

# History Department comes of age

**York History students Bea Gonzalez and Robert Castle take an in-depth look at the history of York's History Department.**



*"Behind the features of landscape, behind tools or machinery, behind what appear to be the most formalized written documents, and behind institutions which seem almost entirely detached from their founders, there are men, and it is men that history seeks to grasp. Failing that, it will be at best but an exercise in erudition. The good historian is like the giant of the fairy tale. He knows that wherever he catches the scent of human flesh, there his quarry lies."*  
—York University Calendar 1960-61

As York celebrates its 25th anniversary we are taking the time to reflect on what we do best. In 1960, York had a mere 76 students. Today, with over 40,000 students and a strong academic reputation, York has grown into the third largest university in the country. Within the Faculty of Arts, the Department of History has distinguished itself as the country's leader in both the Canadian and American fields. In this year alone, fifteen major works will be published by members of the Department. The Department's 73 full-time faculty including Glendon and Atkinson, makes it the fifth largest department on the continent. Seven members of the Department belong to one of the most prestigious scholarly associations in the country, the Royal Society of Canada—an achievement unequalled by any other history department in Canada. These are impressive credentials. How did the Department grow from one professor teaching one course to a Department that boasts of the finest collection of historians in several fields?

When the University opened its doors in 1960, History was one of the 11 fields of study offered. Until 1965, the degree was conferred by the University of Toronto, which also appointed the members of the Department. The first course, taught by Edgar McInnis, was a comprehensive survey course of European History. In 1964, just prior to the opening of the Keele

campus, the Department consisted of a little huddle of a very small number of historians—McInnis, John Bruckman and William Kilburn.

The move to the Keele campus in 1965 marked the turning point in the development of the University and the department. At this time, all administrative links with the University of Toronto were severed and York began to develop its own academic and administrative structures. Although York had been in existence for five years, it now faced the momentous task of clearly establishing a plan for its future development. The man chosen to build the new Faculty of Arts and Science was U of T historian John Saywell. As Dean of a Faculty with no established departments and very little personnel, Saywell had to depend on his dynamism and personal contacts to attract the best scholars to York. His role in developing the History Department was a crucial one.

Saywell set out the clear objective of establishing the best Canadian history department in the country emphasizing the modern period and Quebec. Recognizing York's inability to compete with established programmes, in particular that of the University of Toronto, Saywell decided to place the stress on complementing those already in existence. Since Toronto concentrated on traditional political historiography the emphasis at York was placed on the historical genres which emerged after World War II—Quebec history, social, economic and intellectual history.

With these objectives in mind, Saywell set out to recruit the personalities who would set the direction for the development of the Department. On the surface it would appear that the greatest obstacle facing the Department would be the recruiting of recognized scholars to a new university with no reputation. As Saywell points out the drawing power of the Department was that the new professors would be able "to build a department and fashion the curriculum free from everyone else's mistakes." A factor inadvertently working on York's behalf was the existing structure at U of T. For decades Toronto had been the undisputed leader in the study of history but by the mid-sixties they had lost their competitive edge. Their department was conservative, undemocratic, traditional and unwilling to change. These problems were exacerbated by the in-fighting between members of the various historical fields. Moreover, by its very structure, the department of U of T restricted the participation of the younger members in

making the decisions which would shape the direction in which the department was moving.

Many of the first recruits in Canadian History had been students of John Saywell's at Toronto. Recognizing their potential, Saywell was able to convince them of the contribution they could make in setting up a department in a new university. One of these recruits, Paul Stevens, who went on to become Chairman of the Department in 1974, was persuaded into coming to York despite offers from three other universities. Had he gone to a more established university he "would not have the clout to shape the Department." Having established a young, dynamic corps of Canadian historians, Saywell in 1969 was able to lure the up-and-coming Canadian historian, Ramsey Cook, to join the Department.

One of the first decisions of the new Department in 1965 was to separate Canadian and American History into two distinct fields. This ensured that American History would not be taught by second-string Canadian Historians as was the case in other universities. Wishing to stress colonial American History, Joseph Ernst was recruited in 1969. The following year, the Department appointed Gabriel Kolko from the University of Buffalo and Robert Cuff from the University of Rochester. By this time, both had established solid reputations. The appointment of Cuff attests to Saywell's ability to use personal contact in recruiting the best people available. Cuff had been a student of Saywell's at U of T and had gone to Princeton to do his post-graduate work. Prior to his graduation, Saywell contact him and invited him to join the Department. Both agreed, however, that it would be in Cuff's best interests as well as that of the Department's for him to establish a reputation first. Cuff then received an appointment at the University of Rochester where he stayed until he joined York's Department in 1970.

