

CSCH Presidential Address 2006

Religion and Public History

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Last April I was traveling around France on a tour of the chateaux. While in the Louvre I found the Mona Lisa in a new place; it had been moved and is now all by itself behind some very thick protective plastic. *The Da Vinci Code* was to blame. Everywhere I turned, visiting Da Vinci's grave for example, and some of the other important sites of the book, there were more people with *The Da Vinci Code* in their hands. I, too, have read the *Code*. Although it was not very well written, I thought it was a hoot, because I'm a new kind of church historian. I'm a public historian who specializes in religion; the *Code* hides no terrors for me.

In *The Da Vinci Code*, there is a bathroom down the hall from the Mona Lisa. This brought me to think of a different bathroom. It was February of 1991 and I was beginning one of my first and largest contracts as a public historian. I was trapped, locked into a narrow toilet cubicle in an abandoned wing of a bombed out monastery in Belgium. The lock on the heavy oak door had jammed. There was no space to crawl under the door or the walls, as in our North American stalls; these European stalls were built to last centuries and to guarantee privacy; they were ten feet high; they were oak, two inches thick. Shouting at the top of my lungs and banging on the door accomplished nothing. There was not a hope that any of my cries for help would reach anyone. No one was going to notice anything was wrong until I had done solitary confinement for at least a day

or two. Leaping up on the toilet tank, climbing up the pipes, I was able to twist around, jump off the side of the wall, and grab the top edge of the stall. With great effort, since I have rarely been athletic, I hauled myself up the edge, noticed how few times the edges had been cleaned, swung my feet over the door and dropped to hang from my fingers. There I was, hanging two feet off the ground holding on to the top of the bathroom door by my fingers. Looking around, I could see that if I tried to bend my knees to break the fall, I could severely hurt myself on the useless hunk of metal that passed for a radiator next to the wall. If I tried to swing a few feet across the narrow corridor onto a deep window ledge behind me, I might just keep on going through the window and land on the cobble stones two stories below. Unlike the *Code*, this was not fiction.

Traditionally, there have been three ways to deliver a presidential address at the Canadian Society of Church History. One is a peek at a sliver of a work in progress. I can't do that right now, for some of the work I do is legally confidential. It is best if you buy one of my published books to see some of what I've done, rather than what I am actually doing or I am about to do. The second is an overview of the field with an analysis of trends. When elected president last year, I was specifically asked to do this by some of the members present. Well, it is difficult; I've done it before, and it doesn't pay unless you teach and must do this kind of overview for your students. I do not. The third is autobiography. This last development is relatively recent, and as you can see from my anecdote about my first visit to some Belgian Catholic archives, has its own fascination. It is relatively easy, too, and doesn't take much research, although my memory of events in my own life is sometimes hazy, to my wife's bemusement. Yet, autobiography is hardly appropriate when I hope I am only half-way into my own working life as a religious historian. So, I will give a presentation that is half biography and half a description of a new field within religious history.

A New Field

For the past twenty years, my own work as a public historian of religion illustrates what public history is and its relationship to religion. My nomination to the honour of this society's presidency – besides the fact that I was one of the few people in the room during the business meeting not to have been president – is due in part to a recognition of the flood of work by my company in disparate fields: theology and history, including

eighteenth-century Italy; nineteenth-century Austria; and the half-dozen books and hundreds of articles both popular and scholarly in the area of Canadian religious history spanning Protestantism, Catholicism, Orthodoxy, and Judaism. In the past year alone, the company of Laverdure & Associates helped produce books and articles about Ukrainian Catholics, Saskatchewan Hutterites, and nineteenth-century northern Roman Catholic missions among the Gwich'in Dene. We've been consultants for a number of films, film festivals, radio, newspapers, magazines, drama presentations, archives, anniversary books, museums, and have participated in the conception, edition, translation and publication in print, in film, and on radio of hundreds of items. I am no longer alone. There are history companies springing up, ranging from the one-person office to the multinational.

This is not public religion and history, a field blossoming with Kevin Kee, Gary Miedema, Norman Fennema, and encouraged by Marguerite Van Die at Queen's Theological College. Their field is a discussion of religion in the public square, which is really a development of the traditional church and state studies. I will be talking about public history and religion.

