order words, in 1925.” At the time, the Library building certainly reflected contemporary designs and values – the hopes of the planners was that the building would grow and continue to be significant in the minds of British Columbians.

We must realize that the Main Library was not built in isolation (although it stood in isolation at Point Grey for many years as a bastion of education) to fully grasp its significance to the population of British Columbia. The University of British Columbia was established in 1908 by ‘The British Columbia University Act’, and Dr. Wesbrook made clear his intentions for the new institution:

“The people’s University must meet all the needs of all the people. We must therefore proceed with care to the erection of those Workshops where we may design and fashion the

tools needed in the building of a nation and from which we can survey and lay out paths of enlightenment, tunnel the mountains of ignorance and bridge the chasms of incompetence.”

Wesbrook’s statement seems to indicate that right away this new university would be more than just the buildings constructed on the property – a provincial university would carry the tradition of education to the westernmost regions of the Dominion of Canada. The competition for the design of the university was held in 1912 and won by G.L. Sharp and Charles G. Thompson. However, originally there was no call for a library in the original plans set forth by the government: Sharp and Thompson were at first to only design buildings for Arts and Science, Agriculture, a dormitory, and a power house, all within a budget of \$1,500,000 dollars. However, according to the *Scrapbook for a Golden Anniversary*, Wesbrook saw the need of a library building, and added it to the plans. Thus, we see that while the government may not have considered a library building of importance, it was a priority for the actual developers of the university.

Construction of the university at Point Grey in Vancouver began in 1914, but as soon halted by the outbreak of war in Europe. However, while construction of UBC stopped at Point Grey, students took up residence at the Fairview grounds of the Vancouver General Hospital, and the University of British Columbia opened its doors on 30 September 1915. There, students lived and studied in cramped quarters for ten years. Following the end of the war, the provincial government did not immediately resume construction at Point Grey. While they attended classes at the Fairview campus, many students began to worry about the likelihood of ever moving to Point Grey. J.V. Clyne recounts in the *Alumni Chronicle* how he and Ab Richards addressed the problem: “[Lawyer Ian McKenzie] told us that if we secured sufficient names and aroused a sympathetic public response, he would present the petition in the house [in the Provincial Legislature]“. Thus, the plan for a student campaign to ‘Build the University’ was born. In the spring of 1922, the Alma Mater Society of the University of British Columbia issued every student with a petition, and instructions to:

“Obtain the signatures and addresses of twenty-five electors and mail the filled-out forms to the Alma Mater Society.... The combined efforts means twenty-five thousand

electors pledged to back the campaign. The Petition will be presented to the Provincial Government when the campaign is concluded next year.”

It was important that the students won public support of their campaign for the government to likely support their cause. Clyne states that “[t]here are one or two things about [the campaign] which may not be generally known. At that time, there was a general apathy about the University. It was not an important factor in the community and many people did not know much about it and did not care if it existed or not”. President Klinck himself was impressed by the initiative and success of the UBC students: “I believe that the influence [the petition] has already had upon public opinion in regard to this vitally important question has been very considerable and I think I am safe in saying that the plan is fraught with great possibilities for the University”.

On Saturday 28 October 1922, all 1178 students of the university embarked on a pilgrimage to Point Grey, later known as the Great Trek. “At the Point Grey site, the men,” recalls Roberts, “who has marched ahead, climbed onto the bare girders of the Science Building...”

Eric Lazenby also participated in the ceremonial ‘occupation’ of the incomplete Science Building, as reported by Jo Dunaway Lazenby. The event has been immortalized in the archival photograph shown below, and also has a great significance to the history of the Main Library. The picture of students in the Science Building was taken in 1922: at that point, construction of the Library had not been started. This is evidence from the photo collection of Stuart Thomson, whose earliest picture of the Library building, dated 1923, clearly shows it in only initial stages of construction. Even though construction of the university in general had begun at Point Grey in 1914, only because of the success of the student campaign to ‘Build the University’ did construction of the Main Library begin in 1923.



*The Student Campaign of 1922. Following the 'Great Trek' to Point Grey, students crowd themselves in the frame of the Science Building.*

