

Dr. Marc Milner addresses Ninth Annual UNB GSA Research Conference

Detectives and academics have things in common

Gordon Loane

The Brunswickan

Comparisons between the work of academic researchers and detectives were front and centre last Friday night as UNB military historian Dr. Marc Milner delivered the keynote address at the ninth Annual Conference on Student Research sponsored by the Graduate Student Association.

In an address entitled "Where Clio (the muse of history) meets Poirot (Agatha Christie's famous fictional detective): One Historian's Perspective on the Pure Delight of Academic Sleuthing," Milner declared that research is "basically a whodunit, the challenge of solving the riddle, of laying out the problem and planning a course of action to solve it."

"For Poirot the problem is likely to be a murder in the conservatory while historians usually fetch up somewhere in gaps in the historical record," he said.

"Both professions rely ultimately on a mixture of hard information, of clues and of intuition to solve the case."

"Both require their share of sleuthing and imagination but they also require a measure of luck and a great deal of hard work."

Milner said that for detectives, the urgency to solve the case before the murderer strikes again or in fact gets away with the crime can be compared with the situation in academia where it is less urgent and where it may take a long time to influence public perceptions or policy.

"The detectives' desire to bring the case to court is paralleled by the academic requirement to

publish the findings of your research," he continued.

"For historians, research unpublished is a story untold and a window on the world that is not open."

He said academic researchers get a chance to play detective for the rest of their lives and actually get paid for it, but the only proviso is that they have to bring their case to court too in order to complete a dissertation or produce enough publications to be granted tenure.

Like a detective, Milner said a historian's quest begins with a problem to solve and begins with a simple "what happened" question that arises from a gap in the understanding of history.

It is the historian's job to fill in the gaps, to find out what happened, where it happened and when it happened, on the way to building a master narrative, Milner emphasized.

"To build the master narrative, the historian does much of what Poirot or Sherlock Holmes does - you go to the simplest and most rudimentary evidence and you start building a chronology of events."

"Historians and detectives have to work with some pretty haphazard record-keeping," he noted.

"If records are good and numerous, you can build a master narrative just on the basis of pure hard work and lining up the dates properly."

But not all documents are truthful, dates do go awry, and many events are written after the fact, Milner suggested from experience.

For many historical problems there is simply no direct evidence or no direct documents at all to which to refer.

Milner mentioned the case of Sir Charles Kingsmill, Founder of the Canadian Navy.

"After retirement in the 1920s, Kingsmill quietly read through his correspondence and diaries and flipped them page by page into his fireplace as he read them," he said.

So like a good detective, Milner said a good historian would then need to find out with whom the character traveled, who his friends were, with whom he corresponded, and who among his



Kevin Forneris / The Brunswickan

Dr. Marc Milner delivered the keynote address.

friends and colleagues kept good diaries.

"Sorting through the evidence will usually produce a few small gems but there is no relationship between finding them and the amount of hours you put into the discovery," Milner warned.

In the end, Milner said, historians often have to be content with not knowing all the answers to all the questions and not knowing all the "what, when and where."

For example, Milner pointed to the case of Canadian flying ace, Billy Bishop, who won the Victoria Cross during the First World War.

"We still do not know which German airfield Billy Bishop shot up in the early hours of a 1917 morning when he took off singlehandedly and came back with his aircraft shot full of holes."

"He claimed he had surprised the German airfield just waking up in the morning, zoomed in and strafed it with a machine gun, shot down a couple of planes, and then came back," he said.

While the military records of the day are considered complete, Milner said unfortunately, none of those records refer to an attack anything like Bishop described in the citation for which he was awarded the Victoria Cross.

There are also other historical problems that can be encountered in research; including some historical items that simply do not get recorded, or are changed or that are extensively rewritten after the fact.

Like a detective who might face tampered evidence, Milner said historians often find the record

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Wireless Continued

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laptops will work best when a student signs out a machine.

Teskey stressed this is the first time the library has tried to use wireless technology and feels the spring semester will be a learning experience. One complaint he is already concerned about is the noise the keyboards will make in the quiet study areas and as a result, one section of the library

may become designated for laptop use.

