



DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH, FILM, AND THEATRE

# NEWSLETTER



UNIVERSITY OF MANITOBA

Faculty of Arts

*“Sundry jottings, stray leaves, fragments, blurs and blottings.”*

- Robert Browning

**JANUARY 2016**  
Special Edition

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## Message from the Head Dr. Brenda Austin-Smith

**H**appy 2016 DEFT Members!

This newsletter is dedicated entirely to the special reception the Department of English, Film, and Theatre held last term to celebrate the careers of four members of our department who retired at the end of 2015. David Arnason, Robert Finnegan, Chris Johnson, and David Williams were the centre of attention on December 10, when colleagues, students, friends and family gathered in Marshall McLuhan Hall to eat, drink, share stories, and marvel at the varied accomplishments of these four stellar teachers and scholars.

Below you will find excerpts of the remarks made in honour of each of the retirees, as well as pictures of revellers taken at the event. Thanks are due to those who spoke at the reception—Dawne McCance, Robert O’Kell, Bill Kerr, and Danny Lenoski.



Thanks are also due to Marianne Harnish, Darlene McWhirter, and Anita King, who worked to plan the afternoon, and were there to make sure that everything went smoothly.

Thanks too, to our four retiring colleagues, whose contributions to this department over the course of their tenure are difficult to over-state. We will miss them all.



## Images from the Reception

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**Clockwise from top left:** (1) David Arnason and Dawn McCance; (2) Struan Sinclair, David Annandale, Gene Walz, and Dennis Cooley; (3) Glenn Clark, David Watt, Michelle Faubert; (4) Carol Moriyama and Bill Kerr; (5) Tom Nesmith, David Williams, and Brigitte Lenoski; (6) Barb Donovan, Chris Johnson, and Robert Finnegan



## David Arnason

by Dr. Dawne McCance

I have a fond memory of walking in Québec City one dark evening, in the old town, maybe looking for a restaurant after a day's Congress meetings, with two or three women and David Arnason who, protectively walking a bit behind us as we ambled along those winding passageways, said at one point: "I feel like a German Shepherd."

Well, I can tell you, he *is* a German Shepherd. To me and to so many others, he has been a German Shepherd, sharing all the fine qualities of that breed: highly intelligent, protective, unassuming, gentle, loyal, an incomparable life-long friend.

After two years as a new academic, teaching four courses a term, each in a different building on campus, with no office space available in my department, I applied for a visiting fellowship at St. John's College, and on arriving there, first met David, then Dean of Studies, who welcomed me and handed me my office key - the key as metaphor of so much more that he gave me over the years. In the first place, he took a real interest in my work! With his keen intelligence, he would ask the very questions that provoked me to continue reading and writing. "You are making an ontological argument," he said to me one day. "No," I said, "no I don't want to make an ontological argument." "Well, it's too late now," he sighed, looking at his watch, "Your thesis defense starts in five minutes."

David is protective. When I was assailed at various times over the years for doing the work I was doing, he would say quite matter-of-factly: "you have established yourself as a published scholar in the field; don't think twice about it." He looked after all of us, taught us how to buy and use computers (always Macs) when they first came out, my original one the size of a bar fridge, and I carried it home every night. He even provided a list of instructions for novices to keep on our desks beside the machine: #1 on my list was: "turn the computer on." He'd stop by to tell us when it was time to install a new system, and he would upgrade our machines with additional memory, his large hands inserting the delicate chip-of-a-thing with great precision.

An accomplished bird watcher and a meticulous chef, a gentle Icelander, loyal to his friends: for years, David would invite us for picnics and celebratory meals at Pelican and Willow Islands. I cherish the memory of those gatherings. We shared travels in Europe, Germany and Scotland, where we worked, and also laughed, together. With Dennis Cooley and David Arnason as your guides, you learned and laughed a lot. And about laughing: David's talent as a humorist is extraordinary. I worried about reading one of his new stories while in my office, as I feared that my laughter would roll down the halls and shake the entire academic wing of the College. To the meanness, the petty territorializing, that sometimes thrives in a university, David responded with humor - and I think that gave us hope.

