Epilogue

Association of Retired Academic Staff – U Alberta

Editor's note

It has been a quiet summer, with no ARAS activities, so this issue of *Epilogue* is a short one. Indeed, the campus as a whole has been unusually quiet. Even HUB seems virtually empty, with a number of shops closed. In the Tory building, with the restructuring of the social sciences departments, people are rarely seen in the hallways; office doors are closed; and department general offices are empty, with no equipment to be seen, as all secretarial staff has been concentrated on the 5th floor. Hopefully people will reappear and life will begin again when the Fall term starts.

In advance of the AGM on 26 October, this issue presents the list of nominees for the ARAS Executive Council. Addition nominations may be entered by the membership, but must be received in advance of the AGM. The issue ends with a happily very small In Memoriam box (only two names, thank goodness), and a reprint of an old *Mousing Around* column by Keith Smillie.

Ruth Gruhn

Notices

Fall Lunch With… events

Here are the dates and speakers for the Fall Lunch With events. Hopefully the events can be held as usual in the University Club; but arrangements are yet to be confirmed. Watch the e-mail newsletter for more information.

28 September: Topic: *The Ancestors: Indigenous Peoples of Western Canada in Historic Photographs.* Dr. Sarah Carter, Department of History, Classics, and Religious Studies, who co-curated and co-authored the exhibit catalogue with Inez Lightning, will give an overview of this special exhibit (Bruce Peel Collections Library, September 2022-March 2023), with a focus on the insights and perspectives provided by Elders of Treaty 6 and Treaty 7.

26 October: AGM

23 November: Dr. Vivian Mushahwar , Department of PhysMedRehab. Topic to be announced.

Reports

REPORT OF THE NOMINATIONS COMMITTEE OF THE ASSOCIATION OF RETIRED ACADEMIC STAFF

At its meeting on August 24, 2022, the ARAS Executive approved the following Slate of Candidates for a two-year term 2021-23 for two nominees. No further nominations have been received from the membership at large. ARAS bylaws state that no nominations from the membership shall be received at the AGM unless the Nominating Committee fails to secure a candidate for that office.

Nominated are the following:
For the term 2022-24:   Secretary: Don Carmichael
                          Member-at-large: Bente Roed

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For your information:

Executive members whose current terms will expire in 2023:
President: Jan Murie
Vice-President: Marion Allen
Treasurer: David Cooper
Member-at-large: Tim Hartnagel
Member-at-large: Walter Allegretto

Presidential appointees without term:
Ruth Gruhn   (Editor, Epilogue)

Gordon Rostoker (Technical Advisor)

Past President (ex-officio): June Panteluk

June Panteluk, Nominations Chair

In Memoriam

Maurice Legris	English
Bob Margolis	Dentistry

The Editor deeply regrets including the name of J.C. Holmes in a draft version of the June issue of *Epilogue,* an error due to a reporter's misunderstanding. J.C. is alive and well.

Mousing Around

Keith Smillie

60. Information Fatigue

The Information: A History, A Theory, A Flood by James Gleick is a large book of over 500 pages with a paper jacket intended to give a picture of one of the book's main themes, which is that we have too much information. It has only repeated lines of

The Information The Information By James Gleick

with the three phrases of the subtitle appearing once only in place of the main title, and "Author of Chaos" appearing in several places. Gleick is a prominent journalist and expositor of science and technology for the general reader. His first book, *Chaos. Making a New Science*, was first published in 1987; and has been translated into twenty-five languages. Two of his later books*, Genius: The Life and Science of Richard Feynman* and *Isaac Newton*, were short-listed for the Pulitzer Prize.

The Information begins with a Prolog giving an account of the invention of the transistor at the Bell Telephone Laboratories in 1948, and the work of Claude Shannon in the mathematical theory of communication. It was Shannon who introduced the term *bit*, for "binary digit", as the fundamental unit of communication. (This element was followed a few years later by the term *byte* for eight binary digits, the number of bits required to represent a single character.) The next three chapters give wide-ranging accounts of the evolution of various means of communication, starting with an account of African drum language and the development of the written word, and leading to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, described as "the greatest word book of all".

Subsequent chapters deal with such well-known persons as Charles Babbage and the Difference Engine, Samuel Morse and the telegraph and telephone, George Boole and mathematical logic, Kurt Gödel and computability, Alan Turing and computability and cryptography, Norbert Wiener and cybernetics, James Watson and Francis Crick and the genetic code, and Richard Dawkins and memes. Gleick brings to life in a charming manner both the people and the ages in which they lived. Especially touching is his account in two short sentences of Shannon's final years: "Shannon lived until 2001, his last years dimmed and isolated by the disease of erasure, Alzheimer's. His life spanned the twentieth century and helped to define it".

The last two chapters and the Epilogue are concerned with the increasing amount of information with which we are being continuously confronted and which began with the invention of movable type in the fifteenth century. The author discusses Wikipedia, email, and the profusion of domain names, the Internet, and the World Wide Web; and search engines such as Google. As an example of the proliferation of information, googling – note the verb – "james gleick" on the Web produced about 567,000 hits, and adding "the information" to the search query produced 400,000 hits. The theme of the last part of the book can be summarized by the title of this column, "Information Fatigue," which was defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* in 2009 as "Apathy, indifference, or mental exhaustion arising from exposure to too much information, esp. (in later use) stress induced by the attempts to assimilate excessive amounts of information from the media, the Internet, or at work".

In order to express conveniently increasingly large numbers, meaningful prefixes are used; and we are all familiar with the words kilometres, kilowatts, kilograms, etc. in which the prefix *kilo-* refers to thousands. With computers having increasingly larger memories, more prefixes are required; and we have *mega-* for million and *giga-* for billion; and for example, the size of computer memories is now given in gigabytes or "gigs". Now even larger units are needed, giving rise to the prefixes *tera-*, *peta-* and *exa-* representing 10^{12}, 10^{15} and 10^{18}, respectively. In the early 1990s the prefixes *zeta-* and *yotta-* were introduced; and for example, a yottabyte

represents
1,000,000,000,000,000,000,000,000
bytes. (We might note that there is a computer company on the Calgary Trail with the name Yotta Yotta Inc.)

There are 46 pages of endnotes that have references to the relevant pages in the text so as to not clutter up the pages with endnote references, and 25 pages of references containing over 500 items. The endnotes for Chapter 4 on Charles Babbage are preceded by over half a page of additional references to Babbage's life and work, indicating a special fondness on the part of the author. Charles Babbage was a nineteenth-century mathematician who constructed the Difference Engine for calculating error-free mathematical tables; and then started to work on what was called the Analytical Engine, which if completed would have been the world's first programmable computer. Babbage is often regarded as the "father of the computer".

I can recommend *The Information* to any person willing to take the time to gain some appreciation of the evolution of the information age in which we now live. Recently I reread parts of the book both to admire, and even envy, the author's grasp of the subject and also to simply enjoy his style of writing.

Edmonton's Treasure ---conserve our river valley!