



## ON THE FRONT COVER

CONSTANCE DORA HOLMES  
ISHERWOOD, Q.C.

By Kathryn Berge, Q.C.\*

**C**onstance Dora Holmes Isherwood, Q.C., of Victoria, at 93 years of age and 61 years of call, is—by a margin of two years—the oldest practising lawyer in British Columbia.

Working out of an updated 1887 Victorian heritage building in upper Fort Street, the edifice displays the long-standing firm banner, “Holmes and Isherwood”. Connie, as she is informally known, serves her many clients in a broad range of legal work in the areas of wills and estates, family, corporate-commercial, residential and, upon occasion, commercial real estate. No stranger to the courtroom, Connie appears on all of her own matters, outlining her submissions in her signature articulate, organized and relaxed fashion.

My own relationship with Connie began in late 1991, when I was seeking office space to start my own small firm. Although I had an established practice, I soon found that conventional office buildings were cautious about leasing to new ventures such as mine. I began knocking on doors and came, in time, to the handsome Holmes and Isherwood building. I made inquiries at the front desk about whether, by chance, there might be space available to lease. I was shown in to a lovely wood-paneled office and introduced to a most gracious Mrs. Isherwood (as she is and was invariably referred to by all in her firm). Within a short time, it had been agreed that my new firm would lease the upper floor of the house. In addition to obtaining a most suitable setting for my firm, I gained a unique opportunity to get to know a remarkable colleague, one who embodies the energy, skills and long-term commitment to service to clients that characterizes lawyers of excellence.

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Connie's parents, Grace and Charles Holmes, immigrated to Canada from England prior to Connie's birth. She was born in Nanaimo on January 19, 1920. Her brother, David, followed five years later. She grew up in the community of Pleasant Valley, north of the then small city, and the young family thrived while occupied with a small-scale farm. To supplement the family's income, Charles Holmes entered the fledgling B.C. Forest Service and became a professional forester.

In 1937, Connie graduated from high school in Nanaimo in the commercial stream. She had excelled in her studies of Pitman shorthand and other required secretarial skills and was ready to begin work. Connie's family moved to Victoria almost immediately after Connie's graduation so that her father could accept a promotion with the Forest Service. This position led to him becoming a supervisor, with an office located in the legislative buildings. Once in Victoria with her family, Connie lost no time in seeking work. After two years of miscellaneous positions, she seized an opportunity in 1939 to be trained as a legal secretary to one Mr. Ernest Tait, a senior Victoria general practitioner, whose office was located in the Stobart Building on Yates Street (now the site of St. Andrew's Square).

Once Connie was ensconced in her position as Mr. Tait's legal secretary, her spirit and energy soon found a new outlet: the pursuit of a career in music. In 1940, she joined an all-woman musical group. It boasted a pianist and players for the accordion and guitar, but badly needed a drummer. Connie knew she could fill the bill and, with the aid of some self-study, joined the ensemble as the designated drummer and occasional keyboardist. The group grew to number eight women. With the Second World War in full swing, they were in demand and, at one point, embarked on a four-month tour throughout B.C., Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba. The band played on until 1946, delighting audiences with their originally arranged renditions of big band popular jazz, in the style of Glenn Miller.

The band wound up as the new post-war era began. Recognizing Connie's ability, Mr. Tait redoubled his earlier efforts to encourage her to become a lawyer. However, before she could consider applying to law school, she needed two years of prerequisite post-secondary general studies. These she pursued in 1947 and 1948 at Victoria College, precursor to the University of Victoria.

In the fall of 1948, Connie commenced her studies as a member of the first-year class of the University of British Columbia's Faculty of Law. It comprised 208 students, including Connie's husband-to-be, Foster Isherwood, and eight women. Mary Southin (as she then was) was a classmate in the year after Connie. Diana Priestly, destined to become UVic Law's first law librarian and after whom its library is named, was in the year ahead.