As part of the original 1965 plan, the Department determined to include Modern Far East Asia as one of its major fields of study. Once again this was based on the desire to complement the existing programme at U of T which stressed classical Far East Asian studies. Wanting to maintain the high standards of the Department, Saywell set out to bring one of the top three Chinese historians in the world to York. At the time, Jerome Ch'en was teaching at the University of London. Saywell flew to London to convince Ch'en to join the Department offering him leave and the opportunity

to do research in the Far East. Ch'en joined the Department in 1971, bringing his top student Diana Lary with him. Ch'en's appointment firmly established the Modern Chinese programme as the best in the country.

The appointment of four major historians—Cook, Kolko, Ch'en and John Boshier who joined the Department in 1970 and who specializes in French History—clearly set the intellectual atmosphere that has been maintained in the last 20 years. This atmosphere is based on mutual respect and communication which has prevented the development of barriers which would inhibit interaction between the various fields. This could not help but influence the young cadre of historians—the "Young Turks"—who joined the Department in the late '60s and early '70s. Viv Nelles, York's most recent appointment to the Royal Society, points out that the "people who grew here did so in a scholarly environment" which "had the expansiveness to encourage young people to learn."

The economic crisis, of the early '70s led to a serious underfunding problem which prohibited the Department from making further appointments. This slowing of growth caused the Department to look inward to examine its structures and curriculum. This was the first attempt since 1965 of the Department to reevaluate its role in the university. A committee was struck to examine the structure of the Department and its report stressed that the Department should be "a community embracing professors and students in the pursuit of knowledge according to the principles of a particular discipline." Based on this report, a system of committees was established along with a departmental council made up of both faculty and students. The six committees created at the time were the Executive, Curriculum, Petitions, Planning and services, Advising, and Course Evaluations.

Because of the Department's commitment to instructional excellence at the undergraduate level, top historians have always played a major role in first year courses. In 1973 it had become apparent that the standard of student entering university had declined, chiefly due to the changes in high school curriculum. The department instituted a major reappraisal of its curriculum and determined that significant changes had to be made to first year courses to bring students up to a common standard. This change was in keeping with one of its original objectives which was to develop a curricu-

lum that is coherent, comprehensive, rational, and effective, and fully willing to experiment with new techniques.

Coupled with these growing frustrations of the standards of incoming students, the department had to grapple with other internal difficulties. Morale in the Department, as well as in the university, was low. During this time, at least four members of the department were approached by other universities with job offers. To meet external pressures, the objective of the department now had to change. Instead of concentrating on growth and expansion the Department had to fight to maintain standards and retain its members. At the same time, a debate was raging in the Department as to whether the emphasis would be on teaching or on research. Once again the Department reaffirmed its commitment to both teaching and publishing, arguing that these were not necessarily mutually exclusive. In fact, the publishing capabilities serve to expand the teaching potential of any department. "Any book in a library is a teacher," noted Willard Piepenburg, who has taught at least 11 members of the Department. Piepenburg also noted that any department has the responsibility to train people outside their own university. Judging by the publishing record of York historians, the Department has been successful in fulfilling this role.

The core for research in any department is the establishment of a solid graduate programme that can withstand harsh, critical external appraisal. As a first step, an emphasis was placed on building a very good collection of research materials that graduate students could work with. During the late '60s, York was fortunate for two reasons. First, it had an abundance of money. Secondly, a number of major collections became available. In 1968, York purchased the book collection from the Ducharme Book Store in Montreal making York's the largest collection of French Canadiana outside Quebec. During the same period, 90,000 items of Americana were bought from Paul Stark's collection in Minnesota.

Fields of study offered at the graduate level were Canadian, recent European, 19th and 20th century British, Modern East Asia and American history. Social history was offered as a genre and Victorian Studies was offered in conjunction with the English Department. In 1969, the department felt it was ready to be appraised by external evaluators. The experts from Canada, the US and Great Britain who appraised the programme found it to be of the highest standard. A top assessor from Chicago was especially impressed with the research materials York had gathered in such a short period of time.

In the 1970s demographic indicators showed the student body would decline. At the same time financial resources became progressively limited as well as the number of appointments for graduates. All along the Department maintained its commitment to quality over quantity. Despite its hardships, the graduate programme continued to attract excellent applicants. In 1980, approximately 65% of graduate students came to York with major fellowships.

