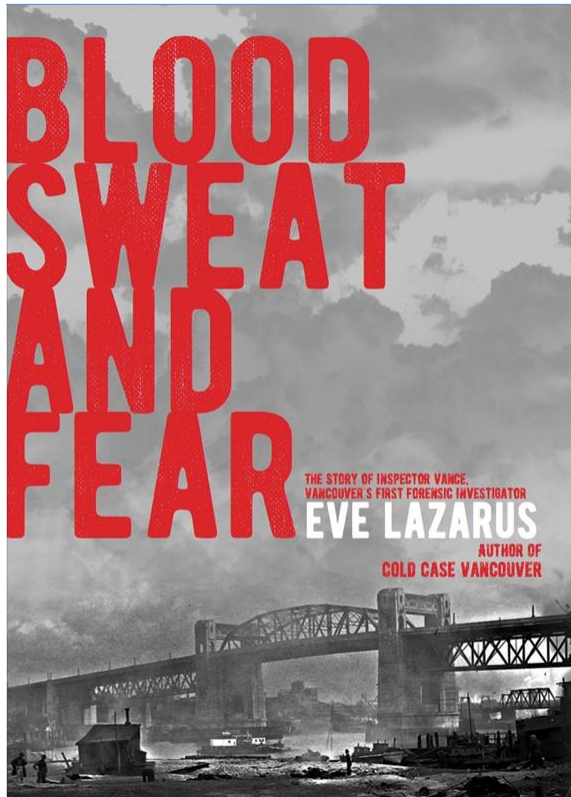


## **Blood, Sweat, and Fear: The story of Inspector Vance, Vancouver's first forensic investigator**

By Eve Lazarus



I first “met” Inspector John F.C.B. Vance when I was writing *Cold Case Vancouver: the city's most baffling unsolved murders*. He turned up at a crime scene in Chapter 1, the murder of Jennie Eldon Conroy, a twenty-four-year-old war worker who was beaten to death and dumped at the West Vancouver Cemetery. It turned out that Vance wasn't a police officer but ran the Police Bureau of Science for the Vancouver Police Department, and his cutting-edge work in forensics solved some of the most sensational cases in the first half of the last century. Unfortunately, Jennie's wasn't one of them.

For most of his career, Vance worked out of 240 East Cordova Street, the building that now houses the Vancouver Police Museum. I looked up some newspaper articles and books that his daughter Marian had donated to the museum years before, and became intrigued by this man who the international media called the “Sherlock Holmes of Canada.”

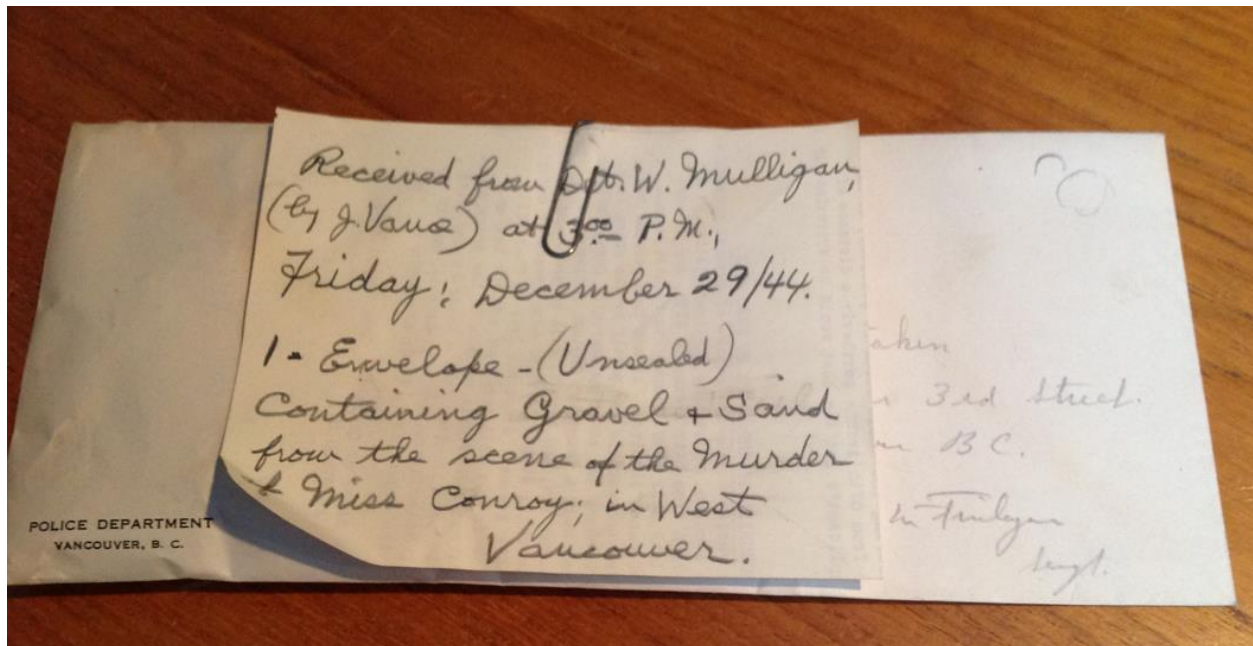
I was able to track down Marian's daughter Janey who loaned me her mother's scrapbook filled with clippings about Vance. Some were neatly pasted in, others just folded, as if at some point she became overwhelmed by the sheer number of articles that featured her father. There were also some intriguing black-and-white photographs of a Model B Ford crashed into a tree and shots of detectives searching through rural buildings that I later tied to a 1934 murder of two police officers in Merritt, BC.



