

THE SITUATION FOR RECENT HISTORY GRADUATES: THE JOB MARKET, RETHINKING THE IDEA OF “PLAN B,” AND SOME IDEAS FOR THE FUTURE.

By Ian Milligan

“I’m going to be a college professor,” declared the enthusiastic animatronic talking head in a viral video that swept the Internet throughout the summer of 2010 (now seen by over six hundred thousand visitors). Needless to say, the glib and dry responses from the professor, highlighting the low pay and benefits of adjuncts, poor permanent job prospects, and other post-PhD issues, form a sort of gallows humour for viewers.

I’ve been asked by Michel Duquet to give a brief write-up on some of the issues and, importantly, opportunities that have arisen for new scholars recently. First, I’ll give a sense of the academic jobs market. Second, I will highlight recent discussions that took place between academics, administrators, and professional organization executive members at the recent American Historical Association (AHA) and Modern Languages Association (MLA), and conclude on a positive note with recent discussions around alternative academic positions (the #alt-ac movement) and suggest what our professional organization might do.

The situation is not all doom and gloom. Similar situations have existed in the past. Nonetheless, it is important to understand the nuances of the current job market for historians – emphasizing some of the factors that lead to discouragement, but also signs of hope emanating from the south.

The Academic Job Market

It is no surprise that the job market for professional, academic historians is poor: it has been so for most of Canadian history! As Michel correctly noted in the last issue, “history students have always somehow managed to make good use of their history degrees in spite of the chronic shortage of professorship appointments.” So why is there such hand wringing by recent graduate students? In part, the answer for the recent upheaval lies in two major trends.

First, there has been a dramatic shift between expectations of academic employment upon entering graduate programs. In my own academic work on the sixties, there was a similar eruption

when students entered universities with one set of employment expectations, and graduated into a radically different context. When considering my own decision to pursue a PhD in 2007, I pulled York University’s history employment figures. They seemed very strong: 68% placed in tenure track positions, 8% sessional, and the rest in a scattering of non-academic or post-doctoral positions. The economic recession, beginning in 2008 and its continued effects today, meant a dramatic constriction in the number of available positions; unsurprising, given the realities of the Canadian post-secondary sector. So if students

entered with one set of expectations, they are experiencing a differing reality, vividly demonstrated in the American figures at right. Still, as the chart above demonstrates, except for brief blips here and there, *things have always been bad*.

Second, new digital technologies have let us talk about these matters. In a very limited sense, these technologies enable a conversation to take place beyond the department or physical locale, and away from authority figures. Thanks to the back channels of Facebook, Twitter, and the many blogs within *University Affairs*, *the Chronicle of Higher*

Education, *Inside Higher Education*, and beyond, graduate students and newly graduated historians have been able to discuss these issues. Discussion begets further discussion, and raises the public profile of this issue.

Graduate growth, encouraged by governments, also continues within Canada. There are two schools of thought on this question, the first arguing for supply-management to bring the number of graduates down to a market-sustainable level. The second argues that holding that a history PhD should bring no guarantee of an academic job. There are merits to both positions, but if we continue with the status quo of a structural mismatch in this regard, we need to begin looking at cultural shifts within history departments. Tenured faculty members need to think critically about the skills they are teaching and the goals for which their students are seeking a PhD. That way, the gap between academic jobs and the number of graduates can begin looking like an opportunity, rather than an obstacle. This also allows us to



“So you want to get a PhD in the Humanities.”

continue training graduate students for future jobs, so if academic positions do return en masse, we will have qualified candidates ready to fill them.

Things are bad (as always): What can we do? No More Plan B and the #Alt-Ac Movement

I followed the AHA and MLA from afar. When it came to the job market, I noticed a theme of hope and agency. The tweets and blogs I followed acknowledged that the job market was bad, but focused on positive changes that could be made. AHA President Anthony Grafton and executive director Jim Grossman have led a movement, “No More Plan B.” Its goal is to convince students and departments alike to move beyond the “tenure-track job or bust” mentality. As a professional organization representing the historical profession, they have publicly encouraged departments to actively consider public history, careers in non-academic departments within universities (research centres and libraries, for example), or even jobs in the private sector that require significant qualitative skills. Others, most notably Jesse Lemisch (who has made very public statements on H-LABOR and at the conference itself), castigate the AHA for adhering to a market-based reality; we should have more historians, he demands, calling for a Works Progress Administration-esque program to put historians to work with writing and research projects.

The idea of alternative academic employment has taken on considerable traction within the American scholarly community, notably within the digital humanities subfield but also much more broadly. Alternative academic careers are just that: employment within universities for academics (many with doctorates), to use their training and skills to work in research institutes, libraries, and elsewhere. Yet they face cultural pressures around being seen as “failed academics,” despite their critical role in providing the research and supportive infrastructure that enables faculty to flourish.

The CHA is well positioned in this regard. Our mission statement is inclusive, drawing on historians working in universities, government and the private sector and on a wide variety of themes and geographies. The membership structure is similarly progressive, focusing on income rather than position. Lyle Dick, our president is a high-profile member of the important and critical public history profession.

So what can we do?

Investigate and Discuss: following the lead of the AHA, the CHA should continue to address this problem. We’re moving in the right direction: “[A Modest Proposal, No More Plan B, the Canadian Edition](#)” will be a panel at this year’s annual general meeting, to be tentatively held on Wednesday, May 30th at 9am. We are currently carrying out a survey of graduate students and recent graduates, collecting information on career aspirations and measures to help with the ‘crisis.’

Support Those who Pursue Alternative Careers: Most academics will openly support alternative careers our private conversations, and sometimes in our writing or departmental events, but there is an implicit trend towards academic employment in how most universities structure their programs. In some ways, this responds to demand: most graduate students *want* to be professors. A few minor changes could begin this:

Celebrate non-academic placement: Departments and individuals celebrate the placement of a graduated student into a tenure-track or postdoctoral position; why not celebrate and announce placements with provincial ministries, or libraries, or museums?

Encourage more participation from public historians at the annual conference, perhaps with a lower fee for individuals without university funding.

Workshop development: Be attuned to workshops. Instead of an A-List of academic jobs workshops and an occasional secondary presentation on “alternatives,” conceptualize them all under the umbrella of “employment.” Use this instead of the term “non-academic jobs,” which implicitly privileges academic work.

Form a Mentorship Network: Most of us have wonderful mentors within the academy. But what about outside? An outreach program to former History PhDs who have found employment outside the academy could help support graduate students at all levels.

Importantly, however, Continue to Support those who want to be Academics: The casualization of academic labour continues unabated. Although larger forces are at play, we must continue to be cognizant of the realities and financial pressures facing adjunct instructors. Moves such as the CHA’s progressive fee structure are a wonderful first step, as are the encouraging words within the *Becoming a Historian* guidebook. One notable step would be emphatic institutional support for postdoctoral fellowships: these are useful bridging positions that can facilitate the entrance of junior academics into the labour market.

I love history and I love being a historian. I also know that no matter where I end up, I will always be a historian, and will be a welcome member of the CHA. Things are not rosy on the jobs front, and realistically, they never are for anybody outside of a small number of supply-managed professions.

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