

BULL'S EYE

Remembering Bob Edwards, the crusader behind The Eye Opener

by Will Ferguson



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So is Christmas

“The most distinctive attributes of a large, bustling city are streetcars, crooked gamblers, confidence men and a ‘complacent’ police force. Hurry up with those streetcars, will you?”

—Edwards’s assessment of Calgary in its early years

He was a soft-spoken man with a slight lisp and a Scottish lilt in his voice. Not the sort of person you would peg as a hellraiser or a firebrand, but brand fire and raise hell he did.

Bob Edwards was a drifter with an education. He bummed his way through Europe and the American Wild West before arriving in the Canadian prairies in 1897. He ended up in Wetaskiwin, a small town south of Edmonton, where he launched a newspaper: the *Wetaskiwin Free Lance*, the first paper ever published between Edmonton and Calgary.

“An editor who started about twenty years ago with only 55 cents is now worth \$100,000. His accumulation of wealth is owing to his frugality, good habits, strict attention to business and the fact that an uncle died and left him the sum of \$99,999.” —Bob Edwards

EDWARDS WAS A RESTLESS MAN and he left Wetaskiwin the following year. He ran his one-man newspaper operation, at various times, in Leduc, South Edmonton, High River, Port Arthur (now a part of Thunder Bay) and Winnipeg—briefly. It was in High River in 1902 that Edwards launched *The Eye Opener*, but after a run-in with a local parson he packed up and relocated to Calgary.

Although *The Eye Opener* moved six times between five different towns in its first 10 years, the newspaper was a raging (albeit unlikely) success. *The Eye Opener*'s circulation in Canada soared from a mere 250 to a whopping 35,000, although, as historian Hugh Dempsey notes, “In truth, *The Eye Opener* was not a newspaper, but Bob Edwards's personal platform for social comment and humour.” Above all, Edwards was a social crusader, a champion of “the little guy,” who worked tirelessly to expose graft and corruption.

“A little learning is a dangerous thing, but a lot of ignorance is just as bad.”

EDWARDS LED A CAMPAIGN to abolish Canada's Upper House, or at the very least reform it, labelling the Senate an “impotent relic,” “a Refuge for fallen political prune-eaters,” “a Haven for the discredited,” “a Home for pensioners who don't need the money” and “an Exhibition of ill-visaged waxworks.” That was 100 years ago, and not much has changed. The relics and waxwork pensioners of the Canadian Senate are with us still. Alas.

Edwards fought for minimum wage legislation, old-age pensions, provincial rights, increased Canadian curriculum in schools, agricultural co-ops, prison reform and a system of public hospitalization that would give equal access to all. Health care, he argued strenuously, was a basic human right. He opposed the racial restrictions placed on Chinese immigrants and warned Canadians about “the prospect of becoming hewers of pulpwood and drawers of waterpower for the Americans.” He was also a great admirer of that other prairie hellraiser, Nellie McClung.

“About the slowest way to settle an argument is to get two women interested in it.”

IN THE EYE OPENER, Edwards teased women mercilessly and with the same unbridled gusto with which he mocked men, but he was also a staunch supporter of women's rights nonetheless and urged women to run for political office. “It is our firm conviction,” he wrote, “that the blending of women's ideas with those of reasonably thoughtful men will some day bring about an era of common sense.” *An era of common sense*: that was the essence of his crusade.

These were exciting times and the Canadian West, especially in its formative years, was very much a self-selecting locale. As Grant MacEwan noted, “The ‘average’ people never reached the frontier.” The men and women who made it to the West were of a different breed. In Calgary especially, it was an age of robust individualism and larger-than-life characters: the cattle king Pat Burns, the irascible Irish lawyer Paddy Nolan, the thundering, hard-drinking fire chief Cattie Smart—and, right in the thick of things, Bob Edwards, the social crusader.

In many ways, Edwards personified a particularly Western Canadian combination of *pragmatic idealism*, a contradiction elsewhere, perhaps, but not here. There is nothing defeatist or fatalistic about it, nothing jaded or cynical. Skeptical, yes. Cynical, no. In Western Canada, the term “progressive conservative” never was an oxymoron. The West was founded on a sense of defiant optimism, a belief that we can remake ourselves and our society.

At its worst, this Western spirit can become self-righteous and shrill (see: the Reform Party). But at its best, it embodies a sense of fair play and upfront honesty (see: the Reform Party). Edwards wielded truth like a weapon. He was caustic at times, but never unnecessarily mean-spirited. He was simply right. And he knew it. In this regard, Edwards was an almost prototypical Albertan.

EDWARDS ABHORRED PRETENSION and was quite capable of blasting his opponents out of the water with a barrage of verbal brickbats. But more often than not, he preferred to employ a withering and devastating sense of humour when taking down the high and mighty: “We understand—ha ha!—that—haw haw!—R.J. Stuart—ah-yaw-haw—ha ha ha!—is going to run oh oh ha ha—for alderman—ha ha ha ha ha ha!—Ha ha ha ha ha ha!—ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!”

How do you recover from something like that?

Edwards was unflinching. He took on both the feudal ministry of Clifford Sifton and the Almighty CPR, whose railway crossings were often poorly managed and downright dangerous. The CPR had operated with a high-handed disregard for public safety that bordered on contempt—until Edwards got them in his line of sight. Edwards began to publish graphic details of CPR death tolls and rail accidents in *The Eye Opener*, and when the railway's solicitor, a young lawyer named R.B. Bennett, attempted to “run Edwards out of town,” Edwards took him on as well.

