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THÈMES CANADIENS

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TAKING CHARGE of our Past

BY Andrew Parkin

IN REFLECTING ON THE THEME "GIVING THE FUTURE A PAST," THE AUTHORS OF THE ARTICLES YOU ARE ABOUT TO READ TOUCH ON MANY OF THE ISSUES THAT HAVE PREOCCUPIED CANADIAN HISTORIANS OVER THE PAST DECADES. HOW CAN WE CONVINCE STUDENTS THAT HISTORY IS AS RELEVANT AS COMPUTER SCIENCE? HOW CAN WE PREVENT HISTORY AS A DISCIPLINE FROM BEING LOST IN THE FOG OF AN INTEGRATED AND STREAMLINED SOCIAL SCIENCES CURRICULUM? HOW CAN WE PRESENT A COHERENT ACCOUNT OF CANADIAN HISTORY WHILE AT THE SAME TIME GIVING FAIR REPRESENTATION TO THE MANY DIFFERENT HISTORIES EXPERIENCED BY CANADA'S DIVERSE POPULATION? AND, AT THE END OF THE DAY, HOW CAN WE TEACH HISTORY IN A WAY THAT DOES NOT PUT STUDENTS TO SLEEP?

These are important questions upon which to reflect – although Ken Osborne does us a great service by reminding us that such reflection has been going on for at least 100 years. There is a danger, however, of historians adopting the tone of the victim: history is under attack, whether by bureaucrats in education departments or school boards, or by a culture which values technological know-how over wisdom, or by the fragmentation of historical narrative that follows the recognition of the diversity of historical experience. What is encouraging about the articles that follow is the way in which the authors recommend that historians go beyond the role of the victim, by taking charge of their discipline rather than merely lamenting its passing. For example, Osborne points to the need for history teachers to organize themselves in order to support one another, share resources, and promote public debate about the future of our history. Chad Gaffield urges a new approach to the teaching of history that encourages students not just to read history, but to be historians. Jocelyn Létourneau proposes a new metaphor to capture the Canadian historical experience without eclipsing the different perspectives on that experience which are key to understanding the country. And, perhaps most important, Penny Bryden implores historians to come up with good answers to the questions that students inevitably will ask about the relevance of history and the usefulness of a history degree. Not only is Bryden's article one of the clearest and best argued cases for the relevance of history, it also correctly places the onus on history teachers themselves. Practicing historians must be the discipline's most articulate defenders.

Bryden implicitly places her finger on an important problem: at the university level at least, it is sometimes too easy for historians to assume either that the justification for their work is self-evident (knowledge for knowledge's sake) or that a request for a justification is an attack on scholarship itself. Politicians or commentators who dare to ask if SSHRC grants provide "value for money" are dismissed. This will no longer do. As Bryden makes clear, a case for the relevance of historical scholarship can be made, and must be made. It must be made by historians, who see themselves both as researchers and as public intellectuals who do not hesitate to engage in debates with fellow citizens (and not just fellow specialists) about the past, present and future of Canada.

Andrew Parkin - Centre for Research and Information on Canada

Throughout this special issue dedicated to the study of our history, we are pleased to include various photographs of important and interesting moments in Canada's past. We hope you enjoy them, as well as the words of our esteemed contributors.

the editors