

1 A HARD WORKER

My father was a hard, hard worker. He climbed the hills of British Columbia, pulling himself up by all sorts of methods. He never made a lot of money, but he enjoyed his work, even though it was a very hard life. He probably thought at times he should have done something else.

—ROBERT “BOB” MCELHANNEY, OCTOBER 2000



W.G. MCELHANNEY
IN THE FIELD IN
BRITISH COLUMBIA,
1912.

William Gordon McElhanney may have inherited his independent streak, as well as his knack for survival against the odds, from his mother, Esther Gordon. In the early 1870s, she was a sixteen-year-old impoverished Irish immigrant arriving alone in New York City. Undeterred by her vulnerable status in the rough and bustling city, Esther promptly found herself a job in New York's thriving garment industry. Soon afterwards, she met and married Robert McElhanney, another Irish immigrant, who worked for the city police force. Neither of them ever looked back towards Ireland.

The couple's first daughter was born in 1874. Soon after, despite having the responsibility of caring for a young wife and infant, Robert gave up his secure job in New York City to try his hand at homesteading in Canada. Although that decision carried obvious risks, Esther supported it. The young couple moved onto fifty acres on the Pine River in the village of Ripley, which was then a remote settlement near Lake Huron.

Neither of them had enjoyed life in the large city, and they were excited about the prospect of their new life together in a rural environment, with which they were more familiar. But the former policeman struggled with farming; from a financial perspective, the best that could be said of the enterprise was that it was marginally successful. The McElhanneys had little choice but to work hard, count every penny and hang on. On March 10, 1877, William, the second of their five children, was born. His brother, Thomas, was born in 1886.

Despite the family's lack of money for any luxuries, William relished his rural childhood. Reminiscing in his eighties, he wrote:

“I have always felt that growing up on a farm was not a hardship, but a privilege.” He recalled only the benefits of country life and a childhood spent on a farm. Helping out was part of that; it formed sound working habits and a base on which to build a robust life as an adult. “There were few distractions and temptations on the farm,” he wrote. “There was more time for absorbing the lessons of nature. The mind was less cluttered with things.”

Perhaps William acquired his lifelong healthy respect for money—or more accurately, the scarcity of it—from observing his father’s experiences. More than seventy years later, he still remembered with affectionate detail both the routines and the pleasures of farm work, from early-winter-morning milking to poaching summer raspberries from the local cemetery with his friends: “Money was scarce, but there wasn’t much needed,” he recalled. “We had plenty of food and lived well and were healthy.”

All the same, when he graduated from high school in 1895 at the age of eighteen, William promptly seized the opportunity to escape a farming career. Like many young men and women of his generation, he obtained a teaching certificate and immediately took over a small public school close to Ripley. Money remained tight, although living at home helped. The young man used the same rickety bicycle he had used as a boy; only now it was used to commute to work. Some portion of his salary helped support the family finances. The rest was carefully hoarded, supplemented by whatever work he could get during the summer holidays, including working in the Ripley village store.

William, however, was not yet settled. The young man’s propensity for mathematics and his keen intelligence remained unsatisfied by a teaching career. He was eager to get to university to further his studies as soon as he could afford to do so. Holding onto his dream and biding his time patiently, William carefully saved his meagre earnings. He retained this habit of economy throughout his working life, and it was to stand him in good stead through future periods in his life far harder than anything he had experienced in his youth. By the end of 1899, the frugal young man was finally able to realize his ambition.

William accordingly celebrated the dawn of the new century by enrolling at the University of Toronto to study his favourite subjects, mathematics and physics. The young man also joined the Victoria College soccer team, playing fullback for the duration of his studies, and revelled in the newfound social freedom of being in a large city. He quickly acquired the nickname “Mac” from his roommate and friends, an appellation he retained for life and often used to sign informal correspondence. Despite all the potential distractions, he remained diligently focused on his studies and achieved honours in his first year at the university.

