

MEMBERSHIP?

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For graduate students and young faculty in the field of Canadian history, membership in the CHA is a right of passage, a token of their commitment to a chosen career and one of the important means of establishing professional ties within the wider academic community in Canada. For their colleagues in other areas of history this commitment is not so frequently made. Yet the advantages of CHA membership are many, advantages that are important to all historians working in Canada.

Like many who work on non-Canadian subjects, my doctoral years were spent outside Canada. Once finished, back home, looking for permanent work and building on my dissertation, my energies were spent fashioning international ties, as well as forging links with others in North America and Europe who shared common research interests. The challenge of creating interdisciplinary and field specific links preoccupied me above all else. No, I did not join the CHA. It did not occur to me in those early years and the advantages were not strongly promoted in my temporary jobs.

In 1987 I began a tenure track position at the University of New Brunswick and very quickly met vocal champions of the Canadian Historical Association. As past and future presidents of the CHA it is perhaps not surprising that my colleagues Bill Acheson and Phil Buckner were such passionate advocates of this professional body. Indeed, the basis of their argument in favour of membership was precisely that, the importance of this national umbrella organization for our profession. In their words, the CHA stood as the single most important advocate for historians working in Canada; as such it held a vital trust to lobby for and reflect the interest of history and all historians. Other groups or organizations could represent the myriad specializations, geographic foci, and analytical bents found in history departments across the country. But, they insisted, only the Canadian Historical Association represents all historians. Our Department is one which lunches together in whole or in part. Over lunch bags and take away, the strengths and benefits of the CHA were laid out, the weaknesses acknowledged and the advantages confirmed. The discussions were sometimes raucous, but the defenders of the CHA prevailed. I was convinced and I joined.

But my professional allegiances aside, strategies aimed at winning a wide non-Canadianist membership remain a challenge for the CHA over each new generation. The obvious mandate of the CHA is to strive for an almost total participation by historians inside Canada's borders. But many still ask: why

belong? In answer, here are several reasons which should be considered. First, all those teaching in graduate programs in history have an obligation to belong to the CHA in the interests of their students. For those masters and doctoral students likely to continue in the field, teaching, researching or engaged in other elements of historical work, the graduate network found within the CHA offers potentially invaluable contacts — a fact emphasized by the Graduate Committee of the CHA. Whether a timely lifeline or a professional soul mate, the umbrella organization offered to grad students through the CHA can help buoy a nascent career. Equally important for graduate students are the public professional links which teachers and supervisors can help them nurture through CHA meetings. Congress sessions are platforms from which new careers are launched on a national stage — experience and reputation develop in tandem. If international conferences are useful for the intellectual networks they sustain, then the Canadian-based Congresses are essential for the national profiles they can help create for the next generation of scholars. Employment is a pressing concern for young historians. Part of the responsibility of established historians is surely to assist in this transition and how better than under the auspices of the CHA networks and through participation in CHA Congresses? Of course, no one would want to replicate the impersonal elements of the AHA meat market — and Canadian demographic realities preclude that sort of development. Simply put, encouraging membership in the CHA among graduate students is an important aid in their future advancement.

In fact, the CHA is an important organization with programs suited to members at all stages in their professional lives, for all types of historians. The higher the levels of participation, the broader the membership among junior and senior academics, the more energized the discipline within the country as a whole.

The CHA is well known for its representations on issues like copyright and archival access, as well as its substantial contributions made through lobbying the federal government and its agencies like SSHRC. However, the practical agenda of the CHA does not necessarily attract the numbers of professional supporters that it should. Competition among professional organizations has grown sharply. Strong push/pull factors influence the numbers of professional associations and organizations that any single person can belong to at any time. Some of these organizations are national, but there are even more which are interest-based, drawing on the time,

money and intellectual energies of Canadian historians. No one could object to the tremendous contributions made by Canadians in these venues, nor object to the important presence they have in international gatherings. However, support for the CHA and other disparate professional bodies are not mutually exclusive.

Can the CHA create more conscious opportunities for collaboration as a means to attract new members in a range of historical fields, while at the same time strengthening our common professional bonds? It is no secret that Canadian research topics have been the backbone of the CHA Congresses. Perhaps it is not surprising then that number of junior and even more senior historians think of the CHA as an organization primarily for specialists in Canadian history, this in spite of its broad mandate directed at “anyone with an interest in history”. But as more and more subjects lend themselves to comparative study, so too opportunities abound to highlight specific disciplinary styles or subjects within the Congress. The broad themes of the CHA Congresses are certainly aimed at this type of transnational exchange. Would more historians recognize the benefits of membership if periodically their area of research was showcased? Prizes for works, such as the recently created award directed at the best article on the history of sexuality, will highlight the diversity within the CHA. But, are there other ways to encourage a wider membership through collaborative ventures? For example, might historians of visual culture and art history enjoy sharing the stage of a future CHA Congress? Might historians of urban spaces, science and technology, business, gender and women’s studies encourage their selected organizations to collaborate in a Congress which addressed these topics, collaborating with interest-based history societies? The potential may well be there to accomplish two goals: to introduce the benefits of CHA membership to a greater number of historians in Canada and to bring the findings of historians of Canada into ever wider fora.

Meanwhile, I acknowledge my debt to the CHA, for its lobbying efforts with SSHRC and for keeping history before the eyes of government during the often inauspicious years over the last decade and a half. But it is clear that the CHA only thrives with our participation and through the conscious implementation of policies which bring the benefits of this organization to young scholars and seasoned academics. So, ask yourself, how widespread is membership in your department? Check with your colleagues, new colleagues and old. Is membership limited to certain fields only? Are graduate students encouraged to join the CHA and are the special grad programs within this body highlighted? The continued strength of the CHA depends on our shared commitment, as well as the recognition of opportunities and responsibilities. As the subjects of historical enquiry change and evolve let us make sure that these changes are reflected in the membership of the CHA and that this organization and its Congresses continue to reflect the full spectrum of historians who work side by side across Canada.

