

Canadians and Their Pasts

Del Muisse

Volume 37, Number 1, Winter 2008

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/acad37_1for03

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Department of History at the University of New Brunswick

ISSN

0044-5851 (print)

1712-7432 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Muisse, D. (2008). Canadians and Their Pasts. *Acadiensis*, 37(1), 93–99.

Canadians and Their Pasts

“CANADIANS AND THEIR PASTS” EMERGED OUT OF OUR SENSE that the role of the past in Canadians’ everyday lives needed to be examined systematically if we were to come to grips with the implications of the supposed “memory crisis” that has been boiling near the surface of Canadian public life since the turn of the century.¹ That crisis is multi-dimensional, encompassing a concern for the supposed historical illiteracy of young and old alike as well as broader challenges to the central place occupied by the history of predominant groups in our national narratives. It is a crisis that is being played out throughout the western world as people and their governments grapple with the uncertainties of postmodernity. More recently, we see it played out in the intense public debates surrounding the Canadian War Museum’s treatment of the strategic bombing of German cities during the Second World War in its new exhibit hall.²

Canadians began to engage some of these complex issues at a conference sponsored by the McGill Institute for the Study of Canada/Association of Canadian Studies – “Giving the Past a Future” – held in Montreal in February 1999. Discussions there were dominated by the supposed decline of Canada’s national history narrative in the aftermath of Jack Granatstein’s lament *Who Killed Canadian History?*³ Mark Starowicz’s keynote speech at this conference outlined the contours of his *Canada: A People’s History* television series, then in production. In that speech he highlighted a broad concern for the future of the past in the public arena, giving particular attention to the problem of finding a space for Canadian content in a rapidly emerging multi-channel universe.⁴

In Winnipeg, a year and a half later, a companion conference (“Giving the Future a Past”), again spearheaded by the Association of Canadian Studies and this time joined by the National History Society, expanded on the themes developed in 1999; but it also featured a massive trade fair with all manner of federal and provincial heritage and other government agencies hawking their wares for the primarily academic and school-teaching communities present. Three subsequent conferences/workshops, with a more scholarly approach, further explored aspects of the theme of public and scholarly aspects of historical memory: one at the University of British Columbia in August 2001 (“Canadian Historical Consciousness in an International Context: Theoretical Frameworks”); one at the University of Western

1 “Canadians and Their Pasts” is a Community-University Research Alliances (CURA) project sponsored by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC). It is based at Laval University where it is directed by Professor Jocelyn Letourneau. Co-investigators include Margaret Conrad (University of New Brunswick or UNB), Del Muise (Carleton), Gerry Friesen (Manitoba), David Northrup (York), and Peter Sexias and Kadriye Ercikan (University of British Columbia or UBC).

2 For a review of the Canadian case and a discussion of the broader contexts of the history wars in an international context as well as some preliminary findings of *Canadians and Their Pasts*, see Margaret Conrad, Jocelyn Letourneau, and David Northrup, “Canadians and Their Pasts: An Exploration in Historical Consciousness,” *The Public Historian* (forthcoming 2008).

3 Jack Granatstein, *Who Killed Canadian History* (Toronto: Harper Collins, 1998).

4 Mark Starowicz, *Making History: The Remarkable Story Behind CANADA: A PEOPLE’S HISTORY* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2003).

Ontario (“The Future of the Past”) in March 2002; and one at the University of New Brunswick (“Heritage, History, and Historical Consciousness: A Symposium on Public Uses of the Past”) in October 2003.⁵ All three symposia, as well as two subsequent Canadian Studies conferences (Halifax in 2003 and Edmonton in 2005), highlighted the new preoccupations of historians and other scholars, archivists, and school teachers working in the trenches with issues of Canadian identity and the nature of the historical consciousness of Canadians.

Meanwhile, the 1990s had spawned the birth of three non-governmental organizations dedicated to expanding public awareness of Canadian history: Canada’s National History Society (1994), the Dominion Institute (1997), and Historica (1999) all contributed in their own various ways to public discussions about the place of the past in our contemporary lives. In this context, some of us were also exploring the major initiatives in the field of collective historical consciousness undertaken in the United States and Australia, which pointed towards the apparent contradiction between the supposed indifference of the general population to formal history and their engagement with the past in a variety of ways. Scores in tests designed to see if people can reproduce canonical dates and personages are no better in those two countries than that achieved in the annual Dominion Institute polls in Canada, and all three countries have a similar amount of breast-beating about the decline of historical consciousness.⁶ But the apparent lack of ability to recall dates and important personages for national pollsters has not been matched by any parallel sense that the past is not important in people’s everyday lives. In fact, the personal pasts of the great majority of those polled in both Australia and the United States indicated a strong interest in family-centred understandings of people’s presents firmly rooted within the past experience of those same families and communities.⁷

