

Bulletin

Canadian Historical Association - Société historique du Canada

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ASKAHISTORIAN.COM: A NEW KIND OF HISTORY FOR A NEW MILLENNIUM?

Having recently arrived at the conclusion that next year I might very well find myself joining the ranks of the overeducated and underemployed, I was once again perusing the job ads on H-Net when I stumbled across an advertisement for a new company selling a very unusual product. Promising to offer its clients "unparalleled insight and understanding into the historical past", askahistorian.com plans to open its doors to the public in September 2000, hiring out the minds of professional historians to those in desperate need of historical knowledge. Lawyers, government agencies, screen writers and others will no longer be required to visit the local library to find the answers to their questions; instead, askahistorian.com proposes to field out their queries to experts in appropriate fields at universities all across the world.

My initial reaction to this news was mixed: elation (at the possibility of part-time employment that would not require me to move or submit myself to a grueling interview process), and a strange, deeply unsettling feeling that something about this whole proposition was very, very wrong. If doctorates in history allow themselves to become 'historians for hire', does that mean that history is, in fact, a commodity?

With this question nibbling away at my academic conscience, I sat down at my laptop to find an answer to this question the best way I know how: the Internet. In response to my general query on a listserve frequented by a number of highly acclaimed professional historians, I received the answer I had been dreading all along. Was I some kind of a nutbar living in the Dark Ages? Of course history is a commodity! Do we not sell ourselves every day when we teach courses for which students pay thousands of dollars?

Discouraged and somewhat distressed by the too hearty response of my colleagues, I decided to toss the question about in my mind a while longer before abandoning my pride and self-worth altogether. It was now clear to me that it is impossible to deny that historians already 'sell their services' in a sense as teachers; but the exchange of historical knowledge in the university setting is certainly not a market experience! Although courses often are set by departments, the content and theoretical perspective of the course is very much up to the discretion of the individual teaching it, and reflects the interests, concerns and eccentricities of that teacher. These factors do not change in order to meet the demands of the student, even if he or she is partly responsible for the teacher's paycheque. Imagine for a moment: if students dictate what is to be taught, as in a market economy based on supply and demand, is this not in some ways a reversion to the days when great works of history were commissioned (and their 'greatness' was defined by how good they made their patrons look)?

Ethical concerns aside, an easily accessible and highly specialised service of this type should certainly prove to have its benefits. As one respondent to my query suggested, if askahistorian.com had existed in the early 1990s, professors of medieval history might not now be plagued by students eager to confirm that William Wallace was indeed Edward III's (albeit illegitimate) father. On the other hand, askahistorian.com presents a number

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The CHA *Bulletin* is published three times a year by the Canadian Historical Association. Notices, letters, calls for papers and articles of two pages or less, double-spaced, are welcome on topics of interest to historians, preferably accompanied by a translation into the other official language. Deadline for submissions of articles etc. for the next *Bulletin* is the following:

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We reserve the right to edit submissions. Opinions expressed in articles etc. are those of the author and not necessarily the CHA. Direct correspondence to:

Bulletin,
Canadian Historical Association,
359 Wellington Street, Ottawa,
Ontario, K1A 0N3
Tel.: (613) 233-7885
Fax: (613) 567-3110
E-mail: cha-shc@archives.ca
Web Site:
www.yorku.ca/research/cha/cha-shc.html

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Veuillez acheminer toute correspondance au **Bulletin,**

Société historique du Canada,
359, rue Wellington, Ottawa,
Ontario, K1A 0N3
Tél. : (613) 233-7885
Télécopieur : (613) 567-3110
Courrier électronique : cha-shc@archives.ca
Site web:
www.yorku.ca/research/cha/cha-shc.html

Editor/Rédacteur : Donald Wright

Contributing Editors: Sara Butler

Caroline-Isabelle Caron

Ruth Sandwell

Transcription: Joanne Mineault

Translation/Traduction: Edwidge Munn

Layout/Mise en page: Robert Ramsay

of obvious difficulties. As any professor of history will agree, by far the most challenging aspect of the profession is teaching students how to ask the right kinds of questions. For example, with all the recent research in social and legal history over the past thirty years, it no longer makes sense to ask the question: what effect did the highly structured system of feudalism have on the medieval peasantry? How does an 'historian for hire' even attempt to answer this question without offering up, at the very least, an annotated volume of Susan Reynolds' *Fiefs and Vassals*?

The goal of askahistorian.com is nothing short of admirable; its recognition of the value up-to-date, specialist research holds for the wider public suggests that history teachers at all levels have been getting their message through: history is relevant! The company's objective, however, may well be unattainable. It seems all too likely that the new millennium's lessons of history, when filtered through a middle man concerned with profit in a setting controlled by the student (rather than the teacher), may well result in the tired and sorry perpetuation of old twentieth century stereotypes and reductionist perspectives.

Sara M. Butler, Dalhousie University

HISTORY OF CANADA'S INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS ON THE WEB

The Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade announces the establishment of its web page "The Department in History." The site features recent volumes of Documents on Canadian External Relations and offers additional information on the history of Canadian foreign policy and of the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade. Visit the site at www.dfait-maeci.gc.ca/hist.

L'HISTOIRE DES RELATIONS INTERNATIONALES DU CANADA SUR LE WEB

Le ministère des Affaires étrangères et du Commerce international annonce la création de sa page Web « Le Ministère dans l'Histoire ». Le site met en vedette de récents volumes de la série Documents relatifs aux relations extérieures du Canada et offre des informations additionnelles sur l'histoire de la politique étrangère du Canada et du ministère des Affaires étrangères et du Commerce international. Rendez visite au site à l'adresse suivante : www.dfait-maeci.gc.ca/hist.