I RECENTLY RECEIVED AN E-MAIL FROM A STUDENT WHO EXPLAINED THAT WHILE HE LOVED HIS HISTORY COURSES AND WANTED TO MAJOR IN THE FIELD, HE WAS WORRIED ABOUT WHAT SORT OF EMPLOYMENT HE MIGHT EXPECT AT THE END OF HIS FOUR YEARS OF UNIVERSITY, ARMED WITH NOTHING MORE THAN A BACHELOR'S DEGREE IN HISTORY. I CAN ONLY IMAGINE THE ANGUISHED CONVERSATIONS THAT HAD OCCURRED AROUND THE DINNER TABLE AT HOME DURING THE PREVIOUS WEEKS, AND SUSPECT A CERTAIN AMOUNT OF PERHAPS JUSTIFIABLE PARENTAL CONCERN BEHIND THE E-MAIL QUERY. WE LIVE IN A SOCIETY THAT IS UNABASHED IN ITS EMBRACE OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY: A NEW UNIVERSITY, THE ONTARIO INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY, IS PREPARING TO OPEN ITS DOORS; THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT HAS POURED MILLIONS OF DOLLARS INTO POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION THROUGH ITS CANADA FOUNDATION FOR INNOVATION AND CANADA RESEARCH CHAIR PROGRAMS, BUT THIS MONEY HAS OVERWHELMINGLY GONE TO SCIENCE, ENGINEERING AND COMPUTER SCIENCE DEPARTMENTS AND PRACTITIONERS; AND POLITICIANS AT ALL LEVELS AND BUSINESSES IN EVERY SECTOR HAVE OUTDONE THEMSELVES IN THEIR EFFORTS TO PROMOTE AND BECOME ASSOCIATED WITH THE LATEST TECHNOLOGICAL ADVANCES. HISTORY IS INCREASINGLY BEING CONSIDERED A "BOUTIQUE" PURSUIT: FINE FOR ELEMENTARY SCHOOL STUDENTS, FOR ROUNDING OUT POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION, OR FOR PRIME TIME TELEVISION VIEWING, BUT NOT DESIGNED TO POSITION ITS GRADUATES WELL IN THE NEW ECONOMY. THIS IS A PERSPECTIVE THAT HAS TO END, AND THOSE OF US WHO TEACH HISTORY TO UNIVERSITY STUDENTS MUST TAKE A LEADING ROLE IN PUBLICIZING NOT ONLY WHAT WE DO, BUT HOW A HISTORY DEGREE PREPARES PEOPLE NOT ONLY FOR ACTIVE PARTICIPATION BUT ALSO FOR SUCCESS IN A TECHNOLOGY-DRIVEN WORLD.

UNDERGRADUATE HISTORY in the 21st Century

BY P. E. Bryden

Students of history, regardless of what area or time-period they choose to specialize in, are all asked to do roughly the same thing. Whether their courses are lecture-driven or seminar-based, we ask that our students take vast amounts of information, distill it, and shape it into coherent papers or articulate contributions to classroom discussions. One of the most basic things that distinguishes history from other disciplines is the sheer quantity of information that we expect our students to use. Our lectures, power-point presentations and multi-media demonstrations are little more than abstracts of information that we as scholars have gathered over years of study; before a student can complete a course, we expect that they will not only have digested the material that we provide them with, but we also demand that they search for information themselves for the purposes of writing reports or preparing presentations. Where they find this material is limitless. The tools of the historian are not only the articles and monographs found in libraries, but also artifacts, maps, oral interviews, internet sources, photographs, songs, polls, maps and countless other items that can provide a clue about the nature of the past. By the time a student has completed a course in history, they have absorbed, often unknowingly, literally thousands of pieces of information. And they have become adept at handling that information.

Having bombarded our students with facts and figures, interpretations and debates, we then ask them to assess the relative value of each. We teach our students how to evaluate the credibility of different sources, how to question interpretations, and how to corroborate versions of the same story. In essence, we teach them how to be critical and we encourage them to be distrustful. But we expect that our classes will be filled with more than merely a group of fact-checkers. We then demand that they arrange the mass of information that

has passed the stringent tests we have set for it into a coherent, logical and more compact whole. It is not enough to simply staple together the pages of documents; we want our students to evaluate what is relevant, and then craft a composition that both tells a story and makes an argument, and does so in language that is at once clear and elegant. By the end of this process, our students have gathered information from a vast array of sources, they have evaluated it and prioritized it, and they have massaged it into a shape that in its simplicity belies the significance of the process that created it. It is easy for us as professors to forget what goes into writing a ten-page paper on the reasons for Atlantic industrial stagnation, but until we start being explicit about the significance of the process, we will continue to have classrooms filled with students who don't understand that what they are learning there is excellent preparation for the work force.

