

Winnie's Statue

Winnipeg, Manitoba

IF THERE WERE A PRIZE FOR CANADA'S MOST UNLIKELY statue, I sometimes think it would have to be awarded to Winnie-the-Bear at Winnipeg's Assiniboine Park Zoo.

Created by the late William Epp, the near life-size bronze sculpture depicts a stalwart military officer, in full First World War uniform, holding a standing bear cub by its forepaws. Man and bear are gazing steadily into each other's eyes, looking for all the world as if they're waiting for some unseen orchestra to strike up a waltz. A quaint, faintly absurd tableau, I thought, when I came upon the statue a few years ago.

The story behind it is equally quaint. Shortly after the outbreak of war in 1914, Lieutenant Harry Colebourn, a 27-year-old British-born veterinary surgeon living in Winnipeg, who had volunteered for the Canadian Expeditionary Force, found himself on an eastbound train from Winnipeg to Val Cartier, Que., en route to Europe. When the train stopped in the remote Northern Ontario community of White River, Colebourn, prompted perhaps by his lifelong love of animals, bought a female black bear cub from the hunter who had killed its mother. He named her Winnie after his adopted home town. Winnie subsequently accompanied her master to England, becoming the pet of the veterinarians of the 2nd Canadian Infantry Brigade. But when Colebourn was sent to France in December 1914, he left the orphan bear in the care of the London Zoo, where she soon became a popular attraction.

Enter the celebrated English writer A.A. Milne and his equally celebrated offspring, Christopher Robin. The pair made a number of father-and-son visits to the zoo, and there Christopher Robin fell in love with Winnie. Thus inspired (so the story goes), A. A. Milne penned his now famous Winnie-the-Pooh books.

The real Winnie died at the London Zoo in 1934, at the ripe old age of 20. More than half a century later, in 1992, on the suggestion of Harry Colebourn's son, the statue of the soldier and his bear was installed at the Winnipeg zoo and dedicated "to the children of the world."

With its homage to a distinctively "high English" brand of nursery whimsy, it can seem a very odd sculpture indeed to come across in such a robustly multicultural and bracingly matter-of-

fact prairie city as Winnipeg, which, whenever I visit, seems to have gained in ambition and gravitas. Even early in its 139-year history (it was incorporated as a city in 1873, despite a population of less than 2,000), it liked to refer to itself in such Chamber of Commerce terms as the "Gateway to the West" and the "Bullseye of the Dominion." But the boasts were not unwarranted. Strategically located just west of the Canadian Shield, at the eastern margin of the Prairies, the city was a natural funnel for the nation's westward thrust, including that of the transcontinental railway. Midway between the Atlantic and the Pacific Oceans, at the confluence of two major rivers, Winnipeg was to become a major industrial and financial centre, the nexus of the western grain trade and a magnet for European immigrants, who were to leave a strong imprint on both the city and the province of Manitoba (among these immigrants was a large contingent of Icelanders, who developed a fishery on nearby Lake Winnipeg).

