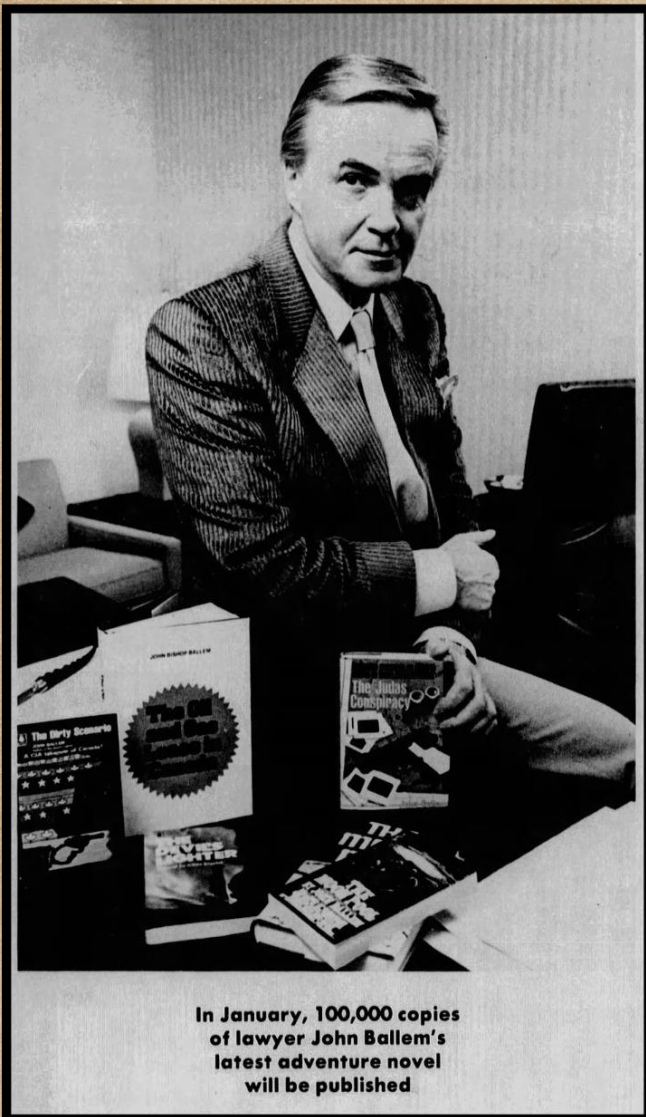


New Glasgow's Murder Mystery Novelist, Poet and Lawyer

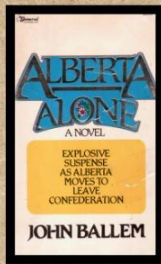


**In January, 100,000 copies
of lawyer John Ballem's
latest adventure novel
will be published**

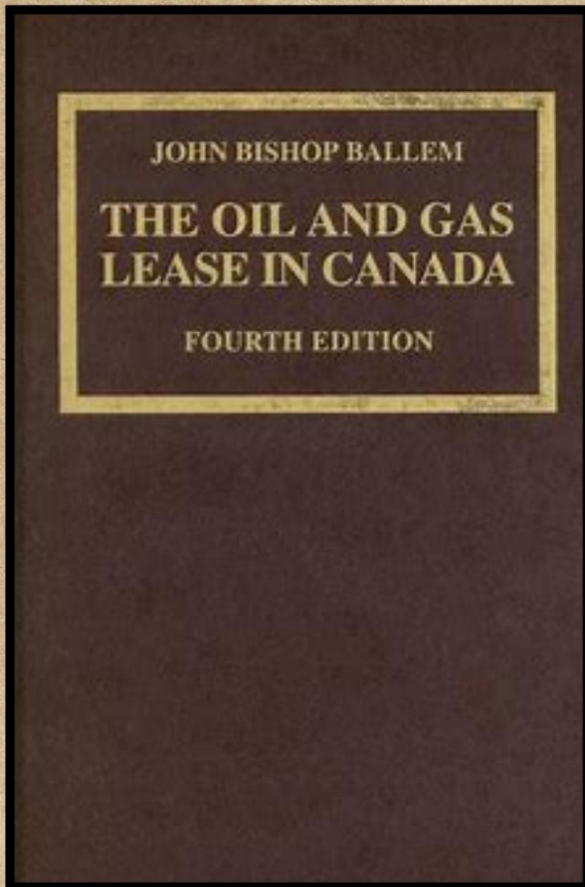
This New Glasgow born individual was called "a keen legal scholar to mystery readers as a polished writer and to the world at large as a perfect gentleman."

John Bishop Ballem was born in our town in 1925. He would be educated at New Glasgow's public schools, Dalhousie and Harvard Universities, where John would earn his law degree. And with this professional background he combined legal knowledge with well thought-out fiction stories that would give the reading public fourteen murder, mystery and thrillers novels.

New Glasgow's Murder Mystery Novelist, Poet and Lawyer



John eventually settled in Alberta where he established a private law business and became a leading citizen in the City of Calgary. Although the globe-trotting lawyer often set his mysteries in the exotic settings, he enjoyed his greatest success with tales of Alberta.



John was also credited in 1973 with writing an internationally recognized standard work called The Oil and Gas Lease in Canada which discusses the legal document that determines the process of which freehold mineral owners may grant oil companies the right to search and produce minerals. For this publication he was awarded the Petroleum Law Foundation Prize, and in 2009, John was awarded the Distinguished Service Legal Scholarship Award by the Law Society of Alberta.