The second year was tougher. After teaching summer school in the town of Tobermory, on the Bruce Peninsula, 160 kilometres north of Ripley—which had required him to dig out his old bicycle to get there and back home again to the farm for visits—Mac was tired before he even started the first term. In a fit of enthusiasm he enrolled for a challenging program that included mathematics, physics, chemistry and mineralogy. It proved too much, and Mac collapsed of exhaustion one night after studying into the early hours. Nurtured back to health by a sympathetic and motherly landlady, Mac swore never again to attempt so heavy a workload.

That summer Mac had his first taste of travel, with a contract to sell stereopticon slides door-to-door in northern Ontario and Manitoba. Along with several fellow students and still on his trusty bicycle, he travelled between small towns on dusty roads that were sometimes little better than trails. It was an adventure he recalled with great pleasure and one that whetted his appetite to see more: “We returned with not as much money as we had hoped, but we had an interesting trip and had seen a lot of new country,” he wrote enthusiastically.

By his third year, Mac had settled into the swing of things at university and was able to enjoy a less strenuous schedule—with plenty of socializing—and still make the senior soccer team. He joined several committees and became president of his class. Along the way, a fellow student named Marion McLaughlin caught his eye. Notwithstanding the distraction of her charms, Mac managed to complete the next two years of his studies with distinction,

graduating in 1904 not only with a degree in mathematics and physics but also sharing the Victoria College gold medal for the year with another student. He was immediately offered several teaching jobs, but chose what he perceived to be the greater security of a position in the Auditor-General's office in Ottawa.

Mac's best friend, Bob Glass, took a similar position in the same office, and young Marion McLaughlin also moved to Ottawa promptly after graduating in 1905, taking a job as a French translator with the post office branch of the civil service. The work was good, the hours were short—nine to four—and life in Ottawa was exceedingly pleasant. Mac participated in baseball, football and basketball. Along with Glass and two other friends, he built a summer cottage on the Rideau River, from which he would canoe the eight kilometres to and from work each day. "Occasionally we would have a picnic for our lady friends," he wrote. Mac and Glass tried unsuccessfully to persuade the young women that they had personally made the fruit preserves they served at one picnic. The delicious dessert had, in fact, been brought back to Ottawa with them after their last trip home, and the girls weren't fooled for a minute. "We had a bit of fun in that cottage," Mac reminisced fondly.

Despite the security and the carefree pleasures of those golden days in Ottawa, none of it was enough to keep Mac happy for long. By 1907, he was ready for a change. "I became exceedingly restless with the work," he wrote. "To be at a desk every day, going to work at the same hour, signing the book in the morning and upon leaving, and struggling with accounts every day was a monotony that I chafed under. When I looked forward to a lifetime of that work, I became more and more restless."

So when his acquaintance Albert "Bert" Stacey offered to take him out west as his assistant on a topographical survey in British Columbia, Mac did not need to be asked twice. The magic combination of being able to use his beloved mathematics and working in a rugged and remote wilderness was irresistible. Stacey was a registered dominion land surveyor, or DLS, with authority to conduct surveys on dominion lands anywhere in Canada. If Mac passed preliminary examinations in basic subjects including orthography,

mathematics and penmanship, Stacey could supervise him for an articling period of three or four years. On completing his articles, Mac could apply to become a DLS in his own right.

He quickly paid the ten dollars required to sit the exams. By February 1907, he had his preliminary certificate in hand and was chafing at the bit to leave his post. His boss at the Auditor-General's office, full of admiration for his courage but appalled at the young man's decision to give up his secure position, offered to hold the job open for six months. Nearly sixty years later, Mac wrote with satisfied finality: "I never returned."

The task assigned to Bert Stacey was the preliminary survey of potential settlement lots in the railway belt of British Columbia—two strips of land, each thirty-two kilometres wide and running parallel to and on either side of the Canadian Pacific Railway line crossing the province. Stacey arrived in Kamloops in the early spring of 1907 with his party of two assistants, two chainmen, four axemen and the all-important camp cook. Mac's younger brother, Tom, then just twenty-one years old, was one of the crew. "Survey work," Mac wrote later, "was entirely new to me. I had never pitched a tent nor slept in one in my life. I had never used a transit nor knew anything of the technique of surveying."

