

## BRITISH HISTORY IN CANADIAN UNIVERSITIES

Historians of Britain have been much concerned in recent years about the state of their field in North American universities. By and large, neither undergraduate enrolments nor faculty positions seem effectively to have kept pace with general trends elsewhere in North American departments of history. Though they are far from universal phenomena, and though the past year has seen some optimistic developments, Canadian universities have not been immune from these trends. Undergraduate enrolments in British History, especially Modern British History, hold their own in some, especially larger, universities, but they seem rarely to be growing, and often to be declining elsewhere. Retiring faculty are often replaced in other fields instead, so that the overall complement of British historians declines relative to other history fields. Graduate training, when not undertaken abroad, seems more than ever concentrated at a handful of our larger, better endowed institutions.

Some of the reasons for this evident decline are not far to seek. Britain is less important to North Americans than it once was. Increasingly multicultural student bodies in both the US and Canada have less of an interest in things British and demand a wider range of subjects. History curricula expand in other directions and sometimes away from the concept of national histories altogether. British History is one of many traditional humanities fields which are almost universally under threat.

Some reasons, on the other hand, seem more subtle. It can be argued that its linguistic accessibility, enormous literature, and well established scholarly traditions make British History an ideal vehicle for introducing a non-Canadian History – indeed, the discipline of history itself – to undergraduates. Yet it has often been tied methodologically to approaches which seem stodgy, narrow and overly detailed when compared with other historiographical traditions. Canadian student interest in such issues as, for example, the British Civil War, rapidly pales before a morass of detail which makes it almost impossible to teach the subject to the uninitiated. In the highly specialized vein of British historical scholarship itself, standard textbook accounts (many of them in their third or fourth decade of common use) doggedly present a finely detailed, highly elitist, political narrative. They often ignore innovative and often interdisciplinary directions; they capture little of the methodological variety or sheer intellectual excitement of many of the newer approaches and recent entrants into history curricula. Finally, most of them speak to a British readership, well-versed in the outlines of its own native history to start with, and over the heads of our undergraduates whose history background remains very slight by comparison.

There seem to me to be a number of ways out of these dilemmas, some of them appropriate to the microcosm of the class-room,

others appropriate to more global initiatives. Unless we want to see the field wane even more broadly than is currently the case, we would do well to consider them.

Starting from the bottom up, it seems to me that those of us who teach the field in Canada need not be bound by the narrow, tightly focused and narrative based approaches of our British confreres. Our physical distance from the insularities of the British university tradition demands a broader overview of the subject. We should continue to take long, hard, looks at the design of our curriculum. We should actively seek teaching across disciplinary boundaries, along with others in, e.g., English Literature, Art and Music History, Historical Geography, Historical Anthropology, and Political Theory. We should not hesitate to collaborate in our advanced teaching even with colleagues at neighbouring institutions.

As faculty and historians, we must do more to keep our own spirits up by enhancing our contact and collaboration with each other. Faculty at the larger, research-oriented universities – those which might enjoy a critical mass of students and faculty in the field – have a particularly important role to play here. They must consider fostering inter-institutional colloquia and seminars to which graduate students and colleagues at smaller and more isolated institutions can come and participate. Lively seminars of this sort have flourished, and some still do, in, e.g., Kingston, Toronto and, more recently, Montreal: they should be supported and encouraged.

And finally, in the effort to enhance public awareness of British History, and thus prime the pump of undergraduate enrolment, several global approaches can be taken. Some of them emerge from the recent deliberations of the North American Conference on British History (NACBS), the umbrella group for the field throughout North America. These include commissioning a lengthy and perceptive report on the state of the field by Prof. Peter Stansky of Stanford (1999), and holding panel discussions at its plenary meetings (as in Boston, in November, 1999).

In addition, and in the spirit of the Stansky Report, NACBS has responded positively to initiatives by its Canadian members in several ways. It has designated a member of its Executive Council to elicit and represent Canadian perspectives in its deliberations: I have been asked to take this on for the duration of my term on the Council. In addition, in the effort to stimulate undergraduate awareness of the field, it has now gained the collaboration of the British Council in Ottawa in sponsoring a nation-wide, undergraduate essay contest, which will go into effect in the 2001-2002 academic year. Ten prizes of \$100 each will be awarded to the best undergraduate essays in any area of British Studies, historically construed, with adjudication by a panel of three senior

members of the NACBS itself. Finally, perhaps more by coincidence than by design, the organization of its annual plenary meeting will be in Toronto, 2-4 November, 2001. (Information on all these initiatives may be had from the NACBS web-site: [www.nacbs.org](http://www.nacbs.org).)

