

CHALLENGE THE STRONG WIND

Canada and East Timor, 1975–99

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Never a Lost Cause

The story ended, as it started, in fire and blood.

The date is September 5, 1999. A Timorese friend is on the telephone, a day after United Nations officials announced the overwhelming vote for independence in East Timor. He's thinking out loud about the future of his country now that almost 80 percent of the Timorese people have voted for independence in the referendum of August 30, 1999.¹

"Of course," he says, this is only the confirmation of an independence already declared in 1975. After that declaration, Indonesian troops invaded East Timor, insisting that the whole operation would be over in a day: "Breakfast in Dili, lunch in Baucau, dinner in Lospalos," they vowed, listing the capital, the second city some miles away, and the far tip of the island.² It would be a quick invasion, they said. They had promised as much to the Americans, who supplied the bulk of Indonesia's weaponry.

As Indonesian troops closed in, many Timorese fled to the mountains. My friend's family was among them. He was a child then, unsure of what was happening, caught up in the movement, the chaos, the creeping violence. But he remembers his sister's prophecy at the time: "They did not conquer us in twenty-four hours. That means that in twenty-four years we will be free, we will raise our flag again." She would perish in 1978 in an encirclement operation on Mount Matebian. But her people fought on, and twenty-four years later they were voting for independence. On the ballot, most of them placed a mark alongside an image of the flag raised in 1975, indicating that they chose independence.

As my friend and I spoke on the telephone, pro-Indonesia militia groups were starting a campaign of mass reprisals against the population, taking bloody revenge for the way they had voted.

Francisco Lopes da Cruz had a prophecy, too. It was 1997, and Indonesia's "roving ambassador on East Timor affairs" was visiting the University of British Columbia (UBC). He was in Vancouver doing damage control, hard on the heels of Nobel Peace Prize winner José Ramos-Horta and João Carrascalão, leader of the Timorese Democratic Union, the UDT. Adversaries in 1975, Ramos-Horta and Carrascalão, along with other Timorese leaders in exile, had joined forces in support of the united resistance movement in East Timor itself.

Lopes da Cruz wanted to muddy the picture of unity. The "polished performer" (as one Canadian diplomat called him³) had been travelling the world with a simple message: if Indonesian troops left, "there will be civil war, like in 1975." He hammered away on his theme. "Look," he beamed, waving a stack of photos at me, "here I am with Nelson Mandela. I told him the same thing."

In 1975, it is true, there had been a brief civil war in East Timor. It started when Lopes da Cruz and his party launched a pre-emptive coup against the Portuguese colonial administration. The coup was swiftly turned back by Timorese soldiers loyal to the pro-independence party, Fretilin (Independent East Timor Revolutionary Front). Some months later, when the Portuguese refused to come back to finish the decolonization process, Fretilin declared independence.

"Civil war" had been the myth ever since. Lopes da Cruz and other Indonesian diplomats seemed convinced that, if they repeated the words *civil war* often enough, people would believe that Indonesian withdrawal would lead to inevitable conflict. When the prophecy did not come true on its own, given the independence vote in 1999, shadowy forces in the Indonesian security forces, working on their own initiative, launched a campaign to prove their diplomats right. There would be a civil war, they decided, even if one had to be manufactured. The result was more bloodshed and destruction – the final chapter in a period of military rule that would claim the lives of more than 100,000 Timorese, perhaps twice that number.⁴

The Canadian government was never ignorant of what was happening in East Timor. Ottawa's policy can be broken down into four stages: indifference (up to 1975); complicity with, and active support for, Indonesian rule (1975–91); tension between intensified trade and the beginnings of a rhetorical but ineffective human rights advocacy (1991–98); and, finally, pressure on Indonesia to seek a political solution that respected human rights (1998–99).