While at UBC, like most students whose families did not live in Vancouver, Connie became a boarder, in her case with a couple living at 4th and Blenheim. Connie remembers these student days as busy, happy years. She appeared in student dramatic and musical performances, including the annual Law Ball, acted as secretary to the Student Council and distinguished herself in debating and mooted competitions. She was dubbed “Sherlock Holmes”, given her penchant for asking questions and, with her enquiring mind, getting down to the truth of a matter.

Each summer, Connie returned to Victoria to work with Mr. Tait and his firm. His confidence in Connie’s ability was confirmed in her receipt of the 1951 Law Society of British Columbia’s Gold Medal, making her the first woman in the faculty’s history to receive this award.

Returning to Victoria upon graduation, it was planned that Connie would join Mr. Tait as an articled student. Understandably, Mr. Tait was only too happy to accept his talented protégé back to his firm. However, before they could enter into a deed of articles, Connie was contacted by William Haldane, one of the two Victoria benchers of the day. He advised her that, given her outstanding success at law school and her previous experience as a legal secretary, the benchers could see no reason why she should not be called to the bar immediately—in fact, they wished her to appear at the ceremony scheduled for the following week. And so it was that Connie Holmes was called to the B.C. bar on May 19, 1951, before the Honourable Mr. Justice Wood.

Connie describes her early days of practice as enjoyable. She feels very fortunate to have had Mr. Tait, who was capable and fair to all, to champion and guide her. It was easy to begin practice, given that she had known the firm’s lawyers, staff and clients for years. By the time Mr. Tait died in 1953, Connie was managing the firm which was, by then, known as Tait and Holmes.

In 1961, Connie’s UBC law school classmate, Foster Isherwood, returned to his hometown of Victoria after articling at Russell & DuMoulin and some years of practice in Yale County. When asked, Connie smiles when describing how she came to know Foster better once he returned to Victoria. Apparently, Foster suggested that they meet in the Empress Hotel’s Bengal Lounge, for what they forever afterwards referred to as a “mint julep”. After their drink, they strolled through the Empress grounds. In the rose garden, romance bloomed. Connie smiles again and says, “Foster always said I led him down a garden path.” She pauses and says, “Well, maybe he actually led me.” They were married on November 2, 1963.

By 1964, Foster had transferred his litigation and criminal practice to Connie’s firm, now renamed Holmes and Isherwood. They adopted two young sons: Charles in 1968 and George in 1969. Women in practice in Vic-

toria and elsewhere were uncommon in those years. However, Connie advises that, for that era, parenthood qualified her to join a smaller cadre yet—women in practice who were mothers as well. Connie thoroughly enjoyed these years of combined parenthood and practice. She continued to be heavily involved with her lifetime interest in her church, St. Mary's Anglican of Oak Bay. As their sons grew older, she and Foster became more and more adventurous in their travels, touring much of the globe, including the Mediterranean, Egypt and Israel and, in 1980, attending the Oberammergau Passion Play and the Russian Olympics. They pursued their keen interest in symphony, opera, architecture and antiques. Connie promoted her practice through the Women's Business Network and was active in the Canadian Scottish Regiment and the Family and Children's Services Association, when it was still a private organization.

In approximately 1995, Connie and Foster, now in their 80s, made the decision to fulfill their dream of building a waterfront home on Otter Point in Sooke, a small seaside community west of Victoria. They had owned a small cottage there for decades, enjoying it as a holiday residence. Foster did a good deal of the building and supervised the construction himself. In 1997, they moved in, and didn't hesitate to take on the 100-kilometre round-trip between their new home and the downtown Holmes and Isherwood office.

On April 28, 2011, the Law Society of British Columbia honoured Connie and Foster with their Sixty-Year Commemorative Practising Certificates, making them the first couple to receive this distinction in the history of our B.C. profession. In November 2011, their remarkable professional and personal partnership ended after almost 50 years upon Foster's death, in his 90th year. Connie wrote the obituary for the *Advocate*.

