

Historica Canada Education Portal

Francis Rattenbury

Overview

This lesson is based on viewing the Francis Rattenbury biography from [The Canadians](#) series. Rattenbury left his mark on the landscape of British Columbia with the many buildings he designed, including the British Columbia Legislature, The Empress Hotel, and The Vancouver Art Gallery. His life came to a tragic end when he was murdered in his home.

Aims

Rattenbury's colourful character, controversial personal life, and his murder will spark your students' interest in his life and work. Students will study the man and his architectural designs to learn about the social norms and aesthetic tastes of the 1920s and 1930s.

Background

It is one of the most tragic stories in our history. Francis Rattenbury was an architect who helped shape the landscape of Western Canada. From his drawings came buildings that have become Western Canadian icons – The British Columbia Legislature, The Empress Hotel, The Vancouver

Art Gallery, and the Crystal Gardens. He would end up a forgotten and ignored old man whose only claim to fame was his murder at the hands of an 18 year old servant who'd been having an affair with Rattenbury's wife.

Rattenbury arrived in Vancouver from Yorkshire, England, in 1894, just in time to enter an architectural competition for the new BC Legislature building. He managed to convince the judges that he was not only experienced enough to do the job but also that he was a well-established Canadian architect. He'd been in the country for only a couple of months, but he got the job and spent the next five years going over budget on the Legislature by 100 per cent. He'd continue to exceed budgets on most of the public buildings he designed, but his results were so spectacular that no one seemed to mind.

By 1923, Rattenbury was Western Canada's most senior architect. He had almost personally designed the whole inner harbour of Victoria. It that same year he met and fell in love with a young woman named Alma Pakenham. The only problem was that Rattenbury had been married forty-five years to someone else and had two grown up children about the same age as Alma. When his wife refused to grant a divorce, Rattenbury moved Alma in downstairs, while his wife was upstairs. They played the piano and sang songs and soon his first wife admitted defeat.

But it would be a hollow victory as the establishment of Victoria disapproved of the new Mrs. Rattenbury and in 1929 Rattenbury, known to his friends as Ratz, took Alma and their infant son John to England. They rented a house in Bournemouth and in 1934 hired a local boy to help with the driving and general household chores. Soon the boy, George Stoner, and Alma, were having an affair.

In the spring of 1935, Rattenbury was murdered as he sat in his living room chair. Both Alma and George were charged with the murder. Alma was found innocent and George was found guilty. Alma committed suicide and George was later released.

Activities

Time Allowance: 1 - 4 hours

Procedures:

1. Ask students to create a government poster advertising for architects to design the new legislative building in British Columbia.
2. What type of architecture most influenced Rattenbury? Ask your students to research this architectural design, and to describe how this influence is reflected in the buildings he designed.
3. Conduct a discussion about some of the social norms of Rattenbury's time and ways that he defied them (Examples: pregnancy out of wedlock, marital infidelity, divorce, etc.). Compare these turn of the century attitudes with those of today. How does this affect the way that we view Rattenbury?
4. In small groups, have students create a mind map of Francis Rattenbury's life. Review the maps as a class, and discuss the significance of their points. Discuss his contributions and talents as well as his misbehaviours and lapses.

Resources

[Francis Rattenbury Worksheet](#)

[Francis Mawson Rattenbury - The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

Barrett, Anthony A. and Rhodri Windsor Liscombe. *Francis Rattenbury and British Columbia*. U.B.C. Press, 1983.

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Reksten, Terry. *Rattenbury*. Victoria: Sono Nis Press, 1978.

Segger, Martin and Douglas Franklin. *Victoria - A Primer for Regional History in Architecture, A Pilgrim's Guide to Historic Architecture*. Victoria, 1982.

[Rattenbury: The case of the murdered Victoria architect](#)