

Mention “The Cairn” to any student or graduate of the University of British Columbia, and the most likely response will refer to the stone monument on the boulevard of Main Mall, between the Chemistry and Henry Angus Buildings, built at the time of the “Great Trek” of 1922. However, there are in fact three campus landmarks that are commonly referred-to as “cairns” – and each has its own unique history.

### **The Great Trek Cairn**

The general story of the “Great Trek Cairn” is familiar to most UBC students and alumni – however, some interesting but possibly unfamiliar details are worth recounting.

The cairn was built at the conclusion of “The Pilgrimage” or parade from downtown Vancouver to Point Grey, on October 28, 1922. Now known as the “Great Trek”, the parade was the climax of a year-long publicity campaign organized and led by UBC students to persuade the provincial government to complete the University’s campus. Suggested by Prof. Paul A. Boving, the cairn was to be built using stones collected by the students themselves, and would serve both as a commemoration of the 1922 campaign and as the first completed structure at the University’s new home.

Surprisingly, not everybody in the University community felt that the cairn was a good idea. An editorial in the October 26 edition of *The Ubyyssey* summarized their objections, which were primarily procedural and financial:

The memorial cairn owes its useless life to an unfortunate departure from the ordinary procedure of student administration.

The Publicity Committee put the plans of the cairn before the student mass-meeting last week – before it had been considered by the Students' Council. It was so presented to the meeting that only the romantic glamor and sentiment of the proposal appeared....

When the plan of the memorial cairn was brought up later in the Students' Council, stripped of its clouds of glory, it was found that the plain facts of the case involved an expenditure of one-third of the total funds of the Student Campaign.



Nevertheless the project went ahead. The architectural firm Sharp & Thompson, the University’s official architects, designed the cairn, with Charles Thompson offering his services free. Professional civil engineer W.H. Powell, assisted by A.H. Finlay of the Applied Science Class of 1924, surveyed and marked its exact position relative to the official campus plan. A local company recommended by the architects was retained for its construction (**left**), with a professional

mason responsible for the stone work. The total cost was \$125.

At the dedication ceremony after the Great Trek, Campaign chairman A.E. “Ab” Richards argued that any procedural and cost considerations had to be considered secondary to the cairn’s symbolic value:

The building of the Cairn to me is full of meaning. It stands for the combined efforts of 1,178 students. Each rock represents a personal contribution in a worthy and just cause. As the mason with his trowel shapes and cements the rocks together into a complete and unified whole so the Campaign has bound the student body together by a bond as strong as the very granite itself.

The base and sides of the cairn, built of stones gathered from around the construction site, were completed before the ceremony. Into its hollow centre the students threw stones they had collected themselves before and during the Trek. A written account of the publicity campaign was placed inside; the top was completed, and the monument sealed. The inscription on the north side of the cairn reads: “TO THE GLORY OF OUR ALMA MATER STUDENT CAMPAIGN 1922-23” (**right**).



In the years since its construction the Great Trek Cairn has served as the centre of student ceremonial life. It has served as the finishing mark of the annual Arts '20 Relay and, later, the Great Trek Relay. Every September during Homecoming Week a ceremony (**left**) is held at the cairn, commemorating the Greast Trek and featuring speeches by student leaders, University officials, and prominent alumni. Sometimes covered in ivy,

but in recent years kept clear of overgrowth, the Great Trek Cairn remains as a symbol of student initiative.

### **The Tuum Est Cairn**

As students returned to the UBC campus in September 1949, they discovered a new landmark under construction on East Mall across from Brock Hall. A large boulder originally deposited thousands of years before by the retreat of an Ice Age glacier, which until then had been popular among students as a “kissing rock”, was serving as a base for a new monument.



Referred-to by *The Ubyyssey* as the “memorial to people who build memorials”, this cairn’s origins were a mystery as it was paid for by an anonymous donor. The bronze plaque attached to the base indicated that it was dedicated to those students who had contributed to the construction of several important campus facilities. On top was inscribed “TUUM EST – IT IS YOURS” (**left**). Other plaques listed the Gymnasium (1929), the Playing Field (1931), the Stadium (1937), Brock Hall (1940), and the Armouries (1942).

In the years after its completion, plaques for the War Memorial Gymnasium (1951), Student Residences (1956), and the Brock Memorial Hall Extension (1957) were added, presumably by the same unknown donor. Construction of each of these facilities had been initiated and paid for, in

whole or in part, by the students of UBC. Such “generous actions of student bodies, in providing for their Alma Mater and the citizens of British Columbia”, in the words of its dedication plaque, led one student to refer to it as the “Carin’, Sharin’ Cairn”.

Bracketed by a hedge and flanked by granite benches, the origins of the so-called “Tuum Est Cairn” mostly remained a mystery for decades. In 1985, however, the Heritage Committee of the Alumni Association confirmed that Professor Frank E. Buck was the person responsible. Buck had been hired as a professor of horticulture in 1920, and in addition to teaching he also supervised the campus’ landscape development until his retirement in 1949. Much of his landscaping work around what is now the core of the campus is still in evidence today.

