



Guest editor's introduction: The early years

BY LORNA MARSDEN

Lorna Marsden was president of York University (1997–2007) and has been a distinguished fellow of the Robarts Centre for Canadian Studies since 2019.

Forty years ago, the Robarts Centre for Canadian Studies opened at York University. Since then, much has changed in the country, in the University, and at the Robarts Centre. In this, the first of two issues of *Canada Watch* focused on those 40 years, we invited contributions from York scholars, staff, visitors to the Centre, and former students who were part of this process. President emeritus Ian Macdonald's article describes the origins of the Centre and the reasons behind the first focus on the existential "Canada–Québec" question that preoccupied the country during the 1980s. This subject continues in three contemporary essays looking back at that period.

Another burning issue in the 1980s was the development of an "independent" Canadian culture, independent from US culture. Two York scholars draw some conclusions on changes from then to now.

During these years, the Centre attracted many graduate students and visitors to Canada, all in the context of significant changes at the University. Between 1984 and 2023, undergraduate enrolment increased from 30,000 in 1984 to nearly 50,000 today, and graduate enrolment grew from 3,000 then to well over 6,000 now. To conduct teaching and research, the full-time faculty has risen to close to 2,000, and other faculty, many of whom are publishing scholars, enrich the research community. Research centres and scholarship strengthen the University, and because President Macdonald had the foresight to create an endowment when the Robarts Centre was established, the Centre has been able consistently to take a significant role in the support of scholarly research and writing.

A different focus on relations with Latin America attracted many visitors in this period. A former graduate assistant recalls that period, while one Mexican and two Canadian scholars examine questions in each other's world.

In the late 1990s, a different approach to research organization emerged in Canada and at York. The University's first Vice President for Research and Innovation describes why and how it changed, a theme further developed by the current coordinator, who describes the changes in the Robarts Centre's role at York University.

"Canadian Studies" has changed, the Centre's approach has changed, and two colleagues who have served as directors of the Centre look at those changes in recent times. Finally, journalist Steve Palkin, author of the biography of Premier John Robarts, brings us back to the inspiration of 40 years ago.

All of the contributing authors have a relationship to the Robarts Centre, and I am most grateful to each of them for their thoughtful essays on this anniversary. I hope you will enjoy these contributions to the first of two anniversary issues of *Canada Watch*, and look forward with us to next one. ■