Twenty-six universities in the United States recently announced having doctoral programmes in history with a specialization in public history. Only five are registered with the American Historical Association as having specializations in religion, another two in religious studies or religion and society. The number of Canadian universities with public history specializations is also growing. The American Historical Association has recently profiled and highlighted the growing interest in public history and the role of public historians especially in departments of history. The National History Society of Canada, with its magazine, *The Beaver*, is making great strides in attracting people to history; these are sometimes the same people who are turned away by the Canadian Historical Association. So, the term "public history" is recent; *The Journal of the Public Historian* has only been published out of California since 1979.

We in religious studies, however, have been slow to recognize public history, even though the last twenty years have been miserable years for any student in the humanities and none more so than in the area of church history. Positions have been abolished or combined with other subjects in seminaries, which have decreased in number. Ever since the promulgation of *Sapientia Christiana* in 1979 the de facto requirement of,

at least, a licentiate from a Catholic institution and usually ordination, in order to teach religious history – since it is erroneously confused with the history of theology – has blocked one of the positions, i.e., church history, open to Catholic lay people. Departments of history and departments of religion have been traditional refuges of the non-ordained or heretical church historian. Here, I am thinking especially of Victoria College's relationship to Emmanuel College and the Université de Montréal's departments of history and religious studies relationship to the department of theology. The lay religious historian usually falls between the stools of history and theology. Even in religious studies departments, the religious historian has been squeezed out by the demands of other topics. Public history is, however, an option for religion students, too.

Definition of Public History

I will not give a definition of religion here, to avoid starting a war (but if you are really interested in my own definitions, you should consult my work, *Sunday in Canada*). The definition of "public history," for our purposes here, is history for non-historians. This is a radical challenge to the historical profession, journals, and teaching of the past forty years which has sometimes equated professional history with obscure history.

I agree with Gerald Prokopowicz, a public historian in the United States who said,

Public history is a format (or rather a wide variety of formats) in which historians can practice their craft, but it is not a substantive area of history. Those of us who learned the craft in a traditional academic program, and then picked up the practical aspects of public history on the job, are examples to our students that the first requirement for a public history career is the study of history itself. If departments begin to hire teachers of public history whose primary qualifications are advanced degrees and publications in the field of public history itself, they run the risk of following the same path that too many schools of education have followed, turning out graduates who are masters of whatever theories are in vogue at their institutions, but lacking any real knowledge of the subjects they are about to teach.

I see public history as means to an end, not an end in itself. It is defined by its connection to public audiences, and can only continue to thrive and develop in constant contact with the public. As soon as

it is isolated in the university classroom, it begins to lose whatever it is that distinguishes it from academic history. Public history only became recognized as a separate field after too many academic historians lost interest in educating and communicating with the public. If public history were to be taught primarily by classroom-trained specialists instead of practitioners, it would eventually lose its public dimension. Wouldn't it be ironic if a field that exists in response to the proliferation of obscure, jargon-filled, theory-driven, highly specialized history were itself to become an obscure, jargon-filled, theory-driven specialty? I would much prefer to see universities training good historians who go on to practice public history, not training theorists who go on to teach other theorists.¹

Too many people teaching history merely teach people who will teach history. To most people, such as J.K. Rowling in the Harry Potter books, the traditional teaching of history is dull and irrelevant. While it is important for historians and religionists to study, be aware of, even know such theories, public history clients are not interested in the "lit-crit" that passes for modern academic discourse, nor are they the least bit interested in Hayden White or Michel Foucault. They want clear, pleasant, jargon-less writing using traditional chronological narrative. If the public does not "get" it, the public historian does not get hired, rehired, or paid.

Public History's Relationship to Religion

While preparing this speech, I was surprised that I could not find a single article or speech about the relationship of public history to religion throughout the academic religious or historical literature. While this speech about public history is a first in the area of religion, it is part of the growing call among all historians for greater readability and relevance. The public is genuinely interested in history and in religion and will get both from us or from Dan Brown. The public is turning to the Dan Browns of the world because history and religion have become increasingly self-referential and, as Prokopowicz has said "obscure, jargon-filled," and "theory-driven." Public history, as I have said, is a means of communicating our findings to the public.

Yet, theory has blanketed North America in a deep and, to the majority of people, dull historical discourse. This leads me to ask, did we historians and historians of religion ever have a "public"? I think we did, but we will need a literary historian to tell us for sure. I suspect Ryerson

Press successfully published a number of religious histories that made the jump from the academy to a wider “public” readership. McGill-Queen’s and Wilfrid Laurier University Press are trying, but I have not heard about any authors celebrating huge royalty cheques. Every university press has its hand out for subsidies. The university historian may get a book published at a university press, hugely subsidized by a government grant, but few will buy it; fewer still will read it. The Beaver publishes tens of thousands of copies a month. My company is now publishing miniature or leaflet religious biographies with an initial press run of four thousand copies each month. This makes for almost fifty thousand a year. They are short, pithy, illustrated, and accessible. And, they are all paid for in advance. So, the historical study of religion also needs the techniques of public history. Or it doesn’t get read.

