



Reflections from the coordinator

BY LAURA TAMAN

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I started working at the Roberts Centre for Canadian Studies as the Centre coordinator in May 2000. The Roberts Centre consisted of a suite of offices with a reception area, meeting room, storage room, and small kitchenette on the second floor of York Lanes. The Kaneff Tower, the current location of the Roberts Centre, did not yet exist. For the first year or two, I worked rather independently with then director Daniel Drache. While there were other research centres in York Lanes, I was not introduced to the coordinators or directors and was completely unaware of the centres' position in the university structure. "Unbelievably," perhaps, it would be a couple of years before I learned that the Roberts Centre was an organized research unit (ORU) under the Vice President of Research and Innovation (VPRI).

"WHAT DOES THE ROBERTS CENTRE DO?"

For many years, if asked, "What does the Roberts Centre do?" I would reply that the focus of the Centre was very much driven by the director's research. An early focus of Centre research and activities with Daniel Drache was "Canada in the World"—what it was to be Canadian in a global context. National and international conferences and publications centred around the public domain, trade and the social deficit, and hemispheric integration.

My first summer, the second of four annual Summer Institutes for Latin American scholars was held and explored themes of exclusion and inclusion in the hemisphere. Over those four years, the Summer Institute hosted scholars from Mexico, Central and South America, the United States, and Spain for one to two weeks on the Keele campus. On the organizational side, it was an "into the deep end" introduction to the position of Centre coordinator, although a recent York graduate, Daniel Martinez, ably assisted me. I will always remember early breakfasts and late dinners with our guests in the Founders College Masters' dining room. Evenings were spent on the patio of the still-missed Cock and Bull Pub.

That first year was also the final year of the original Roberts Chair appointments. Future Roberts Centre director Seth Feldman mounted a year-long series of events on "The Triumph of Canadian Cinema," culminating in the Roberts Lecture delivered in the Nat Taylor Cinema.

AN ORGANIZED RESEARCH UNIT

In 2002, Donna J. Smith, Executive Officer, VPRI began holding regular meetings for the Centre coordinators. These meetings were invaluable. The Office of the VPRI had moved to the second floor of York Lanes, and the very direct relationship between the centres and the VP was at last experienced in practice. Donna's meetings played a key role in connecting the research centres, and the coordinators especially, to the rest of the university. At the meetings, there were presentations from key departments on campus (Finance, Security, Human Resources, University Information Technology, etc.). We were updated on pan-campus policy changes, and we visited many of the new buildings that

were going up on campus. The meetings generated a body of administrative and institutional knowledge for the coordinators. The horizon of the research centres expanded well beyond the second floor of York Lanes as I met many of the coordinators and learned of their centres for the very first time. Phyllis Lepore-Babcock would later join the Office of the VPRI as the junior executive officer. These meetings continued for many years and never ceased to be helpful, even essential.

By 2002, Seth had become Robarts Centre director with Daniel as associate director. The directors held a Research Development Initiative grant on Global Cultural Flows. The Centre supported “Death on a Painted Lake: The Tom Thomson Tragedy,” one of the Great Unsolved Mysteries in Canadian History series, under research director Gregory Klages. The Centre also celebrated the 100th anniversary of the first wireless communication with the Marconi Galaxy in partnership with the University of Bologna.

In 2004, the Centre began administering the Canadian Media Research Consortium (CMRC) Small Research Grants program for the first time. Professor Fred Fletcher (Communication and Culture, and Robarts Executive Committee member) was pivotal in bringing this funding to York to support research in media and communication. The Robarts Centre would administer the CMRC call annually until 2012, providing over \$194,000 in research support to faculty and students in the Joint Program in Communication and Culture. The Centre would be part of York University’s 50th anniversary celebrations with a two-day conference at Glendon College examining “Multiculturalism and Its Discontents.” In 2010, we awarded the first Odessa Prize for the Study of Canada, an undergraduate essay prize for the best essay in a fourth-year course on a topic relevant to the study of Canada.

THE YORK RESEARCH TOWER

In 2008, a second major institutional change occurred as the directors and coordinators began meeting with then Associate Vice President Research David DeWitt to envision a move to the new building under construction at the east end of York Lanes. There was much excitement and discussion around which centres would share floor space, many architectural drawings with distinct visions for each floor’s footprint, and even fights for walled offices (in opposition to open-concept floors). Synergies and collaborations were discussed and hoped for among what would become the 7th-floor neighbours—the CITY Institute, the Israel and Golda Koschitzky Centre for Jewish Studies, the Robarts Centre for Canadian Studies, and two centres no longer with us, the Centre for German and European Studies and the York Centre for International and Security Studies. Our large central “agora” space was envisioned as a site for future collaborations and events. In September 2009, the ORUs moved in to the new York Research Tower, later renamed the Kaneff Tower.

