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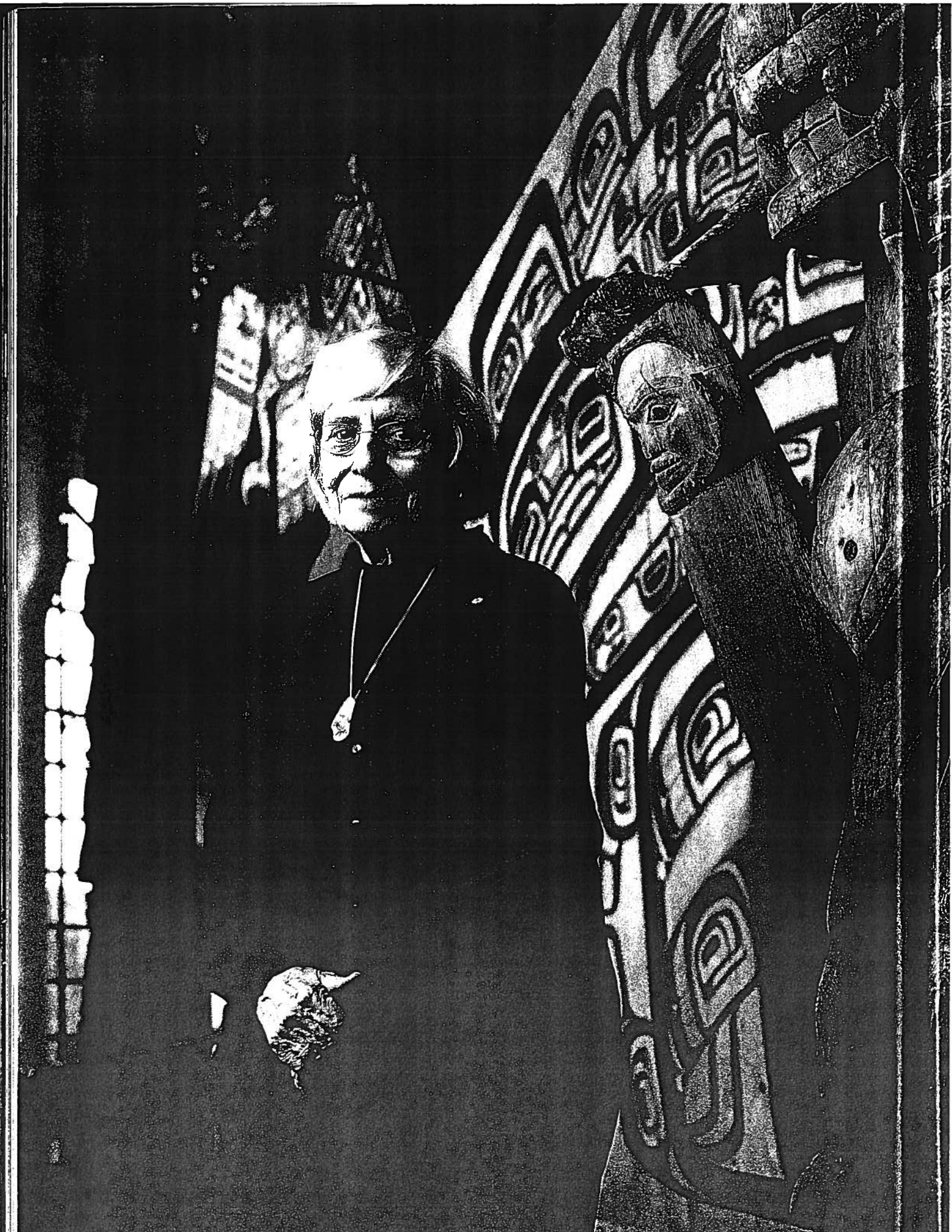
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Late starter

One of Canada's most accomplished historians, Olive Dickason looks back on a career that began when she was 57 years old

BY BRIAN GORMAN

OLIVE DICKASON DOESN'T LOOK much like a role model for women, aboriginal people and anyone who refuses to believe human beings should be packed up and put on a shelf when they reach 65. Carefully picking through her memories on a gloomy late-fall afternoon in Ottawa, she seems more like the stereotype of an absent-minded professor. It would be unwise, however, to underestimate anyone who has spent three-quarters of a century defying expectations and ignoring conventions. She's small and a little stiff and, at the same time, graceful and sturdy-looking, like a human bonsai tree. At the moment, she's rummaging through her apartment for sheepskin.

