IS NATIONAL HISTORY POSSIBLE?

ABSTRACT

Is it even possible to talk of a national history in the context of Canada? Doesn't the history of Quebec, for example, with its nationalist narratives, make such a definition if not impossible, at least highly problematic? In such a pluralistic society, Dr. Morton points out, a national identity can put on many faces, for Canada is a country of several nations.

Is national history possible? As author of five editions of a book called *The Short History of Canada*, I answer, as did Count Frontenac,: "par la bouche de mes canons." But is this book really "a national history of Canada"? In these post-modern days, that would be unfashionable. Ostensibly, I insist that it is nothing but a "User's Manual" to help the current residents to take advantage of the country with the least damage to themselves and their fellow citizens. No doubt my critics could have done better and will.

The words "nation" and "nation" are what translators call "faux amis" though the confusion exist in both languages – a culture, language and history on one side; a sovereign territory on the other, and René Lévesque and his successors to mix them up. That is certainly part of our separate and joint histories. Does it make "a national history"?

L'"histoire nationale":idéologique ou métaphysique?

Indeed how can we describe a book that comments on the evolution of two self-conscious national ideals, and perhaps six hundred of them if we accept Native usage? And is national history bound to be celebratory, exclusive and positivist? If so, then we will repeat ancestral errors by excluding those unwilling to cheer. But could a history of Quebec that ignores important minorities who do not naturally see themselves as *Québécois* be any more truly nationalist? Not unless, like Abbé Groulx, we conflate nation and race. What about history which seeks a sobre re-evaluation of our shared human experience of this part of our small planet? Is that "national history"? If not does anyone show much enduring interest?

For Canadians, Confederation may be a success, a failure, or a work in progress and still sparking creativity and conflict. One common theme of Canada's history is the emergence of different linguistic, cultural, sexual, regional, religious and economic identities, federally or regionally, whatever the desire of authority, be it in Ottawa or Quebec, to make us take a broader view. In 1995, Jacques Parizeau sent out regional commissions to promote the common interests; they returned laden with parochial concerns, from road repairs to opening hours for local CLSCs. How Canadian.

Histoire d'un peuple

In such a pluralist society, it is needless to point out that a national history can have lots of meanings. My own approach was to open with all the different histories Canadians shared at Confederation. The carpenters of this structure added their own places in the plan because, as Toronto suburbanites, their histories came from the whole world. In the end, my own choices had to be imposed but they were not those I would have made at the outset and some have shifted in each edition. Anyone who sets up a survey course will recognize the grand ambitions, hard choices and the modest fulfillment.

Manuel de l'usager

In this book, as in my teaching, I endeavoured not to be carried away by pride or patriotism. My chosen theme was to write a users' manual for Canadians who wanted to understand how their country had worked. The *Short History* was for me a narrative of events, personalities and developments which were remote from my life and experience but which I wanted to understand. Was Canada a country of one, two or several nations? There was, for me, no correct answer but there was some fascinating working out of contradictory principles. Canada was a nation with frontiers where

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My model, if any, was Maurice Careless, possibly because he was unquestionably among the most charming and open of my senior colleagues when I moved to the University of Toronto in 1969, but chiefly because of his brilliant vision of a Canada of "limited identities." Canadians, he suggested, are defined by their "hyphens." When John Diefenbaker insisted he was "an unhyphenated Canadian," it was invariably a pretext for the media to recall him as an Ontario-born Saskatchewan Baptist of mingled Norwegian and British ancestry, embittered because his own party leaders had deliberately mispronounced his name to spoil his leadership bid in 1948. If I had an objective in writing the *Short History*, it was to explain Canadians to Canadians and particularly les Québécois to the multicultural anglophones I had met and taught during my many years at Erindale College in Mississauga.

History, at its most traditional and nationalist, is once more in fashion, in the United States and most of Europe and in our more conservative provinces. In Quebec, passing History in Secondary 4th is the avenue to further education. Other provinces could be tempted in the same direction. You will be familiar with the surveys and promotions fostered by the conservative young men of the Dominion Institute, and the business-backed Historica Foundation managed by former Trudeau aide Tom Axworthy.

History's popularity may be posited on the illusion that, somehow, the study of our past will rediscover roots of duty, patriotism and commitment not yet visible to the naked eye. Faced with this dream or nightmare, most academic historians recoil in disdain, amusement or horror. As I suggested, most of us are sufficiently aware of the post-modern critique of our discipline. History is subjective and a prey to ideological fashion. In Montreal, I often ask students what Quebec's motto, "Je me souviens" includes. Few know that it was derived from Eugène Taché's line that continues, "né sous le lys, je croîs sous la rose." Did the Parti Québécois put "Je me souviens" on my license plate to recall that my province has been shaped by both the Lily and the Rose of old England?

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How to Make Our Own History?

How should we tackle the history of Canada or of Quebec? My answer would be ridiculously simple and utterly complex. We must proceed carefully and cautiously to record a history and what we know and can, painfully, grasp about the past. We must find room for all the participants, loud-mouthed and silenced alike, winners and losers and patient observers. We must even find patience for people, ideas and events we now denounce and deplore: true believers, for example.

In the process, we shall rediscover that History is adult entertainment, complex, many-sided and rarely flattering to the virtuous unless they are also arrogant - and therefore unvirtuous!

With Canada's history, we should most of all be reminded of a past that lacks a single viewpoint. Instead, we have many splendid ones, whether from the noble hill over Montreal, the steep bluffs overlooking the rivers which Winnipeggers again call The Forksor, even most controversially, the view from the CN Tower which extends over close to one in six who call themselves Canadian. Mine, unapologetically, favoured the town where I came to political consciousness at the age of ten, Regina, Saskatchewan, in the midst of this country's most sweeping social revolution.

Canada's history is dominated by material realities: the land, the climate, the need to earn a living and to survive the accident of a dominant, demanding and currently all-powerful neighbour. These realities shape our collective character as Canadians and, whatever our precautions, limit what we can probably achieve as a collectivity. But, as I often ask my students, is there anywhere else in the world where Canada would be better placed?

This is a land settled by losers because, if they were winners, would they ever have emigrated to this cold, remote land? But look how well the losers have done here! At the same time, the memory of losing explains our moderation and our caution. Like King Charles II, we don't want to go traveling again.

Historical knowledge is always a work in progress, and a selection of many distinct and contradictory trajectories. Historians practice the most evanescent of arts, as I have been reminded by the successive editions of the *Short History*. When neither I nor the publisher has energy or capital for new editions, the book will die and be replaced.

When historians claim God's right of the last word, we shall be destroyed, like any other graven image that claims to be truth and succeeds barely to be a human fantasy. If, in contrast, we know our limits, we shall help others to deepen theirs. Robbed of any grandiose claims, any national history turns out to be a photograph of our own brief age, speaking to us and our children, and discarded by them when they have no further need. It is worth doing well but it is not done forever.