

A Scholar of Canada: A Tribute to Robert H. Babcock

Scott W. See

Volume 74, automne 2014

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1060919ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Canadian Committee on Labour History

ISSN

0700-3862 (imprimé)

1911-4842 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce document

See, S. (2014). A Scholar of Canada: A Tribute to Robert H. Babcock. *Labour / Le Travail*, 74.

OBITUARY / NÉCROLOGIE

A Scholar of Canada: A Tribute to Robert H. Babcock

Scott W. See



Robert H. Babcock 1931–2014

THE COMMUNITY OF CANADIAN HISTORY scholars lost one of its most passionate and dedicated members earlier this year. Robert H. Babcock, retired University of Maine historian, passed away surrounded by his family and friends on 12 February 2014. Truly an archetype of the post-war generation of North American historians, Bob, who was born on 19 December 1931 in Cincinnati, Ohio, was utterly dedicated to his research, teaching, and professional collaboration with colleagues in Canadian and American history. Always central to his passion and work, moreover, was the pursuit of the

Scott W. See, "A Scholar of Canada: A Tribute to Robert H. Babcock," *Labour/Le Travail*, 74 (Fall 2014), 21–26.

history of the working-class experience in North America during the 19th and early 20th centuries.

Three points underscore this brief tribute to Bob Babcock and his major contributions, and the title of the work is a gentle word-play based on the title of his most important book. These include his scholarship, his teaching career – in particular his role as a mentor of graduate students – and his personal traits. He was a rigorous, professional, and honest scholar and teacher. Bob possessed a good sense of humor; he was fierce in debate and in defence of his work, but he never ventured into the terrain of mean-spirited or vindictive behavior. In conversation one never had the impression that his mind was closed – closely guarded, perhaps, but always open. His colleagues and graduate students knew full well that they would need to have their ducks carefully aligned if they hoped to shift his opinion when he was resolute. His approach to teaching and collaboration with colleagues was never didactic, yet he was inevitably a stickler for detail and empirical evidence. His work ethic was legendary, perhaps especially among his graduate students who struggled mightily to keep pace. Instinctively generous with his time and scholarship, particularly when conversations ranged into his wheelhouse of all things Canadian, Bob possessed an insatiable curiosity. Trained as an historian, he remained closely attuned to Canadian culture, politics, literature, and sports. Bob never minded the lighthearted observation that he appeared the quintessential stereotype in his love of Canada's national sport, hockey.

As has been the case with many American scholars who turn their intellectual sights on their northern neighbor, a marriage of geography and genealogy set the stage for Bob's lifelong passion for Canadian studies. Raised and schooled in northern New York State, his ties to Canada through his maternal grandfather kindled a childhood spark that provided a foundation for his career. After receiving a bachelor's degree at the New York State College for Teachers in Albany [later renamed University of Albany, SUNY] he was drafted and served two years in the US Army. Following a number of years teaching high school in New York State, he enrolled in the Canadian-American History doctoral program at Duke University, one of the leading graduate centers for the study of Canada in the United States. Mentored by Richard Preston, an important contributor to the historiography of Canadian-American relations, Bob honed his skills and gravitated to a dissertation project based on the extensive papers of American Federation of Labor (AFL) organizers in the early 20th century. The product was an outstanding thesis, published in revised form at the University of Toronto Press in 1974: *Gompers in Canada: A Study in American Continentalism Before the First World War*. Using as a primary lens the activities of John Flett, the Canadian organizer of the AFL, Bob fashioned a nuanced and compelling account of the efforts of Samuel Gompers and AFL activists to subsume the Trades and Labor Congress of Canada as part of a design to craft a North American organization in the first decade of the 20th century. The work provides a textured portrait of the varied and complex

ramifications of Gompers's efforts to eradicate dual unionism. Although the AFL's relationship with the TLC brought undeniable benefits to workers, it triggered varied reactions in Canada's regions and served to radicalize many workers who bitterly opposed Gompers's vision of a more elitist North American craft unionism. *Gompers in Canada* rapidly gained traction among labour historians as it broadened the historiography to encompass transborder dynamics of unionism. It justifiably garnered the attention of the awards committee of the Albert B. Corey Prize, a biennial award offered jointly by the Canadian Historical Association and the American Historical Association. The 1976 Corey Prize, coupled by Bob's hire at the University of Maine the prior year after teaching at Wells College in upstate New York for six years, served to position him for a fruitful career of improving our understanding of the labour history of Canada and the United States. For two decades until his retirement in the mid-1990s, Bob became one of the most active colleagues in the community of North American labour historians. His hire was carefully timed to overlap with the impending retirement of the extraordinarily influential senior Canadian historian at the University of Maine, Professor Alice Stewart. Bob was in many ways the perfect choice to accomplish this generational transition with grace and dignity.

