

Economic history in Canadian universities: a survey

Prepared for The Future of Economic History: A Canadian Conference

Guelph, 17-19 October 2003

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Acknowledgements: The research for this paper was made possible by funding from the Government of Canada for the Canada Research Chair in Rural History at the University of Guelph. Our thanks also to the department chairs who responded to our request for information. Kris Inwood and Herb Emery offered encouragement and good advice; Kris Inwood's reading of several drafts saved us from some significant errors and greatly helped in other respects. Remaining errors are our responsibility, although we would implicate some university website designers. We would appreciate hearing of corrections and additions.

The call for papers for this conference expressed uncertainty about the future of economic history. Not all who commented on it agreed; indeed they pointed to reasons to be optimistic about the field and its future, or at least not to be pessimistic.<sup>1</sup> Others sensed actual or impending marginalization within the profession, a process that within departments works through priorities in curriculum and in personnel decisions, including promotion and tenure for existing faculty and hiring of new faculty. The concern for those in economics departments who believe that the past matters, that economics requires “moorings”, focuses on the place of history and of time in an abstract, theoretical discipline.<sup>2</sup> The bias to principles is, of course, not peculiar to economics or to any one country: in many social sciences and in the sciences this is standard practice.<sup>3</sup> Even the same textbooks are used everywhere. In history departments, by contrast, the past is central. But the discipline is eclectic in methodology and many historians are actively averse to quantitative approaches and to seeing themselves as social scientists. Hiring faculty and training students with the interests and the skills to do effective, theoretically sophisticated, measurement oriented historical research on issues related to past economies thus cannot be taken for granted.

The aim of this paper is to contribute to the conference’s discussion of the future by documenting the current circumstances of economic history in Canada as represented by course offerings and faculty lists. Although economic history is sometimes done in interdisciplinary programs, business programs, political economy, and disciplines such as geography, demography, sociology, and anthropology, we focused our survey on the websites of history and economics departments across Canada and on related university websites (including timetables and course calendars). We did not attempt to acquire information on other indicators such as enrolments or research grants, which are not systematically documented on public university websites. For some departments and universities gaps and inconsistencies in and among websites make it difficult to get even basic information. Thus it is not always clear whether a specific course is offered and who will teach it; if taught by a sessional instructor, what his or her qualifications and interests are; and if not offered, when it last was.<sup>4</sup> To resolve some of these issues and to be sure we had not missed important information, we summarized the information gathered for each department and sent it with a questionnaire requesting confirmation, amplification, and correction. Errors of detail doubtless remain, and there will almost certainly have been changes since our data were gathered in July and August 2003. Yet because such changes and errors are unlikely to be systematically biased, there is no reason to think that the patterns are fundamentally wrong.

The results of the survey are presented in a table that lists all universities at which we identified at least one economic historian or economic history course. The table lists

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<sup>1</sup> Another perspective is that some problems cannot be solved, and lamenting them can lead to repetitive, ultimately unconstructive discussions, which take time better spent on other concerns.

<sup>2</sup> The term is from Alexander J. Field, “Introduction to the Transaction Edition” in *The Future of Economics*, Alexander J. Field, ed. (New Brunswick and London: Transaction, 1995 [1987]), viii.

<sup>3</sup> Analogous issues arise in the history of economic thought. See *The Future of the History of Economics*, E. Roy Weintraub, ed. (Durham and London: Duke, 2002). We are grateful to Ross Emmett and E. Roy Weintraub for alerting us to this highly relevant collection.

