



# The Real Thing: The Natural History of Ian McTaggart Cowan

*Briony Penn*

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*The Real Thing* is the first official biography of Ian McTaggart Cowan (1910-2010), "the father of Canadian ecology." Authorized by his family and with the research support and participation of the University of Victoria Libraries, Briony Penn provides an unprecedented and accessible window into the story of this remarkable naturalist. From his formative years roaming the mountains around Vancouver looking for venison to his last years finishing the voluminous and authoritative *Birds of British Columbia*, Cowan's life provides a unique perspective on a century of environmental change with a critical message for the future.

As the head and founder of the first university-based wildlife department in Canada, Ian McTaggart Cowan revolutionized the way North Americans understood the natural world, and students flocked into his classrooms to hear his brilliant, entertaining lectures regarding the new science of ecology.

During his academic career, Ian McTaggart Cowan stepped outside the narrow confines of academia to pioneer nature television. His television programs in the 1950s and 60s, *Fur and Feathers*, *The Web of Life* and *The Living Sea*, made him a household name around the world by capturing the first microscopic organisms on TV and bringing a live moose into the studio. He was also responsible for hiring a young David Suzuki, who followed in his nature-show-host footsteps.

Cowan's early work in the national parks became the foundation for wildlife conservation and environmental education in Canada. And like his US counterpart and colleague Aldo Leopold, he was part of a secret fraternity that practised a reverence for wildness and influenced three generations of scientists and politicians on everything from conservation of endangered species to the dangers of pesticides and climate change, long before these topics were generally acknowledged.

In his 80s he was still pioneering new ways to communicate nature through ecotourism, and well into his 90s he was still mentoring young ecologists. Cowan's last publication at age 91 was the final volume of *Birds of British Columbia*, which the Royal BC Museum called "one of the biggest publishing events in Canadian history."

Illustrated throughout with colour and black-and-white photos from all aspects of Cowan's life, *The Real Thing* takes the reader on an adventurous and inspirational journey through the heart of North American ecology, wilderness, landscape and wonder.

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