Janey and David, another grandchild, remembered that J.F.C.B.—as Vance was known in the family—had packed up several cardboard boxes full of photographs, clippings, and case notes. No one had seen them for years, and it was thought that they'd been thrown out. And then, in July 2016, more than half a century after Vance's death, the boxes miraculously turned up in another grandchild's garage on Gabriola Island.

Incredibly, when Janey opened the first box she found a large, tattered envelope labelled *Jennie Eldon Conroy murdered West Vancouver, Dec 28, 1944*. Inside there were smaller envelopes marked with the Vancouver Police Department insignia and

filled with hair and gravel samples from the crime scene, an autopsy report, crime scene photos, and several newspaper clippings. Jennie's case had clearly captured the inspector's imagination. He felt the evidence was important enough for him to take home with him when he retired in 1949, and then he packed it up and took it with him again years later, when he moved house. It seemed to be a sign that I should write about Vance, that we shared a fascination for this long-forgotten cold case.



When Vance started as city analyst in 1907, his work primarily consisted of ensuring that the milk, food, and municipal water supply were fit for human consumption. The first time he was brought into a police investigation was in 1914 when he helped to solve a missing persons case. The wife of a CPR executive had disappeared, and it was Vance's understanding of early blood work that found she had been hacked up and incinerated in the basement furnace by the Chinese "houseboy."

From then on, more of Vance's work involved police investigations, and by the end of 1917 almost half his time was spent solving crime. He became a familiar face at crime scenes and in the courtroom because of his skills in serology, toxicology and firearms examination. In those early years, Vancouver was the only police department in Canada that had a forensic scientist on staff and one of the few police departments in North America to use forensics.

Ten of the chapters follow the police investigation into individual crimes. They include the story behind the Japantown "Murder Factory," the murder of two police officers at False Creek Flats, and the death of a nineteen-year-old man at first thought to be murder, but which Vance determined was suicide by cyanide.

Vance frequently brought his expertise in trace evidence and explosives to solve dozens of robberies, earning him front-page headlines. In fact, his skills and analytic abilities were so effective that in 1934 there were seven attempts on his life, and for a time, he and his family were under constant police guard from criminals afraid to go up against his science in the courtroom.

*Blood, Sweat, and Fear* is the story of Vance's extraordinary work in forensic science in the first half of the last century, and in a sense, a history of the early work in forensics. Vance's job, though based in Vancouver, took him all around the province and up into the Yukon in one of the most interesting periods in British Columbia's history. Vance started work for the city of Vancouver four months before anti-Asian riots swept through the city. He worked through the crime-ridden Depression and through two world wars. Yet, during more than four decades on the job, Vance never lost his moral compass in the midst of corruption that reached to the top of the Vancouver Police Department and all the way to City Hall.

Eve Lazarus lives in North Vancouver and writes about true crime and history. Her previous books include the BC bestsellers *Cold Case Vancouver: the city's most baffling unsolved murders* (2015) and *Sensational Vancouver* (2014). Eve blogs at *Every Place has a Story--* [evelazarus.com](http://evelazarus.com) and curates a Facebook page by the same name.