New Glasgow's Murder Mystery Novelist, Poet and Lawyer

John Ballem has the

WRITE STUFF

□ The top oil and gas lawyer in Canada has a compulsion to churn out novels just for sheer contentment

What makes John Ballem write — and write so hard, produce so much?

The question cried out to be asked as we sat discussing *The Barons*, his ninth novel, in his corner office on the 40th floor of Petro-Canada Centre.

I mean, Ballem is the top oil and gas lawyer in Canada — the Main Man in Ballem, McGill, MacInnes & Eden. From his corner office, no, you cannot see forever. It just seems that way.

And the law firm occupies not just the whole 40th floor but part of the 39th? And the walls are festooned with high-priced contemporary art? And here's a late 1950s-style employees' cafeteria, complete with an old-fashioned jukebox and hits from the early sixties?

I shrugged and threw up my hands: "Look, I mean, obviously you don't NEED to write novels."

"Probably you're wrong," Ballem said, placing his coffee cup on the glass table-top between us.

"I think I do. If I didn't write I wouldn't be a contented person."

Not money, "but other rewards" keep Ballem writing.

"It's the act itself I enjoy," he said. "When I'm out for a walk and something falls into place, a phrase or a bit of dialogue — that's very gratifying."

Ballem also cited the "the nice moment" when a book becomes a tangible reality. "And there's pleasure in creating something that will last."

But I hear the academic purists fairly snorting with indignation: "What? Ballem writes mainstream thrillers. Potboilers. Such books don't last!"

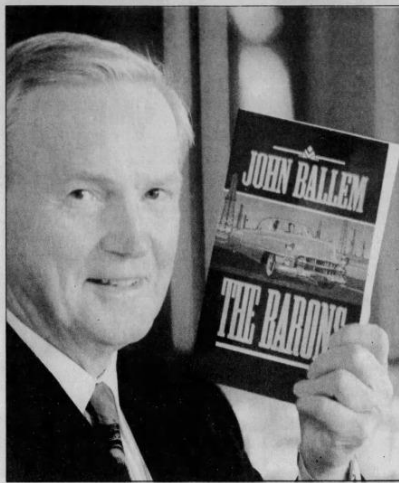
Ah, but not so fast. Certain works, and yes, even novels, have a staying power independent of any question of, ahem, literary merit. Whose meaning, of course, is always hotly contested.

The Barons (Gorman & Gorman, \$14.95) is the third volume (and first) in what Ballem calls *The Oil Patch Trilogy*. The other two are *Oil Patch Empire* (1985) and *Death Spiral* (1989).

Taken together, the three novels paint an invaluable picture of the Alberta oil industry from the halcyon 1950s through the tumultuous 1980s. But imagine you're a scholar 200 years hence. You're investigating the oil patch? Ballem's trilogy will communicate a greater sense of what it was like in these early days than any number of statistical surveys or even lively eyewitness histories.

No, Ballem didn't start out to write a trilogy. But that, he noted, "is fairly common with trilogues."

He began, rather, by thinking he'd



JOHN BALLEM: His newest book *The Barons* is the third volume (and first) in what he calls *The Oil Patch Trilogy*



write a novel about early days in the oil patch — something like *The Barons*.

Ballem set that project aside, however, because the late '70s and early '80s "were a very, very exciting period in the oil industry." He decided to write first, on that period — "one of the most interesting chapters in Canadian history" — and produced *Oil Patch Empire*.

By the time the novel appeared, however, the oil patch was experiencing a traumatic reversal: "The human cost was terrible," said Ballem, who of course had a first-hand look. "It was an absolute, total shock."

Prices were down, interest rates up and companies plunged into money-losing maelstroms or "death spirals." Ballem felt compelled to set his next oil-patch novel against this dramatically altered backdrop: *Death Spiral*.

With that work behind him, Ballem was finally able to go "back to when it all started." He'd already decided that his central character, Mark Hunter, would be a geologist. The mid-'50s were "really a party-time in Calgary," Ballem

said, "and I wanted to bring that out. So he had to be a bachelor."

That situation would lead naturally to complications involving women. But Ballem needed more plot. Having arrived in Calgary in 1954, a young lawyer originally from Nova Scotia, Ballem remembered early-days battles over who would build natural-gas pipelines — "and that seemed like a good thing for several people to fight over."

The Barons takes off from there, leading us through sundry kinds of skulduggery, double-dealing and other wickedness. That's entertainment.

The lasting value of the novel consists, as I say, in its depiction of the early-days oil patch.

"It was very, very macho," Ballem agreed, "and I've never blinked that. It was macho to an extreme degree and it's only now beginning to emerge."

And what of 1950s Calgary? That, too, emerges here in technicolor. To cite a single example, Ballem underlines the significance of the Palliser Hotel: "Come to think of it," one character declares, "the Palliser is the real reason why Calgary ended up being the oil capital of Canada instead of that other place up the road."

And so the defence rests.

These days Ballem is writing a murder mystery set in Banff. And he's contemplating a third Caribbean novel: "I've decided to leave the oil patch in peace for a while."

John was described "as a very glamorous person" where he combined a spirit of adventure and learning. In 1944, he joined the Royal Navy Fleet Air Arm as a pilot. With his love for animals — horses in particular, he became a commentator for broadcasts at the Calgary Stampede and other equestrian events. He filed regular reports to the Alberta newspapers on his exotic travels to the North and South poles. John was a long-time member of the Crime Writers of Canada and served 10 years as president of the Calgary Zoo.

John Bishop Ballem passed away in 2010.