With this in mind, six scholars who had been engaged at various levels in many of the above mentioned conferences and symposia set out to explore Canadian responses to issues of historical consciousness amongst the general population. The core group included Margaret Conrad (UNB), Kadriye Ercikan (UBC), Gerry Friesen (Manitoba), Jocelyn Letourneau (Laval), Del Muiise (Carleton), and Peter Seixas (UBC). When discussions began in the summer of 2003, we immediately determined that to undertake a national survey we had better have someone along who understood such things better than we did. We began discussions with David Northrup and John Pollard of the Institute for Social Research at York University, who subsequently

5 Some of the papers from “Canadian Historical Consciousness in an International Context” appear in Peter Seixas, ed., *Theorizing Historical Consciousness* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004).

6 Dominion Institute poll results are reported on their Web site at <http://www.dominion.ca/>. For an introduction to debates about the place of history in the public life of Australia and the United States see Stewart MacIntyre and Anna Clark, *The History Wars* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2003) and Edward T. Linenthal and Tom Englehardt, eds., *History Wars: The Enola Gay and other Battles for the American Past* (New York: Henry Holt, 1996).

7 See Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998) and Paula Hamilton and Paul Ashton, “At Home with the Past: Initial Findings from the Survey,” *Australian Cultural History*, 23 (2003), pp. 5-30. This special issue of *Australian Cultural History* includes several articles dealing with results from the Australian survey. A monograph written by Hamilton and Ashton is forthcoming.

joined us as co-investigators. We applied for funding for a national survey modeled on the American and Australian examples while suitably amended to account for Canadian realities. We explored the Community-University Research Alliances (CURA) programme of the Social Science and Humanities Research Council in order to add a community dimension and to involve various heritage organizations in our study.⁸ CURA is a programme with sufficient flexibility and funding to allow for the long-term planning of the scholarly work of the survey while, at the same time, combining such an endeavour with the more public and applied elements of a variety of partnered projects. Once we decided on that course, we sought out partners to round out our exploration of the attitudes of Canadians toward their pasts. The application was successful in the 2005 round and the project began in the spring of 2006.⁹

The national survey at the core of this project consists of 2,000 interviews sampling the opinions of randomly selected Canadians from across the country, and it will be completed by the late fall of 2007. In order to maximize our ability to make comparisons between the five “regions,” we have allocated an equal share – 400 interviews apiece – to Atlantic Canada, Quebec, Ontario, the Prairies, and British Columbia.¹⁰ We will not undertake any surveying of the three northern jurisdictions for this particular phase of the project. In addition to the national survey, there will be four supplemental samples. These include a special sample of 100 First Nations people in and around Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, 100 Acadians from New Brunswick, and 100 new Canadians from the Region of Peel (just west of Toronto). A further, much larger supplemental sample of 900 interviews will be undertaken across the four major metropolitan centres of Montreal, Toronto, Calgary/Edmonton, and Vancouver.

The survey, intended to be completed in about 20 to 25 minutes over the telephone, has both closed-ended (quantitative) and open-ended (qualitative) elements. It has been translated and respondents – no matter what their region – are invited to take the survey in French or English. All responses are recorded using computer-assisted telephone survey software, which helps facilitate preliminary analysis of all quantitative, closed-ended data. All the open-ended responses – where respondents are invited to elaborate on their answers – have been digitally recorded and are transcribed for more detailed analysis by the project’s investigators. With a total of about 3200 telephone interviews by the time we are finished, this will be by far the broadest interrogation of Canadians’ attitudes toward the past ever undertaken. It is also much larger than the sample drawn for either the American or Australian surveys. The Americans sampled the opinions of about 1500 people (when they added in some special surveys) while the Australians did just 350 telephone surveys and an additional 150 face-to-face interviews.

The survey includes six substantive areas of enquiry: 1) general interest in the past,

8 The CURA programme is profiled at http://www.sshrc.ca/web/apply/program_descriptions/cura_e.asp.

9 The complete list of partners and their projects, along with a description of the programme of research, can be found at <http://www.canadiansandtheirpasts.ca/CANADScriptorAdmin/scripto.asp?resultat=415753>. This is the official Web site of the project and reports on the project’s various activities. It will also be the focal point of much of the publication of results as they come available.

