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Epilogue

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Editor's Note

As is traditional with this publication, the last issue of the 2025/2026 academic year presents the annual reports of the currently- operating ARAS interest groups, submitted by the groups' organizers. Vivien Bosley summarizes the five Lunch With ... presentations of the year. Her report was followed by a description of the books read and discussed by the Book Club, produced by Jan Murie. Topics discussed by the Current Affairs Salon were reviewed by Gordon Rostoker. For the Dining Out Group, Peggy Allegretto listed the many Edmonton restaurants in which the members assembled for good times throughout the year; and for the Travel Group, Kenneth Roy listed the talks on visited places in Central America, South America, and Africa.

Most happily I can report that the In Memoriam box for this issue is the shortest in living memory, with only two entries. The issue closes with an old article by Keith Smillie, citing a book that points out the overload of information that we cope with these days.

Ruth Gruhn

Notices

Our first Lunch With ... occasion of the 2026-2027 academic year will be on 23 September, when Rob Losey of the Department of Anthropology will give a presentation on the history of dogs. On 28 October we will have our annual AGM by Zoom. The November Lunch With ... speaker is still TBA.

A reminder that the lunch (sandwich, soup, dessert squares, and coffee), catered by The Upper Crust Café, is available by 11:30 and costs \$25 per person (payable in person or, preferably, by Interac to ARAS at emirhse@ualberta.ca). Note that the price has increased this year, in response to the increased cost of catering.

Reports

Summary of Lunch With ... Presentations

Members who attended the five Lunch With... events during the fall and winter term enjoyed lively discussion sessions with the speakers, who were happy to field questions and to enter into debate. The speaker for the opening session was Geoff Rockwell from the Department of Philosophy, who presented the advantages and dangers of AI. Speaking from his philosopher's perspective, he discussed whether AI can be used in an ethical manner.

In complete contrast, November's guest, Josephine van Lier, showed up with a vanload of cellos and violas. She explained the difference between them; and the evolution of stringed instruments, especially during the Early Modern period. She illustrated her talk with beautiful samples of baroque music.

We would have had a gap in the series, thanks to the scheduled speaker's bereavement; but the gap was nobly filled by Gordon Rostoker, who is such a stalwart member of our organization. His was "Is there a God? --a science-based answer". As an expert in solar-terrestrial interaction, Gordon is exceptionally well qualified to speak on the subject. He elicited questions from the audience; but no conversions, one way or the other, apparently.

The amazing Alison Criscitiello, co-director of the Ice-core laboratory on campus, was our next speaker. She dazzled us with her accounts and her pictures of arduous treks to the most inhospitable sites on the planet. On one research project, only two of six people made it to the very high elevation on a glacier to await the helicopter bringing in a 500 lb drill. Her work on ice cores she has drilled in various places in the Arctic has brought national and international attention.

We began the year with a Geoff and ended with a Geoff -this time Geoff Holroyd, ornithologist and Chair of the Beaverhill Bird Observatory. He captivated his audience with maps of the migratory patterns of various birds, and with his stories of the work he does banding and tracking the migrating birds which pass through this part of Alberta.

Although Richard Young has stepped away from the Lunch With... committee, it was he who did the initial setting up of these talks, for which we are most grateful.

And of course, it wouldn't be Lunch With... without lunch. All of the above took place accompanied by a plentiful, tasty spread of soup, sandwiches and squares provided at very reasonable cost by Upper Crust.

Vivien Bosley

2025/26 Report of the Book Club

We kicked off the fall term with *Monsignor Quixote* by Graham Greene, a novel patterned after Cervantes' *Don Quixote*. Father Quixote embarks on a road trip with the ex-mayor of his village as Don did with Sancho Panza. The meat of the book are the philosophical discussions between the two travellers, interspersed with sometimes humorous adventures, with a sub-text concerning politics in the Catholic bureaucracy. The book is laced with Greene's subtle humour, and the contrast (and similarities) of the two travellers' religious views. All in all an enjoyable read that led to considerable discussion and reflection on the Cervantes book.