"I got this one just a couple of weeks ago," she says, dragging out a framed University of Winnipeg Doctor of Letters. She leans it against her desk, roots through some papers and produces another honorary degree, still rolled up. Unfurling it, she looks at it for a second, grunts, hands it over and veers off to find some more. She has 10 of these academic tributes, and only two or three hang on the wall. The rest have found homes in corners, behind bureaus or on shelves, and she's not sure where they are. "Here's another one ... Mount Saint Vincent ... in Halifax. And I've got some more that are not framed. It's a question of space. Where are you going to put them all?"

The few that have made it onto the walls compete for attention with such mementoes as an Order of Canada, a National Aboriginal Lifetime Achievement Award, a Queen's Golden Jubilee Medal and a variety of lesser prizes, some of which are more interesting than the major honours. The most eye-catching is the Dr. Joe Crowshoe Award from the First Nations Student Association and The Native Centre of the University of Calgary. It's an elegant, letter-sized

Olive Dickason, here beside West Coast native artifacts in the Canadian Museum of Civilization's Grand Hall in Ottawa, has devoted the second half of her life to bringing Canada's First Nations into the mainstream of history.

COLIN ROWE



FAR LEFT: LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES OF CANADA/C-3165; LEFT: GLENBOW MUSEUM/NA-1374-2

Until the post-war era, says Dickason, the general view of native people was that of the "noble savage" and the "Indian doomed to extermination." An illustration from the 19th-century text *Loyell's Advanced Geography, Montreal* (ABOVE RIGHT), reproduced in *Canada's First Nations*, for example, shows hard-working settlers and a begging native, depicting the "stereotype of the lazy Indian." An 18th-century image

encompassed by F. Lafitau (ABOVE LEFT), published in *The Mœurs des Sauvages Américains*, frequently shows a man holding a club and a string of beads and wearing snowshoes. It illustrates two important aspects of European-native contact: trade and technology. Dickason says the Canadian experience stands out as a partnership — and an exchange of technologies — between Europeans and natives. Without such aboriginal technology as the

snowshoe and the canoe, and without native guidance, Europeans would not have survived in the endless forests and the marshy limits of the New World. At the same time, Europeans introduced materials that advanced native arts and tools, such as the beads and cloth used in the intricately decorated Ojibwa firebag (OPPOSITE TOP). The argillite pipe (OPPOSITE BOTTOM) shows the inherent skill of native artisans.

certificate with an eagle feather, pressed under glass and hanging in a prominent place in the hallway.

To walk through her apartment is to climb through the strata of Dickason's priorities, to glimpse the astonishing range of experiences and accomplishments she has stuffed into her 84 years. Books line one wall, but they also lie open and in piles, with papers and sticky markers hanging out of them. There's a stack of courier packages on the dining room table containing projects for her to review. The tabby kitten that's bouncing off the walls fits right in — like a physical manifestation of her owner's mind. As you move from the degrees and honours in the study into the bright, front area of the place, you're swept forward by a wave of aboriginal art that washes through the entranceway and splashes around the living and dining room: a couple of dream catchers; soapstone carvings; prints and paintings by a variety of aboriginal artists, including a Norval Morrisseau. Some were gifts from friends. Others are acquisitions that date back to her days as a public relations officer at the National Gallery of Canada — just before she produced her first book, *Indian Arts in Canada*.

Dickason had a stroke a couple of years ago, and she says it made her "better at forgetting than remembering." Maybe, but not so an ordinary person would notice. She has the habit of sitting motionless and patiently gazing at you as you talk, evaluating each word and watching carefully to gauge your seriousness. Say something you haven't completely thought out or that strikes her as superficial, and you can see her eyes widen, the way a cat's do when it sees something move in the bushes. Mi'kmaq anthropologist Stephen Augustine, a curator at the Canadian Museum of Civilization, knows a little bit about this. Dickason was the external examiner for his master's thesis. He compares the experience of working with her to the Mi'kmaq tradition of dunking newborns in icy water to toughen them and ensure their survival. Usually, an external examiner reads a thesis after it has been through the mill of the departmental advisers. He or she makes a few suggestions and sits in on the defence, which is supposed to be more or less a formality after the paper has been moulded, ground, sanded and buffed. "But," says Augustine with a chuckle, "this is Olive we're talking about." She made him do three more rewrites. The first time, she gave him 15 pages of

revisions; the second, 10; the third time, he got five. After his defence, she handed him another five pencilled pages of notes.

