

Historical crime novel set in 1869 Victoria



THE DEVIL'S MAKING

By Sean Haldane

Stone Flower Press with Rún Press (9 May 2013)

Sean Haldane is a psychologist and writer. Having written neuropsychology papers and poetry throughout his life, he turned to fiction. *The Devil's Making* is a detective mystery set in Victoria in 1869, and follows a British policeman trying to solve a shocking murder. Exploring human frailty and the nature of civilization, the book heavily features the history and geography of British Columbia, it *The Devil's Making* won the 2014 Crime Writers of Canada' Arthur Ellis Award. This is Haldane's first novel.

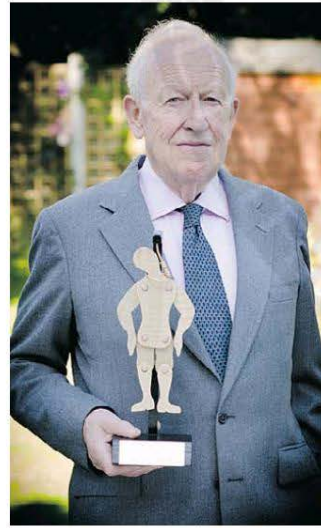
Q What interested you in writing crime fiction?

A Writing it! I wrote the first draft of *The Devil's Making* in 1985 when I was living in Victoria, B.C. — about 10 years in all — working as a psychotherapist and studying neuropsychology, and I had written a self-help book *Emotional First Aid (EFA)* which is based on Charles Darwin's work on emotion in humans and animals, and on Wilhelm Reich's very radical work with emotional expression. I had lost some faith in psychotherapy because of its abuses of the therapist's power. I suppose one tension in the book — in which a psychotherapist is murdered — is personal. But at a wider level I was taken up with Darwin's idea that the difference

between the “savage” and the civilized person is “the difference between a wild and a tame animal.” I was also seized by the experience of living on Vancouver Island. If ever a place worked out Darwin's ideas about civilization and savagery it was there. In 1869, American, European, and Chinese settlers were hugely outnumbered by Indians whom they saw as savage. But the Victorians were savage too.

Q So when you call the novel *A Victorian Detective Mystery* you are using Victorian in both senses of the word — the place and the time.

A Yes. The place overwhelmed me. We — my wife and daughters and I — would go camping on the islands: Saltspring, Quadra (with its Kwakiutl presence), San Juan (now American but it used to be divided just after the Pig War). My wife and I were reading about local history. I have always been fascinated by languages and I was reading up on Chinook, the 19th century trade language. Actually some of it survives: I heard people in Victoria using the word “skookum” to mean something was “all OK.” When I began the novel I was living next to Mount Douglas Park and I could walk where much of the story takes place. Or in downtown Victoria where many buildings survive from 1869 or earlier. When I returned to the novel many years later, images of Vancouver Island were still in my mind — the spawning and dying salmon in the Goldstream, the sunny golden beaches with their icy water.



RAPHAELLE PHOTOGRAPHY

Sean Haldane's novel, *The Devil's Making*, draws on psychology and crime in 19th century British Columbia.

Q How did your work as a psychologist — examining memory and emotions — affect your writing?

A It gave me a respect for the failings of narrative. Memories are memories of memories. *The Devil's Making* is full of stories which may or may not be true, and Chad, the detective, has to encourage people to tell truths they find it hard to face. Neuroscientists would now agree that emotion over-rides cognition: you may think you are making a conscious choice but emotionally the choice is already made. For many years I did court work — as an expert witness in criminal cases. This involved psychological assess-

ment and interviews with various criminals, including murderers. I learned something about the psychology of murder — for example how impulsive it can be. Then I was able to complete the novel.

Q So it's a psychological novel?

A And a crime novel, and a historical novel. It describes B.C. at a key point in its history: would it be American, Canadian, remain British, or even become independent? B.C. was having an identity crisis. So are the main character in the book. The narrator of the story, Chad, is English and falls in love with a Tsimshian woman. Where will all this go? B.C. in 1869 was faced with one of the main issues of the time: what to do with the much more numerous Indians? The Americans locked them away on reservations. In B.C., the Hudson's Bay Company (HBC) were systematically depriving the very enterprising coastal Indian of the freedom to trade. But more liberal thinkers, like Matthew Begbie (a historical character who appears in the book) favoured granting the natives legal titles to their own lands. Now if only that had happened.

Q The Crime Writers of Canada jury described the themes of *The Devil's Making* as “racial prejudice, self-doubt, notions of civilization and love.” Is that a fair summary?

A Yes. And it has something to say about the origins of Canada. And my 97-year-old step father when he read it said it was above all a love story. I like that.