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Epilogue

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Editor's note

This year summer got underway in mid-May, with unusually warm and dry weather, and trees and shrubs leafing out quickly. Unfortunately, though, the wildfire season has also started early. Hopefully that situation will not last through the summer.

This last issue of *Epilogue* for the 2022-2023 academic year features a review of the March Lunch With ... event, and reports on the activities of our Interest Groups over the last few months. Jan Murie has contributed a personal story of two trips from hell to meetings in Pennsylvania, flight travel adventures hard to top. Lastly, following the In Memoriam box, an old Mousing Around article by the late Keith Smillie reviews a book on the development of information overload.

Ruth Gruhn

Notices

Schedule of Lunch With events ... in Fall term 2023

27 September

University President Bill Flanagan will speak on the state of the University, with specific topics to be announced.

25 October

The Annual General Meeting

22 November

Speaker and topic TBA

Christmas Brunch 16 December

The AGM will likely be a Zoom meeting, but all other functions will be held in person in the Papaschase Room or the Saskatchewan Room at the University Club.

Reports

Lunch With ... event of 22 March 2023

Our speaker was Dr. Jan Selman, Chair of the Department of Drama, who reviewed the history of this renowned Department in Arts. It began in the Quonset huts in the late 1940s, and then a long sojourn in Corbett Hall, with finally a move to excellent theatre facilities in the new Fine Arts building. Thanks to outstanding program directors such as Tom Peacocke and David Barnett, the Department has now a worldwide reputation for excellence in training students in play production, staging, and directing as well as acting; and graduates have gone out into the world to establish new theatre companies. Our Studio Theatre produces Classic and Modern plays every year, with a growing emphasis on current social themes.

Ruth Gruhn

Book Club update, March to May 2023

Our book for March was, somewhat fittingly, a personal history of Ireland by Fintan O'Toole, from his birth there in 1958 to the present. *We Don't Know Ourselves* combines O'Toole's personal experiences with a perceptive look at Ireland's trials and tribulations during those years. As many reviewers have opined, the book is well written, with thoughtful interpretations of recent Irish history. However, I felt that the extensive detail in names of people, streets, counties, etc. throughout made this a book most suited for those very familiar with Ireland. Although I learned a lot about the country's recent history, all the detail became tedious.

In April our discussion focussed on *Women Talking* by Miriam Toews, which describes a few days of an emotional discussion amongst a group of women in an isolated Mennonite colony in Bolivia. Some of the men had been drugging and raping women; and the discussion revolved around whether the women and their children should stay and fight, or leave the colony. Time was short, as the men were in town to bail out the men who had been arrested; and be back in a few days. There was considerable discussion among us readers, ranging from the nature of the discussion and why it was being described through the lens of the male taking minutes (the women could not read or write) to the sorts of decisions the author made in plotting the book and the characters. The theme remains relevant, as similarly misogynistic practices still exist in communities of religious sects. Although many members pointed some flaws in the book, I think most considered it a worthwhile read.

The final book this year was *Chronicles from the Land of the Happiest People on Earth* by the Nobel Prize winning author Wole Soyinka. The story is set in a largely fictional Nigeria, and concentrates on two prominent citizens who are long time friends and a cynical leader of the country. The plot is far too complex to summarize, but involves a secretive human meat market, a death, and the machinations of a dysfunctional family. There is a satirical edge that touches on topics from politics to religion and most things in between. The writing, although sometimes eloquent, is frequently grammatically complex and the meaning

obscure, such that considerable concentration is required to keep up through the many tangents from the story line. Most of us struggled with it but the book and its author engendered considerable discussion.

Thanks to Vivien Bosley for keeping the group organized and informed, to Beverley O'Brien for handling the Zoom elements of our hybrid meetings, and to personnel from Emergency Medicine for scheduling the classroom venue for us and helping Beverley with the camera and resident computer system.

We have voted on the nominated books and chosen nine for next year's reading pleasure. We look forward to another good year of discussing an eclectic array of fiction and nonfiction. New attendees are always welcome to our friendly reading group. Just contact Vivien at vbosley@ualberta.ca to be added to her list.

Jan Murie

Current Events Salon update

The Current Affairs Salon met three times during the spring. In the March session, Bev O'Brien led a discussion on the state of health care in Canada in general and Alberta in particular. Matters such as the hiring and retention of nurses and doctors were considered, as well as the state of hospital infrastructure in the province. Burnout of medical personnel from first responders through emergency nurses and doctors as a consequence of excessive demands made by the COVID pandemic have left the medical care system across Canada in a precarious state.

In the April session the topic was the interference of foreign powers in Canadian elections. The discussion was led by Gordon Rostoker, and focused on recent charges that Chinese state-sponsored actors had influenced the life of some Canadian politicians (Conservative Michael Chong, in particular) and the nomination of and subsequent election of Liberal Han Dong. The leaks from CSIS accusing Han Dong of inappropriate contact with Chinese officials were viewed with some skepticism, and it is apparent that the Chinese have been successful in throwing Canadian politics into disarray. [Subsequent events such as the report of David Johnston on the whole affair keep this topic in the limelight.]

