


“Chasing the Unicorn”

It was with more than a little trepidation that I deposited my doctoral thesis at the University of Ottawa this past September. These feelings were, of course, accompanied by a great deal of satisfaction and relief at having (nearly) completed a project that I have been working on for years now, and for which I remain passionate. My trepidation stems from the usual feelings of anxiety that come with submitting a thesis: I pray to Clio for a speedy administrative process and for a timely and successful defence. I hope the readers are satisfied with the work, but I also look forward to discussing it in detail with five different people who have actually read it!

While putting my faith in Clio, I find myself pondering another Greek legend. For, you see, as I approach the end of my degree, I find myself reflecting upon my long-term employment prospects. At the moment, I am looking forward to taking up a postdoctoral fellowship in the winter. But, naturally, I must also contemplate what the future may hold beyond the postdoc. Today, it seems, tenure-track job openings have a lot in common with unicorns – people have alleged that they exist, but one cannot help but wonder whether they are more myth than reality.

I would be the first to argue that a PhD in History provides its own rewards: pursuing one's research interests, becoming immersed in archival collections and the secondary literature, engaging in a highly stimulating intellectual environment with students and professors as colleagues, having the opportunity to lecture, present at learned conferences, and publish in scholarly journals. These are the things that bright-eyed and bushy-tailed undergrads dream of. They generally do not, however, pay the bills.

“These days,” writes *Maclean's* columnist Charlie Gillis, “a doctorate is as likely to inspire pity as veneration.” Ouch! Mr. Gillis may be terse, but he has a point: the job prospects for new PhDs are grim, especially when it comes to obtaining stable employment in their fields of study. Competition is stiff, with universities churning out more PhDs than ever (nearly 5,000 in 2012 alone).¹ Provincial governments across Canada have cut funds to universities, which in turn have looked for ways to trim operating costs – with eyes squarely set on the humanities and social sciences. At the same time, they have attempted to raise revenues by increasing enrolment, which has reached 1.2 million.²



Instead of creating more full-time, tenure-track positions to teach the record number of undergraduate students, universities are increasingly relying on part-time lecturers, who are paid lower wages, have few benefits, and have no guarantee of future employment. What is more, these sessional professors do much of the heavy lifting by teaching large survey and methodology courses that (some) tenured professors prefer to avoid in favour of the smaller, more specialized senior undergraduate seminar classes. The statistics are telling. According to *Maclean's*, only 12% of PhDs under 35 years of age employed at universities held tenure or tenure-track positions in 2007 – before the recession. In 1981, the rate was 35%.³ The situation south of the border is not much better. There, academic job listings in history are 40% lower than they were before the recession, while PhD enrolment continues to rise.⁴ In some history fields, the average number of applicants per job opening is as high as eighty-five people.⁵ Stiff competition indeed!

For new PhDs, even landing a sessional teaching position can be problematic. Universities often have seniority regimes that

¹ <http://oncampus.macleans.ca/education/2013/06/03/are-ph-d-s-an-academic-dead-zone/#more-55875>

² <http://oncampus.macleans.ca/education/2013/06/03/are-ph-d-s-an-academic-dead-zone/#more-55875>

³ <http://oncampus.macleans.ca/education/2013/06/03/are-ph-d-s-an-academic-dead-zone/#more-55875>

⁴ <http://oncampus.macleans.ca/education/2012/01/05/considering-graduate-school-in-the-arts-or-social-sciences/#more-35440>

⁵ <http://oncampus.macleans.ca/education/2012/01/05/considering-graduate-school-in-the-arts-or-social-sciences/#more-35440>

give priority to people who have taught more courses in the past, for understandable reasons. But for new graduates with limited experience, this creates an application process that is fraught with uncertainty. It raises the question: what responsibility, if any, do post-secondary institutions have to provide temporary employment at a time when the job market is poor and they simultaneously continue to accept more graduate students who, in turn, have made the expansion of the more lucrative undergraduate programmes possible? Moreover, participants in online academic message boards often discuss the stigma against long-time sessional professors when it comes to hiring for tenure-track positions. Paradoxically, history departments

appear to be more willing to hire new PhDs to short-term positions before committing to a longer-term arrangement. For new PhDs who have children, are married or in a serious relationship, moving to take up a sessional, one-year or two-year contract can be difficult. We live in an age of balancing two careers and two incomes – uprooting the family, asking one’s partner to give up his or her job, and moving children away from school and friends to pursue a term teaching contract with only the most ephemeral promise of future employment can put a serious strain on relationships, and create uncertainty for the family budget.

