HISTORY AND CANADA'S International Relations

BY Hector Mackenzie

EARLIER THIS YEAR, IN A SPEECH IN TORONTO ANNOUNCING A MAJOR INVESTMENT BY THE GOVERNMENT OF CANADA IN CANADIAN ARTS AND CULTURE, THE PRIME MINISTER DESCRIBED THE PLANNED NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY AS «A MAJOR STEP TOWARDS THE CREATION OF AN INSTITUTE OF CANADIAN HISTORY.» WE ALL KNOW HOW DIFFICULT IT IS TO TRANSLATE A PHRASE OR AN INTENTION INTO A DEED OR A PROGRAMME, PARTICULARLY WHEN THERE ARE SO MANY COMPETING DEMANDS FOR SCARCE RESOURCES AND THE CONCEPT ITSELF IS A NEBULOUS ONE. STILL, THAT ANNOUNCEMENT WAS A MANIFESTATION OF THE FACT THAT THERE HAS BEEN CONSIDERABLY MORE ATTENTION TO PUBLIC UNDERSTANDING OF CANADIAN HISTORY – HOWEVER DEFINED OR ASSESSED – IN RECENT MONTHS INSIDE AND OUTSIDE OTTAWA THAN THERE HAS BEEN FOR MANY YEARS. AS A PUBLIC HISTORIAN, I MUST CONFESS A PERSONAL AS WELL AS A PROFESSIONAL BIAS IN FAVOUR OF THIS TREND, THOUGH THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE PRIME MINISTER'S COMMITMENT FOR OUR WORK AND FOR THE PROFESSION GENERALLY ARE NOT YET CLEAR. TO SOME EXTENT, MY CAUTION MAY BE EXPLAINED BY THE FACT THAT THE OVERALL TENDENCY IN THE PUBLIC SERVICE WITH RESPECT TO VALUING THE STUDY OF HISTORY AND EMPLOYING HISTORIANS EFFECTIVELY DOES NOT SEEM SO POSITIVE AS THE PROMISE OF A NEW INITIATIVE.

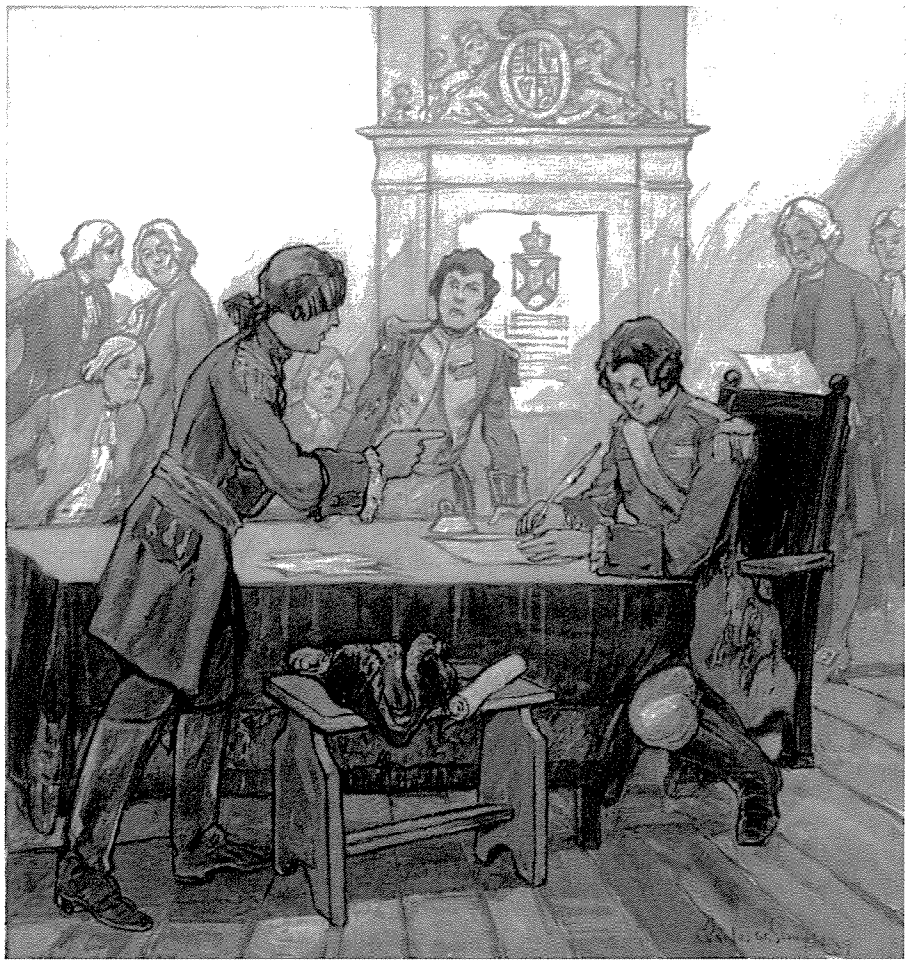


"The Sovereign Council of Quebec 1663" by Charles Walter Simpson / National Archives of Canada / C13950

