

Hamilton Mack Laing – Man of Distinction



Hamilton Mack Laing was born in Hensall, Ontario in 1883. His extended family moved to Manitoba, settling in Clearsprings, where he became a keen hunter and observer of nature. He never shot anything for sport.

He regularly upgraded his professional qualifications. From 1901-1911, he taught school, then became principal of the high school in Oak Lake. He learned drawing and taxidermy, played sports, and became fascinated by birds.

In 1905, he earned a diploma from the National Press Association in Indianapolis, Indiana, for a commercial storywriting course. His first published piece of fiction, was '*The End of the Trail*,' published in 1907. He visited BC in 1909, via steamer up the Sunshine Coast from Vancouver.

He moved to Brooklyn, New York, in the summer of 1911. He enrolled in the Pratt Institute's program of Fine and Applied Arts. Three years later, he graduated with an Art Diploma. He was an accomplished artist and produced beautifully accurate and detailed images. In 1913, Laing's first book, '*Out With The Birds*' was published.

He bought a motorcycle in 1914 and drove from New York to Winnipeg, the first of several "expeditions." In 1915, he drove a new and recently-acquired Harley Davidson motorcycle from New York City to San Francisco, meeting his brother half-way. He kept a journal of the trip and later wrote a manuscript called '*The Transcontinentalist*'. This was edited by Trevor Marc Hughes and published in 2019 as '*Riding the Continent* (Ronsdale Press).

In 1918-9, Laing worked in the observation tower at RAF Beamsville, Ontario. He met three prominent ornithologists during those years - Hoyes Lloyd, who monitored migratory birds for the Dominion Parks Branch, J.H Fleming, a wealthy man who later donated 25,000 bird skins to the Royal Ontario Museum, and Percy Tavener from the National Museum in Ottawa.

In 1920, Canadian Field Naturalist published his article 'Lake-shore Bird Migration at Beamsville, Ontario', which was very well received. He left Ontario and after a visit to friends in Portland, decided to return to Canada. He began writing in earnest and sought work as a field naturalist.

He moved to Comox in 1922, cleared his land and built his home from a "Stanhope" Aladdin Ready-Cut kit.

In July 1925, he was a member of the first expedition to conquer Mt Logan in the Yukon. He was commissioned to film the expedition to the snowfield and then assess the local flora and

fauna for the Department of Natural Resources. The remainder of the expedition was filmed by Allen Carpe, using a special high-altitude camera capable of withstanding extremely low temperatures.

In 1927, Laing married Ethel Hart of Portland and they established a successful and commercial orchard which included walnut, pecan, filbert, hazelnut, apple and plum trees. They also grew mushrooms and vegetables.

Laing was an avid and accomplished photographer, taking many photos of local wildlife, scenery, the people who visited him, and the work done on his land. He kept detailed diaries and observation notes. He was considered an expert on birds.

His visitors included fellow naturalists, artists, hunting and fishing companions, and writers.

In 1929, an article written by Laing entitled '*Oil - Black Death of Waterbirds - The Bird World Faces a New Menace - Oil - Polluted Waters - A Tragedy on the West Coast*' was published in 'Forest and Outdoor' magazine. In 1936, he wrote an article for 'Field and Stream' about the horned owl.

An article by Laing, '*Four-Footed Trailside Friends of the Rockies*', appeared in the 'Canadian Geographic Journal' in April 1937. Over his lifetime, Laing published over 700 articles, 22 of which are in peer-reviewed scientific publications of his day. His works were described as a "delight to read."

Laing was engaged to accompany 10 important expeditions for the National Museum of Canada and three expeditions funded by Canada and the U.S, as a "collector-naturalist", between 1933 and 1935. He was considered a "top field man."

Laing collected over 10,000 vertebrate specimens in his lifetime, the majority for the National Museum. He is credited with discovering two species of mouse. *Perognathus Laingi* was named after him in 1956.

He was devastated when his wife Ethel died of cancer in 1944, after a short illness. In 1949, he sold the Baybrook property, and in 1950, built Shakesides on the adjoining lot, in what is now Mack Laing Nature Park.

In 1979, his biography of a friend and colleague, 'Allan Brooks - artist naturalist' was published by the British Columbia Provincial Museum.

A man of many talents, Laing never tired of writing, and wrote hundreds of letters, expressing his views to friends, colleagues and the press.

He bequeathed his property to the Town of Comox in 1973 and lived in the house until his death, helped by friends, health professionals and Town employees.

In 1978, Laing, still hale and wiry at 95 years old, held an art show at D'Esterre House in Comox.

He was a teetotaler, who in advanced age became very particular about food, also rejecting tea and coffee.

Laing died of a massive coronary in February 1982, at the age of 99, after falling and requiring a hip operation. He is buried in Sandwich Cemetery, Courtenay.

A biography, '*Hamilton Mack Laing - Hunter Naturalist*', by Richard Mackie was published in 1985 (Sono Nis Press), using extensive records and photographs Laing kept during his lifetime.

The British Columbia Archives in Victoria, has a large collection of his correspondence, written articles, unpublished manuscripts and photographic plates and photos (1900-1982), amounting to 3.1 m, including his extensive diaries.