

2007 Presidential Address of the CHA
Public History and its Discontents or History in the Age of
Wikipedia

Margaret Conrad

Volume 18, numéro 1, 2007

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/018252ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/018252ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada

ISSN

0847-4478 (imprimé)

1712-6274 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce document

Conrad, M. (2007). 2007 Presidential Address of the CHA: Public History and its Discontents or History in the Age of Wikipedia. *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association / Revue de la Société historique du Canada*, 18(1), 1–26.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/018252ar>

Résumé de l'article

In keeping with the Congress theme of “Bridging Communities: Making Public Knowledge, Making Knowledge Public,” this paper reflects on issues relating to public history and the impact of the Internet — that most public of media — on the ways in which academic historians create and disseminate knowledge. It explores the rise of public history as a profession and field of study over the past three decades, the efforts of the Canadian Historical Association (CHA) since its founding in 1922 to reach a broader public, and the impact of the Internet on the work of professional historians. By raising questions about the role of academic historians in general and of the CHA in particular in bridging what on the surface seems to be the divergent interests of academic and public history, it contributes to a larger discussion that will almost certainly preoccupy CHA presidents for the foreseeable future: where academic history and the arts disciplines generally fit into the postmodern university and into the rapidly expanding world of knowledge fuelled by the Internet and its related technologies.



Photo by Charlotte Gray

*Margaret Conrad and Bucky, an albino beaver who graces the offices
of Canada's National History Society in Winnipeg*

*Margaret Conrad et Bucky, un castor albinos qui honore
de sa présence les bureaux de la Société d'histoire nationale
du Canada à Winnipeg*

2007 PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS OF THE CHA

Public History and its Discontents or History in the Age of *Wikipedia*

MARGARET CONRAD

Abstract

In keeping with the Congress theme of “Bridging Communities: Making Public Knowledge, Making Knowledge Public,” this paper reflects on issues relating to public history and the impact of the Internet — that most public of media — on the ways in which academic historians create and disseminate knowledge. It explores the rise of public history as a profession and field of study over the past three decades, the efforts of the Canadian Historical Association (CHA) since its founding in 1922 to reach a broader public, and the impact of the Internet on the work of professional historians. By raising questions about the role of academic historians in general and of the CHA in particular in bridging what on the surface seems to be the divergent interests of academic and public history, it contributes to a larger discussion that will almost certainly preoccupy CHA presidents for the foreseeable future: where academic history and the arts disciplines generally fit into the postmodern university and into the rapidly expanding world of knowledge fuelled by the Internet and its related technologies.

Introduction

Of what value are the Canadian Historical Association’s presidential addresses? In the 1990s, the Council seemed to think they were important enough to make them the centrepiece of the CHA’s first foray into Internet publishing. Every presidential address delivered between 1922 and 1997 became accessible on the CHA website in the fall of 1998, but few of these addresses, all carefully crafted by some of Canada’s most prominent historians, seem to have had much

I want to express my thanks to Lyle Dick, Craig Heron, and Peter Seixas who took the time to make valuable comments on an earlier version of the paper; to Jocelyn Létourneau for answering my questions relating to public history in Quebec; and to Rebecca Colborne, who edited and translated my prose.

impact. The Web of Science reports that 11 of the 29 presidential addresses delivered since 1975 have never been cited and only two addresses — that of J.B. Conacher in 1975 and Phillip Buckner in 1993 — have received more than three citations.¹ While these statistics tell us more about the inadequacies of the Web of Science than they do about the impact of CHA presidential addresses on Canadian scholarship, the general findings are telling and temper any hubris I may harbour about the importance of my subsequent musings.

I have decided against focusing my remarks on what CHA presidents have said in the past, though this would, I think, be a good topic for a presidential address. Instead, in keeping with the theme of this Congress, I will reflect on issues relating to public history and the impact of the Internet — that most public of media — on the ways in which academic historians create and disseminate knowledge. My own career has been defined in large measure by involvement in various aspects of what falls into the ever-expanding category of public history,² which for the purposes of this paper, I define as the practice of history for a general rather than an academic audience.³ Public history has also consumed the major portion of my time as a member of the CHA executive over the past three years. As co-chair of the CHA's Internet Communications Committee in 2004-2005, and then as President, I have worried over the processes and impact of posting our journal and booklets on the Internet and in developing a more interactive website.⁴ Almost as much of my time was spent responding to the storm of protest that erupted following the airing of *Prairie Giant: The Tommy Douglas Story* on CBC early in 2006. While the film received some well-aimed criticism by academics, David Smith and Bill Waiser among them,⁵ it would no doubt have been consigned to the limbo of forgotten things had it not become the focus of a crusade by Margaret Gardiner, who was determined to have the film pulled from the CBC catalogue because of the flat-footed way that her grandfather, James Gardiner, was portrayed.⁶

1 My research assistant, Kelly Chevas, compiled these statistics in March 2007.

2 I worked as an editor of history textbooks for Clark, Irwin Publishing Company (1968-1969) before taking a position in the history department at Acadia University in 1969; have served on the advisory boards of various organizations designed to promote history to the larger public, including Canada's National History Society and Historica; have co-written several textbooks; and now deliver history on the Internet through history projects associated with the Atlantic Canada Portal <<http://atlanticportal.hil.unb.ca>>.

3 More specifically, public history includes the practice of history in public institutions such as archives, historic sites, and museums, and in private organizations founded to promote history, ranging from community-based historical societies to entities aspiring to a national audience such as Canada's National History Society, the Dominion Institute, and Historica. History books, documentaries, movies, and websites produced for the general public fall into this category, as do pedagogical tools of various kinds, including the venerable textbook.

4 Margaret Conrad, "Going Down the Digital Highway," *CHA Bulletin* 32, no. 2 (2006): 4-6.

5 Bill Waiser, "Story of the father of medicare needed more time on the waiting list," *National Post* (9 March 2006); David Smith, "Prairie Giant," *CHA Bulletin* 32, no. 2 (2006): 3, 5.

PUBLIC HISTORY AND ITS DISCONTENTS
OR HISTORY IN THE AGE OF WIKIPEDIA

Although the academic consensus is that *Prairie Giant* falls short of the highest standards of accuracy, fairness, and balance,⁷ the CHA cannot advocate the banning of films any more than it would the burning of books. Both scholars and film makers produce some terrible corkers, but in a liberal democratic society, we are encouraged to live with them, criticize them, and, in the best of all possible worlds, use them as inspiration to produce alternative understandings of the past. If nothing else, the controversy over the *Prairie Giant* reflects the challenges that face academic historians in a world where history has become a commodity for production and consumption at levels and in ways unimaginable when I began my university teaching career in 1969.

Prairie Giant was only one of many issues relating to public history that landed on the CHA desk during my watch. Others include the malicious torching of the Black Loyalist historic site in Birchtown, Nova Scotia; Senate committee hearings on the Canadian War Museum's interpretation of the Allied Bombing Campaign in the Second World War;⁸ threats to federal programs supporting museums, heritage buildings, and Canadian Studies programs; issues relating to copyright, open access,⁹ the preservation of 'digital born' research, and a national digitization strategy¹⁰; and two invitations to become a partner in new ventures: one, to participate in a network designed to address the teaching of history in schools,¹¹ and the other, to establish a major awards program in Canadian

6 James Garfield Gardiner served as a Liberal member of the Legislative Assembly of Saskatchewan from 1914 to 1935 and was premier of the province from 1926-1929 and 1934-1935. In 1935 he was elected to the Canadian House of Commons and served as Minister of Agriculture from 1935 to 1957.

7 In his classic study of history on film, Robert A. Rosenstone argues that film makers must be allowed to indulge in alteration, compression, invention, and metaphor; but, to be taken seriously, they cannot violate what we already know about the past. In other words, there are "false inventions" and "true inventions," and film makers will be judged by their ability to situate their work into the body of information that is available in other sources. Robert A. Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 64-79.

8 See "An Enduring Controversy: The Strategic Bombing Campaign Display in the Canadian War Museum," Interim Report of the Subcommittee on Veterans Affairs of the Standing Senate Committee on National Security and Defence," June 20070, <<http://www.parl.gc.ca/39/1/parlbus/combus/senate/com-e/defe-e/rep-e/rep16jun07-e.htm>>, (viewed 23 July 2007).

9 The CHA has become a leader among scholarly societies in supporting the movement to adopt open access for academic research in peer review journals. Open access is defined by the Canadian Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences as "digital, online, and free of charge for anyone with an Internet connection." See the CFHSS position paper, published 25 March 20067: <<http://www.fedcan.ca/english/pdf/advocacy/OpenAccessPosition-e.pdf>>, (viewed 15 May 2007).