In October we dug into *Machines Like Me* by Ian McEwan, a novel that deals with an alternate history to the 1980s, when 25 artificial humans are created and sold to members of the public. The story follows Adam, bought by Charlie and trained by him and his girlfriend Miranda. Adam soon creates a host of problems for the couple while making a lot of money for Charlie in the stock market, and then giving it away. This fanciful tale addresses the pros and cons such realistic robots with AI abilities. Perhaps a little too fanciful for some of us.

We read *Last Call at the Hotel Imperial* by Deborah Cohen for November. This non-fiction book follows the careers of four reporters as they covered Europe in the years leading up to World War II. There is considerable information on the factors that led to the war and the European leaders involved—I learned quite a bit. However, much of the text described the personal lives of the reporters, including considerable detail of their loves and infidelities, sometimes reading like a Hollywood expose.

We ended the fall term on a lighter note, *Death at the Sign of the Rook* by English mystery writer Kate Atkinson. This is an entry in her Jackson Brodie series, set in a grand country house where the guests are marooned by a snowstorm. Both the snowstorm and the plot thickens, the latter in an almost dizzying manner, with several sub-plots that keep one guessing. It reads like an Agatha Christie mystery, but spiced with Atkinson's humorous asides. A fun book for those of us who are mystery fans.

The new year began with *Clear* by Caryl Davies, a novel set on a remote Scottish island where John, a church minister, has been sent to inform the lone crofter, Ivar, that he has to leave the island. Before he locates the crofter, John is badly hurt in a fall off a cliff, and is found by Ivar, who nurses him back to health. As John gets better he learns words of the nearly extinct language, the only one that Ivar speaks. A feature of the book is how that language is closely linked to details of the local landscape and weather conditions—a glossary of the words John learned is included as an appendix. The ending is unexpected, though perhaps fitting. The writing is spare, but movingly descriptive.

February brought a discussion of *Playground* by Richard Power. The book describes the lives of two Chicago boys, their friendship over chess, and eventual parting after college, one becoming a tech billionaire, the other pursuing writing. A second storyline follows the writer and his wife living on a Pacific island threatened by development of "floating cities"

to be made in their harbour, a project that is sponsored by the tech billionaire. There are further complexities but all the threads come together at the end in a surprising way. At first the storylines seem a little disparate, but all keep one's interest. I found it a satisfying book.

Demon Copperhead, a Pulitzer Prize winner by Barbara Kingsolver, was our book for March. Set in Appalachia in the US; and, like our first book in September, it is patterned after a famous novel, Dickens' *David Copperfield*. The main themes of the story are the child poverty in the area, and more recently, the opioid crisis. Damon (Demon) becomes orphaned at a young age, undergoes ups and downs while with foster families or sometimes family and friends, experiences his own and others addictions, but eventually seems to be on an upward track as and his current girlfriend head east to see the ocean. As usual Kingsolver spins an interesting tale with plenty of social commentary mixed in.

On the Ides of April we discussed *One Day Everyone Will Have Always Been Against This* by Omar El Akkad—it deals with the current controversial genocide in Gaza. The book documents a host of atrocities and somewhat lesser racist actions, and vilifies liberals whose words support the victims involved but who take no remedial action. Although we mostly agreed with the basic arguments made, the book was criticized for its lack of structure and little balance in viewpoint. Our discussion was lively and a bit sobering.

The year wrapped up in May with a discussion of *The Mighty Red* by Louise Erdrich. The setting is the Red River area of eastern North Dakota, farming country where sugar beets dominated the local economy. The story follows several families and their teenagers; and is dominated by a girl who is loved by two boys, one rich, the other not. A dark secret lurks in the background before it is revealed about halfway through the book. As well there is tension as to how the three-way courtship will end up, as well as some other evolving relationships. Interestingly, it is a book club that serves to distribute the gossip in the community. Most of us liked the book, particularly its descriptions of rural and small town life in farming country.

Thus, we have completed another fine year of reading, capably overseen by the convenor, Vivien Bosley, and our Zoom coordinator, Beverley O'Brien—kudos to both! We have now chosen our nine books for the coming year from the 25 nominations from members—it looks like another diverse and provocative array!

