

**CSCH Presidential Address 2002**

**Adjusting the Sails:  
Reflections of an Independent Scholar**

MARILYN FÄRDIG WHITELEY

---

Last November I went to Ottawa and attended the meeting of the Humanities and Social Sciences Federation of Canada. Time after time the group's attention was brought back to one central concern: the current demographic shift, and the need it will bring for a large number of university teachers. From where will they come? This raised a second question: how many will come from the "lost generation" of scholars who received their education during a time when there were practically no academic positions available in Canada? Some of these have retained a marginal place in academia; others are developing careers in fields related to their academic training; still others have gone into completely new areas; and a few have sought ways to market their expertise independently.

I found this question very interesting, both when I looked back at my own experience, and when I considered the situation of my older son, a member of that "lost generation" in another academic field. Yet through this discussion and most others at the meeting, I did not feel very free to participate. It was not because I was not welcomed: I was. And it was not because I wasn't our society's official representative, although I was there only because Gary Miedema had a scheduling conflict. It was because I felt like an outsider. I am not an academic, not even a recently retired academic.

*Historical Papers 2002: Canadian Society of Church History*

The meeting sent things whirling around in my mind, and I want to reflect with you on some of them today.

That “lost generation” of potential academics is only a conspicuous example of a much more general situation in society today. Consider this: Is the journey of your life following the course you intended to take once you passed the stage of wanting to be a movie star or a hockey player? For many of us, plans have changed. For some of us, actual careers have changed, and in fact it is common for people today to have, not only a number of different jobs, but different careers during their lifetimes. Partly, of course, this is due to the tremendous pace of change in our world. Even for the younger ones among you, there are many jobs today that simply didn’t exist the first time somebody asked, “And what do you want to be when you grow up?” There are also complex market factors, and family circumstances, and personal changes and growth. You have adjusted and are adjusting to this. In some cases you consciously made decisions. In other cases, if you are like me, you have come to recognize decisions that you had already made.

In today’s world all of us are adjusting, but I want to focus on one of the more radical adjustments, that of the independent scholar. As a definition, I give a statement of the National Coalition of Independent Scholars (NCIS): independent scholars are those “whose research, unlike that of full-time faculty, is not supported by an institution.” They are people who “are actively carrying out work of scholarly merit.”<sup>1</sup> Of course many people doing this do not think of themselves as independent scholars, and probably a good number have never even hear the term, but whatever they call themselves, these are the people on whom I shall focus.

The full quotation of the practical wisdom to which I allude in my title is this: “You cannot change the wind – but you can adjust the sails.” First, as text, I shall outline my own experience – how I adjusted the sails and journeyed where I never intended to go. Next I will look at what it means to be an independent scholar, the advantages and the difficulties. Then I wish to speak to you as individuals, wherever you stand along the continuum from independent scholars to fully tenured faculty and beyond. And finally I want to suggest what role the Canadian Society of Church History can play in the lives of independent scholars. From my own experience, I believe that this role can be a vital one.

In September of 1954, I set forth for Oberlin College, in Ohio, intending to earn a Bachelor of Arts degree and then perhaps a Bachelor of Music Education degree. During the next two and a half years I learned two

very important things. First, while my rather middling musical talent might have sufficed, I lacked the consuming passion for music of many of my conservatory classmates. This negative realization was more than balanced, however, by my discovery of all sorts of unanticipated fascinations, especially the academic study of religion. So it was that part way through my third year, I became a religion major.

This worried my parents because it was not a practical choice, and they had married during the depths of the Great Depression. I was able to stave off their immediate panic, however, because I received a Woodrow Wilson Foundation Fellowship for my first year of graduate work. That was a time not unlike the present in this respect: a need for university teachers was forecast. The fellowships were designed for those who were willing to consider going into college teaching. I needed no encouragement because that had quickly become my dream, and it looked as though this generous aid might make it possible.

In September of 1958 I arrived in New York City, to study in the combined M.A. program of Union Theological Seminary and Columbia University. What a stimulating environment it was! My major was church history, and in June I returned home to write my thesis. At the end of the summer I travelled to New York to hand it in, and to take the required exam.

