

Grace MacInnis Visiting Scholar

In honour of Grace MacInnis and her history of social and political service as a Member of Parliament for the New Democratic Party, a Grace MacInnis Visiting Scholar Program was initiated through the Institute for the Humanities at Simon Fraser University in 1993. Grace MacInnis was the first woman from British Columbia to be elected to Parliament, and was the only woman in Parliament from 1968 to 1972. She was appointed an Officer of the Order of Canada in 1974; was among seven women to be granted the first Governor-General's Persons Awards in 1979 for their work in advancing the status of Canadian women; and was honoured in 1982 by the Canadian Labour Congress with a sculpture and an award for Outstanding Service to Humanity. Previous Grace MacInnis speakers at SFU include: Shirley Williams (1993), Joy Kogowa (1995), Lynn McDonald (1997) and Myrna Kostash (2002).

This year, the Institute for the Humanities was proud to honour Dr. Elaine Bernard as the Grace MacInnis Visiting Scholar. Elaine Bernard discussed labour rights as human rights at the "Seeking Justice: Human Rights in Our Communities" Symposium held at the Wosk Centre for Dialogue on November 8, 2003.

Social Justice Series: Elaine Bernard, Grace MacInnis Visiting Scholar

—Shanthi Besso

Dr. Elaine Bernard is Executive Director of the Labour and Worklife Program at Harvard Law School. The Labour and Worklife Program is Harvard's forum for research and teaching on the world of work and workers. Before being recruited by Harvard in 1989, Bernard was the Director of Labour Programs at Simon Fraser University. Bernard has a BA from the University of Alberta, an MA from the University of British Columbia, and a Ph.D. from Simon Fraser University. Bernard's current research and teaching interests are in the area of international comparative labour movements and the role of unions in promoting civil society, democracy and economic growth.

Entitled, "The Challenge of Labour Rights as Human Rights", Dr. Bernard's lecture at the "Seeking Justice: Human

Rights in Our Communities" Symposium focused on four areas: 1) Are labour rights human rights? 2) Why set out labour as a distinct category in human rights discourse? 3) What are the limits and dangers of "rights" talk in regards to labour rights? 4) Future approaches to labour rights as human rights.

Dr. Bernard began her presentation with a personal reflection on the ways in which the FLQ crisis of 1970 shaped her professional and personal growth. She explained that when then Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau invoked the War Measures Act in response to the kidnappings of British diplomat James Cross and Quebec's Minister of Labour Pierre Laporte, and the subsequent murder of M. Laporte, it was a speedy and shocking lesson in how fragile our rights actually are. It taught her that it is impossible to tell in advance how people or organizations will react in times of crisis, and it ingrained in her a belief that "we" (citizens) are the sole guarantors of civil liberties and human rights.

Thirty years later, Elaine Bernard has honed these initial ideals into a succinct

and passionate set of theories and goals around labour rights. In addressing the first question she had posed at the beginning of her presentation, Dr. Bernard's answer was simple and to the point: Labourers are humans, and therefore labour rights are human rights.

She explained why it is valuable to frame labour rights as a specific category within the broader discourse of human rights. The workplace is a major part of most of our lives, and is also the location of huge rights violations. Dr. Bernard argued that the workplace is the only space where human rights are systematically suspended. We relinquish rights as a condition of employment, not voluntarily, but so that we may have the "privilege" of having a job. She went on to say that we give up such rights as freedom of speech and association, as well as some basic safety and health rights, even in developed nations such as Canada, and that workplace conditions seem to be declining as unions lose strength because of what Bernard calls the modern day Nuremberg defense: "The Market made me do it."

Dr. Bernard argued that labour rights have a great deal to bring to human rights discourse, as they have a history of creating vehicles that allow workers to both win and exercise rights. After all, rights do no good if they remain on theoretical wish-lists and are never put into practice. Bernard gave a great analogy for this concept: A driver's license gives one the right to drive a car, but unless there is a vehicle to drive around in, one cannot exercise that right. Unions and collective bargaining are the vehicles through which workers are able to assert their human rights in the work place.

