

**Labour**

Journal of Canadian Labour Studies

**Le Travail**

Revue d'Études Ouvrières Canadiennes



# Farewell, Walter Hildebrandt Historian, Poet, Publisher, and Promoter of Indigenous Sovereignty and Anti-imperialism

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Volume 89, Spring 2022

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1090024ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.52975/lt.2022v89.003>

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Publisher(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (print)

1911-4842 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

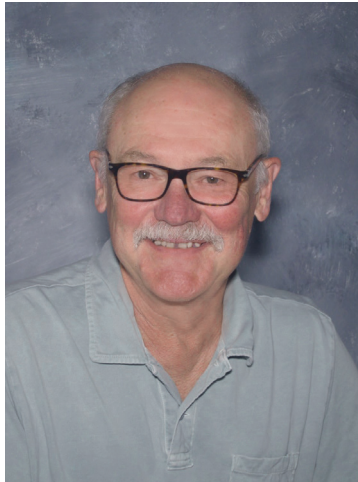
Cite this document

Finkel, A. (2022). Farewell, Walter Hildebrandt: Historian, Poet, Publisher, and Promoter of Indigenous Sovereignty and Anti-imperialism. *Labour / Le Travail*, 89, 13–26. <https://doi.org/10.52975/lt.2022v89.003>

## OBITUARY / NÉCROLOGIE

# Farewell, Walter Hildebrandt: Historian, Poet, Publisher, and Promoter of Indigenous Sovereignty and Anti-imperialism

**Alvin Finkel**, Athabasca University



Walter Hildebrandt (1951–2021)

WALTER HILDEBRANDT REPRESENTED a classic and now all too rare Prairie radicalism that blended grassroots egalitarianism with populist agitation and Marxism in equal measures, which some left-wing scholars might find a strange brew. It made sense in a region where a sense of marginalization has produced various hybrid ideologies. Walter was garrulous, funny, and always in search of new learning. His sudden passing from a heart attack on 11 October 2021, while on holiday in Vancouver with his wife, Sarah Carter, shocked and

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Alvin Finkel, "Farewell, Walter Hildebrandt: Historian, Poet, Publisher, and Promoter of Indigenous Sovereignty and Anti-imperialism," *Labour/Le Travail* 89 (Spring 2022): 13–26. <https://doi.org/10.52975/llt.2022v89.003>

saddened his family and friends alike. Though he had had some health challenges, Walter kept fit with daily visits to the squash court or Aquafit classes at the Glenora Club and by bicycling almost everywhere. How could someone so vibrant and happy be gone so soon after turning 70?

Walter's parents had immigrated from Russia and Germany to Canada and were living in Brooks, Alberta, when Walter was born. They moved to Saskatoon while he was quite young, and Walter attended school and university there, becoming a loyal lifelong Saskatchewan Roughriders fan. It was at the University of Saskatchewan where he met Sarah, whose stellar contributions to Canadian history he always spoke of with pride. They moved in 1979 to Winnipeg, where Walter became a historian for Parks Canada, doing research that would inform two monographs published in 1994: *Views from Fort Battleford: Constructed Visions of an Anglo-Canadian West* and *The Cypress Hills: The Land and Its People*. Both books are marked by Walter's deep respect for the cultures and social values of Indigenous societies and his analysis of the imperatives of colonialism in the economic and cultural spheres.

Challenging earlier work that praised the supposed protection that the North West Mounted Police, predecessor of the RCMP, had provided Indigenous people in the settler period, Walter detailed the NWMP's interactions with the First Nations and concluded, "A careful examination of the acculturation process shows the police involved in both overt and subtle forms of cultural subjugation that reflected their belief in the superiority of the culture they represented and were to impose. They remained agents of the Anglo-Canadian hegemony over the West, often treating the local people as inferiors and sneering at their culture. This they did as much by ignoring the Native community as through overt acts of physical force."<sup>1</sup>

In 1992 Walter and Sarah, and their daughter, Mary, who was born in Winnipeg, moved to Calgary, where Sarah taught at the University of Calgary and Walter, in a career change, became director of the University of Calgary Press. As director, Walter made special efforts to expand the Press's acquisitions of manuscripts related to Indigenous studies and particularly those that involved Indigenous participation. But he did not just acquire manuscripts; he continued researching and writing and emphasizing the voices of Indigenous people. One product of that emphasis was the masterful account of the Blackfoot interaction with Europeans, *The True Spirit and Original Intent of Treaty 7*, which the Treaty 7 Tribal Council produced in conjunction with Dorothy Rider, Walter, and Sarah. McGill-Queen's University Press published the book in 1996, and the following year it won the annual Gustavus Myers Award for outstanding work on intolerance in North America. The book includes the voices of about 80 Blackfoot Elders regarding their knowledge

1. Walter Hildebrandt, *Views from Fort Battleford: Constructed Visions of an Anglo-Canadian West* (Edmonton: Athabasca University Press, 2008), 36.

of the treaty-making process, interspersed with historical documents and the Blackfoot understanding of the meaning of these documents.