But I am ahead of myself. In the spring of 1959 I knew that, when fall came, I would need a job, and I hunted. Finally I was hired, though not to teach. I became Director of Student Religious Life, at Randolph-Macon Woman's College in Lynchburg, Virginia. They wanted someone to serve in an interim position, and that suited me because I had become engaged to an Oberlin classmate. And so it was that this Yankee spent a year in the South during the height of civil rights movement.

But during the year, that Oberlin fellow and I disengaged, and again I needed a job. Again there were no prospects for teaching, again I found a position in campus ministry, this time at the Wesley Foundation at the University of Minnesota, in Minneapolis. Two noteworthy things happened during that year. First, I met an interesting graduate student in engineering, from Canada. And I realized that the parts of my job about which I felt most positive were those most akin to teaching. I did something that still amazes me, and took charge of my life. I saw that I wasn't going to be able to teach without another degree, so in September of 1961 headed back to graduate school.

I had few savings and no financial aid; furthermore teaching assistantships were virtually unknown in that time and place. My parents were able to help me a bit, and I got a job. By the end of three years I had finished the research for my dissertation, and felt it was time to leave New York and go to work. The Woodrow Wilson Foundation had instituted an internship program in which it placed former Fellows mostly in predominantly black colleges in the South, and so it was that this *white* Yankee spent two years in the black environment of Bennett College in Greensboro, North Carolina in the mid-1960s. It was an amazing cultural experience, and it also confirmed in my mind the choice I had made. I loved teaching! And in that particular setting I also felt that I was doing something worthwhile. I had no desire for a more prestigious position, and would happily have remained.

I would have remained, that is, if I had not agreed to marry that Canadian engineer. Hugh and I married in August of 1966, and two days later I was a landed immigrant, living in Guelph. Hugh was very supportive of my teaching, and he made the initial contact with universities in the area. For three years I taught in the religious studies department of what was then Waterloo Lutheran University, two years part-time and one year full-time. The latter was a very busy year: before it ended, I defended my dissertation and produced our first son. But this was a time when core curricula were under fire, and at the end of that year, WLU discontinued the religious studies requirement; enrollments declined, and a sessional lecturer was no longer needed. For a number of years after that, I taught one or two semester courses per year in humanities at the University of Guelph until that, too, was finally affected by the fortunes of the university department that had been hiring me.

It was then that I realized I needed to adjust the sail. I wanted to do research and writing, in church history, but not in the field of *early* church history in which I was trained. I needed some retraining, but I'd had enough of taking classes. So I went to the United Church of Canada archives, and bravely asked whether there was anything I could do as a volunteer. I was a perfect candidate for the chief archivist's pet project, so I began going into Toronto one day a week to work and to learn. Soon I was being paid, and eventually I was working three days a week. I found it satisfying to be doing something useful and at the same time to learn informally through the material with which I was working and especially through contact with the knowledgeable staff. After about seven years I made my choice of research areas, or rather I realized that I had chosen. I began to spend part of my time

at the archives doing my own research, and in 1987 I presented my very first paper, at a meeting of the Canadian Methodist Historical Society. A year later I gave a paper to the Canadian Society of Church History.

By 1990, the United Church was experiencing financial pressure, and the archives had no money to spend on a project outside the regular mandate of archives, and so after twelve years I no longer had a job. I was distressed by this, but at the same time – much as I hated to admit it – I realized that it was good for me. I needed to leave my comfortable situation and devote more of my time, *all* of my time, to my own work. And so, dragging my heels and shedding some tears, I was pushed into the future. Before long but with considerable timidity, I ordered business cards that proclaimed: “Marilyn Färdig Whiteley, Independent Scholar, Church History/Women’s History.”

Several “winds” had brought me finally to become a somewhat reluctant independent scholar. One was the employment situation in the discipline. While many denominational colleges had a long heritage of teaching religious knowledge as well as religious values to their students, the modern field of religious studies blossomed with the burgeoning interest in the church in the 1950s. Not only was it widely taught in “secular” independent colleges and universities in the United States, but it even appeared in curricula of some state-supported institutions. Nevertheless it was a “low numbers” field. Some people like me took graduate training in the area, but the pool of potential faculty members was greatly increased by men (and I use the term in its exclusive sense) who were disaffected with parish ministry. Thus even in a period when universities were competing vigorously for faculty members in many disciplines, in my area there was no shortage of candidates. Some of you have ridden the crest of the wave and others have been in the trough, but all of us are affected by shifts in supply and demand.

