

Michael Petrou
Graduated: 1998
Currently: Freelance Journalist, foreign correspondent

CV: BA Canadian Studies, Queen's University, 1998 / **MA, Atlantic Canada Studies, Saint Mary's, 1998** / DPhil, Modern History, University of Oxford, 2006

On September 11, 2001, Canadian media outlets were desperately seeking reporters with insight on, and contacts in, Afghanistan and the Middle East. Fortunately for Michael Petrou—25 years old, a rookie journalist, and an intern at the *Ottawa Citizen*—he'd just spent the autumn of 2000 in Pakistan.

"A friend and I had been travelling through these tribal areas, which were the incubators for al-Qaeda and the Taliban, though we didn't know it at the time," says Petrou. "So when 9/11 happened, I was one of the few Canadian reporters who'd seen Afghanistan." That initial visit to the Middle East, which a year later provided a sudden and entirely unexpected jolt to his career, was initially driven by little more than raw curiosity—the chance to see and do something he never had before.

Petrou's CV speaks to a career built on that kind of curiosity: he's been a radio reporter in Goose Bay, a foreign correspondent, a reporter and researcher for the BBC World Service, and a three-time National Magazine Award winner. He's the author of two acclaimed books: a work of historical scholarship entitled *Renegades: Canadians in the Spanish Civil War*, and a work of immersive contemporary journalism, *Is This Your First War? Travels Through the Post-9/11 Islamic World*.

Before all that, Petrou was a suburban kid from Markham, Ontario. While earning a BA in Canadian Studies at Queen's University, a professor recommended Saint Mary's as a potential next step in his academic career. Driven in part by the same exploratory attitude that would propel his later travels—"I just liked the idea of living in Halifax"—he contacted History professor and ACS co-founder Dr. Colin Howell. That conversation helped clinch his decision.

Within ACS, Petrou was able to combine his interests as a budding historian and his talents as a journalist.

"Your thesis was whatever you wanted, basically, and mine was on Mi'kmaq traditional medicine," he says. "It was interdisciplinary as well, so I was able to explore old Jesuit accounts, but a large part was simply talking to people, shoe-leather reporting and cultural sociology. I went up to Eskasoni First Nation and simply talked to a lot of people."

After graduation, Petrou continued in that line, working as a researcher and reporter with CBC in Halifax, Charlottetown, and Happy Valley-Goose Bay, before taking the one-year internship with the *Citizen*—one of the most sought-after gigs for young journalists in Canada.

He worked later with the *National Post* and the BBC World Service, before decamping to Oxford to earn a doctorate in Philosophy. He then returned to journalism, working with *Maclean's* magazine as a foreign correspondent, reporting from more than two dozen countries in 10 years.

Petrou's career has been driven in part by his willingness to follow his interests where they take him—from Pakistan to Halifax. And it was at Saint Mary's that he found an academic environment that incubated that kind of creativity.

“It was a really positive experience, and a lot had to do with the quality of the professors,” he says. “It was an extremely small group, and Colin Howell and John Reid were excellent. It always felt so collegial, there were diverse interests, and it was the sort of environment that really fostered just exploring.”