Within the government of Canada, the commitment to historical research has been uneven over the years. Though other departments and agencies have from time to time conducted and published examinations of their own histories, the historical units of the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT) and the Department of National Defence (DND) are distinct in their continuing work to record and to explain the past. However, after reorganizations and cutbacks, the number of historians employed in both departments is considerably reduced. Moreover, much of the original inspiration for this work, particularly the linkage to policy-making, has been obscured as both the context and the content of the historical research and writing have been altered. Even so, in a difficult fiscal environment, the survival of such historical units is itself testimony to a lingering sense of the value and importance of history to foreign and defence ministries, not only in Canada but in other countries as well.

In fact, history and historians have played significant parts in Canada's dealings with the rest of the world from the inception of its foreign ministry. When the government of Sir Wilfrid Laurier established Canada's Department of External Affairs (DEA)

in 1909, its first official head was distinguished as much by his knowledge of the past as by his awareness of current affairs. The founding under-secretary of state for external affairs was Sir Joseph Pope, who had prepared for publication the memoirs of his former boss, Sir John A. Macdonald. Pope himself was a long-time public servant, whose «institutional memory» – as it would now likely be called – was formidable and whose organizational skills and negotiating talents had been honed by personal experience and informed by a study of the past. In effect, the department responsible for Canada's foreign affairs acquired its background knowledge and its awareness of history through the appointment of Pope and by the adoption of his methods for filling the considerable gaps in Canadian records. A similar respect for precedents, not surprisingly, was shared by the legal adviser of the department, Loring Christie, when he was appointed by prime minister – by then also secretary of state for external affairs – Robert Borden in 1913. More so than Pope, however, Christie was inclined to deploy his historical understanding in the service of policy formulation in external relations, especially within an imperial context. Neither Pope nor Christie, however, offered advice that was congenial to Canada's longest-serving prime minister and foreign minister, William Lyon Mackenzie King.



British requiring an oath of allegiance from the Acadians by Charles Walter Simpson / National Archives of Canada / C13956

King's choice as Pope's successor and principal adviser was a distinguished political economist, O.D. Skelton, with an affinity for history. At the time of his recruitment, Skelton was best known for his two-volume *Life and Letters of Sir Wilfrid Laurier*, while his other works included a biography of Sir Alexander Tilloch Galt as well as a study of economic history for *Canada and Its Provinces*. Skelton's first recruit, to replace himself as counsellor, was Jean Désy, a professor of political history as well as of international and constitutional law at the University of Montreal. When Skelton devised a competitive entrance examination for a foreign service for Canada, its format and content favoured applicants with an understanding of Canadian history as well as contemporary issues, as demonstrated by the successful candidates in the initial contests. Half of the early entrants were historians, including Lester B. Pearson, formerly of the history department at the University of Toronto, Kenneth Kirkwood, who had taught history at Columbia University, Paul-Émile Renaud, a former professor of diplomatic history and political science at the University of Montreal, and Hugh Keenleyside, who had a doctorate in history from Clark University and whose study of Canadian-American relations was published soon after his recruitment. Another lapsed historian, Hume Wrong, entered Canadian diplomacy by a less direct route when he was hired to work in the legation in Washington by Vincent Massey, himself a student of history, albeit a patrician one whose appointment as head of that mission owed more to wealth and politics than to scholarship. If not a prerequisite for a career in the foreign service, an understanding of history was apparently an asset for early applicants.

While the proportion of historians recruited to the foreign service of Canada declined in later years, the profession was still well-represented, particularly in the senior ranks of the Department of External Affairs and its missions abroad, when Skelton died in early 1941. Though Skelton's successor, Norman Robertson, was an economist, his initial «joint assistant secretaries» – Pearson and Keenleyside – were both historians. The wartime reorganization of DEA to take account of its growing responsibilities was devised by Keenleyside and Wrong. Among those recruited from academe for special wartime service were numerous historians, including G.P. de T. Glazebrook, H.F. Angus, F.H. Soward and J.M.S. Careless, as well as others with historical training, some of whom stayed on with DEA in the East Block of the Parliament Buildings when the opportunity was presented after the war.