In addition to her other practice responsibilities, for the past 25 years Connie has been accorded the distinction of being the appointed chancellor to the bishop of the Diocese of British Columbia, which covers Vancouver Island and the Gulf Islands. This prestigious, demanding position requires Connie's presence at all formal Anglican Church events and services and to act as the solicitor to the bishop on legal matters. In recent years, the responsibilities of this position have been significant, as she has been the chief adviser to the bishop on the many legal challenges arising out of the diocese's historic involvement with residential schools. The second weekend in January of this year saw Connie flying to Toronto to participate in a national conference for Anglican chancellors.

As might be expected, Connie's achievements and abilities have been well recognized. In 1992, she was a recipient of the Canadian 125th Anniversary Medal. She was designated as one of her Majesty's Counsel Learned in the Law in 1998. In 2006, the University of Victoria recognized her with a

Legacy Award for Lifetime Achievement, both for her work in the community and for her service in its senate.

In September 2012, Connie was the first recipient of the Victoria Women's Pioneer's Award from the Victoria Section of the Canadian Bar Association's Women Lawyers Forum. The award has been created to provide a lasting legacy for those women in the Victoria legal community who have been a foundational part of women becoming established and thriving in practice in this city. At a sold-out dinner in Connie's honour, the Honourable Madam Justice Jacqueline Dorgan introduced the award winner. She described Connie's recent appearance before her. "The drafting was elegant and spare, neither argumentative nor redundant. Her presentation was equally notable—eloquent, gracious and directly on point." Connie herself spoke for a half-hour without notes, delighting the attendees with her humour, sense of history and keen observations of the profession and life in general. Even more recently, in January 2013, Connie received notice that she has been awarded the Queen Elizabeth II Diamond Jubilee Medal.

What is Connie's perspective on practice today? When asked what she enjoys about practice, Connie replies, "Court and preparing for the presentation to the judge." In reflecting on the practice of law over the past 62 years, Connie notes that the big change has been the change in technology. In terms of women in the profession, she notes that the transformation really began when law schools opened, as entry to the profession could no longer be limited to only those students that lawyers would accept for firm-based legal training. In her typically understated manner, she notes: "Women lawyers are quite accepted now. When I was first in practice, women weren't supposed to speak up. Gradually, acceptance has increased." When asked what she enjoys most outside of practice, it continues to be a broad range of popular, standard and classical music.

Today Connie lives with her realtor son, Charles. Son George also lives in Victoria, and works in the marine charter business. Brother David and his son, Robert Holmes, Q.C., live in Burnaby. Robert Holmes is a partner with Holmes and King in Vancouver and practises in the areas of criminal and commercial litigation and arbitration. He has just stepped down from his position as the chair of the B.C. Civil Liberties Association. He credits his "Auntie Con" as being his inspiration and role model from the age of seven, when he realized that, if he could be a lawyer like her, he would live a life of glamour and adventure; one where, if you studied hard, you could contribute to the world by being both a professional who did fascinating work and assisted those in the community who needed it most. In short, you would have a better life. He has fond memories of Foster and Connie's beautiful home in the Uplands area of Victoria and of the wonderful Cadillac cars dri-

ven by his glamorous aunt. Most particularly, he appreciates the way that she can walk into a room of strangers, learn something fascinating about each person present, and leave them feeling important and that much better about themselves.

Connie continues today in her practice at Holmes and Isherwood. She makes the drive from Sooke daily at noon, continuing her practice of afternoon-only office hours, which she began after moving to Sooke. If you drop by the office almost any afternoon you will be able to ask to meet Mrs. Isherwood, provided you can catch her in a break between her appointments. She sees many clients daily, generally booked according to what must be a demanding schedule of back-to-back, half-hour appointments. You will find her poised, high-energy, elegant in her taste and appearance, and refreshed from her travels to two different Hawaiian Islands over the past Christmas season. If she offers you space to rent in her building, take it.

Connie will be prepared to share her secret of longevity and satisfaction in life. “Keep breathing, keep smiling and keep working—you will be sure then to continue to contribute to the world.” You may wish to inquire about what special quality keeps a lawyer working into her seventh decade of practice. In your discussion with Mrs. Isherwood, you will learn what that is: the opportunity to know your clients, to understand their problems and concerns, and to assist them in resolving matters truly central to their lives.