That point is emblematic of a skill that profoundly shaped the various landscapes of his career. Bob instinctively employed his calm, engaged demeanour to fashion constructive bonds with colleagues, students, and members of organizations. Bob possessed a precious commodity in the academic world: an unerring ability to stay true to his beliefs while holding a genuine respect for the opinions and agendas of his colleagues. Interlocked with his scholarship and teaching, his skill in navigating the oftentimes choppy waters of interpersonal relations and organizational evolution was repeatedly put to the test.

At his home institution at the University of Maine he worked closely to strengthen the graduate program in Canadian-American History. Always generous with his time and advice, he proved to be an invaluable mentor of junior faculty. His colleagues in the Department of History repeatedly turned to him to provide direction as they grappled with predictable political tensions between ideological camps or debated the pedagogical changes that would be most appropriate for the graduate and undergraduate programs. He served for eleven years in a variety of capacities as acting chair and chair of the department with such skill that his contributions became legendary in the collective memory of the department and the university.

After his arrival in the mid-1970s Bob quickly sought out connections with the University of Maine's Canadian-American Center, one of the leading interdisciplinary collectives for Canadian studies in the United States. He worked closely with a number of directors, including its current head, Stephen Hornsby. He was an important advisor and liaison between the Center and the History Department's expanding graduate program in Canadian-American History. His contributions to the Center are too numerous to cite, but two deserve close

attention. From 1991–2004 he employed his intellectual breadth in his position as editor of *Canadian-American Public Policy*. During his editorship this pamphlet series published the work of economists, political scientists, historians, scientists, and humanists with a mission to provide exposure to emerging scholarship from a wide spectrum of disciplines in the Canadian-American relationship. Perhaps his most important contribution, one that occupied a great deal of his time after his retirement, was the study of the emergence and entrenchment of Canadian research and teaching at the University of Maine. In classic scholarly fashion, Bob immersed himself in the University of Maine's archives to reconstruct the creation and flowering of Canadian studies at his institution. *A History of Canadian Studies at the University of Maine*, published in 2009, is an elegantly written and thoroughly documented story of the efforts of administrators and professors who laboured to build a reputable Canadian studies centre at the University of Maine.

Equally important, after his arrival at the University of Maine, Bob helped to build cross-border relations with institutions and colleagues throughout the Atlantic region. An active member of the Atlantic Association of Historians and regular contributor to the leading regional journal, *Acadiensis*, Bob was genuinely respected by colleagues throughout the Atlantic Provinces. This was particularly true as a result of his efforts to partner with the University of New Brunswick. He established fruitful ties with UNB faculty such as Phil Buckner, Ernie Forbes, Bill Acheson, and David Frank. Research visits to Fredericton became a regular feature of his scholarly life, and he introduced several generations of graduate students to the history of the region. Not inconsequently, many of those graduate students focused their dissertations and theses on Atlantic Canadian topics, thanks in large part to his strong relationship with counterparts at institutions such as UNB and Dalhousie University.

Without question, his signal contribution was his role in the development of this journal. Bob's scholarship placed him in the top rank of labour historians in the late 20th century, and in *Labour/Le Travail* he found an intellectual home. Starting in 1980 and lasting until his retirement, Bob served on the journal's editorial board. His ability to construct ideological and generational bridges once again served an important role as the journal rapidly became the leading scholarly journal of the history of working-class people in Canada. When the intellectual divide between generations of labour historians was exposed by important historiographical shifts in the 1980s and 1990s, Bob introduced a voice of calm to a sometimes raucous debate and managed to embrace the virtues of conflicting historiographies. As graduate students in his rigorous seminars on Canadian economic history grew to appreciate, Bob was as comfortable discussing Harold Innis's world of fur and fish as he was in exploring the contested landscape of working-class experiences as portrayed by Bryan Palmer and Greg Kealey. Throughout its maturation into a leading journal, *Labour/Le Travail* benefitted from Bob's scholarship, thoughtfulness, integrity and charm.

Bob also served as both vice-president and president of the Committee on Canadian Labour History during its formative years in the 1980s. He moved easily throughout the Canadian Studies world in the United States. For example, he was a regular contributor to the biennial conferences of the Association for Canadian Studies in the United States. During his career he lectured widely in the United States on his areas of research, and he served on numerous editorial boards, including *Labour/Le Travail* and *Maine History*. He received a number of awards in addition to the Corey Prize. Two highlights of his career were a Canadian Studies Senior Fellowship from the Canadian Embassy and the distinguished Alumni Award from the New York State Teachers College in Albany in 1977.

