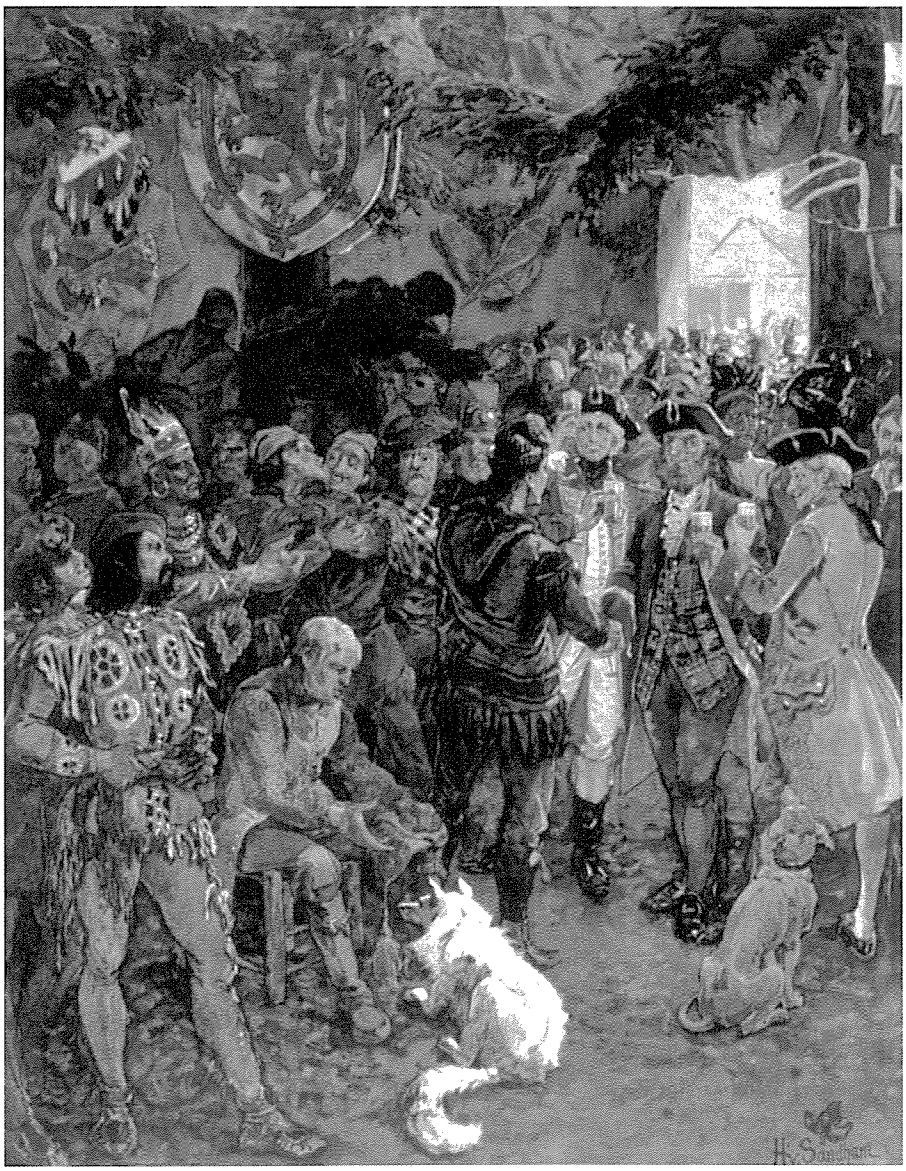
TEACHING HISTORY IN CANADIAN SCHOOLS:
A Century of Debate

BY Ken Osborne

TWO YEARS AGO MCGILL'S INSTITUTE FOR THE STUDY OF CANADA ORGANIZED A CONFERENCE WITH THE THEME OF GIVING THE PAST A FUTURE. THERE ARE THOSE, HOWEVER, WHO FEEL THAT THE PAST HAS NO FUTURE IN CANADA, AT LEAST NOT IN CANADIAN SCHOOLS, THAT HISTORY IS DEAD.



"Meeting of Fur Traders" by Henry Sandham / National Archives of Canada / C122

History certainly no longer holds the place it once did in school curricula. Where it has not been abandoned altogether as provinces orient their curricula to career preparation, it has been replaced with an interdisciplinary social studies, as in the emerging interprovincial curricula in Atlantic and Western Canada. Surveys reveal that Canadians do not know as much history as many of us would like. Historians, for their part, lament the fragmentation of their discipline and its failure to make contact with the general public.