David's career has been multi-faceted. As well as Professor of English, for several years Head of the Department of English and Acting Head of the Department of Icelandic Studies (a field that he has been instrumental in opening and advancing at the University of Manitoba and beyond), he co-founded the *Journal of Canadian Fiction* in New Brunswick; was one of the co-founders of Queenston House Press in Winnipeg; a long-time editor of Turnstone Press, he made it possible for countless upcoming, as well as established, writers to have their work read by people who

cared about reading it; he served on the Manitoba Arts Council; as Chairman of the Literary Press Group; as an executive member of the Association of Canadian Publishers and of *Border Crossings* (formerly *Arts Manitoba*) magazine. David is a critic, a novelist, a writer of short fiction, a poet, and a playwright (by the way, do you remember, as I do, his wonderful and celebrated political satire, *Section 23?*). Among his numerous publications are *Marsh Burning*, *Fifty Stories and a Piece of Advice*, *The Circus Performer's Bar*, *Skrag*, *The Happiest Man in the World*, *The Pagan Wall*, *The Dragon and the Dry Goods Princess*, *If Pigs Could Fly*, and *The New Icelanders: A North American Community*.

I don't know whether we will see the likes again of the creative energy, poetic intelligence, critical acumen, and passion for publishing that, before my time, David Arnason, Dennis Cooley and Robert Enright brought to this university, what Robert Kroetsch in *The Crow Journals* calls "the energy of the St. John's people" that brought him back to the Canadian Prairies and to the University of Manitoba. As it turned out, I was fortunate to be given an office and fellowship in the College myself, and to experience this energy, still very much alive when I arrived—poets in residence, writers in residence, Turnstone Press in the College, guest speakers, Canadian Studies literary conferences, critical theory research groups: it was incredible. And I was most fortunate to meet my friend-for-life, David Arnason. I hope you will join me in thanking him and celebrating his remarkable career.



## Robert Finnegan

by Dr. Robert O'Kell

It gives me great pleasure to speak this afternoon about the remarkable career of Robert Emmett Finnegan. As you know Robert is not a shy and retiring person. He is rather a man of wit and wits. Given this, I always thought that his middle name was likely an apt allusion to the 18th-century Irish patriot, idealist and rebel, Robert Emmet. But whether or not that is actually the case, Professor Finnegan has some qualities that remind me of that very romantic Irish figure who in legend became a martyr to injustice.

Before I praise Robert's impressive achievements, I would like to tell you that when he arrived at the University of Manitoba in January, 1971, he did not come, as the rest of us did, straight from graduate school or an earlier academic appointment, but rather as Captain Robert Finnegan, late of the U.S. Army in Viet Nam, where he had been called to active service immediately upon finishing his Ph.D. at the University of Notre Dame in 1969. In the two years he was in Viet Nam, Captain Finnegan was decorated many times. He was given the Bronze Star for exemplary courage on the battlefield and he was awarded four Air Medals for his bravery and meritorious service in helicopters as they searched for the enemy and sometimes found them, much to their discomfort. He received a number of other medals as well, but, with typical modesty about such matters, he has asked me not to list them all. I have mentioned this service in the U.S. Army because I think it makes clear just why Professor Finnegan was so eager and so enthusiastic about embarking on his academic career in the safe haven of Manitoba after the traumas of that terrible war.

Now to acknowledge a remarkable 45-year career. First, I must say that Robert Finnegan has for all those years been an outstanding teacher. Indeed, he has won every teaching award from the University for which he was eligible. First, he won the award for being an Outstanding Teacher of Graduate Studies. Later he was chosen as the year's UTS Outstanding Teacher in Arts, as chosen by the graduating Arts student with the highest GPA. When I became Dean, I already knew of these awards and the quality of the teaching upon which they were based. But one day I had to prepare for a meeting with a faculty member in another department whose teaching was problematic; and so I decided to look at that person's SEEQ results. As I opened the large binder in which the SEEQ summary results are kept on file, it fell open at the page of Professor Finnegan's section of our first-year course, Representative Literary Works. Being curious, I looked at it and found to my pleasure that in response to almost every question on the form, he received the highest assessment. It is one thing to be a highly successful teacher of graduate and honours courses where there is so much appreciation from bright and knowledgeable students; but it is something else to succeed to this extent in a first-year course, where there can be as many frustrations as gratifications. As a consequence, I was not surprised when, a year or two later, Professor Finnegan won the University's Dr. and Mrs. Hugh Saunderson Award for Excellence in University Teaching. I was also not surprised because I had for many years observed his interactions with students in his office, and heard from students of my own how much they enjoyed his courses. His office on the 6th floor of Fletcher Argue is the busiest one there. Week after week, year after year, I have noticed the extraordinary amount of time Robert spends with his students discussing their essays and tests. And I have heard from many students that they found his classes both highly entertaining and intellectually challenging. "There is never a dull moment," one of them said with obvious affection. A cliché born of truth!