10 Library and Archives Canada, "Toward a Canadian Digital Information Strategy" <<http://www.collectionscanada.ca/cdis/index-e.html>>, (viewed 28 March 2007).

11 In November 2006, Ruth Sandwell, coordinator of the History Education Network/Histoire et Éducation en Réseau (THEN/HiER), invited the CHA to become involved in a Cluster Grants application to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council.

history.¹² Requests for the CHA's endorsement of various heritage-related projects arrive almost daily. While calls for CHA intervention and support are not new, they are becoming more numerous, more insistent, and more challenging. The Congress theme of "Bridging Communities: Making Public Knowledge, Making Knowledge Public," thus comes at an opportune time for us to reflect on the role of academic historians in general and of the CHA in particular in bridging what on the surface seems to be the divergent interests of academic and public history.

In taking up this theme, I am contributing to a larger discussion that will almost certainly preoccupy CHA presidents for the foreseeable future: where academic history and the arts disciplines generally fit into the postmodern university and into the rapidly expanding world of knowledge fuelled by the Internet and its related technologies. In his 2001 presidential address, Chad Gaffield tackled this terrain from another angle when he explored areas of convergence in approaches to academic inquiry employed in the arts and sciences.¹³ My interest is in the convergence of academic and public history.

I will resist the temptation to dwell here on the value of history as an academic or applied pursuit. For my purposes, I will take it as given that history, like any other field in the humanities and social sciences, has value as a way of understanding the place of human beings in the world and therefore has a role to play in the education of citizens. I agree with Ken Osborne that the purpose of history education, both in or out of schools, is to stimulate interest in the past, a sense of connectedness with what happened before we were born, and an appreciation of the present in the context of the past and the future; to introduce us to the nature of history as a form of disciplined inquiry; to illustrate the range of human behaviour; to portray human beings as active agents in the historical process; and to help us understand the nature of the country of which we are citizens and of the world of which it is a part.¹⁴ Along with literature, history

12 Deborah Morrison, President and CEO of Canada's National History Society, is attempting to increase the profile of Canadian history by expanding the Society's own awards program, which includes the Pierre Berton Award for writers and producers of popular history, and the Governor Generals Awards for Excellence in Teaching Canadian History, into a more prominent affair.

13 Chad Gaffield, "Historical Thinking: C.P. Snow's Two Cultures, and a Hope for the Twenty-First Century," *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association 2001*, New Series, 12 (Ottawa 2001): 3-25.

14 Kenneth Osborne, "The State of History in Canadian Schools," paper presented at Heritage, History, and Historical Consciousness: A Symposium on Public Uses of the Past, University of New Brunswick, Fredericton, 21-22 October 2003, available online at: <<http://atlanticportal.hil.unb.ca:8000/archive/00000027/01/osborne.pdf>>, (viewed 20 February 2007). See also Ken Osborne, "'To the Past': Why We Need to Teach and Study History," in *To the Past: History Education, Public Memory, and Citizenship in Canada*, ed. Ruth Sandwell (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 103-31.

PUBLIC HISTORY AND ITS DISCONTENTS
OR HISTORY IN THE AGE OF WIKIPEDIA

has long been central to identifying, interpreting, and sharing the values upon which civil society depends. This kind of knowledge, much discounted in a society driven by stock market swings, the clash of civilizations, and doomsday scenarios, is important, perhaps even crucial, to our well-being as a species.

Public Histories

Before proceeding, it is necessary to reflect on the definition of “public history,”¹⁵ a term of recent vintage with multiple and meandering meanings. The extent to which this term has changed meaning over the past quarter century is underscored by John English’s article “The Tradition of Public History in Canada,” published in *The Public Historian* in 1983, in which he equated public history with the number of people with history degrees in prominent civil service positions, where they were not necessarily practicing historians.¹⁶ At the time, he was chided by C. James Taylor, Chairman of the Historical Research Group of the Professional Institute of the Public Service of Canada, for discounting the *practice* of history in federal government agencies such as the Public Archives of Canada, National Museum, Defence Department, and Historic Sites and Monuments Board.¹⁷ In the end, Taylor’s definition carried the day but the term public history is still highly problematic.¹⁸

The shortest and most common definition is that public history is “applied history,” but this does not get us very far. In the first American text devoted to the topic by Leslie H. Fishel, public history was described as the “adaption and application of the historian’s skills and outlook for the benefit of public and private enterprises.”¹⁹ This definition, too, has its limits. It is telling to discover that Debra DeRuyver, the managing editor of the Public History Resource Centre website, is as humbled as the rest of us when it comes to defining the term. She offers a selection of eight definitions from a variety of online sources, ending with an explanation of public history that will no doubt cause more than a few eyes to glaze. Public history, we are told, is:

- a set of theories, methods, assumptions, and practices guiding identification, preservation, interpretation, and presentation of historical artifacts,

15 Robert Kelley, who initiated a public history program at the University of California at Santa Barbara, claims to have invented the term “public history” in 1975. See Constance B. Shultz, “Becoming a Public Historian,” in *Public History: Essays from the Field*, ed. James B. Gardner and Peter S. LaPaglia, rev. ed. (Malibar, FL: Kreiger Publishing Company, 2004), 31.

16 John English, “The Tradition of Public History in Canada,” *The Public Historian*, 5, no. 1 (Winter 1983): 46-59.

17 C. James Taylor, “Public History in Canada,” *The Public Historian* 5, no. 4 (Autumn 1983): 5-6.

18 For a critique of the term “public history,” see Marc Riopel, « Réflexions sur l’application de l’histoire, » *Revue d’histoire de l’Amérique française* 57, no. 1 (Summer 2003): 5-21.

19 Barbara J. Howe and Emory L. Kemp, *Public History: An Introduction* (Malabar FL: Robert E. Kreiger Publishing, 1986), 12.

- texts, structures, and landscapes in conjunction with and for the public.
- an interactive process between the historian, the public, and the historical object.
- the belief that history and historical-cultural memory matter in the way people go about their day-to-day lives.²⁰

Even this comprehensive definition ignores some of the other applications of this complicated concept and, in 2007, may be seen to unnecessarily privilege public history with attributes of collegiality, collaboration, and community orientation.

In its narrowest sense, “public history” is a term now used to describe a profession and an academic discipline. We think of public historians as those working outside the academy in archives, museums, history sites, historical societies, government departments, private industries, and the various media. For the most part, these practitioners require the same awareness in the content, theories, and methods of historical inquiry as those toiling in the academic stream. What is presented to the public as history is usually not what is researched and debated in academic circles (though it could be), only the results of these time-consuming activities; but it often draws from research conducted in the academy. Ultimately, the difference between public and academic historians boils down to the manner of delivery and audience: academic historians research, write, and teach in university settings, often — but not exclusively — for each other; public historians also research, write, and teach, but they perform these tasks outside of a university milieu, often use methods other than written texts for presenting their work, and usually address a more diversified audience.²¹ We should not, I would argue, make too much of this distinction. As Craig Heron has argued, some historians, especially those involved in the new social history, deliberately set out to reach and interact with a wider public, and teaching in the classroom introduces academic historians to many of the challenges that face public historians when they try to communicate historical research to a relatively uninitiated audience.²²

20 <http://www.publichistory.org/what_is/definition.html>, (viewed 20 February 2007).

21 David Glassberg, “Public History and the Study of Memory,” *The Public Historian* 18, no. 2 (Spring 1996): 7-23. See also David Lowenthal, et al. “History and Memory: Roundtable Responses to David Glassberg’s ‘Public History and Public Memory,’” *The Public Historian*, 19, no. 2 (Spring 1997): 31- 72; and two special issues of journals: “The National Council on Public History: Reflections on a Twentieth Anniversary,” *The Public Historian*, 21, no. 3 (Summer 1999), and « L’histoire ‘publique’ : un enjeu pour l’histoire, » special issue of *Revue d’histoire de l’Amérique française* 57, no 1 (Summer 2003).

22 Craig Heron, “The Labour Historian and Public History,” *Labour/Le Travail* 45 (Spring 2000): 171-97. Heron offers an excellent reflection on his own experience as a public historian. See also Ken Cruikshank and Nancy Bouchier, “‘The Pictures are great but the text is a bit of a downer...’ Ways of Seeing and the Challenge of Exhibiting Critical History,” *Canadian Historical Review* 80, no 1 (March 1999): 96-113.

PUBLIC HISTORY AND ITS DISCONTENTS
OR HISTORY IN THE AGE OF WIKIPEDIA

In recent years, public history has also emerged as a “field” of study. It is largely an American creation and gained some coherence in the 1970s when employment in academic history plummeted just as public interest in history began to explode in our increasingly leisure-oriented society.²³ Demands for training on the part of cultural workers delivering history for public consumption quickly developed into specialized programs that emphasized skills of various kinds. While the United States has well over 100 programs in public history (and even more in related areas such as cultural resource management, museum studies, and archival studies),²⁴ Canada has relatively few. Indeed, it is difficult to tell how many we have. Where would one go for such information?²⁵ The United States and Australia each have a national association and a journal to support public history studies,²⁶ but Canada has neither.²⁷ It is for this reason that I welcome the initiative taken in 2006 under Lyle Dick’s leadership to revive the Public History Group as an affiliate of the CHA.

