



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

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## Episode 15: Hugh Dempsey, Dean of Alberta Historians

The first time I heard Hugh Dempsey speak was at Sidney Smith Hall at the University of Toronto in June 1974. Just a few weeks earlier, I had obtained a teaching position in Canadian history in the History Department at the University of Calgary. That fall I would be paid to teach my hobby—Canadian history. Hugh’s contribution to the Canadian Historical Association panel was based on *Crowfoot*, his outstanding biography of the famous Blackfoot (Siksika) chief. The Alberta historian spoke about the Plains First Nations from the “inside,” in flesh and blood terms. As a graduate student I had been studying Canadian Indigenous history for five years, but had never to this point heard the topic come so alive.

Years later I asked Hugh about his participation in the conference. The dedicated diary keeper checked his journals and found this entry: “Friday June 7 [1974] Toronto: This morning I was part of a three-man panel discussing the writing of Indian histories, at the meeting of the Canadian Historical Association. It went off very well. This evening I started a week’s holiday, during which time I want to do some research on Charcoal.” Already he was on the trail of additional Indigenous history topics.

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In Calgary that winter and in the years to follow, the popular historian helped the new instructor from Ontario with numerous research projects and provided invaluable writing tips. To my classes for over a third of a century Hugh gave guest lectures on topics such as Crowfoot, Red Crow, and Big Bear. These talks were delivered with the aid of a scrap of paper, usually an old envelope with some penciled notes on it. He also assisted me greatly with my research on Chief Buffalo Child Long Lance (discussed in Episode 4), directing me in particular to former Blackfoot (Siksika) Indian Agent George Gooderham who knew him in the 1920s, and Mike Eagle Speaker who helped Long Lance with valuable information about the Blood (Kainai) First Nation. In the same decade, Hugh taught me a great deal about Blackfoot history and culture for that book. My expertise then and now is primarily in the First Nations in Central Canada, but I was eager to learn about the First Nations in the West. In the fall of 1980, after six years of being a professor, I audited his Interdisciplinary Studies course at the University of Calgary on “Aboriginal Canada.”

His writing tips were also greatly appreciated. In those days I wrote my drafts of articles and book chapters without indicating right away the footnote references. Diplomatically Hugh pointed out how short-sighted this was. It made trying to find them later incredibly difficult. He was right, and I changed my technique! Hugh also taught me what he called the 95 per cent rule. That is, when you have almost all the material collected for your project, don't hold off writing, just begin—more good advice.

What initially contributed to his future pursuit of Alberta's past? His English war bride mother deserves much of the credit. In 1916, Lily Louise Sharp married Canadian soldier Otto Lionel Dempsey and became a farmer's wife. The Dempseys farmed in central Alberta at Edgerton near Wainwright, where Hugh, the youngest of four sons, was born on 7 November 1929. The Depression of the early 1930s, and the drought, forced the family off the land. They moved to

Edmonton when Hugh was five. He remembers going barefoot in summer and wearing moccasins in winter with rubbers pulled over them and sealer rings to keep them from falling off. Hugh portrayed his mother in his 2011 memoir, *Always an Adventure*, as the major influence in his Edmonton childhood. She taught him “to be independent and encouraged him to be creative” (*Adventure*, vi).

Hugh was an unenthusiastic high school student. After easy success in elementary school, the young Edmontonian proved an “indifferent” student in high school, apart from his classes in Art, English, and Social Studies, in which he was an honour student. The active young man directed his attention into a series of part-time jobs. He completed his Grade 11 but left the following year before his final Grade 12 year. As he later wrote, “I had made up my mind that school was simply preventing me from getting on with my life, and I wanted it out of the way as soon as possible” (*Adventure*, 32).

Fortunately, after a few false starts, the young man so anxious to gain financial independence obtained a job as a copy boy with the *Edmonton Bulletin*. Within days he realized that he wanted to be a writer. He rose to junior then senior reporter, and at the tender age of 21 became provincial editor. In the process he learned the skills of a seasoned popular writer, such as the importance of the opening sentence and the value of being concise (*Adventure*, 41).

A life-changing event occurred in early February 1950 which altered the whole direction of his life (*Adventure*, 47). As a reporter, Hugh attended an executive meeting of the Indian Association of Alberta (IAA). There he met Pauline Gladstone, the attractive daughter of IAA president James Gladstone. He and Pauline began dating and felt at home together wherever they went. Hugh’s mother became a lifelong friend to Pauline, and Pauline’s father came to regard Hugh as a son.