<sup>4</sup> Despite our follow-up questionnaire, we still have not identified who is teaching courses that are offered at some universities.

universities alphabetically, divided into those that offer doctoral degrees in economics and those that do not (Waterloo will shift categories in 2004). This is, to a degree, a distinction by the size of the university. To avoid double-counting, cross-listed courses have been included in the offering department and faculty teaching in both departments are included in the department that appeared to be the main affiliation. For history, the only data presented are on faculty members. For economics, the table records the number of faculty who either report an interest in economic history or teach a course in it; the number of one-semester courses listed,<sup>5</sup> divided between graduate and undergraduate programs; and the number of courses at each level actually offered in either the 2002-3 or 2003-4 academic year. The latter measure appears to offer a clearer indicator of current activity than the listings of courses.<sup>6</sup> Some economics programs told us that they address the past in courses on regional economies and on growth and development, courses that are present and future oriented elsewhere. In such cases, we counted the courses as historical, although that could slightly overstate the number of history courses.<sup>7</sup> Faculty numbers include full- and part-time sessional faculty and emeritus professors who continue to teach or whose names and interests appear on departmental websites. It is possible for a university to have interested faculty but no courses, or to offer courses but not specifically to identify interested faculty members. The data do not identify students now in economics graduate programs who might see themselves as economic historians.

Among the twenty economics departments offering doctoral programs, 13 list (and 11 offer) one or more graduate courses in economic history. Saskatchewan, which offers the MA, lists but currently does not offer graduate courses. In total, the 11 programs offer 18 courses. Some 45 economics undergraduate programs, including all of the departments offering doctoral programs except Laval and UQAM, list history courses. With these exceptions, most of the Canadian universities that do not have courses on their books at all are small, specialized, or affiliated to larger institutions. In total, 37 institutions currently offer 115 courses in economic history. Ten of these departments offer only a single course.

Our list includes more than 80 economics faculty members with an explicit interest in economic history and 20 universities that have at least two in their economics departments. There are particularly large concentrations (4 or more) at British Columbia, Manitoba, McMaster, Queen's, Toronto, and Waterloo. Faculty numbers correlate reasonably with numbers of courses. Counting graduate and undergraduate courses, British Columbia offers 7 courses, Queen's offers 9, and Toronto offers 18. But it is possible to list (and at times offer) a fairly comprehensive program of courses with just 1 faculty member when he or she is able to devote considerable time to the field, as has been or is the case at St. Francis Xavier, Okanagan University College, and Mount Allison.

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<sup>5</sup> Full-year courses, offered at a few universities, thus count as 2. What appear to be equivalent courses offered in both French and English at bilingual institutions are also counted as 2.

<sup>6</sup> To allow for sabbaticals and regular course rotations, the count is number of distinct courses offered over a two-year span. A course offered in both years counts only as one. Unfortunately, it is not always possible to tell when a course not currently offered was last offered; responses to our email survey indicate that some have not been offered for many years.

<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, it is possible that we missed some courses of other kinds that have substantial historical content.

Current offerings range from a one-semester course in Canadian economic history (e.g. Economics 2170, the Economic History of Canada, at Lethbridge) to extensive programs covering many areas and at a number of levels. For example, the University of Western Ontario lists two undergraduate courses in each of Canadian, American, European, North American, international, and world; plus two graduate courses in North American economic history and one in European, for a total of 15 courses.<sup>8</sup> Courses at the University of Toronto include Europe to and since 1750, Canada since 1500 and since Confederation, twentieth-century, and international, along with some thematic and comparative courses. The only graduate course we identified at Toronto, however, is Economics 2704H, Topics in Economic Growth. That is typical of graduate course titles, which tend to the generic, such as Topics in, Seminar in, Issues in, Approaches to, and Research in Economic History (cf Economics 18.761 at University of Manitoba, Approaches, Methodologies and Techniques in Economic History). If non-western economies are covered, it must be largely in international or global courses, offered by about one-third of the 37 departments. Only Victoria and Mount Allison currently offer courses specifically on China or Japan, although York and British Columbia list Asian courses. We did not find any explicitly Latin American, African, or South Asian courses in listings of economics departments. Aside from some courses on early Canadian and American economic history, there are economics courses on the pre-industrial world at only Concordia, Okanagan University College, Waterloo, and Toronto.

