

2023 OHS AGM Keynote Address Transcript  
Dr. Donald B. Smith  
“Behind the Scenes of the OHS ‘In Hindsight’ Canadian History Podcast”

**Kristin Ives:** It's now my pleasure to introduce our 2023 keynote speaker, Dr. Donald B Smith. A longtime OHS member, Dr. Smith is a Professor Emeritus of History at the University of Calgary and has focused his career as a historian on the history of Indigenous Canada, Quebec, and the history of Calgary and Southern Alberta

In 1971, as a PhD student, Don Smith made a presentation at the OHS annual general meeting in Peterborough on the writer and lecturer Grey Owl. Later that year, the article “Grey Owl” was published in the Society's *Ontario History* journal, Dr. Smith's first article to appear in a Canadian historical journal.

In 2022 and 2023, the OHS worked closely with Don in producing a 21-episode podcast series, *In Hindsight: Half a Century of Research Discoveries in Canadian History*, which debuted earlier this year.

Please join me in welcoming Dr. Donald B. Smith.

**Dr. Donald B. Smith:** Thank you. Oh! Wow, there we go. Well, this is wonderful. I'm technologically really allergic to technology, so we've done very well. I'm blessed by this. My wife helped in the beginning, but let's go.

What an honor to be here, honestly, because my roots are Ontarian, and my career as an historian begins with you. It's Trent University, my paper on Grey Owl, over 50 years ago. So, it's really really special that I'm here.

I'd like to begin with just a story which I like quite a bit actually. It's a story by James Mitchner. You probably know him for *South Pacific*, his book on Hawaii, *Alaska*, and 37 others. He was a very very popular American author. Well, he wrote a short story actually and going back to his boyhood, and the story is entitled “The Old Apple Tree,” and I thought it was appropriate to bring that in right at the outset of this talk.

“The Old Apple Tree” describes a tree that he remembered as a young boy, and he's writing this story when he's in his late 80s. He remembered this tree as a young boy and it was an old apple tree and it was at the end of its producing days, it seemed. But he recalls that the old farmer took eight rusty nails and, circling the base of the tree, hit these nails into the tree. And this absolutely caused a miracle. The miracle being, after this injection of these eight rusty nails, it kicked the old tree into action again. It was goaded back into life.

Well, OHS, you've done that with me because I'm at the end of my career (“fin de carrière,” in

French) and this project – just fantastic – because I'm back in the game. It was a wonderful opportunity for me to pull together a lot of experiences that I've had over half a century in Canadian history. And my base in Canadian history, after all is said and done, is Ontario and Alberta, and in this series, *In Hindsight*, those are the two provinces that really are featured the most because that's where I've done most of my work.

I'd like to just give you a bit of background, though. How did this come about? Like suddenly how come the old apple tree has to be called back to life? I better explain that. It's because my master work, my big project, was published in 2021 and it was called *Seen But Not Seen*. It's a study of non-Indigenous Canadians' viewpoints towards the First Nations from the 1840s to the present. So *Seen But Not Seen* was published by University of Toronto Press and, well, everything was going well. And Rob Leverty in his kindness and generosity – lifelong friend – Rob suggested, Don, listen, when your book comes out, OHS would like to have the book launch at your world headquarters in Willowdale. Well, that was support indeed. That was wonderful, and I said of course that'd be wonderful, be so generous of you.

But the only thing that historians can really say is you can't predict the future, because Covid came along. That totally erased that wonderful idea and there was no book launch at OHS headquarters, no. And we were in this horrible horrible period, which all of us remember too vividly.

And instead Rob said, well, maybe we could do something else. And I was poking around, because I had still... I'm a packrat, I really am. I save paper ever since high school and I've got lots of material and I've kept diaries and letters and my parents were very devoted and saved a lot of things from the early days. I had this mass of material so I thought Rob, let's talk about this. Maybe we can do something and this idea blossomed, oh, a little about two years ago thanks to Rob's... two things here. Rob, his initiative on this, and then he found the wonderful person who could bring this technological ignoramus into the modern world and that's Sarah. Sarah did it.

Rob and Sarah got together, I guess Heather you were in it and Daniel, but it's mainly Sarah that comes through because she had the expertise to do this, to do a series of... I always called them... I don't call them podcasts. I'm an old-timer. I really am. I call what we've done old fashioned radio broadcasts in Canadian history, that's what I call them. But you young people, you moderns, you call them podcasts.

