Epilogue

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Editor's note

This first issue of the academic year presents the schedule of our Lunch With … events, with the University President leading off as speaker. Gordon Rostoker has provided a summary of the lively session of the Current Affairs Salon held in August. I have tried my hand in creative writing, with an account of the trouble I had in coping with the new security system on University email. Alas the In Memoriam box is long, with the loss of long-standing members of the Association of Retired Academics; including its beloved founding member Alison Scott-Prelorentzos. The issue ends with the reprint of an old Mousing Around column by the late Keith Smillie.

Ruth Gruhn

Notices

Schedule of Lunch With … events … in Fall term 2023

27 September
University President Bill Flanagan will speak on the future development of the University (see p. 2 for abstract)
25 October
The Annual General Meeting
22 November
Speaker and topic TBA.

Christmas Brunch 16 December

The AGM will likely be a Zoom meeting, but all other functions will be held in person in the Papaschase Room or the Saskatchewan Room at the University Club.

A description of President Flanagan's presentation, provided by the President's Office:

Bill Flanagan, president and vice-chancellor of the University of Alberta, will be joining our meeting on 27 September. He will provide an overview of the new University strategic plan that sets a course to advance the University's teaching, research, and community engagement. The 10-year plan represents a collective vision; and affirms the U of A commitment to equity, diversity, and inclusion; and the Braiding Past, Present, and Future: Indigenous Strategic Plan.

Reports

Current Affairs Salon

On August 7 the Current Affairs Salon met *in person* for the first time since the pandemic to discuss issues pertaining to the fate of democracies in modern times. Gordon Rostoker introduced the topic by identifying books by various authors who studied the decline of societies. He particularly recommended *The Foundation Trilogy* by Issac Asimov, which evolved in the 1940s and early 1950s, and which had much to say about how societies decline. He then turned the floor over to Don Carmichael, who began by describing Aristotle's definitions of forms of government including democracies. He took note of populism, which seems to be found in many locales around the world in modern times, noting that one can have systems in which democracy and populism coexist. He made particular reference to Alberta in the 1930s into the 1960s, where such a situation described the form of government. He concluded by referring to a book by Charles Taylor, who attributed the decline of democracies to a hollowing out from within.

There followed an active discussion focusing on what was happening in Canada, with particular emphasis on the public health care system. Many Canadians think of their identify as Canadians as defined by our public health care system, although it is obviously encountering serous problems in meeting the needs of Canadians, starting even before the pandemic. Some concern was expressed over the ability of politicians to manage increasingly more complex government mandates with skill sets that are inadequate for the job. Mention was also made of how politicians have found that the path to re-election is marked by convincing the electorate that they should pay less taxes – this action leads to a decrease in revenues, causing governments to underfund the areas for which they are responsible. Some concern was expressed about the decline in support for higher education, a topic that will be addressed in a forthcoming meeting of the Current Affairs Salon.

The meeting concluded by discussing the issue of whether it was preferable to have CAS meetings via Zoom (as they were during the pandemic) or *in person*. It was almost unanimous that the meetings should be *in person*, so the next meeting will be *in person* on October 5 in the Association office at University Terrace. However, it was also suggested that an item be placed in the Newsletter asking if there are any members who would like to see some Zoom sessions of the Salon.

Gordon Rostoker

The Story of the Struggle of an Ancient Professor with the

New University Email Security System

On a Saturday in late July, I sat at my home iMac to check my University email, following the usual route of clicking on the U of A icon in my Favourites screen on Safari; and when required, I entered my password and CCID and clicked on the login box. Instead of a large polychrome M quickly followed by my inbox, however, I got a beige-coloured box, asking for a numerical six-digit passcode. In an orange strip at the bottom of the box was a statement that my computer was more than three years old and urged me to upgrade its operating system. What's this about??? How do they know that my computer was over three years old? For an instant I thought this was a scam: no, it can't be, with all the warnings one received from Information and Technology Services (ITS) if an incoming email is external to the University, they would not have allowed a scam to sneak in. So I clicked on a What's This? icon in the box, and pages of detailed instruction appeared. I was to download a security app called Duo Mobile on my smartphone, and use that to generate the required six-digit passcode.

The problem in this first episode was the requirement of a smartphone. For years I had carried a small mobile phone for emergencies, but it was "dumb": no apps. Last year, however, the server had warned that the little phone would no longer operate in the States; so as I was to attend a conference in Oregon and then visit family in Arizona in April and May, I had been forced to buy a smartphone, a basic Samsung model with a cheap plan. Of course no instruction book came with it (you are expected to be experienced, or figure it out by yourself). Friends showed me how to use the phone function and text function, and that was all that I planned to do with it. I keep it in *off* status in a pouch in my purse.