The news is not all bad. There are even signs that the tide might be turning in history's favour. In 1996 public pressure forced the Filmon government in Manitoba to scrap plans to remove Canadian history from its high school programme, and the current NDP government is committed to keep it there. Quebec, Ontario and Nova

Scotia are strengthening the place of history in their schools. The 1990s saw the creation of Canada's National History Society and the Historica Foundation, both dedicated to the support of history. Researchers are throwing new light on how students understand history and what this means for teaching. The explosion of research, especially in social history, has opened up aspects of the past that were unknown even to specialists a generation ago. The CBC's *People's History* series has demonstrated the existence of a widespread public interest in history that is seen also in attendance at museums and historic sites.

Another encouraging sign that history has a future is the increasing public attention that has been paid to it in recent years. History has become newsworthy. Canada has joined an international debate on the place of history in education.

Regardless of country, this debate revolves around some common questions. What is the purpose of teaching history in schools? What is national history and what is the appropriate balance between it and global history, on the one hand, and local or regional history, on the other? How does one combine the various histories that now exist (women, Aboriginal, labour, ethnic, and the rest) into one teachable synthesis? Whose or what history should be included in curricula? What should be the role of history in educating citizens, and for that matter what is citizenship anyway? Is history a critical inquiry into the past or an affirmation of identity and heritage, be it national or some other? Is history best taught as a chronological narrative or through selected themes or problems? Is broad coverage of many topics preferable to a more intensive study of a few? What is the proper balance between knowledge and skills? Underlying all these questions is another: even if we agree on the problems, are there any rationally or empirically persuasive solutions that go beyond personal inclination or ideological preference? If so, and perhaps even more if not, who should decide what or whose history is to be taught in the schools?

These are all complex and contentious questions, but this has not slowed down the flood of quick-fix solutions currently on offer. A national curriculum. National standards. A return to the old narrative of political history. History days. Teachers' institutes. More demanding curricula. A return to exams. Flashier teaching resources. The computer and the internet. All have their champions. What is missing is any awareness that the questions are not new, that the debate over the teaching of history has been going on for the last hundred years.

It began in the 1890s when the Dominion Education Association sponsored a contest to produce a national history textbook acceptable to all provinces. Though the winning book was not adopted in all provinces, it pioneered a nation-building narrative that quickly became the orthodoxy of the textbook world. It had its critics, not least among feminists, socialists, trades unionists, pacifists, and farmer radicals, but by the 1920s it defined the history that most students were taught, at least in English-speaking Canada.

In Quebec, until the 1960s, things were different. There history was taught as the story of French and Roman Catholic civilization struggling to hold its own against the forces of Anglo-American materialism. Quebec schools taught a nation-building history, but for them the nation of choice was Quebec.

The problem was that though schools taught a nation-building history, students apparently learned little from it. Reports in 1923, 1930, and 1933 agreed that curricula were ineffective, textbooks were dull, students were bored, and history was poorly taught. Some blamed the policy-makers. Some blamed the teachers. Some blamed the conditions in which teachers had to work. Pedagogical radicals blamed the exam system with its dependence on rote memory questions. All agreed that part of the solution lay in moving away from the political and constitutional history that dominated textbooks and turning instead to a social history of everyday life spiced up with stories of adventure and heroism.

In the early 1940s a new set of concerns emerged when a Laval historian, Abbé Arthur Maheux, accused French-language texts of teaching what he called hatred of the English. The history taught in schools, he argued, was destructive of Canadian unity and pitted the two founding peoples of Canada against each other. Maheux's charges caused a furore in Quebec and aroused the interest of English-speaking Canada. André Laurendeau investigated the texts in question and concluded that they were too dull to teach anything. The Quebec government in 1943 commissioned an investigation which found that two very different versions of history were indeed being taught, not as part of a deliberate incitement to division and disunity, but rather from mutual indifference and ignorance. In 1944 the Senate called for a uniform national textbook, containing the facts that all Canadians should know as determined by a committee of objective historians. The historians ignored this suggestion, and a survey of leading historians in 1950 found them opposed to a single national textbook. Some, however, including Maheux, worked with the Canadian Education Association to create a model history curriculum in 1945.

