In Hindsight: Half a Century of Research Discoveries in Canadian History

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Episode 1: A Future in the Past

George Self, Founder of What is Now the Department of History in the University of Calgary

Without question, George Moore Self (1910-1985) was one of the most original individuals I have ever encountered in academic life. I had the good fortune of knowing him during my first decade in Calgary after my arrival at the university in the summer of 1974. Very strange indeed, we shared a common interest in an isolated European country located on the west side of the Balkan Peninsula, opposite Italy. In Grade 10 at Oakville-Trafalgar High School, in Oakville, Ontario, circa 1960-61, in Social Studies class we used as a textbook, *Canada in the World*, in the "Spotlight in Canada Series." I loved learning about other countries. For my assignment I prepared a report on Yugoslavia and Albania, using our local public library's copy of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. The tiny country of Albania in the Balkans became a link between the seasoned professor and the neophyte, the older man at the end of an academic career, the younger one at the beginning. The History Department's founder had written his Ph.D. in International Relations at the University of Chicago in 1943—on the foreign relations of Albania!

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Anthony Rasporich, a Canadian historian but one with a strong interest in Balkan history, later recalled for me how George loved to talk about Albania's two different peoples, the Gegs of the north and the Tosks of the south. Albania only became an independent country in 1912, created out of four districts in the Ottoman Empire. Although part of the nation, the Albanians of Kosovo and Macedonia were left out of the new state. On one of my visits to his retirement home in the late 1970s / early 1980s, I once asked him: "Why did you chose to study Albania?" He answered that one day in 1939, shortly after his arrival in Chicago, he noticed headlines on newsstands reporting Fascist Italy's invasion of its tiny neighbour. He said to himself, I know nothing about this place. Immediately he resolved to learn everything he could about Albania's history and its peoples.

The future founder of what is now the History Department of the University of Calgary was born in 1910 in Canso, Nova Scotia. His father was a telegraph operator from England who came to work at one of the two transatlantic cable stations which linked Ireland to Nova Scotia. His mother was a teacher who, after her husband's death in 1923, later remarried and moved to the Montreal area. George completed his public schooling in Nova Scotia, followed by four years in Arts at King's College in Halifax, where his uncle A.H. Moore served as president. In 1928 the young Nova Scotian decided to attend Macdonald College, McGill's Faculty of Education, from which he graduated in 1929 with a second-class high school teacher's certificate. Teaching jobs followed in Quebec high schools in Ormstown and Shawinigan, later followed by two high schools in Montreal in the mid-1930s, then a position at Maniwaki, located beside Kitigan Zibi, a large Algonquin (Anishinaabe) community on the Gatineau River, northeast of Ottawa on the Quebec side.

In George's words, the knowledge of the French language by "the majority of English Quebeckers, was meagre." (Unpublished essay

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on “William Henry Drummond and French Canada,” page 9.) This deficiency prompted him to learn to speak and write French fluently. In 1932 he attended summer school at McGill and obtained a first-class certificate in French literature. Once he began teaching in Montreal, he took courses at McGill, graduating with his B.A. in history in 1935, followed by the preparation of a M.A. He wrote his thesis on the working-class Chartist movement for political reform in mid-19th century England. The highlight of his graduate studies came in 1937 with a half year of study at the British Museum and Public Record Office in London. He obtained his M.A. In English history at McGill in 1938. Still wanting to go further, he applied successfully to enter the Ph.D. program in International Relations at the University of Chicago. To pay for his studies he worked for a year and a half as a night clerk at an apartment hotel, then for almost a year planning freight routes for a Chicago railway. Using English, German, French and Italian sources, he completed his thesis in 1943. In Chicago he acquired his lifelong love of jazz.

Thesis completed, and the war now underway, George returned to Montreal and enlisted in the Royal Canadian Navy. He entered 1 March 1943 as a writer and after five weeks training at HMCS York in Toronto, left for HMCS Stadacona in Halifax. On account of the severe labour shortage in the city, he also worked as an extra man on the Halifax docks, freight handling. The Curriculum Vitae he prepared years later in 1973 lists this distinction: “1946, elected member of Trades and Labor Council, Halifax.”

George’s wartime service was all spent in Canada, mainly in Halifax at HMCS Stadacona, where he handled correspondence and miscellaneous work for the commanding officer. Among other duties he directed the typists in the central office. With considerable foresight several years earlier, in his last months in Montreal before leaving for Chicago, he had taken a typing and shorthand course at Sir George Williams College. On

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demobilization he left the service on 1 May 1946 as a leading writer.

