

Hopes and fears for the historical profession

This is my last entry as CHA English-language secretary and as co-editor of the CHA *Bulletin*, now *Intersections*. I have had the good fortune of serving in the CHA Executive since 2013, and much has changed since then. In parting, I would like to reflect on some of those changes, and on some of my hopes (and fears) for the profession.

Contracting career prospects in the academy and a shrinking student body

It is no great secret that the university teaching job market has continued to contract, whilst the number of PhDs has grown. Meanwhile, the undergraduate student body – the lifeblood of our profession – has continued to shrink in many universities. The answer to this challenge is, I think, twofold:

1. Adapting programmes to better equip students for the pursuit of careers outside the academy.
2. Better informing students and employers of history graduates' capacity to work in non-academic jobs. (This would help to improve career outcomes and have the corollary effect of making a history degree more attractive to prospective students.)

The CHA has not been idle on this issue, but the decentralized nature of our profession limits our ability to motivate professors and departments to act. In *Bulletin* no. 42.3 (2016), I suggested a strategic approach for history professors and departments to confront the challenge. In addition, Michel Duquet added the excellent “What can you do with a history degree?” page to our website. At the last CHA Council meeting, in November 2017, we adopted a motion to add another member of Council to the Advocacy portfolio to be responsible for employment advocacy.

I remain hopeful. The need for workers with strong analytical and research skills is strong, both in and outside of government. These skills (which are not easily replaced by Artificial Intelligence, at least not yet!) are precisely those that our students develop over the course of their history degrees. History students conduct contextualized and synthesized risk/opportunity and cost/benefit analyses all the time – they're just not aware of it!

Another, more ‘traditional’ career opportunity that lies open to our students is in teaching. No, not as university professors. Rather, as elementary and high school teachers, specifically, in French-second language (FSL) programmes like French Immersion. The demand across Canada for FSL teachers has been booming for over a decade. Why we have not been encouraging our students to explore this opportunity just boggles the mind.

In short, we must continue to do more to align our programmes with the real opportunities that lie ahead for our students.

Making room in the scholarly community for historians outside the academy

Which leads me to another question: How do we continue to make space within the CHA for our colleagues who work outside of universities, be it in primary, secondary or college education, in public history, in government, or in the private sector?

These colleagues do not always enjoy the same amount of time or resources for pursuing individual research and publication as do university professors. Many, however, want to continue engage actively in scholarly discourse and in the CHA, and they have much to teach us – not only in terms of their individual research interests, but also in terms of the different career possibilities for our graduates.

One important step is for the CHA to continue ensuring strong representation of these colleagues on the Executive and Council. Their perspectives must be shared at the heart of our association and help to inform its overall direction.

Another positive measure would be to continue a practice that has evolved over the last several years but that has become somewhat controversial, that is, allowing conference presenters to forego the submission of a formal paper. While historians outside the academy have research that they are keen to share, they are already working full days and have family obligations of their own – they don't often have the time that is required to write, edit and fine tune a lengthy paper.

Shorter, more informal pieces are often more feasible for these colleagues, and CHA *Intersections* has become a good venue for these types of contributions. Another possibility is to invite these colleagues to present on their work outside of the academy more generally, instead of requiring them to present on a purely academic research topic.

Finally, we need to continue affirming the successes of our graduates outside of the academy, for example, by acknowledging and celebrating their career advancement (something that *Intersections'* back page “Historians in the News” tries to do, although it has been a struggle at times to get submissions).

Engaging in public discourse

There appears to be less anxiety these days about the level of engagement of historians in the public discourse, and that's a good sign. “Historians in the News” continues to underline positive examples of this engagement, and the CHA website's “Media

Contact” page appears to have been a modest success. The CHA’s more robust advocacy focus has also borne fruit, as previous editions of the *Bulletin/Intersections* have discussed.

