

A Graduate Student *pas comme les autres*

BY DAVID V. J. BELL

I first met Mary O'Brien when she was a graduate student in Political Science at York University in the early 1970s. I served as Director of the Graduate Programme during most of Mary's graduate student days; I also served on her dissertation supervisory committee; and I had the pleasure of introducing Mary to an eager audience in Ottawa on the occasion of Mary's first professional paper presentation at the Canadian Association for American Studies (CAAS) annual conference.

Mary was a graduate student *pas comme les autres*. In the first place of course she was older than most of her fellow students. Hell, Mary was older than most of her professors. To have an older, highly articulate, brilliant, strong feminist "student" who knew more than most of us and was several years our senior presented quite a challenge. It's not surprising that it led to some "interesting times" (as the Chinese would put it), particularly when Mary presented herself for her "comps" the written and oral exams that determined a student's readiness to move on to the dissertation stage. Mary regarded the examination process as gratuitously humiliating, and she vowed to reform it. Hundreds of committee hours later, we had redesigned the process in response to her withering critique.

Serving on Mary's supervisory committee was one of the most stimulating intellectual experiences of my career. Her work was absolutely innovative and exciting, and the various drafts of her dissertation chapters were invariably a pleasure to read. The committee meetings themselves consisted of lively exchanges among all members. Of course Mary led the debate with her wit, her humour, and her awesome intellect.

Though Mary was at first reluctant (I think because she questioned the interest American Studies specialists would have in her work), I encouraged her to read a paper at the CAAS meeting in Ottawa in 1976. (She was just finishing her dissertation at the time.) The response to her paper was overwhelming—rather like being at a rock concert with a hot new entertainer. Members of the audience gave Mary a standing ovation and then swarmed around her after the session to ask questions and offer comments. From that



Mary O'Brien with friends and colleagues

rambunctious, auspicious occasion, Mary never looked back.

David V. J. Bell is the Director of the York Centre for Applied Sustainability and a Professor in the Faculty of Environmental Studies. As former Dean of the Faculty of Graduate Studies (1981–87) and the Faculty of Environmental Studies, David describes himself as a "Has-Dean, twice removed."