Offered primarily at the graduate level, public history programs in the United States are designed to train history graduates to apply their skills in a variety of settings. Constance B. Schultz argues that such programs differ from traditional M.A. and Ph.D. history training in relying more extensively on non-print sources such as material culture and oral history than is usually the case in academic circles, in emphasizing team work and cross-disciplinarity

23 Anita A. Jones, “Public History Now and Then,” *The Public Historian* 21, no. 3 (Summer 1999): 21-8.

24 The Public History Resource Center lists these programs on their website: <http://www.publichistory.org/education/where_study.asp>, (viewed 20 February 2007). It was last updated 15 August 2004.

25 I am indebted to Del Muise, Carleton University, for helping me sort out public history program offerings in Canada. It seems that Carleton, Concordia, Université du Québec à Montréal, and Western have active programs, and Cape Breton University is in the final processes of introducing one.

26 In the United States, the National Council on Public History was founded in 1979 and incorporated in 1980. It publishes a quarterly journal, *The Public Historian* (initially published in 1978 with the help of a Rockefeller Foundation grant), and a newsletter, *Public History News*. (See <<http://ncph.org/>>, viewed 20 February 2007). The Australian Centre for Public History was established in 1998, six years after the appearance of *The Public History Review*. See <<http://www.publichistory.uts.edu.au/>>, (viewed 20 February 2007). It is also likely to be some time before a Canadian counterpart to Ian R. Tyrrell’s *Historians In Public: The Practice of American History, 1890-1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005) appears.

27 A Public History Group was established at the annual meeting of the CHA in Hamilton, June 1987. According to the CHA minutes for that meeting, 4 June 1987, “The Group brings together all those who do applied work in history in public or private institutions, in government service, and as freelancers. It also includes those who teach or study public history curricula.” The group was active from 1987 to 1995 (e-mail from Marielle Campeau, the CHA’s former secretary and keeper of the organization’s collective memory, 12 July 2006). It was revived in 2006, following a meeting convened by CHA Council member and Parks Canada historian Lyle Dick.

(more attention is paid, for example, to archaeology, architecture, folklore, and geography), and in focusing on skills training (often relating to work in a museum, archives, or historic sites). While academic historians receive little formal training in the skills needed to succeed in a university setting — teaching and collegial behaviour most specifically — public history programs often include communications and managerial courses. Public historians are also increasingly urged to pay close attention to public opinion, which they are obliged to negotiate more directly than most academic historians do.²⁸ In the vanguard of what the new communications technologies promise for all historians, they are subject to “peer review” both by academics and by the general public.²⁹

The foregoing suggests another way that the term “public” is used in connection with history; that is, to describe individual and collective memory as it is created and recreated outside the academy. In academic circles, we increasingly use the terms “public memory” or “collective memory” to describe popular perceptions of the past in order to avoid confusion with the professional and field definitions of “public history” cited above. We are now beginning to understand that collective memory, rather than any academic consensus, serves as the basic framework for how most people engage the past. As James Wertsch has argued and others have documented, most of us embody “narrative templates” about the past that help to anchor us on the continuum of past, present, and future.³⁰ Whether the narrative is officially sanctioned by the state and celebrated in museums, monuments, historic sites, and textbooks; or the result of popular perceptions handed down in family and community contexts; or delivered by various popular media such as novels, film, television, and the Internet, public memory is often deeply rooted and difficult to dislodge.³¹ In countries undergoing regime changes, historians play a central role in recasting the official narrative and testifying before truth commissions; but alternative

28 Shultz, “Becoming a Public Historian,” 32-3, 37.

29 Paul Litt offers a perceptive reflection on the issues facing public historians in interpreting and communicating the past for the general public. See his “The Unbearable Loopyness of Being a Public Historian: Towards a Shared Conceptualization of the Practice of Public History,” paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Historical Association, 28 May 2007, Saskatoon.

30 J. V. Wertsch, *Voices of Collective Remembering* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

31 For a thoughtful exploration of the narrative templates among students in Quebec, see Jocelyn Létourneau et Sabrina Moisan, « Mémoire et récit de l’aventure historique chez les jeunes Québécois d’héritage canadien-français : coup de sonde, amorce d’analyse des résultats, questionnements, » *Canadian Historical Review* 85, no. 2 (June 2004): 325-56. See also “Remembering our Past: An Examination of the Historical Memory of Young Québécois,” in *To the Past*, ed., Sandwell, 70-87.

PUBLIC HISTORY AND ITS DISCONTENTS
OR HISTORY IN THE AGE OF WIKIPEDIA

narratives persist in “hidden transcripts,” ready for action when the occasion permits.³²

Popular understandings of the past frequently conflict with the truths claims of professional historians, both academic and public. In cases where the conflict becomes a source of widespread debate, we pile up ample evidence of the deep emotions that the past can unleash. Controversies such as those relating to *Prairie Giant* and Bomber Command, mentioned above, point to ways in which public perceptions of the past enliven historical debates in academic circles and have led to a sub-field of history called memory studies, which is yet another area sometimes described as “public history.” The application of public memory and political pressure to academic assumptions sometimes has unfortunate consequences, such as the firing of a curator or the closing of an exhibition; but they are the very stuff of memory studies and often lead to a better understanding both of the historical issue being contested and of the discipline of history itself. A significant outcome of the field of memory studies is that it has forced academic historians to recognize that their narrative of the past is only one of several competing for public attention and acceptance.³³

From a slightly different angle, public history, in all its definitions, conjures up the term “popular history,” which has long been used to distinguish academic approaches to the past from those designed to appeal to a broader audience. The growing popularization of history has troubled some scholars. In 1996 David Lowenthal drew a line in the sand with his book *Possessed by the Past: The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History*, in which he argued that a clear distinction must be made between what he called “history” and “heritage.”³⁴ Lowenthal’s comments were only the latest in a long tradition of complaints by university-based historians about antiquarians, popular historians, and the general public who approach history in ways that fall short of whatever academic benchmarks prevail at any given time. Not surprisingly, he was criticized for being too simplistic in analysis; but his point that heritage-mindedness was substituting the marketplace for research in constructing widely-consumed historical narratives raised alarm bells. In the preface to the second edition of his book — its appearance in 1998 only two years after the book was first published documents the widespread interest and controversy it engendered — Lowenthal remained adamant that the distinction between the *aims* of history and heritage be maintained:

32 Annie E. Coombes, *History after Apartheid: Visual Culture and Public Memory in a Democratic South Africa* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003); Ksenija Bilbija et al., eds., *The Art of Truth-Telling About Authoritarian Rule* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2005).

33 David Glassberg, *Sense of History: The Place of the Past in American Life* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001), 9.

34 David Lowenthal, *Possessed by the Past: The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History* (New York: Free Press, 1996).

The historian, however blinkered and presentist and self-deceived, seeks to convey a past consensually known, open to inspection and proof, continually revised and eroded as time and hindsight outdate truths. The heritage fashioner, however historically scrupulous, seeks to design a past that will fix identity and enhance well-being of some chosen individual or folk. History cannot be wholly dispassionate, or it will not be felt worth learning or conveying; heritage cannot totally disregard history, or it will seem too incredible to command fealty. But the aims that animate these two enterprises, and their modes of persuasion, are contrary to each other. To avoid confusion and unwanted censure, it is vital to bear that opposition in mind.³⁵

Lines in the sand are inevitably swept away by the tide, and Lowenthal's contention that academic and public approaches to the past can somehow be kept in hermetically sealed containers is not likely to hold. In many fields of human endeavour, the old binaries — public/private, professional/amateur, academic/popular — are collapsing. For example, the music world has coined the phrase "ProAm" to describe a context in which music can be made and distributed by almost anyone. The YouTube website is another manifestation of the amateur phenomenon trumping the professionals.