From responses to the conference prospectus and the survey, it is clear that economic history is alive in Canadian economics departments. It is part of the undergraduate curriculum at almost all major and many other universities and has a place in the graduate programs of more than half of the doctoral programs in Canada. On the other hand, by the standards of the most extensive curricula, there is scope for substantial expansion in the number and variety of courses even at many of the institutions that do recognize economic history. Whether that will happen is another matter, as there are a number of elements supporting a pessimistic perspective. For example, it is not clear how universally history can be a research focus even in PhD programs in economics that offer courses in the subject. Economic history doctorates have been completed at other universities, and history may be part of research that is classified in some other way. Still, only three, McGill, Manitoba, and Toronto, explicitly mention that economic history is a PhD field. From our survey, universities seem willing to consider historians in competitions for relatively openly defined positions, but nothing suggests that those not offering economic history courses intend to start doing so. And even at those that do, the trend is not always encouraging. Western Ontario, despite the number of courses it offers in economic history, has only one full-time economic historian. Alberta, once a centre of economic history research, lists 7 courses and offers most of them, but now has just one economic historian in economics. Trent, which formerly had several economic historians, still offers a substantial program but with just one instructor. Among those not actually offering courses are Saskatchewan, although it lists 6 courses and the department chair is an economic historian, and Winnipeg, which also has an economic historian in the economics department. McMaster's economic historians include its President and Academic Vice-President and the head of its Labour Studies program; its response to our

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<sup>8</sup> At least one of the graduate courses is listed as being offered with the equivalent undergraduate course.

survey noted that it may make a permanent appointment in economic history but meanwhile it has removed economic history from its list of doctoral fields and relies on one sessional faculty member for its undergraduate offerings in the field.

A number of those identified as interested are not tenured and tenure track faculty. About 1/6<sup>th</sup> of the interested economics faculty are formally retired, including five of the ten at Toronto; two of the four at Queen's; and one or more of those counted at each of Carleton, Western Ontario, Manitoba, and Lakehead. The continuing engagement of a distinguished group of scholars in teaching and research is very much to the profession's advantage; in the long term the crucial test will be when these scholars scale down their commitments. Will their departments hire full-time replacements? Although data on faculty status were not always clear, McMaster's situation is paralleled at Carleton, Concordia, Guelph, and several other departments that rely on sessional faculty for some or even all of their teaching. This is common now in many academic areas, but wherever a field is covered only by sessional appointees it is somewhat insecure; and its attractiveness to young scholars is perhaps weakened by uncertain prospects. Historians are now or recently have been chairs of a considerable number of Canadian departments of economics, but that does not necessarily translate into power to define the terms of new appointments to ensure hiring in history. On the other hand, three of the departments that have lately been chaired by historians (Regina, Queen's, and British Columbia) have made tenure track appointments in economic history. These appear, however, to be the only recently created long term positions in the field. And at Queen's and British Columbia, they represent less than full replacement for retirements and resignations.

In the other discipline we surveyed, history, we found at least as many faculty with an explicit interest in economic history as in economics departments, over 90 in all, in 29 departments. Yet we found so few courses specifically in economic history that it would have had little meaning to include data paralleling those on economics courses. History departments define courses by period or country or theme, and multiple approaches, such as social and economic history, are often specified in a single course description. There is wide variation in the training and intellectual style of history colleagues who declare an interest in economic history, and is not clear how common it is for courses in history departments systematically to aim to develop the kind of theoretical and methodological approach that economist historians take as a basic minimum. Historians such as Catherine Desbarats (McGill) and Michael Huberman (Montréal), who have advanced training in economics, are a tiny minority.<sup>9</sup> The largest concentrations in history departments are at Laval, Montréal, York, and Western Ontario; among them, they account for one-third of the historians. At all the major francophone institutions, in fact, the main teaching of and interest in economic history falls to members of the history department. This also applies at York, despite its three departments of economics (York, Atkinson, and Glendon).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Joy Parr, who like these scholars has advanced training in economics, continues her interest in economic history, but it is not explicitly specified on the Simon Fraser website.

