

Bringing the Orchard Collection Full Circle

IAN STEPHEN

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IAN WILLIAM McLean Stephen (b. January 19, 1925) worked with Imbert Orchard in the field as both the recording technician and on-the-fly editor for Orchard's radio programs. However, although details of Orchard's biography are easy to find, archival records, birth records, obituaries and cemetery records revealed nothing—not even a birth date—for Stephen. As it turns out, without meaning to, Orchard had thrown me off the track. He was a member of Subud, a spiritual movement, which subsequently led him to change his name from Robert to Imbert. As a show of playful affection, and with Stephen's nodding approval, Orchard wrote "Ean" rather than Ian on all the tapes, which is why I was never able to find him.

Fortunately, just as I was literally three days from submitting the final proofs of this book, Colin Preston at CBC Archives called to say that he'd discovered Ian Stephen alive and well and living in Campbell River, B.C.—about three hours up Vancouver Island from where I live. It was like I had found an uncle I didn't know was alive! I got in my car to go and meet the surviving architect of the Orchard Collection. What you have here, then, is an epilogue in the true sense of the word. For me, it is the exclamation point at the end of a ten-year process of studying the collection and writing this book, and it brings the interviews full circle for Stephen fifty years after he and Orchard began to create the collection.

When I first began researching the collection many years ago, I was told that Stephen had died sometime in the 1980s. I'd pictured him as



ABOVE: Ian Stephen (and Odie) aboard his gillnetter in Nodales Channel, 2004. Photo: Robert Stephen

being in his fifties, the same age as Orchard, when the two of them were adventuring around the country. However, when I called Stephen to set up our meeting in Campbell River and he mentioned that he was sixteen years Orchard's junior, my whole mental image of him changed. In person, however, he was just as I'd expected: without saying a word, we understood that our shared interest in recording, in British Columbia's history and specifically the Orchard Collection made us instantly familiar to each other. It was not lost on either of us that I was, in my thirties, interviewing this man in his eighties, just as he and Orchard were doing when he was my age—the Orchard Collection had come full circle and now he was the storyteller. As I placed my microphone on the table and set up my recording equipment, his eyes twinkled and we spent the next several hours sitting back, chatting and laughing like old friends.

Ian told me that he was born in Vancouver though his parents lived in Alert Bay. His father, John Clark Stephen, was a wireless operator for local radio, and in 1927 the family moved to Vancouver as his father worked as an assistant radio inspector for two years before moving to Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan. Radio was in the family, and Ian got his first job in 1941 working for CHAB in Moose Jaw as a transmitter operator. Eventually he moved to Vancouver to attend Sprott-Shaw school, where he studied to be a wireless communication technician like his dad (to this day, he still remembers how to send Morse Code), and was then hired as a transmitter operator for the CBC in Winnipeg. Later, while visiting his parents in Vancouver, he was offered a job by Tony Geluch, the chief technician at CBC Vancouver. He moved to the coast with his wife and three children, which is when he first met Orchard.

It had been almost forty-five years since Ian had heard the recordings he made with Orchard. I had brought along some audio tracks from the book, and as he and I sat and listened, I watched him transform from the eighty-five-year-old man before me to the forty-year-old recording engineer, sitting with his headphones on, visiting and recording the old-timers who became his friends. He remembered Paddy Acland and Wiggs O'Neill by name, and told me all about the guy in Victoria who used to be a whaler (Max Lohbrunner). As he listened to Starret recount

how Cataline would rub the drink into his hair, Ian laughed and made the motion into his own hair.

“Jeez,” he exclaimed, “that brings back memories. Listening to them and realizing that I was there when they were talking, it’s just like I am back there with them. It is! It feels like it, especially Starret there. I can see Starret, I can just see him. Oh I wish we’d had video, just to see some of those people again.” Thankfully, because of Ian, the exceptional sound quality of the recordings brings to life the voices and the stories they tell. Here, in Ian’s own words, are some memories of Imbert Orchard and that time.

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IAN: He was the greatest guy to work with, but I seen what he was doing and I thought so much of it. Nobody else could work with him. Never had the patience, I guess. This was what Imbert asked me at the start: he said, “Now, do you mind working twelve, fourteen hours a day?” I said, “No. What else am I going to do?” “Well, what about on weekends?” You know, we’re away for three weeks. And “Would you rather go home and start again?” I said, “No, we’ll do right through.” From then on, we just got along perfect. But, boy, that’s why once we got working together there was nobody else.

When we were recording these people, he was the one who was sitting there doing that, but I always kept notes and that. And things that I think he’d miss or anything, I was listening to it all the time: if anything happened or something like that, it was up to me to tell him, “Cut it” and we’d straighten it out. I’d stop him lots of times and say, “Okay, the mic’s getting off.” It was absolutely teamwork.

He treated me as if I was part of what he was doing and he’d, many a time he’d ask, you know, “Should I do this?” “Should I do that?” That made me pretty proud of myself that he was asking that.

ROB: So you’d be listening with headphones on?