Canadian policy toward East Timor never made East Timor itself its primary consideration. Policy makers considered, first, diplomatic and economic relations with Indonesia, a large country with a growing market for Canadian goods, services, and investments. They also consulted at all stages with key Commonwealth and NATO partners. Australia, New Zealand, and the United States were the most important voices affecting Canada's Timor policy, but Ottawa also heeded the positions taken by European countries and Japan, as well as Indonesia's partners in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). In other words, policy makers crafted their Timor policy as part of a broader global one informed by Jakarta, Canberra, Washington, and other world capitals. Canada's Timor policy flowed from its position within its international alliances, as well as its economic position within North Atlantic networks. At the time, players in these networks were seeking new trade and investment opportunities across the Pacific as that region moved toward a more central position in the global economy.⁵

Officials in Ottawa were at first indifferent to what was happening on a half-island territory few of them had heard of. They paid no attention to Portuguese Timor, as it was called before 1975. As a Portuguese colony, East Timor had a contested and ambiguous relationship with its colonial ruler. There were periodic uprisings, but there was also an identification with Portugal symbolized by the use of the Portuguese flag and other symbols as sacred items.⁶

Indifference made possible the next stage, that of active complicity with the Indonesian government.⁷ Canadian governments prioritized relations with Indonesia and thus avoided challenging the Indonesian government on its human rights record. Its policies mirrored those of its allies.⁸ Canadian governments rarely made a policy on any issue without first determining the position of the United States on the same issue. In this case,

US government policy was squarely in support of Indonesian rule under General Suharto, the country's president from the late 1960s to 1998. Washington saw his military government as a stable ally in a turbulent region, particularly after communist victories in South Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos in 1975.⁹ However, the regional Commonwealth voices of Australia and, to a lesser extent, New Zealand had even greater influence over Canadian policy makers.¹⁰ Like-minded governments in Ottawa and Canberra often reached similar conclusions on global affairs, and both had to consider Washington's stance even as they determined their own policies independently. Australia's determination to develop close relations with Suharto's Indonesia meant it would side with Indonesia even when doing so contradicted prevailing public opinion at home. New Zealand, too, determined that Indonesian rule over East Timor was "irreversible" and therefore chose to accept it.¹¹ Far away from East Timor, but just as committed to a Pacific policy in which Indonesia figured prominently, Canadian governments took their lead from their Australian counterparts and sided with Indonesia in its asymmetric struggle with Timorese independence movements. In doing so, they both reflected and reinforced similar stances taken by the governments of Britain, Japan, New Zealand, and others.¹²

Recent studies complicate a traditionally held narrative – that Canada neglected Asia before the 1970s. Those studies reveal a web of trade, migration, and cultural interactions in which diplomatic relations mattered less than people-to-people ties across the Pacific.¹³ Still, for Canadian governments from the Second World War to the election of Pierre Trudeau in 1968, North Atlantic priorities loomed larger than trans-Pacific concerns. Trudeau pivoted toward Asia in a way previous governments had not and transformed Canada into a distant but nevertheless significant Pacific power.¹⁴ Trudeau was the first Canadian prime minister to have travelled widely outside the North Atlantic region. Most famously, he was one of five Quebec intellectual leaders to have visited the People's Republic of China during the years when the United States, Canada, and many other Western countries refused to recognize its government.¹⁵ Trudeau pledged recognition of China, and his government inked a deal with Beijing in 1970.¹⁶

Canadian recognition of China was not a simple rapprochement with communist powers, though Trudeau and others in Ottawa embraced

détente across Cold War divides. Ottawa remained firmly loyal to its allies, even as the prime minister mused aloud about shifting allegiances. Recognition did, however, mark an effort to reorient Canadian interests westward across the Pacific. It included a new focus on Indonesia, where Canada had opened an embassy in 1953, though it had never invested much effort beyond that.

In 1970, the first formal review of Canadian foreign policy highlighted Suharto's Indonesia as "a nascent power among the non-Communist nations because of its position and population, and the development potential of its natural resources."¹⁷ The recently founded Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) made Indonesia a "country of concentration" for Canadian aid for the first time. Canadian investment there began to grow. Ottawa could see, for the first time, potential areas of mutual interest with Indonesia.

