

NEW POSSIBILITIES FOR THE PAST

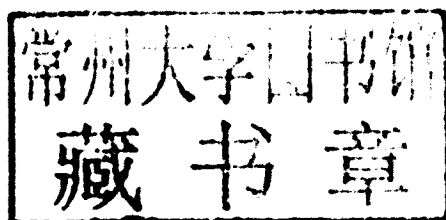
Shaping
History Education
in Canada

EDITED BY
PENNEY CLARK

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Shaping History Education in Canada

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Introduction

PENNEY CLARK

This collection explores and articulates the landscape of history education research and practice in Canada. It does this to help define and refine the research agenda in history teaching and practice, which at the present time take place against a backdrop of public concern about Canadians' abysmal knowledge of their own history and a perceived need for more, and then even more, Canadian history in schools. It is crucial that scholarly research be pursued thoughtfully and in a cohesive manner and that classroom practice be informed by the findings of this research.

Debates

History is contentious in Canada, as it is in most countries. The debates today are not new. They disappear only to reappear over the way. History has been contentious in the public arena, among academics, and in classrooms at every level. The ways we interpret the past to create official (and unofficial) narratives, how we use those narratives and for what purposes, and the place of history in the school curriculum have all sparked debate in Canada time and again.

Recent examples of debate in the forum of public opinion abound. The cancellation of plans to mark the 250th anniversary of the Battle of the Plains of Abraham in Quebec City by re-enacting the event comes quickly to mind; as does the two-year (2005-7) storm of criticism over the representation of the Allied bombings of Germany during the Second World War at

the Canadian War Museum; and the 2001 controversy around the depiction of the colonization of British Columbia in murals located in the provincial legislature building.¹

Academic history is also contentious. Canada has had its own version of the “history wars” that have taken place in the United States and Australia.² From the 1960s through the 1990s, new subjects were introduced to the historical canon, in the process challenging traditional assumptions about what was worth investigating and what was worth knowing. First women, gender, race, class, and regionalism, then other subjects such as sexuality, masculinity, youth, the family, and the environment joined the list; with the result that the unified, politically based historical narrative was, according to some, “sundered” beyond repair.³

In a groundbreaking 2000 article, historian Ian McKay proposed a “third paradigm,” one that would replace the traditional national and socio-cultural history narratives with what he called a liberal order framework, which would involve not a synthesis but a “reconnaissance” of history. By this McKay meant that the study of Canada should be about the expansion of liberalism rather than “an essence we must defend or an empty homogeneous space we must possess.”⁴ This paradigm, which McKay first proposed in the *Canadian Historical Review Forum*, has met with an extensive and diverse response.⁵

Christopher Dummitt and Michael Dawson, in their 2009 edited volume *Contesting Clio's Craft: New Directions and Debates in Canadian History*, suggest that the questions that dominate debate among academic Canadian historians in the first decade of the twenty-first century include these: Why is the public so ignorant about Canadian history? And who is to blame? Is Canadian history “dead”? If so, who killed it? Are we naively clinging to empirical ideas about truth and a knowable past in the face of post-structuralism, discourse analysis, and our postmodern condition? Such questions have generated vigorous debate, but Dummitt and Dawson argue that they are overused and even stale because they have not changed over the past twenty years. They suggest that other debates are beginning to take their place, some of which are tackled in their collection.⁶ For example, Dummitt argues in his chapter that the clarion call of social history for an ever more inclusive history has lost its intellectual originality and that it is time to move on.⁷ Adele Perry disagrees, arguing that the task is to rethink “the past through the categories of race, ethnicity, class, gender, region, sexuality and colonization.”⁸ Magda Fahrni asks how we can explain the increasing reluctance of English Canadian scholars to study Quebec and what

the place of Quebec ought to be in current historical writing on Canada.⁹ Andrew Smith investigates the link between Canada's imperial past and the fact that this country is seen internationally as a success story.¹⁰ Michael Dawson and Catherine Gidney probe the dilemma of how the decisions we make around periodization shape our version of the past. Finally, Dummitt and Dawson ask whether the very notion of Canadian history is now passé.¹¹ Such questions are intriguing and provide a glimpse of possible future directions.

If history is contentious, history in schools is a battleground. Canadians are asking: Are we historically illiterate as a nation? Why aren't history teachers more effective? What academic preparation should history teachers have? Why must we have a separate and different history curriculum in every province? Should we have a national curriculum for Canadian history? How can we best teach national history in a nation that is culturally and ethnically divided? Why are history textbooks so boring? How should we assess students' historical literacy? Why do our children seem to know so little about Canadian history? Are we teaching them enough about their past to enable them to make informed judgments about the best course for their futures? How should schools be using new technologies to teach history?

