

CSCH President's Address 1993

A Paean to the Faithful

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An image of some years ago stands out in my mind: I was standing outside of a classroom, listening to hearty applause from a clearly delighted audience. The person occasioning that appreciation was a small woman in a yellow dress, Phyllis Airhart, who had just finished her excellent Presidential address, "The Three Conversions of Edis Fairburn." The audience's appreciation was obvious; moreover, it was *critical* appreciation. The members of the Canadian Society of Church History (CSCH) who made up that audience had come to expect excellence, and with good reason. The CSCH has over the years consistently demonstrated scholarly excellence through its general membership as well as its executive. When the invitation was extended to me three years ago to let my name stand for the Executive of the Society I was keenly aware of that standard, and of the responsibility I was agreeing to undertake.

This is not the Presidential Address I had originally anticipated delivering. In 1990 I was already pondering the topic I might research for presentation in the event that such would be asked of me. Canadian feminist and Methodist Nellie McClung was an obvious possibility. She had travelled extensively in the United States in support of the U.S. suffrage campaign in 1917, preaching her gospel of women's rights and temperance to an eager audience south of the border. That story had yet to be told, and would provide I hoped, an entertaining and enlightening hour.

Historical Papers 1993: Canadian Society of Church History

Important questions could be considered: how did feminism cross boundaries, both national and ideological, in the early years of this century? Why was McClung, a Canadian from rural Manitoba, looked to by American women as a “saviour” who could make temperance a reality they might not bring about themselves? And what role did conventional religion play in this whole drama?

Yet another topic was Edmonton’s temperance march, also held in 1917. The photographic image of several thousand women marching down Jasper Avenue in this small provincial capital was an impressive sight, and begged for further investigation. What was said from the pulpits about these women? From which pulpits, if any, were they allowed to speak? And what does that kind of public social action, grounded in women’s experience, analysis and quite often religious conviction, have to offer us by way of insight and reflection today? Here too was an intriguing theme for exploration and reflection to bring forward to a discerning audience.

All this remained a possibility as recently as eighteen months ago. By this time last year, however, it was becoming clear that obtaining adequate research time would be unlikely, as other concerns developed which took increasingly pressing priority. During this same time another topic kept nudging at the edges of my consciousness, a topic with its own independent validity. All of us have witnessed over the last several years the deeply destructive impact of a faltering economy on every facet of life. We have heard the horror stories: “strongly encouraged” early retirements, positions being axed, support staff being let go, salary roll-backs threatened, inadequate library budgets, and in the case of Religious Studies at San Diego, the wiping out by President Day’s fiat of the entire department. We have seen already stretched departments being told to “do more with less,” leaving us to wonder just how thinly things are going to have to be stretched before they begin to fall apart completely.

What I want to talk about today emerges from that context, and reflects it. The topic of this address is “the effect of the current economic climate on the face of a discipline;” its title is “A Paean to the Faithful.”

The academic landscape is very different from what those of us who hoped for scholarly careers looked forward to in the 1960s and 1970s. We saw so many changes, and it is with no small amount of irony that I note that we expected disciplines to change radically, but economic prosperity to vary only in its increase! The folly of youth aside, it is fair to say that disciplines *were* being transformed, not least among them our own of

church history. (What follows is not new information, but it bears some brief recounting.) Changes took place in two arenas: the study of history, and the study and practice of religion.

By the time I undertook university studies in the early 1970s religion had been all but excised from the study of history. Even where “religion” was present, neither it nor persons of faith were generally dealt with sympathetically. Religion was “old-fashioned,” something to be superseded by sheer evolution if nothing else. This perspective persists both in the academy and in many students’ general experience; I am regularly asked to give a lecture on “women and religion” to a History of European Women course, and each time I have to preface my talk with some discussion of what religion *is*.

At the same time the study of religion itself was undergoing a sea-change. Departments of Religious Studies emerged to engage questions not easily addressed in Departments of Theology. These questions were not, however, on the whole *historical* ones. The current Canadian scene bears this out. Students of Christian history are considered suspect, possible “closet theologians” for their interest in Christianity, while others less exercised about a confessional focus are, it seems, largely disinterested in learning from the past.

