

Bewitching British Columbia: Ghosts in the Capital

by **Bevan Thomas**

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Panel 1

We are in the inner harbour of Victoria, on the water itself, looking out towards the parliament building and downtown.

Caption: Victoria, capital of British Columbia, Canada's most western province.

Panel 2

We move through downtown Victoria, down Government Street.

Caption: Small and quaint with a British veneer. Favoured by honeymooners and the elderly: “the newly wed and the nearly dead.”

Panel 3

We move over Ross Bay Cemetery, by obelisks and a grave carved in the shape of an angel.

Caption: The nearly dead... and the undead.

Page 2

Panel 1

We are in one of the streams that runs through the bedrock underneath Victoria. The vague outlines of various moaning figures can be seen in the water.

Caption: Perhaps the ghosts are drawn to ley lines of energy formed from the rock formations and watercourses underlying the city.

Panel 2

A thin man stares nervously up at the sky as he leaves an old downtown building. One of the building's windows advertises that particular room as being “Madame Kall, Psychic and Seer,” with the fluorescent image of a raised woman's palm that has an eye looking out from the palm's centre.

This is a made-up location, as I thought it best not to label a real psychic.

Caption: Perhaps there is something in the taste of the architecture or psychology of the populace that calls to those of the Spirit Realm.

Panel 3

We are in an alley that has various posters on the wall.

One poster displays the image of a white cobra with most of its body curled into a spiral, though its head is uncurled with an unfurled hood and is stared with yellow eyes out from the poster and grinning with its forked tongue. The poster includes the words: “La Bete de l'Apocalypse performs at La Belle Dame Sans Merci.” This is a reference to stuff from my horror novel that takes place in Victoria.

Part of the wall is rippling and translucent spectral arms are reaching out into the physical world.

Caption: Perhaps Victoria is simply one of those “soft places” in the world where the Veil between life and death is especially thin. Whatever the cause...

Panel 4

Caption: ...this is a good home for ghosts.

Page 3

Panel 1

The “eerie room” in John Tod's house. The door is open and standing there is the ghost of his aboriginal wife. She has long tangled black hair and is covered in chains and shackles. The woman is trying to say something and holding out her hands as if pleading.

Caption: The Tod House is western Canada's oldest house, built by fur trader John Tod in 1852. For many years, it was haunted by the ghost of an aboriginal woman. Some say she was one of Tod's native wives, who had gone insane and then been chained inside one of the rooms.

Panel 2

Emily Carr's spirit walks through a forest. She carries one of her totem pole paintings under an arm.

Caption: The ghost of famed painter Emily Carr haunts St. Ann's Academy and has also been sighted roaming the Canadian wilds she loved so much.

Panel 3

Robert Service's ghost is reading a book entitled “*The Cremation of Sam McGee*” and *Other Poems by Robert Service*. He is seated in a chair in the Bard and Banker.

Caption: Poet Robert Service haunts a downtown building that used to be the bank he worked at, but now is a pub named in his honour: “The Bard and Banker.”

Panel 4

A red light, like that from a lantern, hovers under the Ellis Point Bridge, 18 inches above the water. This is at night.

Caption: In 1896, Ellis Point Bridge was the site of a street car disaster that killed fifty people. Some nights a ghostly red light can be seen bobbing under the bridge. Perhaps one of the victims is searching for a loved one.

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Panel 1

Image of Beacon Hill Park.

Caption: Beacon Hill Park is no stranger to the Spirit World.

Panel 2

Image of the southeast slope of Beacon Hill. The stone markers of aboriginal cairns are being dug up and removed.

Caption: The southeast slope once was an aboriginal burial site. In 1986, many of the cairns were mistaken for rock piles and removed.

Panel 3

Night, various aboriginal spirits wander over the slope.

Caption: Now at night the ghosts of those buried there hunt desperately for their graves.

Panel 4

Close-up of the spirits' faces, looking miserable and lost.

Caption: But without the headstones, they can never find them.

Page 5

Panel 1

The spirit of a young, slim woman is standing on top of a rounded rocky outcropping in Beacon Hill Park. Her arms are wide apart and her head is lifted up. Though her mouth is wide open and she appears to scream in terror, no sound can be heard from her. She has blonde hair, dark well-tanned skin, a black T-shirt, and white jeans.