In 2000, the University of Calgary Press published *Treaty Elders of Saskatchewan: Our Dream Is That Our Peoples Will One Day Be Clearly Recognized as Nations*, a collaborative work between Walter and Harold Cardinal, one of Canada's most celebrated Indigenous activists. Written for a popular audience, the book focuses on an explanation of the social values and traditions that underpin Cree and other Indigenous societies and the ways in which those values, if more widely accepted, could underwrite relations between sovereign Indigenous peoples and the settler peoples.

In addition to the privileging of Indigenous work, UCalgary Press under Walter's direction emphasized work on settler societies on the Prairies that showed co-operative principles at work even if those often were stained by disdain for the Indigenous peoples whose lands were dispossessed so that such communities could exist. Walter was proud of the historic co-operative tradition in Prairie Canada, embodied by the history of the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation, and lamented its apparent passing in the modern period as small independent farms gave way to agri-business and the co-operative movement became infected with capitalist principles.

In 2006, Walter agreed to be the founding director of Athabasca University Press. Frits Pannekoek, the president of the university, was responsible for starting the Press. It would be Canada's first scholarly press to follow open access policy, providing free access to all of its books on its website in addition to printed versions that carried a price tag. It was a bold undertaking in a province where the other two university presses were expected to run a break-even shop and could hardly consider such an approach at the time. Frits had been Walter's boss at U of C Press, and he asked me if I would be the first chair of the editorial committee for AU Press. "You and Walter think alike and will get along really well," he assured me, and that was certainly true. Walter was almost embarrassingly enthusiastic about everything I had written and viewed me as an obvious ally for the kind of press he wanted to launch.

Walter wanted the Press to feature a mix of scholarly and popular work, all with a focus on radical critiques of society and root-and-branch proposals for change. When I suggested that we could be a catalyst for labour history and labour studies, which were underdeveloped in Alberta, he made clear that he wanted us to become the go-to publisher for all of Canada for works involving working people and socialism. Increasingly disillusioned by the global embrace of neoliberalism, his own socialist beliefs had become only firmer, and he was a fan of the Slovenian Marxist philosopher Slavoj Žižek, among other anti-capitalist critics. One of Walter's books of poetry, *The Time in Between/Adorno's Daemons*, was inspired by his reading of the Marxist cultural critics Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno and their analyses of the dehumanizing, anti-communitarian character of late capitalism.

Just months after AU Press began operation, it became clear that Memorial University planned to dramatically increase publishing costs for *Labour/Le Travail* to the point where the journal's financial future would be in question. Walter, who decided from the get-go that he wanted the Press to host avant-garde journals, made a generous offer to *L/LT* and to the Canadian Committee on Labour History regarding its book-publishing series, and beginning with Issue 60 of the journal (Fall 2007), AU Press is home to both *L/LT* and *CCLH* publications including the *Working Canadians* series.

Walter also made sure that AU Press published a great deal of poetry, well aware that such collections are virtually always money losers for a publishing house. Walter's own writing career shifted over time from producing monographs to poetry, which he believed could distil the insights of research-based work with fewer and more evocative words than scholarly studies. He partnered with talented artists who could match his powerful words with equally evocative images. Altogether, he would produce fourteen books of poetry, including one that will be published posthumously. One of his books of poetry, *Where the Land Gets Broken*, was awarded the Stephan G. Stephansson Award for Poetry in 2005 by the Writers Guild of Alberta.

While Walter's poetry was wide-ranging in terms of topics, much of it was documentary, attempting to approach issues of social justice and injustice. His major subject remained the impact of imperialism, colonialism, and capitalism on the lives of Indigenous peoples. Here we reprint a short selection from Walter's long poem "Let Them Eat Grass/The Dakota Wars 1862."<sup>2</sup> Appearing in his 2016 book *Documentaries: Poems*, it reveals the intensity of his feelings about the dispossession of Indigenous people across North America and the perfidy of the settler side in its cynical interpretations of its obligations in treaties. While the Indigenous signatories had been promised recognition of their sovereignty and rights to receive compensation for lands they generously assigned for European settlement, it soon became evident that these promises were a ruse to make dispossession easier. By the time he published *Documentaries: Poems*, Walter had resigned from AU Press and in his "retirement" was working with Indigenous groups preparing legal cases against the numerous violations of treaty promises that began almost as soon as the ink had dried.