IAN: I’d always have headphones, always have headphones. I tried to keep, get out of the room too. I’d get to another room if possible and that

way there, you know, it's bad enough for these older people to have a mic around their heads, but they see the equipment go on and me changing tapes and that, so I'd get out of the way.

ROB: To help them forget that they were actually being recorded?

IAN: Yeah, yeah.

ROB: How much of the year would you say you were gone for from about '59 to '66?

IAN: Well, pretty well six months, you know, in the summertime. We never really went out in the winter. We had to go out in the summertime when we could travel, by car and that.

He'd go out for a week, then I'd meet him. You know, leave at Prince Rupert I'd meet him somewhere, fly in. And first thing he did when we met, he'd hand me the keys to the car because that was the understanding. I did the driving. I bet you I drove thousands of miles. That was one thing. The other thing was that, that at night, you know, you may only get six hours' sleep or something like that. I said, "We don't bunk in together. We each get our own room and that's it." That's always the way it went.

But it must have been awful; I know it was hard on my wife. You know, us being on the road. And it must have been also for his wife who, she was a real wonderful person. I tell you, it was one of the best parts of my life was that, with Imbert. You know, we were in our own little world, and one good thing about it, nobody bothered us so much on the CBC. We were on our own. Nobody bothered us. No way.

ROB: The two renegades roaming the countryside.

IAN: Mutt and Jeff. He was tall. I was short. Mutt and Jeff. I'm telling you it, some people would've paid thousands to be in my position to see, you know. There is very little places in B.C. that I haven't been to. All through the Kootenays and all through there up to Queen Charlottes and—. Well, what we could do, we talked to people that built the communities. These were the people that went in, there was nothing there, and listened to their point of view. And each one had a little different history

about it. And you have to admire what these people went through, you know, and the tough times they went through. No, it's an experience that you couldn't buy, you couldn't buy. No.

The sweat, you know, that we put in getting those things and where we went: we'd fly in, go in by Indian canoe and horseback. See, we had it figured that we're going out and working, we might as well put every hour we can doing it. We never thought of stopping for supper or this or that. We worked from eight or nine in the morning until ten or eleven at night.

Bella Coola, we were recording right up the valley. In the next motel to us was a couple of anthropologists from the University of B.C. Yeah, and they had come up to get the music and that of this band. And they got on the wrong side of the Chief and them, and they wouldn't have anything to do with them. So one night, I met a couple of Native kids and we got talking. There was only one could say much and, "Do you want to go party?" I said, "Sure." "Okay, come over to our side of town." Very few whites there would go over or would even be invited, so the kids took me over. Boy, they were drinking everything you could think of, you know.

And so I got to meet the Chief. I mentioned to him, "You know, CBC is—" And he says, "I don't like government." And I, "I'm not government, I'm CBC, you know." And talked to him and that and said, "Sure like to get some of your music. We hear you are good." So, right at the end of, I guess around four o'clock, I decided I was going to go back to the motel. So I said to him, "Any chance?" He says, "You be out there on the bank," he says, "in two hours. You be out there, we'll come down."

Sure enough, two hours I got Imbert, shake him, get him up, "We got it, we got something!" We go down, and they come down about a half a dozen of them and played their drums and all that out on the shore of the river. And after, the anthropologists, they heard it, I guess. By the time they got down there, they'd gone and that. They said to me, "How the hell did you ever get that?" I says, "You join 'em, you join 'em." That's all I said to them. And that's what we did with a lot of the people. You go in there and just be one of them and laugh and joke with them and this and that.

It's so much different than just reading about it. But listening to 'em, to get their expression and their feelings, to a lot of them, us having them

go back really meant a lot to them too. Because it would bring laughter to them and it would bring tears to them. And some of them when we left, they didn't want us to leave, because they told us all their experiences and that. And it was just like telling the family. And we were family leaving. So there was a lot of times that, you know, recording the people, their expressions you know really came across. I've seen times that we're recording somebody and the first thing you know the three of us are crying because they'd get so emotional and we'd get so emotional. Every time, after you had finished recording maybe—sometimes only maybe a couple of hours, other times two or three days—you almost figured that you were related to 'em because you had the life history. You lived it with them. And, boy, I'm telling you I'd just go home and dream about, you know, being one of these people. Ah Imbert, he put his whole heart into it. He put his whole heart into it.

I'm glad that somebody is going to, to give him credit for what he did. He was a genius. He was the one that could get stuff out of people. I listened to some commentators, you know, on the TV and radio and that. They don't, they can't get out of people what he did. No way. I am glad somebody is taking recognition for what he did.

ROB: Well, for what you both did.

IAN: Well yeah, we both did. We were, we were both very proud of it but I think we both worried that these tapes would disappear and nothing would be done with them. But they didn't realize what we were going through. It's our history, it's really history that couldn't come from better sources, you know. Right from the source. I'm really proud of it and I'm proud that, like you and maybe other people are doing something about it. It's something. It's like it's coming back again, ah it's being reborn. You know, what we did. Wish old Imbert was around.

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