The Book Club always welcomes new members—contact Vivien (vbosley@ualberta.ca) if interested and to see this year's reading list (the list of all the books read this year are available on the ARAS website). Note that one can attend meetings in person or via Zoom.

Jan Murie

Report of The Current Affairs Salon

September 2025: The topic for this month was infill, particularly as it applies to Edmonton in recent times. With the attempts by the City to increase population in the inner regions, resistance has developed in mature neighbourhoods. The construction of multifamily dwellings with no provisions for parking reflects the City's attempt to push people to more use of public transit and/or bicycles.

October 2025: This session was devoted to the state of the United Nations. Its ability to make an impact in the world has been severely impacted by the United States refusing to pay its dues. As by far the largest contributor (about \$13 billion compared to the next largest contributor Germany at \$194 million dollars), its decision to underfund the UN has serious implications. The Security Council vetoes of some members makes it nearly impossible to reach agreements on matters of global importance.

November 2025: The Canadian Budget was announced on November 4 so the topic of the Salon was logically the Canadian economy. The question of Canada's relations to China and the possible exchange of removing the 100% tariff on Chinese EV's for the removal of Chinese tariffs on Canadian canola and pork products was worth some discussion.

December 2025: As we came to the end of 2025, armed conflicts were breaking out all over the world, complemented by a number of unstable governments which could fall at any time. Will 2026 simply be a repeat of 2025 in terms of the status of those countries, or will the world heat up some more (both in global temperature and armed conflicts). Will the migrations of large numbers of people continue, or will steps taken by "wealthy countries" force potential migrants to stay in their own countries?

January 2026: The topic this month was Canada's economy and the debt that has been building up over the past decade. Can this buildup continue indefinitely? How will Canada avoid reaching a situation when debt serving costs severely impede the provision of services to the Canadian public. The need to stimulate the economy on the heels of Trump's imposition of tariffs on some Canadian producers involves an increase in the Federal deficit that exacerbates the debt problem.

February 2026: For this session, David Cooper led a discussion on Alberta's cleanup of abandoned oil and gas properties. It asked the question of whether the polluters were paying fair share of the cleanup. It was evident from information made available by the Alberta government that the cost of cleaning up the many abandoned oil wells across the Province vastly exceeded the amount of money provided by the oil industry for cleanup after the wells ceased to produce. This situation left the burden of paying for the cleanup squarely on the backs of the taxpayers in the Province.

March 2026: The topic this month was the recently announced Alberta Budget, which showed a deficit of \$9.4 billion thanks to the sinking price of oil. This deficit comes in the face of rising demands for increased resources for the public education system, and the serious decline in the capability of our Health system to properly serve Albertans.

April 2026: It was impossible to ignore the war in the Middle East at this time, so this session was devoted to addressing some questions. What are the “off ramps” which will bring the fighting to an end? Will an end to the fighting bring the creation of a Palestinian state any closer to reality? The President of Lebanon has ordered Hezbollah to disarm- if that happened would Israel and Lebanon be able to come to a peace agreement? These were some of the questions addressed in this session.

Gordon Rostoker

Dining Out Group

The Dining Out group meets regularly on the last Thursday of every month. The group is usually between 15 and 20 people, so there is lots of lively conversation around the table, and the attendees fast become friends. Dining Out meets all year long; and have met at many Edmonton restaurants in the past year, including The Glass Monkey, Buco, Winston’s, Homefire Grill, Continental Treat, Bahubali, Sorrentino’s, and the Upper Crust. A good time is always on the menu, and we are very happy to welcome new members.

Peggy Allegretto

Travel Group

There have been five interesting talks in the past year, ranging from Africa to South America and Central America. In October, Nils Peterson spoke on “the best of Panama, 20011-2014”. In November, Tom Mill presented a talk on “Brazil: rivers of life”. In January, Bev O’Brien spoke of adventures in Morocco. In March, Linda related her trip fro Buenos Aires to Santiago via Patagonia. In the April presentation, Doug Hube spoke about birds and beasts of South Africa, Zimbabwe, and Botswana.

