



The graduate student experience at the Robarts Centre

BY MARC FROESE

Marc D. Froese completed a doctorate in the Department of Politics at York University in 2007. He is a professor of political science and the founding director of the International Studies program at Burman University in Lacombe, Alberta.

I was at the Robarts Centre from 2001 to 2007 under the leadership of Daniel Drache and later Seth Feldman. As leading scholars in the multidisciplinary field of Canadian Studies, they agreed that the Centre ought to approach the study of Canada from a global perspective. To understand this country, we need to understand the dynamics of international integration and fragmentation that influence our politics and culture.

“AN OLD-FASHIONED APPRENTICESHIP”

The graduate students who worked at Robarts began on the bottom rung and progressed from coffee runs and photocopying to conference participation and co-authorship. When asked to describe my duties at the Centre by an external evaluator in 2006, I called it “an old-fashioned apprenticeship,” by which I meant that it was a challenging and intellectually rewarding experience. We were learning by doing, and our duties scaled up as we gained competence and confidence.

Under Daniel Drache, who also served as my MA and PhD supervisor, we approached the study of Canada using the mid-century work of Harold Innis (1894–1952) as a touchstone. Innis asked the biggest questions of political economy: how do our economic activities shape our politics, and how do technologies of mass communication shape entire civilizations?

Professor Drache has a talent for drilling down through the big, world-historical puzzles and focusing on their concrete implications for public policy. I worked with him on projects that examined the fast-growing field of international economic law and its impact on Canadian trade policy. In this fertile research environment, my doctoral dissertation became the first academic book published on Canada’s experience with dispute settlement at the World Trade Organization (Froese, 2010).

At the Centre, I made friends and contacts that have lasted for decades, including Laura Taman, our coordinator, and David Clifton, a fellow “apprentice” and a doctoral candidate in the York/TMU Communications and Culture joint graduate program. Dr. Clifton is now a performance measurement specialist with Parks Canada. Given the wide-angle policy focus of the Centre, it is entirely unsurprising that one of us would become an academic while the other moved into the civil service.

ROBARTS GOES WEST

I was recruited by Burman University, a rural, liberal arts college, to develop an International Studies BA program in 2007. More than 3,000 km from Toronto, this tiny university, bordered by fields of wheat and canola, is a world away from York. Yet the program I founded maintains the same analytical and policy-oriented approach that sustains the Robarts Centre.

Burman's International Studies program has come to fully inhabit a uniquely Canadian approach first imagined by Harold Innis. On the edge of the great northern plains, students from the Caribbean and East Africa (not to mention Alberta and Québec) are using Innis's insights in ways he never imagined. Just as students do at the Robarts Centre, our students learn to analyze politics in the liminal spaces between rural and urban, domestic and global, hinterland and metropole.

In my own research I have also carried on this policy-oriented political economy tradition. Like Innis, I increasingly appreciate that this country is not only its world-class cities. It is also a vast (and usually frozen) topography of staples production; it is hybrid identities and Indigenous ways of knowing; and it is a complex network of rivers and lakes upon which people have travelled for thousands of years. The north shapes its people.

RELATIONSHIPS REMAIN

Toward the end of my time at the Centre, I collaborated with Professor Drache on the book *Defiant Publics* (2008), in which we anticipated the disruption of status quo politics by social media. That work became incredibly important 15 years later when we decided to collaborate again.

Our newest book engages with the political economy of rising nationalism. We are living through the apotheosis of social media-driven political engagement, replete with conspiracy theories, hate speech, and the global rise of a profoundly illiberal strain of authoritarian populism. *Has Populism Won? The War on Liberal Democracy* was published by ECW Press in 2022.

Twenty years ago, I understood that a chance to work at the Robarts Centre was an opportunity of enormous value. Today, I see even more clearly that my time at the Centre was not just a moment in an academic career. It has shaped every aspect of my intellectual life—as a teacher, as a researcher, and, most importantly, as a uniquely Canadian student of the global dynamics that shape this country today. ■

REFERENCES

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