Who is a Public Historian?

Looked at one way, public history is old news. Church historians have already worked as archivists, popularizers, museum keepers, editors, anniversary writers, and consultants. What is new is the realization of what exactly ties us all on a methodological level.

Most public historians, in the past, were amateurs, and rarely had advanced academic training in history or museums or archives, all relatively recent fields of graduate training. Even most church historians were and still are theologians first and historians second. Many of those who could now be called public historians were then government employees, librarians, or a long-serving employee, secretary-turned archivist. Most were not – as I am not now – affiliated with any university. Even I have only been associated with a university merely occasionally as a sessional in bizarrely disparate fields when business was slow or I made costly mistakes in my contracts and needed to pay off some bills. Still, while I am presently unaffiliated, most public historians are usually found as employees in larger institutions such as libraries, archives, public relations offices, government, as well as in different educational institutions.

The broad range of positions that produce public history also demonstrates what jobs are available to people interested in history and religion and how adaptability is an essential skill of the public historian. My own type of public history is not for everyone – it is certainly not for those who need institutional support or for those who wish to feel secure

– but what really is tenure or job security today? Public history’s adaptability has a pedigree. Throwing aside the vision of the historian as gentleman scholar of independent means, Professor John Moir, in his 1980 presidential and later talks to the Canadian Society of Church History called himself a “garden-variety historian.” What he meant was that he was willing to teach anything relating to history; moreover, he believed that his training and the expectations of the day when he graduated in the 1940s, having trained under even more traditional Canadian and British historians, was that he could and would teach in any field, including ancient history, world history, British Empire, American, French, or whatever was asked. This attitude was fostered by those historians who lived through the Depression and were happy to work in any field. As a student who has lived through a series of the worst recessions since the Great Depression, I could do nothing but agree with Moir. I left the Faculty of Religious Studies at McGill for Toronto to study with Moir and to train in what was seen even then as traditional, rather old-fashioned history, specifically in order to apply it to religion. I adapted and enlarged Moir’s dictum to mean that an historian of religion is willing to do anything . . . (well, almost anything) . . . relating to religious history, not just to teaching. So, public history includes archives, translations, editing, publishing, and film consulting. Thus, I believe that public history begins with history and then moves towards its presentation to the public. I and others like me were willing to work as historians of religion, not just teachers. But how?

Training

What John Moir, C.T. McIntire, John Webster Grant, Harry McSorley, Ed Furcha, Arthur Silver, and others I studied all meant and what their even narrower pool of professors trained in the Canadian and European schools meant by history, aside from the givens or historical data they imparted, was a method of approaching, thinking, and working in history. The method presupposed source criticism and linguistic skills just as in biblical studies. Since these same professors also trained in biblical studies – before or after their historical training – the crossover was obvious and my transition from religious studies at McGill to history at Toronto was made possible. There, everything stopped.

What I did not learn from my professors was how to turn these skills into a life-long career, outside or alongside teaching. Most graduates do

not become professors. This is not the time to discuss the benefits of a general arts education, but it certainly is the time to discuss how we can keep our graduate students in the field, even if they do not go into teaching. In fact, I learned that money is the last taboo; it is never discussed in polite company. Some professors, when approached, promised to show me their book and article contracts; none ever did. Some professors were surprised to find me asking about their research techniques, their note-taking techniques, their writing, their publishing. None, not one, gave a single piece of advice or allowed me to view exactly how they researched, wrote, and disseminated their work. Teaching was never training; it was always just testing to see if you knew what they knew or you could produce what they were doing, never mind exactly how you did it. Universities in French Canada, however, make historical methodology a required course in every year of the three-year history degree. French Canada trains historians, not just people who can read history textbooks.

I ask all professors and sessional teachers to consider presenting some of the elements of public history in their church history or religious history methods class; this includes materials about archives, libraries, museums, and business, including advertising, marketing, and law (such as privacy legislation) and contracts. There could be sessions on negotiations and human resource management, which includes insurance issues. Succession planning may mean “who gets the car or the house,” but scholarship succession planning means: what do you do with your private library, with your research notes, your manuscripts, and your contracts? Who and how will your work carry on? There should be sessions on continuing education, such as encouraging all of your students, not just the best and the brightest in your graduate classes, to attend annual conferences. There could be brief sessions on scholarly and commercial writing, translation, editing, and publishing. The list could be longer, but since we generally have not spoken to our students – or I never heard anything – about any of these issues, anything at all will be an improvement.

