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Calgary lawyer wrote mysteries and books about oil and gas

By John Barber
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John Bishop Ballem died on Jan. 9 at the age of 84

Known to his business colleagues as a keen legal scholar, to mystery readers as a polished writer, to his adopted hometown of Calgary as a leading citizen and to the world at large as a perfect gentlemen, Calgary lawyer John Bishop Ballem died Saturday while correcting the final proofs of his 14th novel, *Murder on the Bow*.

Although the globe-trotting lawyer often set his mysteries in the exotic settings he visited with his wife, Grace - "all parts of the world you really didn't want to go," according to the couple's daughter, Mercedes Ballem - he enjoyed his greatest success with tales of Alberta. *The Oil Patch Quartet*, a Ballem omnibus praised by the Calgary Herald for painting "an invaluable picture of the Alberta oil industry from the halcyon 1950s through the tumultuous 1980s," virtually sold out within a few days of its publication, according to Marc Côté of Cormorant Books.

Mr. Ballem's steadiest seller remains *The Oil and Gas Lease in Canada*, a standard legal text currently in its fourth edition. Among the experiences that fed both his scholarship and his creative writing was a job representing Big Oil at the historic Berger inquiry into the first Mackenzie Valley pipeline, flying from place to place in the Northwest Territories on a DeHavilland Twin Otter with Judge Thomas Berger at 60 below zero.

"We practically lived in the aircraft, and our little joke at that time was if Berger saw a trapper out on his line, we would land the plane and have a hearing," he told industry newspaper Upstream in 2006.

Born in New Glasgow, N.S., educated at Dalhousie University and Harvard, Mr. Ballem was "the kind of man who embraced everything, the physical and the cultural," according to Beverley Slopen, his Toronto literary agent. "He was a very glamorous figure."

He was a pilot and a horseman, providing commentary for broadcasts of the Calgary Stampede and local equestrian events. He filed regular reports to Alberta newspapers on his exotic travels, visiting both the North and the South Poles late in life, was a long-time member of the Crime Writers of Canada and served for 10 years as president of the Calgary Zoo.

Last year, the Law Society of Alberta and the Canadian Bar Association of Alberta awarded him the Distinguished Service Award for Legal Scholarship

His interests were "multitudinous," according to his widow, Grace. "But his main love was the law."