

## Life story of John H. Munro

John Munro was born in 1938 in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. Although officially retired, John continues to work. Having started teaching at 26 he is now in his 42<sup>nd</sup> year of teaching—the last 38 of those being at the University of Toronto—and is still doing research on medieval (European) economic history. He has also been involved in the controversy over ending mandatory retirement.

It was close to fifty years ago that John started studying for his academic career, earning a BA (combined honours economics and history), at the University of British Columbia in 1960. He received fellowships to attend Yale, graduating in 1965 with a PhD in history (economic history). Reflecting the life-long interest in medieval economic history that was to follow, the subject of his PhD dissertation was *Bullionism in Anglo-Burgundian Commercial Relations 1384-1478*. During this time, as a student, he endured several crises in his life. In his second year at university (1957: UBC), “my best friend committed suicide; my father, and then my grandfather died of heart attacks, all within three weeks, and just before my Christmas exams.” While doing his doctorate he had married, but it was not to last. After less than a year the marriage was over.

In 1964, what would evolve into a distinguished career and fulfilling life for John had its beginnings at the University of British Columbia. After three years, in 1967, he had met someone, and in 1968 they decided to marry and move to Ontario, where he had accepted a position as Associate Professor of Economics at the University of Toronto. He recalls that his first year of teaching there “was a year of European and North American student rebellions *annus horribilis* – and I took the assaults on me as a personal attack, but survived!!” Meanwhile, his wife was going through an ordeal of her own; she was required to do an apprenticeship before becoming relicensed as a pharmacist in Ontario!

After five years at the University of Toronto, John was appointed Full Professor in the Department of Economics – and he and his wife had started a family. A son was born, and a few years later, a daughter. Over the years, his research activities have taken him to countries such as Belgium, England, and Holland, and attendance at conferences to the additional countries of Argentina, Germany, Hungary, Ireland (Dublin), Italy, Japan, Spain, Switzerland, and the United States, and within Canada. Since 1972 he has been consultant on monetary, financial and numismatic matters for *The Collected Works of Erasmus: Correspondence* (University of Toronto Press). In 2003, having been an elected foreign member since 1999, he was appointed to the Giunta (Executive Board) of the Comitato Scientifico, Istituto Internazionale di Storia Economica ‘Francesco Datini da Prato,’ Italy. Since 2000, he has also been an elected member of the Koninklijke Vlaamse Academie van België voor Wetenschappen en Kunsten (Royal Flemish Academy of Belgium for Science and the Arts). His web-site home-page: <http://www.economics.utoronto.ca/munro5/> contains information about his teaching and research publications, as well as links to various sources of information, including The Question of Mandatory Retirement, his own web-page of links and up-to-date information he has assembled on the subject of mandatory retirement at Ontario universities.

John's scholarly writing includes four authored and co-authored books, 80 journal articles and essays in books and collected studies, and 34 book reviews. As his own retirement approached he became involved in efforts to put an end to compulsory retirement, at one point making a formal presentation, in support of a proposed bill to abolish mandatory retirement, to the Ontario Ministry of Labour's public hearings (published in OCUFA Forum (Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations), Fall 2004, pp. 21-23). From that presentation, a more detailed article has followed, in which he states:

Finally, we may observe that mandatory retirement is a poor and rather ineffective tool to achieve [such] goals of diversity ... to permit universities to hire new blood. But more important, it is unethical: one cannot condone the use of a tool that is a blatant form of age-discrimination in order to combat the perceived ills of a heritage of another form of discrimination (Munro, 2005: 211).

Following his retirement, John's office was taken away from him, requiring him to move his books and equipment to much smaller quarters – a cubicle in the Retirees' Room, N-108, in the north wing of the Economics Building. The room contains a table and desk, and three small cubicles, plus some bookshelves. He tells of his frustration:

I still find the loss of my office, and loss of direct access to about a thousand books (stored in the unused crawl space of my basement – because I have another set of many thousands of books in my home-office), a burden. There is no space to read or write in my little cubicle; and so I have commandeered the desk in the room outside, supposedly for other retirees who almost never come to this room.

John's thoughts on his experience of retirement have been included in *On the Dignity of Work* (Walkom, 2005), in the *Toronto Star*. He found the entire process irrational, and having to give up his large office irritating, at the very least. "It's the indignity of it," he concludes.

There have been, however, some bright moments to what he saw as an undignified exit from his career. An international conference, *Money, Markets and Trade in Late Medieval Europe*, was held in his honour a year ago, in 2004, on his 66th birthday. More recently, one of his former students, on completing a study about teaching, dedicated it to teachers from each school he had attended, Professor John Munro, U of T, being one of them. "I have had wonderful teachers in my life, people with whom I enjoyed learning," writes David Johnson. "People who teach well have a lasting influence on their students. A book about teaching should be dedicated to good teachers. This one is" (Johnson, 2005).

Since retiring, at age 65, John has continued to work, practically the same as before. He receives a pension and a fraction of his old salary for the work he does, but that is not a problem, he says. He is writing his life history – a brief account, he says, entitled *Music, the Muse (Clio), and Me: an apologia pro sua vita*. At home, the children are grown, and his wife now works part-time. He has kept in touch over the years with his older brother, also a retired university professor but living in Vancouver, and they continue to do so, thanks to e-mail.

Two years after he retired, on March 14, 2005, his 67th birthday, the University of Toronto formally announced the end of mandatory retirement for its professors and librarians, to start on July 1, 2006. Although the University's decision has come too late for staff who had already retired or who turned 65 during this last year, John welcomes it as a sign of progress, saying, "I am very happy with this victory – but will be even happier when this odious policy is finally abolished throughout Ontario and then the rest of Canada."

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Life story of John Munro written by Sue McPherson following email interview in 2005.

Diversity in Retirement website: <http://DiversityinRetirement.homestead.com> 2004-05.  
*The Dilemma of Mandatory Retirement*. Sue McPherson writer, website design