



CHC EPISODE 13: BECOMING AN HISTORIAN OF CHILDHOOD

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Interview with Stephanie McBride-Schreiner and Kristen McCabe Lashau is available [online](#)

CHILDHOOD: History and Critique (CHC) is a series of interviews, commentary, and happenings in historical studies of childhood by Dr. Patrick J. Ryan, Kings University College at Western University, Canada.

In 2014, I chaired a search committee for a tenure-track position. We received 112 complete applications. Of these about 100 fit the formal qualifications, and over 30 presented profiles that included prizes, awards, and peer-reviewed publications. My records indicate that 49 candidates were ranked by at least one committee member in the top-12 (while 21 were so ranked by two or more members).

In hyper-competitive situations, decision-making begins to feel arbitrary; at best, delicate phrases like “departmental fit” gain a stronger foothold.



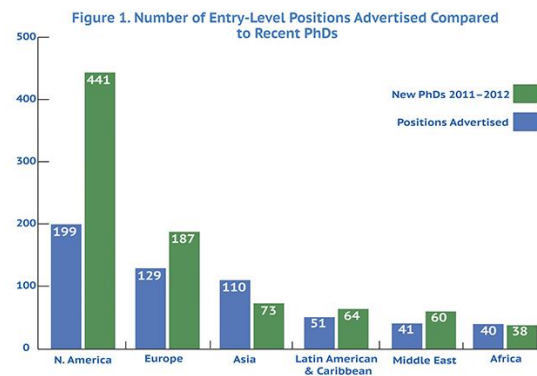
I recall the predictions of the early 1990s. A wave of faculty retirements would open-up career opportunities for younger academics. Things would get better. How long could they remain as they were in 1998 when Columbia’s

Alan Brinkley kindly explained to me that their job-search had been swamped with over 400 applicants?[1] Since then, many have come to the conclusion that the [difficulties](#) facing new PhDs will [persist](#) as long as scholarly [labour](#) is organized as a pyramid of excellence supplied according to an ethos of educational opportunity.

Though varying by state or province, North American funding formulas historically [encouraged institutions](#) to increase graduate enrolment or rewarded them for [producing advanced degrees](#). [2] Student choice, bolstered by various government assistance programs, informed by free, independent [information](#) about [costs and quality](#) remains the American way to regulate enrolment and program

quality. Alternatives to this are not obviously better – at least to me. If we impose limits upon the production of graduate degrees by projecting demands for workers with a given level of training other questions arise. [3] Would such a system respond to change well? Do we want the university be an instrument of the labour market as determined by governmental rationality? How would over-arching metrics value basic (non-instrumental), subversive, or unpopular research programmes in the arts, humanities, and social sciences?

If solutions are not immediately available, there has been a general recognition that graduate education in the humanities deserves re-examination. [4] Completing the doctorate in history usually takes [7 or 8 years](#). But [only half](#) of American graduate students who [pursue](#) it succeed; and, this seems to be an historically high rate of success. For every two new PhDs in history, each year American universities advertise less than one academic position. Unfortunately, it appears that many (about a third) of these full-time positions are limited-term and/or non-tenure-track. [5]

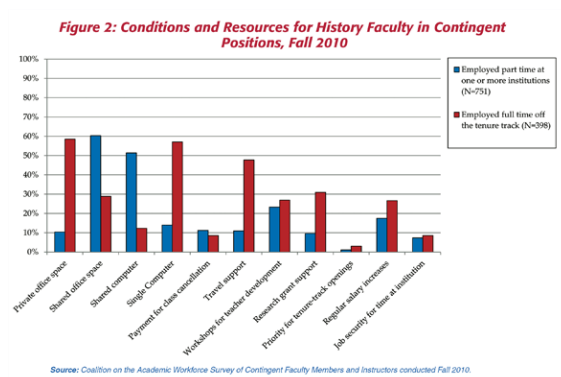


Source: Number of positions advertised includes ads for assistant professors, lecturers/adjuncts, and postdoctoral fellowships, placed with the AHA and H-Net in the academic year 2012–13; from AHA staff tabulations. Number of new PhDs, academic year 2011–12 (most recent year available) from the Survey of Earned Doctorates, National Science Foundation, 2013 (<http://www.nsf.gov/statistics/sed/2012/start.cfm>).



