

Mary MacKinnon (1959-2010)

*Professor Mary MacKinnon, died of cancer in August 2010 after a nine-month battle with the disease. At the session held in her honour at the Canadian Economics Association meetings in Ottawa, Friday, June 3, 2011, Professor **Christopher Minns** of the London School of Economics provided the following appreciation. Professor **George Boyer** of Cornell University then presented a paper in her honour, one that followed up on work Mary did early in her career on the English Poor Laws. Link from here to Prof. Boyer's [text](#).*

Mary received her BA (Honours) in Economics from Queen's, and then continued her studies at Nuffield College, Oxford, where she received her D.Phil. At Oxford she was part of the "golden generation" of economic historians advised by Nick Crafts in the 1980s.

After Oxford, Mary taught at Queen's for five years before joining McGill in 1989, where she became an institution. At McGill, Mary established a reputation as an excellent teacher and a fine colleague both within the Economics Department and more widely. One of Mary's largest contributions to McGill was the term she served as Associate Dean of Arts between 2006 and 2009. Mary was heavily involved in the physical refurbishment of facilities in the faculty, sometimes referring to herself as the "Dean of Space." The tasks associated with "deaning," as Mary put it, were always time consuming, often difficult, and could be extremely frustrating. It was a job, however, that did bring the satisfaction of improving work and study conditions for students and faculty alike. The results of Mary's efforts will have a lasting legacy in the Faculty of Arts in the years to come.

Mary was one of Canada's leading economic historians and an important figure in the discipline worldwide. She wrote an outstanding D.Phil on the English Poor Law, which was awarded the EHA Gerschenkron prize for best PhD dissertation on a non-North American topic. Many in this room will know her at least as well for her contributions to Canadian economic history. She was the author of numerous publications in the leading journals in our discipline. These writings bring important insight to the operation of historical labour markets, and role of policy. In addition to poor relief, Mary's research uncovered new evidence on historical wages and prices in Canada, unemployment in the 1920s and 30s, the economics of migrant adjustment and destination choice, and, latterly, the emergence of schooling in frontier societies.

Mary's writings touched on many major areas of historical understanding. How rich (and how poor) were people in the late 19 and early 20th centuries? How did economic policy, migration, and human capital shape the economic differences within societies? These are the big questions that motivated Mary, but she also understood the importance of what she liked to call the "nuts and bolts" of historical research. A good economic historian writes about the forest, but has to spend some time amongst the trees to understand how it came to be there in the first place. In working with Mary, I was continually reminded of the importance of knowing the details that would allow us to successfully write about the big picture.

In addition to her outstanding scholarship, Mary had presence. At major international conferences, Mary was there. At smaller, more informal meetings such as the CNEH (Canadian Network for Economic History), Mary was also there. You would often hear Mary before you saw her, especially if she was laughing. Mary liked to ask questions, and she knew how to make her questions helpful. She was direct, constructive, and practical. One thing I particularly remember is that she would often choose

to attend sessions of younger, less confident scholars, thinking there might be few others there to ask questions and generally encourage them in their research. Many of us in this room have been beneficiaries throughout our careers.

For me, Mary was a colleague, co-author, mentor, and friend. I met Mary at the first academic conference I ever attended, the CNEH meeting in Kananaskis in 1999. A year later I joined McGill on a two year post-doctoral fellowship based in the economics department. In my first term at McGill conversations with Mary were mostly limited to a typically direct and practical question: “have you finished your thesis yet?” In September the answer was “no,” but by January the thesis was submitted, and we then began to work together on a project with Alan Green. Many more projects were soon to follow.

When I first arrived in Montreal, I thought I knew what it took to be a successful academic. My dissertation research had gone well, I was lucky enough to have had some early success with journal submissions, and I enjoyed teaching tutorials as a graduate student. It turned out that I was wrong – I knew nothing. I have learnt more about how to do my job from Mary than from anyone else. Through demonstration, I learnt how an economic historian goes about their work. At McGill, I began to learn how to deal with student issues. Mary and I had several discussions about the word “fair” - what it might mean to students, and what it might mean to us. I also learnt that a lot of what academics spend time worrying about really isn’t worth the time. Mary often liked to say “what’s the worst that could happen?” In our profession, we are fortunate that the answer tends to be “not much.” When dealing with difficult situations with colleagues or students, I often ask myself “what would Mary do?” The answer to this question has rarely, if ever, led me astray.

The most important thing I learnt from Mary is that being an economist, and especially being an economic historian, is fun.

Mary loved research. Not all days bring cutting new insight, but usually you can learn something new about how labour markets worked in the past. Or at least realize that there was something we really needed to figure out the next day. Mary's love of research was perhaps best exemplified in the last project we worked on in the spring of 2010, where with Kris Inwood we wrote a paper for last year's CEA, soon to appear in an edited volume at McGill-Queen's Press. Mary said that chemotherapy made her brain feel "fuzzy," but as ever, her contribution was clear thinking about the important questions, concern that we get the facts of history right, and most of all, genuine intellectual enthusiasm. We miss her, but Mary's contributions to the academic community will continue through what we have all learnt from her.