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

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Episode 20: Olive Dickason and the Writing of Indigenous History in Canada

Over the past half century, certainly over the last quarter century, and most certainly over the last decade, a revolution in perceptions of the Indigenous Peoples has occurred across Canada. In a halting fashion, many non-Indigenous Canadians have changed direction, leaving indifference and ignorance behind, and are now attempting to establish an equitable and mutually beneficial relationship with the First Nations, to achieve reconciliation. The public acknowledgment today of the traditional territories on which public meetings and events occur provides one example of a new mentality, a new protocol. The First Nations have long included such statements in their community gatherings. In the field of Canadian history one individual in particular, Olive Patricia Dickason (1920-2011), has made an enormous contribution to expanding non-Indigenous Canadians' knowledge of Indigenous Canada.

The first volume of the report by the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) was published in 1991, the first of five volumes. In July 1990 the Mohawk of Kanesatake resisted attempts by the Town of Oka, 50 kilometres to the northwest of

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Montreal, to expand a golf course on disputed lands that included a Mohawk cemetery. The 78-day armed stand-off that followed between the Mohawk and the federal and Quebec governments proved the catalyst for Ottawa to create RCAP. As Olive Dickason pointed out in her award-winning *Canada's First Nations. A History of Founding Peoples from Earliest Times* (Toronto, 1992), page 15, "Canada once made a reputation as a peacekeeper on the international scene, a reputation it is having difficulty in maintaining, if it has not already lost it, within its own borders."

The findings of the commission to investigate the evolution of the relationship between the Indigenous Peoples (Indian, Inuit, and Métis), the Canadian government and Canadian society itself, provide a benchmark description of the situation at the end of the twentieth century. The report and accompanying research papers constitute the most in-depth analysis ever undertaken to date on the Indigenous Peoples. As RCAP's first volume states, "Within a span of 25 years, Aboriginal peoples and their rights have emerged from the shadows, to the sidelines, to occupy centre-stage" (*Report for the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples*, vol. 1, *Looking Forward, Looking Back* (Ottawa, 1996), 216; cited in Alan C. Cairns, *Citizens Plus*, *Aboriginal Peoples and the Canadian State* (Toronto, 2000), page 3).

In 1994, Mary Simon (soon to be named Canada's Ambassador for Circumpolar Affairs, and currently Governor General of Canada), a member of the McGill Institute for the Study of Canada's Board of Trustees, proposed that the Institute sponsor a conference on the RCAP report. Unanimous acceptance followed, and a planning committee then got to work under the leadership of Professors Jeremy Webber (Faculty of Law), Toby Morantz (Anthropology), and Pierre Trudel from the Société Recherches amérindiennes au Québec. Desmond Morton, the Director of the McGill Institute, and José Cadorette, conference organizer, ensured all ran smoothly. Two months after RCAP submitted its report to the

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government of Canada, the Institute from 31 January to 2 February 1997 welcomed more than 900 people for a weekend of dialogue.

In late January 1997, in addition to the aftermath of the Oka crisis of 1990, Montreal had another more recent traumatic memory to deal with. Fifteen months earlier, Canada itself had a near death experience and had almost unravelled. On 30 October 1995, Quebecers voted in the province's second sovereignty referendum, choosing, but only by a very narrow majority (50.58%), to remain part of Canada. In 1997 the prospect remained of another referendum in Quebec, another element in the exciting background to the conference.

I begin this episode at the McGill RCAP Conference on its last day. The discussion that follows centres on the contribution of Olive Dickason to Canadian history, and it introduces her extraordinary life story. The moment of beginning is her short address at the McGill RCAP Conference, the morning of Sunday 1 February 1997. The second revised edition of her *Canada's First Nations*, which had appeared in 1992, was expected later that year. Then in her mid-70s, totally at ease with both English and French language historical sources, the historian had the previous year been invested in the Order of Canada. Later in 1997 she received a National Aboriginal Achievement Award for her work to secure proper recognition of the Indigenous contributions to the history of Canada.