A clear statistical picture has been difficult to assemble, but my guess is that perhaps two or three full-time, tenure-track positions are available for each class of sixteen doctoral students in history.^[6] The odds are lower for the majority of them, because the appointment rate is skewed in favour of the most prestigious programs. There is also tremendous variation by specialization and period. This daunting portrait of full-time and tenure-track employment scarcity frames a set of labour disputes and debates.

Since 1975 the proportion of persons working part-time in American faculties of higher education has swelled from about 23% to about 42%.^[7] According to the U.S. Department of Education, in 2009 three-quarters of the U.S. instructional workforce in higher education was employed in contingent, non-tenure track, often part-time teaching positions. This second figure, lumps everyone together – from graduate students marking papers to emeriti teaching a single class. Statistical snapshots of this messy business make it appear cleaner and more transparent than it is. Those who have worked as a ‘part-timer’ or hired them (I have done both) know the underbelly of a system where ABD and new PhDs teach for years while they attempt to complete their dissertations or book projects with a piecemeal combination of small grants and short-term teaching contracts. For these people class size is large, instructional support is weak, and benefits are scarce. In 2009, about 40% of them reported having no health insurance.^[8]



In a recent report to the AHA, Wood and Townsend emphasized that general unemployment for those who earn doctorates in history is very low – as it is throughout the social sciences and humanities.^[9] Yet, the primary questions are not about whether

someone who holds a masters or doctoral degree in literature, sociology, philosophy, or history can find any job. They are about the teaching load, pay, benefits, security, and likelihood of progression for those occupying the lower levels of the academic hierarchy in the Universities and Colleges where most of us work.

Should students accept a merry-go-round of insecurity to take a stab at the brass ring?

This question underlies the dissatisfaction across North American campuses, and fuels events such as National Adjunct Walkout Day (Feb. 25, 2015), the NLRB’s recent decision to review the rights of graduate assistants to unionize, and a long line of disputes and organizing efforts at places as different as Yale, Southern Illinois University – Carbondale, NYU, Bentley University (Boston), UC-Berkeley, and the University of Toronto.

While union activity, professional organization, and public policy are the means for improving the conditions described above, I wonder how students completing their doctorates in history today view the situation. What implications do these pressures have for an emergent field like the history of childhood and youth? To explore these questions, in March of 2015 I interviewed two students whose academic work seemed strong to me – but with whom I had no previous connection.

Stephanie McBride-Schreiner is a student of Rachel Fuchs and earned her PhD in November of 2014 from Arizona State University’s school of Historical, Philosophical, and Religious studies. Her dissertation was entitled, “Medicalizing Childhood: Pediatrics, Public Health, and Children’s Hospitals in Nineteenth-Century Paris and London.” She is pursuing a career in academic publishing and public education.

Kristen McCabe Lashua will defend her dissertation in April 2015 at the University of Virginia’s Corcoran Department of History. She is working with legal historian Paul Holliday and her dissertation is entitled, “Children at the Birth of Empire, 1600-1760.” She has recently landed a tenure-track position at a small liberal arts college in southern California.



I asked them to situate their doctoral research; I was especially interested in why they came to explore the history of childhood. The stories they tell (of course) are particular, but they share characteristics with other scholars who have appeared on CHC. They emphasized that the “sources” and the experience of archival research was the primary reason why historical questions about children became significant for them.

Stephanie described a movement from a career in organizations advocating for and helping children toward an historical interest in these social policies. Along the way, her focus began to shift toward the people utilizing institutions – including the children. Kristen described having an interest in empire and the Atlantic world, but she found something unexpected: the program of the Virginia Company to bind-out pauper children and youths to colonial households. Paying attention to childhood opened up a set of questions about American settlement, labour, and philanthropy that she had not previously considered.