Caption: For many years, after dark a strange spirit was seen silently screaming on a rocky outcropping in the park.

Panel 2

A murdered woman is lying near the foot of those rocks. She looks like the woman in Panel 4 except her hair is black, her skin pale, her shirt white, and her jeans dark blue.

Caption: On June, 1983, a City Parks worker discovered the corpse of a young woman lying near the foot of those rocks. She was identical to the spirit, though light where it was dark, dark where it was light.

Panel 3

The spirit is shown screaming, exactly like Panel 4, but its colouration matches the woman in Panel 5.

Caption: Her murder was never solved, and whenever the spirit appeared again, its colours matched the body. Had a version of the ghost, a photo-negative, echoed back in time?

Panel 4

Close-up of the spirit's screaming face. She looks like how she does in Panel 3.

Caption: What terrible things had been done to her to make her scream last forever?

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Panel 1

Worm's eye view of the Empress Hotel with Francis Rattenbury standing in front of it.

Caption: Francis Rattenbury designed many of Victoria's prominent buildings, not least being the Empress Hotel...

Panel 2

Similar view of the parliament buildings.

Caption: ... and the parliament buildings.

Panel 3

Rattenbury and Pakenham are getting on a boat to England. Rattenbury is trying to hide his face, doing his best to ignore the reporters chasing after him.

Caption: When he divorced his wife to marry Alma Pakenham, a young pianist, the resulting scandal forced him to return to England.

Panel 4

The chauffeur, wearing his cap and uniform, walks away from Rattenbury's corpse, which lies bleeding from a head wound in the library. The chauffeur holds a heavy candlestick that has blood on it. This is supposed to evoke the game Clue ("the chauffeur killed him in the library with the candlestick").

Caption: There he was eventually clubbed to death by the pianist's lover, Rattenbury's 17-year old chauffeur.

Panel 5

Rattenbury's ghost stalks a hallway in parliament. He is translucent, and his hands are clasped behind his back and his head is down.

Caption: It is said now Rattenbury haunts the Empress and the parliament buildings, reliving its past glory while trying to remove any references to his scandals.

Panel 6

The ghost of Rattenbury rakes his translucent hands down a painting of Pakenham. The fingers tear at the painting, and in the tears, blood bubbles forth.

Caption: It especially seeks to purge any mention of Pakenham, the woman who resulted in his disgrace and later death.

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Panel 1

We see the Victoria Golf Club at night.

Caption: The most famous Victoria ghost goes by many names: the April Ghost, the Watcher, the Oak Bay Ghost, and the Ghost of Golf Bay Point

Panel 2

Close-up of the bell on the sixth green. It is night and there is the full moon overhead.

Caption: She haunts the course of the Victoria Golf Club and it is said that if you ring the bell on the sixth green while under the full moon at night, she will come.

Panel 3

We are in a bedroom, close-up on the table beside the bed. Beside the lamp is an old photograph in a gilt frame. The photograph is up a smiling Doris Gravlin. She is in a shabby brown suit.

Caption: Once upon a time, there was a woman. Her name was Doris Gravlin.

Panel 4

Doris is walking down the street towards the golf course.

Caption: She was separated from her husband Victor, but on Tuesday the 22nd of September, 1936, they arranged a meeting to discuss a reconciliation.

Panel 5

She enters the golf course.

Caption: They were to meet at the Victoria Golf Club.

Panel 6

Same scene from Panel 5, except now it is night and no one is there.

Caption: Neither returned.

Page 8

Panel 1

A cabbie stares at Doris' body, which lies face down on the beach. She is wearing the same shabby brown suit from the previous image, and is missing her shoes. Her clothes are torn, her body bruised.

Caption: On Sunday, a cabbie discovered Doris' body, beaten and strangled, on the beach.

Panel 2

A fisherman stares down at Victor's body floating in the kelp.

Caption: A month later, a fisherman discovered Victor's body offshore, tangled in a bed of kelp.

