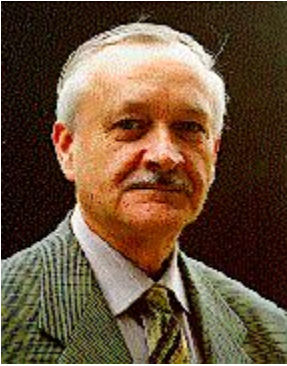


## William Leiss, Ph.D., FRSC

Past President



Dr. William Leiss has been named President of the Royal Society of Canada for a two-year term commencing November 1999.

Born in Long Island, New York at the end of 1939, he grew up in rural Pennsylvania. He began his university education in New Jersey, at Fairleigh Dickinson University, graduating in 1956 with a B.A. *summa cum laude* (major in history and minor in accounting); then in Massachusetts, with a M.A. in the History of Ideas Program at Brandeis University (1963); and finally in La Jolla, California, with a Ph.D. in Philosophy from the University of California, San Diego (1969).

He lived in the United States until 1968 and, as far as he knows, is the only person who ever moved from southern California to Regina, Saskatchewan in order to find work:

"I had never set foot in Canada until that time, and the advertisement I answered, which was placed in *The New York Review of Books*, said that 'the sun shines 80% of the time in Regina,' which as far as I know is a true statement (no mention was made of annual temperature variation)."

He has remained in Canada since then and became a Canadian citizen in 1979.

Academic training at its best is a long and satisfying apprenticeship in an ancient profession according to Bill Leiss, and he was fortunate indeed to encounter not one, but two 'masters' from whom he learned his craft:

"The first was in American history under the tutelage of Herbert Gutman, who later became well-known for books on labour history and the Black family. The second - which lasted for almost two decades, starting at Brandeis in 1960, continuing at UCSD until 1969, and carrying on in friendship thereafter - was with Herbert Marcuse, the German philosopher who became rather notorious in the 1960s during the movement against the war in Vietnam. (When he came north to address a large crowd at Simon Fraser University in 1967, the RCMP had gently interrogated the white-haired, then seventy-year-old philosopher for some time at the border before allowing him to proceed.)

"Marcuse, who had learned his own craft with two of the most famous philosophers of the twentieth century, Husserl and Heidegger, before fleeing from Germany in 1932, ran his evening graduate seminars thus: When the door closed on the room the outside world was suspended (the world in which many of us had spent the preceding day in antiwar activities) and the 'text' was opened before us. In the seminar I remember best, the text was the section known as the 'Doctrine of Essence' in Hegel's *Greater Logic*, the section that begins with the chapter on 'Being and Nothing.' We students were asked in turn to read a sentence and say what we thought it meant in our own words. In the course of a three-hour seminar we covered on average five pages of text; this seminar lasted twenty weeks, so after eight months of wrenching effort we had completed a hundred pages. When we complained, we were told that in the 1920s Marcuse had attended

Heidegger's seminar on Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, and in six months the class never got beyond the first page of the Greek text. But that class (and we) learned how to read a difficult text."

Both of his masters, Gutman and Marcuse, adhered strictly to the rule of apprenticeship in which the objective is the training of a new generation that will find its own way to wisdom and will in turn become, not clones of their teachers, but masters in their own right. In addition, neither of them cared in the slightest for the disciplinary boundaries of academic life, and that sentiment was passed to Dr. Leiss. In an admittedly checkered academic career in graduate school and as a professor, which now extends over almost forty years, he has changed fields every time he changed universities (eight times so far), and he has never held an academic position in a field in which he also holds a university degree.

Dr. Leiss received extraordinary personal and professional support in his first posting, in the Political Science Department at the University of Regina, before moving on in 1973 to two stints with the Faculty of Environmental Studies at York University (also Political Science and the Graduate Programme in Social and Political Thought there), interrupted by a brief stay at the University of Toronto's Department of Sociology; then in 1980 to the School of Communication at Simon Fraser, where he was department chair for six years and later Vice-President, Research. He was awarded the five-year, externally-funded Eco-Research Chair in Environmental Policy at the School of Policy Studies, Queen's University, in 1994 and is currently in the Faculty of Management at the University of Calgary where he holds another five-year research chair, the NSERC/SSHRC/Industry Chair in Risk Communication and Public Policy, funded under the granting councils' Management of Technological Change program.

"I have always had a compulsive urge to write books, and so I am very pleased that, thanks mostly to a kind and indulgent publisher, McGill - Queen's University Press, all of my books are still in print".

The Press's list includes *The Domination of Nature*, first published elsewhere in 1972; *The Limits to Satisfaction* (1976); *Under Technology's Thumb* (1990); *Risk and Responsibility* (1994); and *Mad Cows and Mother's Milk* (1997), the last two with co-authors. Two other books are still in print with other publishers: *Social Communication in Advertising* (1986), with co-authors, and *C. B. Macpherson* (1988). He has just completed the manuscript for a new book, *Vagaries of Risk Management*, which will appear next year.

For the past fifteen years he has also worked as a consultant, mostly with federal government agencies, and mostly on health and environmental risk issues.

"Although it is nice to get paid for one's advice, the most enjoyable aspect of that activity has been the interactions with the very talented and dedicated civil servants who have great responsibilities in these areas."

He is grateful to have had the opportunity to facilitate the process that led to the creation of the Society's Committee on Expert Panels, including the adoption of formal rules of procedure for the oversight of panel processes. These new steps have allowed the Society to increase its ability to serve the public interest on the basis of its unique qualities as Canada's national academy, by organizing the creation of panels that provide disinterested, credible, and highly-competent examinations of difficult scientific and public policy issues. The reports of the first three panels convened so far under these new procedures have been widely recognized as being outstanding contributions, and more are in the works.

In the time that is left he has been known to have a modest interest in cooking, in trying (so far unsuccessfully) to spend more time in Northern Italy, in sports (where he has the excuse of a knee injury), and a concern that transcends all of these for the welfare of his dogs. *He has been a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada since 1990.*

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