

A TALE OF TWO CASTLES

Victoria's famous castles have more than one story to tell . . .

by Lisa Cole

Victoria is a city teeming with art, culture, and beautiful architecture. There aren't too many places in Canada where you can walk down a particular street and feel like you've suddenly arrived in the Great Britain, Ireland, or Scotland of old. Contributing to Victoria's rich history are two Victorian Era mansions that are so majestic and immense that they are now referred to as castles: Craigdarroch and Hatley Gardens. Each belonged to members of the Dunsmuir family – one to a father, and one to a son. The story of these two castles and their relationship to one another reads like a fairy tale.

I walk up Fort Street from the heart of Victoria and turn right onto Joan Crescent. As I scale a rather steep incline, Craigdarroch Castle appears unexpectedly, looming above me with a particularly regal presence. I catch my breath, partly because of the climb, but mostly because it comes as such a surprise. It's hard to believe that this four-and-a-half storey mansion with Roman arches, Jacobean dormers, and iron-braced Elizabethan chimneys is hiding in downtown Victoria. I feel like I've just stepped back in time.

Craigdarroch Castle

Robert Dunsmuir chose Victoria's highest point to build his mansion back in 1887. At the end of the nineteenth century, Dunsmuir was one of the wealthiest men in North America, having made his riches in the shipping and mining industry. Craigdarroch is Gaelic for "rocky oak place." This was to be Dunsmuir's dream home.

Bonanza castles were common in those days, built by affluent businessmen who'd made their fortune in the industrial transformation of the New World. Sadly, Dunsmuir never had a chance to actually live here. He died in 1889, just before construction was completed. His wife, Joan, inherited his entire estate. She lived at Craigdarroch until her death in 1908. After that, the castle was owned by Solomon Cameron before it was converted into a military hospital in 1919. Later, it served as the location for Victoria College, the Victoria School Board, and the Victoria Conservatory of Music. Today, it is a Historic House Museum.



Craigdarroch Castle
Photo Courtesy of Craigdarroch Castle

I open the door at the front coach entrance and a friendly volunteer greets me. She asks me to clean my shoes on the shoe cleaner, a ritual all must follow before entering the main part of the building. Then she ushers me through a narrow passageway into the Main Hall.

"Look up," she says. The ceiling towers far above me. The golden oak stairway seems to spin. "There are eighty-seven stairs to climb before you reach the top," she tells me. I look down again to get my bearings and am struck by the ornately carved wood that is practically everywhere.

"But you go up a little at a time," she reassures me, "so it's not too strenuous."



Main Stairs Craigdarroch Castle
Photo Courtesy of Craigdarroch Castle

She gives me a floor map and information on how to proceed. Then I'm on my own. I walk over to the great fireplace of the Main Hall and read the quotation:

"Welcome ever smiles and farewell goes out sighing," from Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida*. I feel welcome here . . . but, on the other hand, I feel almost like a trespasser, as though I've just walked into someone's home uninvited. In the Library, it feels like someone's just set down their book. Everything is restored to the way it would have been when the Dunsmuir's lived here. Two portraits peer at me from either side of the fireplace: one of Robert, and one of Joan. Goose bumps rise on the back of my neck.

In the Drawing Room, I can almost hear faint echoes of music and laughter. Light pours in through a stained glass window depicting a woman and a swan. The ceiling is hand-painted. There's a white bearskin rug. I am drawn to a beautiful old Steinway piano. Apparently, it is still played on a regular basis.



Craigdarroch Castle-Steinway Piano
Photo Courtesy of Craigdarroch Castle

I ascend the first set of stairs and stop to look at the organ alcove on the first landing. Musicians would have once played here. Their festive music would have greeted guests as they arrived and filled the entire castle.

The room that strikes me most on the second floor is Joan's Sitting Room. The rumour is true: her presence can truly be felt here. It's obvious that she spent a great deal of time in this room. I feel like she's going to come bustling in any second and ask me what I'm doing here.



Craigdarroch Castle-Joan's Sitting Room
Photo Courtesy of Craigdarroch Castle

On the third floor, the Billiard Room stands out. The Dunsmuir daughters would have entertained guests in here. The great billiard table is the focal point of the room. There's a large telescope near one of the windows that once belonged to Robert's eldest son, James, when he lived at Hatley Park.

A staff member asks me if I have any questions.

"Do you have any ghost stories?" I ask.

She smiles and shakes her head. "Officially, no . . . "

"Unofficially?" I persist.



Craigdarroch Castle-Billiard Room
Photo Courtesy of Jeff Barber

"Well, think about it," she offers. "Joan died here . . . Patients passed away here when this place was a military hospital. I can't really say any more than that – except, at closing time, when I'm checking the rooms, there are strange noises and it can get a little creepy."

I make my way up the final, narrow stairway with its creaking stairs, up to the tower where the view is panoramic. I can see all of Victoria from up here - and beyond. When I'm able to tear my gaze away from the window and look down, I'm struck by the intricate mosaic pattern of the hand-tiled floor. As others come up the stairs behind me, I hear their gasps and exclamations. This is the best part of the tour. I could spend all day up here.

Hatley Castle

In some ways, Hatley Castle is almost like an 'offspring' of Craigdarroch, but in many others, it is truly an original. The construction of the castle was completed in 1908, the very year that James Dunsmuir's mother, Joan, passed on.