So that's how the podcast series was born. And so about two years ago we're sorta clicking on this now, and boy, in the last year we've taken off. With a set of headphones, \$40 set of headphones, Sarah with all her skill set was able to interview me basically weekly for half a year. And we came forward with these 21 episodes. And the episodes, for those that are new to this, are... there's a spoken section which is about 25 minutes for each one. And for each session, each episode, there's a written text and the written text is about 3,500 words. So, there's two components: there's the oral and the written.

And I felt that the oral was easy, that was no problem, because I've lived this. I've been out collecting stuff and what have you for 50 years, so that was no problem. I love speaking about history so that was no problem. The devil in it was the text, because I could do the oral. Sarah could film me, we do it in the morning, you know, an hour all done, ready, not even an hour. That was in me. It just was so fantastic to talk about these things I loved, and so that was easy. But the written texts were a week at least each because I had to... I mean I can't just say something because there's no backup. That's not what I do. I'm a documentary historian. I've got to come up with the goods. So, the written texts have them.

And so the spontaneity is in the oral. There's no doubt about it. That really jumps around, and I get quite excited. Even get quite emotional. Sarah had to control me a couple times, and then she encouraged me to be emotional in others. But the real text, the definitive text, the master text, is what's provided as well. And each of these has, the written text has, a backstory, and not all of them, some do. And, certainly, a bibliography or a backstory, so it explains how this particular episode was done, was completed. So there are academic credentials to this project which... I'm very pleased. I'm so all around pleased on every aspect of this.

All 21 are completed and the last one, sorry, the 20 are released. And there's a 21 and that will be forthcoming very shortly. It's all been done and I'm going to talk about that at the end. And I know of course we've only got about 25 minutes, so it's going to be quite abridged and we'll now sort of get a little bit closer to what's going on here.

So we decide, and this now about last fall, where... it's incredible, just, wow, what a team to pull this off. In less than a year's time we have completed this project, and it's really been something.

Now the important decisions along the way, I'll just say a brief bit about that, and one was the title. That was about a year ago and it was forthcoming and *In Hindsight* says it all because here's the old seasoned gladiator looking back in the past, so *In Hindsight*, that that suited me to a T.

But we needed an introduction, and I've known Dave Mowat for many years from my work on the Mississauga, or Anishinaabe, of Southern Ontario. And I did not know Dave was a Vice President of OHS, that's even better. So Dave, will you please do the introduction to the series? Well, of course, generous soul that he was, that he is, he said yes. And that is fabulous, that opener for the series. Each one of them has this. Dave, I can't thank you enough.

Well, what else do we need? We need music, right, to open. You know, we got to have some drama. So each episode has this wonderful theme which Sarah found by checking hundreds of possibilities and she got it. Dave's introduction, the introductory music, it fits like a hand in a glove.

Images. Sarah can integrate images so easily into the written texts and she did that. We have almost a hundred and because of the fact... well, first of all, my parents were packrats. I'm a

packrat. I've got lots of images. And we were able, as I say, to have almost a hundred in the series which livens it up immensely.

Some of them are terrific. I mean I'm so pleased that there was an opportunity to bring them forward. One of them is... and going back to that Ontario Historical Society talk, my very first talk, was to the OHS in Canadian history and was on Grey Owl. And I have a picture in the Grey Owl episode which was taken shortly after that talk.

And it was when I went to England and I found his best friend as a boy, George McCormick. He hadn't talked about his boyhood friend Archie Belaney, or Grey Owl, for 70 years, or 60, it should be accurate, and he did with me. And I found him in Maidstone, Kent, England. And there's a picture of us, of this young lad interviewing him, that's me. So there's a special sort of stamp to this and very, to my delight, really incorporates, makes it so... the visual adds so much.

And Sarah, with her talent set, we even have music, a wonderful ballad by Annie Glenn, a very popular musical figure in Calgary. We have an address by Hugh Dempsey, a very popular writer. We have a couple of audios too so it's a cornucopia, in my opinion, of goodness, and especially from my point of view.

So I'd like to just tell you a little bit now about the last episode, Episode 21, which nobody can see because it hasn't been released yet, but it's in the pipe, and it is really a review of the series of the 20 episodes. And these episodes were really selected because I had good documentary backup. I had worked on a number of them before, but not to the same depth. And there were a number I hadn't touched upon at all.

