

IN MEMORY

The Legacy of Bob McDonald

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Dr. Robert (Bob) A.J. McDonald (1944–2019) died in
Vancouver of complications from a stroke in June 2019.

OVER THE COURSE OF the previous five decades, Bob shared his passion for BC history and politics with a wide circle of colleagues, students, and friends. His enthusiasm and energy for the subject never flagged. At the time of his passing, he was completing

a major monograph, the forthcoming "*A Long Way to Paradise*": *British Columbia Provincial Politics, 1870s–1970s*. Bob contributed significantly to our collective understanding of British Columbia in multiple ways: he produced important scholarship on region, class, and politics; he inspired countless undergraduate and graduate students, some of whom, in turn, produced scholarship of their own; he edited this journal for six years; and he served as president of the Vancouver Historical Society and chair of the City of Vancouver Archives Advisory Committee. When he was awarded the Canadian Historical Association's BC Clio Prize for lifetime achievement in 2011, it was to honour his long and important career of scholarship, teaching, and service.

Bob came of academic age at a time when region and class were of primary importance in social and political history. He was born and raised in Brandon, Manitoba, but the region that captured his scholarly and personal imagination was his adopted home of British Columbia, the place where he would spend his academic life. After completing his BA and MA at the University of Manitoba, he entered the PhD program at the University of British Columbia in 1968. At UBC he studied under the supervision of Margaret Prang, a leading scholar of British Columbia who, along with political scientist Walter Young, co-founded a new regional journal – *BC Studies* – in 1968, the year Bob arrived. *BC Studies* would play a profoundly important role in Bob's personal and professional life as he completed his dissertation on the history of Vancouver and embarked on a fifty-year scholarly journey to understand what made this region historically unique.

As a graduate student, instructor at Simon Fraser University and the University of Victoria, and then tenure-track assistant professor at the University of British Columbia where he was appointed in 1978, Bob was part of an emerging group of scholars who took seriously the importance of class, place, and region in their work. Everything he wrote was an exploration of the province. His first book, *Making Vancouver: Class, Status, and Social Boundaries, 1883–1913*, was rooted in the social history of the 1970s – especially the promise of early data collection and computing methods so influential in urban social history. He was deeply influenced by labour history and remained politically and intellectually engaged by how ordinary working people understood themselves and lived their everyday lives. Drawing on the new labour history while incorporating theories about status, race, and ethnicity, Bob tried to understand how Vancouver workers, the middle class, and wealthy elites each developed a sense of class identity. His intellectual interests plunged him into the

rich and vibrant historiographical debates about the relationship of class, race, and gender, the meaning of social status, and how to define the working class. Although Bob insisted that his scholarship focused on class, region, and politics, *Making Vancouver* also engaged with ideas and approaches of the 1990s, including the relationship of critical race theory to city-building and the making of place, and theories about gender and masculinity in relation to status and identity. His 2001 article “He Thought He Was the Boss of Everything: Masculinity and Power in a Vancouver Family,” explored Victorian cultural and economic power in conversation with contemporary work on the history of women, masculinity, and the family, and was long one of my favourite articles to teach in my women’s history classes at Simon Fraser University. While he remained open to new ways of thinking about Vancouver and BC history, Bob remained an unapologetically data-driven historian, deeply committed to extensive, thoughtful, and highly detailed primary research that described and analyzed the material conditions of people’s lived experience. The extensive biographical research he did on Vancouver’s workers, politicians, boosters, and business people brought to life the everyday circumstances and passions of the loggers, the artisans, the recent immigrants, and the wealthy elites who populated the city.

Bob’s life as an academic was as much about building institutions and communities as it was about publishing books and articles. He spent his entire career building bridges: between academia and the public, between professors and students, between universities and civic institutions. Deeply embedded in the rhythms and structures of the academy, Bob nevertheless understood the tremendous importance of public history. He was passionately committed to supporting the archives and historical societies that preserve documents and community memory, and that make those materials and memories available to researchers and the wider public. Bob took very seriously his positions in the Vancouver Historical Society as president (2013–2015) and as programming director (2016–2019). Animated by his extensive knowledge and desire to learn and share new perspectives on the history of Vancouver and the province, Bob invested enormous energy in finding ways to make the region’s history exciting and accessible to a broad public.¹ He served as chair and as a long-time member of the City of Vancouver Archives Advisory Committee, and City Archivist Heather Gordon remembers Bob as a passionate supporter of the Archives: “The Archives’ future, as we prepare to move it to a new

¹ Thank you to Michael Kluckner of the Vancouver Historical Society.

home, is bright, in no small part due to Bob's concern for the work we do and how we do it."