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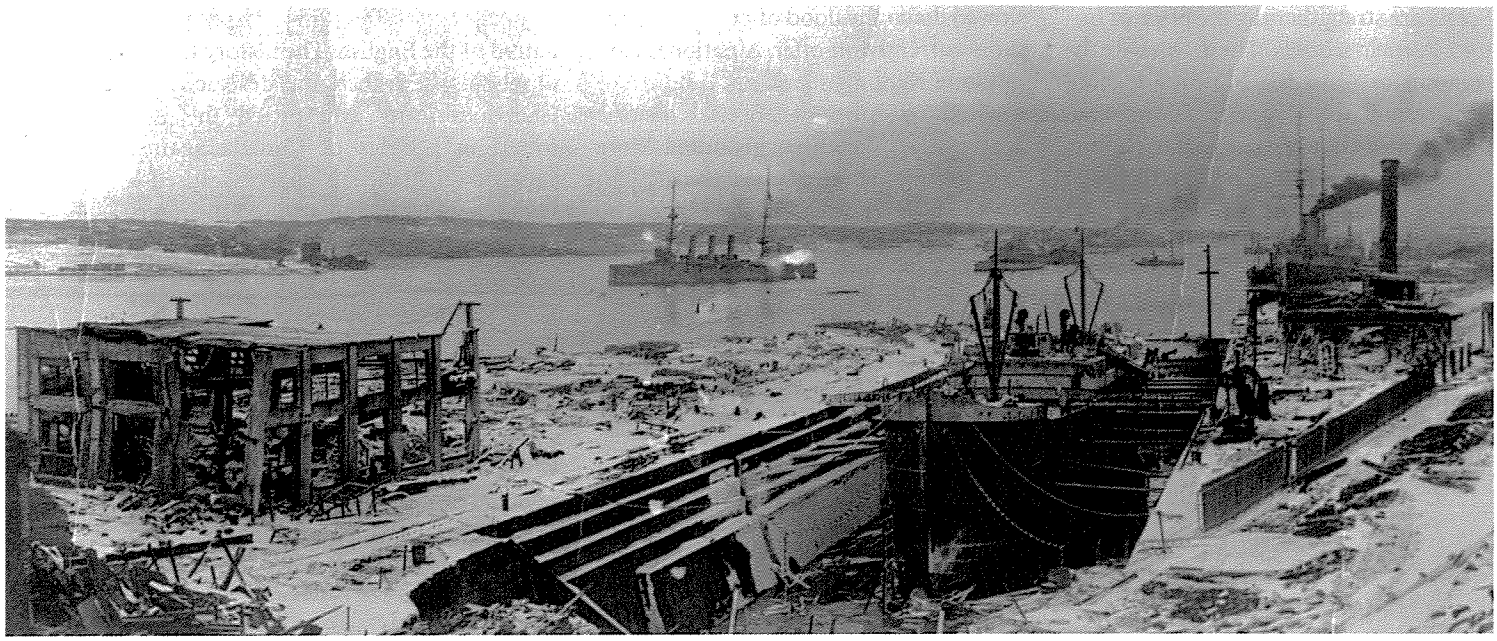
In the years after 1945 the idea of a standard national textbook was aired from time to time, usually to be dismissed, but the project of identifying those historical facts that all Canadians should know always found some supporters. The worry that French- and English-speaking Canadians were learning two very different versions of history never disappeared. Quebec's Quiet Revolution breathed new life into it in the 1960s when it was discussed in the Parent report on Quebec education in 1965; in the Report of the B & B Commission on education in 1968; and



Halifax Explosion / National Archives of Canada / C19953

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in Hodgetts' survey of history teaching, *What Culture? What Heritage?* of the same year.

In the 1950s, however, the main element in the history debate was the need to protect Canadian identity. The Massey Commission on the Arts in 1951 lamented what it saw as the Americanization of Canadian education and the universities took advantage of the Commission's existence to voice their dissatisfaction with the schools. According to the historian, Hilda Neatby, a member of the Massey Commission, students' dislike of history was surpassed only by their ignorance of it, that is when they could write coherently enough to make themselves understood. In her 1953 polemic, *So Little For The Mind*, she largely blamed this state of affairs on the schools' abandonment of history for American-style, interdisciplinary social studies.

Neatby was right about one thing. History was under threat from the social studies. Beginning in the 1930s, most provinces dropped history from the early grades and replaced it with the kind of community-based, "expanding horizons" social studies still in use today. Invented in the United States in the early 1900s, the social studies had established themselves in American high schools by the 1930s, despite a stiff resistance from historians. Alberta followed suit, and, though no other province went that far until the 1970s, already in the 1950s, as Neatby noticed, there were signs that the future might lie with social studies more than with history.

Eclipsed by Neatby's polemic, a survey of history curricula that appeared in 1953 went largely unnoticed. Like its predecessors, it found curricula to be poorly organized; textbooks to be dull and boring; and history to be little more than a catalogue of facts to be memorized, and then quickly forgotten once the necessary tests were taken. Given this state of affairs, the report found it hardly surprising that students found history so pointless.

There things stood until the publication in 1968 of A.B. Hodgetts' *What Culture? What Heritage?*, the most influential of all the reports on the teaching of history in Canada. Hodgetts repeated many of the criticisms made in earlier reports. Rather than contributing to national unity, identity or pride, history was doing the very reverse. The history taught in Quebec was at odds with that taught in the rest of Canada. Curricula and textbooks were outdated and dull. The only thing most students were learning was to dislike history. Only some 7% of history classrooms were doing anything worthwhile.

