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Review of *Always an Adventure: An Autobiography* by Hugh A. Dempsey

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Autobiography has been dismissed as the most self-indulgent of literary forms—biographer Humphrey Carter called it the “most respectable form of lying”—but Always an Adventure seems a little deficient in these respects. Instead, it offers a forthright account of the life of one of Canada’s most eminent public historians.

After starting his working life in 1947 as a sign painter, Hugh Dempsey quickly moved on to become a newspaper reporter and publicist before taking up a career with the Glenbow Museum and Archives in Calgary. His book discusses the early, and sometimes contentious, history of the Glenbow, and Dempsey’s stories of finding major archival collections in basements and abandoned buildings seem almost incredible now in a world of records management and collection acquisition committees. Similarly, the museum’s history and ethnography programs often purchased items from people who just arrived at the museum’s front desk, literally artifact in hand, although Dempsey was a stickler for ensuring that information about provenance and function was collected and that donors were treated with a modicum of respect and understanding.

Dempsey is better known as an author, and for over half a century the core of his work has been the history of western Canada’s Aboriginal peoples. Dempsey notes that it was an assignment to cover a meeting of the Indian Association of Alberta (IAA) in 1950 that changed the entire course of his life. Through the meeting’s unfolding, he became a “convert to the Indian rights movement,” met much of the then-leadership of Alberta’s Aboriginal communities, and—crucially—his future wife, Pauline Gladstone, the daughter of the president of the IAA, James Gladstone.

Gladstone was a respected leader of the Blood First Nation, and he and his family helped Dempsey gain a level of knowledge about Aboriginal communities that few other non-Aboriginal people in Canada of the time could claim. This allowed him to begin collecting material for a series of influential books and articles on Aboriginal history, including major biographies of Crowfoot, Red Crow, and Big Bear. These gave a human face to issues that other Canadian historians often treated simply as legal or public policy concerns.

Readers of Dempsey’s autobiography will find it a valuable source of inside information on museum and archives programs and their development in western Canada, along with the shaping of the career of a prolific author with extraordinary access to Aboriginal elders and ceremonialists and their insights into their communities’ histories.

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