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Don Sparling at 80

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Laudatio

Don Sparling at 80 / Don Sparling à 80 ans

In August 2023 Don Sparling turned 80. We wish to celebrate this occasion with a selection of memories by colleagues and friends.

En août 2023, Don Sparling a eu 80 ans. Nous souhaitons célébrer cet anniversaire par une sélection de souvenirs de ses collègues et amis.

Katalin Kürtösi

Everybody involved in Canadian Studies in Canada and Europe knows who Don Sparling is: he has been a strong pillar of Canadian Studies not only in the Central European region, but in the whole continent, having dedicated himself to the subject for almost half a century. Now around 80, he is still fully active not only as Treasurer of the Central European Association for Canadian Studies, but organizing conferences and other meetings, giving keynote lectures, helping young colleagues, participating in research projects, editing volumes, and so on and so on. In his own community – in his home in Brno, the Czech Republic – he is highly respected as an expert in local history and a motor of expatriates living in the city. Keeping these activities in mind, we can affirm that many people know *who* Don is.

But *what* is Don Sparling? He is a remarkable colleague, always coming up with new and fresh ideas, always ready to find solutions to problems so that others can successfully pursue their research and careers. What might be the secret of his character? Most probably that he is ready to accept and respect different backgrounds and approaches. He is an excellent *débatteur* – without ever hurting the other party. In informal events he can entertain people with his rich reservoir of anecdotes and stories. He is an expert in Central European folk dances and tunes, and a regular concert goer. He organized and supported student acting groups back in historical periods when travelling in the region and beyond was not as easy as it is now. His



former students can attest to this (and most of them could share a story or two!). I have been closely collaborating with him for three decades and am very proud of this: very often we have written messages about a specific topic at precisely the same moment. Without his presence and contribution, CEACS would be a very different group of academics – if it existed at all...

Michelle Gadpaille

Don, as he is always known, was integral to the founding of this association and has been a member of the Executive Board for 20 years. It is thanks to Don that the CEACS exists at all; he has thus been the presiding genie behind the expansion of Canadian Studies in the Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Croatia, Hungary, Montenegro, Romania, Serbia, Slovakia and Slovenia. In this wide swathe of countries, Canada and Canadian Studies gained prominence because of Don's initiative and perseverance. This is his prime contribution to the international status of Canadian Studies.

His commitment to service includes the work of the Executive Board and control of our modest finances, along with the co-organization of conferences, projects and summer schools. In June and July 2008, for example, he helped to broker and co-finance an experimental, collaborative summer school at the University of Maribor, Slovenia: *Europe and Canada: Contemporary Issues*, which attracted international attendance. Such outreach has defined Don's role in Europe. Though based in Brno, he has always looked out – eastwards and, most commendably, southward, to welcome Europe's new countries into Canadian Studies.

When one looks at Don's publication record, his commitment to Canadian Studies is clear, as is his versatility. From his base in literary criticism, Don has branched out to interdisciplinary work involving history – where he is an adept enthusiast – and cultural studies.. One of his early contributions was the study of the influence of English on the Czech language, in which Don is fluent. This man constitutes the best exemplar of what it means to be a Canadian abroad, for Don is multilingual (French, too) and cosmopolitan, while somehow remaining one of the most definitively Canadian people I know. There are many departments in a wide range of countries where the name "Don" means one person and one only.



Jason Blake

Few Canadianists have done more for the promotion of Canadian Studies and of Canada in general than Thomas Donaldson Sparling. From his home base at Masaryk University in Brno (in what was then Czechoslovakia), Don was instrumental in promoting the growth of Canadian Studies in countries that had formerly been behind the Iron Curtain. He started creating and teaching Canadian Studies courses back in 1985. This was half a decade before anyone could imagine the fall of Communism, half a decade before students and teachers from Central Europe could imagine travelling freely to Canada. In these early years, Don taught widely in Brno and throughout Czechoslovakia in order to spread the word about Canada. His personal engagement through the years has been incredibly tireless and relentlessly selfless.

Speaking with Don is always fascinating. We have shared hotel rooms, conference panels, and meals on dozens of occasions, yet he continues to surprise me: with throwaway lines (“I only met and chatted with the Queen once ...”); with stories about being groomed as a potential spy for Czechoslovakia (two apparatchiks tried to get him drunk enough to “sign” his agreement to betray Canada; he did not); with tales about meeting literary luminaries such as John Updike (disagreeing with Updike on Atwood’s grim view of the United States); and with yarns about smuggling Canadian books into Czechoslovakia through personal and diplomatic channels. For a younger generation, it may be hard to understand what an ordeal this last was, not to mention the personal risk involved. These anecdotal details say more about Don’s commitment to Canada than any bibliographical information might.