All of this provided the context for the appearance of East Timor on Ottawa's foreign affairs agenda. The fall of Portugal's Salazar-Caetano dictatorship in 1974 placed that country's African colonies on the road to independence. Portugal's former right-wing regime had ferociously resisted the independence of its colonies; now the country was willing to decolonize in Africa. The same road opened for East Timor. Following decolonization, Timorese nationalism coalesced around two parties, Fretilin and the UDT, which disagreed over how quickly independence should be brought about. Destabilization efforts by Indonesia split the two parties, which fought a brief civil war in August 1975. Fretilin emerged in control and declared independence in November, amidst a simmering war with Indonesian forces. Ten days later, Indonesian troops launched a full-scale invasion of Dili, the East Timorese capital. The consequence was twenty-four years of military occupation accompanied by a litany of crimes against humanity, as recounted in the country's Truth Commission report.¹⁸

In the years preceding the decolonization of Portuguese Timor, many Canadian observers had hoped that the Timorese could be persuaded to accept Indonesian rule. After Fretilin declared Timorese independence, Indonesian president Suharto first made sure that no important Western country would object, then authorized an invasion by "volunteers" to eradicate the republic that Fretilin had declared just days before. The result was death, displacement as people fled to the hills, destruction of villages,

and other crimes against humanity.¹⁹ An early flurry of concern at the UN cooled, resulting in an annual resolution calling for Timorese self-determination. Importantly, the UN never recognized Indonesian claims to have “integrated” East Timor as its twenty-seventh province. But UN resolutions, as would become clear, had only symbolic value.

From 1980 onward, Canada’s UN mission voted with Indonesia, which meant that it opposed resolutions affirming East Timor’s right to self-determination. After 1982, there were no more votes on this matter at the General Assembly or the Security Council. International human rights advocacy was not absent, but it was deflected toward less controversial causes. With no Timorese diaspora in Canada and no pre-existing missionary ties, Canadian media coverage was close to nil and in some years non-existent.²⁰ Meanwhile, the Indonesian army (using US-supplied weapons) ended Fretilin-led conventional resistance in the late 1970s, reducing Timorese resistance to guerrilla warfare. Still, and significantly, that resistance fought on.

When Brian Mulroney’s Conservatives took power in 1984, they promised better relations with the United States.²¹ The Mulroney government’s talk of human rights was mainly a Cold War club with which to beat the Soviet Union. The Canadian and US governments embraced Suharto’s regime, viewing its “New Order” as a reliable pro-Western power and promising trade partner. They saw no reason to muddy the waters by advocating for East Timor.

Yet East Timor was becoming an issue in Canadian public opinion. Department of External Affairs (DEA) files reveal growing criticism of government policy, especially after 1985, when Amnesty International launched a global campaign for human rights in East Timor. Fretilin, East Timor’s “national liberation movement,” had been using the language of Third World liberation. Under the influence of the Timorese Catholic Church, this now gave way to the language of human rights.²² Pro-Timor voices grew in Canada, led by a new Indonesia East Timor Program formed in Ontario. Canadian church support also became a factor. In 1987, an alliance of Canadian churches funded the creation of the East Timor Alert Network (ETAN), a new national solidarity organization. At the same time, the Canadian Catholic Organization for Development and Peace began advocating for human rights in East Timor. Canadian Catholic bishops’

calls for more human-centred development aligned well with critiques of Indonesian state-led “development” (*pembangunan*) emanating from the Timorese Catholic Church.

In the early 1980s, under the leadership of José Alexandre Xanana Gusmão, Timorese guerrillas formed a united front in an effort to overcome the internal divisions of the past. They identified “three fronts,” of which they themselves were only one. “To resist is to win,” Xanana declared, indicating that guerrilla resistance was symbolic and not expected to gain a military victory. The independence effort would rely instead on the two other fronts: the “clandestine front” of young activists living under Indonesian control, and a “diplomatic front” overseas led by José Ramos-Horta, previously Fretilin’s representative at the United Nations.²³ This new resistance structure made foreign advocacy groups, in effect, an unofficial arm of the Timorese resistance. The outcome was a new creature, the “international solidarity movement.”

The years from 1975 to 1991 show Canada following the lead of its allies. Before 1991, Liberal and Conservative governments alike agreed that Indonesia controlled East Timor and that any attempt to change this situation was hopeless. Here Canada was echoing its key allies, especially Australia and New Zealand. The government’s desire for productive and profitable relations with Indonesia dictated consent for the status quo of Indonesian rule in East Timor. A single policy linked diplomats in Ottawa, Washington, Canberra, and other capitals, informed by reporting from each of those countries’ embassies in Jakarta. Solidarity groups began forming in Canada and were becoming effective at raising public awareness of a forgotten conflict, but they could not dent government policy.

