

# University of Saskatchewan

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I arrived in Saskatoon in September, not entirely sure what it would be like to do medieval studies in the stubble fields of Saskatchewan. After less than a year at the University of Saskatchewan, I am still not entirely sure, but have benefited greatly from informative chats with kindly colleagues (none of whom, of course, bears any responsibility for the cheerful ignorance here displayed in my opinions). This institution is perhaps better known for its biotech research, its programs in veterinary medicine, or its synchrotron, but being a medievalist here can be a source of some unexpected pleasures.

To find medievalists at the University of Saskatchewan, one ought to look first in the departments of English and History, or in an affiliated institution, St Thomas More College. The amalgamation of smaller departments into administrative miscellanies, a phenomenon familiar in universities across the country, has meant that these smaller departments are often too stretched to support a medievalist; thus, to take an obvious example, there is to my knowledge no specialist currently doing research in medieval French literature in our Department of Languages and Linguistics. However, the centres of medieval gravity here have kept up their strength through some recent hirings, and we have been able to offer a respectable array of courses at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. In my department (English), for example, there are three medievalists among some 32 tenured or tenure-track faculty—not enough to mount a hostile takeover, certainly, but a decent proportion, especially when we add the support of Michael Cichon from St Thomas More. History has been able to rely on Frank Klaassen, Alan Reese, and a sessional lecturer, Sharon Wright, who is currently doing Ph.D. research on women and violence in late medieval England.

And our medievalists have been allowed, perhaps even encouraged, to be a disparate lot. Carl Still (Philosophy, St Thomas More) is working on Aquinas' theory of knowledge and on models of cognition in the thirteenth century, Frank Klaassen (History) on late medieval learned magic. Among literary medievalists, Michael Cichon is a specialist in Welsh literature, Richard Harris in Old Norse, David Parkinson in late medieval Scots. Having done most of my work in the Middle English romances, I am not used to thinking of myself in terms of staid respectability, but here I feel almost canonical. What this diversity means is that we can provide the standard set of core courses in medieval history and literature, but also less predictable courses that reflect the range and variety of medieval studies: a graduate seminar on Icelandic sagas, for example, or an undergraduate course on late medieval Scottish literature, or a history course on "Magic, Science, and Religion before the Scientific Revolution." There are also, of course, opportunities to introduce students to medieval material in more wide-ranging courses; I mention, as an example, an English "foundational" course in the History of the Book, originally developed by Peter Stoicheff and Andrew Taylor.

One of the most significant new developments relating to medieval studies here is the establishment of a four-year undergraduate program in Classical, Medieval, and Renaissance Studies (CMRS). It is to be hoped that the program will offer students the best advantages of interdisciplinarity: an awareness of context, a familiarity with the tools of various disciplines, a facility in the exploration of ideas. There are presently a dozen students in the program. A glance at the CMRS core course, which serves as an introduction to the program, reveals its possibilities: a student might examine constructions of the heroic from Homer to El Cid to Machiavelli, or engage in a project on the history of food in premodern Europe. The more specialised senior courses in the program are similarly varied, allowing students to choose courses so as to concentrate on areas of particular interest, but also encouraging them to range across traditional period and discipline boundaries.

CMRS is also an admirable project for building a scholarly community: this hermitous medievalist has found that it provides fine opportunities to meet and learn from colleagues in related disciplines, and from classicists and Renaissance scholars as well. CMRS colloquia are spectacularly well attended by an encouraging mix of faculty and students at all levels (easily 30-40 on a typical afternoon); wine and munchies before the seminars contribute pleasantly to the atmosphere of good cheer; and topics are wide-ranging and interesting—last fall's lineup began with David Parkinson on

“Fools’ Epitaphs” and ended with Carl Still’s talk on the ways in which Thomas Aquinas was implicated in the Paris Condemnations of 1277. Also encouraging is the support offered to the CMRS program by various departments and colleges; History, for example, funded the purchase of the entire Cranz Microfilm Corpus of Manuscript Catalogues to assist CMRS scholars in their research.

Medievalists here face challenges that are, I am sure, common across the country—one of the most pressing being the need to convince both administrators and students that medieval studies can be valuable to Canadian universities in the twenty-first century. Certainly, Saskatoon is a very long way from the primary sources of our research, and contact with colleagues from better-known institutions outside of Canada may be attended with puzzlement over how to pronounce “Saskatchewan.” But it does not seem to me that medieval studies here is fighting a rearguard action. New developments—new programs, new courses, new faculty—suggest that the potentials may be more important than the problems. (Perhaps the administrators have not yet located us.) There is a small but significantly consistent stream of graduate students working on medieval projects here; undergraduate interest in medieval courses, not just courses in translation but also the “hard-core” courses such as Old English, is steady or rising. The challenge, therefore, will be a matter of how well we can seize the advantageous moments. Synchrotron research, anyone?