Olive had entered graduate school a quarter of a century earlier to expand non-Indigenous Canadians' knowledge of Indigenous history in Canada. In the mid-twentieth century Canadian historians, both popular and academic, remained dismally ill-informed. In spring 1944, for example, the historian Donald G. Creighton published *Dominion of the North: A History*. This classic work by a master stylist quickly went through numerous editions and reprintings. *Dominion of the North* avoided a description of North American Indian society, and instead, the first

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full chapter covered “The Founding of New France, 1500-1663.” In short, Canada’s history began with the Europeans’ arrival. The well-known Canadian historian Arthur Lower completed his history of Canada, *Colony to Nation*, in 1946; it went through five editions. The preface to the first edition, also included in the last in 1977, contained his interpretation of the relationship between Natives and newcomers as a “clash between backward and advanced cultures.”

In the mid-1940s Edgar McInnis, another professional Canadian historian, diligently worked away on his well-structured *Canada: A Political and Social History*. It had an even longer life than Creighton’s *Dominion of the North*. University instructors adopted McInnis’s book as a course text in Canadian history classes into the 1980s. I know the book well. At the University of Calgary this is the textbook that was used in the introductory Canadian history survey course in the late 1970s. One sentence encapsulates McInnis’s point of view toward Indigenous Canada: “The aborigines made no major contribution to the culture that developed in the settled communities of Canada.” McInnis avoids mentioning improvements in transportation, winter survival skills, military support, invaluable participation in the fur trade, and the provision of herbal cures.

Ironically delegates for the conference registered in McGill’s Stephen Leacock Building (now known as the Leacock Building), the ten-storey structure which houses lecture and seminar rooms on its lower floors with offices on the upper levels. By the outbreak of the Second World War Leacock’s long and successful writing career reached back over half a century, as a political scientist and a popular historian, and most surprising for a university professor, as a humorist. Leacock had become an English Canadian cultural icon with manifold honours and accolades, including seven honorary doctorates for literary excellence. Wearing his historian’s hat, in 1941 Stephen Leacock wrote *Canada: The Foundations of*

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Its Future. His initial pages in the first chapter, "The Empty Continent," summarize his belief that Indigenous history was so thin, it did not merit telling: "We think of prehistoric North America as inhabited by the Indians and have based on this a sort of recognition of ownership on their part. But this attitude is hardly warranted. The Indians were too few to count. Their use of the resources of the continent was scarcely more than that by crows and wolves, their development of it nothing" (page 19).

Nothing infuriated Olive more than such misinformation. In contrast, her scholarship over a quarter of a century had clearly established by 1997 how thriving and productive Indigenous civilizations were centuries before the arrival of Europeans. In her remarks in the Sunday morning plenary session, on "The Commission's View of History: Judgement on the Past, Relevance for the Future," she championed accuracy. She reminded her listeners of the great civilizations present in the Americas before the Europeans' arrival, a point missed by RCAP. The Inca of Peru's "'realm of the Four Quarters' stretched over close to 5,000 kilometres along the Southern American western coasts, incorporating more than 200 groups. The Aztecs of Mexico were not far behind, although the 'empire' they created was much less centralized than that of the Inca" (Olive Dickason in *Forging a New Relationship*, ed. Donald B. Smith (Montreal, 1997), page 13).

Dickason also noted another major omission in RCAP's presentation of the early European approaches to the Indigenous Peoples in what is now Canada. Why, she asked, did RCAP start with the English? They were late arrivals on the scene, preceded in the case of Canada "by two and half centuries of the French regime" (Dickason in *Forging*, page 12). The Spanish themselves preceded the French. In fact, she added, with a humorous story, the first European document known to have been created in what is

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now Canada was Spanish, an I.O.U. signed by a Basque whaler in the late sixteenth century.

