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Presidential Address: Doctoral Theses and the Discipline of History in Canada, 1967 and 1985

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Article abstract

A comparison of doctoral theses in progress in 1967 and 1985 reveals a number of trends in historical studies in Canadian universities during the past two decades. In 1967, 58 per cent of all doctoral candidates chose topics in Canadian history and the largest number — fully 36 per cent of all candidates — were writing theses at the University of Toronto, which offered the broadest range of fields of any Canadian university. Much smaller programmes existed at McGill and the University of Western Ontario; aside from these three institutions, no other university in English-speaking Canada enrolled more than four students. Two-thirds of all francophone candidates were enrolled at Université Laval, where only five candidates were writing on topics other than Canadian history. The political process led the field of interest in all fields of study, while social history of the *Annales* school held little interest for either linguistic group. More than half the dissertations in Canadian fields were supervised by only eight senior scholars.

By 1985, marked changes in this pattern were evident. The number of active doctoral candidates had increased from 236 in 1967 to 294, and Canadian history was the field of choice for 72 per cent. Doctoral programmes and hence supervision had decentralized in anglophone Canada, however, and the University of Toronto's dominance had been challenged by Queen's and York; specialized programmes of some size existed at a much larger number of institutions. Among francophone schools, enrollment had doubled and Laval had achieved a situation rivalling Toronto's in 1967. Laval and the Université de Montréal now had the largest doctoral programmes in the country. In terms of topic, policy and administration had replaced the political process as the subject of choice for both language groups; economic history experienced a modest degree of growth, while the history of ideas retained its traditional level of interest. Social history had become much more popular in both linguistic groups, while less European history was being studied.

These developments pose both problems and possibilities for the profession as a whole. Doctoral studies have been enriched by the diversity of interests, but the potential for academic sectarian strife is troubling. The need now is for syntheses and paradigms which will permit the findings of subdisciplines to be integrated into a broader and more sensitive understanding of the past.

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS

Doctoral Theses and the Discipline of History in Canada, 1967 and 1985

WILLIAM ACHESON

Résumé

A comparison of doctoral theses in progress in 1967 and 1985 reveals a number of trends in historical studies in Canadian universities during the past two decades. In 1967, 58 per cent of all doctoral candidates chose topics in Canadian history and the largest number — fully 36 per cent of all candidates — were writing theses at the University of Toronto, which offered the broadest range of fields of any Canadian university. Much smaller programmes existed at McGill and the University of Western Ontario; aside from these three institutions, no other university in English-speaking Canada enrolled more than four students. Two-thirds of all francophone candidates were enrolled at Université Laval, where only five candidates were writing on topics other than Canadian history. The political process led the field of interest in all fields of study, while social history of the Annales *school held little interest for either linguistic group. More than half the dissertations in Canadian fields were supervised by only eight senior scholars.*

By 1985, marked changes in this pattern were evident. The number of active doctoral candidates had increased from 236 in 1967 to 294, and Canadian history was the field of choice for 72 per cent. Doctoral programmes and hence supervision had decentralized in anglophone Canada, however, and the University of Toronto's dominance had been challenged by Queen's and York; specialized programmes of some size existed at a much larger number of institutions. Among francophone schools, enrollment had doubled and Laval had achieved a situation rivalling Toronto's in 1967. Laval and the Université de Montréal now had the largest doctoral programmes in the country. In terms of topic, policy and administration had replaced the political process as the subject of choice for both language groups; economic history experienced a modest degree of growth, while the history of ideas retained its traditional level of interest. Social history had become much more popular in both linguistic groups, while less European history was being studied.

These developments pose both problems and possibilities for the profession as a whole. Doctoral studies have been enriched by the diversity of interests, but the potential for academic sectarian strife is troubling. The need now is for syntheses and paradigms which will permit the findings of subdisciplines to be integrated into a broader and more sensitive understanding of the past.