Stephanie and Kristen do not speak about their research instrumentally – as a career. Nor, did they say their interest in childhood flowed from established structures, programs, or organizations. It was a “journey of discovery” to borrow Stephanie’s phrase. Their work became meaningful as it helped them make sense of the world. It seems to me that narrating our efforts in this way lies at the heart of modern scholarly, artistic, and scientific ethos. Academics might be alienated from some aspects of the educational system, but we personally identify with our research. We are supposed to be icons of DWYL mantra (do what you love) despite the state of things.

[Some](#) have argued that these scholarly sensibilities [explain](#) why adjuncts and part-timers remain in unfavourable relations of labour. It is like being in a bad marriage. By the time new PhDs arrive at the limited-term or part-time teaching juncture, they have [invested](#) so much energy, time, and resources in their journey that heading in a new direction would be like abandoning who they have become.

There is merit to this argument, but it seems a bit over the top to position graduate students and new PhDs as “[indentured servants](#)” labouring under a false consciousness. Some portray them as victims

of an “[academic cult](#)” who need “[de-programming](#).” If this is a fair way to frame the problem – I must be [brain-washed](#) too. Is it foolish to seek a critical distance from a world of governmental techniques and market measures – or – to value the pursuit of knowledge more than material wealth? I know – it is easy for tenured faculty to mouth such lofty thoughts. But, should we attack these [ideals](#) as if they merely justified relations of domination?[\[10\]](#) If seeking work as a labour of love makes one vulnerable to inequity and more willing to endure insecurity, it seems perverse to locate the fault in the bonds of our affections. Are they not the angels of our better natures?

Admittedly, the academy should not be painted as a peaceable kingdom. Stephanie and Kristen have not been hoodwinked by any such imagery. Stephanie indicated that her research experience had a transformative quality, but the University never became a limit to her horizons. This might be partly due to her experience prior to graduate studies, but she credits the [public history program](#) at ASU with helping her develop alternative career paths. She initially thought of these courses as a “safety valve,” but she found the work in museums and in academic publishing stimulating and rewarding.

Kristen addressed the campus conflict and job scarcity directly. It is an emotional trap, she explained, to wear a stigma of failure if you never gain a tenure-track job at a “Research-I” university. These opportunities simply are too few. She also rejected the argument (with its [legal implications](#)) that graduate studies is an apprenticeship that justifies current conditions. Since future returns are unlikely or significantly limited, the demand for programs and institutions to treat students as rights-bearing workers becomes compelling.

Professional associations, universities, and graduate programs are trying to respond to the larger [structural problems](#). Kristen indicated in the years she has been at the University of Virginia, the graduate program substantially reduced enrolment (from the low twenties to around ten per class). [Similar](#) reductions have been [announced](#) at other [schools](#) since the economic collapse of 2008.

For a long time I have hoped for more positive alternatives. Might developing masters programs in history that include teacher certification, broaden



the career options for PhD students who find themselves at a dead-end? Unfortunately, the requirements of teacher certification currently have very little to do with academic training in the scholarly disciplines. A lot rests on the wall separating the two. Even if this changed, a colleague recently reminded me that secondary schools are not exactly begging for more applicants.

These issues do not have easy solutions. Perhaps this is partly because of the complacency of the professoriate. Yet – government spending priorities and demographically-driven [enrolment patterns](#) frame the situation too. We also have conflicting ideas about what the University is supposed to do for people. If you think the global expansion of opportunity in higher education (for which the U.S. provided the model after WWII) remains a praiseworthy project, it will be difficult to celebrate a massive reduction in access to graduate programs in the social sciences and humanities. Some may [respond](#) to the crisis by writing blogs listing [“100 reasons not to go to graduate school.”](#) For others, it will remain difficult to imagine who we might have become, had we not.

Notes:

[i] Between 1998-02, I conducted an aggressive search for positions in American history, social policy, and education — applying for about 50 positions in each annual cycle. Reviewing my records, many the responses I received indicated that the search committee had received over 100 applications – the high was 1,200 reported by the University of Minnesota.