Robert Finnegan came to us as a specialist in Old and Middle English and the History of the English Language with a particular interest in the theological and philosophical aspects of the literature. And he taught courses for us in all of those areas at the honours and graduate levels. Quite early in his career he published a critical edition of "Christ and Satan," the third book contained in the Junius XI manuscript, which is held in the Bodleian Library. The outstanding quality of his scholarship can be seen if you google "Christ and Satan"; for today, almost 40 years later, immediately after the merely descriptive entries in Wikipedia, Robert Finnegan's book is the first scholarly work listed. Not many academic studies, I submit, have that kind of staying power, and it is clear that his is the definitive edition of the text and the one that is most thorough and astute in its critical judgements. Professor Finnegan has gone on to publish many articles on subjects drawn from Old and Middle English (including, of course, the works of his beloved Geoffrey Chaucer) and they have repeatedly appeared in some of the very best journals of the field, *Modern Philology*, *Philological Quarterly*, *Studies in Philology*, *Texas Studies in Language and Literature*, and *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*. That's not at all surprising, but you may be interested to learn that his scholarly interests are broader than you might expect, for he has also published articles on John Donne, T. S. Eliot and Ernest Hemmingway. In short, Professor Finnegan has had a very impressive scholarly career with an international reputation.

In turning to Robert Finnegan's record of service to the University, it becomes clear that he has always provided willing and helpful contributions to the common enterprise. At one time or another he has served on almost every one of the Department's committees; he served two terms as Chair of Graduate Studies; he served numerous times as either the Department's or the

Dean's representative on tenure and promotion committees; and he has served on both the Arts Executive and on the University Senate. But, before I close, I would like to talk briefly about the special nature of Robert's collegiality. He has consistently been someone who has shared both his moments of success and his moments of frustration with me and other colleagues. Just the other day he showed me and several others an outstanding piece of work by one of his students—a superb essay that was clearly an A+. The great value of such sharing is that it helps to keep our highest expectations alive, when under the blizzard of ordinary or less than adequate performances we might think such expectations are now unreasonable. But Robert was also willing to share his disappointments and despair over poor and inadequate work from students—not just on the principle that misery loves company—but as a way of recognizing that the very hard job of responding helpfully to students who need assistance was a mutual professional obligation that can't be ignored or suspended without the loss of integrity. Yet another aspect of his collegiality was Robert's willingness to share his anger and disgust at the way the humanities have been undermined in the corporatization of the universities. Of course, on the higher plane of intellect (rather than of affect), Robert shared offprints of his articles as they appeared and he accepted in return drafts of my conference papers, even to the point, I suspect, of not really wanting to hear more about Disraeli. All in all, I am sure that you will agree, Robert Finnegan has been an excellent colleague – one whose presence we shall miss.

In closing, I want to mention that shortly after he arrived in Manitoba, Captain Finnegan of the U.S. Army turned himself into a very different sort of Captain when he and Joan bought a sailboat which they commissioned as the “Navigamus,”\* and on which they plied the waters of Manitoba's inland sea until very recently, when they felt they had to sell the boat—and buy a bigger one! So I think that my wish for Robert and Joan, one shared by of all those colleagues and friends here today, is: “may you have smooth sailing in retirement for many years to come.”

\*Navigamus – Latin, 1st person, plural, present tense, active voice, indicative mood: “we are sailing.”



## Chris Johnson

by Dr. Bill Kerr

I am very pleased to have an opportunity to represent the Department of English, Film, and Theatre to express admiration and gratitude to Professor Chris Johnson for his extraordinary service.