When Dickason goes out, she walks, sometimes distances that would have a person a quarter her age hailing a cab. And she travels all over the country. She's professor emerita at the University of Alberta, adjunct professor at the University of Ottawa (U of O), and acts as a consultant to a variety of organizations. She's developing a 13-part series on aboriginal history with Toronto documentary filmmaker Dawn Deme, who produced "Olive Dickason's First Nations" for VisionTV and the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network. And she's writing her memoirs. There's also another historical work, which fellow historian Kenneth Munro calls her "magnum opus," that has been on the back burner since her stroke. It's a comparative study of aboriginal first contact with the Spanish, French and English. "She gets around enormously," says Deme. "She's very current, and wherever she goes, she's picking up more. It's quite amazing."

ALL OF THIS began when Dickason was 47 and had lived through two lives and one career. She'd spent two decades in journalism and raised three daughters alone in an age when single mothers were considered an exotic species — maybe even dangerous. It was the Centennial Year of 1967, and the end of the Summer of Love, when Dickason set out on a course that would change Canadian history, though she says she doesn't think the symbolism played much on her mind. (It's hard to imagine her needing the permission of a social movement to do her own thing.) She was the women's editor at *The Globe and Mail* and easily could have cruised on in the

newsroom to a comfortable retirement. Instead, she cashed in her pension, moved to the nation's capital, went to work for the National Gallery and enrolled as a graduate student in history at the University of Ottawa. By the time she was in her mid-fifties, she had burst into a second career — a life's work — that created a fundamental change in the way we see our history and, by extension, ourselves.

If there's a theme that runs through her work, Dickason says, it's the disenfranchisement of Canada's native people, who were overwhelmed by a majority that they helped install on this continent and subjugated by the tyranny of that majority. "It's the underlying complaint behind all the issues," she says. "It might not be clearly articulated in the minds of the people. They very often think that they're hitting on specific issues. But when you come to look at it, you find that they have no agreement among themselves on most of these issues. It's one thing about aboriginals you can be sure of: if there are five of them together, you'll get five different opinions. It's the nature of their development, their cultural background. They were individual nations, all scattered, each one going its own way, and no one telling the other what to do. And so trying to adapt to this idea of overall control, it's fairly difficult for them."

Munro, who was in the doctoral history program with Dickason at the U of O and was her colleague at the University of Alberta, calls her a pioneer whose work "brought Canada's First Nations into the Canadian mainstream." What she did was propose a doctoral dissertation on the history of Canada's First Nations — and was promptly told by U of O academics that it couldn't be done. Aboriginal people had no history, they said, because they had no writing.





ANDY CLARK/REUTERS

Post-war trends among First Nations were toward self-sufficiency and confrontation, and in the 1990s that seemed to come to a head. In 1996, native people from the Prairies in ceremonial dress celebrate the launch of the First Nations Bank of Canada (ABOVE). Created with the help of the Toronto-Dominion Bank, the first branch was in Saskatoon. Six

years earlier, a Mohawk warrior (OPPOSITE) sports a mask during the standoff between the natives of Kanestake and the town of Oka, Que., over the expansion of a golf course onto land that had been claimed by Mohawks since the 18th century. Dickason's work in history has run parallel to an enormous change in the status of First Nations. The seeds of

native peoples' new assertiveness, she says, were sown during the Second World War. Men who had served with distinction in the military returned to Canada much less willing to settle for second-class citizenship. "This led to a major realization of how absurd and how unfair the attitudes were. That was a major factor in getting things put on a much more equitable basis."

And, without writing, there was no documentary record. Dickason argued that there was writing — the records of the early European explorers, traders and legislators — and that she could fill in the gaps by investigating aboriginal oral tradition and art, and by examining work done by anthropologists and archaeologists. She convinced the history department to let her give it a go, and her dissertation, finished when she was 57, was published in the early 1980s as *The Myth of the Savage and the Beginnings of French Colonialism in the Americas*. It's one of the first — and one of the best — studies of the role native people played in the building of this country. She followed it in 1992 with a second major work, *Canada's First Nations: A History of Founding Peoples from Earliest Times*, which is still used as a text in history courses and native-studies departments across Canada.

