

## CHAPTER ONE GRADUATE SCHOOL: THE BASICS

Graduate study in history, like all creative work, is a labour of love. Historians are motivated by various intellectual and cultural interests, political passions, and scholarly commitments. Such motives, rather than a desire for financial reward or lasting fame and power, must ultimately sustain any person contemplating a career as a historian. As Canadian historian Kathryn McPherson of York University observed, being a history professor simply isn't a good enough job to be worth the long and protracted training and personal sacrifices required unless you love researching, writing, and teaching.

Graduate study in history is challenging and can sometimes be painful and stressful. In most MA programs, you are expected to do an enormous amount of reading, write a dozen papers that demonstrate your virtuosity, and write a major research paper or thesis. PhD students must do all that, plus master several loosely defined fields of history, pass a demanding exam or two, and write an original dissertation. When you are struggling to read a dozen articles and say something intelligent in seminar week after week, prepare for comprehensive exams, survive financially, and find the energy to finish a dissertation, it is easy to lose sight of why you ever chose this particular path. Surviving graduate study requires balancing the performance of certain regimented tasks with maintaining your enthusiasm for historical inquiry.

### **Stages of Graduate School**

It is important to understand what will be required of you in graduate school. Yet clear advice is sometimes scarce. At times, it may seem like graduate school operates according to a secret code of behaviour that is never clearly explained, but by which you are constantly judged. While programs at different universities vary significantly, all ask that students approach their work with a seriousness and commitment not required by undergraduate programs. Compared to most undergraduate history courses, there is less emphasis on learning "the facts" (though it is assumed that you will eventually master them) and more emphasis on interpretation, analysis, and historiography – the study of different approaches to the writing of history. Graduate students are also introduced to a variety of theories, research techniques, and methodological approaches, and to other intricacies of historical and scholarly practice.

Each program in history is different, but there are basic similarities. Some history departments in Canada, and almost all graduate programs in the United States, admit students to the PhD program directly from the BA. Stand-alone Master's programs usually demand a year of course work and either a major paper or a thesis. If you want to end your graduate education at the Master's level, a one year program without a thesis is likely sufficient. If you would like to pursue a PhD, a two-year program which requires a Master's thesis will prepare you well for the rigours of PhD work. Even in a one-year program, however, you can use the MA research paper to get you into the archives and produce an original – and potentially publishable – piece of

scholarship. Both routes will get you into a doctoral program and help you learn critical skills directly related to PhD work.

Doctoral programs usually involve a year or two of courses; six months to a year devoted to studying for a set of comprehensive examinations; and then full-time attention to researching and writing a dissertation. The last phase may take two to four or more years to complete. These days, many Canadian graduate schools talk about "a four-year PhD." Public funding for graduate education is increasingly tied to enrolment numbers and degree completion times, so graduate schools want students to finish faster, and administrators worry about students "lingering" in graduate school. In many schools, students are rushed through the PhD, and it is difficult to secure funding after four years. Clearly, it is better to finish sooner rather than later, but realistically few students finish a history PhD in four years. You will need to juggle various commitments, such as teaching and research work, and you may need to work outside of the university in order to survive. In addition, some dissertations simply take longer than others to complete. In an era when many candidates want to have a "publishable" thesis to help them crack the job market, there is serious pressure to write an "important," not merely competent, thesis. You will need to work efficiently and effectively.

## **Course Work**

All graduate programs involve course work. Taking courses is an important part of your graduate training in history and should not be viewed as a bothersome hurdle, an unnecessary barrier delaying your progress to "the comps" or your MA or PhD thesis. A course will introduce you to different types of histories and bodies of scholarship, and your seminar papers may become the basis of your MA thesis, your first conference paper, or your first publication. Perhaps they will help you formulate a dissertation topic. Graduate seminars are also where faculty and students first get to know each other as colleagues. They are often the main vehicle for building community among graduate students, and your classmates may form the nuclei of your social and intellectual network for years to come.

Graduate courses may be very small directed reading courses involving one, two, or three students working under the direction of a professor. Or they may be larger seminars of ten to twenty students. Some courses will be research-oriented, and involve the preparation of major essays based on some primary archival, newspaper, or periodical research. Others will be largely or wholly historiographical, oriented toward the critical analysis of scholarly works and/or preparing students for comprehensive examinations in topical or thematic fields. Faculty generally teach courses in their areas of expertise, and students can benefit enormously from taking a course in, say, Cultural History, Cold War America, or Crime and Punishment in Early Modern France from a leading scholar in the field – even if that course does not fit your research focus exactly. A few departments require students to take a historical methods course and/or another language. Most students will take all their courses within the history department, but some may enrol in a course or two outside of their "home" department, in a related field (or "cognate" discipline) such as Political Science, or in an interdisciplinary program, such as East

Asian or Religious Studies. Such courses expose historians to the ideas of other disciplines and allow students to develop contacts with faculty and students outside their departments. These connections can be important to your intellectual development and emotional survival in graduate school.