<sup>10</sup> We were uncertain which was the offering department for Glendon's Econ 2680/Hist 2680/Sosc 1680, Modern Economic History: A Canadian Perspective.

In discussing the implications of these data, it is important to remind ourselves that in the Darwinian world of academic life (or perhaps the metaphor should be the academic marketplace) many sub-disciplines and indeed entire subjects cannot take their survival for granted. Although there are institutional elements specific to Canada, the issues raised are not peculiar to the Canadian scene, and many of the researchers in Canada do not work on Canada. What people at this conference share (and with economic historians elsewhere too) is an interest in the subject, and in creating and sustaining frameworks that promote its health. Broadly speaking, the issue is how to foster economic history in multiple settings, and to encourage argument, exchange, and the development of the field.

One part of the answer is necessarily institutional, beginning with appointments, training, recruitment, and retention.<sup>11</sup> Another vital issue is whether there are possibilities and advantages, despite the very substantial institutional and intellectual barriers, to foster more systematic relationships among economic historians in history and economics departments. These seem to consist mainly of occasional, essentially personal, relationships. At individual universities, the possibilities seem to be minimized by the imbalances in numbers evident in the table. At a broader level, the CNEH/RCHE has served as a point of contact, that is as a mailing list and now a website. And it is the framework for organizing these conferences and for giving a voice to economic historians, as when a decision by the Canadian Economics Association put at risk the formal arrangements permitting Canadian participation in international congresses in economic history. Given that approaches differ widely, there may be practical limits to what it can be.<sup>12</sup> Can more be made of it, however, to strengthen informal and formal connections among those who identify themselves as economic historians?

Academic research policy in Canada is a further institutional dimension: granting councils and other agencies (and universities themselves) now seek to foster centers and networks of excellence and to encourage links among disciplines, universities, and countries. Often these have an orientation to what seem to be pressing current issues. An example is SSHRC's recent Initiative on the New Economy (INE), whose definition of "new" embodied a stylized view of the old that many economic historians would not accept. In researching this paper, we were not specifically searching for indications of roles played by economic historians in these networks, centers, and groups. That economic history can be a strategic field in terms of these research policies is, however, suggested by the nomination of economic historians to several Canada Research Chairs based in history departments and by the participation of some economist historians in wider research networks.<sup>13</sup> On the other hand, we found no economist historians linked to some other very large projects relevant to economic history. These include the Canadian Century Research Infrastructure (CCRI) project led by Chad Gaffield (Ottawa)

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<sup>11</sup> Retention refers to the issue of retaining scholars whose interests shift; a variety of examples appeared in our survey of people who once participated in these conferences but no longer identify themselves as economic historians.

<sup>12</sup> Despite the number of economic historians at the University of Manitoba, for example, there have seldom been participants from there in conferences on quantitative methods in Canadian economic history.

<sup>13</sup> The CRCs include Koss (Laval), Lovejoy (York), McNairn (Queen's), and McCalla (Guelph). Simon Fraser has appointed an environmental historian whose work is said to have economic history elements. Carl Mosk is part of a network on migration. We would welcome information on other such participation.

and based at 7 Canadian universities, which aims to produce public use samples from the census for 1911 to 1951, and the York-based Harriet Tubman Resource Centre on the African Diaspora.<sup>14</sup>

These examples bring us to the more fundamental challenges, which are to sustain existing research programs (whose breadth and quality are evident in the papers at this conference) and to build new ones – individual and collective – that have the power to attract the interest and imagination of students and colleagues, including those from outside economic history. The paper deliberately does not try to say what these new programs might be, but the conference can, in the course of both formal and informal discussions. If we want to build network(s) of excellence founded on economic history, or centrally involving it, what would the rationale be? What problématiques would particularly benefit from collective engagement? Which might most usefully draw on the strengths of historians from both history and economics departments? Since the completion of the pre-1926 GNP estimates for Canada, organized at Queen's, has there been anything equivalent? Are there ways to define priorities in economic history research that might encourage individual universities to see it as strategic? What sort of definition would be required for this to happen in an economics department?