Kenneth Roy

In Memoriam

Peter Minev

Mathematical and Statistical Science

Dean Spaner

Agriculture

Mousing Around

Keith Smillie

60. Information Fatigue

The Information: A History, A Theory, A Flood by James Gleick is a large book of over 500 pages with a paper jacket intended to give a picture of one of the book's main themes, which is that we have too much information. It has only repeated lines of *The Information* By James Gleick, with the three phrases of the subtitle appearing once only in place of the main title and "Author of *Chaos*" appearing in several places. Gleick is a prominent journalist and expositor of science and technology for the general reader. His first book, *Chaos. Making a New Science*, was first published in 1987; and has been translated into twenty-five languages. Two of his later books, *Genius: The Life and Science of Richard Feynman* and *Isaac Newton*, were short-listed for the Pulitzer Prize.

The Information begins with a Prolog giving an account of the invention of the transistor at the Bell Telephone Laboratories in 1948, and the work of Claude Shannon in the mathematical theory of communication. It was Shannon who introduced the term *bit*, for "binary digit," as the fundamental unit of communication. (This was followed a few years later by the term *byte* for eight binary digits, the number of bits required to represent a single character). The next three chapters give wide-ranging accounts of the evolution of various means of communication, starting with an account of African drum language and the development of the written word, and leading to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, described as "the greatest word book of all".

Subsequent chapters deal such with well-known persons as Charles Babbage and the Difference Engine, Samuel Morse and the telegraph and telephone, George Boole and mathematical logic, Kurt Gödel and computability, Alan Turing and computability and cryptography, Norbert Wiener and cybernetics, James Watson and Francis Crick and the genetic code, and Richard Dawkins and memes. Gleick brings to life in a charming manner both the people and the ages in which they lived. Especially touching is his account in two short sentences of Shannon's final years: "Shannon lived until 2001, his last years dimmed and isolated by the disease of erasure, Alzheimer's. His life spanned the twentieth century and helped to define it".

The last two chapters and the Epilogue are concerned with the increasing amount of information with which we are being continuously confronted, and which began with the invention of movable type in the fifteenth century. The author discusses Wikipedia, email, and the profusion of domain names, the Internet, and the World Wide Web, and search engines such as Google. As an example of the proliferation of information, googling – note the verb – "james gleick" on the Web produced about 567,000 hits; and adding "the information" to the search query produced 400,000 hits. The theme of the last part of the book can be summarized by the title of this column, "Information Fatigue," which was defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* in 2009 as "Apathy, indifference, or mental exhaustion arising from exposure to too much information, esp.

(in later use) stress induced by the attempts to assimilate excessive amounts of information from the media, the Internet, or at work”.

In order to express conveniently increasingly large numbers, meaningful prefixes are used; and we are all familiar with the words kilometres, kilowatts, kilograms, etc., where the prefix *kilo-* refers to thousands. With computers having increasingly larger memories, more prefixes are required; and we have *mega-* for million and *giga-* for billion; and, for example, the size of computer memories is now given in gigabytes or “gigs”. Now even larger units are needed, giving rise to the prefixes *tera-*, *peta-* and *exa-* representing 10^{12} , 10^{15} and 10^{18} , respectively. In the early 1990s the prefixes *zeta-* and *yotta-* were introduced; and for example a yottabyte represents 1,000,000,000,000,000,000,000 bytes. (We might note that there is a computer company on the Calgary Trail with the name Yotta Yotta Inc.)

There are 46 pages of endnotes, which have references to the relevant pages in the text so as to not clutter up the pages with endnote references, and 25 pages of references containing over 500 items. The endnotes for Chapter 4 on Charles Babbage are preceded by over half a page of additional references to Babbage’s life and work, indicating a special fondness on the part of the author. Charles Babbage was a nineteenth-century mathematician who constructed the Difference Engine for calculating error-free mathematical tables and then started to work on what was called the Analytical Engine, which if completed would have been the world’s first programmable computer. Babbage is often regarded as the “father of the computer”.

I can recommend *The Information* to any person willing to take the time to gain some appreciation of the evolution of the information age in which we now live. Recently I reread parts of the book both to admire, and even envy, the author’s grasp of the subject and also to simply enjoy his style of writing.