The training given scholars in the 1970s and 1980s reflects these shifts. Historians trained in the “New Social History” rightly looked to the tools of social and political analysis to elucidate the objects of their study. Unfortunately, the social theory which was most available in this regard, Marxism, was not especially nuanced in its assessment of religious commitment and action. Religious Studies scholars found the genesis and development of other religious traditions fascinating, but in the main preferred to investigate Christianity according to other, more theoretical criteria, such as those found in the social sciences. Denominational history was seen as a vestige of an earlier stage of development, an unwelcome hangover from seminary days. Seminarians for their part were facing challenges to received wisdom from perspectives hitherto marginalized. An increasingly female student population was decidedly unreceptive to injunctions to study Calvin’s perorations in the “Monstrous Regiment of Women,” seeing that directive, perhaps rightly in part, as a not-so-subtle message about the desirability of their continued presence in seminary. So, History truncated religion, Religious Studies had reservations about

Christianity, and theologians and other religious practitioners wanted to focus on what was happening NOW. Where did that leave Church History?

Potentially, it left it in the capable hands of those trained in the midst of the developments named above. Scholars with a range of preparations, with considerable experience and facility working with and through the creative tensions of disciplinary growth stood poised to take the scholarship into new and fruitful fields. Unfortunately, it was about this time that the bottom dropped out of the academic market. Jobs became fewer and fewer. As they did, the established disciplines consolidated their new orthodoxies. "Pushing the boundaries" was still *de rigueur* for demonstrating originality, but creative re-engagement with areas and approaches just recently determined to be beyond the pale pushed the wrong boundaries entirely! The one discipline in which reconfiguring past formulations of knowledge was strongly encouraged tended to reject religion, particularly Christianity, outright. I am speaking here of Women's Studies. (The scenario being laid out here underlines the critical, ground-breaking character of the session set up for the Kingston Learneds by one of our past-Presidents, Marguerite Van Die. Ruth Compton Brouwer's paper "Transcending the 'unacknowledged quarantine': Putting Religion into Canadian Women's History" illustrates in a profound way how even new "liberating" paradigms can conceal as well as reveal.)

Many new scholars found themselves between a rock and a hard place. Reluctantly, some began to consider, or even found themselves teaching in the seminary contexts which they had originally rejected. At the same time the seminaries themselves had changed. I will not speak for other denominations, but in the United Church (a denomination not known for an emphasis on historical tradition, although rightfully for other good things) an anti-intellectualism is gaining momentum, fed I regret to say (and I *do regret* to say this) by a kind of "Church Feminist" orthodoxy which sees the type of scholarship to which the historian is called, and at times even scholarship in general, as "malestream," "conservative," and "irrelevant to the demands of practical ministry."

Some scholars got into the system and some did not. Those who did not found other ways to do the work to which they were called: in archives, in ministry, on the edges of the academy, in spite of all the obstacles. I would now like to consider some of those obstacles, and through their exploration turn to some concluding reflection on the effect of the current

economic climate on the face of our discipline.

It seems to me that the impediments to scholars practising church history on the edges or outside of a formal academic context manifest in three related areas, namely: material constraints, identity questions and focus. Living with any of these for any length of time provides considerable challenge and demands great fortitude; to contend with all of them is not to be wished on anyone (well, perhaps some university administrators we could think of, if only as an educative measure!).

Material constraints: One of the first things that signals to a new appointee that she or he has “arrived” is the upscaling of material support given through the employing department. First of all, an office is provided – a place to work, usually complete with a desk, shelves, a filing cabinet, and even your name on the door. That door can and may be closed; you can “do your work” without having to share the space with anyone else. This basic material arrangement has immeasurable impact on the factors of identity and focus to which I will turn below.

In addition to office space, there are support services provided: access to the department copying machine, and even on occasion, someone to do the copying for you. Stationery is provided, paper clips, white-out, scratch paper . . . even with the reductions in these services in recent years due to economizing measures, the general convenience of access contributes positively to the ease of academic life. There are mail services, access to letterhead, a phone number . . . all these basic material provisions “grease the wheels” in a daily way. And if things are not always perfect, there is a considerable difference between complaining about inadequate support services and having none at all. The concrete support given to academic work through providing for these material needs makes scholarly life immensely easier.