Another factor was significant at the time I was attempting to enter the work force: I am a woman. In the United States there were men’s colleges; their faculties were almost entirely male. There were coeducational schools; their faculties were predominantly, often overwhelmingly, male. And there were women’s colleges; their faculties were mixed in differing proportions. The job prospects of a woman were not bright. That situation gradually improved, but by then I was bound to a geographic location by family connections and responsibilities, and I was not “modern” enough to consider setting up a second home and commuting between the two.

The demographic factor continues to affect the employment situation while gender has declined as an issue. There is one more aspect of my story which I hope is archaic, but which I must mention. That is mentoring. Once I reached graduate school, I had none. In the doctoral program, my main contact was one interview each semester with a member of the joint degree committee. It lasted possibly as much as five minutes; at that time my registration forms received the necessary signature. That was all. When my dissertation topic was approved, it was apparent that no one either in Union Seminary or on the joint committee was an appropriate advisor, and I was sent to ask a medieval philosopher at Columbia if he would take me on. He agreed. I had already audited one of his courses, and I audited a second, but aside from that my only other contact with him was that I went to see him as I prepared to leave New York to begin teaching. I asked whether he wanted to see my writing chapter by chapter or all at once. He said all at once. Several years later I mailed him the completed dissertation. I guess he read it, and it got passed on to the other committee members. One of them suggested a revision to one paragraph. That is the extent of my mentoring as a graduate student. I never tried to publish my dissertation or even to coax an article out of it. To be honest, I don't think I even knew that people did that! I had no knowledge of academic societies; I had little knowledge and felt less support regarding job searches. And then I came to Canada where I knew no one besides that engineer, and had no academic contacts at all. That is another of the winds that brought me where I am.

All of you have adjusted your sails to the winds of change that are so strong today. You have made changes, you are considering changes. Some of you in university positions are probably working to the point of exhaustion, and you may wonder what would it be like to be an independent scholar. Others, on the margins and wondering what to do to get in, may fear the fate of the independent scholar. Some of you have moved into administration, some are in the pastorate, some are working in unrelated areas, yet trying to pursue interests and use expertise in religious history. What might it mean to identify yourself as an independent scholar? And perhaps those who are retired might consider themselves promoted to independent scholarship! So let us look at independent scholars, the advantages they enjoy and the challenges they face.

Certainly life as an independent scholar has its rewards. How many of you have envied me my time to "do what you want"? I am privileged, and my experience is not the norm for independent scholars. Yet there are those

working part or even full-time outside of teaching who find time and energy to do research and writing that they were not able to do under the pressures of teaching and committee work. I also have the flexibility to do research when and where the need calls me, and I am blessed with a wonderfully supportive husband. I have been free to accept an occasional invitation to travel along an interesting side-channel, off the main course of my research, presenting my work at sometimes rather odd but always stimulating meetings. These are opportunities that most of you in academic positions could ill afford to pursue, and indeed they might do little to enhance the credentials you must forward from time to time to the appropriate committees, yet they have enriched my experience.

Independent scholars also have challenges. Those who are combining scholarship in one field with work in another have the obvious problems of distributing their time and energy, while any who seek self-support have difficulties which I can only acknowledge; I cannot claim to have found a solution. Besides the general challenge of seeking sponsorship for scholarly work, independent scholars may run into two specific difficulties. One is that some granting agencies only consider the applications of those with academic affiliation. The other is that some grants are made in lieu of salary, and if one has no salaried position from which one would be taking leave, it becomes very difficult to present a compelling grant proposal. These are both questions which NCIS has recognized as major issues.