Few students of the history of religion without the institutional support of a university or a church have the time, leisure or inclination to indulge in research. Even before I graduated in 1990 with my doctorate in history from the University of Toronto, I had studied the job market and realized that few people would be employed as teachers of history in colleges or universities, all shrinking from budget cuts. Fewer still would be employed as historians in church positions. The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education had just done an end run on tenure and closed down

its department of history, laying off some of the finest historians and scholars in Canada. I decided that I would not subject my young family to the life of a vagabond sessional in the capricious university world, nor would I take up work in a large institution such as government and risk leaving the religion and history fields which I enjoyed. I moved to Montreal to set up my company as I took business courses at night for four years after my doctorate and learned what I could to apply to church history.

Money

One historian asked me once why I worked so hard without an employer to hold a whip or tenure over me. If poverty was the only motivation, I would have left history and religious history rather quickly. I think that many people who have the opportunity to study choose to study something with deep personal meaning and are willing to forego some financial compensation if the work is interesting enough. It is called the loyalty tax. We can joke about how psychologists and psychiatrists really need to study their area; and you can think of other people who study subjects that they need to study. I have always been fascinated by time; the physics of time, the measurement of time, here in Canada and around the world. Some of that appears in my book *Sunday in Canada*. Fundamentally, I am thinking about death and eternity, continuity and change and I pay attention to histories of these topics, such as those by Jean Délumeau. This should partly explain my twin interests in religion and history.

But I also want to eat. As a self-employed public historian, I look at things that have immediate, commercial, or public relations value. Quite a few years ago, I was approached by a then up-and-coming scholar who wanted to put out an edited work of readings: "Great!" I replied, "I have often thought of doing something along those lines. There is a great need for such a work. Do you need a co-editor?" Well, no, this person already had a co-editor and had a list of articles for the book. "What do you want me to do, if I don't get to choose or edit the articles?" Well, translate some of the articles from French into English. "Great! Yes, there are some excellent things written about French Canada. How much do I get paid?" Well, this person was hoping that I would do it for free, but I would be thanked in the acknowledgments. As one of my political science friends at the conference asked shortly afterwards, "No fame? No money? So, who

do you get to sleep with?” That is the reality of the marketplace. I turned the offer down, just as I ignore the university offers of free office space and a telephone should I wish to work, for free, in their hallowed halls. I already have a telephone and space at home. I was astonished, to say the least, at the university (or universal) expectation that I would want to work for free, because I loved my subject.

This does not mean that I or public historians do no *pro bono* work. This is where public relations comes in. I am or we are merely much more choosy about which *pro bono* work we do. When Bryan Hillis asked me to help with the religion section in the *Encyclopedia of Saskatchewan*, not only did I agree to do some of the entries *pro bono*, out of interest and general curiosity, but I also agreed so as to prepare myself to take up other work that I knew clients would want done. Since I have worked for encyclopedias before and know the work involved, I approached clients and asked if some of the articles could be sponsored. Some reviewers have since noticed that the Ukrainian Catholic Church of Saskatchewan received more space than the Orthodox; I was able to convince some clients to sponsor me to write or supervise some articles about the Ukrainian Catholic Church. Unfortunately, I have fewer contacts with the Orthodox. Other articles, that went unsponsored, helped me increase my knowledge about different fields and served as advertising to new clients. Even some of the *pro bono* work has to have a slight mercenary angle, I admit, but the scholarship is excellent – or so my clients and the awards given to the *Encyclopedia of Saskatchewan* say – and it is getting done. Money and scholarship do mix. The sciences have always known this; we should, too.

One of my most satisfying experiences relates to the founding of Public History, Inc. One of a trio of students from the Ottawa area came to interview me about a recent article I had published in the area of human resource management and history. While that group already had a good idea of where it wanted to go before it spoke to me, I take some pride in knowing that it has since become the largest company hiring more historians every year, possibly than all of the universities of Canada put together. Public History, Inc., grew rapidly at a time when the government was cutting and reducing costs, especially its HR (historical research) sections across all departments, just before the residential native school cases hit the newspapers. Public History now specializes in native claims.