Courses are the main way that graduate students are introduced to scholarly culture. You will be exposed to a wide variety of views, both in your reading and from students and faculty. You will learn to think analytically, and to criticize, rather than to automatically accept or dismissively trash, the scholarship of other historians. You will also receive criticism of your own research, writing, and analysis. While overly harsh criticism is unproductive, we encourage you to be a bit tough-skinned about feedback. Use it to help you to improve your work.

Course work can also be an intimidating and confusing experience. Some professors may seem to favour certain students, or those who have a particular viewpoint, and to belittle students who don't seem to measure up to some unknown standard. Students sometimes compete with each other for the spotlight or faculty attention. Often, students with limited experience in the academy, such as those from working-class or immigrant backgrounds who are the first in their family to attend university, can feel overwhelmed and marginalized in weekly seminars. Some women are put off by male students who seem overly aggressive, and students of colour may be offended by insensitive remarks. Many factors can make a grad student feel like an outsider: being a "minority" in terms of your race, sexual orientation, or ethnic, linguistic, or religious background; holding "different" political or religious beliefs; having children; or even just studying a vastly "different" topic. It is not uncommon to feel inadequate, like an "imposter" whose intellectual failings are – or will soon be – apparent to all. But remember that all graduate students are unclear about what, exactly, they are supposed to do in courses, and all are there to learn.

The pedagogical and interpersonal difficulties many students experience in course work, combined with financial stress and demanding work loads, can be trying indeed. Furthermore, the most intense phase of course work occurs in the first years of graduate school, when many students are settling into a new city or country, coping with separation from family and friends, perhaps negotiating a long distance relationship, and generally adjusting to a new environment with new pressures and demands. As a result, students can often feel isolated and confused.

Try to use the intellectual and social opportunities presented by course work without getting bogged down by its problems and difficulties. Remember that your courses are not the sum total of your intellectual life, and learn what you can from the professor and the reading list and assignments. You do not need to "know" everything and should not lose sleep trying to anticipate what the professor will ask or want to hear. Most professors want some indication that you have engaged with the literature and have something interesting to say about it; they do not want you to sacrifice collegiality or your intellectual development in the struggle to get a good evaluation. You should treat other students with respect, and try to both give and receive helpful criticism without being harsh or overly sensitive. Courses should be places for collective learning and informed debate, and it is everyone's responsibility to be sensitive to the group dynamics.

If you have trouble speaking up in seminar, don't understand the material, or encounter other problems that affect your performance in class, discuss your situation with the professor and other students. Professors often have helpful advice, and like-minded students may find that creating a study group is a useful way to work through the course reading or resolve specific concerns. If you encounter serious problems with the course material, requirements, or classroom environment, discuss them with the professor, your graduate history students' association, your graduate director, or other appropriate authorities. But try to remember: courses are not forever, and they can be a terrific opportunity to learn about new topics, test new skills, and practice the demanding but interesting work of being a historian.

### **PhD Fields**

Early on in a PhD program, you will be asked to choose your fields, or areas of scholarly specialization. Fields are often defined by national histories or geo-political boundaries (such as Canadian, US, African, or Latin American history) or by time period (for example, Medieval Europe, Modern China, or Ancient History). Many departments also offer thematic fields. These may be very broad, as in the case of cultural history or comparative women, genders and sexualities, or they may be quite specific – for example, the history of medicine. Some thematic fields, such as North American labour history, are confined to two national historiographies.

Consult your department's guidelines, and ask your advisor, graduate director, and fellow students how to pick your fields. Try to select fields that match your interests and that complement each other. Draw on the strengths of your academic background and the resources available in your department. It is best to choose your fields early in your career to avoid scattering your efforts, but do remain receptive to new possibilities. Your interests may change during your first year or so, as you encounter new topics, professors and scholarly literatures. This is part of your intellectual development, and most graduate programs will accommodate requests for program changes. When choosing fields, give some consideration to topics that you and your professors think will translate into teaching jobs, but do not worry about coming up with the "perfect" combination of fields to get you a tenure-track job. You cannot possibly predict which particular constellation of specialties a future hiring committee will want.

