

# A Cross-Country Checkup

## A. Universities

Conceived as a pulse-check for medieval studies in Canada, this project found that the pulse is pounding. Universities that had hitherto not replaced retired medievalists now appear to be so doing. Many of us are expanding or developing courses, and especially programs, in medieval studies at the undergraduate level. The evidence provided in these pages is by no means all positive, but for every lament or conclusion that the bleak future will be odd mentions of our field in classes about medievalism or Harry Potter or Arvo Pärt, there appears here a paean of praise to new life and new accomplishments. Sometimes, though surprisingly infrequently, these new accomplishments have to do with integrating our work into the new academic world of cultural studies—especially since, as we all know, cultural studies did not start with the first *Batman* comic. This trend may well accelerate, particularly as we find our balance in this new world of students obsessed by role-playing games, *Lord of the Rings*, and the effects of religious fervour on human endeavour. At the same time, we seem to be standing firm on the traditional courses which anchor our field, with undergraduate program requirements in Latin or in at least two disciplines, and with introductory courses focused on classic medieval themes or centuries.

These reports were all answers to the following set of questions, first sent out in October and re-sent at intervals until the last call in very late March:

You might have received the Call for Submissions for the 2002-2003 issue of *Florilegium*, the journal of the Canadian Society of Medievalists/Société canadienne des médiévistes, in which case you know that the issue is attempting to provide a snapshot picture of medieval studies in Canada at the present moment. I am writing to ask each of you if you would be willing to provide that snapshot picture for your own university/college; that

is, to write a short piece on how medieval studies is taught (or if it is taught) where you are, whether the focus is disciplinary or interdisciplinary; how you and your colleagues engage in research in the field; and generally how medievalists in your vicinity accomplish their work. I'm looking for a sense of who is where, and what individuals and groups are working on, and a sense—whether positive or negative—of how we are practising our vocation across the country. There has been, and seems likely to be in the near future, a lot of upheaval and loss. In my own department, three of four medievalists have been attracted to higher-paying jobs in the States but on the other hand we've attracted a senior scholar to join us; have similar experiences affected your university? Have cutbacks meant that you sneak in a few medieval references in a course on modern fantasy literature, or do you and your colleagues teach focused and intensive courses in specific areas?

If you are willing to write 2-3 pages about the state of medieval studies in your university or college, by 20 January 2003, I'd be very grateful. I'd like to make my final issue of *Florilegium* a clear picture of where we are and where we hope to go in medieval studies in Canada. Please let me know if you can do this; I'm choosing my individuals based on all kinds of complicated criteria so if you can't do it please send me your suggested alternatives at your local institution and I'll correlate your list with mine. I hope, though, that you'll be willing to be involved in this project. This issue of *Florilegium* will go through a modified rapid-review process and will be published in May 2003. jt

Universities unrepresented here failed to respond to repeated requests sent to at least one, usually two to four, faculty members. In many cases, overwork explains the oversight.

In this respect it may be worth noting that medievalists are somewhat over-represented in university administrations across the country. We appear with frequency in the upper echelons, from Alvin Lee, former president of McMaster, to Cynthia Neville, former Associate Dean of Graduate Studies at Dalhousie, to Siân Echard, UBC SSHRC Coordinator. Medievalist department chairs are legion across the country. At the very least, the frequency of the call to administrative service provides junior colleagues with a chance to get some teaching in the field, and at most it means that we influence the hiring and decision-making practices in our universities. Unfortunately, since we all read some moral and ethical philosophy on the way to our

degrees, the evidence for my “at most” scenario is nugatory. Nonetheless, I remain convinced that, like Vitamin C, we are good for the systems of our universities. And, luckily, we are available every day.

There is little representation here from Québec universities. Partly, no doubt, this results from the existence in that province of a separate society for medieval studies, with its own newsletter *Memini*, and with the fine journal *Le moyen français*. Also, there is a different sense of community in francophone universities in Canada, and one that is intriguing, particularly in light of SSHRC’s increasing insistence on large collaborative projects. Humanities research projects appear on university websites in Quebec as sets of large endeavours, with a series of scholars attached to each *centre*, *seminaire*, *projet* or *rapprochement*. In many cases the title for the group is quite vague, intentionally unfocused, so that it is clear that the *projet* is principally a means by which like-minded researchers can get together and embark on projects. An interesting and obviously productive model, this style of umbrella group inside which various projects begin, mature, and result in new projects may well be something the rest of us should look at. Given that only large-scale projects currently appeal to the federal government, we need to find ways to move in that direction without giving up individual research autonomy. After all, if there is a Canada Research Chair who is a medievalist, that person is a well-kept secret. And yet, our research productivity, to use the idiom of the performance indicators, is—judging by these reports—impressive indeed.