Most accounts identify the Santa Cruz massacre of November 12, 1991, as a turning point in international awareness of East Timor. In many ways, this massacre was nothing new – it was not the first time that Indonesian soldiers had killed pro-independence activists. It was not the first time that reports of a mass killing had reached the outside world. But it was the first time that such a massacre had been filmed, with that film being smuggled out and screened at the top of newscasts around the world.

On November 12, a memorial procession was held to remember Sebastião Gomes, a pro-independence activist killed by the Indonesian armed forces. The route began at the site of his killing, Motael Church, and continued to

the Santa Cruz cemetery. This procession was also a pro-independence demonstration, the largest to date held by young activists. On arriving at the cemetery, the marchers were confronted by Indonesian soldiers, who opened fire on the crowd. The church later reported that 273 died in the shooting, with many more missing or wounded. A New Zealand citizen was among the dead, an American journalist among the wounded. More significant still, a British journalist was present and filming. With the aid of clandestine front activists, he smuggled the film out of the country. The brutality of the Santa Cruz massacre, backed by hard visual evidence, could not be denied.

The massacre prompted an upsurge in global solidarity movements. The International Federation for East Timor, anchored by solidarity groups in Japan and the United States, used new communications technologies to link solidarity groups and coordinate lobbying. At times, it responded to events more quickly and nimbly than governments. After 1991, three Timorese university students won refugee status in Canada, making the East Timor Alert Network an effective Canadian voice for Timorese aspirations.

A statue stands today on the Dili waterfront to commemorate the massacre (see Figure 3). It depicts a larger-than-life young Timorese man cradling an apparently dead or dying man in his arms (in fact, both men survived). Setting aside Catholic resonances – the statue is reminiscent of a Pietà statue (the Virgin Mary cradling the body of Christ) – it evokes memories of the Santa Cruz massacre. With this massacre, military violence and the power of images coalesced to mobilize global public opinion about the situation in East Timor to a degree not seen before.

The Mulroney government liked to portray itself as a human rights leader and thus felt compelled to freeze aid to Indonesia in response to the massacre. Yet, even while it broke ranks with Canadian allies, most of which took no action, the suspension of aid proved isolated and limited in both intent and effect. The Mulroney government, and the Chrétien Liberals who followed, took an ambiguous stance. They were influenced on several occasions by domestic pressure but even more so by trade and investment opportunities. Ultimately, the Indonesian market beckoned enticingly, promising untold riches in a range of sectors from life insurance to gold



FIGURE 3 Youth Monument, commemorating the 1991 Santa Cruz massacre, Dili, Timor-Leste

mining. Canada's government thus sought close relations with Indonesia even while positioning itself as a human rights champion.

The contradictions of the Canadian stance became clear at the 1997 Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Summit held at UBC. Ottawa funded a non-governmental People's Summit, with José Ramos-Horta as the keynote speaker. At the same time, Canadian officials promised Suharto he would not be confronted by protesters. To keep that pledge, RCMP officers used force to clear roads through Vancouver for Suharto's motorcade. This led to a public outcry.

Although the 1990s saw Canada stray from the stance of its allies on East Timor, government documents reveal that the Canadian aid freeze imposed in late 1991 was less influential than Canada's decision in 1998 to support Timorese self-determination. In these cases in the 1990s, evidence indicates that Timorese resistance diplomacy and solidarity movement pressure did have an impact on Canadian policy.

The 1997 Asian financial crisis combined with a wave of pro-democracy protests in Indonesia to topple Suharto in 1998. The new president, B.J. Habibie, was vulnerable to international pressure and proved willing to change course. Canadian foreign minister Lloyd Axworthy and Raymond Chan, Secretary of State for the Asia-Pacific Region, saw a window of opportunity, which they used to reverse two decades of Canadian consent for Indonesian rule in East Timor. For the first time, Axworthy and Chan met with Timorese leaders. They heard their message that Canada should endorse the Timorese people's right to self-determination and finally chose to do so.

This policy shift added to mounting international pressure on Habibie to change his country's course. The new Indonesian president agreed in January 1999 to offer autonomy for East Timor "under one condition, that East Timor is to be recognized as an integrated part of the Republic of Indonesia."²⁴ He promised that, if the Timorese people rejected his offer in a referendum, they could have their independence. He allowed the UN to run the referendum, but he insisted that Indonesian troops provide the security for it. At the UN Security Council, Canadian diplomats pushed without success for an international presence.

