



Remembering the Robarts Centre: A training ground, an academic and cultural incubator, and a home

BY CAROLYN PODRUCHNY, JEAN MICHEL MONTSION, AND GABRIELLE SLOWEY

Carolyn Podruchny is a professor in the History Department at York University and is serving as acting director of the Robarts Centre in 2024–25. Jean Michel Montsion is an associate professor in the Canadian Studies program at Glendon College and is the current director of the Robarts Centre. Gabrielle Slowey is an associate professor in the Politics Department at York University and served as director of the Robarts Centre from 2015 to 2021.

Welcome to the second issue of *Canada Watch* devoted to celebrating the 40th anniversary of the Robarts Centre for Canadian Studies. The first issue explored the founding of the Centre, its changing focus over the years, themes that dominated Canadian Studies when the Centre was founded, and how the field has changed over time. This issue celebrates the everyday texture of the Centre and how it has shaped members of its community over the four decades of its existence. We include reflections by students, artists, visiting scholars, and faculty associates. The themes that emerge from these reflections are support, guidance, mentorship, connection, critical reflection, fun, and a place to call home.

We have divided the issue into four sections, with three interludes between them. The first section includes reflections by five people who were students at the Centre. Jaime Yard, who did her PhD in anthropology, was the inaugural winner of the Barbara Godard Prize for the Best Dissertation on the Study of Canada at York, for her study of the changing relationships to nature and place during an economic shift from resource extraction to recreational and retirement real estate investment in British Columbia. Glendon student Rajani Visvanatha reflects on how conducting archival research at the Robarts Centre enriched her degree in French and biology. Erin Yunes, while pursuing a PhD in visual culture and art history, benefited from working with Inuit artists through the Mobilizing Inuit Cultural Heritage (MICH) project and collaborating on the Robarts Executive Committee and Borealis Council. Christopher Hendershot also worked with MICH while doing his PhD in politics and security studies. He was able to apply the skills he learned to a career in project management and grant administration. While an MA student, Audrey Kwan made many connections as a graduate assistant to the Centre, which enriched her academic experience. This section is followed by our first interlude, which celebrates the poetry of PhD student Jesse Thistle, the winner of the Odessa Prize for the Study of Canada while an undergraduate student at York.

In the second section, on artists, June Pak reflects on the creation of the stunning mural *The Geography of Modernity*, which has been on display in the Robarts Centre for more than 20 years. Lori-Ann

Bellissimo, creator of another iconic piece of art in the Robarts Centre, *Polar-Perfect-Past-A-Roid*, discusses her inspiration from a trip to Iqaluit. Our second interlude displays moving images of chairs created by Health and Society professor and Robarts faculty associate Megan Davies, who curated a collection of chairs for her show, *COVID in the House of Old*.

The third and fourth sections contain reflections by professors connected with the Robarts Centre. The third section highlights the experiences of visiting scholars. Shilpa Bhat, from Gujarat, India, used her time at the Robarts Centre to study the archives of M. G. Vassanji. She cites the professional and personal connections made during that visit that helped further her scholarship both within and outside Canadian Studies. Junichi Miyazawa, from Tokyo, Japan, who was studying Glenn Gould and Marshall McLuhan, found the same kind of academic enrichment by immersing himself in a Canadian academic context, which has richly contributed to his scholarship of Canada. Our final interlude, composed by three current and former directors of the Robarts Centre, offers some lighthearted verses on the happenings of the Robarts Centre.

The fourth section presents reflections by faculty associates. Christina Hoicka, now at the University of Victoria, looks back at her time at York and characterizes the Robarts Centre as an incubator of gender diversity in energy research, which allowed her to develop the Women and Inclusivity in Sustainable Energy Research (WISER) network. Deborah McGregor, now at the University of Calgary, calls the Robarts Centre a “home away from home,” where she found a safe space to develop her research program on Indigenous environmental justice.

What emerges from the retrospection of the issue is an appreciation for the myriad ways in which the Robarts Centre has acted and continues to act as a training ground for students, as an academic and cultural incubator highlighting the incredible talents of its associates and innovative explorations of Canada, and as a home away from home where scholars find safe spaces to pursue their academic interests and build connections. The reflections provide glimpses of past and current projects of the Centre, including MICH, MISHI (Manitoulin Island Summer Historical Institute), and WISER. They also recognize the people who provided support, including the late Barbara Godard, Jody Berland, Anna Hudson, Dawn Bazley, Lorna Marsden, Leslie Sanders, and Colin Coates, to name only a few. But the person who is remembered the most fondly as the backbone of the Centre is our heroic coordinator, Laura Taman, the brightest flame in the Centre’s history. ■