The map the library provides with the laptop indicates computers will be able to receive the network signal best on the first and third floors, with little or no signal on the fourth and fifth floors due to the concrete walls which impair signal transmission.

The laptops are available for two hour, in-library use sessions.

Fines will accrue in the same way they do for books. (For more information on this issue, see the website (<http://www.lib.unb.ca/Services/circulation>.) In order to sign out a laptop, students must surrender their student card for the duration of the sign-out period. In the policies for the laptop systems, it states, "However, unreturned laptops will be considered lost at the closure of the library. The patron will be billed and the bill will be sent the next regular working day. The bill will include the reserve fine, a \$100 non-refundable, non-negotiable laptop fine and a replacement cost of \$1,500."

The policy goes on to say that until the matter is resolved, grades and transcripts may be withheld. Aside from supplying and recharging batteries, the library will not provide any technical support for the wireless systems. Patrons are also required to abide by the Policies, Terms and Conditions provided by CSD, which can be found at the website <http://www.unb.ca/csd/student/labs/policies/>.

UNBSJ Cont'd

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to become an independent chartered university.

"The Saint John campus can't compete against its Fredericton sister for government funding or for programs while the Fredericton Headquarters makes all the decisions," Barry told the New Brunswick *Telegraph-Journal*.

"That was one of the reasons why Tucker Park didn't have a 'snowball's chance' of landing the National Research Council's proposed \$37 million E-commerce research centre last year-once its Fredericton bosses set their sights

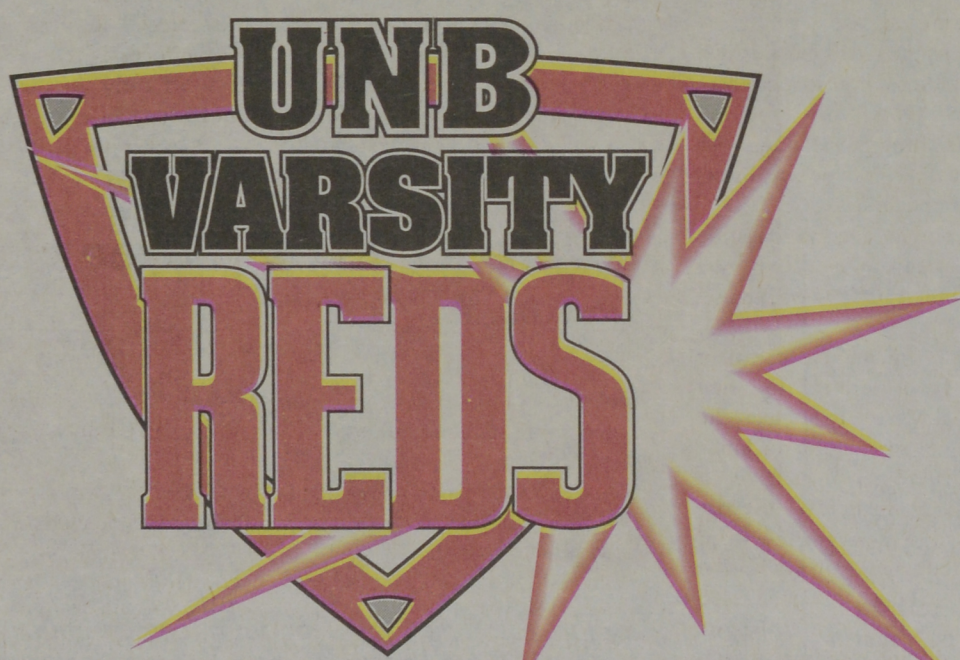
on the same prize," he said.

Meanwhile, Saint John Mayor Shirley McAlary has also mused in recent weeks about a separate university in the Port City.

She said she has "no problem with UNB separating, because I think that Saint John is a large enough city to have our own university."

"Vice President Dr. Rick Miner and the professors we have at UNBSJ could certainly stand on their own," McAlary told the New Brunswick *Telegraph-Journal*.

"They don't need Fredericton to carry them at all," she said.



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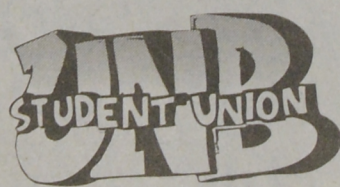
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