In *Seen But Not Seen*, for example, I didn't have the opportunity of introducing Lester Pearson. With *In Hindsight* I was able to include an episode on Lester Pearson and folks, let's just take a breather here. This is the man who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1957 on this very day. Isn't that something? Wow. That's what we need now... just awful situation. October the 12<sup>th</sup>, 1957, the Nobel Peace Prize was given to Lester Pearson, Ontario-born and well, great Canadian.

Now so we have basically... I'm just going to quickly review the series. I know time is pressing so it's going to be abridged. And thanks again to Sarah, there's such a wonderful backup. The inventory is there. The texts are on the Web. The spontaneous oral presentation is on the Web, so there's lots of backup and I'm so grateful for that.

So quickly then, let's just take a gander what's going on. Now the first one, and I must say this too, please. Ontario and Alberta are so integral to this series. They come in and out in a number of places, because that's my background. There's Quebec and the Prairies and there are other sections, but not with the intensity of Ontario and Quebec.

Because you are what you are. I begin with "who am I," who is this fellow who's getting this microform to address a large audience? Who is he? So I tell you who I am in the first chapter and I call it "A Future in the Past," and it just explains how I came to Canadian history.

I was originally, and Episode 2 reinforces this, I came to Canadian history as an internationalist. I was interested in world affairs, but I discovered Canadian history and it just took over. And I was so so fortunate because I was able to get a tenure position at the University of Calgary. I was able to do my hobby as my occupation. How many people in the world have that opportunity, that wonderful blessing? So I was paid to do my hobby for 35 years and, well, I'm just so grateful.

So, first episode is my arrival in Calgary. Second is the beginnings of my research interest in various sectors in Canadian history. And I just can't resist. There's lots of anecdotes – please – I believe in anecdotes. I'm a narrative historian, and try to do the serious stuff, mind you, but you got to have a couple anecdotes. I mean, raisins in the dough. That's what an old First Nations Christian minister told me, Enos Monture. I've got raisins in the dough.

Here's one. That first chapter. It's kind of fun. It'll only... I'll do it in two minutes. I was interviewing this old Delaware from the Six Nations community of Bradford, Enos Monture, became United Church minister. And Enos, actually, we were talking about many things. He gave me some good writing tips, because he was doing some popular writing himself. And Enos told me, he's the one that said that. Don, listen. He read my PhD thesis and he said, look, this is really good. You've really done a great research job. But Don, I'll tell you, I think actually what you have to do is put more raisins in the dough. Anecdotes. So there you go. A First Nation's input into my formation from Enos Monture.

So first chapter then, Calgary arrival. And the founder of the History Department was still there, and I had an in with him right away because I had a strange connection with him. In Oakville, Ontario, in high school, I'd done a report on the tiny country of Albania in Grade 10. I still have it. I'm a packrat, remember, I confessed that to you. Well, George Self, his PhD was from the University of Chicago, and he had studied the foreign policy of Albania in the 1930s, believe it or not. This is hard to believe. George was about to retire, mind you, but he was still on the staff and we had this connection on Albania. So that's how it began.

I had a wonderful welcome in Calgary. They encouraged me to do my work on Indigenous topics, and also I got into Western topics. Hugh Dempsey, one of Alberta's foremost historians, Alberta historians, really helped me out a lot. He passed away about two years ago. He's actually one of the episodes. But just to keep up the sequencing here, I introduce myself. It's E.H. Carr, the great British historian who wrote the book *What is History*, that's what he said. Before you study the history, learn who the historian is. That's so important.

So that's what I do. First two episodes are about me. Historians aren't supposed to do that. You're not supposed to talk about yourself. Well, I've committed two sins, those first two episodes. But it's important, because you got to know my vision, my outlook is so important to how I select the details and how I organize them.

Now we're going to pick up speed. The third episode is Grey Owl, obviously starting with the OHS. That was my first paper, and so I do an episode on him. Then another individual, Chief Buffalo Child Long Lance, who's very similar to Gray Owl in that he had an invented identity, but he made an important contribution. Gray Owl's contribution was in conservation, despite his masquerade. And this chap, he made a very important contribution in his popular writing about the Western Canadian First Nations, Long Lance.

