

History, Children and Professional Scholars: The Canadian Case

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We all know or assume certain things about history. This knowledge is important: it forms a defining portion of an individual's culture, and helps to place a person within a cultural hierarchy. The character in the Herman cartoon, who teaches his school-aged son that "Babylon" is a racehorse with a good chance in the fifth, is a person of low cultural attainment. A truly cultured person has a broad general knowledge of the history of western civilization, with a special knowledge of his own people. As well, he will probably know something about parts of the Third World and the communist countries.

The nature of one's historical knowledge is also of profound political significance. Very broad general interpretations of history have much to do with a person's world-view. By the middle of the eighteenth century the "idea of progress" had become entrenched in historical scholarship. In various permutations, especially "Whiggism", it remains pervasive. In its vulgarized version it encourages people to think of historical development as a form of linear growth, with each stage better than the last. This helps explain our pathetic belief in the virtues of growth and development. It leads us to the silly assumption that because we came later we are better. Conveniently we forget the incredible carnage of two world wars and the viciousness that can be implemented by the modern state, totalitarian or otherwise. We really believe that we are more perfectly developed people and live a better life than the ancient Athenians, Romans of the early empire, or Englishmen in the nineteenth century. Historians have something to do with all of this, although not as much as might be thought. J.B. Bury gave classic definition to the "idea of progress", but the theory itself is of complex origin. It was not the product of a bright young historian who formulated the theory after a dispassionate analysis of evidence. Rather, it became current because of widespread changes in society and the intellectual milieu. Historians and other writers expressed and refined the idea, but were often as much imprisoned by it as were other segments of society.

A similar pattern applies to nationalist historians. Nationalism is an

enormously complex phenomenon that was not invented by historians or practitioners of any other discipline. Like "progress", it was (and is) expounded by historians, some of whom believe that nationalism is the ultimate stage of progress. Also like "progress", "nationalism" became an entrenched cultural value that captured historians as well as journalists, politicians and intellectuals of every type.

Concepts as broad and pervasive as "progress" and "nationalism" might fairly be categorized as macro theories. They are main currents in international thought; along with such other major historical frameworks as Marxism, they have much to do with our understanding of history, politics and society. We consider, criticise and debate these ideas, but we cannot ignore them. They remain elemental aspects of historical analysis.

The situation is different on the micro side. Here we are dealing with matters that are more specific and local, but are nonetheless of major political significance. Historians of Canada can and do have an impact on Canadian perceptions of their country. This impact has been far from negligible, but could be much greater. Special attention should be paid to history for children, and that is the concern of this essay.

Canadians face a recurring problem of definition. We are not really sure of ourselves, and our favorite intellectual parlour game is the search for our identity. Given our history, this problem should come as no surprise. Unlike most other countries with whom we share a cultural affinity, especially Britain, France and the United States, we do not enjoy automatic definition through centuries of shared experience, revolutionary myths and heroic origins. Our country was created by straightforward and pragmatic politicians whose strength lay in negotiation and compromise. There were no prophets, poets, military geniuses or philosophers involved. The pattern since confederation has been similar. We have been sustained by politicians who tend to be similar to the founders. Our origins and the nature of our unity explain much about our ambivalence concerning our identity. So does the bi-national nature of Canada. In many societies, nationalism, ugly as it can be, produces a sort of unity. In Canada the reverse is the case. Our nationalisms are usually English or French, and hence divisive. When English-speaking Canadians opted for jingoistic nationalism during the Boer War and the crisis that came late in World War I, the result was profound alienation in Quebec and national disunity. Similarly, French-speaking nationalism, usually of a racist and inward-looking sort, has infuriated other Canadians and strained the bonds of confederation. That happened during the 1880s when Honoré Mercier exploited the execution of Louis Riel; it

happened again in the 1970s when René Lévesque used a nationalist agitation to install the intellectuals and bureaucrats in the seats of power. A final problem is the overwhelming power and presence of the United States. We share many values and much of our cultural heritage with a superpower. How do we differentiate ourselves from Americans? We have never produced a definitive answer to that question.

