

Of Coronations, contributions and coffee table books

by BROCK WEIR

Do people still buy coffee table books?

Do people know what coffee table books even are anymore?

I'll venture a probably way-off-the-mark guess that when you first hear the phrase, the immediate reaction might a blank stare? or a snicker if you remember Cosmo Kramer's efforts to bring together a coffee table book about coffee tables.

Yet, evidently there is a market for these often luxurious, often treasured, usually difficult-to-store hardcovers that, as the name suggests, were often kept on the table for all to see.

A conversation starter? Sure.

A statement piece? Why not?

A status symbol? Well, judging by the cost of some of the fancier volumes out there, just maybe!

The start of a journey? For me, absolutely.

One of my earliest memories is sitting on a couch in my grandmother's bedroom, in front of one of those old television consoles that took the better part of five minutes to fully warm, leafing through a book published nearly a decade before I was born.

At that young age, I didn't really have a full appreciation of what I was looking at, but the interest was sparked and soon these sparks grew into a flame.

The book in question was The Country Life Book of the Silver Jubilee. Commemorating the 25th anniversary of Queen Elizabeth II's accession to the throne, it compiled hundreds of images of the late monarch's first quarter-century as monarch.

Some of the dreamier images, those by famed fashion photographer Cecil Beaton, for instance, which saw his subjects photographed in front of backdrops designed to invoke an earlier age, were indelible. I wanted to know more ? and the more I learned the more I felt I had missed out on a heck of a lot.

I never thought at the time I would experience a Jubilee and the idea of seeing a Coronation? well, that was unfathomable.

Yet, here we are, with just a couple of days to go before the Coronation of King Charles III and I am not ashamed to say I'm pretty excited about it.

What's exciting me, however, is not the opportunity to see a carbon copy of the last Coronation, but how those evocative images of almost 70 years ago have been updated, translated, or otherwise done away with to fit in with today's sensibilities.

Gone is the endless parade of berobed, be-cornet'ed aristocracy kneeling before the monarch to pay personal homage to him. Instead, after the Prince of Wales symbolically pledges, the people ? in the Westminster Abbey, in the street lining the route or having their own Coronation party, or at home like so many of us will be doing, have been invited to do follow suit in their own ways, if they're so inclined.

In 1953, special seating was constructed in Westminster Abbey to accommodate more than 6,000 people, including all those

clinging to the uppermost rungs of the British social ladder. This time around, the congregation has been whittled down to a less-eyewatering 2,000, including Commonwealth representatives like Governor General Mary Simon and Prime Minister Justin Trudeau ? but, most notably, some 1,000 individuals who have been invited based on their individual merit and how they have supported their communities rather than who their parents are.

This emphasis on personal merit has been underscored with the creation of the Coronation Champions Award, recognizing ?extraordinary volunteers? across the United Kingdom who have contributed to their communities. Hundreds of people from England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have since been recognized as such just ahead of the big day, while volunteerism has been kicked up a notch with The Big Help Out.

The Big Help Out is premised on the idea that ?it doesn't matter who you are, where you're from or what you do ? you can make a difference and help change lives.? The initiative will see people on the Monday following the Coronation (a holiday for the Brits) fan out into the places they hold dear to lend a hand in the name of positive change.

Unfortunately, we in Canada are not getting May 8 off as a holiday like our British counterparts. Nor has our Federal government really taken advantage of what could be a once-in-a-generation opportunity to mobilize portions of the country for the greater good.

Thankfully, as the Citizen went to press on Wednesday, the Prime Minister's Office announced 30,000 Coronation medals will be struck and awarded to ?to Canadians who have made significant contributions to the country, a province, territory, region or community, or an achievement abroad that brings credit to Canada.? While the details of the medal are yet to be announced, this is a welcome change from the last year's Platinum Jubilee when no medals were struck, a small token for everyday heroes that make our communities what they are today, including first responders who gave back tirelessly at the height of the pandemic.

Yet, while a ceremony will be held in Ottawa on Saturday featuring a diverse array of cultural performers, a 21-gun salute, and the unveiling of what is presumed to be a new stamp featuring The King, neither a legacy project nor a large-scale public celebration appear on the horizon.

Canadian commemorations, including the official Coronation emblem, are themed around the colour green to align with the King's passion for environment and sustainability, but there's so much more than that.

Over his last half-century as Prince of Wales, Charles III through his Prince's Trust Canada, has worked diligently to promote youth employment through their WorkReady program of workshops, job coaching, and work experience programs; to support Veteran Entrepreneurship; and to ?champion sustainable solutions? towards what they now call ?the green recovery.?

?Our priorities are focused on preparing young people and members of the military and Veteran community for transforming the world of work, championing sustainable solutions for a green recovery, and empowering our people and our partners to strengthen our collaborative efforts,? reads the Trust's mission.

But, credit where credit is due, the Provincial Government seems to have struck the right balance.

If you're able to get to Queen's Park on Saturday, a full day of fun awaits as the lawns of the Legislature are transformed into a carnival atmosphere, while the Government plans to throw open the gates of 39 provincial parks free of charge ? beautifully dovetailing with the King's green credentials.

Most importantly, in my view, the morning's flag raising ceremony will be presided over by the Lieutenant-Governor, Premier, and Indigenous leaders who, once that part of the ceremony is complete, will also honour worthy community-members with the Sovereign's Medal for Volunteers, the creation of which was approved by the late monarch to honour those who give back.

On paper, it sounds like the perfect way to commemorate a poignant new spin on an ancient ceremony, one which is shaping up to be less about the monarch and more about the people the monarch serves.

These are the images I feel will capture the imaginations of generations to come ? whatever the next generation's equivalent of a coffee table book ultimately turns out to be.