Notwithstanding what appears to be an acute current crisis, three issues emerge as perennial sources of contention: inadequate or inaccurate representations of the past in authorized textbooks; the stature and place of history as a school subject; and its purposes and pedagogy.

Although we cannot assume that the content of a prescribed textbook neatly encapsulates what teachers teach and students learn, the textbook has been central to history instruction and until mid-twentieth century served as *de facto* curriculum. Textbooks have often been located at the centre of controversy.¹² In January 1920, for example, historian W.L. Grant's *History of Canada* was abruptly removed from British Columbia classrooms and teachers were directed to teach civics for the remainder of the year because no alternative history textbook was available. Criticism centred on two issues. The first stemmed from the divide between anglophones and francophones. There were objections to Grant's tolerant treatment of the actions of the Métis during the 1869 and 1885 armed resistances against the Canadian government. He was also criticized for not being sufficiently laudatory about British actions during the First World War, nor sufficiently critical of the Germans. Overall, he was accused of being anti-British, anti-Protestant, pro-German, and pro-French Catholic. This occurred despite his

impeccable credentials as a historian, his having been decorated for his war-time service, and his position as head of the prestigious – and very British – Upper Canada College in Toronto. A somewhat similar controversy took place in New Brunswick around Myers's *General History Textbook*.¹³

There has been major concern about the very different depictions of Canadian history in the textbooks used by francophone students in Quebec and those used by anglophone students in the rest of Canada.¹⁴ In a 1970 study sponsored by the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism, Marcel Trudel and Genevieve Jain commented that after 1760 the texts “do not even seem to be talking about the same country! The English-speaking authors do their best to give an overall history of Canada, while the French authors ... hardly talk about anything but the history of Quebec and its expansion beyond its borders.”¹⁵ This “socialization into discord” was corroborated by later studies conducted by Paul Lamy, J.P. Richert, and Marshal Conley and Kenneth Osborne.¹⁶

During the 1970s and 1980s, attention turned to the depictions of Aboriginal peoples, women, and ethnic groups other than English and French. A 1971 study sponsored by the Ontario Ministry of Education and the Ontario Human Rights Commission examined 143 history textbooks authorized in Ontario. In their report, *Teaching Prejudice*, the authors, Garnet McDiarmid and David Pratt of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), concluded that “we are most likely to encounter in textbooks devoted Christians, great Jews, hardworking immigrants, infidel Moslems, primitive Negroes, and savage Indians.”¹⁷ This study was followed by others, many of them carried out by provincial human rights commissions.¹⁸ As a result of these studies, some textbooks were removed from provincially authorized lists and textbook selection criteria were mandated in every province. Such criteria continue to be used by authors and publishers during the textbook development process, as well as by provincial textbook selection committees when textbooks to support the curriculum are being authorized.

The second perennial source of contention in the schools concerns the stature of history in the curriculum and its presumed demise, its place assumed by social studies. Canada's ten provinces and three territories have control over their own school curricula, and most have chosen the interdisciplinary subject of social studies over the discipline of history.¹⁹ Social studies encompasses history but also embraces elements of geography, sociology, anthropology, and other social science disciplines. In some provinces, at particular times, it has taken an issues or values approach, incorporating

history only as it is relevant to the consideration of contemporary problems of public or personal concern. Social studies became increasingly prominent in the 1930s, at a time when progressive education influences were coming to the fore. Its interdisciplinary nature placed it at the core of “enterprise” or activity-oriented project-based curricula in elementary schools, especially in Alberta, British Columbia, and Ontario.

Opposition to the place of social studies in the curriculum was eloquently expressed by historian Hilda Neatby in *So Little for the Mind* (1953), which achieved bestseller status. Famously condemning social studies as “the truly typical part of the progressive curriculum with its obsession for indoctrination,” Neatby noted that it was “taught not only without the classic distinctions between geography, history and politics, but also without the logical arrangement of place, time, and causation ordinarily considered to be inherent in these disciplines.”²⁰ More recently, a 1996 issue of *Canadian Social Studies: The History and Social Science Teacher* examined the state of history and social studies in Canada. Ken Osborne, an eminent history educator and historian of history education, concluded his article in that issue with this dramatic statement: “The downgrading of history ... is neither an aberration nor an accident. It is part of a wider move to sweep the very idea of democratic citizenship aside.”²¹

