



In Memoriam: David R. Spencer

David R. Spencer, founding editor of the *Canadian Journal of Media Studies*, was more than just a prolific scholar of communication in Canada. He was more than just an influential educator and an innovator in scholarly publishing. A devoted family man, a skilful raconteur, and a delightful companion to all who came to know him, Dr. Spencer was a rare character whose whole greatly exceeded the sum of his eclectic parts. He died on February 29 in London, Ontario after a lengthy battle with cancer. He was 74.

Dr. Spencer's academic accomplishments were voluminous, yet they were dwarfed by his outsized personal qualities, especially his story-telling abilities. "It was impossible to be around him very long without finding yourself laughing at some story that he told or some comment that he made," recalled Pat Washburn of Ohio University, a fellow journalism historian. "I always looked forward to seeing him at academic meetings" (Washburn, 2016). Dr. Spencer's yarn-spinning prowess came naturally but was the result of years of practice. He was a radio journalist in Montreal and Toronto for a decade before beginning a second career teaching the subject. A 1962 graduate of Ryerson Polytechnic Institute's program in Radio and

Television Arts, he worked as an announcer, producer, and production manager at CJAD-CJFM in Montreal and CKFM in Toronto. One day, he told an interviewer in 2012, he decided to quit suddenly and pursue other interests. A year or so later, a friend told him about an opening in the Radio Broadcasting program at Humber College to teach news and documentary writing. He applied but received a rejection letter. "About three months later, I got a call from the dean's office," Dr. Spencer recalled. "The person said, 'You applied for this position, but we were unable to make an appointment. Would you consider having your resume reconsidered?' I thought, 'Sure, what have I got to lose?'

So I returned to Humber and did an extensive interview before a committee. They then told me to go home and stick by the telephone, and at exactly 9:00 the successful candidate will be called, and the unsuccessful candidates will be called at 9:15. At exactly 9:00, I received a call in which they said, "We would like to discuss your appointment with us" (Quoted in Smith, 2013: 434-435).

Once on the faculty at Humber, the scholar in Dr. Spencer blossomed. He studied for his Ph.D. in History and Philosophy at the University of Toronto, and while ABD in 1987 he took an appointment in the Graduate School of Journalism at the University of Western Ontario, finishing his dissertation three years later. He would go on to serve at UWO as Associate Dean, Acting Dean, Rogers Chair for Studies in Journalism and New Technologies, and a founding member of the Faculty of Information and Media Studies (FIMS). He was promoted to Full Professor in 2002. Dr. Spencer also served as Head of the History Division of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication, and as President of the American Journalism Historians Association. He was twice nominated for UWO's prestigious Bank of Nova Scotia Teaching Award and also sat on the Board of Directors of the Gordon Sinclair Foundation.

In 1993, Dr. Spencer was instrumental in the campaign that saved Western's program in journalism. After university administration decided to drop the one-year Master's degree in a cost-cutting move, the UWO Senate voted 45-34 to approve the decision. Ratification by the university's Board of Governors was expected to be a formality. Faculty members and students, however, collected 220 letters of support and petitions protesting the planned closing that were signed by more than 650 journalists from across Canada and by almost 2,000 people on campus. It was a story Dr. Spencer reveled in re-telling. "The media rallied to the cause," he told a Toronto conference in 2005. "The tide was turning, but it was not enough." By the time the Board of Governors was set to meet, it was predicted that the vote would pass narrowly. "Then came the thunderbolt," he told the News Division of the Special Libraries Association.

The Provost chose to absent himself from the most important Board meeting of the year, the one which would hear his initiative, to attend an Iron Man competition in Hawaii. In his place the associate vice president was to take the lead in getting the motion through the Board. But as one supporter of the journalism school pointed out, the Board's constitution did not allow proxy votes. The Provost had just lost one vote which would prove to be significant (Spencer, 2005).

When the votes were counted, the motion to dissolve the journalism program was tied 12-12 and the associate vice president was about to cast the deciding vote for the administration. "One board member noted that there were 25 votes around the table and asked the chair to do a recount," Dr. Spencer told conference attendees, who by this time were no doubt spellbound. "Again twelve members voted in favour of the administration's motion but 13 voted against it. Journalism would remain at Western" (Spencer, 2005). His dramatic re-telling of that tale was always classic David Spencer.