Hodgetts intended his report to be a call for the reform of history teaching but it contained a contradiction that few people noticed at the time. He insisted that history's value lay in its contribution to civic education and to understanding contemporary Canada. The value of the past therefore lay primarily in the light it shed on the present. In other words, history was a means to an end and that end was citizenship, which inevitably raised the question: if citizenship is the goal, is history necessarily the best vehicle for achieving it? .

It is therefore not especially surprising that the influential organization Hodgetts founded to implement his report's recommendations, the Canada Studies Foundation, which existed from 1970 to 1985, did more to advance the cause of an interdisciplinary, present-oriented, social science-based, Canadian Studies programme than it did to promote history. Indeed, when in 1978 Hodgetts outlined a Canadian Studies curriculum for Grades 1-12, history received very short shrift indeed.

This move to an interdisciplinary Canadian Studies was reinforced by the

schools' adoption of multiculturalism in the 1970s. A generation earlier history had been seen as the main vehicle for the Canadianization of children but old-style Canadianization meant assimilation and disregard for minority rights. Moreover, Aboriginal Canadians and women, and cultural minorities also to some extent, rejected the way they were portrayed in traditional history. At the same time historians of education were showing how history was used to cement the hegemony of dominant groups, whether defined in terms of class, gender, or ethnicity. This combination of forces helps to explain the appearance during the 1970s of a series of investigations of how textbooks and curricula treated working people, women, Aboriginals, and minorities. In the words of the most influential of these analyses, the schools were "teaching prejudice." The result was that schools increasingly replaced history with programmes in Canadian studies, women's studies, Native studies, ethnic studies, social problems, and the like, in an attempt to jettison the old biasses of history teaching and to make their courses more interesting ("relevant" was the word of choice) to students.

When schools did teach history, it was no longer the traditional political narrative, but increasingly a social history that paid belated attention to aspects of Canada's past hitherto neglected or unknown. Hence the over-heated charges of some critics that schools were teaching "victim" or "black arm-band" history in which the past was seen not as a celebratory story of nation-building but as the record of oppression, exploitation, and persecution.

This is the background to the complaints that began to be heard in the 1990s and that have put history in the news.. There is an assumption in much of the recent debate that there was a time when history was live and well in the schools, so that all we have to do is get back to the good old days. The reality is that history might have been alive in the schools but it was rarely well. There is a remarkable continuity running through all the reports on history teaching over the last century. Curricula are weak. Textbooks are dull. Students are bored. Teaching needs improvement. History is insufficiently national. Its claims to educate for citizenship are hollow.

At the same time, the debate has always been about much more than the teaching of history. In the 1900s and 1910s it was about nation-building. In the 1920s it was about building character and social consensus. In the 1930s it was about democracy and internationalism. In the 1940s it was about English-French amity. In the 1950s it was about preserving Canada from Americanization. In the 1960s it was about national identity and unity. In the 1970s it was about multiculturalism and diversity. In the 1980s and increasingly in the 1990s it was about the definition of history as a discipline and its contribution to citizenship.

This summary is of course far too neat. It is not that one concern displaced another but rather that different concerns blended into one another, receiving different degrees of emphasis at different times but never disappearing from the mix. Fundamentally, the debate has always been more about competing definitions and conceptions of Canada, and whose definitions and conceptions should prevail, than about history. This is perhaps why the pedagogical literature is so full of talk about themes, concepts, skills, understandings, learning outcomes, and other heavy-duty educational goals, and so rarely about getting students simply to enjoy history.

There is one other consistent theme. All the reports saw teachers as the crucial agents of change. As was noted in the 1920s, any curriculum is only as good as the the teachers who teach it. For the most part, however, the reports proposed doing things to teachers rather than working with them.

Curriculum developers, textbook writers, pedagogical experts, historians, and the rest all have their part to play but the future of history in our schools obviously lies with the teachers. There are outstanding history teachers around the country but they rarely have a chance to meet or confer or to share their expertise with less skilled colleagues. There is no mechanism for it and their working conditions do not allow it. Teachers are isolated, and in many parts of the country under attack. For their part, historians, with a few exceptions, are not involved with the schools. Canada has neither a national organization nor a national journal, embracing both official languages, that brings together all those interested in the teaching of history and that might provide the self-sustaining and continuing impetus that alone can invigorate it.

The McGill Conference of 1999 took a small step in this direction. Its Winnipeg successor this October represents another. Perhaps, after a century of debate, we are finally ready to do something.

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FOR FURTHER READING

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