The view that anyone can be a historian nevertheless sits awkwardly with those of us who have spent a decade or more mastering a discipline that has standards for practitioners. The most fundamental of these is that historians must deal responsibly with the dimension of time, that historical analysis must follow the rules of evidence, that reflection on our own assumptions must be part of the research process, and that past events must be situated in their contexts. While we will never stop history being used in ways that defy these standards, even — and perhaps especially — in the academy, we have been remarkably negligent in conveying to the general public our view of what "good" history actually is and how difficult, we believe, it is to do. Our concern that schools still more often than not assign history courses to teachers who have no training in the field or that producers create historical films without the involvement of trained historians underscores the troubling gulf that sometimes separates public and academic approaches to the past. So, too, do studies conducted in the United States and Australia that suggest most people trust artifacts and eye witness accounts more than other sources of historical knowledge.³⁶

35 Lowenthal, *Possessed by the Past*, xi.

36 Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998); Paula Hamilton and Paul Ashton, eds., "Australians and the Past: A National Survey," *Australian Cultural History* (Special Issue), 22 (2003). Jocelyn Létourneau, a historian at Laval University, is currently principal investigator in a Community-University Research Alliance project (Canadians and Their Pasts), designed to follow the Americans and Australians in using a telephone survey to explore how Canadians engage the past. See <<http://www.canadiansandtheirpasts.ca>>, (viewed 12 April 2007).

PUBLIC HISTORY AND ITS DISCONTENTS OR HISTORY IN THE AGE OF WIKIPEDIA

Academic historians would be quick to point out that artifacts do not “speak for themselves” and that “being there is not enough” to render anyone a reliable source of information. These studies also suggest that most people are more interested in the history of their family and their cultural group than in the history of their county, a finding that will not sit well with those who value national political history above all others.

In a context in which history is increasingly commodity and spectacle, it becomes necessary for academic historians to generate a dialogue with the public about the uses and abuses of the past. This is not always a pleasant conversation, but it is one of the obligations of scholars in a democratic society who have the privilege of dealing in the coin of knowledge and ideas. As former CHA president Jean-Claude Robert argued persuasively in 2003, it is incumbent upon us as university professors also to be public intellectuals.³⁷ We have been too long focused on honing our professionalism and too little involved in the wider world where many people have a curiosity about the past and a passion for historical research equivalent to our own. What is unworthy, for example, about being a genealogist, an amateur historian, or what academics sneeringly call an “antiquarian”? Surely, we all work in the same corner of the knowledge vineyard and have a lot to learn from each other. American historian Carl Becker made this point in his much-cited article, “Everyman His Own Historian,” published in 1932,³⁸ in which he reversed the charge of relevance. Academic historians, he argued, needed to adapt their knowledge to the necessities of the present rather than “cultivate a species of dry professional arrogance growing out of the thin soil of antiquarian research.” Touché.

Public History in Canada

What we now call public history preceded academic history in Canada and the distinction between the two is of relatively short duration. Moreover, the lines between the two approaches to the past have always been contested and blurred. As in other nations of the western world, increased interest in historical inquiry in Canada coincided with the emergence of cultural and national identities that drew on the past for inspiration. The founding of history societies, the collection of primary documents, the publication of historical narratives, the enthusiasm for commemoration, and oral communication about the past across generations were all well established in British North America

37 Jean-Claude Robert, « L'historien et les médias, » *Revue d'histoire de l'Amérique française* 57, no. 1 (Été 2003): 57-69. The same point has been persuasively argued by Robert Weible, President of the National Council on Public History, 2005-2006 in “The Blind Man and His Dog: The Public and its Historians,” *The Public Historian*, 28, no. 4 (November 2006): 8-17.

38 Carl Becker, “Everyman His Own Historian,” *American Historical Review*, 37 (January 1932): 221-36.

before Confederation.³⁹ After 1867 interest in the past flourished. Carl Berger notes that, following its founding in 1882, the Royal Society and its affiliates became major outlets for “enthusiasm for recovering the past, and the literary departments of its *Transactions* in both French and English were dominated by historical studies.” Of the 36 organizations affiliated with the Royal Society in 1900, two-thirds were historical in character and included a group from the Six Nations and two women’s societies.⁴⁰ Meanwhile, the federal government followed the lead of Great Britain and the United States in creating publicly-funded institutions that attended to the preservation and presentation of the nation’s past, among them the Public Archives of Canada (1872),⁴¹ National Museum (1907), Historic Sites and Monuments Board (1919), Canadian War Museum (1942), and National Library (1953). Many of these initiatives had their origins in community and professional organizations, such as the Royal Society of Canada and the Historical Landmarks Association (1907). Indeed, the CHA is itself a child of the Historical Landmarks Association, which also spawned the Historical Sites and Monuments Board.⁴²

At the time of the CHA’s founding in 1922, academic historians and archivists made up less than one-seventh of CHA membership.⁴³ The story of the gradual professionalization of academic history and the CHA has been well-told by Carl Berger, Ronald Rudin, and Donald Wright, among others, and I will not repeat it here.⁴⁴ In recent years, the work of historians outside of the academy has also begun to receive some much-deserved academic attention, most notably in the collection of essays on female historians edited by Beverley Boutilier and Alison Prentice,⁴⁵ and in studies of oral history, especially as it

39 See, for example, Alan Gordon, *Making Public Pasts: The Contested Terrain of Montreal’s Public Memories, 1891-1930* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2001), Chapter 4. See also M. Brook Taylor, *Promoters, Patriots and Partisans: Historiography in Nineteenth-Century English Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989).

40 Carl Berger, *Honour and the Search for Influence: A History of the Royal Society of Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), 26-7.

41 Danielle Lacasse and Antonio Lechasseur, *The National Archives of Canada, 1872 – 1997*, Canadian Historical Association Historical Booklet No. 58 (Ottawa, 1997).

42 C. J. Taylor, *Negotiating the Past: The Making of Canada’s National Historic Parks and Sites* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1990).

43 Berger, *Honour and the Search for Influence*, 32.

44 Carl Berger, *The Writing of Canadian History: Aspects of English-Canadian Historical Writing since 1900*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986); Ronald Rudin, *Making History in Twentieth-Century Quebec* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997); Donald Wright, *The Professionalization of History in English Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005).

45 Beverly Boutilier and Alison Prentice, eds., *Creating Historical Memory: English-Canadian Women and the Work of History* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1997).

PUBLIC HISTORY AND ITS DISCONTENTS
OR HISTORY IN THE AGE OF WIKIPEDIA

relates to Aboriginal approaches to the past.⁴⁶ The scholarship on public commemorations, historical memory, and history education has also added greatly to our understanding of the way that official and popular notions of the past are constructed.⁴⁷ For many of us, the recent focus on “historical consciousness”⁴⁸ and collective memory has been a welcome respite from the history wars around curriculum content that preoccupied the profession in Canada and elsewhere in the 1990s.

After its founding, the CHA became increasingly dominated by historians ensconced in universities, but it continued to see its mandate as reaching a larger public. The CHA’s first major venture into public history was its Historical Booklet series, launched in 1953 with C.P. Stacey’s *The Undefended Border: The Myth and the Reality / La Frontière sans défense : le mythe et la réalité*. To date, some 64 booklets have been published in the series in both English and French. It was a remarkably successful initiative designed specifi-

46 See, for example, Julie Cruikshank, *Life Lived Like a Story* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1992).

47 In addition to the works by Alan Gordon and Ruth Sandwell cited above, see Ian McKay, *The Quest of the Folk: Antimodernism and Cultural Selection in Twentieth-Century Nova Scotia* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1994); Jonathan Vance, *Death So Noble: Memory, Meaning, and the First World War* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1997); H.V. Nelles, *The Art of Nation-Building: Pageantry and Spectacle at Quebec’s Tercentenary* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999); Jocelyn Létourneau, *Passer à l’avenir : Histoire, mémoire, identité dans le Québec d’aujourd’hui* (Montréal: Boréal, 2000), published in English as *A History for the Future: Rewriting Memory and Identity in Quebec* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2004); Colin Coates and Cecilia Morgan, *Heroines and History: Representations of Madeleine de Verchères and Laura Secord*. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001); K. T. Carlson, *The Power of Place, the Problem of Time: A Study of History and Aboriginal Collective Identity* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2003); Ronald Rudin, *Founding Fathers: The Celebration of Champlain and Laval in the Streets of Quebec, 1878-1908* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003). On history education, see two books by Kenneth Osborne, *Education: A guide to the Canadian school debate, or, who wants what and why?* (Toronto: Penguin, 1999) and *In Defence of History: Teaching the past and the meaning of democratic citizenship* (Toronto: Our Schools/Our Selves Education Foundation, 1995), as well as his article “‘Our History Syllabus Has us Gasping’: History in Canadian Schools—Past, Present and Future,” *Canadian Historical Review* 81, no. 3 (September 2000): 405-35. See also Bob Davis, *Whatever Happened to High School History? Burying the Political Memory of Youth: Ontario, 1945-1995* (Toronto: Lorimer, 1995).