Perhaps the strongest expression of the presumed demise of history was historian J.L. Granatstein’s *Who Killed Canadian History?* (1998; 2nd ed. 2007).²² This bestselling polemic blamed the end of history as a school subject on a range of lethal causes, including these: the interdisciplinary subject of social studies, which had resulted in a diluted version of history in many provinces; the limited research focus of many historians; an overemphasis on teaching skills rather than content; and the success of determined interest groups in getting their narrow agendas into the curriculum, which had resulted in a fragmentation of the national narrative and an overemphasis on negative aspects of our history. Granatstein’s most potent vitriol, though, was heaped on social studies. Response to his book was swift and heated on both sides of the debate.²³

Over the past decade, the Dominion Institute, a charitable organization formed in 1997 with the purpose of helping “Canadians connect in meaningful ways with the country’s history, shared citizenship and democratic institutions and values,”²⁴ has administered tests of Canadians’ knowledge about people and events in our past. People have performed poorly. In 2009 the institute assessed provincial history and social studies curricula and found their history content wanting. Its Report Card, which assessed the

amount – and to some extent the quality – of Canadian history in the curriculum in each of Canada's provinces and territories, awarded marks ranging from B+ to an F.²⁵ The institute has been skilful in handling the media, and announcements of the knowledge surveys and the Report Card have garnered a great deal of attention, resulting in much wringing of hands over Canadians' lack of knowledge of their history.²⁶

The third perennial debate is centred on the purposes of history as a school subject and how it should be taught. The assumption underlying the Dominion Institute quizzes is that the more knowledge people possess about events, people, and places in Canada's past, the stronger their sense of identity with their nation. The implied purpose for the teaching of history, then, is to build a strong sense of national identity. There are two problems with this reasoning. The first is that we do not *know* that more information leads to a stronger sense of identity. A recent study by Jack Jedwab, President of the Association for Canadian Studies, indicates the opposite.²⁷ Second, there is no agreement that a sense of national identity should be the *raison d'être* for teaching history in schools. Many teacher education faculty members, provincial curriculum developers, historians, teachers, and students would disagree with such a goal. History educator Peter Seixas, for example, has argued for a "critical disciplinary history" – that is, a history that challenges students to ask questions about historical evidence and the construction of historical accounts.

To date, there is not a great deal of empirical data about what actually happens in history (or social studies) classrooms, though there are anecdotal accounts, such as the following:

Mr. Norris Belton taught social studies. A man with a grey brushcut, who wore glasses that magnified his eyes, rumpled blue blazers and grey flannels, his teaching style was to have the class underline important phrases in the social studies textbook. His classes consisted of forty minutes of his reading a few pages, and stopping every few words so kids could underline an important phrase. What happened of course was that you became an expert underliner. You'd underline some phrases with single lines and some with double lines, and quickly got the knack of whipping out your ruler and drawing perfect lines. What the lines were under didn't sink in very far.²⁸

What Culture? What Heritage? published in 1968, is still the only pan-Canadian investigation of history (and civics) education as it is taught in

schools ever conducted in Canada. This study criticized classroom history as a “bland, consensus story, told without the controversy that is an inherent part of history ... a dry-as-dust account of uninterrupted political and economic progress,” and history pedagogy as a matter of consigning students to the role of “bench bound listeners.”²⁹ It is doubtful whether this pedagogical approach would achieve either national identity goals or the goals of a critical disciplinary history. The report sparked debate in at least one provincial legislature, was widely covered in the media, and as with *So Little for the Mind*, achieved bestseller status.³⁰

A Way Forward

Since 1996, a remarkable confluence of events has created an agenda for history education research. That year, Peter Seixas of the University of British Columbia published “Conceptualizing Growth in Historical Understanding” in *The Handbook of Education and Human Development: New Models of Learning, Teaching, and Schooling*. In this groundbreaking article, Seixas articulated a framework for the field of history education, mapping out six concepts of historical thinking: significance, epistemology and evidence, continuity and change, progress and decline, empathy (perspective taking) and moral judgment, and agency.³¹ This article, which built on and reinterpreted work by Peter Lee, Rosalyn Ashby, Christopher Portal, and others in the United Kingdom, established a research agenda for Canadian scholars.³²

The next event of central importance was the “Giving the Past a Future” Conference, sponsored by the McGill Institute for the Study of Canada in January 1999. Touted as the largest Canadian conference ever on the teaching and learning of history, it had 750 people in attendance. This conference marked the beginning of what is now a decade-long biennial series of national conferences on history education sponsored by the Association for Canadian Studies, often in conjunction with provincial history and social studies teachers’ associations.

Perhaps the most unique aspect of this conference was the remarkable array of people and organizations it brought together. These included historians; history education scholars; provincial Department of Education curriculum officials; public historians, including museum educators and curators; some schoolteachers; and representatives of a variety of organizations, including the National Film Board of Canada, Veterans Affairs Canada, and the Bronfmann Foundation, producer of the popular *Heritage*