Walter was writing *Documentaries: Poems* as the centenary of the 1919 Winnipeg General Strike approached. That pivotal event, as Walter understood it, was part of a national and global postwar uprising against the system that had created a bloody war and sacrificed workers' lives while capitalist profits soared. The language of the short excerpt we provide of Walter's extensive poetic examination of the Winnipeg strike in his long poem echoes his revulsion with the exploitation that had unsettled millennial Indigenous

2. Walter Hildebrandt, *Documentaries: Poems* (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 2016), 25, 30–34.

societies.<sup>3</sup> In both cases he celebrates the movements that rose up in response and asserted human values over the greed and domination that capitalism always extolled.

## LET THEM EAT GRASS / THE DAKOTA WARS 1862

Walter Hildebrandt

...

Treaties

had been  
     the hope for both  
         and as the ground moved  
             the rules changed  
         to share the land  
     to make profits  
         exchange/removal  
             coexistence/genocide  
     a better life or profits  
 peaceful coexistence/army removals  
     either/or  
     (trying) and/but  
         (returning) civilization/savagery  
     either/or  
         need for cultural conformity  
 replacing the peaceful and successful  
     the Dakota had lived peacefully  
         next to newcomers  
             for a long time

. . . . .

3. Hildebrandt, *Documentaries*, 43, 52, 53.

many fled to Canada  
across the Medicine Line  
refugees to the protection  
of the Queen  
once an ally  
Oak River—Sioux Valley  
Pipestone  
Bird Tail Creek  
Dakota Tipi  
Standing Buffalo  
Wahpeton  
White Cap  
all across  
Saskatchewan and Manitoba  
relegated  
as non-treaty  
to small reserves  
by the 1870s some return  
to homelands  
never treated as prisoners of war  
but as criminals

. . . . .

in 1862 these Dakota  
    refused rations  
        live without supplies  
            refused  
                annuity payments  
            witnessing the new worth of the land  
land values  
    exchange values  
the new private property  
    shift from fur–trading times  
        dissolution of kinships  
            imposed  
                by Rangers  
                    supremacists  
.  
. . . . .  
finally the great hope  
    treaties had promised  
    those who could ignore them  
        did the damage  
those who could take prisoners  
    those with the fire power  
        those who could constitute “the enemy”  
            those who built the scaffolds  
the treaty became a gun  
    guns and gallows  
for long–standing reciprocal friendship and trade  
    dispersals and punishments  
        war crimes  
            ethnic cleansing



amnesia

for decades

restitution

that never came

removals

legislated violence

humiliations

marginalization

loss of homelands

windows

onto this complex

history

documentaries

## WINNIPEG 1919

Walter Hildebrandt

. . .

May 15

a strike is called

amid high unemployment

soldiers returning

businessmen

grown rich on war

profits

labour's wages

fell behind

scandals

the Ross rifle

Flavelle affair

rotten hay

shipped to armed forces

strikes across the country

over union recognition

profiteering

unemployment

. . . . .

nationalisms grew  
profits  
colonies  
empires continued  
a precise and homogeneous continuum  
of the passage of time prevailed  
in the national narratives  
steady progress  
chronological ticking  
of the clock  
. . . . .  
yet for a moment in 1919  
the dull time line of Whiggish history broken



THINKING OF EVENTS that gave Walter pleasure and inspired his poetic imagination, Sarah noted in her obituary for him that “Walter would be so pleased to learn that on the day he died orca whales appeared for the first time in decades in Coal Harbour and there was a rare display of northern lights that dazzled Vancouverites.” Along similar lines, I think he would have appreciated Tom Wayman’s poem “Reply,” which we publish here along with two other Wayman contributions as a tribute to Walter because of the similarity of many of their poetic preoccupations. “Reply” begins with “October rain,” marking the month of Walter’s death, and asks, “To whom are we beautiful as we go?”

Tom’s new poems include reflections on work and the silencing of the voices of workers and all others who seek a post-capitalist future, reflected in the life experiences of his own parents who, during the Cold War, felt the need to be silent in order to protect their children from what appeared to be an unrelentingly repressive society that claimed to be all about freedom. It was such illusions that Walter was committed to stripping bare both in his monographs and in his poetry. His works and the memory of this vibrant, decent human being leave a beautiful legacy.