48 On “historical consciousness,” see Peter Seixas, ed., *Theorizing Historical Consciousness* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004). See also Pierre Nora, ed., *Realms of Memory: The Construction of the French Past, Vol 2: Traditions*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996). Useful reflections on the teaching of history can be found in Peter N. Stearns, Peter Seixas, and Sam Wineburg, eds., *Knowing, Teaching and Learning History: National and International Perspectives* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), and Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001).

cally “to supply the general reader, the teacher, and the historical specialist with concise accounts of specific historical problems in Canadian history.” According to statistics supplied by longtime CHA volunteer Marielle Campeau, the CHA has sold nearly 1.3 million booklets over the past 56 years. The prize for highest sales goes to G.F.G. Stanley for *Louis Riel: Patriot or Rebel / Louis Riel : patriote ou rebelle?* which has sold 67,077 copies in English and 18,917 in French since its appearance in 1954. In second and third place, respectively, are Guy Frégault’s *Canadian Society in the French Regime / La Société canadienne sous le régime français* (1954), which sold 43,307 in French and 28,927 in English, and Marcel Trudel’s *The Seigneurial Regime / Le régime seigneurial* (1956), with sales of 45,668 in English and 25,669 in French.⁴⁹

Overall, the sales of Historical Booklets are much higher than for Ethnic Booklets, a series launched in 1982 with assistance from the Secretary of State for Multiculturalism.⁵⁰ Thirty-one of the projected 40 volumes in this series have appeared. In February 2007 both booklet series were made available online with the help of a grant from the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT) and the assistance of Library and Archives Canada.⁵¹ While it is too early to tell, it is likely that the Ethnic series will come into its own on the Internet as genealogists and cultural studiers stumble across these useful summaries of Canada’s heterogeneous peoples.

The booklets were written specifically to reach a general audience and they did so largely through use as supplementary reading in high school and undergraduate university history courses. In 2004, for example, the CHA filled 184 orders for booklets. Thirty-five percent of the purchase orders came from university bookstores (65); 28 percent from individuals (52), 21 percent from institutions, colleges, and secondary schools (37), and 16 percent from public libraries (30). Subtracting the \$20,000 received from DFAIT for a special purchase of booklets for overseas distribution, the CHA received over \$16,000 from the sale of booklets in 2004.⁵² Booklet sales have collapsed in the last two years (from nearly 11,000 in 2005 to 2,509 in 2006) for reasons that have, I suspect, something to do with the availability of new resources for high school and university history courses and the retirement of a generation of teachers who relied on brief narratives as a ped-

49 Two points are worth noting here: first, the sale of French booklets amounted to about a quarter of the total, roughly proportionate to the Francophone population in Canada, and, second, titles relating to Quebec history accounted for five of the ten best sellers. E-mail from Marielle Campeau, 22 February 2007, with attachment dated 19 February 2007.

50 Between 1999 and 2003, for example, the CHA sold 15,551 in the General Booklet series in English and 7,346 in French. The corresponding figures for the Ethnic Booklet series are 7,030 in English and 1,669 in French. Figures supplied by Marielle Campeau.

51 See <<http://www.collectionscanada.ca/cha-shc/index-e.html>>, (viewed 15 May 2007).

52 E-mail from Marielle Campeau, 2 February 2005.

PUBLIC HISTORY AND ITS DISCONTENTS
OR HISTORY IN THE AGE OF WIKIPEDIA

agogical tool.⁵³ In 2006 the CHA Council decided to suspend the Historical Booklet series, while moving ahead with plans to develop a second online-only issue of the *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association*, and a small books series, both designed to focus on historiographical topics of interest primarily to academic historians. No doubt, these decisions will be seen as narrowing the outreach of the CHA, but perhaps we need not worry. Much has changed in the field of Canadian history since the Historical Booklets series was launched more than a half century ago.

To a considerable degree, *The Beaver*, published by Canada's National History Society (CNHS), established in 1994, has taken up the role of informing English-speaking Canadians about the nation's past.⁵⁴ With a subscription base of 42,000, as well as newsstand sales, it may well be a better vehicle for that task than the CHA booklets. *The Beaver* reaches a different audience than the booklets do — a much older demographic than the high school and university students who were the main readers of the booklets.⁵⁵ In an effort to extend its reach, CNHS has also launched *Kayak*, a history magazine for children ages 7-11, and has produced *Fur Trade Stories*, a digital teaching resource developed around Hudson's Bay Company documents.⁵⁶ Unlike the booklets, which are written by academic historians, the articles in *Beaver* and *Kayak* are written primarily by non-academic historians. However, academic historians sit on the CNHS Board of Directors,⁵⁷ where they work with public historians to do what they can to help editors identify timely stories and find able writers. Having read from cover-to-cover every issue of *The Beaver* published in the last three years and *Kayak* from its inception in 2004, I can confirm that stories are generally accurate and readable, the result of the painstaking work not only by the authors but also by a hard-working editorial team. Although I sometimes hear the tiresome complaint in the CNHS offices that academic historians are not very good writers, I agree with my fellow Board member Charlotte Gray, who argues that there are gifted and deficient writers on both side of the academic/popular divide.⁵⁸

53 Tellingly, the first and fourth booklets in the series, C.P. Stacey's *Undefended Border* (1953) and W.S. MacNutt's *The Making of the Maritime Provinces* (1955), were among the recent best sellers, along with David MacKenzie, *Canada's Red Scare, 1945-1957* (2001) and Jacques Bernier, *Disease, Medicine, and Society in Canada: A Historical Overview* (2003).

54 <<http://www.historyociety.ca>>, (viewed at various times in February and March 2007).

55 PRA Inc., Subscribers Survey: 2006, Prepared for *The Beaver*, Draft (9 August 2006), 4. According to the survey, the typical subscriber is a 66-year-old retired male, but this profile is skewed by the fact that subscriptions are often registered in the name of the head of household.

56 <<http://www.furtradedstories.ca>>, (viewed 15 May 2007).

57 The CNHS Publications Committee since 2000 has included Joanne Burgess, René Deroucher, Fernand Harvey, Charlotte Gray, Jacques Lacoursière, Paul-André Linteau, Tina Loo, Doug Owrarn, Mark Starowitz, Bill Waiser, Brian Young, and myself. Catherine Carstairs and I read *Kayak* copy for accuracy and balance.

58 Conversation with Charlotte Gray, 9 March 2007.

New organizations have also done a better job than the CHA in reaching out to teachers. In his 1972 presidential address, Ivo Lambi made a plea for more attention to history teaching in the schools. When I served on Council in the late 1970s, Terry Brennan, himself a high school teacher, was actively engaged in the Teaching of History committee. The portfolio languished after Terry left the Council, but was revived in 1994, when plans were put in place to produce a newsletter for schools. Only one issue appeared, published in the Spring of 1995.⁵⁹ I expect the loyalties of history teachers, at least in English-speaking Canada,⁶⁰ lie more with *Historica*, founded in 1999. Building on the work of the CRB Foundation established in 1986, *Historica* offers a wide range of pedagogical tools for overworked teachers and has much deeper pockets, even in its current cash-strapped state, than the CHA. Academics like to complain about the Heritage (now branded as *Historica*) Minutes, and they certainly have their limits as a genre; but they do what they were designed to do and had the input of academic historians, including John Thompson and Jean-Claude Robert, who were hired as consultants on the series.

In 1993 the CRB Foundation convened a blue ribbon academic committee, which included several past, present, and future CHA presidents, to reflect on the content and value of the Heritage Minutes. We were, overall, remarkably positive in our assessment. If I remember correctly, we expressed disapproval of the Frontenac minute for excessive present-mindedness, pointed out that women were almost always represented in a state of stress and helplessness, and expressed concern that labour history was conspicuously absent from the topics covered; but, on the whole, we were satisfied that the Heritage Minutes were attracting welcome attention to developments in Canada's past and agreed that they should continue to be shown on television and in movie theatres.

The committee was also asked if the CRB Foundation should begin developing learning resources for school teachers. Predictably, the academic committee said "no." That way lies madness, we argued, in a country where the curriculum differs so widely in content across provincial and territorial jurisdictions. Also predictably, our advice was ignored and *Historica* burst on the scene a few years later, its programs for Heritage Fairs, Youth Links, and Summer Institutes for history teachers already in place, and The Canadian Encyclopedia the centrepiece of a sophisticated website.⁶¹ Although the Youth Links and Summer Institutes programs have recently been cancelled, *Historica* continues to launch new initiatives, most notably an ambitious Benchmarks of

59 Details supplied by Marielle Campeau, 9 February 2007.

60 In 2006 there was criticism in the French-language press in Quebec about *Historica*'s sponsorship, goals, and methods, and Francophone academics are often reluctant to have their names associated with the organization. See Alexandre Lanoix, « La fondation *Historica*, l'enseignement de l'histoire et le nation building. » *Le Devoir* (8 May 2006), A7.

61 <<http://www.historica.ca>>.

