



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

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## **Episode 13: Fred and Evelyn Albright**

One of the richest collections of early twentieth century personal correspondence between two English-speaking Canadians is now available on the World Wide Web. The correspondence donated by Frances Gage, the Literary Executor of Evelyn Albright in 1997 to the D.B. Weldon Library, Archives and Research Collections Centre, Western University, is extraordinary. There are over 550 letters; what a miracle that so many survived. They have been carefully edited and transcribed by Lorna Brooke, a library assistant at the university. Andrew Brooke designed the excellent website: <https://sites.google.com/site/echoinmyheartsite/home>.

The collection extends from 1910 to 1917, a two-way dialogue between Fred Albright in Alberta and Evelyn Kelly in Ontario. The exchange covers the time of their courtship, engagement, marriage, and separation when Fred went overseas with the Canadian Expeditionary Force. After their engagement in September 1913, and up until their marriage in June 1914, the well-educated articulate couple wrote daily, sometimes twice daily. After the couple established their home in Calgary, the letters momentarily ceased, but began again in periods of absence, such as from September to December 1915 when Evelyn returned to see her family in the Niagara Peninsula in Ontario. Correspondence resumed from the

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moment of Fred's enlistment in June 1916 in the Canadian Army, and continued during his subsequent transfers, first to Eastern Canada, and then to England and France. During her husband's absence, Evelyn studied law and became a student-at-law in the same office with which Fred practiced.

The young couple shared a love of music and literature and quoted lines from their favorite poems. They discussed religion, current events, male-female relationships, and racial concerns. They respected the opinions of each other. The heartfelt letters cover their expectations for marriage and for the roles they will play. They shared their fears, and their uncertainties. Seven years older than Evelyn, Fred appears quite advanced in his future plans for marriage, writing as an aside in his letter of 1 September 1912, "I've always said I'd like to spend my honeymoon either in a trip to the Old Land or in Northern Ontario in the Temagami or a similar district." At this initial stage of their relationship Evelyn maintained a most critical view of marriage, writing 22 June 1913: "It would be very good for you to get married because you're a man. But how would you like to be a woman and to think of having to get breakfast every morning that's the thing that keeps me from even thinking about it."

In her English and History program at Victoria College, University of Toronto, Evelyn Kelly did very well. To quote the recommendation letter he wrote on her behalf, Pelham Edgar, one of Victoria's distinguished scholars and teachers, wrote his former student "has decided ability, ample common sense." This was a great tribute. The head of Victoria's English Department, then in his early forties, the author of *A study of Shelley with special reference to his nature poetry* (1899), was well on the road to becoming recognized as one of Canada's foremost literary scholars of his generation. (Looking ahead in the years to follow, Edgar published his two career long studies, *Henry James: man and author* (1927) and *The art of the novel from 1700 to the present*

*time* (1933). His memoirs, *Across my path* (1952), would be edited by Victoria's influential literary critic and theorist, Northrop Frye.)

In the last year of her program, Evelyn whimsically recorded her impressions of her instructor in a letter to Fred dated 7 December 1911. "Speaking of English, if I'm not a Pelham Edgarian by the time I graduate, it won't be the fault of my course. I have four hours a week with him now, and shall have him after Christmas. We are all enamoured with him this year. We got our footing with him last year - four hours a week, and now we're walking right in. I'd just like to know Mrs Pelham. She expects him to wait on her. I saw her one night, and of course he's a regular gallant. I wonder what he's really like inside himself aside from all his knowledge. Of course, we do get a glimpse, but it's tantalizing to have only a glimpse into fairyland and then see the door shut, gently but firmly."

Fred loved Calgary. While the newspapers of the time allow for a good exterior view of Calgary immediately before the First World War, the Albright / Kelly letters provide an intimate look at the interior. On 18 September 1912 Fred shared with Evelyn his impressions of the first Calgary Stampede. "I thoroughly enjoyed the whole thing although one or two of the contests are more or less brutal. But it was a wonderfully realistic indication of the life of the early days. You couldn't help but admire the wonderful daring and steady nerve of the cowboys and cowgirls and you are seized with an intense admiration for the qualities that have made pioneering possible. The Stampede was interesting too as marking the passing of the old and the swift incoming of the new regime in the prairie west." His apt phrase, the "swift incoming of the new regime in the prairie west," summarized so well the situation. The change in regime had been so sudden, abrupt. Only one generation earlier the Indigenous Peoples had been dominant in what, since 1905, had become the Province of Alberta. Now several hundreds of thousands of newcomers had reduced them in number to a tiny minority.