Things started badly with the crew's selection of a campsite that promptly flooded, forcing them to relocate through freezing water to a drier site. "The water was ice cold and we suffered intensely," recalled Mac. "My brother Tom had just recovered from typhoid fever, and I thought it might be very bad for him." Tom did not, however, suffer unduly, and although the "adventures" continued—the bedding had to be inspected for snakes every night and the summer heat was at times debilitating, especially around Ashcroft and Cache Creek, two of the hottest places in Canada—by the end of the season, both brothers were hooked on surveying work. "Life on the farm had taught me how to work, and I had the mathematical background required to fish up the necessary technique. I was able in a short period," he wrote proudly, "to take on my portion of the work."

In the fall of that year, Tom returned to Ontario but Mac

chose to carry on to Vancouver with his mentor, Bert Stacey, to look into the possibilities of setting up a business there. While Stacey investigated the options and wrote up his field notes from the summer's work, Mac took on temporary subdivision surveying work with Lieutenant-Colonel Thomas Henry Tracy, a land surveyor and engineer in private practice in downtown Vancouver.

There was no shortage of work. The population of the city was already well over 100,000 souls and growing rapidly. The advent of the motor vehicle had stimulated a major provincial road-building program throughout the Lower Mainland and up into the Fraser Valley. Fishing, forestry and mining were supporting the growth of industry in the city, and new immigrants were pouring in, looking for property. Business was booming, and numerous land surveying partnerships had started to spring up all over the region.

It must have been tempting to stay on with Tracy, to keep doing easy subdivision work from the comfort of a city residence rather than slogging through the mountains and retiring each night to a cold, wet tent and writing up his notes by candlelight. But Mac was made of different stuff. He was only thirty, the lure of the back country remained strong and its challenges were no deterrent to him. When Bert Stacey offered him a position on a township survey in southern Alberta for the summer of 1908, Mac packed his gear and unhesitatingly joined the expedition.

Sadly, Stacey died unexpectedly early in the year. Another DLS, Alfred Driscoll, took over the supervision of Mac's articles in July, and at the end of the season Mac returned to Vancouver once more. By then Mac's sister Margaret and another brother, Robert, were also living in Vancouver. Margaret was working as a stenographer, and Robert as a labourer. The three shared a home at 1668 West 8th Avenue.

By February 1909, Mac had found employment with Brownlee Surveyors and transferred his DLS articles to James Brownlee, who also offered to supervise him in gaining his provincial surveying qualifications. With the experience he had already accumulated, this proved to be no challenge for Mac's agile mind. On April 15, 1910, he received his British Columbia Land Surveyor (BCLS)

commission. He would have to wait a little longer until he received his DLS commission, #426, on January 7, 1911.

Nonetheless, as soon as he had his BCLS commission in hand, Mac left the Brownlee partnership and went into business for himself in association with provincial land surveyor Charles Hope. In addition to having held provincial qualifications for six years, Hope was an engineer. But despite what appeared to be Hope's seniority, when the pair rented an office at 47 Hutchinson Block, located at 429 West Pender Street, the masthead read: "McElhanney, WG & Co., BC & Dominion Land Surveyors, Dyking & Civil Engineers."

Within eight days of starting business, Mac was engaged on his first job as a BCLS, a survey of a timber licence on the Redonda Islands, in the New Westminster Land District, for the False Creek Lumber Co. Perhaps in a surplus of eagerness to tackle his first official survey, Mac made an embarrassing blunder. The field notes he submitted to the provincial Surveyor-General's office in Victoria are completed in his meticulously neat handwriting but are marred by a message from the government draftsman scrawled across the first page: "In wrong district!"

