

Profile

Lyle Dick

CHA Vice-President

Lyle Dick is the author of 90 publications on topics in Canadian and American history, historiography, and Arctic history, including the book *Muskox Land: Ellesmere Island in the Age of Contact* (University of Calgary Press, 2001), which was awarded the Harold Adams Innis Prize for Canada's best-English-language book in the social sciences in 2003, and *Farmers "Making Good"* (Revised edition, University of Calgary Press, 2008), co-awarded the Canadian Historical Association's Clio Prize in 1990 for the best book on the history of the prairie provinces. His refereed articles have been published in scholarly journals in both Canada and the United States, including the *Canadian Historical Review*, *Histoire sociale / Social History*, *American Studies*, *Arctic Anthropology*, *Polar Geography*, *The APT Bulletin*, *The Journal of the Canadian Historical Association*, *CHA Historical Papers*, *Prairie Forum*, *SSAC (Society for the Study of Architecture in Canada) Bulletin*, *Archivaria*, *Manitoba History*, international encyclopedias, and national anthologies.

His work for Parks Canada has included research and planning for the system of national historic sites, national parks, and especially protected areas across western and northern Canada, as well as Canada's war memorial sites in Europe. For his public history work Parks Canada has presented him with three Awards of Excellence, in 1996, 2001, and 2003. He has given nearly 100 papers, public presentations, or special named lectures at universities, libraries, museums, and other venues across North America and in Europe. Currently, he is a member of the editorial boards of the journals *The Public Historian* (University of California at Santa Barbara) and *Manitoba History* (Manitoba Historical Society), and the National Capital Commission's Committee of Experts for Commemorations for Canada's Capital. He is also a member of the advisory boards for the Canadians and their Pasts Project, and NiCHE (The Network in Canadian History and Environment), and the Vice-President of the CHA.

This interview took place in the LAC cafeteria at lunchtime on 8 November 2010. Alexandra Mosquin in discussion with Lyle Dick.

CHA Bulletin: You have been a historian for Parks Canada for over thirty years, could you tell us about your current research?

LD: I have quite a few things going on... several projects for the Nunavut Field Unit of Parks Canada, including contributing to the virtual Fort Conger project – a project to protect and present our internationally significant site of Fort Conger in



Lyle Dick at Fort Coger, Qikiqtaaluk, Nunavut, Canada

Quttinirpaaq National Park of Canada. It's a site intimately connected to the race to the North Pole and it also has a very significant Aboriginal dimension involving Inughuit from northern Greenland who served on Robert Peary's North Pole expeditions. This site tells the fascinating story of adaptation and survival in one of the world's toughest environments – it's really an amazing place.

I'm also working again on the former Defence Research Board camps in northern Ellesmere Island established between the 1950s and 1970s. These sites were formed during the largest interdisciplinary scientific research program in High Arctic history. And I do other projects as required by the field units in the west and the north of Canada, including work for National Historic Sites and National Marine Conservation Areas, as well as National Parks.

CHA Bulletin: Did you travel extensively in northern Canada for these projects?

LD: Yes, I did and I do. Most recently, this past summer I spent three weeks in Quttinirpaaq National Park of Canada in northern Ellesmere Island. The travel to these sites in the far north is always an adventure in itself. However, the textual and iconographic documents for the arctic exploration era tend to be at repositories in the United States, so in the last few weeks I made a research trip to Washington D.C. and Pennsylvania.

I also have projects that I look after from my home base in Vancouver. For example, I'm co-organizing a workshop in Vancouver next March that will search for new potential national commemorations in the area of sports history. In particular, invited experts will look at topics in the history of sports associ-

ated with Aboriginal history, women's history and ethnocultural communities history. These areas have been traditionally under-represented in the government's national program of commemoration, and so in the 1990s I was responsible for coordinating the National Historic Sites System Plan, aimed at developing strategies for greater inclusion. We continue to do outreach activities with the public and scholarly communities to raise awareness and encourage new nominations.

CHA Bulletin: How do these projects connect with the historical research you have done in the past?

LD: Well I did a lot of arctic historical research in the 1990s, and more recently, the Peary Caribou species at risk project brought me back in. It entailed research in explorers' diaries to document the hunting of Peary caribou and muskoxen on Ellesmere Island and adjacent land masses, ca. 1875-1975. It was part of an interdisciplinary project to reconstruct former animal population numbers to feed into the species' recovery strategy.