Fred and John Brownlee, his best friend at Victoria College, visited Calgary together in the summer of 1908. The two newly minted graduates in political science from the University of Toronto looked for possible positions in law. Both men, then in their mid 20s, came from small towns in Ontario, and had briefly taught school. At university they did well academically with perhaps the edge going to Fred who had a stronger finish in his final year. Both men participated fully in extracurricular activities. After visiting the booming city at the junction of the Bow and Elbow Rivers, they both decided to become articling students in Calgary firms, and easily found positions.

Both men passed their bar examinations and gained entrance to the Alberta Bar in late 1912. In his exams Fred stood second amongst all the candidates across Alberta. Both Fred and John were destined for distinction in their new city, and province. In the mid-1920s John Brownlee became premier of Alberta. Almost immediately after his arrival Fred became involved in Calgary's Central Methodist Church. The young Methodist from Ontario taught Sunday School and led a Bible Study Group. Reflective of his own background and upbringing, the young lawyer had an unquestioning belief in the superiority of his own Protestant British Canadian stock. Fred in 1914 took the lead in the campaign to make the province of Alberta dry. In a note to Evelyn on 4 February 1914 he stated that the reason he felt progress was so slow was "because there are so many foreign born who have to be educated away from the use of liquor." In 1915 Fred, a lawyer of just three years standing, helped to frame the Alberta Temperance Act.

Fred enjoyed political topics, as did Evelyn. A note of 1 February 1914 on Canadian nationalism reveals the high tone of much of their correspondence. "One thing is certain," Fred wrote, "Canada has advanced beyond the colonial state of development and no status is tolerable that does not recognize her absolute local autonomy and her equality with other portions of the Empire—the British Isles included."

In 1912 Calgary experienced the final months of a phenomenal boom. The city had grown tenfold from roughly 4,000 or so in 1901 to over

40,000 in 1911. Nine out of ten people in the city were recent immigrants, almost all from Britain, Eastern Canada, and the United States. The newcomers to southern Alberta knew nothing of the area's history, and its peoples. For millennia the buffalo fed upon the lush nutritious grassland where the inner city of Calgary was now located. They were the main foodstuff of the original inhabitants. But the economic independence of the Plains First Nations, whose way of life was then almost 10,000 years old, disappeared with the buffalo's unexpected demise on the Canadian side of the border in 1879. The First Nations of what is now southern Alberta, who had signed Treaty Seven only two years earlier, now became impoverished and indigent. The newcomers had little understanding of them. The awareness was simply not there.

Both Evelyn and Fred ardently supported social reform. Somehow Evelyn in Ontario had learned that Calgary had a serious prostitution problem. Directly she asked her suitor in her letter of 25 May 1913, "What are you doing to bring Christ's Kingdom in?" On 1 June 1913 Fred admitted a red-light district existed, outside the city limits. The Mounted Police had raided the district, but this, he added, had only spread the houses of prostitution throughout the entire city. "The trouble is now that men who are known to live impure lives are received in fine houses and their sins are overlooked. I don't think lasting reform can come until people ostracize men as much as they do women for impurity."

Racial preferences were stated openly in early twentieth century Calgary, the crude racial bigotry undisguised. In 1911, for instance, the Calgary Board of Trade (now the Chamber of Commerce) pronounced against Canada allowing African Americans as immigrants to Western Canada. That same year (6 April 1911) the *Albertan*, the Calgary morning paper, bluntly expressed its opinion of non-Whites: "We do not want a colored Alberta... shut out all colored people from homeland rights. Close out the yellow man, the red man and the black man. They are not

good settlers. They cannot become good Canadians.” The city’s best-known journalist, Bob Edwards, also repeated the message of racial superiority-inferiority. On 6 December 1913, for instance, the famed editor of the *Eye Opener* railed against Canada, “allowing anyone to enter in, irrespective of color, race, creed, or ideals. It is permitting races to enter which cannot assimilate with the white race, and in so doing is retrograding.”