But we have tried. Since the study of Canadian history became a professionalized discipline, our historians have wrestled with the idea of Canada. Separate historiographical traditions emerged in English- and French-speaking Canada, but the mainstream of both traditions has been nationalism. French Canadian writers have focussed on *la survivance*, while English Canadians have had nation building as their primary concern. These traditions have not been complementary in most regards. Recently, English Canadian historiography has veered radically from the nation building model, and is now heavily influenced by the "limited identities" approach, which places great stress on the study of regions and distinctive groups of Canadians.

These influential approaches to our past have schooled large numbers of Canadians. However, it is arguable that the influence of such scholarship, at least in English Canada, has not extended very far beyond the university educated. This poses severe problems for Canadians, their unity and their sense of identity. For reasons rooted in the very structure of Canadian history we have problems in these areas. They are exacerbated by conflicts between English and French versions of Canadian history, and, within both our dualities, by the vastly different perceptions of the Canadian past held by the well and less well educated. This latter problem, although probably more acute in English than in French Canada, runs throughout Canadian society.

The problem is made yet more severe by the American presence. A vacuum in the knowledge of Canada is speedily filled with a knowledge of American history, which is a powerful component of the popular culture of the United States. Even Canadians who are professedly anti-American are filled with vast quantities of information and misinformation about the American past. It pours into the country in magazines, books, radio shows, television, movies and through Canadians who travel in the United States and Americans who live in Canada. This knowledge of America is in fact a major Americanizing influence, and it retards and confuses Canadians in their search for a definition of self. How often have most of us witnessed the most appalling examples of such osmotic acculturation? Our children discuss the pilgrim fathers on Thanksgiving, and think that George Washington founded Canada. They refer to "our

president". The only Macdonald that they know anything about sells hamburgers. Civil rights lore is derived from characters like Kojak issuing the standard American police warning to various brands of American thugs. Our radicals become so absorbed by the American left that many devote themselves to agitating American issues like opposition to wars in Viet Nam and El Salvador. Even educated Canadians lose the empathy for the constitution that comes with a thorough grounding in constitutional law and practice. For example, within our system a prime minister is appointed by the Crown or her representative and holds office until he resigns or is dismissed. Either dismissal or resignation might be precipitated by defeat at the polls or in parliament. Thus Pierre Elliott Trudeau became prime minister in 1968 and formed an administration that survived until he resigned in 1979 after suffering defeat in a general election. Commentators insist on referring to his first (1968-72), second (1972-74) and third (1974-79) governments, when only one government existed during those years. This is a small but illustrative point. How will we survive and prosper over the long run if we do not know that we are a parliamentary democracy that is governed under the terms of the British North American Act (or some amended version thereof)? One shudders to think of the results of a public opinion poll concerning the details of the Canadian constitution.

We do have the results of a recent poll of a different sort. Towards the end of 1979 *Saturday Night* surveyed 840 university students in Ontario. The students were asked to rank people "they admire". Thirty-three names were listed. They ran from Senator Edward Kennedy (number 1) to Ronald Reagan, then only a prominent presidential aspirant (number 33). The top four, all of whom rated a 90% or better level of support, are Kennedy, Jane Fonda, Walter Cronkite and Linda Ronstadt. Pierre Elliott Trudeau ranked 18, one point above Gordon Sinclair. Harvey Kirck outranked Premier William Davis. Knowlton Nash made the list as number 31. The rationale behind this ranking seems clear. Ontarians admire prominent Americans who obtain huge amounts of media attention, or who are media personalities in their own right. The presence on the list, even towards the bottom, of Harvey Kirck and Knowlton Nash is of considerable interest. These men are, no doubt, commendable in their capacity as news readers. How much more did the respondents know about them? Perhaps a similarly high visibility in schools for Canadian historical figures would assist students to learn something about Canadians who have made valuable contributions to our national life. It might be that Canadians merit no place at the top of the survey list. One only wishes, however, that one could be assured that the respondents knew enough Canadian names to exercise informed discrimination.