10 Weighting will be required before national estimates are produced because the sample is stratified by region.

2) activities related to the past, 3) understanding the past, 4) trustworthiness of information sources, 5) relative importance of various pasts, and 6) the sense(s) of the past.¹¹ These sections all start with a general question regarding the theme and are followed up with questions exploring just what is being experienced (done or felt) by the average person in relation to the past. We had challenges with wording throughout and there are, of course, additional complications when translating the questionnaire into French – a problem not faced by others who have done this sort of survey. A central issue was how to define “history” and “the past” as terms that were ambiguous to some extent, but we went with the American and Australian precedents. Interviewers were instructed to be careful to explain just what was meant by our terms and, in the end, we selectively inserted “history” for “the past” just to see if there was any distinction in people’s minds between the two.

Once respondents agreed to undertake the survey they were told the following: “We’d like to start by asking you some questions about the past. By past we mean everything from the very recent past to the very distant past, from your personal and family past to the past history of Canada and the pasts of other countries.” Interviewers then went on to get more detail about the various levels of engagement, trying to quantify just what sorts of activities the respondents might have been engaged in over the past year – from visiting museums, to watching movies, to reading books, to doing family history – as well as more everyday things such as looking at old photos with family members.

In the “understanding the past” area we tried to find out how people saw the past as a factor in their daily lives while they are engaged in the activities they had identified in the first section of the survey: “Please tell us how connected to THE PAST you feel when participating in the activity. By connected to THE PAST we mean understanding what people in the past experienced, feeling connected to their PAST and sharing this with others.” This line of questioning often led to discussions about which past was deemed to be more important to them. Interviewers were instructed to follow up on whichever activity respondents had highlighted. Many pasts come into play when people are given the opportunity to discuss the relevance of history to their lives, though family seems to trump nation or region in most people’s sense of which past is most important to them – something that the Australian and American surveys also found to be the case.

Responses related to “trustworthiness” were among the most interesting. In questions about historical significance a majority of people were not inclined to think the historical narratives they had received in school were particularly relevant or interesting to their lives. On the other hand, history/heritage institutions such as museums, archives, or historic sites were seen to be the most trustworthy and interesting locations for finding out about the past. When probed about this matter, many people cited the “authenticity” of existing documents and other artefacts as carriers of historical truth (though fewer questioned the selectiveness inherent in the presentations of such institutions). Clearly, the perceived authority vested in the quasi-official nature of such institutions was important for respondents even though

11 A copy of the survey designed to be completed on the Web is now available on the Web site of the Institute for Social Research at York University and can be accessed at www.yorku.ca/isr.

they might not have visited a museum in the recent past. People also often showed a great deal more willingness than many historians to validate the recollections of family members and others who “were there and know what happened.” Close to 90 per cent of respondents, in fact, found family stories either “very trustworthy” or “somewhat trustworthy.” Although this is not very different from the trustworthiness accorded to teachers or books, it is not nearly as trustworthy as museums or historic sites, which both scored in the 90 per cent range for “very or somewhat trustworthy” and over 60 per cent in the “very trustworthy” category.

The “sense of the past” section probed respondents about history’s place as a dynamic element of their self-consciousness, such as questions about how one would go about choosing between various versions of the past, and these revealed sophisticated notions about the need to compare sources. We also probed people’s vision of the broad arc of history (i.e., whether or not they felt there was some continuity of progress or decline). These lines of discussion were followed up with questions about what respondents felt would be important to pass along to future generations as a legacy of the past or present. This revealed a great deal of variety of information about what people felt was important to pass on to relatives or others (mostly family heirlooms and stories of one sort or another). Many of the qualitative responses in the interviews reflected a tremendous interest in genealogy and family history amongst some portions of the population. Almost a quarter of the respondents were actively interested in exploring their family roots.

While the full survey, along with the supplemental samples, will not be completed until sometime in 2008, the main lines of at least the quantitative responses are becoming clearer as we approach completion of the initial survey of 2000 Canadians. By and large the American and Australian findings are echoed in our Canadian survey, although a number of nuanced responses seem to address issues of region and community. Another emerging insight is that places with longer histories of occupation and more stagnant populations with direct connections to their communities’ histories – i.e., rural areas that have had sustained out-migration as well as Quebec generally – have a more powerful sense of the place their pasts play in their everyday lives. In contrast, larger urban centres with rapidly expanding populations of diverse backgrounds appear to have a more problematic appreciation of the place of Canadian history in their lives. The major issue for people in large urban areas who are not native to Canada is that they find it very difficult to see their own experiences reflected in the public institutions that are rooted in a pioneer experience that largely predates their arrival in Canada. In addition, the relevance of particular pasts for all of those surveyed reveals some of the same trends that are apparent in the American and Australian surveys – i.e., the pasts of family and immediate community are more important to people than either provincial or national history. Results also reflect how people now come to their sense of history from a wide variety of media, and how not much of this is very directly connected to the activities of academically based scholarship. While such media as television, the Internet, and popular literature all find some resonance with people searching for relevance in the past, it is public agencies such as museums and historic sites that rate at the top of virtually everyone’s list of safe places to find accurate history.