Moreover, last year’s 150th anniversary of Confederation provided a wealth of opportunity for historians to chime in with media interviews, editorials, and thought pieces geared toward a wider audience. At the same time, the rolling back of hyper-partisan commemorative initiatives like the much-maligned memorial to the victims of communism has also helped to temper anxieties about whether or not historians were doing enough to inform the public discourse.

That being said, major anniversaries do not occur every year, and history is not always front-page news (except in hindsight, perhaps!). As such, the challenge remains for the CHA and for the profession more generally to remain relevant and present in the public consciousness.

Engaging in both Official Languages

One of the ways in which we can ensure continued relevance is by ensuring continued engagement in both official languages.

The CHA is a bilingual organization, hence the production of its online and printed materials in French and in English, the right of scholars to present in either official language at our events, and the fact that we have both a French-language secretary and an English-language secretary.

I worry, however, that as a profession we are not doing enough to ensure a continued dialogue between English- and French-speaking scholars in Canada, and that too few of us are reading each other’s work or conducting research into each other’s history. How can one possibly hope to understand Canada’s story and its scholarship without having at least some grasp of the literature in both of its official languages?

Part of the challenge is the perception that the CHA is an “English” organization. The CHA is home to important and influential Francophone scholars from across Canada, but, anecdotally at least, I know that some of them feel that they need to present, publish and network in English instead of in French in order to be heard and understood. For these and other reasons, too many other Francophone scholars simply stay out of the CHA, the result being that Francophones and the French language continue to be disproportionately underrepresented. The CHA has endeavoured to improve things, for example through a more active engagement with the Institut d’histoire de l’Amérique française, thanks to the efforts of our French-language secretary Martin Laberge, among others.

It is in my capacity as *English-language secretary*, specifically, that I raise this issue. For, as members of the majority linguistic community who benefit – consciously or unconsciously – from all the privileges that being in the majority entails, we have a responsibility to help foster an environment in which the

minority linguistic community can also feel at home and thrive within the CHA in its own language.

It’s in our own interest, too! In order to ensure the best outcomes for our Anglophone students, we must encourage them to develop a strong grasp of French so that they can access the full breadth of Canadian historiography, and not just the English half. To create an environment that is more inclusive, we need to demonstrate a desire to learn from our French-speaking colleagues; by reading their work, by attending their presentations and conferences, and, yes, by presenting in French (or in both languages) ourselves.

Ensuring a safe space for debate and disagreement

CHA members will have the opportunity at the annual meeting to vote on a motion that proposes to rename the Sir John A. Macdonald prize. I have already expressed my views on the question of Macdonald and commemoration, in the previous edition of the *Bulletin*.

Whatever the outcome, the CHA must remain a safe space for scholars to express divergent viewpoints, whether those viewpoints are popular or unpopular among a majority of our peers. Anecdotally, at least, I know that there are some historians, younger and older, who have been self-censoring on the Macdonald commemoration question and on other issues because they are afraid that openly expressing their views – even if done so in a reasoned and respectful manner – could have the effect of ostracizing them from the community. As such, they remain silent. This silence becomes confused with consensus, thus further restricting the intellectual parameters of what is considered acceptable debate.

Two decades after the infamous “History Wars,” we have finally begun to bridge the divide between social and political historians. Both groups are well-represented within the CHA, and we have come to understand that multiple fields of history can claim legitimacy at any given time. It would be a travesty to undo it all. Fortunately, younger scholars do not yet carry the intellectual baggage of the old rhetorical conflict. It would be a disservice to saddle them with it, or worse still, to precipitate a second set of History Wars. I, for one, am hopeful that we will all continue to allow space for a multiplicity of views and ways in which to interpret the past.

In closing...

Finally, I would like to thank the members of the CHA, Executive and Council with whom I have had the privilege of working these past five years, and Martin Laberge and Michel Duquet in particular, friends and colleagues both, for their collaboration on the *Bulletin/Intersections*.

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