A good case can be made that it is in the national interest to foster a knowledge of Canada and its past. It is equally arguable that such knowledge will be restricted to small and elite groups unless it is taken to children while they are in the school system. If these premises are accepted, two questions remain. What kind of knowledge should be taught? Who should provide historical material for young people?

The easiest approach to content is to go the route of propaganda. Officials of governments and school boards can compile their lists of desirable objectives and arrange to have history written accordingly. To some extent, even if only implicitly, this is now the case. Writers who wish their books used widely in schools know the current sacred cows of the educational establishment. The native peoples and ethnic groups must be handled with reverence. Feminism and peace are high on the list of things desirable, as are conservation and regionalism. Bilingualism is good and the metric system mandatory.

My wife and I have written two books for very small children. The first, *The Buffalo Hunt*, was published in the *Northern Lights* series (PMA) in 1980. It is about a Métis boy who lived in Manitoba during the middle of the nineteenth century. He goes on his first buffalo hunt with his father and has adventures and fascinating experiences. The second book, *Andrew and the Great River*, still unpublished, tells the story of a boy who lived on Garden Island (near Kingston) in the 1850s. His father worked on the huge timber rafts that were built on the island and sent to Quebec City for transshipment to Britain. Andrew is given a raft trip to Quebec as a birthday present, and in the process faces danger and matures. These stories are quite unexceptional, but the authors learned a great deal during the editorial process. It became clear to us that the propaganda component is always present and can be insinuated as well as pushed. For example, why does a boy and not a girl go on the buffalo hunt and the raft? Does not this confirm stereotypes and conduce to sexism? Maybe it does, but that is what happened in history. Boys hunted buffalos; girls cooked buffalo. This might or might not have been fair, but it is the historical truth. Similarly, boys were inducted into the lumbering and rafting operations on Grand Island. Girls did other things. That was life in nineteenth century Canada. In the Garden Island story the boss of the raft is a French Canadian whose appearance and customs (including his practice of kneeling for prayer before taking his raft through rapids) are described. The comment came back that we had produced a stereotyped French Canadian. But we described his customs accurately: we have photographs of the man and a variety of firsthand descriptions of his activities. Or again, why write a story about a Scottish boy who lived in the St. Lawrence Valley? Surely many other regions and ethnic groups merit attention? Should not

young readers by introduced to all sorts of types of Canadians from all regions? Yes, but in the 1850s most British North Americans lived in Atlantic Canada, the St. Lawrence Valley and southern Ontario. The vast bulk were of French or British origin. That is another fact of Canadian history.

I am not suggesting that these editorial nudges were anything more than that – interested questions from persons with a legitimate concern for what children read about Canadian history. They did however force a couple of neophyte children's authors to think long and hard about the kind of history that should be read by young people. My first, and perhaps overly basic concern, was that history for children should be about the past and not the present. We should not use Canadian history to inculcate into our young people the values that some of us might think that Canadians should espouse. Nineteenth century Canada should not be transformed retroactively into an arcadian sort of ethnic mosaic. Girls and boys, and men and women, had different roles to play in society and should not be presented as functioning as some reformers hope people will function tomorrow. Native peoples were not consistently noble and victimized, and to present them as such is as wrong as it is patronising.

Of course, it must be readily admitted that history for young people has to be simplified and massively selective. Complicated analyses of federalism, policy formation, party politics and so on are not appropriate for very young readers. Colourful portions of the past should be stressed, as should significant events that occurred locally. In eastern Ontario, pilgrims should give way to loyalists; on the prairies the war between the North-West Company and the Selkirk settlers might be more appropriate than the struggle for justice in the United States. But what is taught or read should be real history, and if the format is historical fiction, it should be thoroughly consistent with historical reality.

