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The University of British Columbia

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Introduction

The University of British Columbia stands as one of Canada's premier institutions of higher learning, a place where ideas are forged, discoveries are made, and leaders are shaped. For over a century, UBC has played a pivotal role not just in the story of British Columbia, but in that of Canada and the world. Its journey from humble beginnings to its current status as a renowned global university reflects a remarkable narrative of vision, resilience, and transformation.

Established officially in 1915 amid the aspirations of a young Canadian province, UBC's roots stretch deeper, beginning with the McGill University College of British Columbia and subsequent lobbying for a provincial university. The fledgling institution weathered uncertain times—wars, economic depression, societal shifts—growing steadily, adapting, and ultimately thriving. From the first convocation, where eight degrees were awarded, through the expansion waves after both World Wars, UBC's progress is interwoven with the history of British Columbia itself.

Beyond bricks and mortar, UBC's story is that of the people who shaped and were shaped by the university. It is the story of pioneering women who broke barriers, the stories of Indigenous peoples whose lands and traditions remain integral to the university's fabric, and the countless students, faculty, and staff who have called UBC home. It is a narrative of innovation, as UBC became a crucible for research—from quantum materials and genomics, to education, medicine, and sustainability. It is also a story of community, where artistic, cultural, and athletic pursuits thrived alongside academic rigor.

As a steward of public trust, the university has navigated the challenges of governance, funding, and societal change. It has responded to evolving notions of diversity, equity, and inclusion, engaged in reconciliation with Indigenous communities, and reimaged its role as an active participant in the local and global community. Its campuses in Vancouver and Kelowna, enriched by world-class facilities, libraries, and natural beauty, have become vibrant living laboratories dedicated to sustainable and innovative futures.

This book takes the reader on a journey through the milestones that defined UBC's rise, the ideas and movements that shaped its character, and the individuals whose achievements have echoed far beyond its campuses. Through challenges and triumphs, UBC's enduring spirit—captured in its motto "Tuum Est"—reminds us that the work of a university is never complete. Each generation is called to make its own mark, to embrace the responsibility and possibility that comes with learning, discovery, and service.

In these pages, we unfold the remarkable history of the University of British Columbia—a story of ambition and community, leadership and growth, and the relentless quest for knowledge. Whether you walk its leafy quads, study in its libraries, cheer from the stadiums, or connect from afar as one of its many alumni, this is your university’s story—its challenges, its accomplishments, and its continuing promise.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Land and Its Peoples: UBC's Indigenous Foundations

Before the towering academic buildings and bustling student life that characterize the University of British Columbia today, the land itself held profound significance for millennia. The area now known as Point Grey, where UBC's Vancouver campus stands, has been the continuous home of the *xʷməθkʷəy̓əm* (Musqueam) people since time immemorial. Their oral histories speak of continuous habitation for thousands of years, with archaeological evidence in the broader Lower Mainland dating human presence back 8,000 to 10,000 years. This was, and remains, a place of deep cultural and historical importance.

The Musqueam people's traditional territory is vast, encompassing all of present-day Vancouver, extending northwest into Howe Sound and east up the Fraser Valley. Their name, *xʷməθkʷəy̓əm*, translates to "People of the River Grass," reflecting their profound connection to the Fraser River estuary, with its tidal flats and marshlands. This rich ecosystem provided an abundance of resources, supporting a vibrant and self-sufficient way of life for generations.

Long before any university was conceived, Point Grey served as a significant site for education and sustenance for the Musqueam. The sea was vital for fishing and canoe pulling, while the forests provided opportunities for hunting and gathering. The beaches offered crabbing, contributing to a diverse diet and material culture. This natural environment itself acted as a comprehensive classroom, fostering physical and emotional learning, and transmitting knowledge through generations. It was also a place of defense, with the northern shores of Point Grey serving as a lookout for approaching northern tribes.

The Musqueam had an extensive network of villages and seasonal encampments throughout their territory, connected by waterways, trails, histories, and genealogies. While there were no permanent Musqueam settlements directly on the present UBC campus, villages were located all around the perimeter, including at the reserve to the south of the university lands and at Jericho-Locarno Beach to the northwest. The latter was once a large village site, so extensive that many homes built there later disrupted ancestral burial sites and middens.