Don and I share what he called – in an email from around 2004 – a “wry sense of the world.” As a Canadian living abroad, Don has a sometimes nostalgic, sometimes critical, and sometimes puzzled perspective on Canada; he is not a thoughtless Canada fan. As an honorary Czech who holds only a Canadian passport, Don has been able to bring more than a bit of Canada to the Czech Republic. While in Brno, I remember him discussing Canadian expertise being infused into the Czech Bureau of Statistics and the country’s Constitutional Court. Don’s outreach goes far beyond the classrooms and common rooms of academia. Walking down the streets of Brno with Don is like trying to blend in if you are next to Tom Cruise. The last time I was in Brno I ended up, entirely by chance, at a lively memorial ceremony complete with traditional Czech folk music (Don knew all the songs); the widow of the man being memorialized was the former Chief Justice of the Czech Republic, who had spent several years in Canada before returning to build a new democracy.

Don and I kvetch regularly about academic gobbledegook and jargon. This is a shared personality quirk but it is especially applicable to Canadian Studies. As Don often states, an overly methodological approach to academia can be impersonal



and soulless. Multisyllabic jargon cuts the rest of the population off from Canadian Studies, thus limiting knowledge of Canada to a select few. Anyone who has read Don's fine prose and argumentative style (such as his article for the *Literary Review of Canada* "The Importance of Ernest [i.e. Seton]" or his book chapter "Lost in the Heart of Europe: Doing Canada Among the Czechs") will realize that such is not Don's mode of discourse.

I will not attempt to list all that Don has done for Canada. In addition to his always lively and insightful publications and lectures and keynotes on topics ranging from Leonard Cohen to World War One visual art, to his heading of FEP and FRP committees (remember those?), to his capable organizing of conferences and bringing in guest speakers, to his reviewing and working with me on books and articles aplenty, to his careful proofreading of *The Central European Journal of Canadian Studies*, Don has invested countless hours and plenty of his own cash in keeping CEACS running also during tough times.

Petr Kyloušek

Mon collègue Don Sparling m'a abordé en 1990, au début de ma carrière universitaire, pour me proposer l'introduction de la littérature québécoise dans le cadre du projet d'études canadiennes. La littérature québécoise est ainsi devenue une grande découverte et l'objet d'une bonne partie de mes recherches, projets et publications. J'ai beaucoup apprécié l'esprit fédéraliste de Don Sparling qui a toujours veillé à l'équilibre entre les composantes anglophone et francophone tout en tenant compte de la richesse multiculturelle du Canada. Ensemble, nous avons constitué un fonds de bibliothèque de *canadiana*, qui est une des plus importantes en Europe centrale et un point d'études et de recherche pour ceux qui travaillent sur le Canada. Nous avons lancé des cours canadiens et accrédité une filière de master d'études nord-américaines où la composante francophone canadienne s'inscrit à côté de l'américanité anglophone et hispanophone. C'est aussi grâce à Don Sparling que la littérature québécoise est devenue matière obligatoire du cursus licence en philologie française à l'Université Masaryk.

Thomas Donaldson Sparling s'est avéré un fin diplomate à tous les niveaux pour propager l'idée du Canada et des valeurs canadiennes. Progressivement, à l'aide de ses contacts avec la Gesellschaft für Kanada-Studien, il a lancé l'idée d'une large collaboration régionale entre la Pologne, la Tchéquie, la Slovaquie, la Hongrie, la Slovénie, la Croatie, la Serbie, la Bulgarie et la Roumanie. Il en a résulté la création de l'Association d'Études Canadiennes en Europe Centrale qui organise ses conférences triennales, publie son journal, stimule des activités, anime des contacts et des



échanges à large échelle dont Thomas Donaldson Sparling est toujours encore le pivot.

Ce qui appert des constatations précédentes est le caractère durable et de longue portée des activités de Thomas Donaldson Sparling. Chacune de ses démarches s'inscrit dans le temps et dans le concret, la pensée pragmatique l'emportant et prouvant sa qualité. Ajoutons-y un aspect civique, lui aussi de longue durée et portée, car il remonte aux années d'avant les événements de 1989: en qualité d'enseignant universitaire « étranger », c'est-à-dire échappant partiellement aux contraintes du régime autoritaire, Thomas Donaldson Sparling a incarné ce pôle de liberté, en contact avec les dissidents, qui était inspirateur pour son entourage et pour les étudiants universitaires. Canada n'aurait pas pu trouver une meilleure personne que lui comme représentant digne de la canadienité et des valeurs canadiennes.