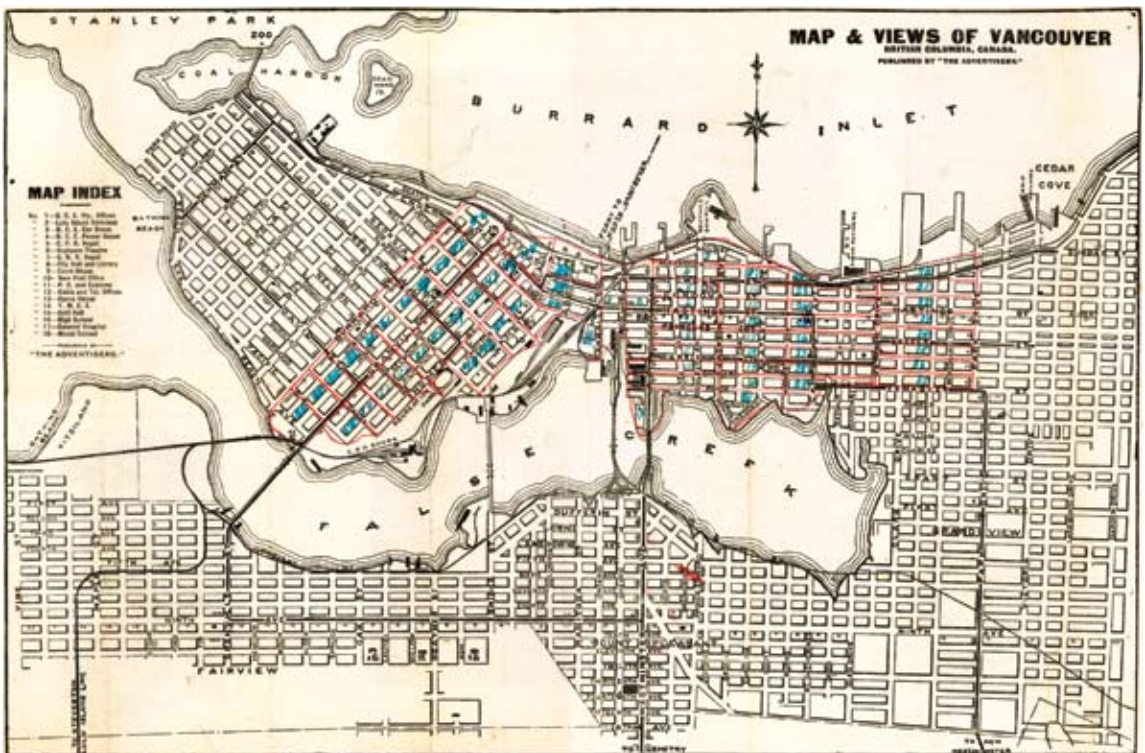
The notes were returned to Mac with a terse admonition from Surveyor-General E.B. McKay himself: "This licence is described from lot 2243 and I shall be glad to hear whether you tied on this lot as no mention is made of it in your field notes. This survey is in New Westminster District. Therefore you will kindly alter the posts and field notes accordingly." Mac had recorded the licence as being located in the wrong land district: the Coast Range I District, instead of New Westminster. The amended notes were returned to the Surveyor-General's office a month later with a contrite note from Mac that concluded: "I hope you will find these notes correct."

Undeterred by his error, Mac kept himself busy in 1910. In the course of his duties that year he named Dickson Lake and Dickson Creek, located between the Chehalis River and Stave Lake, after chainman John Nesbitt Dickson. He also undertook several sizable surveys in the New Westminster District, including at least two timber licences for his associate, Charles Hope.

The business relationship with Hope was short-lived. By 1911,

Hope's name had disappeared from Mac's business listing, which had been amended to "WG McElhanney, BC & Dominion Land Surveyor." It was an odd match in the first place, apart from the naming of the partnership. By 1910, Hope had for all intents and purposes ceased any surveying or engineering activity and was heavily involved in real estate deals. He had also bought himself a large property in the Fraser Valley, had built a home there and was raising dairy cattle.