Receiving an adequate salary is another plus – being able to pay back student loans, buy new books and bookshelves to house them, being able to think about attending conferences elsewhere – for here especially, an academic position provides access to forms of funding (perhaps less than hitherto, but still available) not open to the unaffiliated scholar. And with mobility to conferences, including the Learned, comes networking and again, identity, legitimacy and profile.

Identity: Material support is important, and none of us would deny the importance of an adequate income in doing our work. At the same

time, humanities scholars tend, in the main, not to be terrifically financially acquisitive. All those years in graduate school perhaps, or a simple preoccupation with a non-consumerist agenda, but for whatever reasons, the prime source of self-worth tends not to be a bulging bank account, or a yacht in the Toronto harbour. What is important is to be known by one's peers, and to have one's work respected.

Living in the academy provides some of that automatically. You are listed in departmental faculty rosters, in brochures and outside of department corridors. Your name, as mentioned before, is on your office door – you have a place to work and you deserve it, people are paying you money and are willing to be associated with you in print. They may even be proud of having you around! Students (sometimes) take you more seriously, because you are a “real” professor. Your status is established externally; you are then free to enhance it, but you do not have to try to prove your worth at the outset. This is a “given” of academic appointment, at least to the outside world. And while it is certainly true that tests of legitimacy and worth occur regularly – incessantly! – within the system as well, there is still a profound difference between being evaluated for how well you play a game and trying to prove that you deserve a chance to play at all.

One of the most telling examples of what I am trying to point to comes for me at Learned societies conferences, when introductions are being made. Stated affiliations are paramount – and how much easier it is to say “I’m at Carleton” or “I’m the Reformation person at VST” than “I’m interested in . . .” The awkwardness can perhaps be circumvented by openers like “My latest publication is . . .” but there is a fine line between creating a legitimate identity and just “trying too hard.” Doing this dance, again and again, causes tremendous strain, and wears very thin over time.

Finally, there is the question of *focus*. This is a problem for all academics, in the system or not, as we are all becoming increasingly overburdened trying to keep the apparently sinking ship of post-secondary education afloat. For the un/under-affiliated scholar, however, there are further difficulties. Scholars who have found their primary employment outside the academy face “shifting gears” from the work – often equally important and challenging work – which “pays the rent,” and the scholarship to which they are called. The difficulty of that move is recognized implicitly through sabbatical leave; we have to get away from daily demands to really do some thinking.

For those outside and on the edges of the system who still have some desire to get in, the situation is even more difficult. Jobs are described and advertised in the “fishing expeditions” which characterize a buyers’ market. Those in the system who are asked to prepare and teach in an area in which they are no longer current will recognize what is being asked here. Imagine if your entire future rests on providing credible, even outstanding expertise in often quite separate areas which, while perhaps part of one’s graduate school preparation, are very far from what one currently cares about. And imagine the demand on one’s psyche and time if those areas are constantly changing in relation to the available job offerings, from year to year.

What does all this have to do with church history? In addition to many of our scholars, our discipline itself is arguably “outside the system,” or at least on its edges. It lacks a firm material positioning in mainstream academic departments, and while its status in seminaries is more or less intact, its centrality to theological education is suspect in the prevailing ideology. Church history’s identity is likewise jaundiced in the secular academy. (I cannot, for example, tell you the confusion engendered when I indicate my affiliation with this Society in Women’s Studies gatherings.) But what church history has – what WE have – is focus. The scholarship which I have encountered in this Society over the last eight years has been stimulating, and consistently creative. The Society itself has striven, successfully, to be gender-inclusive, and actively seeks to treat all members equally, regardless of university affiliation.

That this is the case is due in large measure to those who do this work for the love of the work itself – despite the barriers, despite the frustrations, and despite the real hardships imposed by the seemingly interminably constrained circumstances of current academic life. Their commitment deserves at least *this* acknowledgement. And it is because of *all* of our work, within the academy and without, and facilitated through this Society, that the subject we love will continue to survive and to flourish.