Bob helped build and support academic institutions that were intensely regional, rooted deeply in a sense of place, and he emphasized the importance of understanding region as a category of analysis. He attended the first annual Qualicum History Conference on Vancouver Island in 1975 and rarely missed a gathering thereafter, including last year's meeting in January 2019 in Parksville. Starting as a conference for professors at UVic, SFU, and UBC, the Qualicum conference morphed over time into something decidedly unique: a space in which emerging graduate students (and a number of future history professors) in British Columbia travelled to a small town on Vancouver Island to deliver their research, surrounded by supportive peers and professors who served as session chairs. He was a key contributor to and supporter of *BC Studies* when it emerged as a pre-eminent regional interdisciplinary journal; one of his first peer-reviewed articles on the early economic development of early Vancouver was published in it in 1979.² He contributed many articles over the years on topics ranging from the modernization of the civil service to the province's complex political culture. As the journal's editor from 2002 to 2008, he maintained the commitment of previous editors to ensure that it remained interdisciplinary and relevant: as he wrote in the first issue he edited, he was determined to keep the journal scholarly but accessible, with articles that were "read and appreciated across disciplinary boundaries."³ Over the twenty-six issues under his editorship, the journal published what his editorial successor called "a rich feast of interesting and accessible scholarship"⁴ on a huge range of topics, including Indigenous cultures and geography, electoral reform, religion and gender, and environmental politics. Passionately committed to regional history, Bob always insisted that regional historians were neither "parochial" nor "intellectually stagnant" but, rather, deeply engaged in vibrant, interdisciplinary, comparative, and often highly theoretical work.⁵ He introduced many a student and junior colleague to the supportive and vibrant BC Studies Conference, which began in 1979 and continues to be held every other year to this day; indeed, Bob

² "City-Building in the Canadian West: A Case Study of Economic Growth in Early Vancouver, 1886–1893," *BC Studies* 43 (Autumn 1979): 3–28.

³ "Editorial," *BC Studies* 134 (Summer 2002): 3–4.

⁴ Graeme Wynn, "Editorial," *BC Studies* 159 (Autumn 2008): 3..

⁵ "The West Is a Messy Place," *BC Studies* 111 (Autumn 1996): 88–92.

attended the conference in May 2019 with his trademark energy and enthusiasm.⁶

Many scholars take these sorts of academic institutions for granted: papers are presented, talks are given, articles and journals are published. But these institutions do not just happen: they only emerge, thrive, and survive because people like Bob are devoted to their success and believe in their mission; because they consistently support them with their time and energy; because they remain engaged with them over time as disciplines change and move in new directions; and because they always invite new people to sit at the table.

For Bob, these institutions and programs were a means not just to build research on the province that he loved but also a way to build relationships and a sense of community. He loved teaching seminars on BC and Vancouver history to undergraduate and graduate students alike. His dedication to his students was genuine, and his intellectual support, enthusiasm for their work, and ongoing encouragement changed many of their lives, convincing them to go on to graduate school or to build careers in the historical profession. Even in retirement, Bob remained excited about graduate student research, always making a point to attend – and to give feedback on papers presented by new and former students participating in – department colloquia at UBC, at the BC Studies Conference, and at the Canadian Historical Association. His desire to stay engaged in the historical profession manifested itself in enthusiastic support for junior scholars who arrived in British Columbia. In Bob, many found their first introduction to the local professional landscape and a sense of belonging to a larger community. He often worked collaboratively, writing and editing projects small and large with others in the field, including his UBC colleagues Peter Ward and his long-time friend and colleague Jean Barman, with whom he published two edited collections on BC and Vancouver history.⁷ He loved to talk, discuss, and passionately debate politics, politicians, and the state of the history profession with his many friends and colleagues, whether it was in print,

⁶ With thanks to Patricia Roy and Robin Fisher for information on the first BC Studies Conference, which was organized by Robin Fisher and Alan Artibise, held in Victoria, and featured J.M.S. Careless as the banquet speaker. See *BC Studies* 45 (Spring 1980) for the articles emerging from the first conference. Bob McDonald served as the organizer or co-organizer of this conference three times (twice with his colleague Jean Barman) as well as on many additional organizing committees.