It is important to specialize, but do not become overly narrow. Think seriously about demonstrating a breadth of knowledge and versatility both for teaching and research purposes. For instance, if your major field is African history, you might take a secondary field in Empire and Colonization and a third in the Atlantic World. If you are interested primarily in Medieval Europe but hope to write a thesis dealing with family and community, you might choose women's/gender history for your second field, and for added breadth, a third field in religious history, ancient history, or European antiquity.

### **Comprehensive Exams**

In most programs, doctoral students usually complete their comprehensive or qualifying exams at some point during their second or third year of study. Usually, students are examined on one, two, or three fields, each of which requires mastery of a list of books and articles set by the department or developed by the student with the examining faculty. Some programs require only written exams; others demand an oral performance. Still others require that students demonstrate their acquired knowledge both in written exams and in an oral defense before a faculty committee.

Unfortunately, comprehensive exams have become the object of a great deal of student anxiety, folklore, and grief. We want to put them in appropriate perspective. On one level, the comps do represent a rite of passage, marking the transition in a student's status from that of a promising beginner to a mature scholar-in-training, who has demonstrated a capacity for in-depth reading and analytical thought – both key skills of our trade – and who possesses a breadth of knowledge necessary for teaching. Most departments do tend to categorize PhD students as pre and post comps, and some faculty are more tough-minded than others about quality of performance they expect in an exam. Some students find that professors who appear relaxed and friendly suddenly become exacting and conservative taskmasters. But no one intends the comps as an instrument of humiliation, intellectual torture, or infantilization. Both students and faculty share some of the blame for the hysteria that seems to accompany the comps in many departments. Especially in large programs, some students seem to enjoy regaling each other with ghastly tales of horrifying examinations, and senior students tell their "war stories" to junior colleagues.

Take all this lore and hype with several large grains of salt. You will find that preparing for the comps is demanding and at times quite stressful. But remember: it is a tremendous opportunity for reading and reflection. Preparing for comprehensive exams actually entitles you to spend a prolonged period of time reading widely and contemplating scholarship – something that we, as intellectuals, value. You will not have much time for this in the years that follow. Of course, you will be asked to discuss and evaluate secondary sources, but you do not have to have the "correct" answer. Faculty are looking for intelligent reflection, not quiz show answers. Of course, you will be asked to read and comment on historical developments or scholarly works that do not reflect your particular interests, but if you are going to claim expertise in an area of history you need to master the broad parameters of the field. And, if you get a teaching job, the chances are that you will be required to cover events and literatures outside the narrow confines of your specialties. The major objective of the comps is to give you breadth and prepare you for teaching. So, try to enjoy your reading, concentrate on what you do know, and avoid panicking about what you have yet to learn. And remember that almost everyone passes on the first attempt.

There is no secret key to success on comps, but being well prepared and informed about expectations and experiences can be crucial. Consult all members of your examining committee about their expectations. Does one member stress historiography, while another insists on a general narrative or knowledge of key events? Some examiners want you to master certain bodies of literature; others will demand a "textbook knowledge" of a field and thus drill you on

historical figures and events. Most faculty members see the comps largely as an exercise in self-directed reading, but individual professors differ in how they see their role in the process. Some meet with students on a weekly or monthly basis; others agree to a few meetings. Many departments now keep former exams on file, so check out this possibility. Consult with senior students about their exams or form a study group; many students find "mock exams" and other practice exercises beneficial. Throughout the preparation, keep in regular contact with your examiners; let them know about your progress and any problems you encounter.

Generally, faculty members do not want to see students do badly on exams; they want students to do as well as possible. But if something does go awry and you fail an exam, remember that it is not the end of the world. Most departments will let you try again. Find out why your committee was unsatisfied with your performance, and ask how you can improve. At the same time, if you feel you were treated unfairly, be sure about your rights, and develop a strategy for dealing with the problem. Consult with sympathetic faculty members and administrators; talk to the graduate program director and the school of graduate studies.

At worst, comprehensive examinations are something to struggle through. At best, they are a useful vehicle for mastering several bodies of historical literature capped by a satisfying moment of public recognition. If, after passing your comps, your friends or committee wants to take you out for lunch or dinner, enjoy the event. For most of us, these are the last set of exams we will ever have to write.

