

INTRODUCTION HISTORY, HISTORIANS, AND YOU

This manual introduces readers to the historical profession and helps you navigate the various phases of becoming a historian, from the decision to apply to graduate school to finding and keeping an academic job. We have emphasized practical strategies and situations we feel have not been adequately addressed in other publications. The manual considers the international context, especially the US job market, but focuses mainly on Canada. It discusses public history and post-academic careers, but deals mostly with university contexts. It tries to address issues relevant to groups who traditionally have been under-represented in the historical profession and still face unique challenges within it. We deal with both the joys and strains of becoming a historian.

Most graduate students are given conflicting advice. This manual will not readily solve that problem. The guidance offered here reflects personal experiences and established wisdom, and should be taken with the proverbial grain of salt. But our suggestions also reflect careful consideration and consultation with many people. Although we have tried to take into account a broad range of experiences and points of view, readers should not assume that we offer the definitive answer or the only road to scholarly success and personal satisfaction. But we invite you to mine the manual for helpful hints: to dip in and out of the sections that most directly relate to your (changing) situation, and to compare your experiences to those described here.

What is a Historian?

Each historian defines his or her job, profession or calling differently. But all historians study and interpret the past. They also teach and write about it. Most historians work as professors in universities and colleges; others work in archives, museums, government agencies, trade unions, social justice groups, private corporations, and high schools. While some enjoy full-time employment, others piece together a meaningful career on a free-lance basis, straddling academic and non-academic worlds.

There are many difficulties associated with becoming and being a historian, some of which this manual addresses at great length. Yet being a historian has much to recommend it. It gives you the tools and credentials to contribute to important political and scholarly debates. As a professional historian you can spend much of your working life researching and writing about facets of the past that *you* find intellectually compelling. You can access the resources required to bring to light the rich histories of marginalized social groups. You can demonstrate to the wider public the value of a historical understanding of contemporary concerns. Being a securely employed historian also means the privilege, enjoyed by comparatively few other citizens in our society, of a working life characterized by relative flexibility and independence, and the right to call a life time of active learning your job.

We asked some colleagues to comment on the joys of being a practicing historian. Their

responses reveal varied interests, but also a shared curiosity about the past. Or, as Natalie Davis, Professor Emeritus at Princeton and Toronto, put it: "To rummage around in the archives or in rare printed pamphlets and discover surprising things about people in the past – especially people who seem difficult to track down. To begin to see a pattern, to see how parts of community fit together, to see the fault lines of conflict, the arrows of change. To write about the past, and in the writing, savour its strangeness and its familiarity, to delight in making the past live for others."

Our colleagues' comments reveal a common commitment to research and teaching, encouraging informed debate, and a continuing engagement with both the present and the past. Michele Johnson of York University observed that historians "slowly, sometimes painstakingly (and even painfully) stitch together the threads of evidence which together form a tapestry of questions, narratives, analyses, explanations and perhaps understandings." They explore the "'foreign country' that is the past," she added, and "mark the landscape with signposts of theories, theses and debates and tread upon varying paths that indicate the discipline's increasingly expansive definitions of a valued and valuable past. They struggle to unveil the complexities of the large and small processes, community developments and personal choices which together combine to create the many strata of past human experiences. They record...the 'large' and 'small' narratives of societies; and they make their thoughts available to those who would engage with them." In noting the joy such activity brings her, she concluded: "I simply cannot imagine doing anything else, being anywhere else."

Nadia Fahmy-Eid, formerly a professor of history at the Université du Québec à Montréal, explained her ongoing enthusiasm for historical inquiry as "un voyage dans le temps, qu'il s'agisse du temps présent ou du temps passé." "Ainsi," she added:

la notion de voyage le plaisir qui y est lié sont deux éléments indissociables dans mon esprit quand il s'agit de l'histoire. Aussi bien l'histoire qu'écrit les autres que celle que j'écris moi-même en tant qu'historienne. Écrire et lire l'historique c'est un voyage de découvertes constantes où ce que l'on connaît déjà d'un lieu familier permet de mieux comprendre les paysages nouveaux qu'on y découvre. L'historique pour moi est enfin le plaisir de l'intellect, celui lié à l'acte de comprendre. A la lumière de l'histoire mon présent de femme et de citoyenne acquiert certainement un sens plus profond, une signification plus intense que si ce présent avait été coupé de ses liens (historiques) avec le passé. Faire de l'histoire représente donc, selon moi, le besoin de savoir et le plaisir de comprendre réunis en une seule démarche.

Colleagues highlighted the dual roles of scholar and teacher, and the links between intellectual inquiry, informed debate, and active citizenship. Professor James Miller of the University of Saskatchewan noted that "as a researcher of history, the best features of my work are the constant engagement with complex and interesting analytical puzzles, and the freedom to change my specific topics of research in response to methodological innovations and shifts in contemporary concerns." As a teacher of history, he added, "the opportunity to spend one's time reading, thinking about, and discussing historical topics with bright students is something I appreciate and

cherish." As a historian of Canada, he enjoyed the fact that "my workaday life and my life as a citizen overlap and sometimes become inseparable."