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Une comparaison des thèses de doctorat en préparation en 1967 et en 1985 révèle un certain nombre de tendances dans l'étude de l'histoire au sein des universités canadiennes au cours des deux dernières décennies. En 1967, 58 pour cent de tous les étudiants au doctorat choisissaient des sujets portant sur l'histoire du Canada et de ce nombre, la plupart, soit un peu plus de 36 pour cent de tous les candidats, rédigaient leur thèse à l'Université de Toronto qui, de toutes les universités canadiennes, offrait le plus vaste évantail de domaines. Des programmes beaucoup moins considérables existaient à McGill et à l'Université Western Ontario; à part ces trois institutions, aucune autre université au Canada anglais ne comptait plus de quatre étudiants au doctorat. Les deux-tiers des candidats francophones étaient inscrits à l'Université Laval et cinq d'entre eux seulement avaient choisi de rédiger leur thèse sur un sujet étranger à l'histoire du Canada. De tous les domaines d'études, c'est le processus politique qui suscitait la recherche la plus active, alors que l'histoire sociale à la façon des Annales *ne présentait que peu d'intérêt pour l'un ou l'autre des groupes linguistiques. Plus de la moitié de toutes les dissertations sur des sujets canadiens étaient dirigées par seulement huit éminents professeurs.*

En 1985, on pouvait observer des changements marqués dans cette distribution. Le nombre de candidats actifs au doctorat était passé de 236 qu'il était en 1967 à 294 maintenant et 73 pour cent d'entre eux avaient choisi d'étudier un sujet relatif à l'histoire du Canada. Toutefois au Canada anglais, les programmes de doctorat, et par conséquent la direction de thèse, avaient subi une décentralisation et la domination qu'exercait l'Université de Toronto avait été remise en question par Queen's et York; des programmes spécialisés d'une certain ampleur existaient maintenant dans un nombre beaucoup plus grand d'institutions. Le nombre d'inscriptions avait doublé dans les écoles francophones et la situation à Laval était maintenant comparable à celle de Toronto en 1967. Laval et l'Université de Montréal offraient désormais les plus importants programmes de doctorat au pays. Pour ce qui est des sujets choisis, les questions de politique administrative étaient maintenant préférées à celles touchant au processus politique par les deux groupes linguistiques; l'intérêt pour l'histoire économique s'était accru quelque peu, alors que l'histoire des idées conservait sa position traditionnelle. L'histoire sociale était désormais beaucoup plus populaire au sein des deux groupes linguistiques, alors qu'on choisissait moins souvent des sujets touchants l'histoire de l'Europe.

Cette évolution présente à la fois des difficultés et des possibilités pour l'ensemble de la profession. Les études de doctorat se sont enrichies par la diversité des sujets, mais la possibilité de conflits sectaires est troublante. Il nous faut maintenant des synthèses et des paradigmes qui permettront l'intégration des résultats de la recherche dans des sous-disciplines en une compréhension plus complète et sentie du passé.

The presidential addresses of the Canadian Historical Association have included scholarly master works, such as that delivered by Ramsay Cook two years ago, scintillating think-pieces, such as Susan Trofimenkoff's examination of the use and meaning of gossip, and discussions on the state of the profession. I have decided to

complete the trinity by exploring the state and nature of doctoral studies in history over the past two decades. I do this not with a view to posing a problem and offering a prescription but rather to report on the nature of the changes which have occurred in recent years and the significance which these may hold for our profession. My subjects for this study are the theses chosen by doctoral candidates and the university programmes in which they wrote them. The research interests of doctoral candidates are, of course, of more than passing interest to the profession: assuming that the rest of us eventually give way, those presently in doctoral programmes will shape the intellectual perspectives of the discipline well into the twenty–first century.

In a perceptive article introducing *The Past Before Us*, which he edited for the American Historical Association in 1980, Michael Kammen argued that the discipline of history, after possessing a high degree of coherency and continuity for nearly a century, entered a period of discontinuity in the 1960s which has continued to the present.[1] In the field of American history, the break was accompanied by the collapse of both the progressive and the consensus paradigms, and by the disappearance of nationalism and detachment, the most cherished values of American historians. In their place has arisen the doctrine that history is essentially a moral science. The result has been the spawning of a large number of new subdisciplines, each with its own practitioners, high priests, and journals. The former danger of national chauvinism, Kammen argued, had been replaced by the high risk of subdisciplinary parochialism. The structured professional world of the 1950s, in which a small group of senior professors could determine research priorities and control appointments, and in which the history departments of a few prestigious universities dominated, had disappeared. Kammen sees the "discovery" of women, blacks, ethnic groups, the labouring classes, quantitative methods, urban and rural history, and the new social history of structures and mobility, of family, sexuality, factories, prisons, hospitals, churches, and towns as the very essence of American historical scholarship in the 1970s.