Very few people of African, Asian, and First Nation background then lived in the city. In 1921, Calgary’s population numbered 63,000, of whom 52,000 (82%), or four out of five Calgarians, declared they were of “British” background. The remainder were of various European backgrounds with only slightly more than 1% of the total population “non-White.”

In the early twentieth century the First Nations lived apart from the newcomers. The neighbouring Sarcee (Tsuu T’ina) from Fish Creek immediately to the south of Calgary, the Blackfoot (Siksika) at Gleichen 100 kilometres to the east, and the Stoney (Nakoda) at Morley 50 kilometres to the west visited Calgary, but they resided on their reserves. Conventional wisdom held that the larger society would absorb the First Nations. The local First Nations people faced great prejudice. Diamond Jenness, the renowned Canadian anthropologist, visited southern Alberta frequently after the First World War. He later recalled that farmers around Calgary in 1921 paid “\$4 a day to immigrant harvesters of Polish and Ukrainian nationalities, but to Indians working in the same fields only \$2.50.”

A good number of the French (or Red River) Métis, and some English Metis (Métis without the accent) or “Half Breeds” to adopt contemporary usage, remained separate. Standing apart they felt the resentment of the majority, which included some of their own people. Mary Lee, a Calgary Metis woman, recalled years later her memories of attending the Midnapore public school in the mid- and late 1920s (Mary Madeline Lee, *The New Nation—Christ’s Chosen People* (Calgary, 1987), page 17):

When my brothers and I attended the Midnapore public school. We encountered racial discrimination from the students, but not from the teachers. I still remember the jeers of “Nitches”, “gawd damned Sarcees”, and other obscenities that were shouted at us by our tormentors, as well as the viciousness that goes with discrimination in its rawest form. Probably the most pathetic part of this whole horrible experience was the fact the children who tantalized us the most were themselves Scottish-French Half-Breed, who denied their Indian ancestry.

As so many other non-Indigenous Canadians of their era, Fred and Evelyn remained unconscious prisoners of the racial and class attitudes of their day. Fred’s opinions emerge in his comments about the production of “King Lear” in the Grand Theatre in early February 1914. The Calgary lawyer had taken a balcony seat. On 4 February he mentioned to Evelyn, now his fiancée, “last night I noticed in one seat, two Greeks, 2 Canadian girls of very good family, a mulatto, and a couple Italians. Many other races were represented within a very small radius.” Fred strongly objected to this “indiscriminate assembly of extremely diverse classes.” Then went on to add: “This is one disadvantage in taking seats anywhere but in the best part of the house. I wouldn’t want to take any lady unless I could afford the better seats for this reason.”

Fred’s attitude toward the Chinese, largely confined to the laundry and restaurant businesses, seemed contradictory. He mentioned in a letter to Evelyn on 7 September 1913 of helping once a week with the Methodist outreach mission to the Chinese in the city. The Methodist church worked to teach the Asians English and to introduce them to Christianity. Yet, in another note he rejoiced that he found the Empress hotel cafeteria did not employ Chinese labour: “The dishes are clean the food well cooked and reasonable in price--and there is only white help in the kitchen.”

As for the First Nations, Fred hardly mentioned them at all. The Tsuu T'ina First Nation's numbers had plummeted since the making of Treaty Seven in 1877. By 1913 the population was under 189, less than half the number when the reserve was established. The Calgary lawyer overlooked the fact that Treaty Seven recognized First Nations reserves as First Nations property. With several friends he went trespassing on the Sarcee (Tsuu T'ina) Reserve, immediately southwest of the city, hoping to stake an oil claim on their land. The party took guns with them to do some game hunting. As Fred frankly admitted to Evelyn on 18 October 1913, "Now we were violating the law in two particulars—We had no license and shooting on the Indian Reserve is forbidden. I hope you don't think that we were terribly wicked."