The May session focused on the upcoming provincial election. In the discussion led by Gordon Rostoker, three items were considered. The first was the obvious urban/rural split in voting preferences of the electorate, with the big cities tending to be more supportive of the New Democrats and rural ridings tending to strongly support the UCP. Secondly it would appear that the New Democrats would focus their campaign on health care while the UCP would focus on affordability. Finally, the whole question of populism and whether a charismatic leader was what it takes to win elections was discussed.

Dining Out Group update

The Dining Out group has continued to maintain its monthly gathering to enjoy the company of friends while experiencing a variety of local restaurants. In February we went to Normand's and celebrated Eunice Barron's 90th birthday (in absentia). In March we gathered at the Glass Monkey; in April at the Hayloft, and in late May we will meet up at Olivetto. The Dining Out group is a lively one; and the conversation is always good, sparkling with laughter. We welcome anyone who is interested in joining us.

Peggy Allegretto

Travel travails, by Jan Murie

Since air travel has increased dramatically post-COVID, we hear lots of horror stories of travellers delayed and stranded, as flights can be late or cancelled at a moment's notice. Seems that much of the problem has been the fault of the airlines recently; but there have always been a few such occasions, as well as travel difficulties beyond the control of the airlines. I've experienced a few annoying such problems as well as delayed luggage (once for a week on a two week tour of Guatemala), but two trips stand out in my mind as creating more angst than usual.

Both trips were in the 1990s to attend a reunion of fellow graduate students at Penn State University from the years of about 1965 to 1970. One of the professors from that era, now retired, had access to a hunting club's camp in the hills near State College, with a lodge and ample camping space. It was a great opportunity to reconnect with a number of good friends from a "tight" group of graduate students, as well as to get to know others with whom I'd had little overlap at school.

On my first trip to the reunion, I was leaving from Jackson Hole, Wyoming, where I was visiting relatives; and the schedule looked simple; a short hop to Salt Lake City, a flight to Pittsburgh, and picking up the rental car for a 3-4 hour drive to State College and the camp. However, when I arrived at the airport early in the morning I learned that the previous afternoon the plane from Salt Lake City had sucked a sage grouse into one of its engines and could not leave until a part was received—hence it was not leaving today. Along with others I lined up to get rebooked; and eventually was rerouted to Dallas, thence to Atlanta, and then to Pittsburgh, arriving late at night, so I would have to overnight in Pittsburgh. Oh, well, better late than never. The flight to Dallas went without a hitch, although it turned out I had to change terminals there. No problem, as I boarded an underground train for the 10-minute ride. After a few minutes the train stopped and the lights went out. Oh-oh! Then lights on and we move, then stop again. Nothing happens for 5 or 10 minutes but then a dis-embodied voice informs us the train is dead, but not to worry as another will come along shortly. Another wait of 5-10 minutes as my departure time ticks by. Finally we are decanted into another train, and I'm deposited at the terminal, about half an hour after my departure time. Nevertheless, I run up the stairs and down to the appropriate gate to discover that the plane was late and wouldn't load for another 10 minutes. I had made it! But a new worry arose, as arrival in Atlanta would be nearly an hour late now, close to the time my flight to Pittsburgh was to leave. So on arrival in

Atlanta, I sprinted (well, ran as fast as I could) past about a dozen gates to arrive at mine just as the last few people were boarding. With a sigh of relief I followed them on and was on the way to Pittsburgh, where I located a room in the third hotel I tried, and was off to the reunion the next morning.

A few years later another reunion was arranged. This time I was leaving from Winnipeg, where I was visiting friends. The arrangement was about the same as before—a quick flight to Toronto, on to Pittsburgh, and on the road in a rental car by 2 or 3 PM, plenty of time to reach the camp for dinner. All was well until the plane loaded in Toronto, on time for the moment. But a thunderstorm approached the airport, and we were held on the tarmac for almost two hours waiting for it to pass. This delay made it look dicey to get to the camp, but it still looked possible. But by the time I had picked up my rental car, the Friday rush hour was in full swing. To make driving more difficult, it began to pour rain, nearly obscuring some of the route signs. Making matters worse, one contact lens had become a little dirty and blurry. Traffic was moving at a snail’s pace, which was perhaps the only reason I didn’t miss any turns, despite the rain and dusk descending. By the time I reached Altoona it was well past dark, and I knew I wouldn’t make it to the camp. So I looked for a motel with a vacancy—several were full, even one that still had the vacancy sign on. It turned out some event on the weekend had attracted a crowd to the area. At the second motel I stopped at, the friendly clerk called around and found an Econolodge with a vacancy. Relieved, I checked in and headed to my assigned room, pretty frazzled from the drive. When I stepped in to the room, I was faced with an unmade bed showing signs of recent occupancy and an ashtray holding a couple of cigarette butts. Tired though I was, I trekked back to the office to complain and was rewarded with another room with a pristine made bed. Again, I reached the camp the next morning and enjoyed the weekend of conviviality.

That was the last of these reunions, as access to the camp ended and no one figured out a new venue. Kind of sad, but I’m not sure I would have been keen to attempt that trip again. Just too much aggravation.

Jan Murie

In Memoriam

Bill Blanchard	Psychology
Ted Chambers	Business
Laura Frost	Biological Sciences
Phyllis Giovanneti	Nursing
Chuck Harley	Medicine
Steve Hunka	Education

Richard Kimmis

Educational Psychology

Chris Varvis

Medicine

Garry Watson

English and Film Studies

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 term 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 such with 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. where 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.