These are powerful and controversial conclusions. While some reflect the author's biases, the general argument is compellingly demonstrated in a number of short historiographical studies outlining the state of the art in a number of historical fields in the United States. To what extent has such revolution occurred in Canada? Since I do not intend to prepare a doctoral dissertation on the subject, I propose to consider a few of these questions in terms of the nature and subject matter of the doctoral theses in progress in Canada, and the university programmes in which they were written, for the years 1967 and 1985. The data for this study are largely drawn from the annual *Register of Dissertations*. Since the occasional thesis did not find its way into the *Register*, the details of the study are not always infallible.

1. Michael Kammen, *The Past Before Us* (Ithaca, 1980), 21–36.

Throughout the discussion I will use the terms doctoral candidate or those in doctoral programmes to refer to those with a registered doctoral subject.[2]

Many many years ago, while a young graduate student studying with Maurice Careless at the University of Toronto, I sat at the feet of an aging Ramsay Cook as he argued for the need for a broader, richer Canadian historiography capable of accommodating and reconciling the complex realities of this society, and offering differing paradigms explaining the Canadian experience. One obstacle to such a development, he argued, was the great strength of the University of Toronto within the Canadian field and the difficulty in creating other major research centres. Some time after this Ramsay left Toronto to assist in the formation of the new graduate programme at York. Not even Ramsay, however, could predict the profound changes that were to so dramatically alter the structure and the historiography of this field in the years following that decision.

What, then, was the state of history doctoral research in 1967? I have identified 236 history doctoral candidates who had indicated a thesis topic.[3] Of these, 130 — about 56 per cent — were writing in Canadian history and 106 had chosen other fields, principally British (44), European (25), and American (16). The central institutional fact in the discipline (as Ramsay had pointed out) was the place of the University of Toronto. Fully 36 per cent of all candidates were at Toronto. Toronto and McGill (the second largest programme) contained over half of all doctoral candidates in all fields, a degree of concentration vastly exceeding anything which existed in the United States. The strength of the Toronto programme was revealed in the range of fields which it dominated. Not only did it possess by far the largest programme in Canadian history, but it also contained nearly half of the candidates in British, European, and American, more than half of those in historiography, and all of those in ancient history and the history of the Far East. The department had a significant impact on the writing of Canadian history in English. Its only competitors in the field were the much smaller programmes at McGill and Western. Apart from these three institutions no anglophone doctoral programme in Canadian history contained more than four students. In other fields important programmes in British history existed at Toronto, McGill, and British Columbia; in European history at Toronto and McGill, and in American at Toronto. A few very small specialist programmes were found, notably that in African history at Simon Fraser which contained three students.

2. Since most doctoral subjects are not registered before the end of the first year of doctoral study, this means that the actual number of candidates for the degree would be considerably larger than the numbers dealt with in this study.
3. Canadian Historical Association, *Register of Post-Graduate Dissertations in Progress in History and Related Subjects* (Ottawa, 1967). I have attempted to restrict this list to theses written for history and ancient history departments in Canada. The 1967 *Register* is actually the second register. The 1966 volume did not contain entries from francophone universities.

The English-Canadian experience was repeated, on a more limited scale, in the French-language universities. Laval played the role of Toronto with more than two-thirds of all doctoral candidates writing in French. Candidates at the francophone universities were also marked by their commitment to Canadian history: only five were preparing theses outside the Canadian field. Put another way, a clear majority of candidates in anglophone programmes were not writing Canadian history, while more than 90 per cent of those in francophone programmes were.

Geographically, nearly five out of six candidates were in Toronto, Quebec, Montreal, and London. The remainder were sprinkled in niggardly fashion at Vancouver, Edmonton, and in several tiny programmes, none having as many as five candidates. There appears to have been no effective programme in the Atlantic provinces.

