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2020-2021 OCUFA Teaching and Academic Librarianship Awards

Citation for Dr. Mairi Cowan



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When William Faulkner, in his 1951 novel *Requiem for a Nun*, famously declared, “History is not dead. It is not even past” he could just as easily have been describing Dr. Mairi Cowan’s classroom at the University of Toronto Mississauga (UTM). After all, history becomes enchantingly alive in Dr. Cowan’s classes; it is certainly not dead. Dr. Cowan’s history students have learned and sung medieval chant and early polyphony, played ancient board games, sewed a reproduction of a sixteenth century children’s gown, cooked and eaten a reconstructed medieval meal and tapped the rich veins and long arteries of oral history. Because Dr. Cowan seeks active engagement in all of her courses, these are but a few examples of the historical experience thriving in the epochal present of her classroom.

Dr. Cowan loves to teach and exhibits the passion and diverse interests required of a good teacher. She has taught 32 distinct courses, all designed by her. It is, therefore, not surprising that in her teaching philosophy Dr. Cowan approvingly references another great teacher, Hugh of St. Victor, from twelfth-century Paris, who memorably said, “Learn everything. You will see afterwards that nothing is superfluous.” Indeed, as Dr. Cowan and her students would say, history makes us who we are and helps us chart the future. Learn everything to know where you are going.

This is why studying and teaching history is not a novelty for Dr. Cowan, but an ethical responsibility. A defined learning goal for one of her courses is to “Develop a sense of stewardship for the past and an ethical engagement with the politics of historical memory.” Or, alternatively, as she states in her teaching philosophy, “We have a responsibility to represent the past as fairly as possible.”

Despite her extensive teaching assignments, Dr. Cowan’s research agenda does not lag but exemplifies the best practices of a research and teaching scholar. Critics laud her fine research and great storytelling on medieval Europe, Premodern Scotland and old Quebec. As testimony of her scholarly reputation is her recent appointment as Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association*.

Dr. Cowan’s research and publishing agenda also embraces pedagogy, whereby she inspires other university teachers. She is committed to teaching her students to write, whether with her scaffolded course writing assignments, or her very successful co-authored student writing text, “*Writing History: A Guide for Canadian Students*.”

For Dr. Cowan, her learning relationship with her students will always remain paramount and provide the creative teaching incentive. In the words of Nada Ibrahim, a current student: “[Dr. Cowan] treats her students with respect, dignity, and attentiveness.” Likewise, the testimony

of another current student, Tomasz Glod, declares, “she treated us as collaborators in the classroom.” No wonder history comes alive for both student and teacher in Dr. Cowan’s classroom.

Dr. Cowan’s colleague, Dr. Ken Derry observes: “[M]ore students have told me how much they have learned from [Dr. Cowan] than have spoken to me about any other professor at the university. I can think of no one who more deserves to receive the OCUFA Teaching Excellence Award.” We agree. Please join me in congratulating Dr. Mairi Cowan as a 2020-2021 OCUFA Teaching Award recipient.