## **The MA Thesis and PhD Dissertation**

Courses and comprehensive examinations take up a large amount of time and energy, but the MA thesis or research paper, or PhD dissertation, is the most important part of graduate study in history. The completion of an interesting, well-executed MA thesis or PhD dissertation is a significant accomplishment and should be a source of great pride and satisfaction. It is your PhD dissertation, moreover, that will define your career and determine how others in the historical profession will see you. Your dissertation is where you make an individual mark as a scholar. No matter how impressive your seminar performance has been, no matter how disappointing you found your comprehensive exams, your PhD dissertation will most directly determine your success on the academic job market. This section focuses on researching and writing the PhD dissertation, but much of the general advice is also applicable to the MA research paper or thesis.

### *Choosing a Thesis Topic and Writing the Proposal*

When choosing a dissertation topic, try to select a subject that fits with current scholarly trends but also strikes out in some new directions. The best topics are those that break fresh ground through new empirical discoveries, new modes of conceiving questions, or interpretive innovations. However, it is sometimes difficult to find support for topics that are out of the ordinary. It is a good idea to select a topic with potential for publication as a book (or article, if you are working on your Master's), but choose something that interests you, as it will dominate

your thoughts for a long time. It is also important to make sure your topic is “do-able,” in the sense that you can find and access sufficient primary sources. Your thesis should also be of a manageable size for a project that must be completed within a specific time frame, generally between two and four years for a PhD. Your supervisor and other faculty members can help you identify resources and assist you in shaping an idea or an inspiration into a workable topic. Do not, however, allow faculty concerns to dominate your own. Make your own choice, rather than accepting a topic chosen by your advisor that does not interest or sustain you. Yet if your professors hesitate to approve your topic, listen carefully to their concerns. Contact historians in the field about sources, scout out the archives, and follow up leads in published periodicals to make sure your planned thesis is something you can actually do.

When you have chosen a topic, your graduate program will submit it to the Canadian Historical Association and American Historical Association for inclusion in their databases of history dissertations. (Head to <http://www.cha-shc.ca> for the CHA’s online register of history-related dissertations in progress and <http://www.historians.org> for the AHA directory). This will ensure that the larger historical community is aware of your topic of study. You can also use these databases to find out what topics are already being studied when you are in the process of choosing your own dissertation topic.

Most universities require you to submit a dissertation proposal, or *problématique*. This step prevents students from trying projects that would never win final approval because they are impossible, unethical, or otherwise unwise. Requirements for the dissertation proposal or *problématique* vary widely. In many departments in English Canada, the proposal is not very elaborate. In Quebec, the *problématique* is usually more detailed. In every province, new research protocols – such as ethics guidelines for oral history interviews – have enlarged and complicated the process. Check with your graduate program office for the specific requirements of your program.

Regardless of the specific requirements of your program, the process of preparing a *problématique* or dissertation proposal will help you clarify your thesis plan. Your proposal should provide a clear research outline covering the subject you intend to pursue and some general questions of inquiry. It should include a brief discussion of the relevant secondary literature as well as some of the archival and other primary sources you intend to explore. Do not worry if you are unsure about some of these details: the proposal is a forecast, a series of working questions and hypotheses, not a road-map. You should show that you have a concrete research agenda and perhaps that you can comment on the quality of some of your primary sources, not that you already know the answers to your questions. Your dissertation will take shape and probably change as you research and write. But until you produce chapters, this document may well be the only written work that your professors and department have for evaluating your performance. So, it can be an important source for any references they might write for you. It also can serve as the basis for preparing personal statements for fellowship or job applications, and some university funding opportunities require a formally accepted proposal before you can apply for awards. Take the exercise seriously, but it is important to get it finished and submitted in a timely fashion. You can shorten or expand it, update and revise it as the

occasion demands.

### *Researching and Writing the Thesis*

Whatever systems of support may be available, whoever is your advisor, ultimately it is you who must research and write your thesis. Some programs encourage students to work primarily with one advisor, while others facilitate a committee system. Adapt your approach to the prevailing system of your department, the preferences of your supervisor, and your own needs. Speak to your advisor or dissertation committee to clarify expectations of how you will proceed. Maintaining a good working relationship with your committee is essential, and, given the realities of power relationships, it is chiefly up to you to accommodate the relationship. Remember that your professors, whatever their shortcomings, know more than you do about writing history.

The process of research is what many historians identify as their favourite aspect of academic endeavour, the facet of intellectual life which is most compelling and exciting. At this stage, you are entitled to immerse yourself completely in your research. Do not put off going into the archives or beginning the daily grind of reading old newspapers in the microfilm room. Research for a thesis, especially when it involves travel or archival work, takes time; it usually involves many seemingly unproductive days sifting through materials that yield no results. Even the most brilliant PhD candidate cannot "blitz" the thesis. Indeed, at this stage, perseverance may prove more important than brilliance. It is often useful to begin with secondary sources and then move on to analyze your primary sources. It will also be difficult to predict how long your dissertation research will take – so the sooner you begin the better.

