SAVING CANADIAN HISTORY: Focusing on the Classroom

BY Paul W. Bennett

CANADIAN HISTORY IS CERTAINLY A HOT TOPIC IN THE NEWS. NATIONAL SURVEYS OF CANADIAN HISTORY KNOWLEDGE CONDUCTED BY THE TORONTO-BASED DOMINION INSTITUTE NOW GENERATE NEWSPAPER HEADLINES AND NATIONAL TV NEWS COVERAGE. JUST OVER A YEAR AGO, ONE OF THE MOST INFLUENTIAL NEWSPAPERS IN THE UNITED STATES, THE *WASHINGTON POST* STIRRED UP A NATIONAL FUROR WITH A FRONT PAGE FEATURE THAT DISMISSED CANADIAN HISTORY AS "FORGETTABLE" BECAUSE CANADA HAD NEVER FOUGHT A CIVIL WAR, NEVER PRODUCED A GREAT LEADER, AND NEVER COMMITTED ANY "MEMORABLE ATROCITIES." MOST RECENTLY, *THE GLOBE AND MAIL* GREETED US ON JUNE 30, 2001 WITH A FRONT PAGE EMBLAZONED WITH A FAMILIAR 1891 JOHN A. MACDONALD ELECTION POSTER BEARING THIS HEADER: "WHO IS THIS MAN? 46% DON'T KNOW." THE ACCOMPANYING NEWS ARTICLE AND THE LEAD EDITORIAL HIGHLIGHTED MORE DISTURBING SURVEY RESULTS AND CONCLUDED THAT CANADIANS SUFFERED FROM A KIND OF COLLECTIVE AMNESIA WHEN IT COMES TO THEIR HISTORY.

If the current public debate had a point of ignition, it can be found in the publication of J.L. Granatstein's popular book, *Who Killed Canadian History?* in 1998. That polemic succeeded marvelously in its prime objective. It set off alarm bells and ruffled many feathers about the state of history – and history teaching – in all parts of Canada. The little red book also catalogued the well-known causes: the absence of instructor teacher training in the universities, the paucity of good textbooks, the watering down of history in interdisciplinary social studies courses, history curricula designed around the "hit and miss" potted plant model, the net effect of "skills-mania" approaches on student engagement, and the lack of national history standards.

While Professor Granatstein's diagnosis hit the mark, his prescriptions for resuscitating or "saving" Canadian history were less convincing. In typically bold and provocative fashion, he called for reconstructing a national history, organized around significant political developments and reaffirmed in a set of national history standards. Such a formula set itself against the full weight of the current "limited identities" historical orthodoxy, offended the sensibilities of Quebec historians, and gored the oxen of provincial educrats, curriculum experts, and most faculty of education instructors.

Granatstein's critique did find considerable favour with the Canadian public. Our two national newspapers, first *The Globe and Mail* and later *The National Post*, both took up the cause of saving Canadian history with feature articles and sympathetic editorials. Leading Canadian businessmen, including BCE's Red Wilson and Charles R. Bronfman, were moved to join forces in the formation of the Historica Foundation, an impressive demonstration of commitment to regenerating Canadian history. Prominent critics of school history such as Bob Davis, author of *Whatever Happened to High School History?* (1995), felt vindicated and many rank-and-file classroom history teachers nodded in quiet approval.

It's time to move beyond the "Canadian history wars" and to focus on really addressing the problem afflicting Canadian history teaching in our schools. Professor Ken Osborne's lead article in *The Beaver* (August/September, 1999) may well serve as a starting point in directing us to revisit what is actually going on in the history classroom. Indeed, while much is being done to popularize Canadian history through the Historica Heritage Minutes and the CBC-TV blockbuster series *Canada: A People's History*, precious little attention has been paid to improving the quality of teaching in Canadian history classrooms.

A study of Canadian History curricula, conducted by Historica's John Fielding in June 2000, is starkly revealing. In Canada's ten provinces, Canadian history is taught in a crazy-quilt fashion at various grade levels and in a variety of ways, predominantly as a component of "Social Studies."