James had never been to Craigdarroch Castle due to an ongoing dispute with his mother. His father, Robert, had left his entire estate to Joan. This came as a great shock to James and his brother Alex, for Robert had made verbal promises of inheritance to each of them. Both boys had grown up working in all the stages of the mining process. James, the elder of the two, had risen in the ranks to a managerial position. And now, after all their years of hard work, the two brothers were left with scant financial security. After a seven year negotiation period, Joan finally granted them title to the

San Francisco Company. James and Alex then proposed to purchase the Wellington Colliery from her, but it took her another three years to concur. After Alex's death, a great and infamous court battle ensued between Joan and James over Alex's Will. James, Premier of British Columbia at the time, was crushed by the publicity, including a headline that appeared in the New York Times that read: "Premier sued by his Mother."

Bearing this in mind, it is no wonder that James eventually retreated from public life and politics and sold off all businesses with which his family name was associated. He turned his attention to building Hatley Castle and the surrounding gardens - this was to be a place of opulence, leisure, and, with its sprawling six hundred and fifty acres (at the time the land was purchased), a welcome sanctuary from the outside world.

"Money doesn't matter," James Dunsmuir told his architect. "Just build what I want."

I arrive through the front gates of Royal Roads University and park in the lower parking lot. As I get out of the car, I remember my research from the night before and realize that I'm standing on the site of the original Hatley house that burned down years before James purchased the property.

Above me, the castle stretches across the landscape and rises into the sky. I turn towards the water and see two swans milling about in Esquimalt Lagoon. Beyond them, the Olympic Mountains are standing guard. How romantic this place is! As I walk up the path to the castle, I have to stop to let a flock of Canada Geese and one mottled seagull pass by.



Hatley Castle-Olympic Mts. in background
Photo Courtesy of Hatley Castle

My tour guide, James Douglas, welcomes me inside and leads me into the Grand Hall – a reception room very similar to the one at Craigdarroch Castle, but with its own unique style. There is that beautiful golden oak again, imported from England. This is an Edwardian Home with a renaissance feel to it. In the centre of the Grand Hall is a massive sandstone fireplace, reminiscent of Craigdarroch Castle as well. These impressive fireplaces were meant purely for show as both castles had central heating.



Hatley Castle-Foyer Fireplace
Photo Courtesy of Hatley Castle

My guide tells me that when James and Laura sat down with their architect to design their home, they each described totally different tastes. Therefore, one side of the castle's main floor was created for Laura and the other side was created for James. Laura enjoyed having parties and was very much a socialite. So her needs are reflected in the domestic and public offerings seen on first floor. James, on the other hand, needed his solitude and called for more private rooms.

Each room on the first floor is made from a different kind of imported wood, giving each its own particular appearance and 'flavour'. The wood gets fancier and more luxurious as one proceeds.

First, we go to Laura's side of the main floor. Here we find the Butler's Antechamber, where he would stand and direct bustling servant traffic during festive occasions. There are two doorways here - creating both a transition zone for the servants and also a sort of buffer zone - so the guests wouldn't be able to see all the activity happening behind the scenes. The Dining Room and Drawing Room are also on this side of the main floor. The Drawing Room, where the ladies withdrew after dinner, is very spacious. The front doors lead out to a terrace large enough to hold a thousand guests. The room is open concept so that furniture could be arranged according to the particular occasion.



Hatley Castle-Dining Room
Photo Courtesy of Hatley Castle

The only stationary piece of furniture, my guide tells me, was a Steinway piano. "The very same piano," he says, "that you would have seen in the Drawing Room at Craigdarroch Castle." Apparently after Laura died, the estate was liquidated, and the piano was sold at a public auction for just \$500. It was later donated to the Victoria Conservatory who then sold it to Craigdarroch Castle as a fundraiser, for \$50,000. Today it's worth more than a quarter of a million. One day it may be returned to Hatley castle, who knows?

Next is the Library, and although the atmosphere in here is warm and almost welcoming, it's apparent that we're already starting to enter James' domain of the main floor. The room is smaller than the preceding ones and there is a slightly 'closeted' feel to it. It has woodland and hunting themes on the walls and fireplace.



Hatley Castle-Dining Room
Photo Courtesy of Hatley Castle

James' Study became the Commandant's Office during the castle's military college days and had been an extremely private area for about fifty years. My guide tells me that he's shown cadets this room and they were visibly shaken, knowing that if they saw the inside of this office it meant they were getting kicked out of school. The study is the fulcrum of James' particular interests. And, as with Joan's Sitting Room at Craigdarroch, I certainly get the feeling that he'd spent a great deal of time in here.

On the far right of the castle is James' Private Entrance, where there's a built-in "escape route." When James would arrive home from yachting, hunting, or fishing, he could go down the little hall to see if Laura was entertaining - and if she was, he could turn around and go right back out again. The door handle is four inches higher than all others in the building as an indicator that no one else was allowed to use this door.

James Dunsmuir died in 1920, Laura went on to live in the castle until her death in 1937. After that, the building became the Royal Canadian Naval College, the Royal Canadian Air Force College, the Canadian Services College and finally, Royal Roads Military College. It now serves as an administrative building to the college - and often as the ideal location for many film and television projects, including *Smallville* and *XMEN III*. Hatley is slowly being restored to its former state and will one day become a full-fledged Heritage House Museum, just as its forerunner, Craigdarroch Castle.

For more information, visit the web site of:

[Craigdarroch Castle](#)

[Hatley Castle](#)