

*Presentation given by John Duncan and Gordon Olsen
of the Mack Laing Heritage Society
at the Comox Community Listening Event
Filberg Park, Comox
September 11, 2021*

Hamilton Mack Laing (1883 – 1982) is a National Treasure.

Internationally known as an ornithologist, the National Trust of Canada recognizes Mack Laing as an “esteemed naturalist, collector, author and educator”.

His extensive collections, illustrations, scientific observations, journals, and other writings, are in the National Museum and Archives of Canada, the Smithsonian Institute, the Yukon Archives, the Manitoba Museum of Man and Nature, the Royal BC Museum and others around the world.

In 1973, Mack Laing entered into a Charitable Trust Agreement with the Town of Comox to ensure that his home *Shakesides*, together with eight acres of waterfront, would be dedicated to the quiet enjoyment of the public forever.

Contrary to the terms of the Trust, *Shakesides* has never been opened to the public since his passing in 1982. Instead it was rented to private individuals for the next 32 years. The accrued rental income went into General Revenue of the Town of Comox.

In 2015 the Town of Comox attempted to demolish *Shakesides* without Court approval. Demolition was halted due to opposition from the MLHS (Mack Laing Heritage Society), the BC Attorney General and the public.

The Town of Comox, as Trustee, has applied to the BC Supreme Court to change the Trust to allow demolition of *Shakesides*.

The Court has set aside November 15 – 18 in Nanaimo for this application. Mack Laing Heritage Society, with our legal counsel, will be there as a Court designated intervenor to oppose this application.

The Town of Comox has had many Mayors and Councilors since 1982. During this entire time there has been no progress in meeting the terms of the Charitable Purpose Trust. Change is long overdue.

Mack's gift to us was huge: land, buildings, cash and art. He chose the Town of Comox to act as his trustee; a choice which has proven to be a mistake. Rather than comply with the conditions it had agreed to, the trustee made questionable choices from the start. Eventually both the land and the building suffered from neglect. The land overrun with invasive plants, the building abandoned.

After years of unaccountability, and with the guidance of a chartered accountant, Mack Laing Heritage Society produced figures which recently led to the trustee repaying a large sum of trust money; it now holds close to \$300,000. More scrutiny is needed, however, and a complete audit will likely prove that the true value of the trust may surpass half a million.

One of Canada's pre-eminent naturalists, Mack Laing gifted Shakesides and its surrounding land as a legacy to inspire and nurture the appreciation and care of the natural world in young and old. That was his intent.

In our community, there exists a committed core of local businesses, trades and professionals prepared to pitch in, repair, restore and fulfill Laing's wish that Shakesides be open to the public. Widespread support for the preservation is indicated by the signatures of well over 1000 Comox residents.

Shakesides enjoys additional support from: ***Heritage BC, The Land Conservancy of BC, Federation of BC Naturalists, Comox Valley Land Trust and Conservation Partnership, Project Watershed and the BC Assoc. of Heritage Professionals.***

A community which does not have a Heritage Register is not serious about their history. Gone today and forever, evidenced only by street names: Fairbairn, Carthew, Ellis, Stewart, MacKenzie; each was a classic century home.

MLHS has created a viable business plan to protect Shakesides from the scrap heap and to make it into the jewel which expert opinions say it could be. You deserve it, we deserve it and, above all, Mack Laing deserves it.