

Coast Salish poems 'Homeric' in scope, says B.C.'s Lt-Gov.

By [Robert Freeman - Chilliwack Progress](#)

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Poems that open a unique window on the past of the Coast Salish peoples are finally going to be available to the general public at a book launch Saturday at the Skowkale First Nation.

The Sepass Poems: The Ancient Songs of Y-Ail-Mihth are the epic tales of the Coast Salish, mainly the legends of Xa:ls, the great Transformer, who bears a resemblance to Jesus in his mission 'to put things right' on Earth.

The 16 poems are the only English translation of traditional Halq'emeylem stories, committed to memory in their centuries-old oral form by Chief William K'HHalserten Sepass.

Born in 1841, just 33 years after Simon Fraser arrived on the West Coast in 1808, Chief Sepass died in 1943 in Sardis after witnessing the "withering away" of the Coast Salish language and culture.

But Sepass, the last of the specially-trained Coast Salish orators, wanted to make sure the stories and legends of his people that had been passed down to him in their oral form would not be forgotten.

With the help of Eloise Street, a crippled white girl Chief Sepass met at Cultus Lake in 1911, and with her mother Sophia, who was raised by Sto:lo nannies and fluent in Halq'emeylem, the poems were translated into English - but with their native rhythms and imagery intact.

However, the poems went out of print until Longhouse publisher Ann Mohs spent two years tracking down the Street family to return the copyright to the Sepass family. She also discovered the "missing" 16th poem.

B.C. Lieutenant Governor Steven Point has written a foreword to the new book comparing its poems to the "Homeric legends" that formed the foundation of Western thought.

"The Sepass Poems are a profound legacy to future Xwelmexw generations as they continue to seek meaning and stability in an ever-changing modern world," Point writes.

The book launch Saturday at the Skowkale community hall is open to the public and starts at 11 a.m. Two hundred limited edition "Commemorative" copies of the book are available for \$175, and 1,000 with cloth dust jackets for \$79. Art cards that illustrate selected poems will also be available.

Noted Fraser Valley anthropologist Gordon Mohs will read selections.

A second book launch is scheduled for the next day, Dec. 6, starting at 2 p.m. at the Xa:ytem Longhouse in Mission.

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