On 4 August 1914, the Great War began. As it turned out Fred and Evelyn were in London on their honeymoon in England. In his diary Fred recorded the stress, the anxiety of the last hours of peace. Sunday afternoon 2 August they attended the packed afternoon service at Westminster Abbey. Fred wrote: "The Archbishop of Canterbury preached on the war situation, a masterly appeal to the people, embodying as it seemed to me all that is best and noblest in British character. Oh, I was proud to be British in that hour. It was just what was needed to steady me."

Strongly conscious of the sacrifices of those who had immediately enlisted, Fred joined the local militia in late 1915, as he explained on 22 October to Evelyn, then absent with her family in Ontario. "I believe now it was my duty." Half a year later he took the next step and signed his attestation papers as a private for active service. He was promoted in October and assigned as a recruiting sergeant in Alberta. In April he left with his unit for England. In the service Fred bore all the physical hardships without complaint. Wishing to serve in France at the earliest opportunity, he reverted to the rank of private in the 50<sup>th</sup> Battalion. He left England for the front in Flanders in September 1917. In mid-October Fred moved with the



50<sup>th</sup> into a frontline position in the Ypres area to a village named Passchendaele. Victor Wheeler, a signaller in the 50<sup>th</sup> Battalion, later described the several square miles of Passchendaele mud and deep shell holes filled with water: “Unmitigated hell reigned.” No trenches existed as the whole area was simply a mass of mud.” (Arthur W. Wheeler, *The 50<sup>th</sup> Battalion in No Man’s Land* (Calgary, 1980), page 224.)

Evelyn continued her work in Fred’s law office five and a half days a week with Saturday afternoon and Sunday free. She wrote her husband on Sunday 11 November about the church service that day, mentioning that she had taken David Coutts, the four-year-old son of their good Calgary friends George and Berta Coutts, to Sunday school at Central Methodist that morning. Young David was a favourite of Fred’s. In a special note written earlier on 20 August 1917 he requested: “Remember me to David and give him an extra good night hug and kiss for me.” The next day, Monday 12 November, Evelyn received a terse telegram from Ottawa that changed her life forever. It read: “Deeply regret to inform you 895173 Pte Frederick Stanley Albright Infantry Officially Reported Killed In Action between Oct 23 and 26 1917, Director of Records.”

## **Bibliography and Back Stories**

For the “racial” atmosphere in the early twentieth century Calgary I relied heavily on my fully documented overview, “Color Conscious. Racial Attitudes in Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Calgary,” in *Remembering Chinook Country, Told and Untold Stories of Our Past* (Calgary, 2005), pages 119-132. A specific Calgary example can be cited.

On 3 February 1914 the Sherman Grand, the city’s finest theatre, prevented Charles Daniel, a man of African descent, from

occupying a seat on the main floor. William Sherman, the manager of the theatre, explained his rationale for directing non-whites to the theatre's balcony. He explained in a court statement on 24 April 1914 (page 9, William Sherman, Provincial Archives of Alberta, GR1979.285 Roll 109 File 5821): "Regarding the colored people, our audience objects very much and I like their money as well as any one else's and it is not for that I object, but the audience complains. We have had colored people come down in front, say, and sit down there, well, we invariably have to change eighteen or twenty seats." The 1914 civil rights incident is the subject of a gripping 2019 video, a TELUS Original, "Secret Calgary: Kicking up a Fuss": <https://youtu.be/hLSxERRq8p0>.

I reviewed the Albrights' story in chapter 7 in *Calgary's Grand Story* (Calgary, 2005), pp. 115-135, 317-319. Three books recreate conditions in southern Alberta in the early twentieth century: David Bright, *The Limits of Labour. Class Formation and the Labour Movement in Calgary, 1883-1929* (Vancouver, 1998); Bradford James Rennie, *The Rise of Agrarian Democracy and Farm Women of Alberta, 1909-1921* (Toronto, 2000); and the spirited biography by Grant MacEwan, *Eye Opener Bob. The Story of Bob Edwards* (Edmonton, 1957; an annotated edition by James Martin appeared in 2004). For the Tsuu T'ina (Sarcee) First Nation see Patricia K. Wood, "Pressured from all sides: the February 1913 surrender of the northeast corner of the Tsuu T'ina Nation" in *Journal of Historical Geography*, 30 (2004): 112-129.