Well, all that July Saturday morning I tried to comply with the ITS instructions. Before anything else, I had to turn on the smartphone, and then connect it to my Wi Fi; but I couldn't see a Wi Fi icon on its screen; nor was there an app store in order to find the icon for Duo Mobile. To make this long story a bit shorter, I'll skip the details and just say that after a few long hours of trial and error, I did manage to find the Wi Fi icon and to download the required app. With my clumsy swiping and tapping, the phone was going dark every few minutes, requiring me to squeeze the *on* switch again and again; and when I did manage to get a six-digit number out of the Duo Mobile app, an orange strip at the base of the beige-coloured box on my computer screen declared that time had expired; and I had to start all over again. As lunchtime came, I decided the hell with it and I'll try again another day.

With black thoughts about ITS even though I knew full well that the problem lay in my ineptitude in modern technology, I spent the next week seeking a mentor among friends and colleagues in my Department in the Tory building; but it is dead during July and August, with students and staff on vacation, on field research, or working at home. Now with the University's "restructuring," even the office staff members are based on another floor in Tory. I go in to my office on the 13th floor on Mondays and Wednesdays, often to find that I am the only person on the floor. As the days went by, every now and then I tried again to get access to my University email but just for a few minutes that I could spare. One day, though, the orange strip at the bottom of the beige box declared that I had to put on a PIN for secure

access to my smartphone! The ITS people were not only into my computer but even my mobile phone! At least this order was relatively easy for me to carry out. I clicked on the cogged wheel icon for Settings on the phone; and following the instructions under Security features, I was able to install a PIN on the phone. To my amazement and delight, the big polychrome M appeared on my iMac screen, and instantly access to my University inbox was opened. My mistaken idea that I would have to go through the ITS routine every time and therefore keep my mobile phone at my computer was squashed, as for two weeks thereafter I was able to access my email directly after logging in with my usual password. I congratulated myself on my success in finally managing *Tech*. But no…

Now for the second episode: on Saturday afternoon 5 August, the evil beige box appeared again, with the orange strip at the bottom, advising that my older version of Safari (the Apple internet browser) was not secure. I *had* to update the OS (operating system). Impossible – months ago I had discovered that my iMac was too old to accept even the next level of OS. I had known for some time that I should buy a new computer; but as long as my old one did what I needed, I had kept putting off the pain of purchasing a new one, and getting my documents transferred from old to new. Now with the September issue of *Epilogue* to produce, going through that change at this point seemed dangerous, so I put off getting a new computer until early September, even though that meant no University email for weeks. So be it, thought I, even though considering my age, my correspondents in the States and overseas might think that I had passed away.

Well, there was one more chance perhaps to make the system work for me – apply for a fob that would generate the passcode; so I asked the department secretary to call ITS for authorization. She found out that I should phone their number with my "seven-digit ID number" on hand (her follow-up call discovered that the seven-digit ID meant was that on my One Card). So I dug out my One Card and called ITS, and was told to just go to the SUB Bookstore and ask for a fob at the counter. To my surprise the young lady at the counter recognized me, and my affiliation with Anthropology; "I'm glad to meet you", she said graciously. My self-esteem returned. She took my One Card and worked her computer. It was an old card (of course) and the number on it did not work to identify me for ITS, but she had success with my date of birth. She handed over a small white cardboard box containing the fob (which was the size of a flash drive) and said that ITS would activate it in a day or two and notify me by email. Of course I wondered how I could get that message if I couldn't access my email, but the next day the activation message appeared in the beige box. I pushed the green button on the fob, a six-digit number appeared in its window, I copied the number to the beige card, and lo! – the polychrome M appeared and my inbox opened! And the old system is still working as normal every time I log in. Now that it has done its job, I can now put away the fob in a pretty little basket in my computer room; and my mobile phone can stay in its pouch in my purse far away.