More than 98 percent of eligible voters turned out for the referendum. The final tally was 78.5 percent for independence. Despite Habibie's promise, the Indonesian army responded with a wave of violence. Pro-Indonesian "militia" groups attacked and killed independence supporters, burned much of the country's infrastructure to the ground, and forced 300,000 people from their homes. This wave of violence, which took place in full view of the world,²⁵ prompted a wave of international protest, which finally changed Western governments' generally held view of Timorese independence: no longer would they consent to Indonesian rule there. Within a month, an international peacekeeping force replaced the Indonesian army. The UN took over administration, running the country until it handed power back to Timorese leaders in 2002.

In 1999, Canadian diplomats played a strong and constructive role on the world stage, and this made a difference in East Timor. But it would not have happened without sustained diplomacy and pressure from Timorese representatives and their supporters in the Canadian solidarity movement.

As we shall see, Ottawa acted as an advocate for East Timor largely in response to pressures from Canadian civil society.

This book describes Canadian policy toward the twenty-four-year conflict in East Timor, giving equal attention to government and non-governmental perspectives. In doing so, it centres the concept of “other diplomacies.” The Canadian state, of course, carried out relations with Indonesia primarily through government-to-government diplomacy. That said, Canada-Indonesia relations developed in other realms simultaneously, from religion to economic development. Writing about Canada-Asia relations, political scientists Mary Young and Susan Henders highlight the way “other diplomacies” have shaped Canada’s links with Asia, suggesting that interactions between Asians and Canadians constitute another form of diplomacy that should be taken seriously.²⁶ This book follows Young and Henders in giving weight to “other diplomacies” in both its coverage and its source base, using previously untapped government and NGO archival sources. It also aims to be part of a broadening of understanding of Canadian diplomatic history to include non-state actors and ideas, a turn that one recent volume has dubbed “undiplomatic history.”²⁷

Two types of diplomacy operated between Canada and East Timor. One was the government’s official diplomacy, which often operated to reinforce Canadian strategic and trade interests in Indonesia. A transnational “official mind” reminiscent of the official mind of British colonial days operated across borders, encouraging Canadian policy makers to reach decisions influenced by thinking in the United States, Australia, New Zealand, and Japan.²⁸ The most visible aspects of Canadian foreign policy have always been directed toward the United States and Europe. At times, China and Japan appear on the diplomatic radar screen. In general, however, Canadian policy toward the Global South is formed as an afterthought to relationships considered more central. This diplomacy is unseen and often less influenced by public opinion and media coverage. Seeing and centring it allow a different picture of Canadian diplomacy to emerge.

Less visible diplomacy also emerged, this one grounded in civil society. Religious networks combined with scattered activists whose interest in East Timor was rooted in a critique of the very basis of Canadian foreign

policy. A counter-policy emerged that challenged Ottawa's approach to the Global South. Only by examining these unseen diplomacies can we paint a full picture of Canadian relations with Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The creation and eventual triumph of a counter-policy are well illustrated by Canada's record with East Timor.

This book is broken into separate parts for each change of government or shift in Canadian government policy on East Timor, along with chapters surveying the tactics and messages of some half-dozen NGOs. Chapter 2 describes Canada's response to the invasion of East Timor, which was widely anticipated in Western capitals. Alliances mattered to Canada, none more so than ties to Australia, the dominant regional power, and thus Ottawa viewed events through an Australian lens. Chapter 3 describes similar alignments in the non-governmental sphere, depicting Oxfam Canada's support for Australian relief efforts in East Timor and how they sparked the first NGO efforts to lobby the Canadian government on East Timor. Despite these efforts, Canadian officials shifted their support to Indonesia, a change described in Chapter 4. The appearance of human rights on the government's foreign affairs agenda during the 1970s "human rights moment" actually ended up reinforcing a tacit agreement to ignore Indonesian human rights violations in East Timor.²⁹ This acquiescence continued even after a short ceasefire ended with an Indonesian air offensive that included dropping napalm on civilians, the topic of Chapter 5.