There are other practical matters even if one discounts the financial challenges. Access to resources is a significant problem, and this is another area of concern tackled by NCIS. Scholars need borrowing privileges at libraries, and interlibrary loan service. A valid Victoria University staff library card is one of my precious possessions, but it's probably better if you don't ask how it is that I have it! Friends outside the field wonder whether I can't do most of my research on the internet now. You know the answer to that; if the types of primary sources that I use ever become available electronically, it will be long after I have finally shut down my computer! There is now fine bibliographic information available to anyone who has an internet connection, but a number of more specialized resources available on-line and in university library systems are password-protected and are unavailable or prohibitively expensive to unaffiliated individuals.

There are also internal challenges. For me, the problem of identity was daunting. In fact, I found that to be the most difficult thing about leaving the archives. I no longer had a peg on which to hang my identity, both how I

perceived myself and how others perceived me. There is often no explanatory line on my name-tag, nothing that provides strangers with an adequate label for me.

Related to this problem is the challenge of defining success. In a talk at the Western Association of Women Historians, independent scholar Karen Offen stated that the criteria of success have largely been defined by men, and few women have been able to meet them. Instead, they must develop their own criteria. She continued, "It's a question of saying: I'm not the crazy one, they are. It's a question of trusting your own gut, of achieving some sense of inner direction, of retaining some sense of the wholeness of life, of balance."<sup>2</sup> That is what all independent scholars, men as well as women, must do.

Connection with others in the field can be a scarce resource for independent scholars. I recognize that those of you who are teaching may lack colleagues who share your interests and concerns. Even if you are fortunate enough to find compatible colleagues, you have little time for intellectual intercourse with them. I am also fully aware from experience as well as hearsay that universities are not utopian communities. Nevertheless you have much more opportunity for connection than someone who has *no* colleagues. Even those students who are often the bane of your existence may sometimes stimulate you by their provocative questions or by the sheer magnitude of the task of getting them to comprehend your ideas!

Finally, there is the independent scholar's problem of mustering energy and using time. As much as I can, I try to spend my days as if I were working for pay, outside the home, but the world considers me to be at leisure, a potential doer of many good and useful things. When the kitchen is in chaos and the cupboard is bare, it is hard to justify sitting with a book or at the computer. No promotion and tenure committee is going to look at my CV. I have found it useful to take on small assignments because, for me, nothing stimulates action like a deadline. So I have submitted paper proposals and accept requests for pieces of writing, knowing that such activities deflect my time and energy from larger projects.

From time to time the big question intrudes, and now that I am officially of retirement age it raises its head more often: why bother to keep working? Then I remind myself of something Frederick Buechner has written, that God calls us to vocation, to the crossroads where "your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."<sup>3</sup> Admittedly, when I am



rejected the world does not seem very hungry, but mostly I persist in my “deep gladness.”

Now I offer a few words to you as individuals. First I would speak to those who are following non-traditional paths whether by choice or by circumstance, and to those who are considering doing so, or recognize that they may be forced to do so. I cannot tell you how to make a living, but I can reinforce what I hope you already know: as an independent scholar (whether or not you take on that title), the work you can do is valuable, and it will be valued on its own merits, and not by the pedigree of an academic position. Of that I am convinced.

For your information, I pass on the address of the National Coalition of Independent Scholars: <http://www.ncis.org>. Though it is based in the United States and some of its initiatives are focussed there, it has a number of Canadian members, and the organization will be holding a conference at Simon Fraser University in October 2002. The group is working on issues of real concern, and it deserves your attention.

Of course you already know to call on friends and acquaintances, but I wish to underscore this. Although I was doing research and writing at the time that the Canadian Learned met in Guelph, I didn't attend because I hadn't the slightest knowledge of how to become connected. Later I asked Phyllis Airhart, I believe, and became a member of the CSCH. Friends told me I should meet women's historian Alison Prentice, but it took me several years to screw up my courage and arrange to see her. I have been very grateful that I finally did, and I urge you to be more forward, less hesitant, than I have been. There are undoubtedly many knowledgeable people willing to be as helpful as Phyllis, Alison, Marguerite Van Die, and others have been to me, but they cannot know your needs unless you tell them.

Most of all, I encourage you to attend meetings of the CSCH and other relevant academic societies whenever you can, and to become involved in them. For those who are not in traditional academic positions, such groups offer an unparalleled opportunity to connect with people in the field, try out your ideas, hone your skills, and not incidentally add to your CVs. Some people regard society participation as a one-shot experience; they present a paper and then disappear. Stick around! There are many rewards.