Who was Olive Dickason? What was her life story? *Changing Canadian History*, by Darren R. Préfontaine, a full biography of one of the most extraordinary women I have ever met, provides the best starting point. The author is a researcher and writer with the Métis Culture and Heritage Department, at Saskatoon's Gabriel Dumont Institute. The extensive documentation, the illustrations, the interviews, the thorough index, all greatly enrich his narrative. During his quarter-of-a-century with the Dumont Institute, Préfontaine has helped develop dozens of Métis-specific resources, like *The Virtual Museum of Métis History and Culture* (www.metismuseum.ca). At the 2011 Saskatchewan Book Awards his *Gabriel Dumont: Li Chef Michif in Images and in Words* won the Book of the Year Award.

In addition to conducting his own exhaustive research, Darren benefitted tremendously from the resources Olive's three daughters, Anne Dickason, Clare Trzeciak, and Roberta Maron, have donated to the Gabriel Dumont Institute. Invaluable are the 15 interviews that eldest daughter Anne provided. Canadian historian Christine Dernoi also generously shared the material she had gathered for a memoir on Olive. In short: the source materials are a biographer's dream.

On 6 March 1920 Olive Patricia Dickason was born in Winnipeg, the eldest daughter of Frank Williamson (1887-1975), an English immigrant from Manchester, and Phoebe Philomène Côté (1892-1985), who was born in Red Lake Falls, Minnesota, but whose parents came from Quebec. Phoebe, who had become a schoolteacher, met her future husband Frank, then working as a bank clerk, in Vibank, Saskatchewan, a small town east of Regina. After the war the Williamsons lived a comfortable middle-class life in Winnipeg. Olive and her sister Alice, a year and a half younger, both attended a Roman Catholic convent school, until the

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Depression swept away Frank's business ventures. In 1932 the family left Winnipeg, lured by Frank's dream of developing a northern gold mining property, but the venture failed. This forced the family to live on the land, near the eastern shore of Lake Winnipeg, southwest of the mining town of Bissett. At first, they lived in a deserted two-room prospector's cabin in an abandoned mining camp. Local people taught the family survival skills, fishing, trapping, hunting, and harvesting their own food. Darren Préfontaine writes: "Life was a constant struggle, and they often went for days without eating" (*Changing*, page 21). Eventually they began a reasonably successful mink ranch.

Interesting to learn that Olive's love of writing began as a young woman in the bush, with her composing fictionalized accounts of her life in the forest. Several of her youthful diaries survive. It took time for her to acquire a simple colloquial style; but, as with everything she took on, she persevered. Olive also had a love of art. She sketched and painted and made her own Christmas cards.

The young city girl by necessity learned to hunt, trap, and handle a dog team. She spent the impressionable years from ages 12 to 18 in the bush east of Manigotagan. Her dad, raised in a city, was almost helpless, but her mother who had grown up on the land knew what to do (Christine Dernoi, *Native Studies Review*, 21,2 (2012), page 36). In the bush Olive developed within herself a real self-confidence, a rock-hard core, that prepared her to meet many future challenges. Her teacher mother helped her with her correspondence courses for grades 9 and 10. She and her younger sister Alice benefited from the personal library of and conversations with a neighbour, a well-educated remittance man, Bob Hamilton.

Bright and extremely capable Olive handled her distance education well. As Darren writes: "When she left the bush at 19 for the city she could speak confidently on contemporary art movements,

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current events, politics (with a special interest in Hitler and the Nazis), history, and Greek philosophy" (*Changing*, page 13).

Urban life in Winnipeg proved difficult as the Depression still lingered on. After a false start as a house maid, she later obtained a job with another young woman, and later a team of young people, selling magazine subscriptions in little prairie towns across southern Manitoba and Saskatchewan.

An entry in one of my diaries, written a quarter of a century ago, reminds me that while I had some previous introduction to Olive's formative years, I knew nothing close to the detail Darren provides. In early October 1995 Olive had flown down to Calgary from Edmonton to catch a flight via Toronto to Albany, New York. We were on our way to the annual Iroquoian Studies Conference, an interesting American academic gathering held near Albany on the Iroquoian peoples of the Great Lakes area. The weather in Calgary was terrible, which led to a delay in our departure. My entry upon arrival in Toronto en route to Albany reads: "Speaking with Olive. We've talked now for six hours, covering many subjects. She mentioned her early schooling—to Grade VIII in a convent, mother, a teacher taught her from Grade VIII to Grade X. [But lack of the increased tuition required prevented Olive from going further]. Luckily met Athol Murray, able to attend Notre-Dame for Grade X1. Athol Murray had a profound influence on her. Père Murray—Jesuit-trained, French-speaking."