Of course, new PhDs should not limit themselves to seeking employment at post-secondary institutions. Work outside academia can be extremely rewarding, and offers a chance to effect change in ways that are not always possible from the lofty heights of the Ivory Tower. For PhD graduates in History, however, the current environment of fiscal restraint does not bode well – the types of policy and research work for which we are well suited are often found in government, or

with organizations that depend on government contracts. Some people overseeing hiring will unofficially screen out job applicants with PhDs out of a concern that they will be unable to transition from academic work, feel overqualified, and resent entry-level tasks that are “beneath” them. Official government hiring practices mirror those in academia – more temporary contract workers with low pay and no benefits, and fewer permanent, stable career positions.⁶ (I know of at least one individual working under a temporary help services contract for the federal government who had seriously considered staying at her old job as a barista because the tips paid better.) After having left academia, it can be hard to get back in. Working in a non-academic job can place limitations on pursuing research interests and publishing, which in turn can make history departments less interested in a candidate.

It’s not all doom and gloom. The overall unemployment rate of PhDs is below the national average.⁷ At some universities, meanwhile, part-time positions earmarked for PhD students can allow them to get a foot in the door, and provide valuable teaching experience. Teaching is a recurring theme in this edition of the *Bulletin*, and aspiring professors would do well to pay heed. In his article, Shawn Graham suggests that concerns over the allegedly job-killing MOOCs (Massively Open Online Courses) may be overblown. Ian Milligan’s piece demonstrates that taking advantage of online research and teaching tools is easier than ever before. John Lutz and Keith Thor Carlson provide an intriguing look into a successful history field school with BC First Nations that merits consideration elsewhere in Canada. In his column for the “Teaching Corner,” Stephen High broadens our understanding of how oral history can be applied in the classroom, and in partnership with other disciplines. Bonny Ibwahe’s article on the intersections of African and Canadian history testifies to the fact that Canadianists can look beyond our borders for new and fascinating directions in research. Finally, Craig Heron’s reflections as a long-time member of the CHA provide a hopeful reminder of the possibilities that may yet lie ahead for new PhD grads.

The tenure-stream job opening may not be as mythical as the unicorn after all. Still, it remains a very rare bird indeed!

Robert Talbot
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⁶ <http://www.psc-cfp.gc.ca/adt-vrf/rprt/2010/th-at/index-eng.htm#toc12>

⁷ <http://oncampus.macleans.ca/education/2013/06/03/are-ph-d-s-an-academic-dead-zone/#more-55875>





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L'automne est synonyme en Outaouais de plusieurs choses : les arbres se départissent de leur feuillage, les outardes reprennent leur migration vers le Sud et les étudiants de l'Université du Québec en Outaouais reprennent le chemin des salles de classe. La reprise des activités d'enseignement m'offre l'occasion de revenir sur un thème abordé il y a quelques mois.

Vous vous souvenez sans doute comment j'avais envoyé cet hiver les étudiants de mon cours de méthode historique à *Bibliothèque et archives Canada*. J'étais alors enthousiasmé par le succès de l'activité : les étudiants s'étaient lancés à la recherche de documents couvrant une période historique et un thème spécifique choisi en classe. La phase de recherche et de consultation des documents archivistiques avait ravi les étudiants, qui étaient fascinés par le processus de recherche documentaire et la facilité relative avec laquelle ils avaient eu accès aux documents. Je dois rappeler que l'aide du personnel de BAC avait également contribué au succès de la première phase du travail.

C'est par la suite que les choses se sont corsées... À l'enthousiasme original succéda la surprise, l'incompréhension et, dans certains cas, la panique! En fait, les étudiants furent confrontés à la réalité du travail historique : la difficile interprétation des sources. Plusieurs étudiants ont tenté de poser sur leur document les connaissances apprises en classe, les analyses déjà croisées dans leurs travaux, bref, de calquer une interprétation déjà faite sur un document archivistique. Également, malgré mes avertissements, plusieurs étudiants ont sérieusement sous-estimé les connaissances préalables

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nécessaires à l'analyse d'un document d'archives. C'est particulièrement vrai pour ceux qui ont choisi des archives militaires, truffées d'acronymes, d'abréviations et de termes techniques. Ils croyaient à tort que les documents « parleraient » d'eux-mêmes. Leur plus grande surprise fut sans doute la difficulté de restituer la « profondeur » des documents choisis, c'est-à-dire, identifier les non-dits, les allusions obscures, les noms de personnages souvent secondaires et oubliés par l'Histoire, etc.

L'historien français Antoine Prost exprime bien l'expérience vécue par mes étudiants lorsqu'il rappelle qu'« il est une conviction bien ancrée dans l'opinion publique c'est qu'en histoire il y a des faits, et qu'il faut les savoir. [...] On touche ici sans doute la différence majeure entre l'enseignement et la recherche, entre l'histoire qui s'expose didactiquement et celle qui s'élabore. Dans l'enseignement, les faits sont tous faits. Dans la recherche, il faut les faire. »

Malgré les difficultés rencontrées par les étudiants, je compte reprendre l'exercice au semestre de l'hiver 2014. Non seulement la majorité des analyses furent de haut niveau, mais les étudiants ont compris la véritable nature du travail historique et des efforts déployés par les historiens pour proposer de nouvelles interprétations et donner du sens au passé.

Martin Laberge

Secrétaire de la langue française