When I asked if I could join as a partner, I was refused; the company believed that I would take it into an area of public history that it did not

want to go. Obviously, that area is religion and non-profit institutional history. Not for profit is an unattractive area of public history. That is why my company has remained small, diversified, and I have few clients willing to pay enough to keep me. Younger scholars have come to me asking if they could study with me, to learn how to live, work, and make money in the area of the religious history of Canada. Most of them are between jobs or degrees. I have had to send almost all of them away and I am very willing to continue sending them to one of you. Research in religion, unfortunately, for most public historians, is usually entirely *pro bono*. There is not much paid work in public religious history except in museums, archives, editing, translation, publishing and other ancillary fields to history research and writing. Also, there are so many amateurs and university historians willing to do it for free.

This brings me to how much money can the public historian make in religion? One of the most tightly guarded secrets of our society is how much money can or is made. Although institutions such as governments, universities, and even churches usually publish their salary scales, people do not speak about such things, to avoid jealousies. In the public history field, I recommend that students get what they negotiate, aware of their skills, degrees, experience, the difficulty of the contract, the overhead costs of travel, equipment, and human resource support such as insurance and continuing education, aware of what institutional employees receive for equivalent work and also aware that there are volunteers, even university professors or students or ministers or parishioners, willing to undercut their price. What does all of this mean? The public historian gets paid what he can get, nothing more. It is not very helpful, but the wide range of income possible in this field baffles us all. Some are doing well. Most are not.

Challenges

1. Agreement in Principle

The greatest challenge to those interested in public religious history is the negotiation between the researcher and the client, not just about means and money, but about the results. While the historian needs to ask questions and present findings, the client may not be interested in the questions or the answers. Although the public historian may concentrate on methods and topics likely to be popular, even sensationalistic, to attract

attention and funding, and thus remain in the general area of religious history, the religious client may have something else in mind. It is a delicate balancing act, writing history that is both true and interesting, objective yet relevant to the intended audience.

Many public historians will find that they are confused with or seen as publicists, advertisers, paid cheerleaders, recruiters, and copywriters. It is a hard education for both the historian and the client to reach agreement on a mutually acceptable public history. The historian may try to produce a work acceptable to the academy when the client or the employer really want a work that is not history, but advertising or part of a marketing plan. There must be agreement about what is to be produced before work begins.

Public historians are sometimes required to be subservient to earn their wages. Subservience means to write or proclaim as history what the historian may doubt to be the true story. It means accepting the received history of an institution and rewriting it in a new form for a different audience, academic or other. It is a form of intellectual prostitution. So, public service can degenerate into low-paid or volunteer servitude, but it can also go further into servility. The best option during a disagreement, of course, is that the written history is then rewritten by a third person to suit the religious institution's purpose. If the historian is paid for the first version, and if the historian's name is removed from the final version, then there is not much else that can be done. The historian and the client have to get agreement in principle before work begins about what happens to the work.

2. Confidentiality

A religious organization is no different from any other organization in a heightened belief in its own self-worth – hence the desire to record and present its history – and a hyper-sensitive desire to keep some less worthwhile things private. As one individual frankly told me, “I’m not going to wash our dirty linen in public.” What is the public historian to do when faced with such an attitude on the part of a religious institution? I’ve worked on native residential school cases, clergy abuse cases, native land claims, had a brief time on the outskirts of the Mount Cashel inquiry, and other sensational subjects. I’ve produced histories that are staying in private files and will never be published. That is why I sometimes state that the particular kind of public history I do is really private history.

There must be an agreement in place about how the work will be published, if ever, before work begins. Too often, an historian will work, perhaps for years, on a project that does not get published, although there was some vague understanding that it would. This happens to all historians. If the draft or final narrative is not meant to be published, then there should be clear agreement about this, too. Some historians have given talks or published sections of works-in-progress, and found that there were unpleasant legal consequences.

3. Access

Another disadvantage to the public historian is when the employer or the client does not see the historian as sympathetic. There is a lack of trust. The Christian employer may have John 10:12 in mind: “He is a hireling . . . sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees.” Unless the historian can prove in some way that he or she has some interest, a vested interest, in the well-being of the organization, of the church, the parish, the congregation, the non-profit organization; unless the historian has shown long-term commitment, membership, donations in time and money, the historians does not automatically gain trust and access. At one Vatican archive, I danced attendance every day for almost a month and received permission to see documents on the day before I was scheduled to return to Canada – a day the authorities very well knew about since it was part of the application. Does this sound like a Vatican conspiracy worthy of Dan Brown? I have not yet returned to find out if my permission is still good, but I’m told it is not a conspiracy, these people do it to everyone. Roma is misspelled as Mora, which means delay. Compare the Vatican with what happened to me during research into a native residential school question. I was physically prevented from entering an archive room by a government lawyer who stood in the doorway and threatened legal action should I lay a finger on him to move him out of the way.