This approach is not advocated solely because the author is a professional historian. It is advocated because it is consistent with the objectives set out above. If Canadians are to know themselves and their heritage, and eventually come to terms with their identity, they must acquire a knowledge of their history that becomes a permanent part of their cultural baggage. Their interest must be aroused and be of long standing. This objective will not be met if the history given to our young people is really a disguised version of social policy for the 1980s; it might be met if the history taught and read is interesting, plausible and true. Canadian history that is well written and taught on an extensive basis might well make a major contribution to Canadian nationhood, whatever that is, by awakening in Canadians an

awareness of the fact that they are different from Americans, Frenchmen and Britishers. Canadian affairs can only be enriched if we acquire a more thorough knowledge of our heritage and the functioning of our country.

The final question to consider is the role of the professional historian in providing materials for children. If the proposition is accepted that history for children should be real history, albeit simplified in nature and format, then the professional historian must be intimately involved in the writing process. The weakness of much historical material for young people is that it is not proper history. It is often written by well meaning, often talented writers, who use the work of professional scholars as source material for fictionalized history. Lacking the kind of intellectual purchase over a discipline that comes through extensive research and writing, they are prime targets for "presentism". That is, they are subject to seeing the past through the eyes of the present. It is often their natural inclination to write about the past in such a way as to advocate their concerns for the future. This does not always happen, but many such writers present views of history that are really quite ahistorical. Such approaches might give a student some intimation of where he should be going, but he does not get an adequate idea of where he has been.

At this point, one can easily say that nobody is stopping professional historians from writing for children. This is all too true. Professional scholars, especially in the universities, are not sufficiently visible in the field. Only a small number of specialists in Canadian studies could be involved. Some are unsuited to such writing (or any other, for that matter). Others are intimidated by professional norms that make light of popular writing, and especially writing at the elementary level. A scholar does not enhance his "international reputation" by writing about the buffalo hunt for children. Still others are alienated by the real collaboration with editors and illustrators that is required by this type of writing.

Historians are also impeded by the very nature of their discipline. Historical scholarship is (or should be) sophisticated, subtle and often controversial. Vast amounts of data are assembled and analysed. The results are usually presented in heavily footnoted works that are written within a very carefully conceived interpretative framework. Inclusiveness, not radical selectivity, is one of the norms of the profession. Complexity is a characteristic of this type of scholarship. Simplification is mistakenly equated with the simplistic. It is understandable that writing for children is a problem for professional historians, and even for the small minority with the aptitude for that kind of writing.

This is an unfortunate result that should be remedied. Universities and historians' professional associations should address this question and develop policies concerning this kind of writing. Historians themselves should think deeply about their professional and social responsibilities. Many believe that they have an obligation to try to give society political direction through political activity and comment. Why not consider the proposition that they might make an equally useful contribution by disseminating to a vastly increased audience at least some of their scholarship? Why not revert to an older tradition that argues that an informed citizenry is a better citizenry?

Very few informed Canadians will disagree with the proposition that our collective knowledge of our past is pitifully small. I submit that this condition is debilitating to Canada as a nation, and that it is in the national interest to rectify the situation. A knowledge of our heritage should be fostered and should become a part of every Canadian's culture. We should start with children, and should provide them with an abundance of well written, nicely illustrated and professionally sound works of history. Good scholars should be involved, in fact, have a social and professional responsibility to be involved. Publishers, professional associations, governments, universities, individual historians and the educational establishments have a responsibility to encourage and expedite this reform. People are more conscious of their heritage than ever before, and an increasingly large number of Canadians are dedicated to the restructuring of our school curriculae around more basic programmes. The time is right. Let us get on with the job of taking real history into the intellectual lives of our children.

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