If Mac had needed an active partner, he had plenty of working surveyors from whom to choose. Perhaps the arrangement with Hope was one of convenience for both sides. If so, Mac was not inclined to recall it in that way later in life: he omitted any mention



A HISTORIC 1909 MAP OF DOWNTOWN VANCOUVER SHOWS 429 WEST PENDER STREET, WHERE W.G. McELHANNEY OPENED HIS FIRST OFFICE, AS WELL AS THE LOCATIONS OF HIS FIRST HOME IN THE CITY AT 1936 WEST 15TH AVENUE AND SUBSEQUENT OFFICE PREMISES ON ALBERNI AND BEATTY STREETS. MAP #204, VANCOUVER CITY ARCHIVES.

of Hope in his brief 1957 autobiography and in his later handwritten memoirs.

It was both a fascinating and a felicitous time to be starting a business as a surveyor in Canada, and nowhere better than in the west. The depression of the 1890s was already long forgotten. The well-established rail connection with eastern Canada was bringing increasing numbers of settlers and entrepreneurs west with it. By 1911, the population of British Columbia had reached nearly 400,000. The province promised a wealth of potential resources waiting to be extracted from its mineral-rich geography, vast hydro-electric power potential in its fast-flowing, high-volume rivers and a seemingly endless supply of timber for every purpose.



DURING THE EARLY YEARS OF WESTERN CANADA'S SETTLEMENT BY EUROPEANS, SURVEYORS FACED MANY CHALLENGES. ON THE BACK OF THIS EARLY PHOTOGRAPH, ONE OF MAC'S IMAGES FROM HIS DAYS IN THE FIELD, HE NOTED: "A ROCK SLIDE WHICH CAME DOWN JUST BEFORE WE PASSED. WE HAD TO CLEAR IT BEFORE GETTING OUR WAGONS PAST. 1908."

Hydroelectric power development already offered huge opportunities for industrial and urban expansion. Timber harvesting was booming, and agricultural production was expanding at an astounding rate. In the Okanagan alone, the area under production had grown from about 2,800 hectares in 1901 to more than 40,000 hectares by 1909. The mining of copper and coal were well-established industries, and the search for oil had begun in northeastern British Columbia as well as Alberta, albeit unsuccessfully. The new cities of Edmonton and Calgary were already well established as western hubs for agriculture, mineral extraction and commerce.

Modern topographical surveying techniques were also being trialled in Canada with great success, and the training centre for the Geological Survey of Canada had recently been located on southeastern Vancouver Island. With its mountainous terrain close to dense population centres, the location was seen as the ideal place to test out new mapping methods and techniques. In 1912, B.C. premier Richard McBride initiated an ambitious and far-reaching province-wide mapping program; it was so ambitious, in fact, that his government surveying department could barely keep up with it.

Nevertheless, the equipment being used by surveyors was still elementary. In common use was the transit, a bulky and unwieldy mounted telescope with the ability to swivel in order to measure both horizontal and vertical angles. Chains, steel tapes, rods and axes were the other basic tools in the kit, accompanied by tents and camping gear for field trips that often lasted for months at a time. For all the province's booming industry during the first decade of the twentieth century, most of British Columbia was still a blank space on government maps, awaiting even rudimentary survey or mapping information. The provincial lands department kept numerous staff and contract surveyors fully occupied on expeditions into the field that could require dozens of crew, even more horses for carrying the heavy equipment and a tolerance for the kinds of conditions that Mac had experienced on his first survey season in the railway belt in 1907.

Heavy snow could be encountered at any time of year in the mountains, where glaciers, icy rivers and the steep terrain added to



the dangers of an already risky remote venture. In summer, the heat and smoke from forest fires were debilitating. Mosquitoes were a seasonal trial, and bears and cougars posed a constant threat. The lack of modern communications systems meant that survey parties were cut off completely from their loved ones and from any help that might come in the event of an injury or disaster. None of this deterred Mac, who still relished the adventure of a season spent in the wild and would continue to do so until well into his sixties.

Mac loved his job, but he also wanted a family, and he hadn't forgotten the lovely young woman from Ottawa. In December 1911, he went back to Ontario to marry Marion McLaughlin and brought her back to Vancouver, to their newly purchased \$7,000 home at



TOM McELHANNEY, 1912.

1936 West 15th Avenue. Their first child, Janet, was born in 1912. In the meantime, two other McElhanney sisters, Kelly and Tillie, also stenographers, joined Margaret in her home.