When the *Bulletin* folded in 1951, Hugh became a publicity writer with the Alberta government. Already he had developed a deep

interest in Indigenous history, and a desire to write in this area. He sent out in the months to follow many letters in search of information and references to important books and articles. His life-long friendship with John Ewers, the Associate Curator of Ethnology at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington D.C., began that same year. Hugh published several short articles in *The Native Voice*, an important Indigenous newspaper in British Columbia. His first article in the newly established *Alberta Historical Review*, “The Story of the Blood Reserve,” appeared in 1953.

He and Pauline married in 1953. In Hugh’s biography of James Gladstone, *The Gentle Persuader* (Saskatoon, 1986), he wrote, “I had become part of a close-knit extended family of brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, cousins, and people whose exact relationship was uncertain. That is a wonderful thing about Indian families—blood lines are less important than a mutual acceptance of someone as ‘family’” (page 141). Through the Gladstone family, Hugh gained an entry into the First Nations’ world, one completely unknown to most non-Indigenous Albertans. Pauline noted of her husband, “I noticed Hugh’s mind was like a sponge. Not only were people willing to share their knowledge with him, but they were fascinated that someone was interested in hearing their stories and reminiscing with them” (Pauline Gladstone Dempsey, “Foreword,” *Napi* (Victoria, 2018), ix).

At first there were many misunderstandings. In Hugh’s own words he “didn’t know his way around.” He learned, for example, that at a pow-wow there are protocols, for instance for the Owl Dance which is for couples: “Three rules were that the women asked the men to dance, the men could not refuse, and wives could not dance with their husbands” (86). On his visits to southern Alberta reserves, he learned that traditional families laid out their houses in the same fashion as a teepee. “This meant that the fire, the stove, was in the middle, the owner of the lodge was at the back, and his

altar was in front of him. Female members sat on the south side of the room, and men on the north. ... It was important never to go between a man and his altar, or between the altar and the stove” (96). In the Gladstone home Hugh also learned that a son-in-law was not supposed to speak directly to his mother-in-law and should even avoid staying in the same room with her if possible. Pauline’s mum lived in two worlds on this issue. She didn’t avoid Hugh, but “neither was she openly talkative and chatty” (98).

When he married Pauline, Hugh learned first-hand how the Canadian government had divided many First Nations families. Their wedding led them into the complications of the federal Indian Act. “When my wife married me,” Hugh said in a 1961 interview, “she legally became no longer an Indian. At the same time, her brother married a white girl, and the girl legally became an Indian. This gives us a situation where my wife, who was raised on the Blood Reserve and speaks the language fluently, is not an Indian; but her sister-in-law, who was raised in a white community and does not speak the language, is legally an Indian” (*The Way of the Indian: Thirteen Documentary Programs Broadcast on CBC Radio*, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 1963, page 5). The Indian Act only altered this bizarre regulation in 1985.

Hugh became involved in the Indian Association of Alberta (IAA), attending annual conferences, and helping to write resolutions. Calgary schoolteacher John Laurie, a great admirer of the First Nations, became a friend. After Laurie’s death in 1959, Hugh took his place as honorary secretary of the IAA for six years. Pauline fully supported him in his work and James Gladstone remained an invaluable ally. Hugh became a bridge between worlds, communicating invaluable knowledge of the Indigenous world to non-Indigenous Albertans. With a family of five children in the 1960s, both young parents were extremely busy. In their order of priorities family came first.

In 1954 the young journalist-cum-historian had momentarily

considered enrolling in the University of Alberta in Edmonton to complete an anthropology degree. Jack Ewers advised against quitting his government job to do this. The respected Great Plains scholar wrote his young friend, “I believe that you are now much better qualified to make something out of anthropology than the average person entering college with a yen to become an anthropologist—your published work would show that” (Ewers, quoted in *Adventure*, 107). In any case, as Hugh points out in his autobiography, he never had to decide about his best course of action. “It all became academic when the University of Alberta indicated it had no desire to accept a high school dropout into its ranks” (*Adventure*, 107).

