

OBITUARY

# Historian Hugh Dempsey's deep connection to Indigenous people brought rigour to his work

JAMES CULLINGHAM

SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL

PUBLISHED JUNE 16, 2022



Hugh Dempsey, right, with Jim Many Bears of the Siksika Nation examining one of the displays at the opening of The Spirit Sings exhibition in 1988. COURTESY OF THE FAMILY

Hugh Dempsey spent more than half a century working on truth and reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians before it was referred to as such. Mr. Dempsey was an archivist, editor, author and historian. Associated with Alberta History magazine until the final years of his life and the Glenbow Museum and Archives in Calgary for decades, Mr. Dempsey was Alberta's first professional archivist and wrote several engaging works about Indigenous and southern Alberta history.

Mr. Dempsey was born on Nov. 7, 1929, on a farm southeast of Edmonton in the McCafferty district near Edgerton, Alta. He died in Calgary on May 24 at the age of 92 of old age, his family said.

Mr. Dempsey attended high school in Edmonton. By his own account he was an indifferent student, eager to get on with his life. He found his way into the newspaper business, beginning as a copy boy at the Edmonton Bulletin, where he found his *métier* as a writer and editor. He rose quickly through the ranks.

On Feb. 4, 1950, he was sent to cover a meeting of the Indian Association of Alberta in an assignment that would change the trajectory of both his life and career. Members were discussing proposed changes to the Indian Act, which many felt would bring in legislation that was even more repressive. He wrote later in his autobiography that it was at that meeting that he became “a convert to the Indian rights movement.” It was also where he met his future wife, Pauline Gladstone, daughter of James Gladstone, who would eventually be appointed to the Senate in 1958 as its first member of Indigenous origin.

When the Bulletin folded, Mr. Dempsey began writing publicity for the Alberta government. He befriended academics and was further drawn into the realm of local history, trying to better understand the frontier dynamic that forged the province. He helped launch Alberta History, a publication that the fledgling historian first distributed in mimeographed copies.

In 1953, Mr. Dempsey married Pauline, and the couple had five children. Mr. Dempsey’s acceptance into the extended Gladstone family inspired some of his most celebrated works, including biographies of Big Bear, Chief of the Plains Cree, and Crowfoot, Chief of the Blackfeet.

In 1967, Mr. Dempsey was made an honorary chief of the Kainai Nation in southern Alberta. His son John Dempsey recounts that Mr. Dempsey was very proud of that honour and the ceremony at which he was given the name Potai’na (Flying Chief), the name that was held by his father-in-law.

Historian Nancy Janovicek of the University of Calgary remembers Mr. Dempsey as a “kind man and a generous scholar with deep knowledge and passion.” Mr. Dempsey was an advocate of accessible archives that connected with ordinary people. “Glenbow was a great archives to teach undergraduates. That’s part of Hugh Dempsey’s legacy,” Ms. Janovicek said. Mr. Dempsey was named chief curator emeritus of Glenbow upon his retirement in 1991.

Through Glenbow and his own writing, Mr. Dempsey became an invaluable and highly respected interlocutor in relation to the First Nations of Alberta. “Future students should know that Mr. Dempsey was one of the first non-Indigenous historians committed to understanding Indigenous history and the Treaties. I hope they see that this work has been going on for a long time,” Ms. Janovicek said.

Donald B. Smith, now professor emeritus of history at the University of Calgary, considered Mr. Dempsey a mentor and friend. Arriving at the University of Calgary as an “eastern greenhorn from Ontario,” the future historian found Mr. Dempsey to be an ally and frequent guest lecturer on Alberta history. “Hugh would come and speak to students with his usual special approach – a few notes scribbled on an envelope.” Mr. Dempsey was a galvanizing storyteller able to bring “flesh and blood” history to life, Prof. Smith recalls.

Prof. Smith had first encountered Mr. Dempsey when he was student himself at the University of Toronto at Sidney Smith Hall where Mr. Dempsey lectured about Crowfoot. “It had a big impact. Here was a guy who had spoken with elders and had also done rigorous archival research.”

Mr. Dempsey’s biography of Crowfoot was released in 1972. It is commendable for its rigour, readability and Mr. Dempsey’s access to both profound archival sources and oral history, including testimony of some elders who were born in Crowfoot’s lifetime. John Dempsey says that his grandfather James Gladstone worked closely with Mr. Dempsey in collecting elders’ stories in the Blackfoot language.

“In the 1940s and 50s some of those stories were being lost as elders of the Treaty-signing era died off. My father got those words down and recorded for history,” he said. Using a newspaper person’s technique of pencil and notebook in the field, Mr. Dempsey then created

accomplished prose. “The Crowfoot book almost transports you back to the time, with descriptions of the land, weather, people and communities,” John Dempsey says.

It’s in the larger sense of Indigenous-non-Indigenous relations that Mr. Dempsey’s contribution is perhaps most noteworthy. Prof. Smith says, “If we are serious about truth and reconciliation, we have to be able to talk to each other. Hugh was involved in that dialogue for two thirds of a century.”

In 2019, at the occasion of Mr. Dempsey receiving an honorary degree from the University of Lethbridge, chancellor Charles Weaselhead, a former Blood Tribe chief, stated Mr. Dempsey, “has played a very important role in the history of our province and more specifically, that of the Blackfoot people. Through his stories and his dedication to capturing the history of First Nations peoples from the elders themselves, he has helped preserve a proud culture for future generations.”

Mr. Dempsey’s Alberta legacy will endure. The Glenbow Museum is currently being refurbished in downtown Calgary and the Glenbow Library and Western Research Centre opened at the University of Calgary in 2019. The centre houses books, films, photos and textual documents about western history. Much of the collection was amassed by the enterprising Mr. Dempsey and the team he gathered around him starting in the 1950s. That zeal for collecting is richly recounted in Mr. Dempsey’s 2011 autobiography *Always an Adventure*.

In his later years, Mr. Dempsey’s lifelong work and professional generosity still made him a go-to person for investigators. Filmmaker Alex Williams visited him about a decade ago seeking help on a documentary project. Mr. Dempsey was having breathing difficulties at the time and Mr. Williams recalls that a filmed interview stopped and started while the elderly Mr. Dempsey took relief by reconnecting himself to an oxygen unit.

“He had a kind of Prairie pragmatism and straightforwardness about the work. He had the air of a responsible historian who was deeply connected to community through Pauline. He was obviously in relationship with Indigenous people,” Mr. Williams said. He was also touched by the relationship between Mr. Dempsey and his wife, Pauline. “There was a beautiful kindness between the two from many decades of living together.”

Mr. Dempsey was named a member of the Order of Canada in 1975 for his contributions to the preservation of the culture and interest in the history of the Plains Indians.

He leaves his wife, Pauline; three of his children, Louise, John and Leah; 10 grandchildren, five great-grandchildren and one great-great-grandchild. He was predeceased by his children Lois and James; and brothers Harry, Bill and Glen.