Father Athol Murray and his Notre Dame College at Wilcox (now the Athol Murray College of Notre Dame), just southeast of Moose Jaw, saved her. Out of a collection of shacks in the Depression, the dynamic priest established a co-educational classical college affiliated with the University of Ottawa. He had prominent connections: an uncle, Hugh John Macdonald, son of Sir John A. Macdonald, was married to his father's sister (Jack Gorman, *Père Murray and The Hounds* (Sidney, B.C., 1977), page 48). Father Murray's constant message to all students was empowering:

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"Every human life is insignificant until you make yourself great." The school was based on resourcefulness and self-reliance (Gorman, *Murray*, pages 5, 70).

Her travels with the sales crew included a stop in Wilcox, near Moose Jaw. The fact that Olive could survive constant door-to-door knocking to make sales tells me, a former Fuller Brush Man, a great deal about her grit and determination. Constantly she kept her eye out for bigger opportunities. While in Wilcox she visited Notre Dame College and met, as one of his former students once described him, a "stocky little man, a shock of undisciplined hair crowning the powerful face, the lantern jaw and the perpetually dangling cigarette" (Gorman, *Murray*, 98). Her conversation impressed the educator. Athol Murray tried never to refuse a student deserving of an education. Thanks to his intervention she paid for her room and board by helping in the convent's kitchen and with the housekeeping chores. Olive finished two years of high school in one, then entered Notre Dame College itself to complete her B.A. in Philosophy and French, which she received in 1943.

At Notre Dame, Carlotta Blue became a close friend. In 1983 she recalled in a letter to the National Film Board's Bob Sparks, who was then exploring making a documentary about Olive, her college memories of her life-long friend. Carlotta mentioned (*Changing*, page 44) she initially assumed Olive was Indigenous, as she wore moccasins, which "NOBODY" wore, and she had "high cheek bones." She had little time for socializing at school as she was "always either doing dishes, or else she was studying."

This young woman, with her tremendous drive to succeed as a student, had submissions published in the Regina *Leader-Post.* She gave back to Father Murray by teaching without pay for one year at Notre Dame, then was hired in June 1944 as a reporter by the *Leader-Post.* Olive thus began a nearly quarter-century long career in journalism. She quickly learned the gender inequality in the newspaper business. As she told her sister in a letter dated 11

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November 1945, “I am doing work that a man would get paid about $50 a month more” (*Native Studies Review*, page 19).

In Regina Olive met some of her French-Canadian mother’s relatives, in particular her mother’s sister Laura Côté, and became aware of her family’s possible Métis roots. Darren Préfontaine has identified her maternal aunt’s link through marriage with the three Ritchot / Ritchotte sisters, Métis women from North Dakota (*Changing*, page 312). This encounter in Regina planted the seeds of the idea, that even though the Ritchot sisters were not blood relatives she might have some Indigenous ancestry from other family members. Years later she would undertake a rigorous genealogical search, but no conclusive documentary evidence was located.

In the fall of 1945 Olive fell in love with Anthony “Tony” Dickason, an English journalist she met at the *Leader-Post*. They both obtained reporting jobs in Winnipeg, he with the *Tribune* and she with the *Free Post*, but they moved on shortly afterwards when Tony obtained a well-paying public relations job with the CIL chemical company in Montreal. His heavy drinking soon cost him his job and in turn destroyed their marriage. In 1949, Tony abandoned Olive with their two daughters when she was pregnant with their third child. He left Montreal, and his support cheques bounced. Olive obtained a job as a reporter with the *Montreal Gazette*, later becoming Women’s Editor. She had to place her three daughters for six years in foster care. Only with her move to Toronto to join the *Globe and Mail* in 1955, where she become their Women’s Editor, could she re-unite her family. She bought a tiny but comfortable house, later moving to a larger one. At the *Globe* she became a renowned, award-winning fashion writer (*Changing*, page 96). Every Thursday she edited *The Women’s Globe and Mail* from 1962 to 1967 (*Changing*, page 103).