On October 22, 1985, the Alumni Association and the Alma Mater Society hosted a ceremony (**right**) to formally re-dedicate the Tuum Est Cairn. Professors Alexander Roman and Blythe Eagles of the Alumni Heritage Committee recounted the story of the cairn and Frank Buck’s involvement in its creation, and a new plaque was added to permanently memorialize its origins. Two years later a second ceremony added another plaque with a list of more recent student-initiated projects, including the Winter Sports Centre (1963), the Student Union Building (1969), and the Aquatic Centre (1978), bringing the Tuum Est Cairn up-to-date.



## The Engineers' Cairn

ERTW – “Engineers Rule The World” – is the motto of engineering students everywhere. On January 26, 1966 UBC’s Engineering Undergraduate Society first attempted to demonstrate the motto in (\*ahem\*) concrete fashion.

That day over 300 engineering students swarmed in front of Main Library. Dressed in academic robes, EUS President Art Stevenson addressed the crowd, condemning the sloppy dress of most UBC students and declaring that from then on, engineers would lead a new trend in being “well-dressed”. They then built a small cairn of rocks and cement, symbolizing their intent to take responsibility for keeping the campus beautiful. The cairn held a marble plaque, dedicating it “in humble appreciation of the diversified and continuing contributions to campus life by the Engineers”.

Two days later, however, the cairn was gone. EUS Vice-president Don Allen claimed that it had been “built only for ceremony and dismantled later” – whether it was removed by the engineers or by UBC Plant Operations remained unclear. Art Stevenson declared that they would build a new and bigger cairn elsewhere on campus. “The engraved plaque needs a resting place”, he told *The Ubyyssey*. “I’m not too sure how big the new cairn will be but no one will be able to move it”.

It would be more than two years before there was a second attempt to build an engineers’ monument. In September 1968 a hole was dug near the centre of campus, in front of what is now Koerner Library on Main Mall. The hole was filled with scrap metal and concrete. The concrete was levelled to form a flat slab with a large “E” stamped into it – thus implicating the EUS, although nobody ever confessed and the individuals were never identified. Like the first one, this monument was also promptly removed.

The monument builders struck again in February 1969, during Engineering Week. The new structure was a three-sided monument about five feet high, painted white with a big red “E” embossed on each side and a new memorial plaque bolted to it. Again located on Main Mall, rumour had it that a car was buried underneath (perhaps even “Omar”, the mascot car of the Forestry Undergraduate Society), and that it was reinforced with a cage of steel rebar, making it impossible to remove or destroy. So it appeared that the so-called “Engineers’ Cairn” (technically it was a “truncated obelisk”, as a true cairn is made up of a number of large blocks, while the new structure was a single mass of concrete) would remain.

However, when plans were announced later that year for the new Sedgewick Undergraduate Library, to be built beneath Main Mall, the new cairn was found to be right in the middle of the proposed site. Rather than see another engineering monument destroyed, the EUS arranged to move it. A crane was hired to lift the cairn and transport it to the south end of Main Mall, between the Barn Coffee Shop and the MacLeod (Electrical Engineering) Building.





The Engineers' Cairn remained in place and intact (**left**) for almost two decades, even as it became a target of vandalism by other student groups. It became tradition for clubs, fraternities, and undergraduate societies to scrawl graffiti on the monument or re-paint it in their own colours. Bonfires were built around it. A forklift was used in an attempt to tip it over. Still the cairn remained, with the bronze plaque removed for safe-keeping and a fresh coat of red and white paint applied after every vandalism attempt.

On March 4, 1988 a group of forestry students rented a back-hoe with a heavy-duty pneumatic drill. With this they set to work to destroy the cairn, partly as a stunt and also to avenge the many incarnations of Omar the mascot car the engineers had trashed over the years. They found no rebar, and no remains of the first Omar. Within a few hours all that was left was a pile of rubble, which they used to spell the word "FORESTRY" on the lawn beside the cairn site.

Ironically, according to *The Ubyyssey* an independent contractor had received an inquiry into the cost of demolishing the cairn and alerted the EUS. For reasons unknown, however, the engineers opted not to investigate or otherwise act on the tip, and left the cairn unguarded. Their response to the loss of the cairn was surprisingly subdued. "We are rather disappointed in what they did", EUS Treasurer Peter Gwalick told *The Ubyyssey*, voicing the opinion of most engineering students. "I mean if they had stolen it, it would have been an impressive stunt, but anyone can demolish a concrete cairn".

Legal action was threatened, but instead the EUS proceeded to replace the cairn. With the support of engineering alumni, this time they would make it bigger and better than before – as indestructible as the old cairn supposedly had been (**right**). A deep hole was dug and a foundation poured with rebar extending upwards, and a wooden form was built around it. As a ready-mix truck poured the concrete, the work crew had to brace the sides of the form with their trucks to prevent its collapse from the weight. In the end, the poured concrete was still four inches short of the top of the form, so the eight-foot structure was finished using bags of concrete mix "liberated" from a civil engineering lab.



The new Engineers' Cairn was dedicated on February 11, 1989, during Engineering Week. The EUS and the Engineering Alumni Division hosted a dedication ceremony, during which the cairn was christened with a bottle of beer smashed over one corner.

(Sources: *The Ubyyssey*, *Alumni Chronicle*, *Tuum Est*, University Archives website <[www.library.ubc.ca/archives](http://www.library.ubc.ca/archives)>, "hEUSStory" website <[heustory.apsc.ubc.ca](http://heustory.apsc.ubc.ca)>. All

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