However, volunteering to do some *pro bono* work in an institution sometimes opens the doors. When visiting an institution in Victoria, I was denied access to some papers, but was eventually granted access after I volunteered to translate some nineteenth-century documents from Spanish that the secretary had stashed in the archives. It is a technique I do not recommend, although it may be necessary. It means working for free and this is the aspect most religious and non-profit organizations appreciate most, unfortunately. After volunteering to do some work at another

archive, I was given the task of trimming some bushes outside. Then I gained access to several files. A furious afternoon of pulling files from bulging cabinets gave me some information, but still not enough to answer my questions. The administrator who sat there in the office watching me work, satisfied with getting the bushes trimmed or stricken with some guilt or inkling of why I was there, that I needed documents, statistics, files, anything, then informed me that several boxes of old files were in the basement. I had one evening left before my plane left, so I worked again in a dank basement with no desk or chair with boxes and papers scattered all around as I squatted and squinted to see whether any could be considered important.

4. Trust

Before visiting one archive in Edmonton, I had been careful to get all necessary permissions, or so I thought. Once in Edmonton, I was told I needed yet another permission to view the unaccessioned, unorganized papers, too. The busy religious administrator took three days to type the letter; I was staying in the same building and we ate at the same table at breakfast, but it took three days and my return flight was already booked. Again, I must insist that this religious organization acted no differently than the Alberta provincial government employee who shook so much from nervousness that I had to hold his hand to sign the permission slip allowing me to look at the Lord's Day Act criminal files that were nestled between the explosive Lubicon Indian files and the files describing the administration of the War Measures Act of 1970 in Alberta. Public History does not differ when researching Religion. The challenges of standards, credibility, and access are the same as in other fields.

Religious institutions, however, can be reminded that Ranke's methodological aim of objectivity was motivated by a religious agenda, the same one that will continue to send historians to religious archives. Ranke wanted to grasp the divine intention in history. How can an historian test the hypothesis of God's intervention in human history? How can historians write a history of a religious institution where the subject concerned is convinced of Providence? People who are interested in this question will continue to show up at religious archives. Most people who show up at religious archives are already predisposed to like religious history and their subject. Why else would they spend any time doing it? So, religious communities have little to lose in welcoming historians.

Although some individual visiting historians may write hatchet-job histories, I believe that religious communities should be grateful for the publicity, thinking as do many public figures, that it did not matter what was written, as long as the names were spelled right. (My name is usually misspelled.) Take the Jesuits for an example. Despite centuries of calumnies, they are the most famous of all Catholic Reformation organizations. They continue to attract benefactors and novices; despite suppression they were able to revive after the French Revolution, and they are one of the largest religious communities of men in the Catholic world today. A little persecution goes a long way. Opus Dei should take note. The tourist office south of Edinburgh should make a small donation to Opus Dei so that Opus Dei can continue its fight against Dan Brown's book. It seems tourism to the Scottish community where part of *The Da Vinci Code* was filmed is getting even more visitors than ever before since Opus Dei and other Catholic religious organizations started raging about the book and the film.

As in *The Da Vinci Code*, all roads lead to the Vatican's Secret Archives and security is tight, tighter still in other Vatican archives. Unfortunately, the portable computer newly-bought and tested in North America belched smoke and burst into flames fifteen minutes after I turned it on. I had ordered and paid for the proper wiring, but the Canadian distributor provided substandard equipment. The Romans shrugged their shoulders; no replacement could be had in Italy: "a third-world country" one German remarked. I had to take notes with pen and paper and beg the loan of a photocopier that periodically seized up in the heat. One archivist, who had taken to wandering into the archives wearing nothing but his underwear because of the heat, finally handed me the keys to the place and left on vacation. Was I being set up? Was this a conspiracy? Actually, the documents I needed were in another building.