In the end, the future of British History in Canada may be influenced by Britain's role in the world, and by the extent to which Canadians in general and undergraduates in particular perceive that role as important and interesting. But we who teach the subject, and who hope to pass that responsibility and privilege

on to the next generation, have a very considerable part to play as well. In our current plunge towards education as vocational training, in a world where university funding increasingly depends on performance contracts and guaranteed graduation rates, and in departments where myriad new fields vie for funding, we must learn to defend our corner. The days when 'The Professor of British History' could sit and write all summer and then expect his or her classroom to be filled in September are waning quickly. Now is the time to act.

**Robert Tittler**  
Concordia University

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## HISTORIANS IN THE NEWS / HISTORIENS À LA UNE

**Donald Harman Akenson**, Queen's University, was nominated for the Pearson Writers' Trust Non-Fiction Prize for his book, *Saint Paul: A Skeleton Key to the Historical Jesus*.

**Serge Bernier**, Histoire et Patrimoine, ministère de la Défense nationale, a été élu à la Société royale du Canada.

**Colin Coates**, Centre of Canadian Studies, University of Edinburgh, received the 2001 Prix du Québec. A competitive research award, the Prix du Québec is awarded to UK-based researchers by the Délégation générale du Québec à Londres.

**Jacalyn Duffin**, Queen's University, received the 2001 Jason A. Hannah Medal from the Royal Society of Canada. The Hannah Medal recognizes an important Canadian publication in the history of medicine. Quoting the citation, "Prof. Duffin's *To See with a Better Eye: The Life of R.T.H. Laennec* (Princeton University Press, 1998) combines a very high degree of scholarship with unusual literary skill. The author has reviewed a staggering amount of original source material, including lecture notes and individual case records, both published and unpublished."

**Matthew Evenden**, UBC, received the 2000 Rachel Carson Prize for the best dissertation in environmental history from the American Society for Environmental History/Forest History Society. Evenden's dissertation, "Fish vs. Power: Remaking Salmon, Science and Society on the Fraser River, 1900-1960," was completed at York University.

**Gerald Friesen**, St. Paul's College, University of Manitoba, was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada.

**Geoffrey Hayes** received the University of Waterloo Distinguished Teaching Award.

**Mary Kinnear**, University of Manitoba, was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada.

Chalk up three more for Carleton University's **Brian McKillop**. His book, *The Spinster and the Prophet: Florence Deeks, H.G. Wells and the Mystery of the Purloined Past*, received The Crime Writers of Canada's Albert Ellis Award for true Crime. As well, *The Spinster and the Prophet* was nominated for the Writers' Trust of Canada's Drainie-Taylor Award for Biography. Finally, McKillop was also elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada.

**Léopold Migeotte**, Université Laval, a été élu à la Société royale du Canada.

**Wendy Mitchinson**, University of Waterloo, has been appointed Co-editor of the *Canadian Historical Review* effective July 2001.

**Veronica Strong-Boag**, UBC, was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada.

Congratulations to the following historians who were named "**Popular Profs**" by the *2001 Maclean's Guide to Canadian Universities and Colleges*:

Félicitations aux historiens suivants qui ont été nommés « **Professeurs les plus populaires** » par le *2001 Maclean's Guide to Canadian Universities and Colleges* :

Robert McDonald (UBC); Skip Ray (UBC); Derryl MacLean (SFU); Chris Hosgood (Lethbridge); Jim Pitsula (Regina); Stephen Cavan (Saskatchewan); Peter Bailey (Manitoba); David Topper (Winnipeg); Bruce Muirhead (Lakehead); Linda Ambrose (Laurentian); Kees Boterbloem (Nipissing); Robert Surtees (Nipissing); James Carson (Queen's); Geoffrey Smith (Queen's); Thomas Barcsay (Ryerson); Carolyn Kay (Trent); John Syrett (Trent); John English (Waterloo); Georges Harvey (Bishop's); Gil Troy (McGill); Penny Bryden (Mount Allison); Tony Rhineland (STU); Susan Brown (UPEI); David Weale (UPEI); David Duke (Acadia); Ruth Bleasdale (Dalhousie); Wayne Ingalls (Mount Saint Vincent); Brook Taylor (Mount Saint Vincent); James Cameron (St. F.X.).

Bragging rights belong to the **Department of History at Wilfrid Laurier University**. Six members were named "Popular Profs" by the *2001 Maclean's Guide to Canadian Universities and Colleges*. They are: Terry Copp, Leonard Friesen, Richard Fuke, Barry Gough, Doug Lorimer and Michael Sibalis.

Le **département d'histoire de la Wilfrid Laurier University** a de quoi se pavaner. Six membres de son corps professoral ont été nommés « Professeurs les plus populaires » par le *2001 Maclean's Guide to Canadian Universities and Colleges*. Il s'agit de Terry Copp, Leonard Friesen, Richard Fuke, Barry Gough, Doug Lorimer et Michael Sibalis.