Following the publication of *Gompers in Canada*, Bob turned his attention to an ambitious project on a comparative study of Saint John, New Brunswick and Portland, Maine from the mid-19th century until the post-World War I era. Employing the platform of his general interest in North American economic history, Bob worked assiduously to unpeel the layers of the economies, working classes, capitalists, cultures, and infrastructures of two classic port cities in northeastern North America. Over two decades he published components of his expansive research project in chapters and articles. These included contributions to *Labor History*, "Will You Walk? Yes, We'll Walk! Popular Support for a Street Railway Strike in Portland, Maine" (1994); *New England Quarterly*, "The Decline of Artisan Republicanism in Portland, Maine, 1825–1850" (1990); *Labour/Le Travail*, "Saint John Longshoremen During the Rise of Canada's Winter Port, 1895–1922" (1990); *American Review of Canadian Studies*, "Economic Development in Portland [Me.] and Saint John [N.B.] During the Age of Iron and Steam, 1850–1914" (1979); *Maine Historical Society Quarterly*, "The Rise and Fall of Portland's Waterfront: 1850–1920" (1982); and *Acadiensis*, "The Saint John Street Railwaymen's Strike and Riot, 1914" (1982). Although the major points of the research project were sketched out and presented in initial form in these articles and other book chapters, it is scholarship's loss that the comprehensive study did not reach completion during his lifetime.

His contributions as an educator provided the third significant thread that ran throughout Bob's career. Beginning as a high school teacher, then as a professor at a small liberal arts college, Bob got the opportunity to mentor and train graduate students when he joined the University of Maine. Yet he never lost his passion for teaching undergraduates in introductory and upper-level courses on Canadian history. Bob's seminars on the Northeastern Borderlands, consisting of the Northeastern United States, Quebec, and the Atlantic Region of Canada – often taught with his colleague, Jacques Ferland – constituted a core course for legions of graduate students. Coupled with his other central graduate responsibility of teaching the seminar on the History of Canada and the United States, Bob cemented his role as a senior instructor in the Canadian-American graduate program. He mentored and saw to

completion ten doctoral and six Master's candidates. His Master's students went on to doctoral programs at Canadian and American institutions such as the University of New Brunswick, Queen's University, and Duke University. Many of his doctoral students established careers in Canadian and American schools such as Concordia University, the University of Ottawa, Memorial University, the University of Vermont, and the University of Maine. His graduate students, one of whom is the author of this tribute, knew well how demanding a mentor he was. It is not hyperbole to acknowledge that his students wear their "Babcock survival" badges with pride. A rigorous taskmaster, Bob insisted that his students' scholarship was structured around theoretical themes, soundly based on evidence – and lots of it – and presented in coherent if not elegant prose. Even as I write this piece I can sense his thoughts and imagine the inevitable editorial criticisms. That sense of Bob's guiding presence and high expectations has been a positive, enduring influence on me over the three decades since I graduated.

As is fitting of a retrospective essay designed to highlight the professional endeavors of a colleague, this piece has focused on Bob's manifold scholarly and pedagogical contributions during a career that spanned four decades. I would be remiss, however, if this tribute did not conclude with some words on the core elements that governed Bob's life: his family and faith. Anyone who had the experience of being in Bob's company for even a brief interaction gained a sense of his abiding love of his wife and children. Bob and his wife Rosemary raised six children. He quite appropriately thought of his family as the most important element of his life, and he was one of those fortunate academics who managed to balance his personal life with his professional obligations without sacrificing one for the other. A true intellectual and gifted educator, his compass never moved off his family. It was also obvious to those of us who had the pleasure to study and work with Bob that he was a devout Roman Catholic. His faith readily translated to his abiding dedication to social justice, which was reflected in his scholarship on the struggles of Canada's working people and reinforced by his volunteer work with organizations such as Peace in Central America.

The triad of a loving family, an unswerving faith, and a successful professional career often proves to be an elusive goal for academicians. With extraordinary aplomb and hard work, Bob managed to achieve the three. He lived his final days dividing his time between the cottage that Rosemary and he restored in Birch Harbor and their winter home in Portland. It is fitting that he closed out his days in Portland, one of the cities that occupied so much of his intellectual energy. And true to form, as his family, friends, and colleagues can attest, he maintained his passion for all things Canadian until the end. With this tribute I salute the impact of a genuine scholar and steadfast mentor.

The author thanks Graham Carr and Betsy Beattie for their insightful comments and editorial suggestions.