

Victoria's Tale of Two Castles

Through the ages, castles have always been designed to impress architecturally, to project a message of strength and wealth though not necessarily comfort for their occupants. We have seen numerous castles in our travels, but what makes us remember one from another? It is usually the human interest stories associated with those who built or lived in them.



In peaceable Victoria, British Columbia, there was certainly no need for personal battlements in the late 19th and early 20th century, but you will find two impressive castles that tell the tale of a single family's rise from European immigrant poverty to great wealth, and the tragic demise of its family members over two generations. Both castles are open to the public and well worth a visit.

Scotsman, Robert Dunsmuir, sailed across the Atlantic Ocean and around Cape Horn up the west coast of South and North America to prospect for coal in the earliest British settler days. He brought with him his wife, Joan, and not much more than an optimistic frame of mind. Ten years later in 1869, he discovered the richest seam of coal on Vancouver Island and went on to become the wealthiest man in British Columbia with his own railway and ships for moving the coal as well as collieries, an iron works, sawmill, even a theatre and extensive real estate holdings.

Robert and Joan had two sons and eight daughters, and a strong desire to declare their extraordinary success in life. What better way than to build a castle atop a hill overlooking the city of Victoria? **Craigdarroch Castle** (craigdarrochcastle.com) featured a distinctly rough-stone Scottish design and, so the story goes, was a reminder of the castle towering above the rural village where Robert and Joan grew up and married.

Sadly, Robert died shortly before his dream castle was finished, but Joan lived in her opulent stained glass and polished wood home, entertaining as though she were nobility until her death 18 years later. Contrary to promises made to his sons who had worked into their thirties on behalf of the family business, Robert left the entire estate to his wife, who had a powerful controlling streak that fractured any family harmony that may have earlier existed. Legal battles between family members, including several daughters, went to the highest judicial bodies in Britain for settlement. Most of the girls were married to either wealthy or titled husbands in Europe, with mixed success.



Could it get any worse? One son, Alexander, then died and the other, James, by now Lieutenant Governor of British Columbia, decided to build a castle of his own. Mother and son did not speak to each other for years and it was only a last minute decision for him to attend her funeral. The daughters sold Craigdarroch Castle which subsequently served as a WWI military hospital, later a residential college, and finally as a wonderfully restored, authentically-furnished example of late Victorian opulence and British heritage. Within walking distance of Victoria's Inner Harbour, the castle is open every day except December 25, 26 and January 1.

Along the shoreline looking back to Victoria's city center, James Dunsmuir's Tudor-style **Hatley Castle** (hatleycastle.com) clearly eclipsed his parents' design in sheer size and hundreds of acres of formal gardens and forest lands sweeping down to a large protected lagoon overlooking the Strait of Juan de Fuca and the snow-capped Olympic Mountains in Washington State. Its impressive crenulated exterior announced the lavish interior of oak and rosewood panelled rooms, teak floors and custom-made lighting. James apparently said, "Money doesn't matter, just build what I want."

Ten kilometers of roads laced the estate and a hundred men were employed in the gardens alone. Many of the 40 rooms of this castle were filled with flowers even in winter, thanks to a large conservatory that, among other plants, featured hundreds of white orchids from India and a banana

tree. The Dunsmuir family occupied their new home in 1908, and two years later, James sold all his businesses so as to pursue a life of leisure on his estate and aboard his luxury yacht. That is exactly what he did until his own death in 1920 at the age of 69.



After his wife's death, ownership of the property fell to the Canadian government for 55 years, where it served as a naval training college and a military university with degree-granting status. During that time, the spit and polish of the grounds and castle were maintained at the highest level, and many elegant balls, weddings and special events were held there. Since 1994, Hatley Castle and a portion of its acreage have served as home to Royal Roads University, a civilian academic center of excellence, with most of the grounds and castle still open to the public free of charge. Deer and peacocks are the most prolific wildlife. A fee is now charged to tour the well-established Japanese and Italian gardens and the interior of the castle.

By Alison Gardner

Editor/journalist, Alison Gardner, is a global expert on nature-based vacations and cultural/educational travel. Her **Travel with a Challenge** web magazine, is a recognized source of new and established operators, accommodations and richly-illustrated feature articles covering all types of senior-friendly alternative travel.

Date: 2011-11-28

Article link:

<https://www.tourism-review.com/travel-tourism-magazine-victoria-a-tale-of-two-castles-and-one-family-article1675>