We had hoped to do so in a different space. We had hoped that this event would take place in our new Theatre and a theatre that is the realization of years of, no decades of, effort by Chris that has finally come to fruition. I quote here from a conclusion to a report Chris submitted to the then English Department to argue for upgrading the makeshift Black Hole Theatre and shops and hiring a full time technical person: “There are limits to what can be done with the Black

Hole, but what we can do, we should do, even if only as an interim measure.” That report was made in 1980 and improvements were implemented by the department at that time, allowing for that 35-year interim measure.

But perhaps it is fitting that we make do outside the new space this one last time because Chris has had to make do, or should I say use all his powers of imagination and industry to make do, to make the program exist, or rather I should say to thrive, to produce hundreds of productions (of which Chris has been personally involved in over a hundred). He has always kept his focus on serving and teaching generations of students while also serving as coordinator, fighting for the-atre for over a quarter of a century all while somehow finding the time to become the country’s foremost scholar on the work of George F Walker. Chris has not made do, he has made better.

I have been canvassing different constituencies for their thoughts on Chris and his effort and accomplishments have been a constant theme. I asked our longtime admin assistant Marilyn Loat and she, aside from steering me to the report I quoted above, reminded me that whenever there is a threat of rain or melting, Chris covers all the work surfaces in his office with plastic because of the many leaks. I will not say that he does this happily, but he does as he has always done—what is necessary so that work may continue.

She also told me the story of student volunteers not showing up for assigned duties to productions which led to one show with Chris ushering and Dennis doing box office. Whatever was needed. A more formal structure was put in place afterwards to cover this eventuality but I recall a couple of years ago Chris volunteering once again to usher (in order to lead/shame his students into taking the jobs. It didn’t work.) And there was Chris not learning from experience, handing me a program, once again doing what was necessary to make the show work, to make the company work, to make the program work.

Ian Ross told me a story of Chris as his teacher.

A scene Ian was going to do for class fell through and it was left to him to find one to do. He went to Chris to ask for a recommendation who remembered a scene Ian had written for a class in a previous year. He told Ian to:

“Do your play.”

Ian said, “no.”

Chris said, “yes.”

Ian said, “no.”

Chris said, “yes, you have to.”

Ian agreed with the proviso that the actors left in the class, Mike Bell and Angus Kohm, had to agree to do it. He was sure they would say no, but they didn’t and all three are still writing/creating to this day—so indeed, they had to, having had the opportunity to do so.

Chris has inspired this level of work from colleagues as well. George Toles told me about the two times he was directed by Chris in Moliere’s *The Miser* and Euripides’ *The Bacchae* and how well they collaborated even if (or perhaps because) students at the time sometimes described

George as Chekhov and Chris as Brecht. George noted that Chris is technically very different in working with actors than George was and is (with Chris offering smiling encouragement and spare comments). George felt he had to do anything to make his work as an actor better in order to increase that smile and indeed if possible to elicit a burst of laughter from Chris—this was apparently easier in *The Miser* than *The Bacchae*.

All of us in the theatre program know what an excellent collaborator Chris is whether we have worked in that director/actor relationship or as director/playwright/dramaturge or as a co-director. We are also very much in his debt as we are the fortunate recipients of the many struggles he had to make do and make better, even having to fight for such things as being able to claim theatre tickets as legitimate research expenses.

Personally, I want to thank Chris for being a mentor, a leader, a cocreator and a friend who has, like Moses, brought us through the wilderness to the River Jordan. Fortunately, he will get to cross over and direct for us for our March show and beyond (we're not letting him leave that easily).

Former student Nathan Dueck posted recently what Chris told him to do with the empty nostalgic feeling after closing a production. Chris told him to “take a deep breath and start preparing for your next show.” I will close then, fittingly I think, with Chris's own words about what to do now. “Take a deep breath and start preparing for your next show”—it opens in 4 months!



