

STAN PERSKY / Home Port

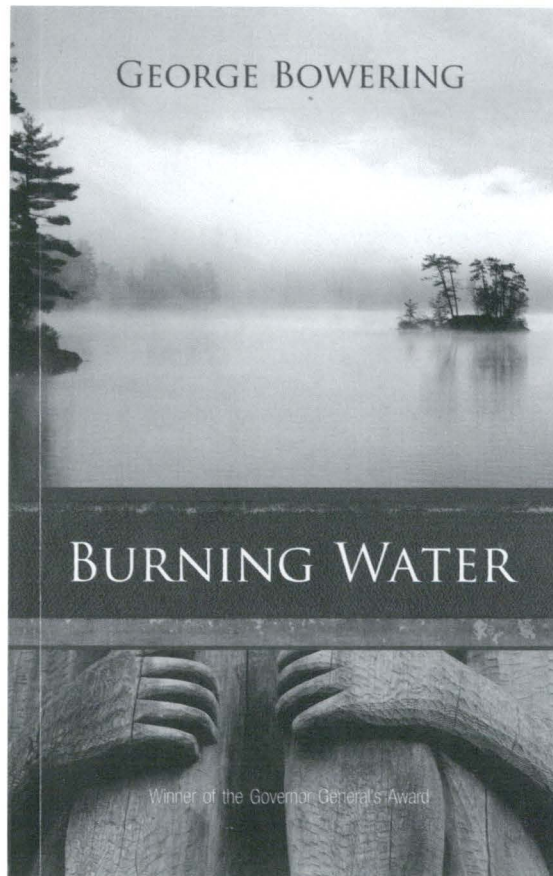
In the late 1970s, the western Canadian poet, novelist, and essayist George Bowering temporarily dropped anchor in the Italian port city of Trieste. Not only is Trieste “my favourite city in the world,” as Bowering declares in a volume of autobiographical essays, *A Magpie Life* (2001), it’s also a well-known literary harbour that has provided, at various times, writing space for James Joyce, Italo Svevo, and Claudio Magris as well as the occasional wandering Canadian scribbler. Once Bowering was ensconced in that old “Hapsburg spy city of white mountains, red roofs, and blue sea,” he began writing an unusual book about the pre-history of his own distant home port, the city of Vancouver.

That book is *Burning Water*, a comic, historical novel first published in 1980 (and most recently re-issued in 2007). The title is borrowed from anthropologist Laurette Sejourne’s 1960 book of that name about thought and religion in ancient Mexico. The title phrase derives from the Aztecs and corresponds, roughly speaking, to something like our notion of “imagination.” In his book, Bowering imagines the adventures of his partial namesake, Captain George Vancouver, and the English seafarer’s voyage in 1792 to the coasts and islands of what would become the Canadian province of British Columbia, including the inlet on whose shores a city bearing Vancouver’s name would in due course be established.

Of Bowering’s many books, *Burning Water* is one I’m especially attracted to because, among other things, its vision of Burrard Inlet in the 1790s is strikingly similar to my own recurrent fantasy about the city of Vancouver before it became a city.

At the vantage point of First Avenue and Larch Street, looking north down the slope, as I’ve often done (I lived in a house just a half-block below for several decades), there’s a panoramic view of the inlet basin, along with the 400-hectare dark green patch of the trees of Stanley Park, jutting into the water at the end of the downtown peninsula. Looking across the inlet, I periodically gaze at the houses and ridges of the North Shore (blinking windows caught by the sun in West Vancouver), and behind them, the Coast Mountains. Beyond the mountains, more mountains, further and further north. In my vision of it, modern Vancouver disappears and is replaced by the earlier forested slopes, and maybe a native longhouse or fishing

camp down on nearby Kitsilano beach. When the late afternoon sun flashes on the inlet, the water looks like it is “burning.”



Burning Water (Vancouver: New Star, 2007)

My recurrent imagined sight is motivated, as is Bowering’s book, I think, by the recognition that the existential question, “Where are we?” has a particular urgency in our time. That is, there’s a mundane and obvious sense of where we’re located at any given moment, but in an era where so many places are designed as franchised replications of elsewhere, so that in the end we’re often “nowhere,” figuring out where we actually are demands an act of historical and creative imagination.

Bowering's historical concern has two biographical sources. Born in 1935, and raised and educated in the small towns and orchard country of British Columbia's South Okanagan Valley, Bowering became aware, at least retrospectively, that his schooling had offered only minimal attention to the past and present of the place where he was. The absence of the local (and even the nation) was a puzzle that would be subsequently recognized as a political effect of living in a place culturally subservient to several dominant empires.

Later, as a young writer, Bowering imbibed the lessons of the American poet Charles Olson, the author of *The Maximus Poems*. "Olson told us to dig exhaustively into our local concerns," Bowering recalls (again, in *A Magpie Life*). "We began to do so, and the geography, history, and economics of Vancouver became the grid of our poetry." *Burning Water* is one response to Olson's injunction that understanding where we are is inseparable from knowing who and what we are. Further, the investigation of where we are is not a parochial but a cosmopolitan enterprise; we locate ourselves in relation to the world.