CHA Bulletin: You have also published extensively in other areas beyond your Parks Canada work, what are some of those areas?

LD: My outside research and publication has been largely driven by personal curiosity, such as my current research on the culmination to the Race to the North Pole in 1909-10, when Wall Street's elites took steps to ensure that Robert Peary reached the North Pole, whether he got there or not! It's American history but it's also fascinating. I just go where the documents and my imagination take me and you never know where it will end up. I also have a long-standing interest in the writing of history, its forms and meanings, so I try to publish in that area as well.

CHA Bulletin: What are your thoughts about being a public historian in 2010? Is it getting easier?

LD: There have been different challenges in every period. Right now there is strong pressure from government and the public for programs to be as responsive as possible and we have to find ways to do that. I have always enjoyed being a public historian because it has enabled me to connect with people and constituencies across the country that I wouldn't otherwise have had a chance to interact with. And I enjoy working with different people to recognize their histories – histories, as in deliberately plural – these neglected stories need to be better told.

I derive a particular sense of satisfaction from working with minorities. When you find out how important someone else's history is to them and that you can be a conduit for bringing it forward, it gives you a sense of satisfaction. It helps build a better, more inclusive country.

CHA Bulletin: Did winning the Harold Innis Prize for *Muskox Land* make a difference to you as a professional historian?

LD: It was gratifying, but especially so to see the important and fascinating history of the High Arctic recognized. Remote regions and small populations such as the Inuit are as deserving of historical attention as any other regions or peoples in Canada.



*Arctic Fox in Quttinirpaaq National Park, Nunavut, Canada. /
Un renard arctique dans le parc national
Quttinirpaaq Nunavut, Canada. Photo by / de Ansgar Walk*

CHA Bulletin: Would you have any advice for today's graduate students who are considering a career in public history? What do you make of public history training versus training in a regular history department?

LD: When I started work at Parks Canada, there were very few public history programs. Historians were trained in conventional history departments. Today the landscape has changed. All kinds of training are useful. Training in oral history is always useful for today's public historians. Where you go to study, however, really depends on the work or vocation that appeals to you as a graduate student. I'm not sure that I do have any advice to offer on this front. I do know that it is important to stay connected with what I call "the grass roots" – local and provincial historical societies or heritage groups – this is a very good preparation for what a public historian might be involved with. As well, it's important to stay connected with a network of historians across the country. That's why we have the CHA to provide this network for us and we want to encourage as many young historians, whether they are interested in public history or not, to come and join the CHA.

We're all historians, whether we work in universities, for public agencies, or as independent scholars – the CHA is there to represent us all.

CHA Bulletin: What are you reading right now?

LD: I have been reading Rolf Tiedemann's recent English-language translation of Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project*, a great work of history and historical criticism that offers us an alternative model for conceptualizing and presenting history. Another book I have been reading is Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*, including his drafts, related correspondence, and poems that influenced his

masterpiece. It's not only a notable contribution to American literature – it represents a defining moment in the struggle for free speech in the post-war era and Ginsberg was consciously documenting that period, so you could say it's also a work of history.

CHA Bulletin: How did you get involved with the CHA?

LD: I was first invited to be a commentator at the CHA conference in Guelph in 1984. I really enjoyed the experience and I have delivered many papers and commentaries at the annual conference since then. When I'm at a conference, I like to learn about what is going on in different fields. I've been involved in the CHA particularly in the last decade, when I've attended most of the conferences and presented almost every year. In 2005, the Nominating Committee invited me to stand for election and I was elected to council where I chaired the Advocacy Committee. It was a pleasure to work with Margaret Conrad, Craig Heron, and the Advocacy Committee on various issues. Last year I was honoured when the Nominating Committee asked me to stand for Vice President. I'm trying hard to fulfill this important responsibility.

CHA Bulletin: You've written about the television documentary series *Canada: A People's History*. What do you think is interesting in terms of history on TV right now?

LD: AMC's *Mad Men* – it's irresistible and also so true to my remembrance of that period right down to the clothing, the furniture, the music, but also the patriarchy, the paranoia and the down side of the apogee of North American progress. It's a real slice of social history.

CHA Bulletin: Thanks, Lyle, for taking the time to meet with me here in Ottawa.



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