



# David Moak

Tuesday November 8, 2016, by [Administrateur Chateaubriand](#)

## **2013 HSS Chateaubriand Fellow Princeton University - Université de Nice History**

The purpose of applying for the Chateaubriand Fellowship was to fund my dissertation research in France. As is often the case with graduate students in history, it was necessary to spend a year abroad in order to work in the archives, and the resources offered by the fellowship were too good to pass up. The stipend, health insurance, and institutional network allowed me to work efficiently and effectively towards my goal. They allowed me to travel to various national and regional archives, to participate in university life, and to read and write in tranquility. For these opportunities, I will be forever grateful. But ultimately, my experience was so much more. As a graduate student, I am used to thinking of life as a series of pauses between my studies, as a sort of interlude between periods of intense work. A moment of respite, a moment of regeneration. As a result, life is defined negatively. It is the absence of work and lived in the anticipation of work. It is experienced as an abstraction, mediated by the written word. The French Revolution, the Rights of Man, Republicanism, Jacobinism, and Nationalism are so many words used to define and reify France. They confer the comforting feeling of knowing. "I know France because I have read about its history and culture." But France is not an object to be studied; it is a passion to be lived. Much like a human being, it is not defined by its past or its cultural productions. It is continually changing and evolving, and the only way to get to know it is to enter into dialogue with it. To share its everyday activities. This is what my experience has taught me: that eating regional dishes, wandering city streets, and interacting with people is just as important as passing time in the archives. That these everyday activities, *les ruses du quotidien*, can teach you things and give you insights that no text can. That they are the only way truly to know France. Instead of life being the interlude between periods of intense work, it is work that is the interlude between periods of intense life. Texts can help make sense of things, they can provide a framework for understanding, but it is life that provides the meaning. The Chateaubriand Fellowship allowed me to experience France. It allowed me to live in France, to get to know it in the most profound sense of the term. I can only hope that others have a similar opportunity, and can only encourage them to apply for this fellowship.