From 1975 until the early 1980s financial constraints prohibited the department from making any new appointments. Since 1983 nine new appointments have been made to the Department. The most notable of

these is the long-awaited arrival of Fernand Ouellet. Ouellet was first sought after during the late '60s, to meet the departmental objective of emphasizing Quebec History. His appointment signals the culmination of the first phase in the history of the Department. The Department has now assembled what is unquestionable the finest collection of Canadian historians in the world. The drawing power of the Department is so great that Ouellet was willing to give up the Chair of the Department of History at Carleton to come to York.

Has the Department of History met the objectives it set out 20 years ago? "I think we're certainly the best department of Canadian history and arguably the best history department in the country... We have enormous research potential," says John Saywell.

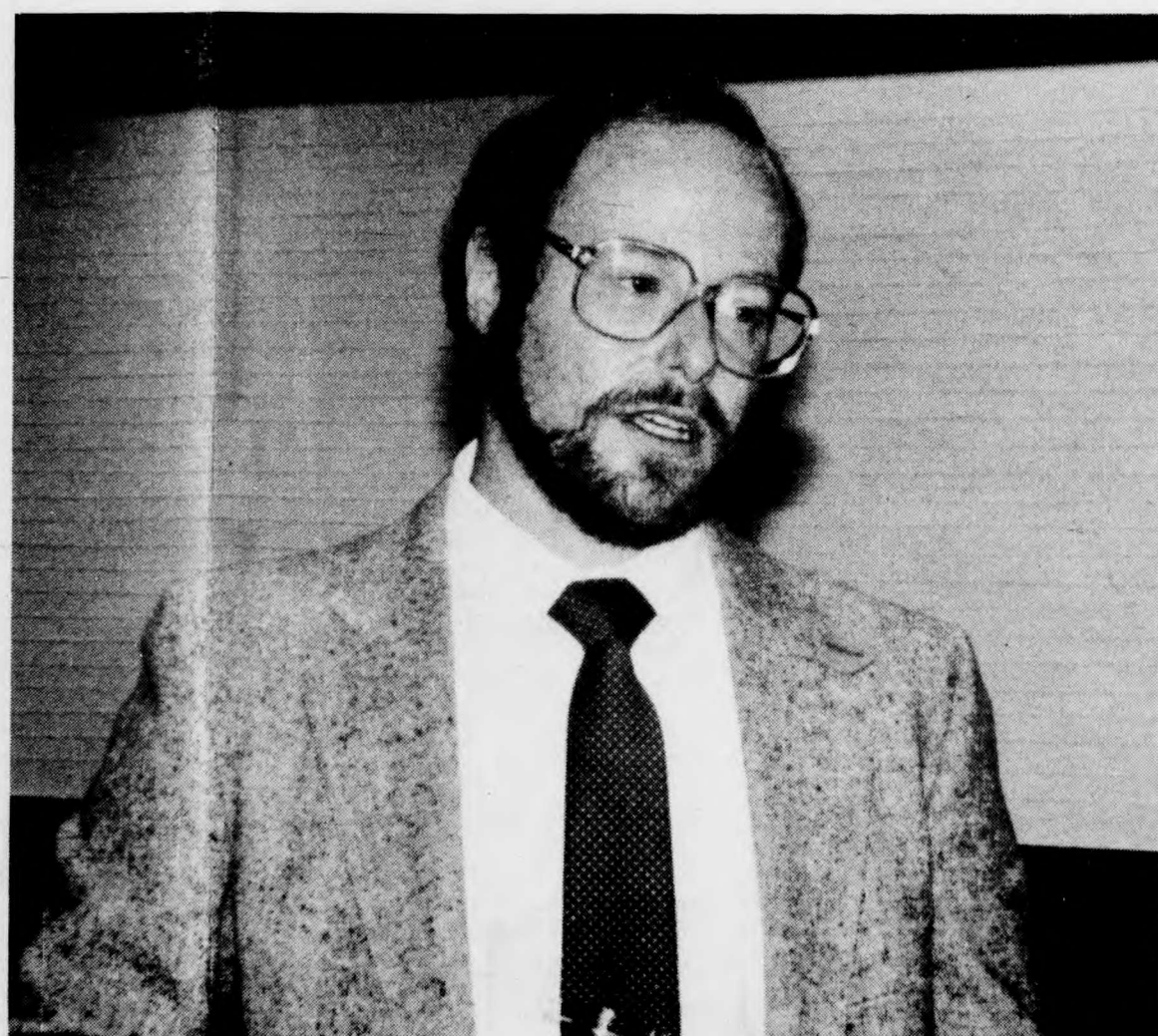
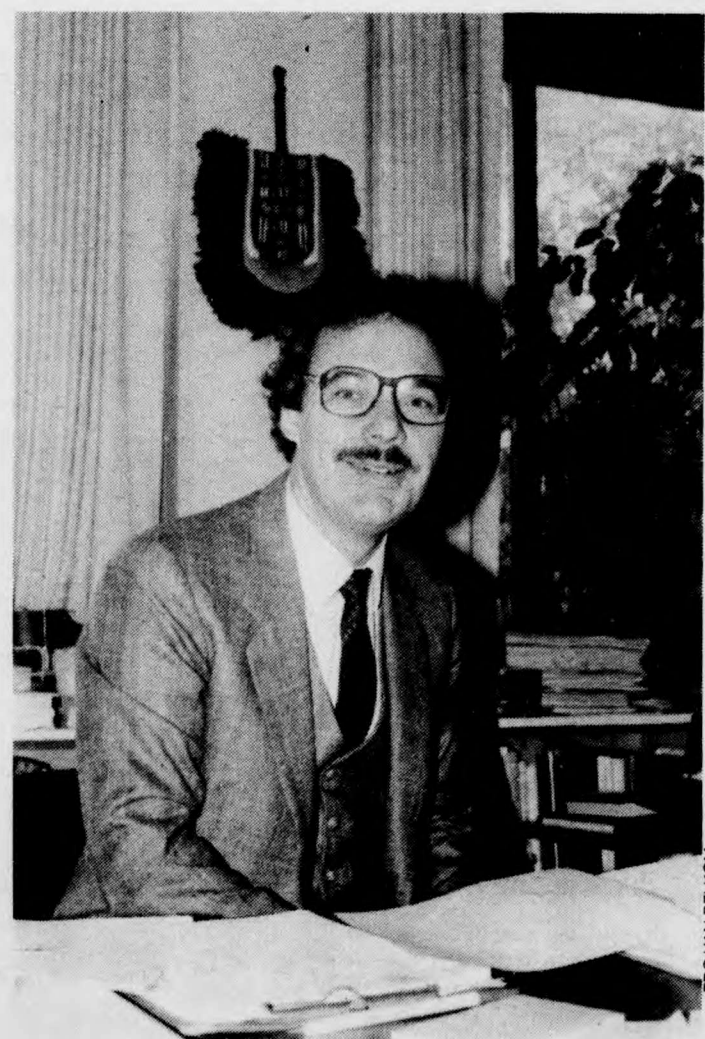
Nelles points out that the potential present in the mid-'60s in the highest-ranking scholars has now been fulfilled. They have continued to produce as they did 20 years ago. To the same degree, the second generation historians have made important contributions in their fields and are now considered amongst the best.