The subject matter of the theses reflected the traditional consensus of history-writing in Canada and Great Britain. Nearly six out of ten studied the operation of the state, although the proportion was rather lower in Canadian history and rather higher in British and European. The most popular genres were political biography, political process, and political thought. Most of these studies were being written at Toronto and Laval. Little attention was given to policy, diplomacy, military history, or political economy. The largest group of public policy studies was being prepared for Laval in the field of education. Almost all studies on Canadian external relations were being written at American and British universities. Other significant topics, apart from the state, were the history of ideas — which was centred at Toronto, Laval, and Montreal — and the history of religion which was found everywhere *but* Toronto and Montreal. Other topics — business, labour, ethnicity, and community — were each represented by a few scattered studies but these were solitary enterprises with no concentration in any graduate school. Two students at the University of British Columbia were preparing studies on British women, the only studies in women's history in Canada at the time. Regional studies within Canadian history were largely restricted to the universities of Quebec and Ontario and generally dealt with an aspect of the history of a subregion within those provinces. The only exception to this generalization was at the University of British Columbia, where four candidates were preparing theses on that province.

Finally, the high degree of concentration of Canadian doctoral studies in a few universities gave a disproportionate influence in the discipline to a small group of distinguished scholars from these institutions. Again, the characteristics which Michael Kammen described concerning American practice at the time were even more typical of history doctoral studies in Canada. Within the Canadian field, for example, more than half of all the doctoral theses in progress in 1967 were directed by eight men. Of these, three were at Toronto, two at Laval, two at Western, and one at McGill.[4]

4. These were J. Hamelin, J.M.S. Careless, D.G. Creighton, G.R. Cook, R. Sylvain, D.G.G. Kerr, L.L. LaPierre, and M. Wade. The supervisor's ability to influence the student is probably less important than the student's decision to select the supervisor knowing his concerns and biases.

A striking characteristic of the 1967 studies was the absence of any significant social history. Regardless of topic, field, or subfield, the approach of the overwhelming majority of doctoral theses was institutional or dealt with the relationship between the institution and the individual. Few of the topics, even at Laval and Montreal, suggested the influence of the *Annales* tradition. Instead, emphasis was placed on the state, the administration, the party, the man, the denomination, the idea, the firm, or the union. The few exceptions included several religious and ethnic studies, the titles of which suggest an explicitly social history approach.

The decade following 1967 witnessed a significant growth in the number of history doctoral candidates and in the number of universities offering doctoral programmes. Most of the factors contributing to this growth had their roots in the 1950s. They included generous federal funding for postsecondary education, growing university enrollments — occasioned both by the baby boom of the post-war years and by the rising expectations of many Canadians of humble origins — and the creation of new universities. All created a demand for more academic historians and all added to the general euphoria which characterized North American university life between 1960 and 1975.

The demise of this golden age was foretold in James Conacher's 1975 presidential address to the CHA.[5] He warned of a crisis in the profession occasioned by too many graduate schools producing far too many professional historians for an already declining academic market. He urged that graduate schools cooperate to rationalize programmes and to limit access to the profession.

The response to that call and to the circumstances which produced it is reflected in the 1985 *Register of Dissertations*.[6] That document reveals that the number of doctoral candidates declined during the early 1980s but was still larger than the 1967 group. I have identified 294 history doctoral candidates compared with 236 in 1967. The distribution of these candidates over the several national fields had changed markedly. The proportion of candidates writing Canadian history had risen from 58 per cent to 72 per cent and accounted for all of the increase in the number of candidates. Within the Canadian field the emphasis had shifted sharply to the national period. As a result the number of theses being written on the Canadian national period had doubled. The number of theses dealing with the colonial period remained constant. Those writing on post–Confederation topics outnumbered those dealing with the earlier period by a margin of three to one. The number of theses being written in non–Canadian fields actually declined from 106 to 96. It should be pointed out, however, that the decline occurred entirely within British history and historiography. Historiography has apparently been eliminated

5. James Conacher, "Graduate Studies in History in Canada: The Growth of Doctoral Programmes," *Historical Papers/Communications historiques* (1975), 1–15.