Never did Olive mention her husband to me. Until reading *Changing Canadian History*, I knew nothing at all about him.

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Olive's work at the National Gallery, she did mention. In 1968, anxious for a new challenge, she cashed in her pension and took a job at the National Gallery of Canada, as Chief of Information Services. Art was always a major interest of hers. I remember well a visit in the early 1990s to her most attractive home in Edmonton full of well-selected Indigenous art.

From my friend Ken Munro, a colleague of hers in the History Department at the University of Alberta, I recently learned a fascinating story of her days at the National Gallery. In an email of 19 April 2023 Ken wrote:

> Olive once told me that at the National Gallery, she came across many paintings of Indigenous Peoples on the walls with the description of "Red Man on the Prairies," "Prairie Indian," "Squaw on a trap line" etc. This really infuriated her since she said these individuals are human beings who have names, but unlike "European men and women", their names were never presented. She wanted desperately to change that situation in our public galleries and museums because she rightly saw that the obliteration of names made these individuals seem less than human.

In 1972 the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs published in English and French the well-received *Indian Arts in Canada,* the high point of her three years at the National Gallery. Now, with her three girls young adults, and her savings on their way to recovery, she could follow her dream of exploring Indigenous history.

I am familiar with her academic work once she entered graduate school at the University of Ottawa. How "gutsy" indeed, on her part, to quit her well-paying job at the National Gallery for full-time graduate work. Thanks to her quarter-century in journalism she had "self-discipline, an established work ethic, and the ability to meet deadlines" (*Changing*, page 123). During her research for her Ph.D. thesis, she learned Spanish to read pertinent historic

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documents. She devoted her studies to learning as much as possible "about the Aboriginal aspect of Canada's history" (Olive quoted in *Changing,* page 305). The distinguished Canadian historian Cornelius Jaenen served as her supervisor for both her M.A. and then her Ph.D. which she obtained on 7 March 1977.

When I first met Olive in Edmonton shortly after she joined the University of Alberta's Department of History in the mid-1970s, she inferred she had Indigenous background. I never enquired in depth about this, but years later she told me that she believed that one of her Métis ancestors was a Wilkie (see *Changing*, page 310-311). The question of Indigenous identity was regarded so negatively in her younger years that her mother never discussed it. But now, as an older woman, a scholar studying the First Nations, Olive had a deep curiosity about any possible Indigenous heritage. Family migrations and illiteracy made the tracing of her mother's ancestry most challenging. She persevered, but success eluded her, as Darren's "Appendix 1: Olive's Journey to find Her Métis Ancestry" testifies (*Changing*, pages 303-321). By the late 1990s it was clear that "all her mother's family, according to the genealogical record were entirely French Canadian. Her only documented Indigenous ancestor was a woman who lived during the early reign of Louis XIV" (*Changing*, page 320). Yet this was by no means conclusive, as genealogists will tell you. Genealogy has its gaps. Caution remains the best rule, as Darren Préfontaine writes: "People often raised children who were not their own, such as a grandchild, or children born as a result of infidelity or the infertility of one partner. Sometimes people raised children who were not their blood relatives, and informally adopted them" (*Changing*, page 306).

Olive's first book, *The Myth of the Savage and the Beginnings of French Colonialism in the Americas*, published in 1984, was based on her 1977 Ph.D. thesis at the University of Ottawa. Well-received, it provides an excellent well-documented and superbly

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illustrated account of early French-Indigenous relations. Within she describes the French and European outlook whereby, "The duty of Christians, as the children of God, was clear: legally to claim non-Christian territory in order to implant the faith and to lead the inhabitants into civilization" (Dickason, *Myth*, page 274). She dedicated her book, "To Pere Athol Murray Notre Dame College, Saskatchewan."