British historian John Beattie similarly observed that "the pleasure – and the privilege – of being an academic historian comes from the connection between research and teaching." He added that "historical research carries the special bonus of allowing the researcher to handle documents and artifacts from the past, a pleasure in itself because of the immediacy of the contact such research provides with people in the past, and an immense aid to the imaginative effort that constitutes the essence of historical enquiry and especially historical writing." Whatever the documents, he concluded, "the act of historical research provides a constantly renewed contact, tactile and immediate, with the subjects of the work."

The importance of a research agenda that combines rigorous scholarship with a politics of social change was articulated by several colleagues, including labour historian and University of New Brunswick Vice-President (Research) Gregory Kealey. He reflected on "the pleasure that derives from understanding the past better, an understanding that clarifies the present in significant ways and allows one to envision a different and better future. The knowledge that things have been different, that there were choices made, allows one to see that we too make choices and that the world can be different." There is a "joy in the realization of the complexity of the past" and "that historical interpretation is never easy. Historical joy lies in the solving of mysteries; the historian is a detective and the major clue is human agency. The greatest joy is detecting the most plausible explanation of why things turned out the way they did."

Canadian women's historian Veronica Strong-Boag of the University of British Columbia shared her candid views on the personal and political contexts in which feminist historians write history and make community. "As for the joy," she wrote, "it's the continuing wonder of getting paid for doing something one loves, for thinking new and interesting thoughts and for having people who seem and may well be very interested in discussing ideas about the past." Given the "awfulness of much contemporary life (environment, wars, sexual terrorism)," she found it reassuring "to return to former days and see the human capacity to survive despite tremendous odds; personally it helps give me courage to go on." She concluded: "I also think a shared enthusiasm/passion for the past has brought me tremendous friendship without which I could not survive and a community that is not restricted to any single part of Canada. I continue to believe that understanding history, one's own and others, is the best way to approach the present and future, that historians are ideally the spurs to conscious, the guides to potentially more utopian/sane/kind visions of the world."

In answering our question, Atlantic Canada historian Margaret Conrad returned to the theme of an informed citizenry, noting that "a study of history and engagement in debates about the meaning of the past is a critical component of good citizenship. Because history can be invoked to support a wide range of causes, both for good and ill, it is essential for citizens to have a working knowledge of what happened in the past and to be able to identify arguments that rely on a distortion or trivialization of historical evidence." Like other fields in the humanities and social sciences, she added, "history has value as a way of understanding the place of human

beings in the world. Along with literature, history has long been central to identifying, interpreting, and sharing the values upon which civil society depends. It is an essential discipline for building community, for encouraging empowerment, for expanding our horizons, and for developing skills in discerning how knowledge and power intersect across time and place.”

At the time of writing this new edition of *Becoming a Historian*, Craig Heron was president of the Canadian Historical Association. So we shall let him have the last word on the many joys of being a professional historian practising his craft in Canada:

A historian is a privileged worker in Canadian society with both the independence to shape one’s work and a remarkable scope for creative activity in a challenging, diverse intellectual community. We quietly shout eureka when we finally track down a document in a box of dusty archival records. We glow with excitement when we sort out some complex connections in the behaviour of human actors in the past. We marvel at the insights of a scholar whose analysis provides our work with a brilliant theoretical framework. We delight in the engagement with other historians in our widely scattered but close-knit community. We thrive on the energy of young scholars who take up the fascinating projects that we always wished we had had time to pursue. We take much satisfaction from seeing sparks ignited among our undergraduate students as we share our distilled knowledge of the past. We relish the many opportunities to reach even wider audiences, to apply our historical expertise to public history and cultural programs, to current questions and controversies, and to collaborate with movements for social change. We take pride in our efforts to stimulate popular consciousness of the past and shape public memory.

While each of us has our own reasons for commitment to historical scholarship, historians work within a larger community of scholars. Historians teach one other, research together, critique each other's writing, and engage in controversies together. We vet each other's proposals, write each other references, and serve on hiring committees. We teach students and engage wider publics. Every historian draws on the work of others and should be prepared to take part in the collective endeavour of knowledge production.

A university-based historian does not merely join the historical profession, but also joins the academy, which brings together scholars with different disciplinary backgrounds, training, and commitments. Historians in Canada are represented by a number of organizations, including the Canadian Historical Association, which foster debate, encourage historical scholarship, promote history on school curricula, and work to further the interests of the profession by lobbying government and funding agencies. Many individuals cross disciplinary lines as they conduct research, engage in debates, and build their intellectual relationships and support networks. We urge readers to think broadly about community and networks.

Historians also work within the wider public sector. In Canada, where education is overwhelmingly state-funded, historians are publicly-employed educators. We share responsibility with other educational workers to defend publicly-funded education. Since

cutbacks to universities are often justified on the grounds that scholarship is irrelevant and a waste of taxpayers' money, it is also important that historians, like other scholars, demonstrate the greater value of our teaching and research. We can do more to popularize the study of history – to get our discoveries and interpretations out into the public domain – and to seek greater public funding for higher education, historical research, and historic preservations. Historians are not lone scholars happily ensconced in the ivory tower: we have responsibilities as professionals and citizens.

Historians do not merely eat, sleep, and think history. All historians have other interests, loyalties, and responsibilities. Still, the career of the historian is a demanding one, requiring strong commitment, intellectual curiosity, self-discipline, and perseverance. It can also offer priceless rewards: professional autonomy, intellectual achievement, social status, and meaningful work. This manual provides those interested in pursuing an apprenticeship in the historical trade with some guidelines and gauges of success.