Hugh joined Calgary’s new Glenbow Foundation in 1956, where he served as archivist from 1956 to 1967, and then as curator/director from 1967 to 1991. In his diaries he began to gather notes on historical events and interesting Albertans. Biography became a special interest. Hugh began writing about the Blackfoot (Siksika) and Blood (Kainai) nations, assisted by his father-in-law’s skill as an interpreter. James Gladstone had an extensive knowledge of old-time Blackfoot and modern English. He also knew sign language so if he encountered a real difficulty with the old terminology, he could still make himself understood. “In speaking to me, he gave me everything that was said, including the conversations. That was one thing I noticed about Blackfoot storytelling. Even though an incident might have occurred two or three generations earlier, the informant would speak as though he had been there, complete with conversations” (*Adventure*, 97). The old people, speaking in Blackfoot with his father-in-law, told of buffalo hunts, battles, the supernatural, and the accomplishments of great chiefs. The mid-1950s became the most active period of Hugh’s pursuit of history gathering through personal interviews.

Oral history is not an easy matter. It involves much more than a simple conversation with an elder. The written as well as the oral



records must be reviewed in depth, and the fact always remembered that some elders have better memories than others. Hugh conducted his interviews in the mid-1950s with Blackfoot Confederacy members—some of them unilingual speakers—accompanied by James Gladstone. The elderly individuals he met were grounded in a Blackfoot-speaking world. Dempsey summarizes in his memoirs, “Over a period of time, I developed a couple of methods for determining the accuracy of elders. For example, I would pick out nine or ten statements of fact from an elder and compare them with different sources, such as statements of other elders, fur trade records and government documents. If I could find comparative data for even half of them and they checked out, then I knew the elder was reliable” (97).

In 1957, Hugh began writing his in-depth biography of Crowfoot, orator, diplomat, and peacemaker, the most important spokesperson for the Blackfoot Confederacy at Treaty Seven. Hugh completed the manuscript the next year, but the publishers he approached replied that there was no market for Canadian history. Macmillan of Canada offered to bring it out if cut by two-thirds and rewritten as a children’s book. When finally published in 1972 by University of Oklahoma Press (and distributed in Canada by Hurtig Publishers of Edmonton), *Crowfoot* did very well in both sales and reviews. Dempsey at 41 years old was on his way to becoming a highly successful author. After *Crowfoot*, he published a new book, not always on Indigenous topics, almost every year for the next 20 years.

The next of his books to appear were *The Best of Bob Edwards* (1975) and *The Wit and Wisdom of Bob Edwards* (1976), collections of Edwards’ humorous writings from his satirical newspaper, *The Calgary Eye Opener*. At its highpoint in the 1910s Edward’s caustic wit and total unpredictability made his newspaper the most widely read in early Alberta. *The Eye Opener* provides the best available looking glass into the history of early

Calgary.

After completing his two Bob Edwards books, Hugh returned to First Nations subjects. In his second major book, *Charcoal's World* (1978), he focused on a Kainai holy man who shot and killed his wife's lover in 1896 and became a fugitive. He had found them in the act of adultery. As Hugh wrote: "The white men who ruled their lives said it was wrong to do these things. The police had the guns; they had the rope; they had the power. Even to kill a fornicator who broke the unwritten rules of the tribe was now wrong. The Indian laws meant nothing; only the white man's laws counted. When he had violated these, Charcoal knew he would soon die" (*Charcoal*, 71). To prepare for his entry as an honoured warrior into the spirit world, he resolved to kill an important person whose spirit would announce his coming. For months he eluded police patrols, thwarting attempts to entrap him. He killed one of his attackers, a Mountie, just a few days before his capture in mid-November. He was tried and hanged in March 1897. The whole incident, the Alberta historian argues, reveals the dilemma of a clash between two cultures, "neither completely understanding what was motivating the other" (*Charcoal*, viii).

Even before the publication of *Charcoal's World*, Hugh had begun another major project, a biography of Red Crow, head chief of the Bloods, one of the most important Plains First Nations chiefs in the late nineteenth century. *Red Crow, Warrior Chief* came out in 1980, and in the preface Hugh thanked his late father-in-law "who was my interpreter for most of the interviews and who added his own knowledge of the chief" (*Red Crow*, vii). One of my treasured objects is a copy of *Red Crow* that Hugh gave me. It is inscribed, "With kind regards to Don Smith, who shares my interest in native peoples."

Next, in 1984, came *Big Bear: The End of Freedom*. Based again on written and oral sources, the Big Bear biography remains the authoritative source for accurate information about this important



Plains Cree leader. After *Big Bear*, Hugh wrote the biography of his father-in-law James Gladstone, *The Gentle Persuader*, published in 1986, 15 years after his death. In search of solitude for the arduous task of writing his book, he prepared much of the Gladstone biography in the seclusion of a foothills cabin. It is absolutely amazing the very busy Glenbow Museum administrator accomplished so much. As he wrote in his autobiography, “I never did write my books on Glenbow time, and did very little on evenings or weekends” (*Adventure*, 324). He wrote his manuscripts during his holidays.

