

## **Grant MacEwan: A leader, storyteller, and nature lover**

By Michael Giovanni Indratmo



It was Monday morning in May, and I was reading a book in a garden in front of my dad's workplace. Suddenly, a skunk ran out of nowhere, followed by a man chasing it. When he finally caught it, he sat on the bench beside me. He noticed the Grant MacEwan biography in my hands. He asked me, "What brought you to read that book?" I replied, "I'm learning about a champion of Alberta." "Well, what do you know about him?" he asked.

I shared what I had learned so far, "Grant MacEwan was born in 1902 just outside Brandon, Manitoba. Growing up in a pioneer family, he spent his youth working hard on the family farm in Brandon and later in Melfort, Saskatchewan. After studying agriculture, he became a professor of Animal Husbandry at the University of Saskatchewan and the Dean of Agriculture at the University of Manitoba. Grant MacEwan was a great leader. In 1950, a terrible flood caused by the Red River rising struck Winnipeg. With the water at 30 feet high, Dean MacEwan evacuated animals and took the midnight shift operating the sewer pump. Later, he became the mayor of

Calgary and the ninth Lieutenant Governor of Alberta. Loving storytelling, he wrote 49 books, most of them on Western Canadian history. He received the Officer of the Order of Canada and the Golden Pen lifetime achievement award. Grant MacEwan was known as a writer, a professor, and a politician.”

“All those things you just said are true, but do you know what he was very passionate about?” he asked me. “What was that?” I asked. “He cared about the environment. I, um, he planted trees everywhere and was committed to leaving the world better than he found it,” he told me. “That’s amazing!” I exclaimed. “I know him very closely,” he whispered. “Wow, could you tell me more about him?” “Sure,” he replied.

So, he began telling me about how Dr. MacEwan helped farmers during the Great Depression. “The worst drought hit Saskatchewan in 1937. Can you imagine a farm with nothing but weeds? During that time, only Russian thistles grew. Farmers had nothing to sell, and the livestock had nothing to eat!” “That must have been hard!” I said. “Yes, indeed,” he sighed. “But Mr. MacEwan found that Russian thistles could be fed to livestock. You see, he found a substitute for something that wasn’t available.” Upon hearing this, I asked him, “I miss going to the mountains, but I can’t go because of the pandemic, so what should I do?” “Hmm, an adventure can happen anywhere; it doesn’t need to be in a faraway place. Try reading about Dr. MacEwan’s unforgettable adventure from the book *Watersheds*,” he advised.

Suddenly, a woman approached us and said, “Dad, we need to go now.” “I’m coming, Heather,” he replied. I told him, “Thank you, Sir.” “You’re welcome,” he said. I dashed into the building to find my dad. When I passed through the library, I stumbled upon a picture that looked like the person I met minutes ago. I read the caption in disbelief. Flipping through the biography, I tried to find photos of Dr. MacEwan. I discovered that he had a daughter named Heather. I even spotted his picture with two pet skunks. That was Grant MacEwan himself! I quickly ran to my

dad's office and told him, "Have you ever seen the picture of Grant MacEwan in the library?" My dad chuckled, "Of course, this university is named after him!" I then told him about my conversation with Grant MacEwan.

The more I learned about Grant MacEwan, the more I became inspired by his kindness and modesty. From bracing the frosty Winnipeg winter dragging a sled full of Christmas hampers for families in need to creating a foundation to support his community, Dr. MacEwan was always a philanthropist. Being a person who puts others before himself, he fixed a friend's flat tire after his wedding ceremony. Despite having a high position in the government, he remained frugal and modest. While he was the mayor of Calgary, he often walked or rode the bus because it was better for the environment instead of riding the city's limousine. Can you imagine receiving a luxurious gift, and the next day, trading it for a cheaper one? That's exactly what Grant MacEwan did. When the Government of Alberta gave him a fancy Jeep at the end of his service as a Lieutenant Governor, he traded the car for a smaller and more efficient model, and he gave the money difference back to the government.

Grant MacEwan inspired me to be kind and ready to help others. One of our friends collects unsold bread from a local bakery and distributes it to charity organizations. There has been more leftover bread during the pandemic, so my family helps them out. We take big bags of bread and pack each loaf individually for children in need. Sometimes we would pack 15 bags and other times 50, but most importantly, the bread was not wasted and used for a good purpose.

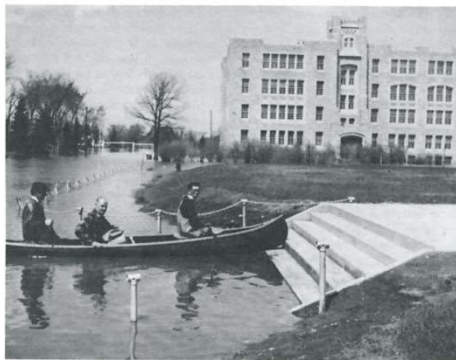
I would also like to share information, time, and talent like Dr. MacEwan. I have started a YouTube channel to demonstrate various projects, such as making a simple electric motor and doing a fun experiment in the cold weather. I plan to add more videos to inspire others. In addition, I would like to write books about my travelling experiences. When we travelled, I recorded my adventures in a journal, and now, I will transform those bits and pieces into a book. To share my

time and talent, I am committed to playing piano at church more often while working on my grade six RCM piano examination.

Ever since my encounter with Grant MacEwan, I often told my parents about him and how he tried to leave the environment better than he found it. I brainstormed about how I can help the environment. When I go to the library, I will ride my bike instead of riding a car when possible. The next time I see a light that is on unnecessarily, I will turn it off. Lastly, before I throw an item away, I will ask myself, “Can I recycle this?” Since I have talked about Dr. MacEwan a lot, one day, my mom suggested, “Why don’t you write about your encounter with Grant MacEwan?” And so, I did.



Grant with pet skunks, “This” and “That”



Dean MacEwan goes to work with two paddlers during Winnipeg Flood in May 1950  
(MacEwan Collection)



Grant became famous for planting a tree every time he attended an outdoor ceremony. Here he performs the ritual at the 50th anniversary of the Southern Alberta Institute in Calgary in 1966.

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#### Image Credits (in order of appearance)

Grant MacEwan is seen here in 1948, while Dean of Agriculture & Home Economics at the University of Manitoba. (2001). [Photograph]. In *Alberta History: Grant MacEwan: A Tribute* (volume 49 edition 4 ed., p. 8).

MacEwan, G. (1986b). Grant with pet skunks, “This” and “That” [Photograph]. In *Grant MacEwan’s Journals* (p. 87).

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