The 1999 "Giving the Past A Future" Conference, spearheaded by Desmond Morton under the auspices of the McGill Institute for the Study of Canada, offered a glimmer of hope. It was the largest conference ever held in this country on the teaching of history. Most impressively, the Montreal conference attracted an amazing diversity of participants, ranging from leading Canadian historians to regular classroom teachers, from business magnates to local history activists, and it included significant representation from the Quebec francophone community. If the movement initiated by the Conference leads to action in the schools, it will be regarded as a major milestone

in the process of regenerating Canadian history.

Getting to the history classroom means penetrating the Canadian educational bureaucracy and this presents a formidable challenge. Provincial ministries of education, faculties of education, and curriculum experts have a real stake in preserving the status quo when it comes to fragmenting Canadian history and watering down history standards. A study of Canadian History curricula, conducted by Historica's John Fielding in June 2000, is starkly revealing. In Canada's ten provinces, Canadian history is taught in a crazy-quilt fashion at various grade levels and in a variety of ways, predominantly as a component of "Social Studies." A compulsory and explicitly "Canadian History" secondary school (Grade 9-12) course is only offered in five of the ten provinces, while two other provinces lump it into a compulsory Social Studies course. Only one province, Quebec, is actually committed to offering history in some form at every grade level.

Teacher training and professional development are crucially important if revitalization efforts are to actually reach students in the classroom. Canadian faculties of education need to become part of the solution. Most of our faculties of education are organized to promote the teaching of "Canadian social studies" rather than history taught as a discrete subject and even the venerable History and Social Science Teacher is now lingering on as Canadian Social Studies. Within the faculties themselves, instructors continue to promote integrated social studies, to focus almost exclusively on "how" to teach rather than "what" to teach, and to favour largely discredited progressive methods over more popular neo-traditional, standards-based approaches. The most savvy teachers new to the profession know enough to adhere to this orthodoxy, at least until until they secure a classroom of their own.

One of the most positive developments has been the emergence of Historica Foundation and its determined efforts to reverse the trend. Under the leadership of Dr. Thomas Axworthy, the new Foundation has committed itself to promoting "Canadian history" in the schools. What began as an annual CRB Foundation Summer Institute for mostly elementary teachers has expanded into two Summer Institutes, one Elementary (Grades 1-8), the other Secondary (Grades 9-12), enrolling three times as many history teachers.

More fundamentally, Historica has recognized that secondary school teachers are a "distinct species" with different professional development needs. While the Summer Institute for Elementary Teachers continues to focus on mostly on innovative teaching methodologies and on promoting the use of resources, the Montreal-based *Institute for Teaching the History of Canada (ITHC) in Secondary Schools* seeks to pursue a different mandate. Lower Canada College's *ITHC Summer Institute* aims to bring leading historians and talented teachers together to discuss the central issues of identity and nationhood, to share differing perspectives, and to interact with master teachers recognized by the Governor General's Awards for Teaching Excellence in Canadian History.

While the debate over the state of Canadian history is hardly new, it has reached a critical juncture. When the smoke clears in the ongoing "Canadian history wars", the protagonists will begin to focus on what really matters to students and teachers. A renewed focus on what happens in the history classroom is long overdue. It begins with the teacher and his or her passion for Canadian history. We cannot allow ourselves to be lulled into complacency or diverted by the psycho-educational methodologists and their obsessive emphasis on developing generic employability skills.

Not long ago, history was king among the social sciences. It's time to reaffirm the primacy of history and to push for the full restoration of "Canadian (or Quebec) history" as an explicitly defined subject. We are coming to recognize that the "what" is at least as important as the "how" in the teaching of history in our schools. Students can be reached and stimulated through a variety of means, ranging from traditional story telling and Socratic teaching to cooperative group learning and computer simulations. Finding ways of bringing Canadian history alive in our classrooms is what the debate should be all about.

Good historians absorb the lessons of the past and, in this respect, educators have much to learn from them. What we need is not really a return to the "good old days". Our real goal should be to inspire, to challenge, and to engage students in the active process of learning Canadian history in our classrooms. If and when this happens, Canadian history will be permanently removed from the "critical list."

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