As I mentioned, last November the HSSFC gave much attention to the impending need for university teachers, and people wondered how many of those who had not found academic positions fresh from graduate school might do so during this second chance. Yet all of us either know directly or

can easily sense how quickly a scholar can get out of touch or become invisible. Academic societies offer one way that those on the margins can keep in touch with what is going on, and can strengthen their credentials.

For those of you who are established in academia or anticipate being there soon, first of all I hope that you will be aware of the variety of opportunities available. You, like all the rest of us, are on a journey, and sometime you may wish to adjust your course. Second, when you are in positions of power or influence, I hope that you will remember that there are competent and dedicated people who may need information, or encouragement, or help in gaining access to resources. What are the practices of your university toward serious but unaffiliated scholars who need research material? And are there any ways that such people can gain some official affiliation with your institution? There are things you can do to help alter policy, and there are things you, personally, can offer to independent scholars.

I would especially encourage you, as you are able, to be alert for opportunities to mentor. To my delight I observe the mentoring in which some of our members engage, and I know that what I see is a small part of the whole. I told about my experience at length because it was – I trust – extreme. I recognize that it was from a distant era, yet I hope it might startle you enough to prod you to wonder whether even today there are people who could use your support or advice, or simply a friendly pair of ears.

To the CSCH as a whole, I would say that we have much to offer independent scholars, but I would not have this sound like “haves” giving largesse to “have-nots.” Let’s step back for a moment and look at our diversity. At an earlier meeting, when we were discussing the thorny issue of subscriptions to *Studies in Religion*, it was suggested that at some future time we might look at the diverse and shifting composition of our society. Someone who might have opened up that issue at a later meeting decided not to because it was potentially divisive. Today I say let us open it up, but in the context of a wider range of diversity.

When the issue came up, it did so because some judged *SR* to be irrelevant to those who identify themselves primarily as historians, rather than as church historians or as historians of religion. That is the first division, and I have deliberately exposed myself this afternoon as coming from the classic line of church historians. In fact, I confess with some trepidation that I have not had a straight “history” class since my first year at university! Although my teaching career was brief, I have taught courses in philosophy,

Greek and Roman Culture, Medieval and Renaissance Culture, Old Testament, New Testament, and a year-long course on Eastern religions; the only teaching I have done in my own field comprised twelve lectures covering all of church history in the large introductory course at WLU. How different that is from the experience of most of you!

But there are other differences, many more – overlapping – categories. Those who are primarily “historians” and those who are “church historians” or “historians of religion” would define “the field” differently, but let us set aside that ambiguity and look at another instance of diversity. We have within our membership people teaching directly within the field (whatever that is!), students in the field, pastors who retain active interest in the field, people who have taught in the field and retain an interest while they are engaged in another activity such as administration, people involved in another field but doing research that is somehow within the realm of interest of the CSCH, members of the “lost generation,” retired people who remain interested and active to various degrees, independent scholars, and probably some other categories that I’ve missed.

Then there’s the matter of age. We have students, recent graduates seeking appointment, genuinely young scholars, those in mid-career, established, mature scholars, grand patriarchs, and people like me who have occasionally been classed anachronistically as “young scholars” based on our limited experience in our new field. Theologically we are situated on a long continuum from conservative to liberal, and even beyond to those who have a purely intellectual interest in this area. Those who teach do so in various types of institutions: we teach secondary school students, undergraduates, graduates, and seminary students, and we teach in both publicly supported and private religious schools. This latter difference became acutely clear some years ago when the group found itself sharply divided on issues of academic freedom.

When I was telling you the story of my life, I hope that at some level of consciousness each of you had two experiences. I hope that there were at least a few things that resonated with your own experience. But I also deliberately stood before you as “the other.” My experience is unique, *and so is that of each one of you*. And it is only when we recognize and celebrate that diversity that we can become truly welcoming, welcoming of independent scholars and welcoming of everyone who may venture within our circle.