A number of partner projects located at various points across the country will undertake studies designed to explore just how the history of their community

intersects with the public dimensions of our heritage industries. Included among these will be a special exhibit at the Peel Heritage Centre to be undertaken in collaboration with local immigrant communities to explore elements of their transition to Canada. Another initiative will examine how a Web site developed by the Union of British Columbia Indian Chiefs on the topic of treaty rights is being used and perceived by various user groups and thus contributing to a broader understanding of the perception of treaties by educators and members of the public. Yet another project explores how the *Historica fairs* (formerly the *Heritage fairs*) undertaken by the *Historica Foundation of Canada* have affected the thousands of children who participate in these annual events at the local, regional, and national level.

Two partnered projects are based in Atlantic region heritage agencies. The Association of Heritage Industries of Newfoundland and Labrador will, starting in the spring of 2008, undertake a series of focus groups to assist them to come to a better understanding of the role local heritage agencies play in Newfoundland and Labrador. And, in collaboration with the *Musée de la Civilisation* in Quebec City, the *Musée Acadien* at the *Université de Moncton* will measure the impact on school children of a new exhibit presenting a comprehensive overview of Acadian history. The project will survey students' sense of Acadian heritage before and after visits to see how the attempt to tell a comprehensive narrative of the history of Acadia is received by students from various age groups.¹²

A national project sponsored by the Canadian Museums Association has strong regional roots. Del Muise and Lon Dubinsky have completed a series of focus groups at various sites across the country. They are designed to enquire into the role that volunteers and regular users of museums, such as school teachers and community and family historians, envisage their institutions performing in promoting historical consciousness. The first two sessions were held at the New Brunswick Museum in Saint John in the fall of 2006; eight others were subsequently held across the country at Kamloops, Brampton, Winnipeg, Montreal, and Quebec City. They reveal a widespread concern for the future of museums as public agencies dealing with public memory. This goes beyond a concern for the future of these publicly funded agencies in periods of fiscal restraint. More deeply felt is the concern for the resilience of our long-standing museum practice in the face of dramatic demographic change. Problems of community representation in such museums are at the core of this anxiety about the future; museums face issues of inclusiveness and contestation as people raise questions about how groups such as New Canadians or First Nations are to be accommodated within the sometimes narrow conception of museums that represent the pioneering traditions of only some of a community's residents.¹³

Overall, it is still too early to tell just what "Canadians and Their Pasts" will reveal about our multiple meanings of the past. Rather than see the project definitively answering the question "What do Canadians think of the past?" we hope to initiate a public discussion that will get beyond preoccupations about Canadians' hopeless

12 The exhibit depicting the history of the Acadians is profiled at <http://www2.umoncton.ca/cfdocs/etudacad/maum/index.cfm?page=histoire§ion=0>.

13 A brief discussion of some aspects of the focus groups is presented in Lon Dubinsky and Del Muise, "Partnering with the Past: The Canadians and Their Pasts Project," *Muse*, (Winter, 2007) (in press).

scores on polls about master narratives as well as preoccupations with the potential divisiveness of regional or local history. This discussion will neither be resolved nor will it likely go away in the near future. As we roll out the results of the survey and the projects being undertaken by our various partners over the next few years our hope is that a heightened awareness of the subtleties of historical understanding will permit a more informed discussion of the ways in which the past continues to be a central part of the present of all Canadians.

The vitality characterizing the discussions of the place of historical understandings in our daily lives – irrespective of respondents' background or geographical location – was palpable throughout the survey process. Our experienced interviewers expressed initial concern that people would never undertake a 20-minute or more telephone interview when called. Once engaged, though, respondents were fulsome and detailed in responding to questions. The interviewers' primary task was mostly to keep the respondents on time and on topic, so wide-ranging was their interest in the subject matter of the interview. And anecdotal evidence gathered from interviewers indicates that this was one of the most interesting surveys to conduct from the perspective of the enthusiasm and engagement expressed by respondents. When asked if they would be interested in continuing the dialogue at some future date, 75 per cent of our respondents agreed to do so. Participants in the focus groups conducted with museum users also were eager for further discussion of the role of history in their lives. This is a very positive indication that Canadians are more than willing to engage in serious discussions about the place of history in their lives. It remains for us to establish just how those conversations can be continued. The benchmarks and contacts we are establishing with "Canadians and Their Pasts" will undoubtedly inform much of the future research in this field.

DEL MUISE