⁷ Jean Barman and Robert McDonald, eds., *Vancouver's Past: Essays in Social History* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1986); Jean Barman and Robert McDonald, eds., *Readings in the History of British Columbia* (Burnaby: Open Learning Agency, 1989); W. Peter Ward and R.A.J. McDonald, *British Columbia Historical Readings* (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1981).

in his car on the way to a conference, or over a drink after a long day at work.

Bob's commitment to building community at every level is perhaps the best example of how he was, at heart, a true social democrat. A long-time supporter of the NDP, he grappled over the course of his long career with how to think about the left: the relationship between socialism and social democracy and how those politics shaped the political culture of the province; the failures, the successes, and the promises of the left; and the complexities of political partisanship in the past and the present. His commitment to the larger social good permeated his personal values, his scholarship, and his professional decisions. His door was always open, and he was unfailingly generous with his time, feedback, encouragement, and knowledge. His belief in the common good led him to choose retirement in 2012, even though it was no longer mandatory. For Bob, retirement was an opportunity to open the door to a new generation of scholars whom he believed deserved an opportunity to shape the fields of BC and Canadian history – and indeed the university itself – in new ways. He delighted in meeting junior colleagues and loved hearing about their research. He was an unfailing champion of the successes of his friends and colleagues, old and new alike.

Retirement was in name only – an end to the well-trod academic rhythm of grading and course preparation accompanied by a renewed focus on the completion of what would be his last book. Bob continued to show up to his UBC office every day without fail, where he welcomed students and colleagues, argued and listened, and painstakingly researched and wrote. In recent years he began to draw on his long-standing interest in populist reform to explore the development of social democracy in British Columbia, exploring the connection between populism and socialism in the emergence of the CCF.⁸ But his life in retirement was shaped overwhelmingly by his largest project, a comprehensive political history of British Columbia. He often joked that he was lucky to complete a few sentences – perhaps a paragraph – by the end of the day and that he was unsure when the book would be completed.

"A Long Way to Paradise": British Columbia Provincial Politics, 1870s–1970s was completed in spring 2019 and will be posthumously published by UBC Press. The book is the culmination of Bob's scholarly quest to

⁸ "Telford Time and the Populist Origins of the CCF in British Columbia," *Labour/Le Travail* 71 (Spring 2013): 87–100. See also "Fabianism and the Progressive Left in British Columbia: The 'New Party' in Historical Perspective," in *Party of Conscience: The CCF, the NDP, and Social Democracy in Canada*, ed. Roberta Lexier, Stephanie Bangarth, and Jonathan Weier, 59–71 (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2018).

explain the history of British Columbia's political culture. Drawing on his earlier research on class, urban development, and politics, and shaped by his consistent attentiveness to region, the book tells the story of British Columbia's political and economic development in the context of modern liberalism, populism, and modernity – a process shared by many industrial societies but always, in Bob's words, marked by the “particularities of place.” The book explores the momentous shifts in the province's political history – the election of the progressive Liberal Party in 1916, with its “new liberalism” of labour and social reform and modernization of the civil service; the coalition politics of the 1930s and 1940s that worked to keep socialism and the rising Co-operative Commonwealth Federation out of provincial power; the 1952 election that brought the upstart Social Credit Party to office and kept it in power for twenty years on a widely supported platform of large-scale state-funded “megaprojects” and rapid economic growth combined with a “conservative populism” that extended higher education and health care while retaining a suspicion of collectivist social welfare.

The book ends with the lead-up to the provincial election of 1972, as rising unemployment, suspicion of bureaucratic technocracy, concerns over the environment, and the rise of younger and more modern pressure groups lobbying for greater rights and more expansive social welfare resulted in another significant political shift: the election of the NDP led by former social worker Dave Barrett. Bob hoped that *A Long Way to Paradise* would be read not just by academic specialists but by a wider public interested in how societies think about the obligations and role of government and the relationship between the individual and the collective. Like so much of his earlier work, his love for stories about his province shines through his words and shapes his arguments. While Bob's plan to write more popular books on Vancouver and British Columbia will not come to pass, this last book is a fitting culmination of his long career. His work and his legacy live on in the things he so deeply valued: the careers of the scholars and students whom he mentored; the vigour of regional institutions such as the Vancouver Historical Society, the City of Vancouver Archives, and the *BC Studies* journal; and the lively exploration of ideas among friends, readers, and fellow historians in British Columbia and across the country.

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