An important point to remember is that 20 years ago many universities were recruiting at the same rate as York and had the same potential but they were not able to create a similar scholarly ethos as the Department at York did. This ethos was one which developed amongst the early senior members. Says Nelles, "The Department is internally driven; it has grown and produced from within." It is this internal self-motivation that has allowed the Department to maintain its outstanding record and distance it from the more lethargic and cumbersome Departments of History in the country. The recent re-appointment of Paul Lovejoy, a well-known African historian, as Chairman is indicative of the progressive nature of the Department. This would be a rare occurrence in most other universities where the Chair is usually drawn from the more traditional areas of study.

As the Department looks to the future a number of potential problems present themselves. A common theme within the Department is the fear that as the Department grows older and senior professors retire, lack of funds will prevent hiring new and vigorous young academics. Within the next 10 years five senior professors will retire. One possible solution suggested by John Saywell would be for the Department to get hold of government grants and research money so that professors could be held until the University has funds of its own. The University itself must realize the necessity of providing proper funding to ensure that History at York remains one of the strongest areas of the University. "It would be sad if the University doesn't see the Department as one of the jewels in its crown," says Saywell.

Another of the problems faced by the Department is its ability to continue to attract students to study history. Many students are choosing to pursue a degree which offers greater potential economic rewards such as economics, computer science, business.

In a short period of 20 years the Department of History has amassed a great collection of scholars and has developed a fine reputation for teaching and research at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. The challenge now facing the Department is whether it can maintain its competitive edge for the next 20 years.



*A veritable cornucopia of history minds. From far left: John Saywell, Paul Lovejoy, Tom Traves, and Willard Piepenburg.*