Panel 3

Police stare down at Victor's body. One of them holds Doris' shoes in his hands.

Caption: Doris' shoes, missing from her body, were found stuffed into his pocket. The police assumed it was a murder-suicide, and closed the case.

Panel 4

The empty golf course.

Caption: But a few months later Doris started to appear.

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Panel 1

Close-up of Doris' shoeless feet on the course.

Caption: She can appear any month, with late March being the commonest. She prefers two areas and two times of day.

Panel 2

Doris is walking through the golf course. Feet are shoeless.

Caption: Between 4:30 and 5:00 in the evening, she walks through the golf course looking like a normal human save for her old-fashioned brown suit.

Panel 3

A boyfriend and girlfriend in modern clothes are walking through the course.

Caption: Between 9:30 and 10:00 at night, the most common time to see her, she appears at the green closest to the water....

Panel 4

The couple hugs each other, attempting to give solace from the cold. Wind whips around them.

Caption: Her presence is heralded by clammy coldness and rising winds.

Panel 5

Doris looks very spectral as she floats towards the couple with her arms outstretched. She is dressed in a long white gown with a shining aura around her. Her face is twisted in a scream that stretches her mouth farther than is natural and her eyes seem larger, almost about to bug out of her skull.

The two lovers are terrified and cling to each other for protection.

Caption: Then she appears, looking very different than she does in her walks across the course.

Panel 6

Doris passes through the bodies of the terrified lovers.

Caption: Those couples that she encounters are destined never to marry.

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Panel 1

We are walking through Bastion Square, towards the Maritime Museum.

It is in the day time, and there's numerous people moving around.

Caption: And then there's Bastion Square.

Panel 2

Now it is night in Bastion Square and almost deserted.

The shadow of a gallows with someone hanging from the noose is seen. The shadow is being cast on the wall of the Maritime Museum with nothing to cast the shadow.

Caption: It was here where the old courthouse used to be; it was here that the condemned were hanged.

Panel 3

Show Helmken Alley behind the Maritime Museum. The shadows of a row of convicts in chains pass by. Their shadows are reflected on the wall, but we can see that there's no one casting the shadows.

Caption: Down Helmken Alley behind the Square, you can still hear the heavy boots, the rattle of chains, as the convicts go to be judged. Sometimes their shadows flicker on the walls.

Panel 4

A translucent convict ghost with a look of desperation on his face holds out his chained hands to a group of scared people.

Caption: Sometimes they holds their hands, begging the living for mercy.

Panel 5

The people run away in fear. The convict ghost looks miserable, as if those people were his only chance for salvation.

Caption: But they find none.

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Panel 1

We look into the basement at Helmken Alley and see the well there, all desolate.

Caption: Look into the basement of the Rithet Building in Helmken Alley and you can still see the well.

Panel 2

Caption: In 1858, a young aboriginal boy was paid by a miner to go and recover a dropped tea-kettle.

Panel 3

The boy slips and falls down into the wall, causing an avalanche of boulders to follow him.

Caption: Tragedy happened.

Panel 4

Caption: The Rithet Building was built over the spot and used for offices.

Panel 5

Two modern office workers in their suits and with their briefcases are close to the well. They stare in horror at the small shadowy form that stands beside it.

Caption: Even now, the spirit won't let itself be forgotten.

Panel 6

Close-up of the ghost's face. It has a stoic expression.

Caption: There is something it still needs.

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Panel 1

Outside of the Maritime Museum.

Caption: Where the Maritime Museum in Bastion Square now stands was once the courthouse.

Panel 2

Various ghosts pass through the walls and door.

Caption: Various spirits haunt its walls, but standing judgement over them all is....

Panel 3

Begbie's spirit stands at the door. The other ghosts pass around him on both sides, bowing respectfully to him.

Caption: ... Sir Matthew Begbie, the “Hanging Judge.”

Panel 4

Image of Begbie in life, judging an Songhees aboriginal who has been accused of theft. He is listening to the testimony of another Songhees man, who stands in the witness box. Begbie is respectful towards the witness, while some of the other white people there are looking at the witness in scorn.