Pre-comps students may find it difficult to believe that many senior students actually find it difficult to stop researching, that even after a few years of research they are curious to know what is in the unseen archival boxes or want to visit yet another local archive. No matter how satisfying archival work can be, at some point you must begin to write. Many historians find it helpful to write as they research, so that they are not faced with a daunting and indigestible pile of research at the end of a year or two. Some students prepare chapters as they research, while others use conference papers as vehicles for getting preliminary thoughts on paper. Others prefer to gather all their data before turning to the task of analysis and presentation. Whatever the case, begin writing the section you are most confident about; this is rarely the "Introduction." Expect that some days you will seem to get nothing done, but your mind will be working, and the next day, or week, may prove extremely productive. In any event, keep track of the ideas and inspirations you have as you research, ruminate, and think: they can be an important base for larger arguments in your dissertation. You may want to consider getting a notebook or keeping a computer file entirely devoted to noting down your ideas (and problems) as you research.

Writing is a skill that takes time and practise, and writing a thesis involves plenty of outlines, drafts and re-writes – so do not be discouraged. Also, do not fool yourself into thinking you can write a dissertation in a few months. Even those who have the luxury of being able to devote full-time to thesis writing will take longer than that: at least a year or more. Start earlier rather

than later; some faculty advise that you spend as much time writing as you do researching your thesis. Once you begin writing, how you proceed and present work to your committee will vary according to departmental protocol, individual preference, and the demands of your committee. You may be called upon to hand in chapters at regular intervals, a method which allows students to revise gradually. Or you may prefer to write substantial amounts of your thesis before seeking committee feedback. While the latter method has the benefit of allowing you to develop ideas and arguments continuously, it also means that you run the risk of having a large amount of work rejected or seriously criticized, which can be a major setback. The amount and character of faculty feedback varies enormously: some professors offer detailed analytic and stylistic commentary, while others provide a few short remarks, usually with the encouragement "to keep going." Some students receive feedback from their entire committee throughout the writing process, while others consult only with their supervisor until their final revisions. Whatever your particular case, listen seriously to faculty feedback and remember that the writing process will inevitably involve major revisions. Being asked to revise is not a catastrophe, but part of the writing process. Be aware, moreover, that if your advisor or committee members set certain rules, you will have to comply.

Most students must make an effort to overcome the isolation of daily, dissertation work, and those with economic pressures or family responsibilities must work extra hard to carve out the time to write. Group support, whether formal or casual, can be the key to success and survival. Lunches at the archives have sustained many a historian-in-training. Informal student groups dedicated to the helpful discussion of work-in-progress often provide a crucial place for developing ideas in a supportive environment, as do more formal research seminars. Some people with "writer's block" find it useful to be given concrete deadlines (with rewards for meeting them). Others have made use of helpful services: your university probably has counselors to help with serious writing difficulties.

The dissertation is the last stage of your graduate education, and you should not let it become a stumbling block that keeps you from moving on to other stages. It is not your magnum opus. Think of the dissertation as an extended essay, or a series of inter-related essays, on a subject about which you have learned a great deal. Your thesis, after all, is just a thesis, not a book, and graduate school is a stage, not a life-sentence. It can be demoralizing to drag out the thesis process, and potential university employers may not consider a candidate who does not have a PhD, so try to get the dissertation done in a reasonable amount of time. Still, most departments acknowledge that caretakers of children, students with health problems or disabilities, and people who face serious financial pressures may find it difficult to finish within a set time-frame. Do not assume that delay is seen as a personal failure; rather, try to tap available resources to both allow you to meet existing requirements and alter them to realistically suit your situation.

After the entire committee has seen a full draft of your dissertation and agreed that it is acceptable, the final stage of the process is the defense. For about two hours, you will answer questions on your dissertation by an external examiner who is an expert in your field, one or two university representatives, and the members of your committee. The process varies between universities; find out how the defense operates in your department. If defenses are public, attend

one to find out how it operates in practice, and invite friends to see yours. Above all, enjoy the defense. You know more about your dissertation than anyone else in the room. Don't be afraid to take control of the conversation; like the comps, it is ok to admit when you don't know the answer.

Graduate study in history can be taxing at times, but it can also be a highly rewarding experience. Capitalising on the benefits and minimizing the difficulties of graduate school will help you navigate this stage of becoming a historian – and remind you of the passions, joys, and interests that led you to history in the first place.