A lover of books, Dr. Spencer was a prolific book reviewer for numerous journals and also authored three books of his own:

- *The Yellow Journalism and the Rise of America as a World Power* (Northwestern University Press, 2007);
- *Transit Progress Derailed: Ontario Hydro's Radial Electric Railway Scheme* (DC Books, 2012); and
- *Drawing Borders: A Cartoon History of Canadian/American Relations in the Gilded Age* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2013).

In 2007, as a guest editor of the media history journal *American Journalism*, Dr. Spencer continued its tradition of naming a "Dozen Best" list of books. He chose books on Canadian journalism and media history as the subject of his list. His preface to the list, however, may have ruffled a few Canadian feathers. "One of the great regrets in searching for meaningful titles in Canadian journalism and media history is just how few there are," he wrote. "Even when accounting for the obvious differences in population between Canada and her other English-speaking partners, the United Kingdom and the United States, the output is rather meager. . . . Hopefully there will be much more to come" (Spencer, 2007: 217). His list:

1. Paul Rutherford, *Victorian Authority: The Daily Press in Late Nineteenth-Century Canada*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982.
2. Frank W. Peers, *The Politics of Canadian Broadcasting*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969.
3. Cyrille Felteau, *Histoire de La Presse, Tome 1, Le Livre du Peuple, 1884-1916*. Montreal: Les Editions La Presse, 1983.
4. Mary Vipond, *Listening In*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1992.

5. Robert Babe (ed.) *Canadian Communication Thought*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000.
6. Minko Sotiron, *From Politics To Profit*. Montreal: McGill Queen's University Press, 1997.
7. Jean Guy Rens, *The Invisible Empire (L'Empire Invisible)*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001.
8. Michael Nolan and Walter J. Blackburn, *A Man For All Media*. Toronto: Macmillan, 1989.
9. Wilfrid Kesterton, *A History of Journalism In Canada*. Ottawa, Ontario: Carleton University Press, 1984.
10. Carman Cumming, *Sketches of a Young Country*. Toronto: The University of Toronto Press, 1997.
11. Ron Poulton, *The Paper Tyrant*. Toronto: Clarke Irwin, 1971.
12. J. M. S. Careless, *Brown of The Globe*, Vols. 1 and 2. Toronto: MacMillan, 1959 and 1963.

His interest in books on Canadian media made Dr. Spencer a natural choice as the founding book review editor for J-Source, a website of the Canadian Journalism Project, when it was established in 2007. By then Dr. Spencer was already editing CJMS, which he helped conceive as an online alternative to the long-publishing *Canadian Journal of Communication*. "Hopefully we can take our place beside those publications which have already set the standards for media scholarship in this country," he wrote in the inaugural issue of CJMS in 2006. "From our modest beginnings, we hope to expand over the next few years as the increasing interest in communication and media studies continues to make its growing presence felt on Canadian university campuses" (Spencer, 2006).

Dr. Spencer's research interests, which in addition to journalism history included labor journalism and political cartooning,

were out of the mainstream of communication research. He contributed a chapter on alternative journalism in Canada, for example, to the well-received 1995 book *Newsworkers* (Spencer, 1995). “I like finding out about things that other people don’t think about,” Dr. Spencer explained in 2012. “Thinking about the labor press and cartooning, and the women’s issues I’ve written about as well, I think there are people out there whose voices need to be heard, or whose voices in the past have helped shape what we do” (Quoted in Smith, 2013: 435). The root of these interests was undoubtedly Dr. Spencer’s immense compassion. Tales of his kindness toward colleagues, for example, are legendary. “He was compassionate toward all,” noted Dean of FIMS Thomas Carmichael, “welcoming to new faculty, supportive of his junior colleagues, encouraging when it was needed, and all of that he conveyed with a wise, comic appreciation of the slings, arrows and ironies of everyday life in academia” (Quoted in Smith Fullerton, 2016). I can also attest to Dr. Spencer’s kindness. After I met him at a conference while I was a doctoral student in 1998, he encouraged me greatly in my career, writing a nice review of my 2001 book *Pacific Press*, offering to publish my papers in CJMS, and sending me books to review for J-Source, even when I was as far away as Fiji. When I mentioned that I would have to pay my own way to present a paper at the 2005 Canadian Communication Association conference in London because I was between teaching positions, he generously billeted me in his own home, arranged to chair my session, and looked the other way when I neglected to pay my registration fee.

Dr. Spencer is survived by his wife Judi, daughters Shara and Kyra Lynn, and grandsons Sam and Nicholas. He will be greatly missed by his many friends and extended family members, scores of colleagues, legions of students, and his adoring cats.

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