In October 1919 Evelyn was called to the Alberta Bar. She became the second woman lawyer to be admitted to the Law Society of Alberta, but she decided not to practice. The young war widow instead returned to Ontario, where she obtained a position teaching English at the University of Western Ontario in London. Evelyn Kelly Albright became the first female instructor in the department. Thanks to several summers at the University of Chicago she obtained her M.A. in English. She became an

associate professor of English at the University of Western Ontario. She never remarried, retiring in 1951. Evelyn Kelly Albright died in London in 1979 at the age of 89. Upon her death Frances Gage, her literary executor, donated Fred's and her letters to the Western University Library. At my request Lorna Brooke has described subsequent developments in which she has played such an important role. She wrote on 8 March 2023:

Here is some background about how I found the letters and what I did with them. I was working in the archives collections at Western and had the fortunate experience of sorting and arranging the big box of the Albright correspondence that had been donated by Frances Gage who was Evelyn Albright's Literary Executor.

The letters were still in their original envelopes and were not in chronological order. As I sorted, smoothed them out and arranged them in order I couldn't help but read snippets of them! What I discovered was so intriguing that I told myself that when I retired I would take a closer look at the them - which I did. The website "An Echo in My Heart" was the result. I had asked Frances that if she ever found any more Albright material if would she get in touch with me. This she did and brought in several more documents and photograph albums etc. These items were added to the website.

Frances Gage contacted me again later to say that she had found more items – two diaries written by Evelyn during her school and college days, and a notebook containing letters that she went on writing to Fred after he was killed. As Frances said "the letters to Fred are heart wrenching," and she wondered if she should destroy the notebook. She was in two minds but realized that Evelyn had not done so. Fortunately I managed to persuade her not to destroy them. These items have been added to the website.

I have always had an interest in World War I so this task was truly a labour of love! My hopes that in putting the correspondence on the web it would be accessible to researchers, teachers, students and anyone else interested in early 20th century Canadian history - in many of its aspects - social, political, economic as well as insights into personal lives and activities. I am pleased that over the years the website has generated interest from several quarters.

Lorna's comments, 9 March, after seeing my final draft, summarize so well the contents of this episode. "You have woven the Albright's lives and those of their contemporaries into the context of the times with the examples you give -- a time of great change in Alberta. As you say the Albrights, despite their staunch religious beliefs, were a product of these times - when institutionalized racism and bigotry prevailed. It always seems to be fear of the other."

A personal endnote to this episode on Evelyn and Fred Albright must be added. During my first year in Calgary in 1974/75 I joined the Chinook Chapter of the Historical Society of Alberta. Decades later, when researching the Fred and Evelyn Albright correspondence, I realized that our President that year was the same four-year-old Dave Coutts, who Evelyn had taken to church the Sunday before she received the fateful telegram, which she wrote three weeks later, "has taken the joy, and I might say, the purpose out of life."

Another extraordinary development. In the early spring of 2022, I contacted Bob Gidney, the Canadian educational historian at Western University in London, with whom I have been in touch for nearly half a century (please see my Back Story note in Episode 9 on Lord Bury). I had some questions for him about what would become my Episode 7 on Egerton Ryerson. I knew Bob and his wife Wyn had lived in London for decades and enquired if they might by chance have known in university circles an "Evelyn

Albright.” My policy is to try not to leave any research stone unturned! Wyn Gidney kindly sent me this extraordinary email reply on 2 April: “Evelyn Albright. VERY interesting. I can't believe I lived next door to this woman for 9 or so years. She was a nice old woman, obviously intelligent and well educated, but I knew her primarily as a nice neighbour, a person whom I read books to for a while, and a person who liked having my toddler to visit.”

In concluding this episode, I must thank my fellow Canadian historians Sarah Carter, who twenty years ago brought these extraordinary letters to my attention, and David Marshall, who shared with me his printed copies of the transcripts.