6. *Register of Post-Graduate Dissertations in Progress in History and Related Subjects* (Ottawa, 1975).

as a significant subject of research in Canada. The number of students writing British history has been halved since 1967.[7] That is unfortunate since both Toronto and McGill have long been viewed internationally as important centres for the writing of British history and the decline is a loss which the whole Canadian profession can ill afford. The number of candidates in European and American history remains substantially unchanged.[8] The most rapidly growing non-Canadian field is the study of Africa. The number of candidates writing African history has doubled since 1967, and now includes students of both anglophone and francophone Africa.[9] Sadly, Asia remains *terra incognita* to most doctoral programmes.

The most radical structural change that occurred in doctoral training between 1967 and 1985 was the decentralization of history graduate studies. Three universities apparently heeded Professor Conacher's advice. Toronto, McGill, and Western each had enrollments in 1985 which were less than half those of 1967. By contrast, every other university which had a doctoral programme in 1967 had increased its enrollment by 1985, some of them significantly so. Queens, for example, increased its numbers from four to twenty-six during the period. In addition, new programmes had been developed in the intervening years at York, New Brunswick, Guelph, Carleton, Dalhousie, Calgary, Victoria, and Memorial. The result was a decentralization of enrollment in English-speaking universities. Queen's, the largest programme in 1985, had only twenty-six candidates, as opposed to Toronto's eighty-three in 1967. It required the combined enrollments of nine anglophone universities to account for half of the history doctoral candidates in Canada. The changed geographic distribution of these students is reflected in the rank-order of the nine: Queen's, York, Toronto, British Columbia, McMaster, New Brunswick, McGill, Alberta, and Manitoba. Even so, the range among these nine is only from twenty-six students at Queen's to twelve at Manitoba. The remaining half of all doctoral candidates were found in eight small English-language programmes,[10] in the bilingual University of Ottawa, and in the large francophone programmes at Laval and Montreal.[11]

The trends which marked anglophone doctoral studies in 1985 were not present in francophone programmes. The number of francophone candidates doubled between 1967 and 1985 and enrollment in each of the francophone programmes doubled or nearly doubled as well. As a result Laval and Montreal possessed the two largest doctoral programmes in Canada and the typical francophone candidate studied in a group two or three times the size of her anglophone counterpart. Laval replaced Toronto as the major centre for professional historical studies in Canada. Indeed, Laval's doctoral programme (or at least the students in it

7. From forty-four to twenty.
8. Twenty-eight and thirty in continental European history and twenty and seventeen in American.
9. The number of African theses increased from six to thirteen.
10. Two of these programmes — at Carleton and Guelph — had between ten and twelve candidates. The remaining six each had between one and six candidates.
11. With nine, fifty-seven, and twenty-five candidates respectively.

preparing theses) was nearly as large as the combined programmes of Queen's, York, and Toronto. Moreover, the swing to Canadian studies, so evident in the anglophone programmes, has been reversed at Laval and Montreal, where a growing number of students were writing on the francophone community in metropolitan France and in Africa. The same opposing trends are also evident in the area of thesis supervision: the supervisory loads of some Laval historians closely resembled those of the largest 1960s programmes; in anglophone universities in 1985 few supervisors had more than four doctoral candidates.

Changes in topics selected by thesis writers in 1985 were even more significant than changes in national fields and the decentralization of programmes. The state had been the principal object of inquiry in 1967; by 1985 it was the choice of only one-third as many candidates regardless of national field. Political biography, the traditional favourite subject of Canadian historians, had been virtually eliminated, while studies of political process were gradually giving away to examinations of policy and administration. Studies of business and political economy experienced a modest growth. The history of ideas remained relatively unchanged as a topic of choice. Taken together, however, these three topics accounted for fewer than half of the history doctoral theses being prepared in Canada. The majority were scattered over a dozen topics, some of which had no takers in 1967. The largest of these "others" were community studies, religion, ethnicity, women, family, labour, Amerindians, medicine and medical treatment, and poverty. It is, of course, this very diversity that has raised concerns about the disintegration of the discipline unless a historical theory capable of integrating these diverse elements into a discrete reality can be forged.

The present crop of history doctoral candidates in Canada, then, generally consists of members of comparatively small programmes examining a larger variety of topics. The result has been a growing degree of institutional specialization. Most labour history, for example, is written at York and Montreal; most community studies at Laval, McGill, and Montreal; most studies of provincial political process at Laval; most history of ideas at Laval and Montreal. The major centre for African studies is Dalhousie. Not surprisingly, regardless of the subject examined, most topics touching on a province or region of Canada tend to be written at a provincial or regional university: most topics relating to British Columbia are done at UBC, most topics relative to the Maritimes at UNB.

