

Victoria maritime historian honoured for his work



Barry Gough receives the Maritime Museum of B.C.'s 2014 SS Beaver Medal for Maritime Excellence from Lt.-Gov. Judith Guichon at Government House on Wednesday.
Photograph By ADRIAN LAM, Times Colonist

The sea otters of Vancouver Island played a part in how the grand houses of Imperial England once looked — and Victoria maritime historian Barry Gough can tell you why.

Gough's knowledge and contributions to B.C.'s marine heritage netted him a prestigious award Wednesday from Lt.-Gov. Judith Guichon — the Maritime Museum of B.C.'s 2014 SS Beaver Medal for Maritime Excellence.

As Gough explains, sea otters opened trade pathways between the Island and China in 1787, when European fur traders and First Nations hunters first began to decimate the population of the small marine mammals for their dense pelts.

The First Nations traded the pelts to the Europeans at Nootka Sound, and the mainly English and Boston traders took them by schooners across the Pacific to China, where they were highly valued as "the ermine of Asia," Gough said.

In turn, traders bought porcelain, cloth and tea — all the "magical things" that the Chinese produced — and sent them from Canton on English East India Company ships to London, where they became prime indicators of wealth and status.

Gough, who spent 32 years as a professor at Wilfrid Laurier University in landlocked Waterloo, Ont., is the author of 20 books and 80 academic articles on maritime and Imperial history. Now 75, he loves being retired in Victoria, in the "great old house" his parents built in 1931.

Among his proudest achievements was his first book, *The Royal Navy and the Northwest Coast*, which explained the history of Esquimalt as a naval base.

“I put Esquimalt on the map in the larger British picture,” he said. He’s also proud of his success in drawing attention to the little-known position of B.C. not as a backwater but as central to the British Empire as “the watchtower on the North Pacific — watching the Russians and the Americans and the Japanese.”

Gough called the SS Beaver medal “a great tribute,” complimenting the museum and Guichon, its honorary patron, in the process.

“The Maritime Museum has world-class holdings in its library and its archives and I’ve been using it since 1966. The Maritime Museum has always been one of the great places that I use for my research and they’ve been very good to me.”

Another Victoria recipient of the award was Capt. Tom McCulloch, who began his career in 1953 and made many contributions to Canadian and Commonwealth hydrography — scientific study of the features of surface waters.

Maritime historian Leonard McCann was the third recipient, honoured for his dedication to the Vancouver Maritime Museum for more than 35 years.

The medals were made with material salvaged from the first steamship on the West Coast, the 19th century Hudson’s Bay Company SS Beaver.

A special award was given to the Sidney-based ROPOS — Remotely Operated Platform for Ocean Sciences — a research submersible built in North Vancouver in 1986.

The ROPOS has conducted more than 1,500 dives for scientists in almost every ocean. It has undergone several re-builds, most recently in 2013.

Owned and operated by the Canadian Scientific Submersible Facility, it can operate from vessels anywhere and spend unlimited time on the ocean floor.

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