Although Dr. Bernard is obviously a strong advocate for labour rights discourse, she also offered some concerns around the limits and dangers of using rights terminology and theory. Rights discourse can over-emphasize individual rights to the detriment of collective rights; rights are meaningless abstractions with no ability to exercise

themselves; and the universality of rights ignores the asymmetry of power in our society. By this, Dr. Bernard was referring to the co-optation of rights language and theory by the powerful and privileged. This can be seen in the advent of such concepts and language as “reverse discrimination,” and in protectionist policies enacted by First World countries to ensure that Third World countries cannot compete for trade, thus protecting the “rights” of the rich and powerful.

In the end, however, Dr. Bernard comes out firmly in favour of labour rights discourse, and offered some ways that she believes the labour movement can contribute to the greater human rights movement. She sees the workplace as a space where rights intervention can happen; where truly democratic self-organizing can occur; where solidarity can be fostered and encouraged; and where we can address the difficult task of focusing on economic, rather than political, rights.

Dr. Bernard also believes that broader human rights discourse can bring valuable concepts to the labour rights movement. Human rights discourse can offer lessons regarding the value of universality; it can speak from a high moral plane; and human rights discourse has the power to mobilize people and take action on a broader social and political plane than labour rights on their own.

The lecture was not only informative, but also funny, passionate and thought provoking. Dr. Elaine Bernard ended, appropriately, with a quotation from J.S. Woodsworth, who, in addition to founding the CCF (which evolved into the NDP), was also of course Grace MacInnis' father. The quotation, a variation on the golden rule, is a beautiful summary of what it means to be a human rights defender: “What we demand for ourselves, we desire for all.”

Shanthi Besso is Event Coordinator of Community Education Programs at SFU Harbour Centre

The SFU Field School in Prague

The SFU Field School in Prague has been in existence for ten years and owes much of its present form, and success, to the leadership of Jerry Zaslove. Retirement rules being what they are, Jerry was not able to continue leading the Field School in 2003, and I had the daunting task of trying to fill his shoes. The Prague Field School runs over eight weeks from early May to early July. Students receive eleven credits, the equivalent of three courses at SFU, but there are actually different instructors in Czech language, visits to historical and architectural sites, studies in art history, politics, literature, film, and the intellectual tradition. The program is organized through the Office of International and Exchange Student Services and the Humanities Department at SFU. —David Mirhady, Humanities, SFU

*In 2003 The Institute for the Humanities provided a stipend to assist a travel study student to attend the Prague field School. **Jessica Denning** was the 2003 recipient of the award and the following reflects her experiences while in Prague with the school.*

Learning in the Czech Republic: Transforming Perspectives

—Jessica Denning



Jessica Denning

Vancouver, August 2003

Now, I wake up in the morning and I forget that I am the only one in the room. After spending eight weeks with a roommate, in a suite with three other women, and spending five out of seven days with twelve other classmates that up until three months ago were strangers, I am still not used to living alone. I am definitely experiencing some sort of re-entry culture shock, and every day I wake up I remember less and less what my life was like while living in Prague. After searching

through my emails and journal entries, and scanning through my eighteen rolls of film (some people are obsessive), I came to some sort of compromise with myself. After returning home and having time to reflect on Prague, I realize it is unreasonable for me to provide a thorough explanation of a life changing experience; only glances at personal and specific moments of my time in the Czech Republic are possible.

Prague, May – July 2003

Every morning I invariably wake up to some cacophonous sound. Most mornings it is the chambermaids who stir me from my slumber at 6am, but who, because we are still sleeping in them, never change our sheets. Other mornings it is my roommates, awake and getting ready for the day. But every so often, I awake to the sound of the recycling truck picking up the glass bottle receptacle. No one in Prague has individual recycling containers, so the sound of a thousand beer and other miscellaneous bottles crashing into the back of the truck sounds like the end of the world. After reluctantly gaining the strength to push off my lead-like pink comforter, I get ready and head downstairs for breakfast.