*UBC Archives Collection, No. 1.1/1315.*



*Construction of the Main Library, 1923. Stuart Thomson, No. 1.1/1858*

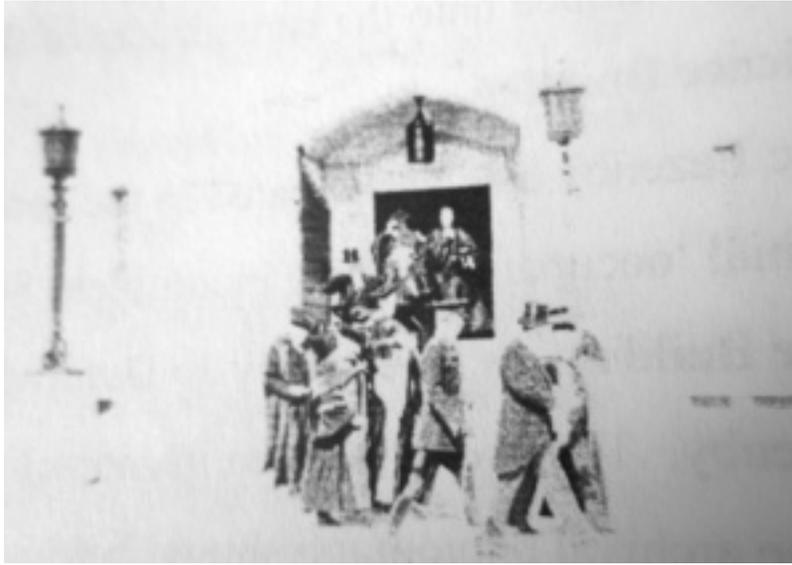
*UBC Archival Collection.*

Once completed in 1925, the Main Library played a major functional role on campus. There had reportedly been problems in the Fairview Library of keeping students focused on studying: Ridington reported 13 December 1915 how “I have on several occasions had to speak to students in the Reading Room, who were engaged in conversations so loud as to prevent study on the part of those who were reading”. Not until the opening of

the Main Library building at Point Grey was the UBC Library collection used to its full potential. Ridington's *Report of the Librarian to the Senate* of December 1926 states that "[t]he greatly improved facilities for storage and study of books has been reflected in corresponding increases in circulation. This has multiplied six-fold in seven years, the average in 1919 being about 700 volunteers per month, while in November, 1926, the total exceeded 4,000". In sharp contrast to the lack of studying of the Fairview Library, the Library Committee reported in December 1928 that:

"...The Librarian has opened the seminar room to partially meet the overflow and has given permission for students to use the book exhibit table in the main hall. At time students have been studying on the staircases and every day others may be seen using the encyclopaedia [sic] stand as a desk, and studying standing."

By 1931, "2297 students were registered as having library privileges. Of these, 1910 students enrolled in the autumn and spring terms, 285 were registered as attending in the summer session, while there were 102 extra-mural readers..." Records on the Library archive's web site indicate that the total student population (undergraduates, graduates, and short-course students) was 2,772: that would indicate that over 80% of the student body used the library! It seems evident that the Library served as an important role for the student population, acting as a centre for learning and studying on campus.



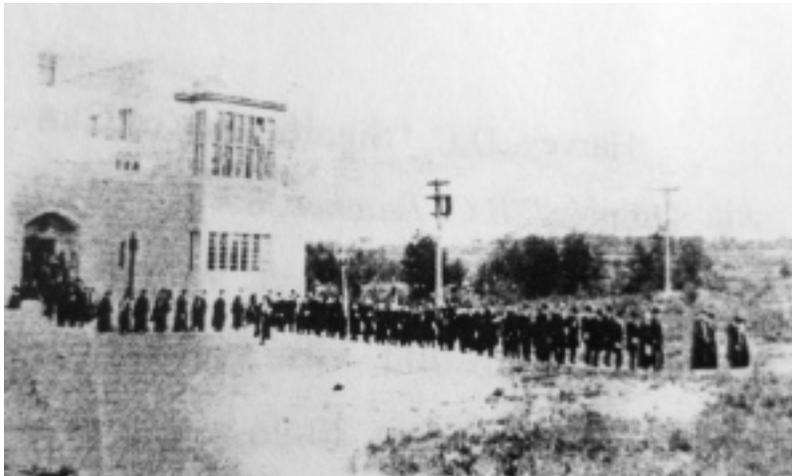
*Congregation procession leaving the Library, 1927. Stuart Thomson. No. 1.1/511  
Collection.*

*UBC Archival Collection.*

Furthermore, we can see from photographic evidence that graduation ceremonies were held at the Main Library. The following two photographs date from 1926 and 1927. There is a large gap in the photographic records of congregation ceremonies between 1927 and 1946, so it is difficult to tell for how long graduation ceremonies were held at the Main Library building. The Old Gymnasium built in 1929 could have perhaps accommodated the graduation ceremonies; however, the other that are large enough were not constructed until the 1940s. For at least two years, and potentially many more, the Main Library served as the arena for the most important day in the lives of UBC students, when they would leave the university to pursue their ambitions for the future.

When the Main Library at Point Grey was completed in 1925, it stood alone on the new campus of the University of British Columbia. However, for the people of British Columbia the new university represented the cultural progress of their province. The Provincial Government had arranged its construction, architects had planned the design, and students had mobilized public support to finally secure the funding to construct the Library.

We also know that the architectural details linked the Library to the British tradition of education, but that it also served to project the vision of the Library onto future generations. As the century progressed, the university expanded, and new buildings developed alongside the Main Library. Although the Koerner Library has recently replaced it as the main library for the Faculty of Arts, the Main Library's station as the architectural or intellectual hub for the University of British Columbia has not been surpassed, and it still upholds the traditions of higher education in Western Canada.



*Graduation procession leaving the Main Library, 1926.  
UBC Historical Photograph Collection, No. 1.1/1289.*

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