Their brother Tom wasn't far behind. In 1912, having graduated from the University of Toronto with an engineering degree, he returned to Vancouver and moved in with his sisters. Tom had spent at least two summers working for the government lands department on topographic mapping surveys of Vancouver Island, and despite the appalling weather and rampant forest fires he encountered in both seasons, he was evidently smitten with the west. Tom obtained his DLS commission, #505, in Vancouver on May 17 that year, and on October 21 he received his BCLS commission, #110. The two brothers immediately became partners, opening McElhanney Bros. in new premises: the Dominion Trust Building, at 402 West Pender Street.

The economic good times in Vancouver continued. In his brief handwritten 1957 autobiography, Mac wrote: "There was a great boom in real estate, with subdivisions extending far beyond the confines of Vancouver. Hopes were high and everybody was a potential millionaire." Mac, however, did not jump on the speculation bandwagon himself, perhaps because he simply did not have the financial means to invest. In any event, surveying had become the work he loved.

From 1911 until the outbreak of World War One, both brothers divided their time between timber and mineral claim surveys in the New Westminster and Coast Districts. Mac worked on government surveys along the Fraser River between Tete Jaune Cache and Chilliwack. In 1912, he took on a challenging project of the kind he really hankered for: a multi-season, 480-kilometre survey of the 124th meridian in central British Columbia, with more than three hundred monuments to post.¹

That season Mac covered 175 kilometres, a formidable accomplishment under the circumstances of poor weather, almost virgin

1 See Appendix A, "Meridian Surveys: Wilderness and Technology," page 272.

terrain and the thick smoke from nearby forest fires. But William McElhanney was a strong man, and an independent one. His son, Bob, recalled that his father would deliberately use a short axe to cut line faster, and even in the late 1930s, when Mac was in his sixties, his articling student at the time, Gordon McRae, marvelled at the strength his boss exhibited: “Mr. McElhanney had built himself up to be a very efficient machine. He was in good physical shape. I’d get to the end of my chain and look around and there he’d be, waiting for me.”

All the same, in 1912 the conditions of bush work and life had not improved markedly since Mac’s first experiences a few years earlier. In his report to the Surveyor-General at the end of the season, he wrote: “Travelling over the line was so difficult at night that night observations were avoided as much as possible. Great difficulty was experienced in observing on account of smoke from nearby forest fires...camp was moved twenty-three times. It was found advisable to not make camps too far apart as travelling through the windfall was very slow.”

Things seemed to be quite different for Tom McElhanney in the spring of 1913, when he took over the task of continuing the meridian survey. For a start, Tom had the luxury of ferrying many of the crew and some of the equipment part of the way by motor car. The trails were better, and there were no forest fires. Although the last few miles of the meridian ending at the 55th parallel were challenging to get to on account of snow and windfalls, Tom’s major complaint—one that he saw fit to include in his report to the Surveyor-General—was that the local wild raspberries were of a late-maturing variety, the flavour of which “was found very much inferior to that of berries where the sunshine is more abundant.”

While Mac supervised several large crews engaged in timber surveys throughout the province in 1914, he also kept busy closer to home, spending a little more time with Marion and his infant son, William Hugh McElhanney. Tom returned to the 124th meridian for the 1914 season, to complete the surveying of the meridian to the Finlay River Valley. This time, progress was slower because the snow-melt was very late that year, heavy rainfall impeded observations

and flooding made transportation difficult. But when Tom emerged from the bush with his crew on October 22, it was to news more shocking than any they had heard that summer. Canada was at war—and had been, for two months already.



W.G. McELHANNEY WORKING ON FIELD NOTES DURING THE 124TH MERIDIAN SURVEYS FOR THE B.C. GOVERNMENT IN 1912.



SURVEY CREW WORKING ON THE 124TH MERIDIAN SURVEYS, 1912.



IN CAMP, OUT IN THE FIELD, 1912—A TIME TO CATCH UP ON CHORES. ON THE RIGHT IS TOM MCELHANNEY; SECOND FROM RIGHT IS W.G. MCELHANNEY.