[ii] See Michael S. Teitelbaum, *Falling Behind?: Boom, Bust, and the Global Race for Scientific Talent* (PA: Princeton University Press, 2014): 155-171.

[iii] These issues are complex. See Maresi Nerad and Barbara Evans, eds., *Globalization and Its Impacts on the Quality of PhD Education: Forces and Forms in Doctoral Education Worldwide* (Sense Publishers, 2014).

[iv] Ronald G. Ehrenberg *et al*, *Educating Scholars: Doctoral Education in the Humanities* (Princeton, 2010).

[v] A slightly more favourable estimate is offered by

L. Maren Wood and Robert B. Townsend, [“The Many Careers of History PhDs: A Study of Job Outcomes, Spring 2013.”](#) Even according to them, if around 75% of Ph.D.s land some sort of academic position, only two-thirds of these are in tenure-track 4-year schools. And these figures seem difficult to explain if the production of doctoral degrees in history is double all academic positions in the discipline (including the limited-term appointments). See: <http://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/january-2014/the-2013-jobs-report-number-of-aha-ads-dip-new-experiment-offers-expanded-view>

[vi] You will find vastly varying estimates based upon slight different ways to pose this question. I followed this logic: (1) half of the doctoral students in history never complete the degree; (2) universities provide teaching/research positions for less than half of these; (3) and about 1/3 of these positions are non-tenure track.

[vii] See [John W. Curtis and Saranna Thornton](#), “Here’s the News: Annual Report on the Economic Status of the Profession, 2012-13,” *Academe* (March-April, 2013): 7.

[viii] According to Coalition on the Academic Workforce, [“A Portrait of Part-Time Faculty Members”](#) (June 2012) four out of five part-time temporary faculty had been in this situation for three or more years (over half for six or more years). Also see Robert Townsend, [“Underpaid and Underappreciated: A Portrait of Part-Time Faculty”](#) *Perspectives on History* (Sept 2012).

[ix] I respect Townsend’s and Wood’s expertise in this area, but I have several concerns about “The Many Careers.” First, it is not clear how we should interpret high rates of employment in diverse careers for those who hold the doctorate in history. One might think that a general weakness in the profession creates an environment where many who earn the highest academic qualifications in our discipline have to do whatever they can to get along. We end-up everywhere. Second, I have questions about their data collection methods. A reliance on the AHA directory and social networks online for professional data might bias the sample toward those who are successful and/or trying to stay in the game. Third, the report avoids critical [comparative](#) questions about differential economic outcomes or labour conditions. For talented middle-



class young people in affluent societies there is a choice: sales, business, management, law, social work, medicine, science, scholarship, the arts? [U.S. labour statistics](#) suggest that post-secondary teachers face substantially higher levels of insecurity and lower returns than those who hold [comparably advanced credentials](#). For example, in the years following 2008 the [National Association for Law Placement](#) in the U.S. wrote a series of alarming [reports](#) because “1st-year-out” employment requiring the Bar began a multi-year decline from 75-65 percent. A direct comparison for historians isn’t possible, but one could read Wood’s and Townsend’s data as suggesting that the odds of landing a position practicing law after passing the

Bar (even after the ‘collapse’) remain 30-50% higher in the **first year out** than they are for the **first 10 years out** pursuing a secure academic position in History. The defense that historians have many options outside the academy doesn’t hold water, because the same applies to many professions – especially those holding the JD who have passed the Bar.

[x] Maresi Nerad and Joseph Cerny, “From Rumors to Facts: Career Outcomes of English Ph.D.s,” *Communicator* v. 32 (Fall 1999): 1-11.



Kristen McCabe Lashua completed her doctorate at the University of Virginia’s Corcoran Department of History in May 2015. Her dissertation, “Children at the Birth of Empire, c. 1600-1760,” explored the use of destitute children in the creation of the early British empire. She looks forward to beginning an assistant professorship next Fall with the History and Political Science Department at Vanguard University of Southern California.



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