Breakfast at the dorm is complimentary. It is very European, with meats and cheeses, breads, fruit, vegetables, hard-boiled eggs, some kind of pastry, yoghurt, and various beverages. Invariably every morning I open the lid of my yoghurt and get squirted on—so much for the four hours I spent doing laundry the day before.

On Tuesdays after breakfast, we meet our teachers, David and Vaclav, for a fieldtrip outside of Prague. I board our OK Bus Praha, and grabbing a *jahoda* (strawberry) candy, wave good morning to Michael, our bus driver. Michael used to be a race-car driver, so once we hit the highway out of Prague the speedometer ranges between 110-160 kilometers per hour. He is frequently on his cell phone making connections about where we are going, and when we return to the bus from a long day he often greets us with candies, pastries or chocolate. Vaclav begins every class, standing in the aisles of the bus, recounting in his thick Czech accent, where we will be going and what we will see. He takes us to many places tourists never go, or know about, and the breadth of his knowledge astounds me every week. He always wears suspenders.

Strangely, the atmosphere of each place we visit infiltrates my group, and depending on where we are, we often adopt the roles of the people who used to live in castles, fight in battles, perform theatricalities for the community, or hide from the enemy. Of the many places Vaclav took us, I found the greatest pleasure among the arts, the ruins and nature. It is admittedly a strange combination, but it is a reflection of my entire education, and as Prague is the final step in obtaining my degree, I find it fitting that the third day we spent in Southern Bohemia fulfilled these passions, and was most inspiring.



2003 Prague field school students

Every year when my birthday comes around, I feel it necessary to reflect on the past year and decide whether I am happy with my accomplishments and have met my failures with a sense of humour. On May 28th, 2003, the day before my twenty-third birthday, our group left the Chateau in Libin where we had been staying—our home away from Prague—for a fieldtrip. Vaclav kept exclaiming that we were to pay attention to the differences in the geographical

features hurtling by. Our first stop was the Baroque Theatre in the medieval town of Cesky Krumlov.

Cesky Krumlov is located on a merchant trade route. In the sixteenth century it was a mining town for silver and graphite. Almost all of the architecture is Renaissance, including the castle that was transformed from its earlier medieval style. The Rosenberg family, who had the castle transformed and were almost as rich as the Bohemian king, built the first theatre in Cesky Krumlov as a demonstration of their wealth. Sometimes it seemed difficult to grasp how old something is, and that it has miraculously survived such a long history. It is interesting how space can envelop you, generating feelings of awe, privilege, fear, happiness, jealousy, anger, sadness, and causing you to realize you are sharing a perspective of history with thousands that have long perished.

The Baroque Theatre, Zamecke Divadlo, was built in 1682, and then rebuilt in 1766. Having previously studied technical theatre I was able to appreciate the sophisticated level of machinery still in operation. The theatre houses over five hundred and seventy costume pieces and accessories, and three hundred and fifty scenery flats and decorations to make thirteen complete scenes. Baroque theatre was based on miracles, illusions and special effects. In terms of the aural spectacle, the sound machines, orchestra, and use of gunpowder were all integral to theatricality, and I was most impressed with their technical function in scene changes. The tour of the theatre was fascinating, though somewhat disappointing. The only piece of machinery we were shown was the equipment for making a storm. Despite the fact that I have worked backstage for so many years, I was not allowed to participate in creating the storm because the equipment was heavy and I was a woman. I was not only frustrated, but also surprised to find such prejudice. The storm equipment was surprisingly realistic, and the machinery backstage

had been completely restored. The theatre, which has been under renovations since 1997, will unfortunately never be used again for public performance, as it is a valuable heritage site.

After the tour, and a lunch, we reconvened for the second half of our fieldtrip. It began with a long drive through a countryside that progressively became less and less inhabited until Michael dropped us off in the middle of the Sumava Forest. The hike was long and steep to begin. There was a cool breeze in the air, and plenty of shade from the sun. We stopped along the way to have a beer (“Czech tradition” Vaclav said) and wrestle with a puppy.