One of my many techniques for getting past a reluctant archivist is to ask for the grand tour. A tour sometimes helps me to know how an archive is organized and what is in it so that I can be more precise in my requests and also, to know what materials are available. So I asked one of the clerks in the Curia for a tour. He proudly agreed and soon we were in the basement with the Curial archives. In this case, the secret archives were stored in a former bank vault, with each part of the world assigned a separate locked box. Very casually, I asked if the clerk had the keys, say, to a box cryptically identified with a number I knew was the one assigned to English Canada. He had the keys. In a moment, I had a bundle of papers

in my hands. I paged through a few documents, and almost in a panic with excitement, I asked to return to my room to get note paper; I rushed across the court yard and back only to be met by a small man barricading the main door with a broom. This Brother, a Vietnamese refugee, had faced down more dangers than any historian could throw at him. The sweaty clerk soon appeared behind the good Brother and announced that the tour was over. I never again saw the inside of those archives. Now, I also always carry a pencil and paper.

Beginning a Career

Remember, although I stand before you all, safe and in one piece, I started this talk hanging from my fingers. It was actually a tough contract that everyone else, perhaps even some people in the Canadian Society of Church History, had refused. Three previous in-house historians had died, one after the other, and so I was hired to do the job. I arrived in Brussels groggy with jet lag, fended off a clutch of pirate taxi drivers and jumped into a legal car and gave the directions: the wrong ones. The driver honestly brought me to where I asked and I foolishly left the taxi only to wander for two hours in the streets with my bags. When I asked for directions, people stared at me strangely. Unshaven, haggard, clutching bags, I must have seemed a disreputable street-person, but then the Flemish character of northern Brussels was forcibly brought home to me; no one could or would understand my French. As I paged through the Flemish-French dictionary I had handily brought with me, I tried to convince people that all I needed was a telephone or some directions. Coincidentally or maybe not, one man turned out to be a priest and he called the monastery for me. Thirty minutes later, three Belgian priests drove up and hastily bundled me off as if I had recently escaped from their monastery. They gave me some bread, coffee, and cold cuts and showed me my room in the abandoned wing of the monastery, close to the archives. When I woke up the next day I had some kind of intestinal flu which the monks put down to my general state of health and the stress of travel.

I greatly appreciated the fact that the monastery allotted me a room in the building in which the archives were stored. Some organizations do not, requiring hours of commuting between hotel and archives. I overlooked the fact that the room was in the abandoned wing of the monastery, the windows were broken and that Belgium was suffering one of the

coldest winters of the decade; I overlooked the fact that I woke up most mornings shivering under several woollen blankets and a light dusting of snow. The same had happened to me before, when I visited the Baptist Archives in Hamilton in 1984 and McMaster University had assigned me to the dormitory that, I later learned, had been the model for the fraternity in the b-movie *Animal House*. The *Animal House* dorm had been trashed in traditional fashion shortly before I arrived and did not even have blankets on the bed as the temperature dipped below zero. Belgian hospitality at least included woollen blankets! I overlooked the fact that only one meal was served each day, at noon, and that this was costing me (or I should say, my Canadian sponsors) thirty euros a day.

I didn't mind that I didn't understand much of the Flemish being spoken all around me. It was an adventure; a chance to learn something of another language and culture. I didn't even mind that no one seemed to be taking any notice of me, talk to me, or ask if everything was all right. They were probably busy. I didn't find it extraordinary that there were no tables or chairs in the archives, or that the archives were in the abandoned part of the monastery, in a bell tower, reached only by a rickety circular wooden staircase without a handrail in the blackness. I was not discouraged when I had to work with every piece of clothing I could put on wrapped around me. I cut the fingers off my gloves and worked to copy documents in pencil, since the pen froze. I came from Canada where I had seen worse in private, church, and diocesan archives, where the conditions were sometimes just as primitive, where I had been frozen, dirty, sitting cross-legged on floors, and tired. I was in Belgium to work and a few inconveniences were part of the contract. That's what public history is all about. As they say in cowboy Canada: "Yuh gitter done."

I was young; I was excited. OK, I was foolish, but how often does a Canadian historian have the chance to work in a European archive? I was willing to put up with a lot. Despite the fact that much of Canada's religious history is from Europe, hardly anyone goes there to explore Canada's religious roots. I began to suspect the reason. It is so much easier to declare religion in Canada unique - just as the historians of the United Church of Canada try to prove. I was very happy to be working as a religious historian in Europe. In any case, my room was as cold as the archives and time was short, since I had booked only three weeks for this trip. I sat on the floor of the archives and worked my way through the materials, probably in the same way as some early church historian had.

