

The Graduate Student Column

The executive of the Graduate Students' Committee welcomes three new members. Olivier Côté, having been elected Co-Chair in June of this year, now shares the reins of the GSC with Alison Norman, whose mandate will come to an end next year. Olivier is a doctoral candidate at Laval University, where he specialises in the study of identity representations in the mass media and works on dissertation centred on the television series *Canada, A People's History*. Jess Durkin replaces Josh MacFadyen as treasurer. Jess is currently wrapping up her masters' at Carleton, where she will begin doctoral studies in September. Her dissertation will tentatively examine the changing practice and meaning of canoe-tripping for Ontario. The GSC has also found a new webmaster in Jonathan Crossen. A doctoral candidate enrolled in the Tri-University History Program at the University of Waterloo, Jonathan is preparing a dissertation on the history of Indigenous internationalism since the World Council of Indigenous Peoples in 1975. Lastly, Heather Steel takes her leave as Graduate Student Representative to the Council of the Canadian Historical Association; I have the honour of succeeding her to that position.

The GSC, it will be remembered, has the mission of promoting and defending the interests of graduate students in history throughout the Canada. For obvious geographical reasons, student collegiality manifests itself rather sparsely, and is not easily structured, at this scale. What happens at the local, departmental level is quite different. And so I thought it worthwhile to devote this brief column to the groups that – under the labels of association, society, or committee – gather together all students registered, full-time or part-time, in a program leading to a graduate degree in history in any given university.

Having conducted a quick online survey, I have discovered that at least six groups across the country have chosen the name of Graduate History Students Association (GHSA). Others vie with each other in originality. The prize, if there was one, should go to the *Regroupement des étudiantes et étudiants à la maîtrise en histoire (RÉÉMHUS)* of the Université de Sherbrooke. This group has adopted as its logo the historically rich image of the she-wolf suckling Romulus and... Remus, get it? The students at McGill and Laval, for their part, deserve at least an honourable mention. The former, for having displayed a touch of black humour

in naming GASH, the Graduate Association of Students in History. The latter, for having freed themselves from the oppressive bonds of acronymy by naming "ARTEFACT" their Association des étudiants de 2e et 3e cycles du Département d'histoire.

To my knowledge, the Université de Sherbrooke is the only place where an association of masters students in history can be found. Of course, the small size of the graduate student body in universities that do not offer doctoral programs, coupled with the short duration of masters studies, tend to make the institution of such associations either impossible or undesirable. In the large universities as much in the smaller ones, however, the very nature of graduate studies pose hurdles to associative life. The scholar's work is traditionally solitary and the milieu remains rather individualistic. For better or worse, only a minority of the student population bothers to attend the meetings and activities of its associations. And sooner or later, even those who are most devoted to associative life must take their leave in response to the needs of research, of dissertation-writing, of sessional teaching, of family, and eventually because their studies come to an end. The vigor of student groups generally fluctuates from one year to the next, according to the interest and industry of the membership and executive committee.

Generally speaking, the administrative, academic, and social activities vary little from one group to the next. Almost all of them hold monthly meetings during which they keep their members informed and consider issues of concern to them. They delegate representatives on the departmental, faculty, and university-wide committees. Some of these associations maintain web sites that allow them to reach out to their members and to maintain an institutional memory. Most of them organise and subsidise, according to their means, all sorts of social and academic events that punctuate the year. In this way, student initiatives complement those of the faculty or compensate their absence. These associations play an important role in the welcoming and orientation of new students. They organise BBQs, potlucks, and much appreciated pub nights. Many coordinate outings to the woods, mountain or beach – depending on the local landscape –, sporting events or trivia competitions. A few associations publish annual or semi-annual bulletins. The Graduate History Society Review of the students at the University of To-

ronto and the satirical Document of their neighbours at York are particularly nice examples (recent issues are available for perusal online). The University of Toronto's GHS also began, a few years ago, to award annual prizes to those students and professors who make notable contributions to the graduate experience.

On the academic front, the most active associations organise brown bag lunches, workshops (on teaching, publication, the job market), and annual conferences. Laval's ARTEFACT, as well as the Association des étudiants(es) diplômés(es) du Département d'histoire de l'Université de Montréal (AEDDDUHM), have even been publishing their annual conference proceedings. To make all of these activities possible, student associations must fundraise. They generally receive a sum of money from their history departments, faculties, or universities. To finance conferences, students often manage to find additional sponsors from outside of the academic community. To finance their more routine activities, certain associations organise book sales, bake sales, or the sale of customized clothing. I know of at least one group that organised and benefited from the proceeds of a hockey pool, and whose members briefly contemplated organising a poker tournament with the same aim.

It seems worthwhile to dwell on the subject of annual conferences organised by and for graduate students. The last decade, as most will have noticed, has seen the multiplication of such events. The Qualicum Conference, an event aimed at students and professors in British Columbia universities, has existed for over thirty years. But the oldest graduate history conferences, in the strictest sense, appear to be Carleton University's Underhill Colloquium and Concordia's History in the Making Conference. Their creation goes back only to 1995. Among the newest events, I would cite the Colloque étudiant en histoire de l'Université de Sherbrooke, which was held for the first time last February.

The scale and *raison d'être* of these events vary. Some remain rather small, and, judging by their programs, cater above all to their immediate student community. Others have become remarkably large and diverse. At York University, the 2008 edition of New Frontiers in Graduate History brought together slightly over a hundred students from approximately thirty institutions.

These conferences have many advantages. Students brave enough to organise them acquire a precious professional experience – the organising of conferences, colloquia, and workshops seems to be an unavoidable

facet of the historian's craft in this day and age. Student presenters, for their part, have the opportunity to share the results of their research and to receive the feedback of their peers. Finally, for everyone involved these events provide an occasion to do a little networking and have a lot of fun. If we can judge by the number of conferences and of participants on a countrywide scale, it becomes quite obvious that they respond to a real need.

That said, it seems important to reflect constructively on such events. As noted, they have multiplied over the last decade. Have they become unnecessarily numerous, especially given the sheer number of "other" conferences, colloquia, and workshops that, without being reserved for graduate students, nevertheless welcome them with enthusiasm? Is there not an excess of parochialism? The Montreal-Toronto axis seems particularly privileged or burdened, depending on one's perspective: graduate students at the University of Toronto and York both have their annual conference; the same is true at the universities of Ottawa and Carleton, as well as at the Université de Montréal, Concordia, and McGill. Might there not be benefits in establishing partnerships between associations and institutions? Certain examples of collaboration come to mind. The hosting of the McGill-Queen's Graduate Student Conference in History alternates every year, as does that of the University of Maine-University of New Brunswick History Graduate Student Conference. On a much larger scale, the venerable Qualicum Conference caters to graduate students in universities throughout British Columbia, while the new Buffalo Province History Conference aspires to do the same for their counterparts in the Prairies. It also bears pointing out that both of these events, while giving priority to graduate students, also invite the participation of exceptional undergraduates. Would other graduate history conferences not benefit from opening up in a similar way?

I hope that such deliberately provocative questions will goad the student organisers of future conferences and their faculty advisors into finding innovative ways of rethinking, of "decentring" their events. More generally, I would encourage graduate students to get involved with their local associations. And I would encourage those who are already involved to have a look at the web sites of their colleagues' associations *a mari usque ad mare...* and while they're at it, why not peek at those of their colleagues outside the country? They will discover, I trust, valuable sources of inspiration.