PUBLIC HISTORY AND ITS DISCONTENTS
OR HISTORY IN THE AGE OF WIKIPEDIA

Historical Thinking project, under the leadership of Peter Seixas, to encourage teachers to make explicit efforts to introduce historical thinking into their classrooms.⁶²

The Dominion Institute, founded in 1997, also makes history its special focus in its mission to enhance, promote, and sustain Canadian citizenship. Best known for its polling of Canadians on their knowledge of Canadian history, the Dominion Institute also reaches out to schools with, among other things, its Memory Project designed to bring Canadian veterans into classrooms to share their wartime experiences, and its Aboriginal Youth Writing Challenge, which offers cash prizes for essays on Native heritage.⁶³ With initiatives such as these, as well as websites such as *The Great Unsolved Mysteries in Canadian History*,⁶⁴ and history television channels in English (History Channel) and French (Historia), it is little wonder that CHA booklets are less popular in classrooms than they used to be.

In the minds of some academic historians, the CHA dropped the ball in allowing these new kids on the block to become the public face of Canadian history. Such a perspective ignores the fact that the CHA represents, theoretically at least, all academic historians, not only historians of Canada. And, even if our membership derives primarily from this narrow base, it is difficult to see how the CHA could have succeeded in the way that Canada's National History Society, Dominion Institute, and Historica have done, especially in raising funds both from corporations and various levels of government. While the CHA might well wish for some of the crumbs that fall from the corporate and federal tables into the hands of these three history giants, I doubt that we could ever muster the energy to do the necessary lobbying or, indeed, would want to manage such labour-intensive initiatives. Much better that we, as individual historians, and the CHA, as a corporate entity, offer advice when it is asked for, criticism when it is warranted, and enter partnerships with these and other groups to achieve commonly-defined ends.

Again, it must be underlined that entering into partnerships, academic or otherwise, is time consuming and often difficult work. Over the past few months, I have witnessed Patrick Watson criticize a visiting scholar for using PowerPoint slides in his presentation, received reports of Laurier LaPierre ranting against "academic historians," who, he believed, were trying to "hijack" Historica, and heard enough "politically unconscious" comments to keep my

62 <<http://www.histori.ca/benchmarks>>, (viewed 15 May 2007). See also Peter Seixas, "What is Historical Consciousness?" in *To the Past*, ed., Sandwell, 3-10. In the Benchmarks Framework, historical thinking is built around such concepts as evidence, significance, continuity and change, progress and decline, empathy and perspective, moral judgement, and agency.

63 <<http://www.dominion.ca>>, (viewed 15 March 2007).

64 <<http://www.canadianmysteries.ca>>, (viewed 15 March 2007).

blood on a permanent boil.⁶⁵ To be an academic historian in the twenty-first century is to be on the front lines of battles about truth, identity, entitlement, and legitimacy. This is a dangerous place to be but not one that we should abandon for the safety of the ivory tower. Indeed, as with global warming, terrorism, and other scourges of our time, there is no place to hide. Hiding is not an option in the age of the Internet.

The Internet

For more than a decade now, the new communications technologies have served as the context in which the CHA Council has made decisions about its major initiatives. Under the leadership of José Igartua, who sat on the CHA Council from 1997 to 2000, the CHA created a website, posted its presidential addresses, and launched an ambitious project in partnership with Chinook Multimedia to develop a Canadian History Portal. Designed to catalogue and annotate Canadian history websites, the Canadian History Portal was sustained by a grant of \$381,418 from the Millennium Bureau of Canada, plus \$37,000 from the Department of Canadian Heritage. Based on practices of scholarly integrity and critical evaluation, this project eventually collapsed under its own weight. At exactly the same time, in a parallel universe, a new mode of online collaboration emerged in the form of Google and *Wikipedia*. Both have helped to transform the way that some historians, and most of our students, do their research.

The digital revolution, though perhaps not as dramatic in its outcomes as early cyber-enthusiasts predicted, is indeed transformative. In a little more than a decade, the Internet has flattened notions of expertise and many of the conventions, such as peer review, copyright, and even authorship, that professional historians have come to value. It has also inspired new forms of collaboration, new forums for debate, and new ways of collecting evidence about the past. It is now *the* key player in erasing the line between academic and public history. Unlike print publishing and television, the Internet is so far largely free of gatekeepers and relatively inexpensive to engage. It has given prominent voice to amateur historians, who have been more adept than academic historians in probing the potential of the new medium.

Although techno-skeptics never tire of reminding us that the Internet threatens to flood cyberspace with unreliable and unstable information created

65 Following the lead of Ellen Dubois and Alison Prentice, I use the term “politically conscious,” rather than the narrow and now sullied term “politically correct,” to underscore the need to recognize inequities and injustice, past and present. See Alison Prentice, “Bluestockings, Feminists, or Women Workers? A Preliminary Look at Women’s Early Employment at the University of Toronto,” *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association*, New Series, vol. 2 (1991): 260.

PUBLIC HISTORY AND ITS DISCONTENTS
OR HISTORY IN THE AGE OF WIKIPEDIA

by people without academic credentials,⁶⁶ Daniel J. Cohen and Roy Rosenzweig, in their book *Digital History*, urge us to take courage.⁶⁷ The promise of the new communications technology, they maintain, far outweighs the perils. Who would want to blunt the exciting prospect of searching across federated platforms for all primary and secondary sources relating to our scholarly interests, large and small; of forging alliances with like-minded researchers, academic and otherwise, in the digital universe; and of opening to everyone the right to create and access knowledge? This is an appealing vision, one to which the CHA and its associated institutions, including the Canadian Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences, Library and Archives Canada, and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, have been devoting considerable attention.⁶⁸ Unfortunately, Canada has nothing equivalent to the Center for History and New Media at George Mason University. Not only does the Center help historians think their way through the issues associated with the digital divide, it also showcases the potential of Internet for new methods of research. For example, in an extraordinary exercise in public history relating to events of 11 September 2001, the Center collected some 2000 e-mail accounts of the tragedy as well as photographs, flyers, and video and audio recordings.⁶⁹

Like my students, I now usually turn first to the Internet when I want to find answers to my questions and, almost invariably, *Wikipedia* (<http://wikipedia.org>) appears near the top of my list of potential sources. *Wikipedia* caught me unawares a year ago when Rebecca Colborne, who does French translations for me, corrected an error in my narrative by reference to this online resource. Almost simultaneously, Roy Rosenzweig published an article in the June 2006 issue of *Journal of American History* in which he

66 Such critics abound in Canadian history departments, who echo arguments presented in David Noble, *Digital Diploma Mills: The Automation of Higher Education* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001).

67 Daniel J. Cohen and Roy Rosenzweig, *Digital History: A Guide to Gathering, Preserving, and Presenting the Past on the Web* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 1-17. In keeping with the times, this monograph appeared first in digital form and then as a printed book. See: <<http://chnm.gmu.edu/digitalhistory/>>, (viewed 15 March 2007).

68 The results of an early SSHRC initiative in charting and encouraging the application of new technologies to the humanities in Canada can be found in Raymond Siemens and David Moorman, eds., *Mind Technologies: Humanities Computing and the Canadian Academic Community* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2006). See also Susan Schreibman, Ray Seimens, and John Unsworth, eds., *A Companion to Digital Humanities* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004).

69 James J. Sparrow, "On the Web: The September 11 Digital Archive," in *Public History: Essays from the Field*, ed. Gardner and LaPaglia, 397-415. The Internet is home to an extraordinary array of primary sources and creating better ways of finding them is one of the challenges facing historians. See Debra DeRuyver and Jennifer Evans, "Digital Junction," *American Quarterly* (2006): 943-980.

explored the *Wikipedia* way of doing research and its implications for academic historians.⁷⁰ His conclusion — that *Wikipedia* was, on the whole, as accurate as the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* in the areas he explored and a whole lot easier to correct when errors occurred — caused me to reflect on my dismissive attitude toward such online resources. Meanwhile, articles were beginning to appear in Canadian newspapers and *Time* magazine celebrating the work of Simon Pulsifer, a Halifax-born Wikipedian, who had produced nearly 3000 articles and 78,000 editorial interventions.⁷¹ Simon is the son of Cameron Pulsifer, a historian at the Canadian War Museum who shared with me the rigours of Acadia University's history honours program in the 1960s. While pursuing his undergraduate degree in history at the University of Toronto, Simon spent as much as six hours a day writing and editing articles for *Wikipedia*.⁷² He told me in a telephone interview that his fame as a Wikipedian and his skills as a word-smith, honed more by the constant editing of fellow Wikipedians than by his professors at the University of Toronto, were instrumental in him being offered a job at Quillsoft, a company that develops software for people with writing disabilities.⁷³ In such ways are careers shaped in the twenty-first century.