Likewise, degrees in history were among the qualifications of many of the first women admitted to the foreign service after the war.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, it was an historian, Pearson, who succeeded Robertson as deputy minister in September 1946. Though Pearson would not stay long in that post, his subsequent tenure as secretary of state for external affairs is often identified with a «golden age» for Canadian diplomacy. It was also a favourable time for history and historians in DEA, as the directorate of historical research and reports was established in December 1950 (as of 1952, the historical division) and various studies were initiated, including significant projects by Soward and Kirkwood which were seen as directly related to the priorities of DEA. However, neither the mandate nor the personnel of the division was exclusively devoted to historical scholarship. In fact, the current work of historians in DFAIT began much later, with scholarly access to departmental files and the publication of *Documents on Canadian External Relations / Documents relatifs aux relations extérieures du Canada* beginning in the 1960s and the start of an official history of the department in 1978. These initiatives undoubtedly enhanced the department's relations with the academic community and the professional reputation of departmental historians, but little else survived the «downsizing» of the division to a section in 1985. The work of the historical staff became more exclusively linked to longer-term research projects, with less resources and flexibility to respond to immediate needs or priorities.

By then, the foreign service was also less likely to employ historians than it had been in the past. The examination process devised by Skelton and adapted by his successors over the years, with its stress on broad questions and lengthy answers, so favourable to those with historical training, became impossibly unwieldy for examiners confronted by vast numbers of applications in the 1960s. For a while, the inquisitors selectively scanned the written work of those who met the other qualifications for interviews, before the formal requirement for essays was finally discontinued. Clinging to its distinct entrance ritual and its associated elite reputation, the department of external affairs had long resisted the entreaties of the civil service commission (as it then was) to shift the emphasis toward «objective testing» (true/false and multiple-choice questions). Under the weight of applications, that struggle was largely abandoned, as the unique element of the examination for entry into the foreign service increasingly resembled that for its counterparts in the domestic public service. Eventually, the pretence that a quiz on contemporary international affairs could have a meaningful relationship to qualification for a diplomatic career (not unlike the proposition that knowledge of history can be assessed by playing trivial pursuit over the telephone with a polling organization) was itself abandoned.

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Thereafter, the screening standards and the interview phase became the critical determinants for entry into the foreign service and the examination in every other respect ceased to be distinct. Though there was only one occasion when historians and political scientists, among other unwelcome categories, were actually disqualified from selection, the former bias in favour of their skills and background had been removed. What is less clear is whether this shift in recruitment strategy was based on a reassessment of the needs of the foreign service in the modern world or simply a response to the logistics of administering the process.

Whatever the explanation, there are not only proportionately fewer historians today in DFAIT than in its formative years, but also fewer members of the foreign service with historical training than in the past (though a few years ago it was still true that there were more doctorates in history held by members of the policy planning staff than among the department's historians). Whether the lack of historical background will affect the capacity of the contemporary foreign service officers to contribute to another «golden age» for Canadian diplomacy – or simply their ability later in life to write well enough to convince readers of their memoirs that they were part of one – remains to be seen. There is little doubt that the demands of diplomacy and consequently the requirements for effectively representing Canada abroad have changed considerably over the years, as the world around us and the international agenda have both been realigned and redefined.

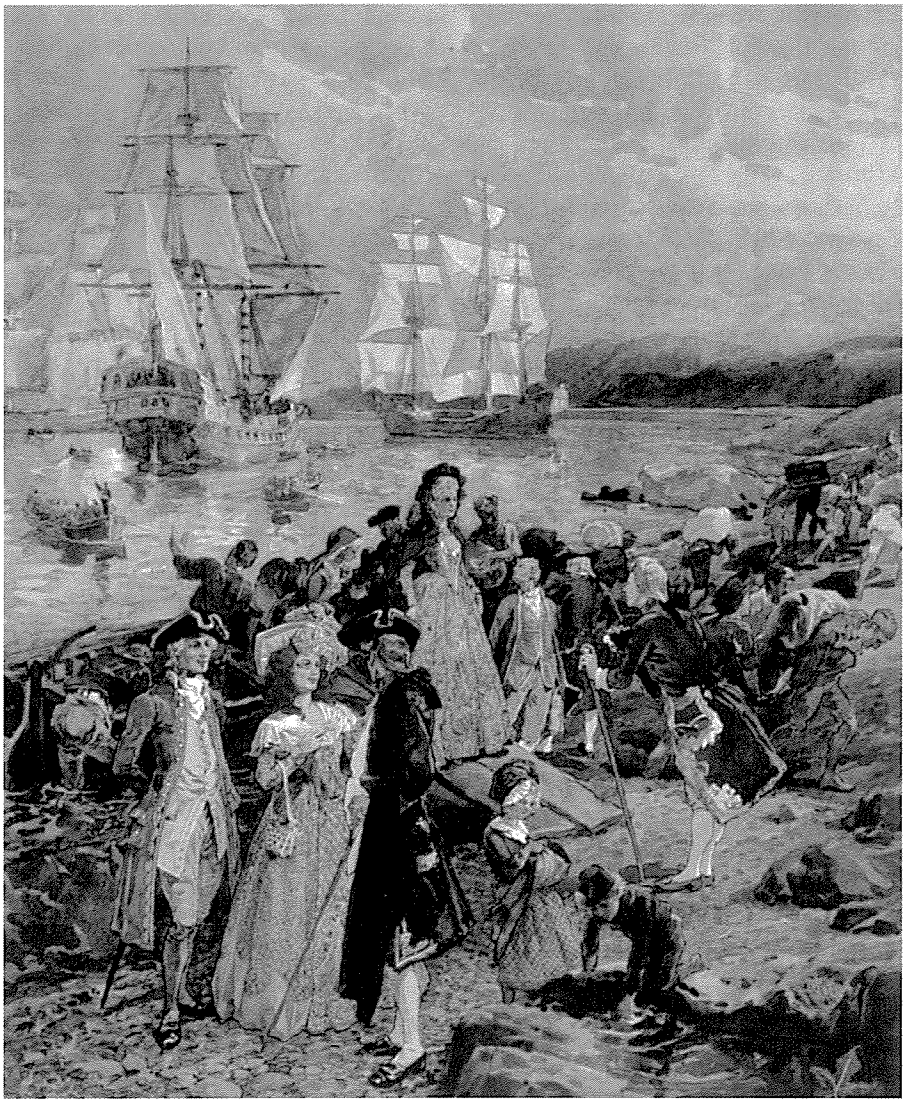
Still, DFAIT is more aware of its own history and of the significance of historical precedents than most parts of government and it has sustained projects that are valuable not only to it but also to scholars and students in Canada and abroad. Some of the adaptations that have taken place in recent years have been significant improvements – for example, work on an educational web site, *Canadians in the World / Les Canadiens dans le monde*, led to the development of an on-line version of the *Documents on Canadian External Relations / Documents relatifs aux relations extérieures du Canada*. That compilation is now available via the history page of the departmental Internet site and its searchability in that format is vastly superior to the table of contents or index for a printed volume. To some extent, the work of historians in DFAIT now has a more narrow scholarly focus than when the historical unit was created; expectations about relevance currently are linked more to the academic audience for these projects than to the possible value of studies that might