And then moving on, we get to a block of four episodes, and they're on the Mississauga. Now that is what... in Ontario, I did my PhD on the Mississauga, and they were so welcoming, and I owe them a tremendous amount. And there are four episodes on the Mississauga, or to use their own name for themselves, Anishinabeg. And Dave Mowat, of course, is a member of that First Nation. So four on the Anishinabeg or Mississauga.

Then moving on to 9, 10, 11, politics. See, my generation, we paid a lot of attention to political history, and this is the reflection of that, because I'm looking back. I'm not coming out new territory. I'm just explaining how it was done, what topics we liked, how we did it. And it was important to read, to go to the archives. It was important to read microfilm.

There's not the Internet. There's none of these technological tools. It's very important to go to the locations and to meet descendants and all that. That's what I did, and it's so different today. So that's why I think this has merit, this project. It's telling you where it used to be, the research game.

So I do Lord Bury, an Indian Affairs official. And then the next two are John A. Macdonald, well known, extremely well known, and Will Jackson. Macdonald and Jackson are Ontario born... no Macdonald, he lived as a boy in Ontario but he wasn't born here. Jackson was. He was raised in Wingham. He became Louis Riel's secretary in 1884/85, a young political idealist, and he went out and joined Riel, but never took up arms. He wanted peace. He was working for peace. Very astounding fellow, totally opposed to Macdonald's Indian policy.

So, in these sketches you get a lot of variety. I'm not saying Macdonald's great. He was, in some respects, building a country. Negative side on the Indigenous, certainly. And Jackson is the counterfoil for that. He opposed Macdonald's Indigenous policies. So, in Episodes 10 and 11, you're getting that. You're getting variety of opinion and that is the only way history flourishes. There are as many opinions of the present as there are about the past and that diversity must be reflected in history.

So moving on, we come now to four Alberta stories. Now don't be deceived. I was born in Ontario, raised there. Left Ontario at 28. So, I mean, I can't escape it. That's it. It says "Alberta Stories," four Alberta stories, but two of them are Ontarians. Henry Bird Steinhauer was an Anishinabeg or Ojibway from Rama, Lake Simcoe. And he became a Methodist missionary, came out west and started a mission agricultural settlement northeast of Edmonton. So he's the subject, and the teacher that did so much good in his community was an Ontario teacher, Elizabeth Barrett, and so there're there.

And then another Ontarian, two of them actually, are the Albrights. I have an episode on the Albrights. These are two Ontarians that come to Alberta, to Calgary, and we have 550 letters between them. Fred tragically was killed at Passchendaele in 1917, but his widow kept the letters and they're quite revelatory of early Calgary. So that's it for Alberta stories.

Moving on now, Canada's 20th century Canadian political history. Well, I'm very much interested in Indigenous topics, and the first gentleman here is Fred Loft. He was the founder of what today would be the Assembly of First Nations. He was a First Nations from Six Nations community and he made a big difference. He's one of my episodes. His arch enemy or nemesis was Duncan Campbell Scott, the well known, now, Indian Affairs official, also Ontario born.

And then, a lighter note, we look at Lester Pearson. He's Episode 18. And Lester Pearson, amazing fellow, I mean honestly, Nobel Peace Prize and all. But on First Nations, no. He's just like everyone else, with some exceptions. Jackson was the exception. But Pearson, he doesn't really see them. They're invisible to him. He's really the last of our prime ministers that was able to ignore them, really, because the First Nations' resurgence is just about to begin, political resurgence, and they're going to be recognized very very soon.

So finally, Gary Potts. He was a friend of mine. It's another Ontarian story because Gary was the Anishinabeg chief of the Temagami, and he was a personal friend and I liked him dearly and he's Number 19.

Twenty, now, it's Olive Dickason. And in a way, Oliva Dickason, I think of her as Canada's greatest historian of Indigenous people, and that's my explanation of that belief in that episode. And she does... again, see, it's indelible, it's all over the place. Where's the Ontario link with Olive? Before she went into history – fasten your seatbelts – she was the Women's Editor of the *Globe and Mail*, and in her mid-50s she went to graduate school and did these marvelous books. She passed away about, well, two decades ago but her impact is still felt.

So, there we have it. We're up to Episode 21 and that will be forthcoming very shortly. Thanks to Sarah's magic it will be out, and that will be it. That'll be the completion of the series and its title tells it all. The title of Episode 21 is what I'm all about: "Ontario Made Me. Calgary Adopted Me." Thank you.