What is now the University of Calgary originated in 1945 when the former Calgary Normal School became a part of the University of Alberta's Faculty of Education. The next year the teachers' college moved to the campus of the Southern Alberta Institute of Technology (SAIT) on the brow of the city's North Hill. The University of Alberta Calgary Branch occupied the west wing of the historic SAIT building, now known as "Heritage Hall." The Tech students used the east wing. Anticipating the eventual development of a full university, the Calgary City Council designated land southwest of SAIT in Hounsfield Heights for a future campus, a location later exchanged in 1950 for the present site west of the old Banff Highway.

Immediately after his wartime naval service George worked as an assistant to the Archivist of Nova Scotia in 1946-7. He became the principal author/editor in preparing for publication the late Harry Piers's *The Evolution of the Halifax Fortress, 1749-1928,* which the Public Archives of Nova Scotia published as a monograph in 1947. George also worked as a research assistant in the Institute of Public Affairs and Lecturer in Public Administration at Dalhousie University. But all the while he hoped to undertake further specialization in history. At one point he mentioned to Dalhousie President A.E. Kerr that he hoped to continue in the field of Slav and East European Studies at the University of London. But he reversed course once he learned of a full-time academic appointment at the University of Alberta, Calgary branch. In spring 1947 he applied, successfully. George had a wife and two children. Reality dictated that the young father not pursue further historical training.

In the summer of 1947, the new appointee to the Faculty of Education in the University of Alberta at Calgary found himself in a largely agricultural province with a population of 800,000.

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Veteran Calgary Herald journalist Allan Connery, born and raised in the city, recalled in his book, *As Reported in The Herald* (1982): "In 1947, Calgary was a quiet little city of about 100,000 people. Street-cars and horse-drawn milk wagons still contended with cars for space on the narrow streets. The main roads were paved, but some side-streets were still dirt, graded and oiled every year" (page 166).

Half a year before George Self arrived in Calgary, Imperial Oil had blown in its famous well at Leduc, just southeast of Edmonton. The discovery was welcome as production in the neighbouring Turner Valley oil field had begun to decline. Oil and gas production after Leduc in 1947 raised Alberta into a "have" province from one with a per capita income below the national average to one well above it. Thanks to the already existing field at Turner Valley south of the city the oil companies had already established offices in Calgary, which continued as the industry's administrative centre after new exploration discovered major fields even larger than Leduc. Calgary tripled in population to over 300,000 in 1966, the year that the satellite campus of the University of Alberta became the independent University of Calgary. By 1966 about half of Calgary's rapidly expanding population owed their jobs to oil and gas.

George reached Calgary in the summer of 1947, amazingly by car, no mean feat, as the TransCanada Highway remained a quarter-of-a-century away. The historian and graduate of McGill and Chicago assumed teaching duties in history and political economy at the new branch of the University of Alberta, the old Calgary Normal School. Shortly after his arrival he and his wife and two children settled in a home in Mt. Pleasant, on 21 Avenue N.W., within walking distance of SAIT.

The new hire, a true internationalist with world-wide interests, found himself in a rather closed society. Only three years earlier the *Alberta Teachers Association Magazine*, in its issue of

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October/November 1944, raised the alarm that at the Normal School the "percentage of Anglo-Saxon students dropped from 70 in 1930-31 to 35 in 1943-44." (Cited in Stamp, *Teacher*, page 51.) This was a zero concern to the new arrival, who, at the time of continuing anti-Japanese sentiments in Alberta, welcomed Roy Kiyooka, a young Japanese Canadian art student at SAIT, to board in his home. Harry Kiyooka, Roy's brother, later recalled the history professor's "amazing collection of 78 records, jazz, classics, folk and everything else." Before Roy left Calgary for Eastern Canada in 1949, George, who knew the Montreal Group of Painters, gave him letters of introduction to Marion Scott and Goodrich Roberts.

1949 was the year George left on a grand summer adventure, an extensive tour of Africa, apart from the Union of South Africa. As he wrote in a letter dated 23 November 1962, "Colonial Policy was one of my Ph.D. fields and in my case this meant overwhelmingly Africa." Very interested myself in Africa in high school, I had read *Inside Africa* (1955) by John Gunther. In exciting fast-paced prose, the American journalist described African geography, economics, and politics on the eve of the British, French, and Portuguese African colonies' independence. George had seen developments first-hand. I remember his telling me with great excitement about the huge African political meetings he witnessed in the Gold Coast, the future Ghana.

Newly settled in his new city, George came to embrace it. One of his acquaintances in Calgary in the late 1940s was a kindred spirit, the *Calgary Herald* columnist Bob Needham (1912-1996). After he left Calgary in the early 1950s, "Richard J. Needham" later became a celebrated writer with the Toronto *Globe and Mail*. In the words of Canadian historian Christopher Dummit, "For much of the 1960s, he wrote columns castigating what many were coming to call 'the Establishment'" (*Unbuttoned. A History of Mackenzie King's Secret Life*, page 190). Needham adored Calgary

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for its “spirit.” In his farewell story for the *Herald* (15 February 1951) he wrote: “It is a matter of spirit, and that is what Calgary has. Restless, lucky, casual, hard-living, hard-working, hard-drinking, it is one of the last places in the world where an individualist can feel at home.”