Since not all contributors to *Wikipedia* are as skilled as Simon Pulsifer, and critics continue to emphasize its failings,⁷⁴ I decided to do a little research of my own. American topics might be well-served by *Wikipedia*, I reasoned, but what about Canada? Early in 2007, I downloaded over 1000 pages of information, beginning with “Canada,” its provinces and territories, and our common words for regions such as “Western Canada,” “Atlantic Canada,” “Prairies,” and the “North.” I spot-checked for various big moments in Canadian history — Seven Years' War, Battle of the Plains of Abraham, War of 1812, Rebellions of 1837, Responsible Government, Confederation, Indian Act, Vimy Ridge, Persons Case, and Dieppe — as well as the biographies of Canadian prime ministers since 1867. I then turned to historiographical topics to see how, if at all, Canada was represented. Just as I was conducting this research, a discussion of the virtues and vices of *Wikipedia* erupted on H-Canada. It was all grist for my mill.

To a considerable degree, my skepticism about the quality of the entries relating to Canada was rewarded. The Seven Years' War and the War of 1812

70 Roy Rosenzweig, “Can History be Open Source? *Wikipedia* and the Future of the Past,” *The Journal of American History* (June 2006): 117-46.

71 Alexandra Shimo, “Prolific Canadian is King of Wikipedia,” *Globe and Mail* (4 August 2006). Simon Pulsifer was also featured in *Time* (16 December 2006), the issue that selected “You” as the “Person of the Year.” See, Lev Grossman, “Simon Pulsifer: the Duke of Data,” <<http://www.time.com/time/printout/0,8816,1570732,00.html>>, (viewed 3 April 2007).

72 “Simon Pulsifer,” <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Simon_Pulsifer>, (viewed 13 April 2007).

73 Simon Pulsifer, telephone interview by author, 12 April 2007.

74 For a recent negative review see Graham Broad, “The False Promise of the ‘Peoples’ Encyclopedia,” *CHA Bulletin* 33, no. 1 (2007): 11-12.

PUBLIC HISTORY AND ITS DISCONTENTS
OR HISTORY IN THE AGE OF WIKIPEDIA

were devoid of a Canadian perspective and contained enough errors to give any student who relied on them as their sole source of information a failing grade. In contrast, the entry on Vimy Ridge was written almost entirely from a Canadian perspective and was surprisingly nuanced, as was the entry on the Battle of the Plains of Abraham, to which I was directed after entering the search term “Battle of Quebec.” *Wikipedia* appropriately lists four battles under the latter term, those of 1690, 1759, 1760, and 1775. The entry on the “Maritime Provinces” was well-informed but, on the whole, the entries on Quebec history and culture were thin. In contrast, Canada’s First Nations figure prominently in *Wikipedia* and, with the notable exception of the Indian Act, which was described in a narrowly present-minded way, the information was detailed and seemed relatively accurate.

The entries for Canadian prime ministers were sometimes idiosyncratic and that of Arthur Meighen was riddled with errors. However, with the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography Online*⁷⁵ and Michael Bliss’s *Right Honourable Men: The Descent of Canadian Politics from Macdonald to Mulroney*⁷⁶ providing reliable backup, it is not surprising that, overall, the prime ministerial biographies made good reading when tackled in one go. Apparently entries on American presidents are often the subject of frequent malicious revision, but Canadian prime ministers are less likely to suffer such indignities, there being perhaps less at stake in smearing the reputation of a Canadian leader than one from the United States. (It is interesting to note that the entire staff of Congress has been barred from *Wikipedia* for sabotaging one another’s entries.⁷⁷) Curiously, the entries on two Canadian Prime Ministers, William Lyon Mackenzie King and R.B. Bennett, include extended discussions of their alleged racist and fascist leanings. While John A. Macdonald and Wilfrid Laurier might also be criticized for lacking political consciousness in a period when there was precious little, they emerge relatively unscathed in the Wiki-world.

Canadian social history had a predictably uneven quality. It will probably come as no surprise that Canadian women’s history is poorly represented, as are women generally in *Wikipedia* and on the Internet as a whole. Although I could read a reasonably good essay on “Canadian labour history” and “Canadian military history,” I could find nothing on “Canadian women’s history.” Nellie McClung, Agnes Campbell Macphail, and Cairine Wilson were accounted for, but the Canadian angle was entirely absent from the entry on women’s suffrage. Similarly, the long entry on “homosexuality” lacked a mention of Canadian

75 <<http://www.biographi.ca>>, (viewed 15 May 2007).

76 Michael Bliss, *Right Honourable Men: The Descent of Canadian Politics from Macdonald to Mulroney* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 1994).

77 *Time* (16 December 2006), <<http://www.time.com/printout/0,8816,1570732,00.html>>, (viewed 11 May 2007).

sources; but the “Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives” was cross-referenced from an idiosyncratic grouping of “Studies in Canadian History.” The Imperial Order Daughters of the Empire (IODE) was incorrectly titled (Imperial Order of the Daughters of the Empire), a common enough problem and easily corrected. More disconcerting, the entry on “Women’s Institutes” ignored the organization’s Canadian origins, but had a substantial reference to *Calendar Girls*, the movie inspired by a Women’s Institute project in Yorkshire, England. J.S. Woodsworth, Henri Bourassa, Clifford Sifton, and Albert “Ginger” Goodwin made the cut, but not J.B. McLachlan; the Winnipeg General Strike of 1919, but not the Cape Breton strikes of the 1920s, not even in the entry on Cape Breton, which focused instead on the island’s current crop of famous persons, many of them musicians. While trying to track down the Cape Breton strikes, I encountered a highly informative piece on the Sydney Tar Ponds, which if located anywhere else in Canada would be recognized for what they are — a source of national shame. Environmental activists clearly have been doing their Wiki-work. Although I could not find an entry for the great Miramichi Fire of 1825, it topped the “List of Forest Fires: North America” — *Wikipedia* is a great source for lists of various kinds. Sports historians have also been busy. I found long essays on various forms of hockey generally and “ice hockey” in particular, and both the Stanley Cup and the Clarkson Cup were acceptably identified.

Entries on Canadian history, Canadian historians, and Canadian history institutions often make light and amusing reading. Under “Canadian Historical Association,” I found a “stub,” which means that *Wikipedia* editors are looking for someone to provide copy. The “List of historians by area of study” included five Canadians, of whom only J.L. Granatstein is still alive, Donald Creighton, Lionel Groulx, Harold Innis, and W.L. Morton having passed away some time ago. In the longer “List of Canadian historians,” the dead still prevail and include such luminaries as Pierre-François-Xavier de Charlevoix, François-Xavier Garneau, George Wrong, and James Bartlet Brebner. In the still kicking category, we have Conrad Black, Michael Ignatieff, Laurier LaPierre, Patrick Watson, and Peter C. Newman, but not Denyse Baillargeon, Gérard Bouchard, Gerald Friesen, Chad Gaffield, Charlotte Gray, Jacques Lacoursière, or Alison Prentice. Only four women appear on the list, evenly divided between the quick and the dead (Margaret MacMillan, Hilda Neatby, Margaret Ormsby, and Joy Parr). If we needed any confirmation of the second class status of Canadian historical scholarship, it would come from the “List of History Journals,” which includes not so much as one Canadian title. In contrast, the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, *Canadian Encyclopedia*, and Centenary Series all warrant short entries. The Dominion Institute found its way into *Wikipedia*, but not Canada’s National History Society or Historica, only their flagship products, *The Beaver* and the Heritage (Historica) Minutes. The ultimate irony in my

PUBLIC HISTORY AND ITS DISCONTENTS
OR HISTORY IN THE AGE OF WIKIPEDIA

romp through *Wikipedia* is that the term “public history” is represented by a stub. (The foregoing analysis is only a snapshot in time and was invalid the moment it was written. As this article goes to press, I notice that I now have a bibliographic entry in *Wikipedia*, written, it seems, by a former student in one of my graduate classes.)

What is most remarkable about *Wikipedia*, of course, is not the number of errors in its entries, what is missing from the site, or even the vandalism that mars its reputation; but the sheer volume of reasonably good material that is available in multiple languages and how quickly errors and omissions get spotted. There are over 3 million Wikipedians in the world today producing at a prodigious rate: four hundred words a minute and twenty million words a month in July 2006. Even a fast reader, we are told on *Wikipedia*'s statistics page, could not keep up with the new content. Academic notions of team research and peer review are here carried to extreme levels. While many scholars have given up contributing to *Wikipedia*, and some universities have issued injunctions against students citing from such an unreliable and unstable source,⁷⁸ I have taken another tack. I have no problem with my students citing a *Wikipedia* entry as a source of information, but I am quick to pounce on them if they accept what *Wikipedia* delivers without further research and evaluation, just as I would if they based their analysis on an unworthy print text. As I like to point out to my students, *Wikipedia* serves experienced scholars very well because they usually know how to spot errors and bad research. Students take history courses at universities to develop these critical skills and good professors offer formal instruction to help students to assess online and print resources.⁷⁹ Although such training was always valuable, there never was a time when it was more needed.