I laughed at the fact that there was no electricity in the archives and

that I had to work by the grey daylight that filtered through the bell tower window openings. After my experience in Rome, I had wisely decided not to bother bringing a laptop computer. After Rome, all international travel would see me minus the extra ten pounds of luggage that caused airport officials to frisk me, sometimes ungently. The lead-lined bags that held the computer diskettes were heavy and suspicious and caused more delays. European airports' extra-strength x-rays had scrambled hard drives and diskettes. I returned to the traditional church historian methods; the same methods used a hundred and a thousand years before. Solid penned or pencilled notes in my hand luggage and stored under my own plane seat were more secure than anything yet devised by clever programmers. It was slow work, but when I returned home, I would be certain to have my notes. Some of my friends and colleagues over the years have had their notes zapped in the airport, lost in the e-mail transmission, and in one case, dropped out of the plane's cargo bay somewhere over the Indian Ocean.

The line of monks in front of the better working toilets on the other side of the monastery seemed to be getting longer as the mysterious flu that sent me into the bathroom began to claim other victims. Since I was not a monk, I was not expected for prayers, only for the one hot meal of the day, at lunch. Breakfast was dry bread and coffee. Supper was bread, cheese, and cold cuts set out on the tables. With the weather so cold, there was no need to put the food away; the salted meats stayed on the end of the table, replenished occasionally when they got low.

So, there I was, hanging from my fingernails from the top edge of the door to the one toilet that still worked in the abandoned archive wing. Death seemed a short two-story drop. The thought that all of my predecessors in this work had died crossed my mind. The bell for lunch had sounded. Hanging from my fingers, yelling at the top of my lungs while banging on the door with my feet accomplished nothing. Everyone was probably in the refectory, at the other end of the monastery, across the courtyard, enjoying or enduring the same bowl of soup that sometimes served as stew if too much water had boiled off. No matter; it was the only meal being served that day and I, sick or not, wanted some of it. Dirty and bleeding from the scrapes and limping from the bruises caused from falling onto the radiator, I limped into the refectory to eat the soup. No one seemed to notice. Opus Dei's storied discretion towards its own traveling members had nothing on this group of monks.

Shortly before I left, with the entire monastery throwing up and emptying out their chamber pots in the bathroom at regular intervals, a

doctor was called in, condemned the unhygienic kitchen practices, and blamed the cold cuts. The meat disappeared; it wasn't replaced. The food poisoning almost disappeared by the time I left for Canada, several pounds lighter. One thing I can promise you is that public history in religion will keep you trim.

My memories are already the stuff of history. Technology has changed; laptop computers are more reliable, smaller, lighter, and more acceptable to airport security officers. Most archives in North America and Europe have instituted archival transfer policies and documents are made available to researchers. Many religious archives have catalogued entire archives on the item level – a massive task – and the catalogue is on computer as well as available to researchers. More and more religious archives even have rooms, desks, chairs, catalogues, and archivists. Cardboard boxes have been replaced by fire-resistant steel, catalogues have been updated, air-conditioning and humidity controls have been installed. It is so much easier being a public historian of religion now.

I feel a little nostalgic for the years when one needed to be completely mad about religious history in order to undergo the grueling tests of perseverance required. You can, however, still obtain the pasty-white look of a crazed albino Dan Brown assassin after a few years spent in sunless basement church archives.

Conclusion

I have only touched on some of the issues faced by the public historian. Basically, there is nothing wrong with negotiating a better contract or organizing your work in such a way that it is professionally and physically possible to continue doing it in the long term, even without the support of a large institution. Our society has too long relied on unpaid, volunteer historians, religionists, and other clerks or clergy to do highly specialized, long-term work and wonders why no one can do a good job once an historical question comes up. Volunteers, whether students or professors, move on to other interests and jobs that can sustain them. We should try to train people who can remain in our field.

My time in Belgium was a moment of low comedy, but it taught me more about the nitty-gritty of public history in religion than any document

I could read. Public historians can afford to go to Europe or elsewhere to learn about Canada in world perspective. University historians who stay home in Canada to teach rarely can get away to the archives and when they can, summers, Easter, or Christmas, the archives in Rome, I know, are closed. You have to be on sabbatical; or you can hire a public historian. Public history can be a full-time job. Finally, the public historian who studies religion can easily read *The Da Vinci Code* without being threatened by its fiction. Finding the truth in religious history can be stranger still.

Endnotes

1. See "Teaching Public History: Jonathan Spence in conversation with Gerald Prokopowicz," *Perspectives* (May 2004); reprinted in <<http://www.historians.org/Perspectives/Issues/2004/0405/0405pre1.cfm>>