

## "HAVE DOCTORATE WILL TRAVEL" : REFLECTIONS ON LIFE AS AN ITINERANT HISTORY PROFESSOR

### *"Once Upon a Time"*

The story begins in 1989 - with optimism, enthusiasm and a certain trepidation. Having finished my degree, and been made fit by a year of work in construction, I accepted a one-year contract in Western Canada, rather than full-time work at the Public Archives of Canada. The alternative: a lifetime of wondering "what if." The year, by most every measure, went well - but perhaps in keeping with future fate, the full-time contract went elsewhere. The deciding vote, I came to learn from the voter himself, was based on my supposed urge to return east (a goal I did not have, but there you go).

### *"Dreams to Realities"*

Of course, the end of the contract **did** mean a return east - to more concentrated university terrain and to be nearer family in case of difficult times. Thus began a history of "pragmatic" teaching - I would become both a busy and well travelled "part-time" professor. Well, make that an "Instructor", an "Assistant Professor", an "Adjunct Professor". The labels varied, but what remained consistent was the nature of the instruction. In just over a decade I taught the equivalent of 70 full year courses in five Departments at four universities . Classes were usually large; teaching supports highly variable; and pay levels a fraction that of full-time academics.

One might have dreamt otherwise, but what were the options? While the academic community spoke of "publications", the rest of the world wanted bills paid. So off to teaching I went. The "lessons" were hard won. What lessons? First, expect the unexpected - for instance, offers to teach courses with a month or even days' notice. Second, be ready to teach "widely" - not just Canadian (I have covered every era from 1500 to 2000) but U.S. history, Western Civilization ... how about online? If full time opportunities beckon - push the parameters even farther - and so Canadian Studies entered the *curriculum vitae*. Flexibility and versatility became watch-words, as did the relentless search for more teaching. Gone was earlier reticence - Department Chairs were frequent recipients of emails in search of work. And searching the *CAUT Bulletin*, *University Affairs* and, as the decade wore on, a variety of websites became second nature.

### *"Toils and Trials"*

These searches, and a hard won versatility, won me much teaching. Adding to my arsenal was a growing reputation for being dependable, on time and effective. Sounds immodest

perhaps - but the facts speak for themselves - and the universities have a buyer's market; the mediocre instructor will soon find him or herself struggling. For all the rhetoric about the value of "part-timers", the reality is that we are more closely scrutinized than nearly any other academics.

Did I say academics?- yes I did. For in the midst of many hours on the road (I drive 50,000 to 60,000 kilometres annually crisscrossing southern Ontario) there was the struggle to be the "active" academic - to produce papers and publications. Mind you, to give papers was to find conferences nearby (no travel monies were available until recently) and conferences that fit into teaching schedules that consumed most weekdays. Then there was the issue of accessing archives and more. Sometimes the effort could even be lucrative - government funded research was remunerative, if perhaps less than warmly received as "publication" by the academic community. Many other papers and a variety of small publications were given and completed; large projects tended to wane into dormancy in the face of time pressures. That factor helped confirm "part-time" status - full-time positions were rare and "big" publications a key.

Time pressures - not just driving as much as 20 hours a week; not just teaching big classes but also marking literally hundreds of papers a term. There was also the need to prepare for an ever widening circle of courses - sometime taught just once after many hours of effort.

### *"A Personal 'Notwithstanding Clause'"*

So - a litany of woes ? A memoir of a best forgotten past ? Hardly. While almost anyone would prefer job and income stability, I **DO** have a collection of "pink slips" an inch thick. And what an opportunity to collect the letterheads of Canadian universities (and a few American ones too). I joke about having been turned down by every English-language university in Canada!

But seriously - the key is in the experience. As a veteran of ditch digging and other such joys, there are far worse things to be than a "part-timer" even if the role was as grim as it is sometimes described. In my case at least, I harbour few regrets and little bitterness. (Although one can hardly read job descriptions overtly stating that the winning candidate will be a recent graduate without flinching. How is that "exclusiveness" different from announcing that candidates of a certain gender or ethnicity will not be welcome ?)

So, why few regrets? The answer is simple. As I travelled to and fro between as many as three universities a term (sometimes teaching online too) - one factor never wavered. Teaching university students was a privilege and joy, a chance to shape young minds; to encourage them to think; to convince them of the merits of the Canadian experience. If they became better writers or speakers - a bonus.

Doing work one loves; paying the bills - they are paid off ! That it took teaching the equivalent of 70 full year courses in a decade is a minor issue. Did I deserve better? The "expert" assessing my many applications concluded over and over that I did not. Students, however, support my enthusiasms (or is it naivete ?) Nominations for teaching excellence; students offering letters of support should I need them; students amazed but pleased to find that the history they "had" to take was actually a pleasure. What could be better?

*"Dreams Frayed but Extant"*

So I say to others out there: if you have worked through the dry years of Canadian academe as a "part-timer" I salute your enthusiasms. I know that I am not alone - I have met many

others "on the road." Each of us has a different story; but I know that school after school, Department after Department would be diminished without we who dwell on the fringes of academe.

Thus my story does not end - it continues - with enthusiasm if an inevitable trepidation. A decision well made; a career fashioned out of scores of contracts; a familiarity with the highways and byways of Southern Ontario, and even the Internet. The experience, and it continues, is worthwhile beyond measure. But time to stop - with three course to cover this summer, I have matters to attend to.

Dr. Peter V. Krats  
University of Western Ontario  
(except when someone else hires me)