European contact with Indigenous peoples on the Northwest Coast began in the late 18th century. Spanish explorers like José María Narváez in 1791 and British naval captain George Vancouver in 1792 were among the first Europeans to chart the coast, including Point Grey and Burrard Inlet. Initially, relationships between European

traders and Indigenous peoples were often mutually beneficial, centered around the exchange of goods like copper, iron, horses, and metal tools for local knowledge and resources. However, this early period of interaction quickly gave way to a more challenging relationship as European settlers began to arrive in greater numbers.

The influx of newcomers, particularly following the Fraser River gold rush in 1858, led to the declaration of the mainland as a British colony. Under colonial policies, settlers could claim vast tracts of land, often disregarding existing Indigenous land use and occupation. Small Indian reserves were established, but not always at ancestral village sites, and often significantly reduced the land base available to Indigenous communities. The Musqueam population, like many Indigenous groups, was severely impacted by European diseases such as smallpox, measles, and tuberculosis, which decimated their numbers. By the early 1900s, the Musqueam band membership had reportedly fallen to a low of 92 individuals.

Further restrictions came with the Indian Act of 1876, which legislated nearly every aspect of Indigenous life in Canada. This act aimed to assimilate Indigenous peoples into Christian Canadian society, leading to policies such as the residential school system, which forcibly removed children from their families and cultures. The Musqueam people faced significant social, geographical, and economic isolation, their presence effectively erased from much of the burgeoning city of Vancouver. Despite these profound challenges, the Musqueam people demonstrated remarkable resilience, persisting in their culture and societal structures.

The land where UBC's Vancouver campus now stands was originally designated as "Crown Land" under the British Empire and later became part of the University Endowment Lands. The logging of the rich forest resources on these lands, which began as early as 1865 and continued until 1951, generated significant income. These funds, derived from the land itself, provided crucial financial support for the Province to eventually build the University of British Columbia. This historical context underscores the deep and often unacknowledged connection between the university's very foundations and the Indigenous lands and resources that preceded it.

Similarly, the land for UBC's Okanagan campus in Kelowna was established in 2005 on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territory of the Syilx Okanagan Nation. The Syilx Okanagan People's territory spans approximately 69,000 square kilometers, a diverse landscape of deserts, lakes, alpine forests, and grasslands, extending into both British Columbia and Washington State. Like the Musqueam, the Syilx Okanagan Nation is a distinct and sovereign people with shared language (nsyilxcən), culture, and customs, and their historical presence and stewardship of the land are fundamental to understanding the Okanagan campus.

Today, acknowledging the Indigenous foundations of the university is a vital part of UBC's commitment to reconciliation. Both campuses routinely begin events and

communications with land acknowledgements, formally recognizing that UBC Vancouver is on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territory of the Musqueam people, and UBC Okanagan is on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territory of the Syilx Okanagan Nation. These statements, while seemingly simple, are a respectful yet political recognition of the colonial context of the territories and the ongoing presence and rights of Indigenous peoples. They are meant to be a first step towards deeper understanding and responsibility.

UBC has formal affiliations with both the Musqueam Indian Band and the Okanagan Nation Alliance, and strives to foster meaningful and reciprocal relationships with Indigenous communities. This includes initiatives such as the First Nations Longhouse, a student services center that provides a welcoming space and programming for Indigenous students. There is also the Indian Residential School History and Dialogue Centre, which works to provide access to records for survivors and their families, and encourages dialogue about the lasting impacts of colonialism.

The university has also implemented an Indigenous Strategic Plan, a comprehensive framework launched in 2020 that outlines goals and actions to advance Indigenous human rights and reconciliation. This plan is a direct response to the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls' Calls for Justice, and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action. These efforts reflect a growing understanding within the university community of the importance of recognizing Indigenous history, culture, and ongoing contributions, ensuring that the land itself is not merely a physical location, but a living connection to millennia of Indigenous heritage.

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