

In Memoriam: J. Donald Wilson

July 6, 1936–December 22, 2019

It would be wrong to insist that J. Donald Wilson wear only one hat or even two. He had several, and they all suited him well. As historical researcher and writer, Don moved from biography to political history, from rural to urban studies, from the investigation of ethnicity and class at national and international levels, to diachronic studies of religion and family structure. As editorial impresario and research enabler, Don was responsible for a dauntingly long list of books, typically writing an original chapter or two in each.



As teacher and advisor at the University of British Columbia (UBC), Don helped upwards of a dozen people earn doctorates in the history of education, along with an even larger cadre of magistral students. As collaborator and encourager, he helped build the Canadian History of Education Association (CHEA), led the Canadian Ethnic Studies Association, served on the boards of five major history and education journals, and urged one or another national academic association to bring academic matters into the mental worlds of as many Canadians as possible.

Throughout, Don showed an overarching concern with education, with public and private schooling, formal and informal education, and with socialization broadly speaking. His death on December 22, 2019, is a loss equally to the historical and educational professions.

But Don Wilson was not wholly caught up by academic life. He loved a good party, was a generous host at his Vancouver and Thunder Bay houses, enjoyed music (he was as enthusiastic about Dizzy Gillespie as about Dmitri Shostakovich), and took pleasure in meeting, socializing, and working with people in the wider community. He was a keen kayaker, walker—often with a dog—and traveller. His homes in Thunder Bay and Vancouver featured a sauna, for reasons that will shortly become evident.

His enthusiasms accompanied him after retirement. He was a faithful supporter of the Thunder Bay Symphony Orchestra and a member of its board, serving also on the board of the Thunder Bay Art Gallery. His long-time partner, Nancy Fisher,

wrote a few days ago to say that Don was as “energetic and stubborn in his fight against cancer” as he had been in a busy life as writer, traveller, and active citizen.

Don was born in Hamilton but raised in Brantford, Ontario. His father worked in the Bank of Montreal while his mother helped raise Donald. Having finished Grade XIII at Brantford Collegiate in 1956, Don began the Honours course in history at the University of Western Ontario (UWO), later Western University. He later spoke of the influence of James J. Talman, a historian of Upper Canada and a past chief archivist of the Province of Ontario, and Wallace K. Ferguson, a well-known specialist in Renaissance European history. Both teachers were involved in research on educational theory and practice, understood as essential features of Canadian and world history.

On graduation from UWO in 1959, Don took an entry-level job in External Affairs, eventually working as “second or third secretary” to the Canadian ambassador to Yugoslavia. The Balkans were immensely fascinating, but the External Affairs bureaucracy immensely off-putting. Don resigned in 1960, returning to university to take an MA in history at the University of Toronto in 1961. His master’s thesis dealt with the problem of religious preference in the construction of the mid-nineteenth-century Upper Canadian education system.

His timing was good, as he then obtained a World University Service scholarship to study at Stockholm University (1961), the Sorbonne (1962), and the University of Belgrade (summer 1962), territory with which he was already familiar. These international connections never left him.

Since Don combined MA coursework with studies in teacher education, he was qualified to work as a secondary school teacher in London, Ontario, from 1962 to 1964. Although a successful school teacher, Don’s scholarly inclinations led him back to graduate studies, a PhD program at UWO beginning in 1964 and ending with a 1971 thesis on “Foreign and Local Influences on Popular Education in Upper Canada, 1815–1844.” Between 1968 and 1971, Don took up an untenured appointment at UBC as assistant professor in Educational Foundations, but in 1971, with doctorate in hand, he was able to negotiate a tenured job in the Department of History at Lakehead University, whence he moved back in 1975 to a tenured post at UBC that he held until his retirement in 1999.