"She was a person who shouldn't have been," says Munro. "Here was an older student, in her fifties when she began this. You would think this would have come from the Young Turks, the rebels." Dickason, however, began life under the guidance of rebels and has never really ceased to be a Young Turk.

SHE WAS BORN Olive Patricia Williamson on March 6, 1920, in Winnipeg to British expatriate Frank Williamson and his wife, a Metis named Phoebe Coté. Williamson was a remittance man, the black sheep of a prosperous British family, and had been sent off to the colonies to work in a bank. When the Depression struck, he lost everything and moved his wife and two daughters to some land he owned in northern Manitoba. The plan was to raise mink and prospect for gold. "For my mom, it was a big achievement when she married this Englishman," says Dickason. "So for her, it was a very bitter disappointment when he ended up back in the bush. She was the one who taught us how to survive under that circumstance." Through it all, the girls never could get their mother to talk about their native heritage — but this was a time when native people were barely considered to have a heritage. "I tried a couple of times, but there was no hope," Dickason says. "And it just upset her so. She came from a generation when having an Indian in the family was ... what was the expression that was used then? The family was tarred. It was just not something you talked about."

Olive and her younger sister were educated at home, but only up to grade 10, because the tuition for a correspondence course in grade 11 was \$60 a year — well beyond the reach of a down-on-his-luck remittance man and his long-suffering wife. But when Olive was in her teens, two men came into her life who guided her toward a lifelong love affair with education. It's interesting, given Dickason's track record of independent-mindedness, that both were mavericks who had been pushed to the fringes of civilization.

The first was a wayward Scot, who lived at the other end of the lake from the Williamson family. "The rumour was that he had been in some high position and had gotten into trouble and ended up in the Canadian bush," Dickason recalls. "But he brought with him a very fine classical library, and subscribed to all the top publications in Britain." To the Scot's way of thinking, a tenth-grade correspondence course was little better than no learning at all, and he took it upon himself to educate the girls. So by the time she was in her late teens and ready to go out into the world, Dickason had digested the works of Aristotle, Marx and Plato and had, for several years, been a regular reader of *The Times of London*.

The second influence was a priest named Athol Murray — known as "Père" by his students — a fiery iconoclast whom the Church had banished to Wilcox, Sask., where he ran Notre Dame College. In Zale Dalen's 1980 Canadian feature film *The Hounds of Notre Dame*, Thomas Peacocke played Murray as a tough-talking, chain-smoking, hard-drinking man's man, whose dedication to bringing education to the



ANDY CLARK/REUTERS

'She came from a generation when having an Indian in the family was ... what was the expression that was used then? The family was tarred.'

Prairie poor was equalled only by his passion for hockey. Dickason says that pretty well describes the man she knew — except for the drinking. She met the priest in 1939, when she was selling magazine subscriptions door to door. Murray, taken by her intelligence and the breadth of her knowledge, insisted she continue her education at Notre Dame, and she stayed there until the early 1940s, when she graduated with a bachelor of arts degree.

Then she began a 24-year career in journalism that took her to the *Regina Leader-Post*, the *Winnipeg Free Press*, *The Gazette* in Montréal and *The Globe and Mail* in Toronto. She landed in Montréal when she married Anthony Dickason, a public relations executive for the chemical company CIL. The couple had "triplets the hard way" — three daughters in three years — and Anthony, a heavy drinker, quickly fell out of the habit of supporting his family. Olive found herself a reporting job at *The Gazette* and walked away from the relationship. That meant putting the three girls in foster care. "I didn't go on welfare," Dickason says fiercely. "I paid for them, but the welfare people found them a place. I was able to keep the children together. That was one of the things I insisted on." At *The Gazette*, she "horrified" her hard-news col-

leagues by applying for — and getting — the job of women's editor. "Being the women's editor gave me access, among other things, to the clothing factories," she says with a sly smile. "Montréal was a clothing-manufacturing city. I had three girls to raise, and to be able to get clothes at factory prices" After nine years, she got an offer from *The Globe and Mail*, which meant more money, a down payment for a house and a family reunion. Dickason says she never allowed herself to be distracted by the "unpleasant fact" that she was an unmarried woman with three kids in the "Father Knows Best" world of the 1950s. It did, however, make her blood boil on occasion — like the time she took one of her daughters to a doctor, who apparently couldn't see past the fact that she was a single mother. "The instant he found out that I had no husband, that was the cause of all my children's problems. And that was the general attitude back then."