In 1990, Hugh took early retirement from the Glenbow, ending a tenure 35 years long, becoming Chief Curator Emeritus. The reading room at the Library and Archives was named after him. Many other honours have come to him over the years. One of the greatest was to be inducted as an honorary chief of the Bloods. At this ceremony he received the Blackfoot name of *Potaina*, or Flying Chief, the name of Pauline’s grandfather. He already had received an honorary doctorate from the University of Calgary in 1974, and the Order of Canada the following year. Other honours and awards for his outstanding contributions to Alberta history include Alberta’s prestigious Sir Frederick Haultain Award.

The tireless Alberta historian kept up his writing and research in retirement. His love of his adopted city led to his 1994 *Calgary. Spirit of the West*, an entertaining anecdotal history brought out in Calgary’s 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary as a city. That same year another of his early post-retirement books, *The Amazing Death of Calf Shirt and other Blackfoot Stories* (1994), recreated the world of the Blackfoot Confederacy in a series of tales containing rich cultural observations. Several new titles came out after he turned 70, including *Firewater. The Impact of the Whisky Trade on the Blackfoot Nation* (2002), and *The Vengeful Wife and Other Blackfoot Stories* (2003). To write the biography of mid-nineteenth century Cree chief Maskepetoon, Hugh conducted interviews and

carried out research in Cree country. *Maskepetoon: Leader, Warrior, Peacemaker* was published in 2010, shortly after Hugh turned 80.

In addition to his own writing, Hugh Dempsey constantly helped others—including me. For my book *Mississauga Portraits* (2013), he shared with me notes he had taken on a talk by former Alberta Lieutenant Governor Ralph Steinhauer about his great-uncles Egerton and Robert Steinhauer, both Methodist/United Church Cree ministers. Hugh had made the notes at a meeting of the Historical Society of Alberta in Edmonton in 1955. Episode 12 on the Steinhauers makes great use of them.

In fall 2016 Dempsey published *The Great Blackfoot Treaties*, a summation of much of his work on the history of the Blackfoot Confederacy and the Stoney Nakoda of southern Alberta. Of his role as a historian, Hugh told George Melnyk in a 1995 interview that he saw himself as “a writer who has entered the field of history. I tried not to be an academic writer. When you write something you should try to communicate to your audience, whoever that audience happens to be” (Dempsey quoted in Melnyk, *Literary History of Alberta*, vol. 2, 113).

It says so much for this dedicated Albertan’s commitment to his province’s history that he edited the magazine that originated as the *Alberta Historical Review*, later becoming *Alberta History*, for 63 years. His remarkable tenure as editor only ended at age 91 with his retirement after the publication of the Autumn 2020 issue. Hugh Dempsey added so much to our understanding of Alberta’s heritage. As a researcher, editor, writer, and archivist, he has rescued many aspects of our history by collecting historical manuscripts and photos, and by recording the oral memories of First Nations people and non-Indigenous Albertans. He has written 22 full length books and edited another 17. What a career, what a contribution to Albertans’ knowledge of their past! The Dean of Alberta historians passed away in May 2022!

## Author's Note

An earlier shorter version of this article entitled “The Right Man at the Right Place at the Right Time” appeared in the Autumn 2021 issue of *Alberta History*, the journal that Hugh Dempsey edited from 1958 until 2020. I benefitted greatly, five years earlier, by working with Alberta author Fred Stenson who edited superbly my essay, “Hugh Dempsey. Dean of Alberta historians—and bridge between worlds,” in the January/ February 2016 issue of *Alberta Views*. In this text for Episode 15 I have also added several additional comments.

The direct quotations in this 2021 article, all indicated in the text, are taken from the following sources. Invaluable is Hugh's autobiography, *Always an Adventure* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2011). The other quotes appear in *Charcoal's World* (Saskatoon: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1978); *Red Crow. Warrior Chief* (Saskatoon: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1980); and *The Gentle Persuader. A Biography of James Gladstone, Indian Senator* (Saskatoon: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1986). The quote by Pauline Gladstone is included in her “Foreword” to her husband's last book, *Napi. The Trickster* (Victoria, B.C.: Heritage House, 2018). The Hugh Dempsey quote in George Melnyk's *Literary History of Alberta*, vol. 2 (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1999), appears on page 113. The Autumn 2021 issue of *Alberta History* contains an invaluable collection of important articles about the Dean of Alberta historians.