Caption: He was the first chief justice of BC. Despite his nickname, he always tried to judge people as fairly as possible, even those whose race or faith were disdained by Sir Begbie's countrymen.

Panel 5

Begbie's spirit is rising from his grave in Ross Bay Cemetery.

Caption: Perhaps that is why, after his death in 1894, a special place was chosen for him.

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Panel 1

We are inside the Maritime Museum.

Caption: In his domain, the Veil between the living and the dead is especially weak, a fact made known...

Panel 2

Someone in the museum turns as she hears a disturbing noise.

Noise: Skrrrrhhhhhhh!

Caption: ... by phantom noises...

Panel 3

In the bathroom, insects are coming out of the drains and taps in the sink while rats are skittering out of various holes in the wall.

Caption: ... plagues of rats and insects...

Panel 4

A janitor in the basement stares down in terrified horror at the oily silver liquid that oozes around his feet.

Caption: ... an oily silver-coloured substance that sometimes oozes into existence...

Panel 5

An invisible hand is carving an “M” on a mirror.

Caption: ... the letter “M” scratched on mirrors...

Panel 6

Sir Matthew Begbie, in his black judicial robes, walks the hall. He is translucent.

Caption: ... and Sir Begbie himself walking the halls.

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Panel 1

Close-up of Begbie's spectral gravel hitting a table.

Caption: The sound of Sir Begbie's gavel echoes through the halls, calling the dead to court.

Panel 2

In one of the rooms of the Maritime Museum, the ghosts have gathered at a court. It looks like there are two rooms superimposed on each other, the museum room and a courthouse, with spectral chairs. Begbie sits in the judge's seat. He is flanked by three male bailiffs: a Caucasian, an aboriginal of the Songhees tribe, and a Chinese.

The courtroom is filled with numerous ghosts. Some are from the stories told in this story (including Doris, the Boy in the Well, and Rattenbury), others are new. They are from all stages of Victoria's history: pre-contact aboriginals, fur traders, early settlers, all the way to 21st-century individuals.

Caption: The court that “sits day and night, and never rises,” as Sheridan LaFanu would say.

Panel 3

Begbie gestures with his gavel to a spectral door that is being open by his three bailiffs. Light streams from the door as three ghosts walk into it. None of these are ghosts from earlier in the story.

Caption: Some lucky souls are granted release, allowed to pass beyond the Veil into whatever fate awaits them. Others remain.

Panel 4

Doris and Rattenbury are at the court. They stare down dejectedly.

Caption: Some, such as poor Doris Gravlin or Francis Rattenbury, may never receive reprieve.

Panel 5

The narrator sits at the edge of the ghost court, watching the proceedings. He is alive. He is a tall man wearing a black trenchcoat, gloves, and fedora and is facing away from us, so we cannot see his features.

Caption: I do not know why some are granted their freedom and others remain. Who am I to understand the laws of the dead?

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Panel 1

The narrator is walking through downtown Victoria. It is raining and the narrator is dressed entirely in black, with a black trenchcoat that goes down to his ankles, a black fedora, black gloves, etc. The only bit of colour is a red scarf around his throat. He is still walking away from us, and in fact will do so for the entire story. We never see his face and in fact never see his skin, so we can't even be sure of his ethnicity.

A girl is walking towards him.

Caption: I do not comprehend the ways of ghosts, but I can see them. I know that they are there.

Panel 2

The girl passes through him. She is a ghost. He flinches because when she passes through him, he feels very cold.

Panel 3

More and more ghosts start to appear, walking through the crowd.

Caption: Each one trapped in this realm, their needs unfulfilled.

Panel 4

The narrator stares at them. As always, he is staring away from the audience.

Caption: Will that one day be my fate?

Panel 5

The narrator glances at the Maritime Museum.

Caption: When the time comes, will my spirit be brought up to Begbie's court?

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Panel 1

The narrator stares up at the tops of the buildings, studying the downtown.

Caption: A city's history is inscribed in the pages of its dead and they are with it always.

Panel 2

The panel takes up most of the page.

The narrator sits on a bench and watches the host of ghosts walking through the crowd.

Caption: You only have to know where to look to see those of the Silent Company. Each has a story to tell, if you could only understand it.