Bowering's "swashbuckling" novel, as he's referred to it, begins, as it should, on the pristine wooded slopes of Burrard Inlet, where two native men are talking about "whatever it was, the vision [that] came out of the far fog and sailed right into the sunny weather of the inlet" on a mid-June day in 1792. Rather than reprising the whole, I only want to point to a couple of things that define the book right from the beginning. It is appropriate that the story begins with (and continues to be framed by) the perspective of the native inhabitants who watched Captain George Vancouver's tiny ships sail into these waters. It's here, at the outset, that Bowering makes his first crucial move. Bowering's natives are not the stereotypical aboriginals of Hollywood movies talking a Hollywood Indian patois. Instead, they're witty postmodernist 18th-century *philosophe* natives, and again, appropriately, they are arguing about the distinctions between fact and fancy, just as other contemporary *philosophes* might be doing in the salons of Paris.

The point is, we don't know what the aboriginals said to each other when Vancouver's ships appeared in Burrard Inlet, and we need a storyteller to imagine some sophisticated banter to launch the tale. At the end of the opening chapter, since this is a "reflexive" novel, as Bowering calls it (i.e., one that reveals its making alongside its telling), we are introduced to the author.

In Trieste, it was raining most of the time, and he would bump other umbrellas with his own on his way down to the piazza, where he would look out at the fog that had drifted in across the northern end of the Adriatic. It was his idea, crazed in all likelihood, that if he was going to write a book about that other coast as it was two hundred years ago, he would be advised to move away in space too.

The “he” in that passage is Bowering himself, and the book he’s thinking about is the one we’re reading. The literary clowning around immediately marked *Burning Water* as a “postmodern” confection (perhaps Canada’s first significant postmodern novel), and it’s relevant to note that while Bowering was working in Trieste, his equally playful, older Italian contemporary, Italo Calvino, was down the coast, in Rome, having just published *If on a winter’s night a traveler* (1979).

The Bowering who’s a third-person character in Bowering’s novel about George Vancouver—a lonely writer in the dismal drizzle of a faraway city—is, in many ways, as present to me as the Bowering I’ve known in a casual friendship over some forty years. The Bowering I know is amiable, tall, craggy-faced, and frequently has a mustache. He’s, to my mind, quite shy. The shyness accounts, I think, for his manner, which often features the telling of an intentional bad joke (thus making it ironic in its badness), followed by a hee-haw laugh. His friends roll their eyes, and say, “Oh, George,” forgiving their gawky pal’s foibles.

But behind the cracker-barrel façade, there’s a consistently interesting writer, and a man possessed of considerable intellectual courage, in particular an insistence on fashioning his own literary tradition out of a sense of the “west” (in this case, western Canada), and an adherence to poets, such as Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, Jack Spicer, and Frank O’Hara, who have been important to his own work, rather than accepting an imposed or official heritage. The cheerily vulgar (not vulgar) manner finds expression in his writing in the rhetorical figure of *tapinosis*, “the saying of very serious things in offhand language, in vernacular, even in slang,” as Bowering defines that term in *Errata* (1988).

Between the *philosophe* natives and the author in Trieste, which establishes the parameters of *Burning Water*, the rest is a wonderfully-drawn knockabout account of the 35-year-old Vancouver, who had sailed with the late Captain James Cook; his fellow voyagers, principally Archibald Menzies, the Scottish ship’s botanist

who is Vancouver's *bete noire*; and the secret hero of the novel, Vancouver's older Peruvian-born Spanish counterpart, the elegant Juan Bodega y Quadra. The "plot" is an often-farcical send-up, but it retains just enough plausibility to entice the reader into wondering about "what really happened."

In the historical reconstruction, Bowering makes his characters "real" people rather than realistic figures, and he reminds us that Vancouver's ship, HMS *Discovery*, is ninety-nine feet and a few inches long, the length of two lifeboats on a modern-day BC Ferry heading to Vancouver Island. The facts of life on a tiny ship carrying a complement of 101 officers and men explain a lot about what follows. The narrative plays with the fuzzy border between myth and history, just as the appearance of Vancouver's ships ply the boundaries between fog and clear air.

At the conclusion of one of his later books, *Bowering's B.C.* (1996), an informal but accurate history of British Columbia, Bowering winkingly notes that not everyone was pleased by *Burning Water*. He cites the well-known Canadian archivist W. Kaye Lamb, who grumbles that Bowering's novel about George Vancouver takes "only scant account of historical facts and good taste... he has bespattered his pages with numerous errors of fact that are both pointless and needless... without a shred of supporting evidence...." The worthy Lamb obviously didn't fully appreciate the *tapinosis*, or the relation between fact and fancy.

Burning Water, upon its original publication in 1980, was not only favourably "noticed," as they say in the book business, but won the Canadian Governor General's literary award for fiction that year (Bowering had won the GG for poetry in 1969). Bowering soon followed *Burning Water* with two further novels about the "west," *Caprice* and *Shoot!*, and together, the three books can be read as a trilogy.

The reason *Burning Water* has remained in print—beyond the fact that it's a very good novel and fun to read—lies in our understanding of (or insistence on) its place in Canadian writing. For a variety of cultural reasons, the estimation of what books are important in Canadian literary history is underdeveloped. Normal features of other national literatures, such as a rough "canon" and a critical account of modes of writing (such as "realism," "modernism," "postmodernism," and the rest) are, at best, only fitfully delineated in Canada. On this still rough literary frontier, there are few available ways to stake a claim for a book's abiding importance, other than the raw declarative: consider the claim staked.