Ultimately the issue is not to attempt to reverse deep forces shaping the entire academic enterprise, but to manoeuvre within them. The case has to begin at the intellectual level: what do we do that is really important to the world, and how do we create space to pursue that work? At our most ambitious, we might ask where the next Innises (and Kuznets and Fogels and Norths) might come from. Could they be produced in Canada? Could they find the necessary intellectual context to thrive here? Who would notice? Indeed is it even possible for individual scholars today to make equivalent impacts?

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<sup>14</sup> Another census project, to prepare a public use sample of the 1891 Canadian census, is underway at the University of Guelph (and will be discussed elsewhere at this conference). It too is based in a history department, but it is built on close and explicit cooperation between historians in history and economics departments

Table 1A  
Economic history courses and faculty numbers  
Universities granting economics doctorates

	Economics					History	
	Faculty	courses offered in			courses offered in		Faculty
	N	graduate	02-3 or 03-4	undergrad	02-3 or 03-4	N	
Alberta	1	2	2	5	4	5	
British Columbia	5	2	2	7	5	4	
Calgary	2			1	1	4	
Carleton	4			3	3	2	
Concordia				4	2		
Dalhousie	3			4	2		
Guelph	2	2	1	4	3	2	
Laval						8	
Manitoba	7	2	1	6	4	1	
McGill	3	2	1	9	3	2	
McMaster	4			2	2		
Montréal (including HEC)	3	2	1	2	2	8	
Ottawa	1	2	2	4	4	8	
Québec à Montréal (UQAM)	1	1				5	
Queen's	4	2	2	7	7	3	
Simon Fraser	2	3	2	5	3	2	
Toronto	10	1	1	17	17	3	
Victoria	1	1		4	3	2	
Western Ontario	3	3	3	12	10	6	
York				5		7	
	totals	56	25	18	101	75	72
	institutions represented	17	13	11	18	17	17

number of courses = 1 semester; thus full year = 2

faculty N includes part-time, adjunct, sessional and emeritus

Table 1B

## Economic history courses and faculty numbers

Other universities teaching economic history or with interested researchers

	Economics					History
	Faculty	courses	offered in	courses	offered in	Faculty
	N	graduate	02-3 or 03-4	undergrad	02-3 or 03-4	N
Acadia				2		
Augustana University College	1			2	2	
Bishop's	1			2		
Brandon				4	4	
Brock	2			3	1	
Concordia University College of Alberta				2		
King's College, London Ont				5		
Lakehead	2			1	1	
Laurentian						1
Lethbridge	1			2	1	
Memorial	1			3	2	3
Moncton						3
Mount Allison	1			5	4	
New Brunswick (Fredericton)	1					3
Northern British Columbia				1		
Okanagan University College	1			5	4	1
Prince Edward Island				1	1	
Québec à Chicoutimi				1	1	
Québec à Trois-Rivières						4
Regina	3			4	3	
Royal Military College	1			2	2	
Ryerson				3	3	
Saint Francis Xavier	1			5	1	1
Saint Mary's	1			4	1	
Saint Thomas						2
Saskatchewan	1	2		4		1
Trent	1			4	3	
University College of the Cariboo				3		
University College of the Fraser Valley	1					
Waterloo	4			3	3	1
Wilfrid Laurier	2			3	2	1
Windsor				2	1	
Winnipeg	1			1		3
totals	27	2	0	77	40	24
institutions represented	19	1	0	27	19	12
combined totals	83	27	18	178	115	96
institutions represented	36	14	11	45	37	29
share of universities in 1A	67%	93%	100%	57%	65%	75%

notes follow Table 1A