On occasion the one-man History and Political Economy Departments had to travel to Edmonton for crucial meetings, speeding up on the old Highway 2 in his beloved 1942 Cadillac he called *Agatha*. He gave his impression of the relationship of the Calgary Branch to the U. of A. in a 24 January 1960 letter as “a colonial outpost of the University.” On the Calgary campus he became a champion for greater autonomy. Right from the start he fought for proper library resources for his programs.

The outspoken advocate of individual rights also challenged what he saw as mindless bureaucracy. When the administration established a dress code that required professors to wear jackets, Dr. Self immediately questioned it. How does this affect the student’s ability to learn? (Telephone interview with daughter Patti Laliberté, 15 July 2022) A portrait of George painted by an art student around 1950 [the family kindly gave the portrait to the Department of History in 1997 at its 50th anniversary celebration] captures his rebellion. It shows him in a jacket but wearing a pullover rather than dress shirt and tie.

A citizen’s group, the Calgary University Committee, pressured the politicians for university courses and expansion of the Calgary Branch after the end of the Second World War. With rapid population growth the demand grew stronger. An obliging City Council in 1950 exchanged the designated lands near SAIT for the campus’s present site west of the old Banff Highway. In 1951 a branch of the faculty of arts was established followed by physical education (1956), and commerce and science (1957). After a decade George stopped teaching economics, and now concentrated

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for the next twenty years teaching only history. He taught all kinds: Canadian, American, European, and African.

In Calgary George worked to promote greater knowledge of the world, organizing public lecture series on contemporary issues. George and Phyllis Self welcomed three Hungarian refugees from the 1956 uprising in Hungary to live in the basement suite in their home upon their arrival in Calgary in 1957. At the University of Alberta in Calgary, George and his good friend Earl Guy of the English Department, without payment, held English classes for Hungarian newcomers: four evenings weekly, for six weeks. George and his first wife, Margaret Dulcinea, had separated in 1950. The following year he had married Phyllis Alma. They had a family blest with five children. Burdened down by a heavy teaching load, numerous community engagements and family responsibilities, George did not publish academic articles or books. He committed himself to building up the Calgary Branch's library, and he assembled an extensive collection of maps from all areas of the world for classroom instruction.

The new campus officially opened in October 1960 with just two buildings: the one to the north was Science and Engineering (now Science A), and to the south, the Arts and Education Building (now called Administration). The full-time student body numbered only about 1,000 students. Just the previous year the History Department had doubled in size with the arrival of Dr. Friedel Heymann, a renowned Reformation scholar who left Nazi Germany after his promising career in journalism. In Calgary he published several books on Central Europe and the Czech Reformation. Bob Shields, a Canadian historian, followed in 1960 and new hires followed in quick succession.

One of George's second year courses in 1960/61 reviewed 19th century European diplomatic history. Alan Arthur, later a Professor of History at Brock University, was one of his students. Vividly he remembered: "The lectures were discursive and at times prolix, but

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eventually came together." The problem was the instructor began with the immediate post-Napoleonic world in 1815, but by the end of the year only reached the late 1830s. Arthur adds: "We had all been forewarned, however, and were prepared for what were waggishly labelled 'Self-taught courses.'" Even though the course had not been completed, "in retrospect," Alan wrote me in 1998, "even a couple of years later, I realized how much I had learned from his lectures about how to think about and analyse information."

Lou Knafla, who joined the Department in December 1965, remembered his success through the late 1960s and 1970s in teaching about the origins of the two world wars: "They were two of the most popular courses in the department." Lou remembered him warmly: "George loved students. He would invite them over to his house on Friday nights. There were often a few dozen there. He had a large stock of homemade wine, and a fantastic vinyl record collection. They would spend the night listening to music, chatting and drinking. Some would leave gradually throughout the night; and by daylight, there would be a few left. George's wife would then come in from the bedroom and cook up a breakfast."

Student numbers had grown ten-fold to over 10,000 by 1976, the year of George's retirement. From just two buildings in 1960, the campus in 1976 had twenty-five. The History Department now had twenty-three full-time faculty. George remained interested in contemporary events. When political scientist Tareq Ismael welcomed René Lévesque, the leader of the new Parti Québécois, to the campus in March 1971, "George was thrilled about it and was present when I had special dinner for René and had a long-animated discussion with him."

