

The Use and Abuse of Teaching Assistants

One of the sessions at the CHA Annual Meeting which dealt with matters of interest to the profession as a whole considered how teaching assistants were used by history departments across the country.

The panel discussion revealed the wide variety in the work that Teaching Assistants (TAs) do, and their working conditions across the country. Panellist Larry Hannant (Douglas College) remarked that TAs have a number of concerns in common with faculty concerning workloads, class sizes, and the quality of education. Moreover it is usually to the department's interest as well as the TAs' to ensure that TAs receive a fair rate of compensation for their hours worked. Hannant added however that there are also times when the interests of a TA and individual faculty supervisors diverge. He called for the establishment of guidelines to deal with disputes between TAs and their supervisors, including agreements on how much work the TA is expected to perform, how the TA will be evaluated, and procedures to handle harassment grievances coming either from students or between TAs and their supervisors, as a way of protecting both parties.

Margaret Watson (York University) emphasized the importance of separating the academic work of graduate students and their paid employment as TAs. She pointed out that a teaching assistantship is not a scholarship, it is wage income for work that is performed by the TA for the benefit of the university. Watson, who is President of the York local of the Canadian Union of Educational Workers, argued that TAs, as employees, were best able to defend their interests and the quality of education by unionizing and Hannant concurred.

Jennifer Veitch (University of Victoria) drew attention to the fact that TAs are unleashed on students with no training in teaching methods and often little or no background in the area that they are supposed to teach. She summarised the pilot course she has helped the Teaching and Learning Centre at the University of Victoria prepare to help prepare TAs for their immediate task as well as for their roles as future course conductors.

A spirited discussion ensued with TAs in the room echoing the frustrations enumerated by the panellists on being thrown into classrooms unprepared and having no protection against abuses and no job security unless they were unionized, while a faculty member and

other graduate students reflected on some of the drawbacks of seniority agreements in TA union agreements. If a consensus emerged it was that more attention must be paid to the training of TAs and the conditions under which they are employed.

A Living History Adventure Canada From Sea to Sea

by Jim Smithers

During the summer of 1989, twenty-five students and two leaders from the School of Outdoor Recreation at Lakehead University in Thunder Bay, Ontario, completed the first leg of an ambitious five year plan. They retraced Sir Alexander Mackenzie's 1789 voyage of exploration and commerce. While completing this 3500 kilometre journey from Fort McMurray, Alberta, to Kendall Island on the Beaufort Sea, they faced many of the challenges experienced by Mackenzie and his hardy band of French Canadian voyageurs, Native guides and hunters.

The Canada Sea-to-Sea Project is a cooperative effort of Lakehead University in Thunder Bay, Ontario, The One Step Beyond Adventure Group in Canmore, Alberta, and the Alexander Mackenzie Trail Association in Kelowna, British Columbia. The next three phases of the plan involve the retracing of Mackenzie's travels across Canada in search of the North West Passage (1991 - Montreal to Winnipeg, Manitoba, 1992 - Winnipeg to Peace River, Alberta, 1993 - Peace River to Bella Coola, British Columbia). As was the case in 1989, the modern day voyageurs will present a two hour historical interpretive programme for school and community groups along the route. In addition, they will be travelling in historically designed canoes (of modern materials), and they will have costumes, artifacts and trade goods appropriate to the time period.

The goals of this challenging undertaking are:

to commemorate on its bicentennial anniversary the first recorded crossing

of North America from the Atlantic Ocean to the Pacific Ocean.

- to educate Canadians about Canada's adventurous heritage and the need for readopting this spirit of adventure and entrepreneurship in today's increasingly urbanized world.
- to reestablish the first route to link Canada from sea-to-sea as a National Heritage Trail.
- to reaffirm for modern Canadians the spirit of teamwork, unity and multiculturalism that built Canada as a nation.

As ambitious as these goals are, contemporary expeditions face additional stresses related to the interests of the sponsors, the tyranny of schedules, the realities of the weather and the scrutiny of the media. However, the enthusiasm displayed by the children and communities who take part in a fleeting moment of Canadian history as a canoe brigade passes through their lives more than makes up for the hardships involved. Such expeditions are also an incredible personal and professional experience for the Lakehead University students. They also may be meaningful experiences for all Canadians. The role models presented by a talented and hard working group of young Canadians who are recreating a shining moment in Canadian history may provide a much needed alternative to the superficial glitz of some contemporary teenage heroes.

If you would like to know more about the Canada Sea-to-Sea Project, please contact Dr. Jim Smithers at Lakehead University, Thunder Bay, Ontario, P7B 5E1. A copy of the Expedition Diary is available upon request.