Dickason's eldest daughter, Anne, now a federal government employee (the other two grew up to be nurses), recalls a tough, resourceful woman who was interesting and exciting to be around and encouraged her daughters to find their own way in life. "Who knows what drives an individual," she says. "For Mom, it was like an internal thing. She would have



COLIN ROWE

Pondering the changes she has seen in white-First Nations relations during her time as a historian, Dickason says, "The balance is slowly being restored. I don't know that we've achieved it yet. But certainly, we've come a long way."

been driven no matter where she was born or under whatever circumstances."

Through her career, Dickason cultivated a fascination with aboriginal culture. When she was a reporter, she took every opportunity to write about aboriginal affairs, and at the National Gallery, she used her position to study native Canadian art. So it was a natural evolution that she would take her preoccupation with her native heritage into 'academe. "People explore their own backgrounds as they become more interested in them," she says. "I know I was quite unwilling to think of my own ancestors as being savages."

As well as setting the record straight on that count, says John Kim Bell, founder of the National Aboriginal Achievement Foundation, Dickason's work has helped lay the legal framework for land-claims rulings, such as the one involving the Nisga'a in British Columbia. In her histories, Dickason showed that the legal basis for a person — or people — to claim land can be dated back to the Roman Emperor Justinian. Under Justinian, it was ruled that the first occupants are the rightful owners of the land. This was a principle of international law up to and after the European conquests in the New World. The European nations, however, justified their actions in the New World by defining native people as "human in form only." Therefore, they weren't entitled to protection under international law. "In part," says Bell, "her investigation does give more solid defence that there are aboriginal rights."

"I think John's embroidered it a little," says Dickason, more out of caution than modesty. She avoids legal and political entanglements like the plague. There are politicians and lawyers who would love to use her as a propagandist, and as Munro says, she has always been wary of her work being used as "a weapon."

"My goal has always been to present the situation as it actually was," she says, "and to recognize the actual role of the Indians in our history — their fundamental role. The point is to try to make that clear. There's still a way to go yet. Unfortunately, my time is short; it was late in life when I got started. I'm not interested in battles. It sounds contradictory, doesn't it? It's not so much the fight, but fighting arouses antagonisms that can really deepen splits."

Dickason may not be interested in battles, but she has never been inclined to walk away from one, as the University of Alberta found out when it tried to retire her in 1985. She had joined the faculty as an assistant professor in 1976, and she says, it had never occurred to her that the school would ever force her to leave. When she got her notice from the university administration, she took them to the Alberta Human Rights Commission and won. The university challenged her at the Court of Queen's Bench, and she won again. Then the school won on appeal, and

Dickason was ready to pack it in. However, her lawyer, Sheila Greckol (now an Alberta judge), insisted on taking it to the Supreme Court of Canada — pro bono. "God bless her," says Dickason. "She had the bit in her teeth." Finally, in 1992, the Supreme Court ruled against her. "And the next day, I got the letter from the university: 'You're out,'" she says bitterly. Still, she had won a victory of sorts. She had hung on for seven years and was made a full professor before she left the university at the age of 72. And she managed to make the most of the school's resources to complete her major work, *Canada's First Nations*, which was published shortly after she retired. Now in its third printing, it put her on the road to most of the honours that hang on her walls today.

With the feeble, late-afternoon sun casting a yellowish glow on her, Dickason looks back on it all with an almost predatory logic. "No, I never backed down," she says with a shrug. "It never entered my head to back down. I had nothing to back down to." Still, the question of what drives her hangs in the air, and she's asked whether, perhaps, the early days in the northern Manitoba wilderness may have had something to do with hardening her outlook and shaping her personality. With the shadows growing longer across the room, she looks down at the kitten playing at her feet and thinks for a moment. Then she says, "You know, when you grow up in the bush, if you allow yourself to get pushed around, you don't last very long."

Brian Gorman is a writer living in Russell, Ont.



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