In 2011, Colin Coates became director, focusing on a strategic reconnection with the university community. The Centre undertook a membership drive connecting with faculty members and graduate students who identified as “Canadianists.” Small grants funding in support of conferences and events were first offered and research clusters were established—the first two being the “Nature Culture” and the “Indigenous Peoples and the Environment” research clusters. The research clusters were seen as mechanisms to bring together faculty and students from across the university with an interest in a diverse range of topics important to the study of Canada. The number of research clusters would grow over the years, with the Centre supporting 10 research clusters in 2021.

In 2013, the Annual Robarts Lectures were reintroduced with Professor Bettina Bradbury reflecting upon the key influences on her career in Canadian Studies. In June 2013, the Centre hosted the annual general meeting (AGM) of the International Council for Canadian Studies (ICCS), establishing a relationship that would eventually see the Secretariat of the ICCS move from Ottawa to the Robarts Centre in the fall of 2021. The Centre also introduced the Barbara Godard Prize for the Best Dissertation in Canadian Studies.

In 2014, the first annual, multidisciplinary graduate student conference was organized by Mario D’Agostino (graduate student representative on the Robarts Executive Committee). For many years, the graduate student conference was held in conjunction with the Robarts Lecture, and for that first

year only, it coincided with a special Canadian Studies comedy night at the Underground, where a few brave faculty members tried their hand at turning their areas of research into stand-up comedy routines.

THE CENTRE'S ROLE EVOLVES

This period also saw a subtle shift in the Centre's role, with the Centre increasingly providing administrative support to faculty associates' research grants. The Centre supported research grants and clusters on cultural performance in the Arctic, First Nations and Métis history, environmental history and culture, Indigenous environmental justice, and women in energy research. The Centre was evolving into what Gabrielle Slowey, who would become director in 2015, described as a "hub" on campus for Canadian Studies. The Centre was defined less by the research direction of the director and more by its mission of providing post-award support, including administrative, event planning, and eventually technical and social media coordination, for faculty associates across the university, in addition to Centre-specific programming.

Appointed director in 2021, Jean Michel Montsion has continued to increase the membership base of the Centre with a focus on providing support for research grant applications and administration. The Centre introduced a keynote lecture held in conjunction with the ICCS AGM and new Robarts Lecture formats. Opportunities for ORU collaborations have been explored, and new external connections have been established with the TransCanadian Network, the Centre Canadian Studies at Stockholm University, and the centres for Canadian Studies at Trent and Mount Allison universities.

The Centre has established initiatives to support student connections with Canadian Studies. In 2018, the Robarts Centre Fellows program was established to enrich the experience of undergraduate students engaged in Canadian Studies. In 2022, as research centres continued to explore the best outreach formats in a post-COVID environment, Robarts Connects events were launched as a series of online conversations and mentoring sessions for graduate students. And now, as the Centre looks toward its 40th anniversary, plans are under way for an international summit on the state of Canadian Studies.

A COMMUNITY

What is missing from these reflections? The many people whose paths have crossed with the Robarts Centre over the years, especially the visiting faculty and scholars whom the Centre hosted for a few weeks or many months, some of whom returned year after year. Even before the launch of the Visiting Professorship in Canadian Studies in 2015, the Robarts Centre was a temporary home to scholars from around the world. The Centre has hosted scholars from the University of Western Australia; the Wuhan University of Technology, China; Freie Universität, Berlin; the University of Punjab, India; St. Petersburg State University of Economics and Finance, Russia; the University of Istanbul; Aoyama Gakuin University, Japan; the University of Ljubljana, Slovenia; and the Korea Aerospace University, to name but a few.

There are the graduate students who have worked with the Centre's directors or on Centre projects—Marc Froese, David Clifton, Adam Sneyd, Stacy Nation-Knapper, Emilie Pigeon, Daniel Rück, Erin Yunes, Joanna Pearce, and many others. It is always rewarding to be a part of their journey.

Finally, there are York's research centre coordinators with special remembrance for my fellow 7th-floor coordinators from September 2009, on move-in day—Sara MacDonald (CITY), Merle Lightman (CJS), Gary Galbraith (YCISS), and John Paul Kleiner (CCGES). It was such an exciting time as we moved into a brand-new building dedicated to research. We had visited the site during construction when there was nothing but the building skeleton in place, and now we were setting up the research centres anew.

All these connections have made me incredibly happy that I took notice, in 2000, of a job posting for a centre coordinator at the Robarts Centre for Canadian Studies. ■