As a society, we have placed an increasing emphasis on technology, but our love affair has tended to be with those who can design the tools themselves. Students of history worry that they are not learning skills that will enable them to make careers for themselves in the computer or communications industries or earn the high salaries that appear to go with such professions. But with our focus on developing new and better and faster ways that knowledge can be conveyed, we have paid scant attention to what our society is supposed to do with that plethora of information that is now available at our fingertips. A graduate with a degree in history is extraordinarily well-positioned to handle the quantity of information that has to be understood in order to perform any job in the new economy effectively.

Most students graduate with a degree in history, however, without realizing the level of expertise they have gained in information management, and are therefore not as adept at identifying their skills for potential employers as they might be. University teachers now have an added responsibility. As knowledge simply for the sake of knowledge becomes increasingly devalued, we must underline for our students the very practical skills that a degree in history is providing. Rather than assuming that the parallels between researching history topics and preparing legal factums, risk analyses or share-holder reports are obvious, we have to become more diligent in identifying for our students the similarities. A history BA is not a professional degree, and therefore does not immediately direct its recipients to an obvious career. Only by reminding our students that they are acquiring valuable research, assessment and communications skills can we expect them to be able to point to these skills as they search for employment.

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Just as important as the skills that students acquire as they study history is the knowledge that they gain. Here too, however, teachers of history at the post-secondary level must be more specific about the relevance of their course material for participation in the modern world. Students who must choose between biology and computer science courses that clearly provide the foundations for careers in the high-tech industry must be lured to history with assurances that the information covered in these courses is also applicable to real-world situations. We must demonstrate not only that the process of studying history clearly provides students with abilities that translate easily into the new information economy, but also that the content of our courses prepares them to take advantage of opportunities available.

Professors of Canadian history are particularly well-situated to be able to identify obvious parallels between the past and the present, although we don't do nearly enough in this direction. The current resurgence of interest in Canadian history has tended to focus on the events of the past in a kind of vacuum, again assuming that the connections between what is taught in the classroom and what happens in the world outside will be transparently evident to our audiences. Santayana's admonition that those who do not learn from the past are doomed to repeat it is often quoted and has become little more than a platitude, although professional historians frequently behave as if this is the obvious justification for studying history. We need to do more than pronounce that a knowledge of one's country's past is a necessary precondition of engaged citizenship; we need to explain why.

A number of organizations and institutions have recently taken up the cause of Canadian history, and their efforts in publicizing the debate over what we teach our students are to be lauded. The Dominion Institute, for example, demonstrates every Canada Day the appallingly limited knowledge of Canadian history with the publication of its survey results. Participants are asked to identify the names of various Prime Ministers, the dates of certain battles or legislative accomplishments, and the claims to fame of a number of individuals and groups; year in and year out, Canadians demonstrate that they just don't know. The CBC and the newly founded Historica have attempted to rectify this situation through the incredibly popular *Canada: A People's History* television series, and a variety of funded prizes, speakers' tours and university chairs. These have been enormously valuable services, and their effect on the level of knowledge the general public can now claim should not be underestimated. However, none of these initiatives adequately explains to a middle manager at Nortel how a degree in

Canadian history could have prepared them for the job market. This is as much a challenge facing university professors of history as elevating the general level of knowledge. Only by providing these sorts of explanations will history be able to successfully weather the high-tech onslaught.

Students currently enrolled in Canadian history classes are already learning about a multitude of past events and issues that have relevance to today's society, although for the most part they probably don't realize it. Knowing that John A. Macdonald was the country's first prime minister is interesting information, but it isn't likely to make or break anyone's career in anything other than the academy. Knowledge of how he came to power, though, and how he manipulated the trade issue or how he developed patronage networks or how he handled the Riel issue, can have important applications today in identifying economic strategies, cultivating business associates or appreciating the deep roots of Quebec separatism. Understanding the class and gender divisions that both promoted and impeded the organization of unions in the early part of the century is also interesting for its own sake, but will remain little more than historical trivia until we force our students to see that these tensions continue to affect our society. Without an appreciation of the reasons for these cleavages, and how the tools of compromise, accommodation and open conflict have been variously used in the past, tomorrow's workforce will be poorly equipped to design private or public policies any more likely of success. Having spent a year researching, thinking and writing about Ontario's relationship with the federal government in the years following the Second World War, and then returning to chair a department struggling with issues of the division of power within a university, I know only too well how the general patterns of the past we study can cast important light on the problems of the present.

A degree in history, I told the student who sent me the e-mail, is excellent preparation not only for the obvious post-graduate professional degree programs like education, library science and law, but it also provides the necessary foundation for immediate entry into the business, consulting, government, or financial worlds. The methodology employed in history steeps students in skills that are highly-valued in the workforce, and the content of history courses provides students with so many examples of both success and failure that virtually any challenge can be faced with at least some helpful insights from the past for direction. But I shouldn't have had to explain all this within the context of a private e-mail correspondence; I should be making these skills and these contemporary parallels clear to all my students in all my courses. We all should.



Canadian soldiers liberate Holland, 1945 / National Archives of Canada / PA13437

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