When the founder of the History Department retired at the age of sixty-six in 1976, University's Department of Information Services phoned and interviewed him. The "Notes on Dr. George M. Self" contain this revealing comment: "He particularly enjoyed the

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intimate atmosphere the university had when it first moved to its present site—1,100 students, small faculty, like a small group of friends." Much of the old intimacy and sociability disappeared. The late Ian Adam of the English Department recalled his colleague and History Department friend of a quarter of a century in his letter to me 12 November 1997. He wrote his note at the time of the Department's celebration of its 50th anniversary of our founding: "I knew him very well and am pleased that his talents and contributions are receiving fitting recognition in the History department. He was, of course, not a conventional academic, but I miss the era in which we could tolerate—if not always properly value— the unconventional."

With this reminiscence of Dr. George Self, this delightful unconventional academic, my story of my half a century of research discoveries in Canadian history commences. My Calgary appointment made possible a career of research and writing. Vividly I still remember my enthusiasm to arrive in a city with Indigenous place names. In the west right by the University was the major north-south traffic artery Crowchild Trail, named after David Crowchild, a respected Tsuu T'ina (Sarcee). The major north-south traffic artery in the east had just been named Blackfoot Trail after a famous Blackfoot (Siksika) long-distance runner in the late 19th century. Another important name in Calgary's lexicon was the power dam on the outskirts of the city to the northwest, the Bearspaw Dam, named after one of the Stoney Nakoda signatories of Treaty Seven. My focus on Canada was now set. Time and chance played an essential role in the transfer in late 1968 and 1969 of my historical research interest from the world to Canada. In hindsight, it was the pivotal summer and fall of 1968 in Quebec City that turned a student of the world into one centred on Canada.

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A Short Note on Sources on George Self and the History of the University of Calgary

For the history of the University of Calgary two books, in particular, proved most helpful: Robert M. Stamp, *Becoming a Teacher in 20th Century Calgary. A History of the Calgary Normal School and the Faculty of Education, University of Calgary* (Calgary, 2004); and Anthony Rasporich, *Make No Small Plans. The University of Calgary at Forty* (Calgary, 2007). I enjoyed historian Margaret Macmillan's several pages on Albania in her *Paris 1919* (New York, 2001).

In terms of archival resources, I warmly thank Curtis Frederick, Archivist of the University of Calgary, for his invaluable assistance. I found most valuable boxes UARC 88.025 and 209.018 on the History of the University of Calgary; and the four boxes of George Self material, UARC. 86.004. I also received welcome assistance in 2022 from the following university archivists: Lori Podolsky (McGill), Dianne Landry (Dalhousie University), Tracy Lenfesty and Patricia Chalmers (King's College, Halifax), and Catherine Uecker (University of Chicago Library). Harry Sanders, then an Honours History student at the University of Calgary, assisted me in the summer of 1987 with the history of what is now the University of Calgary.

The following individuals remembered George Self for me in emails: Maurice Yacowar (6 November 1997), Ian Adam (12 November 1997), Alan Arthur (20 March 1998), and Lou Knafla (14 and 19 April 2022, 10 August 2022). I am grateful for interviews with Petr Mirejovsky (27 March 2022), Anthony Rasporich (31 March 2022), Valeria Lee (23 April 2022), and Tareq Ismael (19 July 2022). I am most grateful for the assistance of George Self's two daughters, Patti Laliberté and Kathi Langston (July 2022). Most generously they shared their father's condensed

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service record in the Royal Canadian Navy with me. I am most grateful to Roger Sarty for his assistance with the history of the Royal Canadian Navy in Halifax, 1943-45. My wife, Nancy Townshend, directed me to the memoir of Roy's brother, Harry Kiyooka, "Roy Kenzie Kiyooka. Life and Times," in the exhibition guide, "'71—the penultimate year.' Roy Kenzie Kiyooka, April 5-May 22, 2001," Triangle Gallery of Visual Arts, Calgary, pp. 2-19. Roy's fascinating book about their mum, *Mothertalk. Life Stories of Mary Kiyoshi Kiyooka*, ed. by Daphne Marlatt (1997), contains references to the family's difficult years in Calgary during the Depression and the beginning of World War Two, before they left in 1942 for Opal, a farming community one hour's drive north of Edmonton (pp. 98-99, 111-122, 135-137, 145-146, 179, 187). A reference to Bob Needham as columnist for the *Calgary Herald* appears in Robert E. Gard, *Johnny Chinook. Tall Tales and True from the Canadian West* (Toronto, 1945), pp. 109-120. His career in Toronto is covered briefly in Christopher Dummit, *Unbuttoned. A History of Mackenzie King's Secret Life* (Montreal and Kingston, 2017), pp. 189-192.

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