If we wish to be even more welcoming – for I do believe that we are already hospitable – how can we express this welcome? I have no ready-

made answers, but I do have an example. I frequently attend meetings of our counterpart in the United States, the American Society of Church History (ASCH); I value the stimulation of the meetings and also the connections that I have made and nourished there. One of the things that draws me to the ASCH is the women's breakfast: Women In Theology and Church History. (Newcomers are always invited to notice the acronym.) It's a no-reservations-necessary, over-priced continental breakfast in a hotel meeting-room. At some time during the hour and a half, all are invited to introduce themselves to the group. Who are you? What is your current project? Is there something that we might celebrate with you? Is there anything with which the women in this room might be able to help you? Women with institutional affiliations speak of them, but that's not the focus. I've seen new books, watched people make connections with strangers who share their interests, and heard sad tales of searches for employment and of academic promises not kept. The ASCH women's breakfast cannot simply be transplanted to the CSCH, but surely that approach, that attitude can be nurtured.

So I return to the question of what this society can offer to independent scholars. First of all, there is our welcome in all our diversity, a welcome that does not assume that we are all alike, but accepts "the other" as someone with whom to share and someone from whom to learn. By doing so, the society helps to nourish that scholar's identity as a scholar, which is of more value than you may recognize.

The American Historical Association offers letters of introduction which may be of value to unaffiliated scholars travelling to do research. The CSCH may not possess quite the prestige to make that a viable service! More realistically, our society affords an opportunity for the independent scholar to hear and to present papers. Through our constructive discussion and criticism, we can give the feedback that is in such short supply in the isolated world of an independent scholar. The society best serves independent scholars and indeed all its members by presenting programs of high quality, where methods are explored and resources are shared and everyone's work is given serious attention. The society is especially enriched when it includes presentations of established, mature scholars. While these can be traditional papers, they need not be, and I would encourage not just program chairs, but other members to consider diverse ways – panels, after-dinner speeches, or perhaps informal coffee hours, pub gatherings, or breakfasts – to facilitate the use of the human resources that are in our midst.

Furthermore, the society can serve as a matrix for the development of mentoring. Although mentoring is traditionally an individual activity, our society provides an environment in which such connections are made. For many of us, meetings are times to visit with far-away friends and colleagues, to catch up, and make plans, and seek help. All this is good, but it may lead us to ignore those who are not woven into the same network. It may not be obvious what an unaffiliated scholar has to offer. If we reach out to include them, we may give more than we know, and we may also be surprised by what we receive.

That brings me to one last thought: how do we in the CSCH benefit from the activity of independent scholars within our midst? We can be enlivened by their fresh papers and stimulating questions, and by the enthusiasm of those not burdened by academic drudgery. And occasionally the society may receive the services of an independent scholar who recognizes a debt to the society and knows that he . . . or she . . . has some of that precious commodity, time, to take on responsibilities on behalf of the society.

The Canadian Society of Church History has been of great value to me, and I bring you these thoughts in the hope that many more people can benefit as I have. Perhaps some of them will feel called to give back to the society a bit of what they have received.

I have felt welcomed . . . almost always . . . but let me end with an example that is less than positive. The very first CSCH meeting I attended was not at the Learned's, but was a joint meeting of the CSCH and the ASCH held in downtown Hamilton in the spring of 1987. Before the first session, people were milling around waiting for the hotel meeting-room to be opened, and I was feeling far from secure. A member of this society greeted me. I knew him from another group. In a most patronizing voice he asked, "And are you getting interested in church history?" I summoned up as much dignity as my fragile ego could muster, and said rather quietly, "I do have a doctorate in church history." I bit my tongue and did not continue, "Do you?" I *knew* he didn't. I was a woman, lay, not ordained, without an academic position. If I had heard the term "independent scholar," I certainly hadn't yet appropriated it. And I did not feel welcomed.

We can do better than that. We are a diverse group of scholars united by a common core of interests. Some of us have needed to make mighty adjustments to our sails. Let us help one another on the voyage.

***Endnotes***

1. Margaret DeLacy, *A History of NCIS* (revised 21 August 1999). Available [Online]: <http://www.ncis.org/history.htm> [April 2002].
2. Quoted in *The Independent Scholar* 15, 2 (Spring 2001): 13.
3. Fredrick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), 95.