In a recent letter to the *Literary Review of Canada*, Peter Desbarats expressed an uncertainty that many of us feel when confronted with the uneven and ever-changing nature of online communications. “The best you can say at the moment,” he argued, “is that the Internet seems more and more to resemble society itself and that isn't very comforting unless you happen to be a gambler, a religious fanatic or a sexual predator.”⁸⁰ It is our job to make sure that the Internet offers a little more comfort to historians. Ranting against “Wikiality,”⁸¹

78 Scott Jaschik, “A Stand Against Wikipedia,” *Inside Higher Ed* (26 January 2007), <<http://insidehighered.com/news/2007/01/26/wiki>>, (viewed 28 March 2007).

79 See, for example, a course offered by José Igartua at Histoire-Hypermédia <<http://h-h.ca>>.

80 Peter Desbarats, “To the Editor,” *Literary Review of Canada* 15, no. 1 (January/February 2007): 29.

81 A send-up of *Wikipedia* on the popular American television program, *The Colbert Report*, defines “wikiality” as the new approach to reality: “together we can create a reality that we can all agree on — the reality we just agreed on.” See “Wikiality” video at <<http://www.comedy-central.com/motherload/player.jhtml>>, (viewed 24 April 2007).

or even the likely eventual demise of *Wikipedia*, will not make the issues it raises about knowledge in the twenty-first century go away. Alan McCullough, a former historian with Parks Canada with whom I often agree, puts it best in a posting to H-Canada:

[*Wikipedia*] is imperfect but it has potential and it won't be made perfect by boycotting it. This doesn't mean that anyone is under any moral obligation to contribute to *Wikipedia* or any other collaborative enterprise. There are many valid reasons for not taking part, but the fact that anyone can contribute to *Wikipedia* is not one of them. Academic historians do not have a good record of accepting the efforts of popular and amateur historians Popular historians (including those who do TV documentaries and historical dramas) provide most of the public's knowledge of history. What academic history has gained in rigour and sophistication over the past 50 years, it has lost in audience breadth and public influence. Projects which involve a large number of historians, amateur and otherwise, are filling a space which academic history has largely abandoned. They provide an outlet for individuals who are interested in history as well as useful, accessible, historical resources. What's wrong with that?⁸²

Implied in this comment is a concern raised in the H-Canada discussion about the voluntary nature of the work done for *Wikipedia*. While academic historians who populate the Internet and engage in public history projects often do so as volunteers, public historians are more likely to be free-lancers.⁸³ Free-lance historians rightly complain that those of us hired by universities and government departments can well afford to work *pro bono*, but in so doing we may be taking jobs away from them.⁸⁴ They also often take a different perspective on copyright and open access questions than do historians who receive a regular salary. Thus, in any attempts to bridge the gap between academic and public history, it is important that we keep labour relations in mind.⁸⁵

A final word on the impact of the new communications technologies on our work as academic historians. We now need much more infrastructure than formally to succeed at what the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council calls "knowledge mobilization." As a recent study conducted for the American Council of Learned Societies has argued, scholars in the arts urgently need sys-

82 Alan McCulloch, E-mail to H-CANADA, 3 March 2007.

83 Recent figures show that 27 percent of the jobs in Canada are temporary, part-time, or contractual. See Ed Finn, "Outsourcing and job 'restructuring' swell corporate profits," *The CCPA Monitor* (February 2007): 4.

84 This point is frequently made and was raised in the H-CANADA discussion on *Wikipedia* by Graham Broad, 24 February 2007.

85 The status of women must also be included in this category of concern. See Dianne Dodd and Geneviève Postolec, "Report of the Survey on Women in Public History," *Canadian Historical Review* 81, no. 3 (September 2000): 452-66.

PUBLIC HISTORY AND ITS DISCONTENTS OR HISTORY IN THE AGE OF WIKIPEDIA

tems, personnel, and best practices to support research, including digital collections, online collaborative platforms, and digital archives.⁸⁶ Most universities are unwilling to acknowledge these needs and still see tuition paid by students in arts faculties as generating funds for programs on the other side of the campus. Such policies smack of an astonishingly out-dated sense of the importance and potential of the humanities and social sciences in our wired world.

Conclusion

Where, then, does the CHA fit into this evolving picture? The CHA's first responsibility, of course, is to serve its fee-paying members, who, unlike eighty-five years ago, are now primarily university-based historians and their students. This does not mean that our membership base cannot change. I would be delighted if the CHA could attract the allegiance of public and popular historians in all their multifarious activities, as well as academic historians in fields other than Canadian history, so that we could work together to reflect on our differences, develop bold, new programs, and advance the larger cause. This is not likely to happen, at least not in the immediate future. Even our academic base is uncertain. The departure of the archivists in 1975 to found their own association signalled a new era of specialization that called into question the value of large umbrella associations such as the CHA. Indeed, the ultimate success of the new Public History Committee of the CHA may well be its emergence as an independent organization.

That said, there is a need, now more than ever, for an organization that represents the interest of professional historians, academic and public. Gerald Friesen reminded me, when he sweet-talked me into taking on the CHA presidency, that academically-trained historians as a collectivity do important intellectual work for our country: we undertake much of the research on which our notions of the past depends, we engage the research conducted by historians all over the world thereby infinitely extending our narrow national framework, and we teach in a variety of settings many of the history teachers. In our efforts to maintain and adapt the values that we hold dear — whether it be archival integrity, acknowledgement of sources, or critical evaluation — we need an organization that takes into account the larger picture, that represents

86 See *Our Cultural Commonwealth: The Report of the American Council of Learned Societies' Commission on Cyberinfrastructure for Humanities and Social Sciences*, Chair: John Unsworth, 18 July 2006, 2, available at <<http://www.acls.org/cyberinfrastructure/acls.ci.report.pdf>>, (viewed 28 March 2007). See also a recent European Union initiative: Commission of the European Communities, "Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council and the European Economic and Social Committee on scientific information in the digital age: access, dissemination and preservation," 14 February 2007, which can be found at <http://ec.europa.eu/research/science-society/document_library/pdf_06/communication-022007_en.pdf>, (viewed 28 March 2007).

the academic approach to the past in a variety of contentious settings, and, most importantly, that reaches out to those who share our interest in the past. If we do this job well, our organization will almost certainly change in unsettling ways, but to ignore the current knowledge revolution symbolized by the Internet is to court irrelevance.⁸⁷

In his recent analysis of the controversy surrounding *The Valour and the Horror*, produced in 1992, historian Graham Carr explored the protracted struggle by a range of stakeholders for control of the historical narrative relating to Canada's involvement in the Second World War. He concluded, "Rather than talking to each other or attempting to grasp opinions different from their own, many participants in the controversy elected to talk 'past each other,' transforming the debate into a kind of echo chamber where snippets of conversation bounced aimlessly back and forth."⁸⁸ More than a decade later, snippets of conversation continue to bounce aimlessly back and forth in the echo chamber recording the controversies surrounding *Prairie Giant* and Bomber Command. It is time for academic historians to consider new ways of representing ourselves in these debates.

We have spent nearly a century building barriers to ward off those who might challenge academic approaches to the past. In the twenty-first century, our urgent task must be to build bridges. To do so requires new skills in communication and diplomacy, new rules of engagement, and more financial resources — expect your membership fees to rise. The goal of this bridging exercise is not to gain new members for the CHA or to cast pearls as academics have often been wont to do, but rather to open a dialogue so that academic and public historians, as well as the public at large, can all learn from exploring the past which has shaped us all, gives meaning to the present, and inspires our future goals.

* * *

A member of the History Department, Acadia University from 1969 to 2002, **MARGARET CONRAD** currently holds a Canada Research Chair in Atlantic Canada Studies at the University of New Brunswick. She has published widely in the fields of Atlantic Canadian and women's history. She is co-author with Alvin Finkel of a widely-used 2 volume textbook *History of the Canadian Peoples*. In her capacity as Canada Research Chair in Atlantic Canada Studies, Professor Conrad has produced the Atlantic Canada Portal to support and disseminate research on the Atlantic region (<http://atlanticportal.hil.unb.ca>).

87 During my term on the executive, I frequently heard the comment from historians in fields other than Canadian history that the CHA had little to offer them. My response, borrowing from John F. Kennedy, is that it is not what the CHA can do for members, but what members can do to keep the CHA relevant and engaged. Membership is, in short, a professional obligation.

88 Graham Carr, "Rules of Engagement: Public History and the Drama of Legitimation," *Canadian Historical Review* 86, no. 2 (June 2005): 354.