EDITORIAL

Canada's History and Two Prime Ministers



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Much has been written about the demise of Canadian history, particularly as a distinct course in Canada's high schools. What is remarkable is how much attention has been paid to this lamentation when the logic of the argument presented would suggest that Canadians should know little and care less about this tragedy. Moreover, some institutions are prepared to spend large sums to correct this problem, so long as the remedy is consistent with their own biases as articulated by their designated advocates. Many of the arguments — and the adversaries — will be familiar to those who have noticed the verbal jousts between the "new" and the "old" history or the clashes between "professional" and "popular" historians. Despair about the current state and probable fate of the curriculum in secondary schools also has its antecedents.

Another familiar take on the relationship between our past, present and future came from a departing American correspondent, who broadened the epitaph to include Canada, not just the teaching of its history. Steven Pearlstein of the Washington Post suggested that a key to Canada's fate was "the fact" that Canadians cannot coalesce "around a shared sense of history" because they "have so little of it worth remembering." For Pearlstein, apparently, our failure to have a history like that of the United States doomed us to become a part of our southern neighbour. There was little that was new in this journalistic soothsaying, particularly not the pronouncement that "time has not been kind to the Trudeau legacy." Pearlstein may have gleaned that insight from the writings and ratings of that endangered species, Canadian political historians.

The death of Pierre Elliott Trudeau, with the attendant grief and recollections, has called into question not only Pearlstein's brusque aside but also some assumptions underpinning the debate about Canadian history and how it is learned. What was evident from the popular reaction to Trudeau's death was both how much he affected Canadians and how much we collectively respected him, whatever our political views. With a few ignoble exceptions, we "remembered" him, not always unanimously or necessarily correctly, but usually with an affectionate regard and generosity of spirit that were worthy of the occasion, the man and the country. Canadians young and old were captivated by words and images from the "Trudeau era", as pundits — including historians — attempted to make sense of that time for those who had experienced it and for those who had not. Canada's political history and Trudeau's part in it prompted reflection and commentary, along with the personal concerns that are associated with the passing of an individual.

That is not to say that there was a common verdict on Trudeau's legacy, nor any expectation that there should be one view of his contribution to Canada. In that sense, Canadians were almost as divided as Canadian historians. But these variations in assessments were ultimately seen as less significant than a shared appreciation that Pierre Elliott Trudeau had made a difference to our public life and that he deserved to be honoured, even by his foes, for his commitment and his character.

Another prime minister who was not afraid to lead where others might not follow, Sir Wilfrid Laurier, unites this edition of *Canadian Issues / Thèmes Canadiens*. When Laurier died in 1919, thousands lined the route of his funeral procession, but his likely historical image was uncertain. The issues of reciprocity with the United States and conscription for overseas military service had prompted Liberal defeats in consecutive elections, dividing the party and the country. Laurier's achievements in office seemed to have been eclipsed. There is still no agreed interpretation of Laurier. Instead, there is a continuation of the dialogue between the present and the past that is the essence of history. Undoubtedly appraisals of Trudeau's deeds will fluctuate over the years to come.

But history is about more than former prime ministers and we learn our lessons in various ways. As the CBC embarks on a popular audiovisual history of Canada — and thereby exposes itself to the slings and arrows of outraged historians — we are reminded that the study of Canada and its history is more dynamic than some commentaries have suggested. As Patrick Watson argued in The Globe and Mail, there is a misplaced nostalgia for how and how much Canadian history was taught in the "good old days" of memorization and simplistic quizzes. Now the old trivia tests have been recast as national surveys of historical knowledge.

Nonetheless, good may still come from the focus on Canadian history. The willingness of media outlets to devote valuable time and space to the question of its appropriate place in education suggests that people are interested in the study of Canada. Whether the institutional response will satisfy the critics remains to be seen. ■