After the refreshments, we made an unexpected stop at a church. The elderly man inside spoke Czech and German and so was able to communicate with both our teachers. After listening to him speak, Vaclav turned to us to translate: “So he is a little crazy.” Apparently, this man, acting on divine prophecy, had taken it upon himself to save the church from complete destruction after the Second World War. He kept shouting things like, “Discipline!” He grabbed my hand and placing a coin in it, showed us all where to donate to the church collection plate. While examining the fine craftsmanship of the rafters he had built, an unexpected, definitely not holy, sound came soaring up through the beams: “Is that the ice-cream truck song?” A group of us raced down the steep and narrow staircases to the nave of the church, and sure enough, our classmate was playing “The Entertainer”, on the church organ. Vaclav eventually hustled us out of there, and was heard to remark: “They will erect a sign here stating that this church was once desecrated by a group of Canadian students”.

After half an hour we were at our final destination for the day. On top of a large hill loomed the ruins of Vitkuv Kamen. Without even waiting for the forthcoming lecture my classmates and I ran ahead to explore. The foundation of the entire site was sub-merged in grass

and crumbled stone. A friend of mine and I climbed over the sunken barrier between the stronghold and the forest, and, grasping sticks in our hands, we imagined ourselves as enemies at the gate, storming the castle walls.

This medieval castle, built in the fifteenth century, was built as a frontier castle for the Vitek family, from which the Rosenbergs developed. The Viteks built in this area three important fortifications—Vitekuv Kamen, Rozmberk and Cesky Krumlov. The importance of these castles gradually shifted from south to north closer to the fertile Budejovice Basin, that is, Cesky Krumlov. Vaclav talked extensively about Martin Luther and his association with the Protestant Reformation. Though Luther had no direct connection with this castle, I found it a provocative analogy to speak of the decay of the Catholic Church amongst the ruins of a castle that at one time had been the most prominent in the kingdom. These kinds of comparisons between geography, architecture, religion, and politics are made all the time in our classes, and it is interesting to gain a historical perspective that acknowledges how everything is interconnected. Admittedly, I now know more about the history of the Czech Lands, than I do about Vancouver, the city I have grown up in for the past twenty-three years.

Sitting amongst the ruins of the castle, listening to Vaclav, the atmosphere of the past permeating my thoughts, I felt extremely satisfied with my decision to attend the field school. It was a most enjoyable way to finish my degree. But I hardly had time to contemplate this thought, before the lecture was over and we were heading down the mountain, back to the bus. Grabbing sticks along the way, a bunch of us ran down the mountain, sword-fighting and screaming like children. Though sweaty and dirty, I was smiling and feeling alive.

We arrived back at the Chateau in time for dinner. That night, after games of pool, walks through the forest, and watching the sun set from the lookout

tower, a group of us moved into the cottage bar to have a couple of drinks and play cards before bed. A couple of games turned into a marathon and soon it was midnight. Our teacher called for a bottle of champagne to celebrate my birthday. The bartender, Filip, who had stayed up with us after last call, took it upon himself to celebrate my birthday with me in true Czech fashion. I believe it must be a custom that the birthday person to get drunk, so drunk, in fact, that she does not see what is coming. Czech humour is difficult to figure out, and is ironic and dark. With a language barrier, it is especially hard to translate the exact meaning. The most universal jokes are practical, and Filip was a master. After feeding me free beers for a while, he suddenly had me facing the group, with a funnel in my pants and cheering me on to drop a Krone from my head into the funnel. “Why am I doing this?” I asked myself, as I went to drop the Krone from my forehead into the funnel for the second time, and Filip poured a glass of water down the funnel, soaking my pants. He called me “inkontinencni vložky” (“piss-pants”) for the rest of the trip. Of course, my initial shock and anger eventually subsided, and I was finally able to laugh at the situation – “you got me, Filip” – we had another bottle of champagne in celebration.

Now, as I reflect on my summer, I realize that I experienced one of the most wonderfully intellectual, positive, action-packed birthdays ever in the Czech Republic. My summer days were full of adventure and risk, and every moment I feel compelled to acknowledge how my perspectives of the world and my position in it have changed.