NGO activism on East Timor resumed in 1985 with actions by new solidarity groups and Amnesty International, recounted in Chapter 6. However, NGO involvement did not initially shift government policy. Instead, as Chapter 7 explores, the years 1985 to 1991 saw the governments of Canada and Indonesia begin to move, for the first time, toward a closer partnership.

In the same period, Timorese and Canadian Catholic groups developed direct contacts that helped to build a new source of Canadian NGO activism, especially through the Canadian Catholic Organization for Development and Peace. Chapter 8 explores how Canadian Catholics increasingly lent their voices to those pressing the Canadian government to make human

rights more central in its relations with Indonesia. As Chapter 9 lays out, the Canada Asia Working Group (CAWG) of the Canadian churches, in a show of transnational religious solidarity, promoted an alternative Canadian foreign policy grounded more in human rights and social justice. Specifically, CAWG backed the creation of the East Timor Alert Network (ETAN), described in Chapter 10, which succeeded in establishing itself as a national solidarity organization in support of Timorese human rights and self-determination. In an effort to sway Canadian public opinion, ETAN deployed images of Timorese “tribal peoples” and strongly condemned Canadian government “complicity” in Indonesia’s brutal occupation of East Timor. ETAN quickly became the *bête noire* for those in External Affairs working for closer Canada-Indonesia ties.

The Santa Cruz massacre in 1991 sparked widely divergent responses in government, business, church, and activist circles, as discussed in Chapter 11. Ultimately, the Canadian government opted to suspend some economic aid to Indonesia, formally linking aid to human rights for the first time. As a result of the work of ETAN and Timorese refugee activists in Canada to foster citizen engagement, it was now politically costly for Ottawa to embrace the Suharto regime, and the Canada-Indonesia relationship cooled. As spelled out in Chapter 12, ETAN itself grew through the influence of Timorese refugees and an influx of younger activists who viewed East Timor as a symbol of Canada’s complicity in global injustice.

The electoral victory of Jean Chrétien’s Liberals in 1993 saw a renewed embrace of Indonesia as part of a broader push for trade diversification, which is the subject of Chapter 13. Chapter 14 examines the subsequent interplay of government and NGO approaches to East Timor, as the old narrative of the “lost cause” gave way to a more complex and informed understanding of that country. Ultimately, the government accepted Timorese arguments and announced publicly that Canada supported self-determination for East Timor. The reasons for this change in policy are the subject of Chapter 15, which also outlines Canada’s role in the end of Indonesian rule.

Chapter 16 sketches Canada-Timor relations after 1999 at both government and NGO levels, while Chapter 17 summarizes the conclusions that

can be drawn from their involvement over the past quarter century. From 1975 to 1998, the prevailing winds favoured Canadian support for Indonesian rule over East Timor. Timorese activists and their Canadian supporters challenged those winds, and by 1999 they had succeeded in shifting Canadian government policy. This book, consequently, suggests that a fuller understanding of Canadian foreign relations requires a close examination of both government and non-governmental actions and the interplay between the two. No country is passively buffeted by prevailing winds. Winds can shift, if they are challenged.

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Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Title: Challenge the strong wind : Canada and East Timor, 1975–99 / David Webster.

Names: Webster, David, author.

Series: C.D. Howe series in Canadian political history.

Description: Series statement: C.D. Howe series in Canadian political history | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: Canadiana (print) 20190203072 | Canadiana (ebook) 20190203161 |

ISBN 9780774862974 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780774862998 (PDF) |

ISBN 9780774863001 (EPUB) | ISBN 9780774863018 (Kindle)

Subjects: LCSH: Canada – Foreign relations – Timor-Leste. | LCSH: Timor-Leste – Foreign relations – Canada. | LCSH: Canada – Foreign relations – 1945- | LCSH: Timor-Leste – History – 20th century.

Classification: LCC FC251.T56 W43 2020 | DDC 327.7105987 – dc23

UBC Press gratefully acknowledges the financial support for our publishing program of the Government of Canada (through the Canada Book Fund) and the British Columbia Arts Council.

Additional funding was provided by the C.D. Howe Foundation.

Set in Perpetua and Minion by Artographica Design Co. Ltd.

Copy editor: Matthew Kudelka

Proofreader: Dallas Harrison

Cover designer: George Kirkpatrick

Cartographer: Eric Leinberger

UBC Press

The University of British Columbia

2029 West Mall

Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z2

www.ubcpress.ca