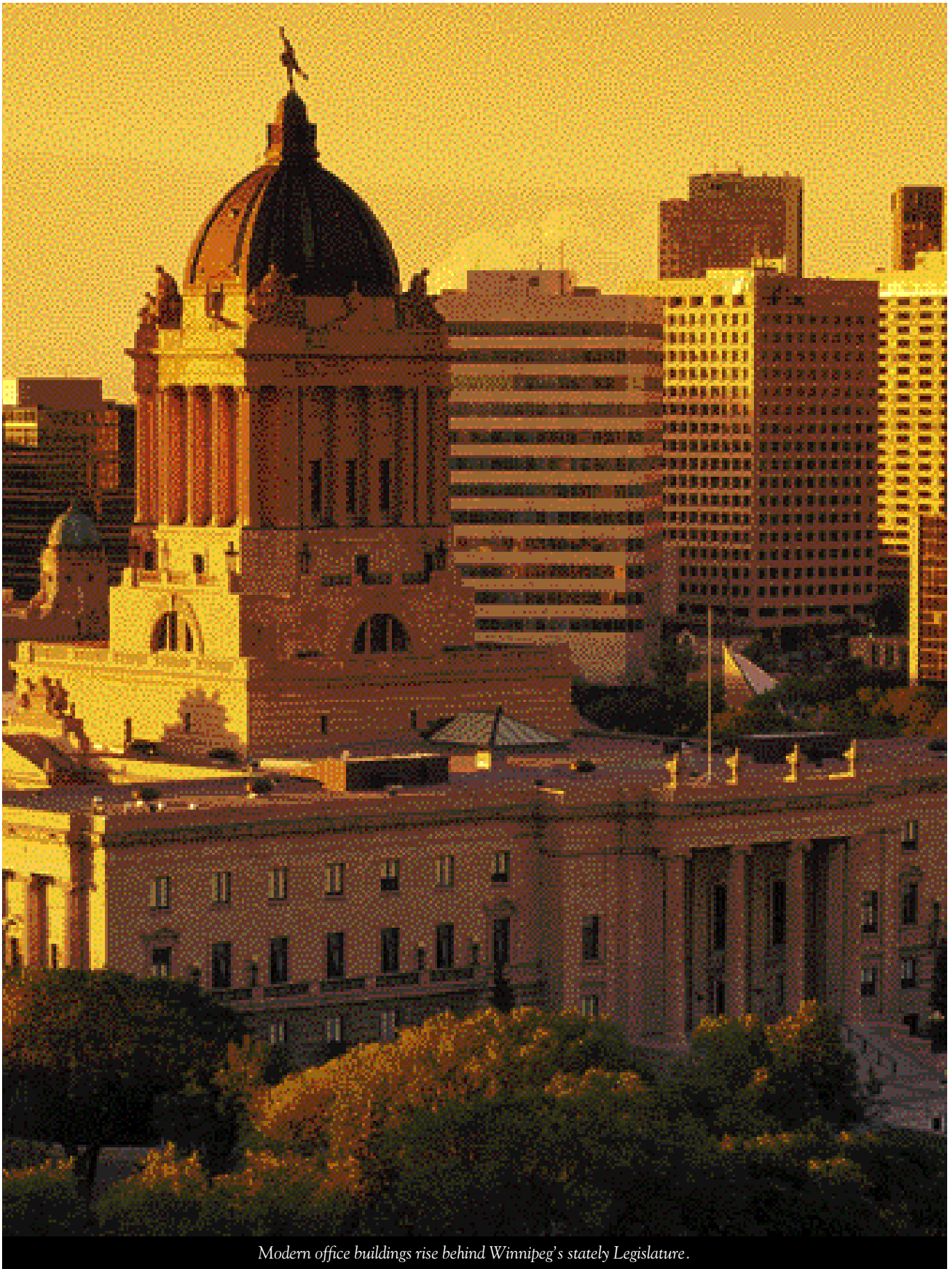
Perhaps because of its relative isolation, Winnipeg, whose population is now 681,000, developed its own strong cultural life, pioneering a major Canadian ballet company and supporting two universities, a symphony orchestra, galleries, museums, theatre and an important writing community.

But consider, also, the city's engaging and varied architecture: the onion domes of the Ukrainian Catholic churches, the synagogues, the striking modernistic Winnipeg Art Gallery, the grand limestone legislative building with its golden boy statue perched atop its dome, and the shopping centres and high-rise office buildings.

Above all, Winnipeg is a hospitable place, one that is reputed for its friendliness. "The vast prairie countryside inspires an openness that has become part of Winnipeg's character," wrote Barbara Cansino in the *New York Times*. "Licence plates say, without exaggeration, 'Friendly Manitoba.'"

So perhaps it's not all that surprising that a Winnipegger should have made room in his heart for an orphaned cub or that the city itself should have made room for a statue of the famous Canadian bear. A word of warning, though. Don't make the mistake of referring to the bear in the statue as Winnie-the-Pooh. Disney has a lock on the copyright. "We have to be very careful," says a zoo official. It's "Winnie-the-Bear," please. — Wynne Thomas





DAVE REEDE

Modern office buildings rise behind Winnipeg's stately Legislature.