In fact, Edwards roasted R.B. Bennett so thoroughly that

the future prime minister finally waved a flag of surrender. Bennett and Edwards even became friends, but Edwards never wavered in what he called his campaign of “ridicule and awkward truth” against the CPR. Awkward truth, indeed. That was Edwards’s forte.

When the CPR refused to back down, Edwards cheerfully changed tack and began running headlines that read “No deaths caused by the CPR this week!” and “Not a single life was lost last week at the CPR rail crossing on First Street West!” (In a similar vein, Edwards once sank a local greed merchant by reporting what *hadn’t* happened. Yet. “The many friends of Alex B. Munson, who amassed a comfortable fortune in Calgary during the oil boom, will be glad to learn that he is still out of jail.”)

The CPR finally relented and Edwards, true to his word, ended his campaign. In all his years as a windmill-tilting, dragon-engaging, underdog-defending knight errant, Edwards was only ever successfully sued for libel once, and that was over an obvious spoof. Edwards published an apology and continued on, undaunted.

When cautioned to use the word “alleged” more often, he replied with a news article that read: “J.W. Pringar of Cayley, with his alleged daughter, paid High River a visit last week. After putting his alleged horse in the barn, Mr. Pringar filled up on some alleged whisky which seemed to affect his alleged brain.” (The humour here is incredibly deft; note how each “alleged” Edwards employs carries with it a slightly different nuance and a slightly different meaning, suggesting in turn infidelity, a stolen horse, cheap moonshine and a lack of intelligence.)

The Eye Opener offered its readers a wealth of advice—almost all of it bogus, whether it be health tips, points of etiquette or even recipes. (A typical recipe for rabbit stew begins: “Take a good fat cat and give it a bat over the head in the cellar.”) He also published wildly popular, and equally bogus, “society notes,” which perfectly lampooned the pretensions of Calgary’s social-climbing set. The comings and goings—and drunken excesses—of such upstanding citizens as Annabel McSwattie, Mrs. Bucklewhackster, Peter O’Snuffigan and Mrs. T. Tinglebuster were duly reported in deadpan style, leaving readers guessing as to which events were real and which were not.

After sitting through an especially effusive eulogy, one that managed to elevate a recently deceased alderman from the realm of mere politician to that of statesman, Edwards mused: “Now I know what a statesman is; he’s a dead politician. We need more statesmen.”

Make no mistake: there is a definite “Alberta sense of humour.” It is not as florid or as richly layered as Newfoundland’s, nor as gentle as that of the Maritimes, but it is every bit as effective. In Alberta, the humour—like the politics—is one based on *ruthless common sense*. It is often blunt, usually direct, and occasionally scathing. (Imagine how much nastier *22 Minutes* would be if it were made by Albertans!)

As someone born and raised in this fair province, I have tried—not always successfully, I admit—to employ a certain “Alberta approach” when it comes to humour. When I

went through a list of Canada’s glorious leaders in one of my books and classified them as either “bastards” or “boneheads,” I like to think that Edwards would have approved.

Over time, Edwards’s fame spread as far as Great Britain and the United States. A New York literary journal hailed the “clear judgment and common sense” of Edwards’s writing and held up a theatre review Edwards had written as a “specimen of dramatic criticism that might well serve as a model for some of our more pretentious critics in the New York press.” In the British papers, Calgary was referred to, by way of explanation, as “the place where *The Eye Opener* comes from.”

“Applause has made a fool of more men than criticism.”

THE TRAGEDY OF BOB EDWARDS was that he failed to live up to his larger literary talents. In the pages of *The Eye Opener*, he penned brilliantly comedic tales about characters like Peter J. McGonigle [see page 26], the fictional editor of the equally fictitious *Midnapore Gazette*—an irascible but oddly charming horse-thief and boozehound who was constantly being thrown in and out of jail. Edwards also wrote about the wonderfully inventive British remittance man Albert Buzzard-Cholomondeley of Skookingham, England, whose letters home, trying to inveigle funds from his gullible parents, stand with the best of Stephen Leacock.

Edwards was an alcoholic and a binge drinker who went on week-long benders that often ended with Edwards checking himself into the Holy Cross Hospital to be treated for delirium tremens. It was his battle with the bottle that undermined Edwards’s true genius. As Grant MacEwan notes in his biography of Edwards, “Had he lived longer, consumed less whisky, and possessed more ambition for personal advancement and fame, he might have shared immortal honours with the likes of Mark Twain.”

“The worst sting of defeat is the sympathy that goes with it.”

IN HIS FEW LAST YEARS, Edwards tried his best to stay sober. He married, settled down and even ran for the provincial legislature—as an independent, natch. But by then, his health was already failing. He attended only one session of government.

Bob Edwards died on November 14, 1922 and was buried in Calgary’s Union Cemetery at the alleged age of 58. (There is a discrepancy between the date of birth Edwards had given and the dates inscribed at his grave.) His widow, Kate, a woman 30 years younger who had been enamoured of Edwards from the moment they first met, tucked a flask of whisky and copies of her late husband’s newspapers into the headstone. And thus Edwards was laid to rest alongside his greatest strength and his greatest weakness.

A toast, I say! A toast to Bob Edwards, one part muckraker, two parts crusader—and an Albertan through and through. To Bob, I say! In appreciation and admiration. And one final quote: “*Meanwhile, the meek are a long time inheriting the earth.*” 

Will Ferguson is the author of *Bastards and Boneheads; Why I Hate Canadians*; and several other works.