Problem resolved at last – I hope. Maybe I'm simply in another two-week grace period. Now that the *Epilogue* is done and out, there is no excuse for delay in getting that new iMac; so I'll be off to West World next week. Wish me luck in the data transfer…

Ruth Gruhn

In Memoriam

George Baldwin	English
Peter Calder	Educational Psychology
Joyce Dillon	APO, Immunology
Tina James	Library
Chris Gordon-Craig	English
Al Kalantar	Chemistry
Kathryn Merrett	English
Bill Pearce	Ophthalmology
Bill Phillips	Rural Economy
Alison Scott-Prelorentzos	Germanic Languages
Anne-Marie Stacey	Department unknown
Keith Stromsmoe	Electrical Engineering
Gordon Unger	AASUA Administration
Jean Young	Elementary Education
John Young	Education Policy Studies

Mousing Around

Keith Smillie

63. Algorithms

Last February we saw the last of the Canadian penny as legal tender, an action that will save the taxpayer an estimated eleven million dollars a year. As the loss of the penny requires the rounding of many prices, the Canadian government published detailed accounts

of how this rounding was to be done. (I even saw a copy of the rules posted on the door of a Tim Hortons!) One version of the rules was the following:

Amounts ending in 1 cent and 2 cents are rounded down to the nearest 10 cents;
Amounts ending in 3 cents and 4 cents are rounded up to the nearest 5 cents;
Amounts ending in 6 cents and 7 cents are rounded down to the nearest 5 cents;
Amounts ending in 8 cents and 9 cents are rounded up to the nearest 10 cents;
Amounts ending in 0 cents and 5 cents remain unchanged.

(One might ask if the cost of a one- or two-cent stamp is 0 cents.) This text was preceded by a diagram illustrating the rules, and followed by this example, illustrated with a picture of a cup of coffee and a sandwich:

Coffee	1.83
Sandwich	2.86
Sum total	4.69
Tax	0.23
Total	4.92
Payment	4.90

We may note that the rounding is done on the total cost only and not on the individual items making up the total.

The above example, which carefully gives the rules for carrying out a numerical procedure, illustrates what the mathematician or computer person would call an *algorithm,* which one dictionary defines as follows: "Any set of rules or step-by-step procedure (orig. for solving problems in mathematics). (*al-Khowarizni* 9c Arab mathematician; influenced by Greek *arithmos,* number)".

While I was thinking about writing this column, I heard of the book *Love in the Time of Algorithms: What Technology Does to Meeting and Mating* by the American journalist and author Dan Slater. One review on the Web began as follows: "This book was a great read. The history around how Internet dating has evolved combined with the anecdotes about how people are adapting to this environment for meeting and mating was fascinating, entertaining and informative. … ".

One of the earliest algorithms on record is for finding the greatest common divisor of two numbers; for example, the g.c.d. of 45 and 108 is 9; and the g.c.d. of 63 and 25 is 1. Because the procedure was first described in Euclid's *Elements* (c. 300 B.C.) it is usually called the Euclidean algorithm. Another early algorithm is one for solving quadratic equations, i.e., equations of the form $ax^2+bx+c=0$, attributed to al-Khowarizni, the 9th century mathematician mentioned earlier. Modern algorithms which we may use daily without realizing it include the PageRank algorithm developed at Stanford University for assigning a rank to every Web page during a search.

Calculations required by an algorithm may be so simple that they may be done very quickly by hand, or so complicated and lengthy that they may not be accomplished by even the fastest computer. In the first category are the penny or GST calculations, and in the

second is the factoring of very large numbers required in public key encryption discussed in a previous column. In between are algorithms that are "good enough for all practical purposes". An example of an algorithm in this class is provided by the Tower of Hanoi puzzle, also discussed in a previous column, in which a number of discs are to be moved from one peg to another by moving only one disc at a time and never putting a disc on a smaller disc. As a child's toy with eight discs the puzzle is nicely manageable; but with sixty-four discs it is not, although the monks in Arthur C. Clark's "The Nine Billion Names of God" were able to accomplish it even using the computers available in the early 1950s.

One heirloom in our family is the 2620-page 1913 India Paper Edition of Webster's New International Dictionary. I looked up "algorithm" in this dictionary, and was referred to "algorism" with the following two entries: "1. The art of calculating with nine figures and zero. 2. The art of calculating with any species of notation; as, the algorisms of fractions, proportions, surds, etc." Incidentally, the word "computer" was not given but there were several entries beginning "comput…" including "comptometer" defined as a "calculating machine" and accompanied with a picture of a mechanical adder designed for desk-top use. How technology influences our language!

Now the word "algorism" is often associated with quotations from Al Gore, both when he was Vice-President and later after the publication of *An Inconvenient Truth.* We shall close with the following two very different Al-Gore-isms taken from a very large selection which may be found on the Web:

"I was recently on a tour of Latin America, and the only regret I have was that I didn't study Latin harder in school so I could converse with those people".

"Two thousand scientists, in a hundred countries, engaged in the most elaborate, well organized scientific collaboration in the history of humankind, have produced long-since a consensus that we will face a string of terrible catastrophes unless we act to prepare ourselves and deal with the underlying causes of global warming".