The following year Olive turned 65 on 30 June 1985. After a very strong decade in the academy, she now must retire on account of the university's mandatory retirement policy. Olive fought her mandatory retirement case all the way to the Supreme Court of Canada. In a split 5-4 decision on 24 September 1992, the court upheld the previous decision and turned down her appeal. In the long run, however, Olive's legal fight had a tremendous impact. It helped to change working conditions for university professors across the country (Rod Macleod, *Native Studies Review*, 21,2 (2012), page 69). In Canada today mandatory retirement policies are virtually non-existent (Naomi Szigeti, *Native Studies Review*, 21,2 (2012), page 57).

After the Supreme Court made its decision, Olive began a new chapter in her life: she ran in 1993 for the Alberta legislature as a candidate for the New Democratic Party. She lost but I remember her later telling me how much she had enjoyed the experience and wished that she had become involved as a political candidate earlier.

The same year as the Supreme Court's decision, in 1992, her signature book appeared: *Canada's First Nations. A History of Founding Peoples from Earliest Time*, with two subsequent editions in her own hand to follow (1997 and 2002). *Canada's First Nations* is an extraordinary book, one which concisely summarizes the latest historical academic scholarship on the Indigenous Peoples. The author has taken a huge mass of material and given it shape. Her documentation rests on the widest possible

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search of the available primary and secondary sources, placing her study in the mainstream of academic scholarship. Olive herself recognized that the book's framework remained European, as Indigenous perspectives at this point "wouldn't be understood. It is too big a leap" (Olive Dickason quoted in *Changing*, page 203).

She knew exactly the limitations of her traditional historical approach to Indigenous history. As she wrote at the outset of her first chapter, "And the People Came," in the first edition of *Canada's First Nations* (page 21), "for the First Nations this land was the land of their origins, and their myths, with their metaphoric descriptions of the genesis of humans and the present world, are many and varied; their different perceptions of time and nature place these tales at another level of reality than that of this work."

In 1993, *Canada's First Nations* won the Canadian Historical Association's Sir John A. Macdonald Book Prize (now the Canadian Historical Association's Best Scholarly Book in Canadian History Book Prize).

Olive's productive scholarly career continued into her mid-80s after her relocation to Ottawa in 1996 to be closer to her family, and to work as an adjunct professor at the University of Ottawa. On visits to Ottawa around 2000 or so, I have warm memories of two or three dinners with her at Zoe's at the Chateau Laurier. She had lived in many worlds and eras. She was such a good conversationist. I always escorted her back to her apartment, to have more time to visit. Even in her 80s she walked everywhere. At age 75 Olive and her sister Alice went on a rafting trip on the Nahanni River in the Northwest Territories (source: Olive's granddaughter, Naomi Szigeti, *Native Studies Review* 21, 2 (2012), page 57).

By the late 1990s and RCAP, the Indigenous peoples had gained greatly in numerical importance, as Olive noted in *Canada's First*

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Nations: “where Amerindians had represented 1.1 per cent of the population in 1961, 20 years later the proportion had increased to 1.5 per cent. In 1996 the figure was 3.0 per cent; today, it is 4.1 per cent and still growing” (*Canada’s First Nations*, 3rd ed. (Don Mills, Ontario, 2002), page 427). Higher birth rates, longer life spans, and more people identifying as Indigenous best explain the rapid increase in numbers which continues today (Willow Fiddler, “Indigenous population growing faster than rate of non-Indigenous Canadians: census,” *Globe and Mail*, 22 September 2022, A7).

Olive died of a heart attack on 12 March 2011 with her daughter Anne and granddaughter Naomi at her bedside. What is this distinguished scholar’s best epitaph? I like very much the short inscription in her honour on the plaque at her gravesite in Ottawa’s Greenwood Cemetery:

DICKASON

OLIVE PATRICIA

VISIONARY, ACADEMIC, JOURNALIST AND ACCOMPLISHED HISTORIAN.

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"Fired across the bow of Canadian historiography—OLIVE PATRICIA DICKASON," Beechwood Cemetery, Ottawa, Ontario, https://beechwoodottawa.ca/en/blog/fired-across-bow-canadian-historiography-olive-patricia-dickason.

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