REPLY

Tom Wayman

*To whom  
are we beautiful  
as we go?*

*—David Ignatow, "Three in Transition"*

October rain  
strikes leaves  
just beginning to transfigure  
to gold or scarlet; each time a drop  
connects, the leaf  
quivers

though whether with the same  
ecstasy  
water brought in spring  
or in memory  
of that delight  
I cannot say

Perhaps we are beautiful  
to water as we go  
which equally gives itself to the duff  
these leaves will join after death  
and to the green stems hidden underground  
in their dark seeds

## WHEN THE FUTURE WORE A MASK: MY PARENTS AT WAR

Tom Wayman

My parents endured more than twenty years  
of wavering, worrying expectations. The war  
was only an aspect of those decades  
of anxiety: one setback overseas  
followed by another, and this after  
fascism's triumph in Spain, the arrests  
and murders of Jews in Germany,  
then Austria, then occupied Europe.  
At the end of resistance in England,  
would an invasion flotilla steam up the St. Lawrence  
headed for Montreal, cheered on by  
Arcand's Quebecois Blue Shirts  
and the Catholic priesthood?

As an Ottawa Valley pulp mill employee, my father  
was declared exempt from conscription  
but he and others from the plant's lab  
joined the reserves, joking about how their section  
were all PhDs except their corporal,  
a French-Canadian educated no further than  
grade school. My father was an excellent shot  
due to, he claimed, his hours at a microscope.  
Even years later he remembered  
how to swing his arms in a marching step.  
A photo of a picnic after the war shows him  
wearing a T-shirt bearing the regiment's crest.

Yet how strange to serve as a soldier  
in the army of a state he and my mother  
had for years worked to oppose.

V-E Day,  
V-J Day, and the Party illegal since 1940,  
with a new wave of arrests in 1945  
as the Cold War began: my parents having met  
during the Depression at a Toronto YCL picnic  
while my mother edited a publication  
for the Young Pioneers. My father, though, was informed  
by his thesis supervisor that he had to choose  
between his activism and being allowed to proceed

to his degree. For my parents, education was the only sure route out of their childhoods' poverty: his father a garment factory operative when he worked, hers a cabinet maker when he worked. My father insisted his election, in his youth, as secretary of a furrier's union local was because he was the only member who could read and write English. He chose to continue his studies, my mother, too, stepping back from Party work.

Still, when a journalist friend of theirs was released from jail in 1945 for lack of evidence, he stayed at my parents' to recuperate.

In the mill town on the Ottawa River where the majority was Francophone, because of the Church's anti-Semitism, my parents were as much at risk for being born Jews as for having been Communists. Children of my father's colleagues recall being instructed by their parents never to mention in public my parents' background, because the priests would agitate their congregations to demand my family's expulsion from the town. The clergy had already driven out of the community a merchant discovered to be of Jewish descent.

No word of any of this inside the family while I was growing up. The threat of loss of education, loss of job kept my parents silent as did their wish that their children would not know fear. Only when my father was offered a better position at a B.C. mill and we moved west did the constant hovering danger lessen for my parents. Our home's bulging bookcases when I was a child, however, held no left-wing volumes at all: the sanitized shelves forming the permanent scars of a disease.

## ARS POETICA: NAIL

Tom Wayman

When I bent my ear close to  
 a nail—two inch, common, galvanized  
 I use to repair my fence rails—  
 a clamor of voices and engines  
 was audible. I stepped inside the nail  
 where a small skid-steer loader,  
 bucket filled with earth, was backing up  
 to the rhythmic noise of the reverse alarm.  
 Nearby a man operated a small winch  
 to lift roofing shingles up a ladder. I saw  
 a woman, first into an extensive office in the morning,  
 turn on the overhead lights, heard  
 two truckers talking in a parking lot  
 over the noise of one of their tractors' diesels,  
 watched a nurse starting a shift  
 peer at a medical chart on a screen.

I flagged down a school teacher.  
*How can a nail secure anything?* I asked.  
*If you hammer it into wood, why doesn't it slip out*  
*from the hole it made going in?*  
 "You want someone to unplug your drains?"  
 she said. "Sell you insurance? Gasoline?  
 Assemble a new shirt? All we do  
 that shapes us, and those around us  
 because of our work  
 pushes the diameter of the nail  
 outward against what constrains it."  
*But wouldn't, over time, that grip*  
*loosen, I protested, and the nail fall out?*  
 "One day the expanding nail  
 will do more than build, connect,  
 imagine," was the answer I got.  
 "One day the nail itself  
 will be a house."

*Madwoman,*  
 I thought, and stepped out of the racket  
 and commotion, into sunlight.  
 Somehow my right hand  
 held a hammer.