## David Williams

by Dr. Daniel Lenoski

I am delighted to be here among so many old friends and colleagues at a reception to honour 4 people I worked alongside for roughly 40 years. I have been asked to talk briefly about one of them: my colleague and good friend David Williams. I am honoured and pleased to do this, but at the same time, given his distinguished CV, it is a rather formidable task. After retrieving from my e-mail the CV the department sent me, I clicked ‘print’ and left my seat at the computer to get a shot of liquid fortifier. I returned somewhat later to discover the tray of my printer overflowing with a fountain of paper replete with single spaced print and the red light flashing, indicating that the printer was empty of paper and the ink cartridge needed to be replaced. To say that David's CV is impressive is an enormous understatement. Let me very briefly summarize: After receiving a Pastor's diploma in 1965 from Briercrest Bible College, David received his B.A. (Honours) from the University of Saskatchewan in 1968 and 2 degrees from the University of Massachusetts: M.A. (1968-9), and Ph.D. (1969-72). He taught there as a teaching assistant for a year and has taught here at the University of Manitoba since 1972, attaining the rank of full Professor in 1983. During that time he has also taught as a Visiting Professor or Guest lecturer at Universities all over the world, including some in Asia. This includes an appointment

as Honorary Professor and Advisor at the Institute for Canadian Studies at the Harbin Institute of Technology in China. He is mentioned in biographical entries in 19 *Who's Who* types of publications with titles like *The International Directory of Distinguished Leadership*. His publications include at least: 10 books authored or edited, 21 articles published in learned journals, 24 contributory essays to books edited by other scholars, papers read at scholarly conferences and other conference activity (too numerous to count). He has currently 2 works in progress: *The Resurrection of Louis Riel* (414pp) and *Milton's Leveler God* (586pp).

His teaching has been similarly impressive. He taught a great variety of courses both graduate and undergraduate, dominated by Canadian and American Literature and Milton. He also supervised 27 theses, M.A. and Ph.D. He acted as External or department examiner on 10 graduate examining committees and 33 Ph.D. Candidacy Exams. Thirty-five times students he supervised won mostly Graduate awards. As a result of his supervision, his students produced 3 books and 17 articles in Learned Journals. Numerous students and faculty have marveled at his ability to stimulate creativity and hard work in his students and, I might add, in colleagues as well. Indeed, I felt this influence myself. There were very few times that I returned from a friendly conversation with David in his office that I did not feel guilty for not working harder and producing more impressive results... even if that conversation involved an analysis of the fading fortunes of the *Winnipeg Jets*. He has been a gift to his colleagues and his students!

Equally distinguished and ambitious was his professional service to our University and others (on committees for example), to Literary Presses and Journals and to Federal and Provincial Governments and to Writers' Guilds... and to the public around the world (thirty-five public readings) and at home as a reader of his literature on the radio, in classrooms and in speakers' forums. Nor am I alone in my praise. His awards for teaching (three at the U of M), research and service to the community and academia have been many.

Such a list of academic awards and work would suggest that David had little time for anything else. However, the opposite is in fact the truth. He played wide receiver for the U. of Saskatchewan in CIS football. He was also a minor hockey and baseball coach (11 times) and terrific hockey player (as were Bob Smith, Arthur Adamson and Vic Cowie) as I discovered years ago when I played on the English Dept. team with him in the annual game against the students which we always used to win. As in academia, he was both skilled and tough. If I remember correctly he was one of the 2 combatants in a now mythical fight that took place in the penalty box.

David was also an advocate for those people and ideas in which he believed. Several colleagues told me about how helpful, influential and supportive he has been in their personal and academic lives. Both students and faculty speak of his generosity and kindness and accessibility. His door down the hall from me at St. Paul's, has always been open to me personally when I would arrive with a problem or a question and he always seemed to have a comment that would help me or satisfy me even when I had a different political or ideological view. Furthermore, he always seemed to know about or have a book that would help me, not to mention a word of encouragement. In particular, I am also personally grateful to him for encouraging Brigitte and me to travel

to see our youngest son play hockey for Canada in the World University Games in Harbin, China in 2009. David was correct: it was a shared experience that the three of us will never forget, including debriefing with Dave and Darlene when we returned and comparing our experiences with theirs on an earlier speaking engagement.

David thank you for your hard work, collegiality and friendship during all these years at the University of Manitoba. On behalf of everyone, let me wish you... David and Darlene... bon voyage and many smiles and, if I can borrow a term from a new Prime Minister, sunny days on the future roads of life.