Finally, in Canada as in the United States, the work of those writing history in the 1980s strongly reflected the influence of social history. While a title is sometimes misleading in providing a clue to the approach which the author proposes to use in his study, it does seem that close to half of all doctoral theses being prepared in Canada today are fundamentally concerned with relationships between social groups. The largest group of such studies were community studies being prepared in Quebec universities and apparently reflecting the *Annales* influence. Others include most religious and ethnic studies, and perhaps half of the studies of women, labour, education, and Amerindians. As well there are a number of studies in the history of ideas and of political process which are essentially studies in social history.

The trends in history programmes and history writing in Canada seem clear and, insofar as historians ever predict, inevitable. The powerful continuities provided by topic, concern, ideology, and common enterprise — those same continuities that Kammen saw as central to the structure of American history before the 1960s — are much weaker within the Canadian profession today. Within the Canadian field there has been a noticeable growth in subdisciplinary specialities. Given the size of the Canadian field this often means groups of a few dozen historians interacting with each other and with similar specialists in the United States, the United Kingdom, and France. Social history has added to the complexity of this process by bringing the insights of the *Annales* tradition, of neo-marxism, of modernization theory, and of statistical technique to bear upon the topics under discussion. All of this has risks. The potential for academic sectarian strife is obvious. Indeed, some of the more militant European social historians have openly repudiated history as a discipline, arguing for the creation of a separate social history profession. [12]

Despite the concerns and potential difficulties, the new questions, the new topics, the new approaches, and the new ideologies have opened important dimensions to the discipline and offered useful insights into a number of traditional topics. The historiographies of Canada and of most other national fields studied by historians in Canada are richer and more interesting today than they were two decades ago, and in Canada, as in the United States, the principal developments have been initiated in the new topics and from the new approaches. Sometimes supporters have preached with the zeal of the missionary rather than with the scholarly dispassion which, historians have been taught, is the great virtue, but this does not of itself detract from the basic contribution. Above all, what is now needed are the syntheses and paradigms which will eventually allow us to integrate significant parts of these various understandings into broader understandings of the past and its relationship to the present. Certainly we cannot return to the simple historiographical reality of a generation ago: too many historians have received their professional formation in milieus and traditions in which other questions have been posited as more significant than those which concerned historians before 1960. Like it or not, we have had our "reformation" and must now live with the sectarian consequences.

But to come back to my original proposition. How would an aged Ramsay Cook view the world of the Canadian doctoral student in 1985? Does our "reformation" represent a movement toward maturity and diversity or one leading to a disintegration of a once-noble intellectual enterprise? Despite some excesses in decentralization and the occasional overly-grandiose scheme, it must surely be said that, even in its weakness and lack of integration, the discipline is now more challenging and varied than at any time in its history. While it is important that scholars toil within their separate caves, it is equally important that they share the common room of the profession. The danger of professional particularism is that

12. See Peter Stearns, "Coming of Age," *Journal of Social History* 10–11 (1976–77), 246–55.

scholars will not appreciate the influential articles and major books on many topics within their field, on the grounds that the topic is not central to their scholarly interest, or the methodology is too arcane, or the viewpoint is ideologically incompatible. Criticism and controversy are endemic to the discipline of history — indeed it is the only humanity in which the roles of creator and critic are normally played by the scholar. It is a sign of disciplinary vigour that new viewpoints should be advanced and challenged. Indeed, the notion that there may be two or three major schools of historical writing developing in the community should be seen as a sign of maturity as much as disintegration. I become truly troubled about our discipline only when I read a new synthesis which ignores much of the historiography of the subject. Ultimately the doctoral candidates of the 1980s, like those of the 1960s, were called to their task by a desire to be historians and create an understandable and a usable past for a living community. The period of synthesis is yet before us. During the past two decades we have lived through a period of unprecedented expansion and analysis. Let us rejoice in the opportunities which this has provided to our discipline and, in the coming years, let us work toward the integration of the insights of new work into broader and more complex visions of the past.