

“Old Bill”

In its early days, the University of British Columbia was as well-known for its “characters” as for its academic life. There was “King John” Ridington, UBC’s first University Librarian, who allegedly instructed students to walk only on the black tiles of the Library floors, as they were easier to clean than the white ones. Lionel Haweis officially worked as a library clerk, but was a self-described black sheep from a family of eccentrics, and was equally well-known as a writer, photographer, and patron of student literary efforts. Garnett Sedgewick, autocrat of the English Department for many years and arguably UBC’s leading scholar, raconteur, and wit, would play both Romeo *and* Juliet while lecturing on Shakespeare.



A lesser known character from the University’s early days – although one who would be instrumental in the development of one of UBC’s most important programmes – was William Tansley. Known to students over the years as “Old Bill”, he was born in Stoke-on-Trent, Staffordshire, England, in 1859. Apprenticed in a lawyer’s office at age 12, Tansley soon left that position for one as a coach-builder’s apprentice. After four years he changed positions again, working in his grandfather’s warehouse. However, Tansley’s main interest was art – he hoped to teach drawing, and was actually good enough to qualify for a tutorial position. Unfortunately, illness prevented him from accepting that job.

Tansley emigrated to Canada in 1903, living first in Dundurn, Saskatchewan. The following year he moved to British Columbia and worked at a series of jobs before coming to the University in 1916. Working at first as a janitor in the Fairview campus’ Arts/Administration/Library building, he later assumed responsibility for general maintenance, repairs and janitorial services, and also served as a night watchman.

Well-read and a natural story-teller, Tansley was popular among students and faculty alike. Professors who stopped to chat with him often found him almost as knowledgeable of their subjects as they were. Students called on him to open jammed lockers, paint signs advertising a campus event, or even just lend a sympathetic ear. Every Christmas a collection was taken up to buy him a present – one year a set of books, another year a gold watch.

The library functioned somewhat as the campus social centre also, especially the Smoking Room for men in the basement. There the studious janitor Bill Tansley held clinics on philosophy.... (Dr. William C. Gibson)

W. Tansley is perhaps the most erratic gentleman around college (and that is saying something). He may often be heard waxing enthusiastic over some extract from the classics, or seen brush in hand, laying up a libel suit for himself at some future date. His picture shows him at one of his innumerable tasks – removing some of the corruption from the Men's Common Room. (1918 Annual)

Everyone knows "our Mr. Tansley." If you want to open a stubborn locker, if you've lost the only note book you ever valued, if you must have a poster that will arouse universal interest and curiosity, "Ask Bill," and your worries will vanish. But perhaps everyone does not know that Mr. Tansley found time to aid the French Red Cross by painting several charming posters for their recent entertainment. The Countess d'Audiffret was so pleased with the cleverness and skill displayed in his work that she has taken the posters away with her.... (The Ubysey, 26 October 1922)

Although acting as janitor, part of whose duties are as a watchman and the other part as sweeper and cleaner, in the long night and morning hours my brain and imagination are at times very busy, especially as I pass through the library and look on the seemingly endless rows of books.

Here is Froissart, truly in every sense a chronicler, and as I turn over the pages richly illuminated and illustrated in the quaint mediaeval way, I am reminded forcibly of Sir John Fastolf and Caister Castle in Norfolk....

I have many times visited the old castle, the first brick castellated and moated structure erected in England. The outer walls and tower still remain, also remains of the old staircase to the tower summit....

Another volume, Visitations of Norwich, brought a flood of reminiscences to my mind of old Benet's Abbey, founded by Canute the Dane, the monks of which, at Sir John Fastolf's death, were specially barbered and shaved for the funeral obsequies.

Gray's Elegy – yes, with its pathetic lesson for all. "The rude forefathers of the hamlet sleep" – and, wearied with the long and hard night's work, as I seat myself among this vast array of history, romance and philosophy, the severe modernity of the stacks seems to soften, the old, old monastic arches take shape, and the narrow spaces resolve into scriptorium, with the painstaking monks laboriously inscribing those glorious pages on vellum.

But this dreaming will never do – a janitor's job is to clean and dust and make the place presentable when the institution opens for the students in the morning. (William Tansley, The Ubicee, February 1917)



Tansley was given another responsibility in 1927 when Dr. Frank Burnett donated his extensive collection of artifacts and artwork from the South Pacific to the University.

Tansley and Burnett were friends; supposedly, “Old Bill” knew the collection so well that when it was donated to UBC he automatically was given the position of curator.

Housed on the first floor of the Library, the Burnett Collection included weapons, tools, items of clothing, idols and other religious artifacts, human skulls and bones, and many other curios. Numbering nearly a thousand pieces, it was at the time one of the largest such collections in the world. Tansley was responsible for maintaining the collection in its display cabinets, and for conducting tours for interested students and staff.

The museum ... consists mainly of South Sea Island curiosities collected by Dr. Frank Burnett. There are, however, a few things such as Roman tiles, cuneiform tablets, and Babylonian vessels among all the nose rings, bark clothes, idols, dyak scalps, evil charms, shell money and clubs.

*Perhaps the most interesting and certainly the most gruesome of all the things displayed are the cannibal forks. What tales of wild adventure and what horrible pictures they can conjure up.... (“Campus Explorer”, *The Ubyyssey*, 17 October 1933)*

*There is a heavy door through which generations of freshmen have peeped with awe and a librarian. Led around more or less by the ear, each newcomer gets a brief flash of the grim array of savage cutlery, then he is whisked away, to trundle through the remainder of his academic career with merely a hazy recollection of what lay beyond the door. Few ever return to it. Some cannot remember where it is. Most refuse to believe that they ever saw it at all. One freshman never got out of it. He may be seen today under one of the glass cases, and, though the specimen card claims that he is a Melanesian rice-bowl, we know, don't we? (Eric Nicol, *The Ubyyssey*, 24 September 1940)*

Over the years, other materials were added, including artifacts from First Nations groups in B.C. The combined collections became known as the University Museum, and Tansley served as curator until his retirement in 1941. He was succeeded by Dr. Ian McTaggart Cowan of the Department of Zoology. The museum continued to evolve, and began shifting from the collection of curios towards supporting serious research and study – especially after 1947 when anthropologists Harry and Audrey Hawthorn were appointed director and curator, respectively.

William Tansley died in 1957. The museum he helped to establish eventually was re-named the UBC Museum of Anthropology. Since its transfer from the Library to its current site on Marine Drive in 1976 the Museum has become a world-famous centre for anthropological research and education, and one of the University's most important landmarks.