David Staines

I have known Don for many years; he has visited me a few times on his visits to Canada; and I have lectured in his classes in Brno on two separate occasions. I am also totally cognizant of the immense amount of work he has done – and is doing – on behalf of Canadian Studies in Brno, in the Czech Republic, and in all of Central Europe.

Born and raised in Ottawa, Don obtained his BA from Victoria College and conducted graduate studies at Oxford University. From there he went to Czechoslovakia, now the Czech Republic, where he taught at language schools until he joined the Department of English and American Studies at Masaryk University in Brno in 1977. His first teaching of Canadian Studies occurred in 1985, and five years later he founded the Canadian Studies Centre at Masaryk University, where over the years he and the Centre Co-Chair, Petr Kylaoušek, brought in and purchased an astonishing array of films, built up a library of over 6000 Canadian books, and fostered a unique Master's program in North American Cultural Studies that included – from the very beginning! – a strong Canadian component.

Beyond Masaryk, Don was the co-convener of the European Network for Canadian Studies. In 2004 he was elected founding President of the Central European Association for Canadian Studies, where he has been the Association's Treasurer since 2007. And the Association's Secretariat is located, quite appropriately, at Masaryk University's Canadian Studies Centre.

Don has also organized more than a dozen international conferences and seminars, most of them in various areas of Canadian Studies. He has also published more than fifty articles, more than forty of them dealing with Canadian subjects. The range of subjects is vast indeed, ranging from studies of Central European interest in Canada to individual accounts of such contemporary or almost contemporary writers as



Leonard Cohen, Douglas Glover, and Richard B. Wright. And he co-edited collections of articles dealing with translations of Canadian writing in the eight languages of the member countries of the Central European Association.

What is truly unique about Don is that though he lives in Brno and can regale one with its culture and history, he has never left Canada. He is totally aware of everything that is happening in our fiction, our landscape, our country. When I have met up with him at various international conferences, he has always been ready for a discussion of Margaret Atwood's most recent volume, the travails of Justin Trudeau, or the land claims of the Indigenous peoples. I only wish that some of our own professors here were equally abreast of what is going on here in Canada.

Don Sparling is a remarkable professor, wholly knowledgeable of and devoted to Canadian Studies at his own university and throughout Central Europe. He has taken willingly the leading role of organizer, trusted head, and supreme leader of Canadian Studies in Central Europe. There is no one of his sensitivity to Canada, his sweeping understanding of its past and its present, and his own deep-seated humility.

Albert Rau

I have known Don for many years: we first met at one of the annual conferences of the Association for Canadian Studies in German-speaking Countries (GKS) in Grainau a very long time ago. Don has been a frequent participant of our conference, where he has always promoted not only "his" organization, the Central European Association for Canadian Studies (CEACS), but, even more so, the cooperation of Canadianists across Europe.

Don has a long list of publications, articles and monographs and is the co-editor of numerous collections and publications that cover a wide range of genres, Canadian themes and topics. Already in the mid-1980s he started to introduce Canadian Studies in Central Europe at Masaryk University, Brno, where he worked, taught and did research. Don's list of activities and projects is long and diverse and it also includes the foundation of the Canadian Studies Centre at Masaryk University in 1990. He was the Co-convenor of the European Network for Canadian Studies (ENCS) from 2000; most importantly, however, he became the founding President of the Central European Association for Canadian Studies in 2004. Within the association he has represented the Czech Republic, and since 2007, he has been its Treasurer. In March 2023 he participated in the roundtable at the GKS-conference in Grainau, representing Central Europe.

Don is a fervent Canadianist, who has made it his mission to promote Canadian Studies and, in doing so, young students and emerging scholars in particular have



been in his focus. From 2010 until 2013, for example, he was Executive Director of the EU-Canada Study Tour and Internship Programme “Thinking Canada”, which took students from across the European Union to Canada, where they participated in an intense four-week programme plus a two-month internship.

I have been a member of CEACS for many years now and, as a matter of fact, Don was one of the people who encouraged me to join it. He is a friend and a reliable link to Central and Eastern Europe and the development of Canadian Studies there. Don is still going strong, relentlessly active advancing Canada and Canadian Studies in Europe.

