

The true meaning of Vancouver

It seems the inspiration was not divine, but bovine

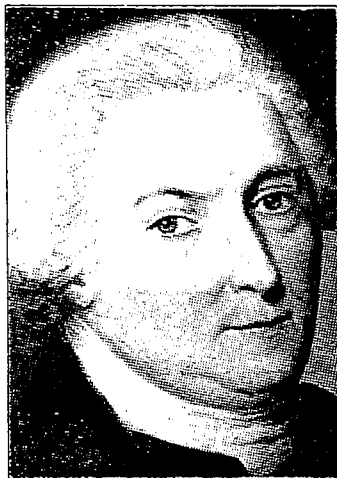
By JOSEPH JONES

‘What does ‘Vancouver’ mean?” The question gave me an excuse to try to find the answer. I had wanted to for a long time. Questions are my business. I am a librarian.

I set off on the quest. This one had looked tough enough and trivial enough to be left alone. What to do seemed fairly clear. How to do it was another matter. Vancouver was named for the explorer George Vancouver.

Many people can tell you that off the top of their heads. An essential first step, but it only reveals that a place name came from a personal name. It doesn’t get to the origin.

Small digression: the study of names has a name: onomastics. It is not a discipline that reaps great academic honor. Any Western surname is likely to reflect one of four things: an occupation (Smith), a parent’s given name (Jones — son of John), a place (Field), or a personal characteristic (Brown). Just speculating on these probabilities would not be enough. The problem now became, what does George’s last name mean? The encyclopedias, the biographies — none of them helped. Neither did my next attempt, which was to call Vancouver Public Library and hope that the fruits of someone else’s labor had been recorded in their files. My breakthrough lead was indirect, a local article by



a relative of George Vancouver in a small periodical indexed by the University of B.C. Library’s Special Collections department. George Vancouver’s ancestors came to England from Coevorden, a small town in the Netherlands. A personal name led back to a place name. Full circle.

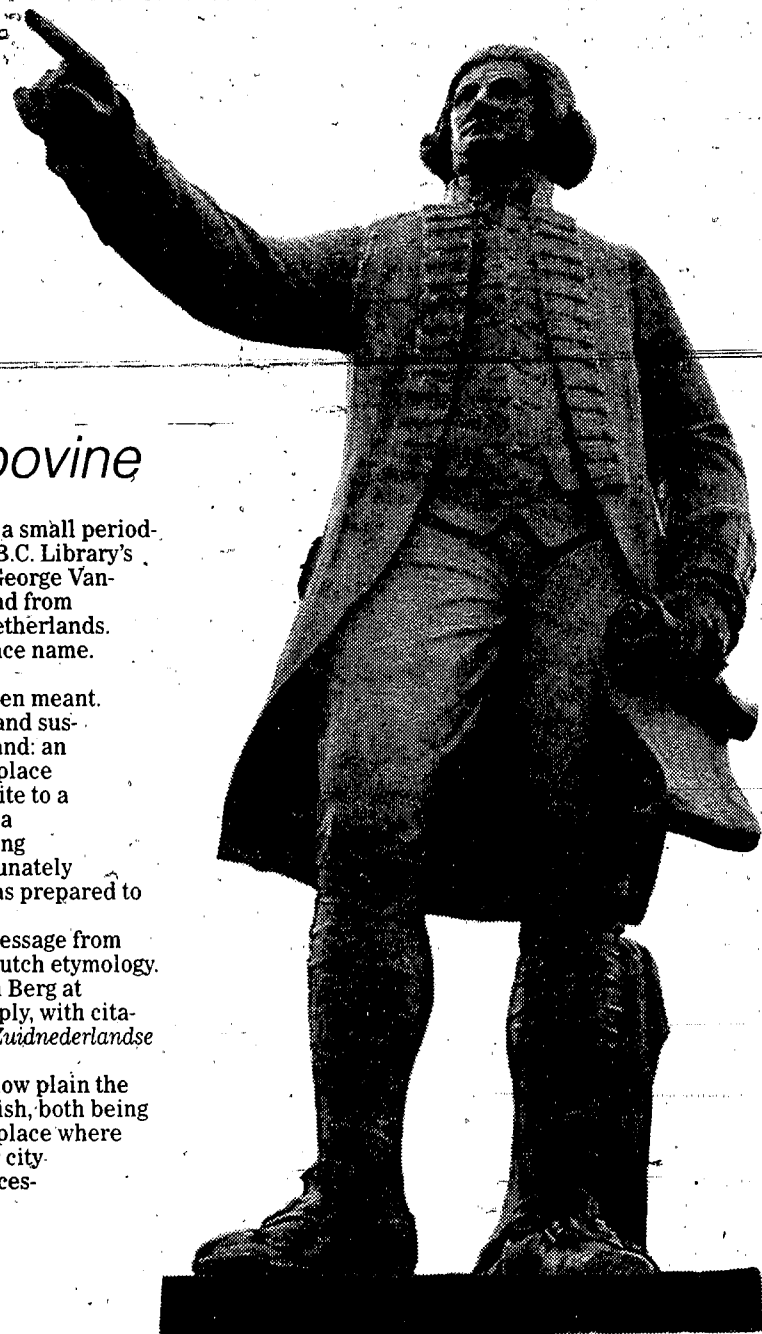
I still didn’t know what Coevorden meant. I did not know what was needed, and suspected rightly that it was not at hand: an etymological dictionary of Dutch place names. All else failing, I could write to a Dutch lexicographer I had met at a workshop. I procrastinated, wanting something easier and faster. Fortunately the person asking the question was prepared to wait.

Then, on the Internet, I saw a message from someone working in the area of Dutch etymology. I popped off a note to Jan van den Berg at

Tilburg University. Back came a detailed reply, with citation to a book, *Woordenboek der Noord — en Zuidnederlandse plaatsnamen*.

Almost before I read his response, I saw how plain the meaning was (Dutch is a first cousin to English, both being West Germanic languages): “Cow ford,” the place where cows cross the river. So the place where our city has grown was explored by a man whose ancestors came from a cow ford. Not especially appropriate to Burrard Inlet or the Fraser River. Perhaps, though, it has a western *je ne sais quoi* that cannot be found in a name like Oxford. ♦

Joseph Jones lives in Vancouver.



Newsmaker of the year: Prozac (how depressing)