

## Alexander Norbert (Norb) Macdonald 1925-2015

Alexander Norbert (Norb) MacDonald, a longtime member of the History Department at the University of British Columbia (UBC), passed away on April 1, 2015 in Salmon Arm, BC. Born in Stellerton, Nova Scotia, in 1925, Norb completed BSc and BA degrees at Acadia University and an MA at Brown University before pursuing a doctorate in American urban history at the University of Washington. Having defended his PhD in 1959, he joined the UBC History Department in 1961. He retired in 1990.

Norb's dissertation research on the topic of Seattle's economic development from 1880-1910 laid the foundation for a productive career as a teacher of modern American history and a research specialist in the field of comparative urban history. Having studied Seattle's early development but now living in Vancouver, a short 200 kilometers away, Norb was struck by the unexplored potential of a scholarly comparison of these two geographically proximate cities. As he wrote in the Preface of *Distant Neighbors: A Comparative History of Seattle and Vancouver*, published by the University of Nebraska Press in 1987, he saw in the comparative approach a way to understand the development over time of two regional urban centres that grew in tandem, but in different countries. From today's perspective two aspects of Norb's project stand out. One is the relatively new status of urban history, especially in Canada, in the 1960s. The emerging field of urban history at this stage emphasized that cities be explored as a form of biography, an approach that proved especially challenging when the chosen subject was two cities rather than one. Norb's work also emerged before the influential turn towards computer-based analyses of urban social structure that came to define the "new urban history" of the 1970s and 1980s. Within this historiographical context *Distant Neighbors* stands out as an important example of the historian's ongoing search for new ways to understand the past. This achievement was recognized in 1990 when the Canadian Historical Association awarded *Distant Neighbors* the Clio Prize in regional history for British Columbia. The citation noted that *Distant Neighbors*, while appealing to both specialists and general readers, successfully explored how national connections shaped the history of Seattle and Vancouver in historically distinctive ways, despite their similar geographies and historical context.



Norb Macdonald (right) and friends brave the rain to protest B.C. Provincial cutbacks to education in 1985. Photo: *Malgré la pluie, Norb Macdonald (à droite) et ses amis ont manifesté contre les coupures du gouvernement de la C.-B. en éducation en 1985. Photographie : Peter Moogk.*

Norb MacDonald will be remembered especially for several essays about Vancouver, including his work on the influence of the Canadian Pacific Railway, his exploration of the "boom" that defined the pre-war years to 1912 as "a critical growth cycle," and particularly his demographic analysis of the two cities, which underlined the distinctively Anglo-Canadian character of Vancouver and American identity of Seattle. The latter found expression in planning, architecture, and parks. The comparative approach also illustrated important differences that emerged in the 1940s when the industrialization that all major Pacific Slope cities experienced during the Second World War led to very different patterns of postwar industrial development, Seattle emerging as a major centre of aircraft production while Vancouver remained tied to its forest hinterland. The war also changed the racial composition of Seattle by drawing into the city a substantial Black working class population, further accentuating its distinctive American character. The contrasting influence of federal governments in shaping urbanization in the United States and Canada, revealed for instance in different approaches to urban renewal and freeway development, also stands out as an important observation. Norbert MacDonald was a valued friend and colleague who contributed substantially to the history of the Pacific Northwest.

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