Meanwhile... in 1970, Don was lead editor—with Robert Stamp and L.-P. Audet—of *Canadian Education: A History*, a 528-page volume of original essays on the development of education across Canada, completed with the help of only a few face-to-face editorial meetings, but with abundant correspondence. The book was a commercial success, adopted at once across Canada in English-language faculties of education (and arts). In an influential 1996 review, Paul Axelrod called the book “an impressive project which simultaneously filled and exposed historiographical gaps.” Don was justifiably proud of his 1970 book but slightly embarrassed by his temerity in taking up so large a project while still a doctoral student: “I wouldn’t do it again, nor do I recommend it, and I’m not quite sure where the necessary hours and the required energy came from.”

Of the ten books he edited or co-edited after 1970, more than half were concerned with British Columbian, western Canadian, or pan-Canadian matters. They

relied on Don's organizational talent, his persistent use of the pen, and his enormous network of friends and fellow historians. Don stubbornly refused to type or to write on screen even as the Canadian academy moved from pen to PC or Mac, but this preference rarely affected his output.

All along, Don wrote original papers on subjects as diverse as the historiography of Canadian education, Indian education in Upper Canada,¹ or (significantly) on the Finns in Canada. Of the fifty refereed papers he published between 1970 and 2000, Don liked to point to the ten entries he wrote for the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, especially his biography of Matti Kurikka.

Readers will remember his contributions to Australian, European, American, British, and Canadian journals, typically after he had presented them as invited papers in Finland, the USA, the UK, or Canada's provinces. His frequent visits to Finland and his close friendships with Finnish colleagues led some to think he might be "a Finn wannabe." Indeed, his interest in Scandinavian matters may partly account for his decision to retire in 1999 not in Vancouver, but in Thunder Bay, whose Finnish people came to know and value Don's work, and whose geography suited Don well.

For many Canadian and international colleagues, Don Wilson is associated with the creation and sustenance of the Canadian History of Education Association. He was one of the presenters at the founding conference held in 1980 of the CHEA, speaking on "The Picture of Social Randomness: Making Sense of Educational and Ethnic History." He acted as organizer of two CHEA conferences in 1983 and 1998, and served as president of the Association from 1996 to 1998. The 1983 conference was a collaboration with the History of Education Society of the United States; it occurred in early October in the midst of the Solidary Movement and just after a week-long near-general strike in British Columbia. CHEA members could look out the windows of the conference hotel and see just over 110,000 demonstrators opposed to the budgetary and social policies of the provincial government of the day. It is a tribute to Don's stamina that the meeting went off without a hitch.

Don was a member of the editorial board of *Historical Studies in Education/Revue d'histoire de l'éducation* from 1995 to his retirement. His support for the journal was unflinching. In the midst of controversies over how the journal could best respond to the rise of critical theory or how to encourage the work of scholars in all versions of the feminist movement, Don was a consistent exponent of broadly explanatory social history, a fan of inclusive and egalitarian history. His interest in the experience of minorities in Canadian history was not just convenient, but a symptom of his attitude to politics: fairness and openness were important to Don.

By the late 1970s, Don Wilson was teaching in a department where six highly productive historians of education were active. Along with Don, there were John Calam, Neil Sutherland, William Bruneau, Marvin Lazerson, and Jorgen Dahlie. In allied departments—in history, in kinesiology, and in medicine—still other energetic writer-researchers worked on subjects connected to the history of education.

¹ Although today the appropriate term is Indigenous education, "Indian education" was widely in use when Don wrote on the subject.

Educational Studies (previously known as Educational Foundations) was home to a constellation of writer-researcher-teachers. That constellation helps to account for Don's own productivity over the last quarter-century of his UBC career.

But in the end, Don was a valued colleague because of his thorough-going commitment to reason and to fairness, his willingness to accept his share of the burden of service in the community, and his particular brand of humour. In his death, the university and the country have lost a good citizen and a good person. His best memorial would consist in the continuation of the work he began.

*William ("Bill") Bruneau
University of British Columbia
February 5, 2020*