serve as background or reinforcement for policy-making.

As mentioned above, the other link between history and DFAIT was forged by the recruitment of students and instructors of history. Foreign service officers today are less likely to possess formal historical training, though they may be interested in the trials and tribulations of their predecessors. As with historians in the public service, the context for diplomatic work and its content have been altered considerably since the early days of the foreign service. Though it may be a cliché, it is nonetheless true that change is the only constant in international affairs. When one considers the pace of world events and the extent to which Canada and other nations must react to hazardous developments as well as initiate proposals for betterment, it is understandable that policy-makers cannot always pause to reflect on the «lessons of the past,» if such examples even exist. Instead, as Antonio remarked in *The Tempest*, albeit when plotting an ultimately thwarted assassination attempt, «what's past is prologue.» In the circumstances, we can understand, if not always forgive, our colleagues for their conviction – not limited to the foreign service – that the ultimate task for a Canadian diplomatic historian is the search for an apt quotation from L.B. Pearson to bolster the case for another new commitment in world affairs.

That Pearson's words, and possibly the notion of «Pearsonian internationalism» as well, still seem to strike a responsive chord not only within the building that bears his name (DFAIT's headquarters) but also with Canadians generally suggests that the history of Canada's international relations has some resonance and possibly relevance, even as attention is understandably focused on the here and now. Moreover, as Prime Minister Chrétien has reminded us often, there is a strong inter-relationship between the national spirit of Canadians and an appreciation of our shared past, whatever the field of endeavour.

In my view, there is also still a place in diplomacy and in a foreign ministry for an appreciation of history and for the application of historical methods, including such critical abilities as the careful analysis of evidence, the awareness of context and biases as well as the formulation of well-grounded arguments. That these skills have been vital to the development of Canadian government policy was certainly appreciated by Skelton and by those he recruited, including Pearson. Whether this knowledge is still acquired in a curriculum unit or course identified as Canadian history, social studies, civics or otherwise, seems to me to be less important. Consequently, I am not as preoccupied with national standards for Canadian history or with tests – objective or otherwise – of historical information as may be other commentators. That is not to deny the importance of historical education in the classroom, whether in primary, secondary or post-secondary institutions, but simply to temper the reaction to current controversies over how history is taught.



"The Coming of the Loyalists" by Henry Sandham / National Archives of Canada / C168

As for popular understanding of Canadian history, the size of the audience *for Canada: A People's History* suggests not only that there is a «thirst for knowledge» about this subject but also that there are various ways to quench it, outside as well as within the schools. The challenge for historians, now as ever, is to convey to Canadians an understanding of our past as well as a sense of its relevance and purpose in today's life. Ideally, that flexibility of approach and determination to reach a large number of people across the country that so obviously shaped *Canada: A People's History* will also influence how the «institute of Canadian history» is elaborated in the future.

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