TEXTBOOK WARS: CANADIAN STYLE

ABSTRACT

"How far could historians go in revealing the warts on our national past without compromising national unity?" Relatively far, assert Margaret Conrad and Alvin Finkel in this essay, which exposes and tackles the terms of the debate surrounding the publication(s) of their textbook, History of the Canadian Peoples. Conrad and Finkel's book presents students with a complex view of the past, and encourages them to develop a critical approach to evaluating claims made in the name of history. Other more conservative scholars denounce this approach to teaching history – they view it as a destructive blow dealt to the worn-out fabric of the discipline. The fact that teachers of history can't agree on the content and approaches of history textbook is a good thing. Indeed, the authors believe that it is the adoption of a definitive text that would finally signal "the end of history."

According to historian David Lowenthal, "No publisher tries to sell a textbook with the claim that it is more accurate than its competitors" (Lowenthal, 1996: 169). They do, however, claim that their text is more comprehensive, more relevant, more affordable, and more accessible to students. In 1993-94 professors of Canadian history had the luxury of choosing from among several new or recently revised two-volume survey texts on Canadian history (see bibliography). They also found themselves unwittingly at the centre of a debate about what "basic" knowledge students should glean from an introductory university survey text. As co-authors of one of the new textbooks, *History of the Canadian Peoples*, we found ourselves caught up in this debate whose paper trail, now approaching an impressive weight, has become required reading in many graduate courses on Canadian historiography.

The history of *History of the Canadian Peoples* is almost as interesting as the history of Canada itself. Although the first edition did not appear until 1993, Margaret Conrad signed a contract to write it in 1987. She had been asked in 1986 by Brian Henderson, then an editor with Copp Clark, to write single-handedly a one-volume survey of Canadian history. This task she wisely refused to take on – but then began the long process of finding co-authors. (Textbooks, unfortunately, are not rated highly by members of university tenure and promotion committees.) Finally, a team, that included Michael Behiels, Cornelius Jaenen, Veronica Strong-Boag as well as Margaret was assembled and flown to Ottawa for a planning meeting. Michael subsequently withdrew from the team; Nikki did two chapters and then dropped out. Rebecca Coulter joined briefly and then also resigned. Margaret finished her chapters in 1988; Cornelius completed his chapters as well but they were deemed to require substantial revision for an introductory survey; Alvin Finkel appeared on the scene in 1989, upon a suggestion from Rebecca Coulter. Alvin and Margaret ended up doing most of the writing and rewriting, communicating by e-mail as they fit their writing around busy schedules. For subsequent editions, Conrad and Finkel became the primary authors.

We make a good team. Our research areas – gender, labour, region, and politics, broadly defined – means that we understand each other, even if we do not always agree on interpretations. From the beginning, the goal for the text was to integrate the findings of the new social history relating to class, culture, gender, race, and region into the national narrative and we embarked on our mission with enthusiasm. To ensure that we achieved what we set out to do, the text was organized thematically, with separate chapters for political, economic, and social topics for each of the time periods that had been defined at the initial planning meeting in 1987.

Unfortunately, the second volume of the first edition was done in indecent haste, which meant that we had no chance to get real feedback on the manuscript. The decision to produce a two-volume rather than a one-volume text came before Alvin joined the team but the structure of the post-Confederation volume, including its peculiar time periods, was not revisited, despite our grave misgivings. What saved us from total failure was the fact that Barb Tessman is a gifted historian as well as a fine editor. She helped to make the text both more accurate and more readable than it would have been otherwise. We also had a leg up on our competition because we approached

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ALVIN FINKEL

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history as a discipline requiring critical skills rather than as a narrative of received truths that students needed to ingest. In our texts we acknowledged sources in footnotes, included selected readings that informed our thinking, and flagged areas where historians disagreed. We also included illustrations and inserts that focused on events and people, making our text look visually attractive.

Copp Clark did a major advertising blitz for the text, producing promotional mugs to flog to professors and getting us a spot on CBC's *Morningside*. Although initial reaction was positive, a groundswell of anger erupted from scholars fighting a rearguard action in the so-called "culture wars" over history texts that swept North America in the 1990s (Nash et al. 1997). These wars were really little more than a tempest in a teapot – *a cri de coeur* from those who saw history primarily as a discipline focused on political and military themes rather than one that embraced a growing number of sub-fields. Within a decade, most thinking people had come to recognize that it was not an either/or issue. But in the meantime there was a lot of blood on the floor in history department common rooms.

The rallying cry for the political historians was produced by Michael Bliss, a prominent historian at the University of Toronto. In a provocative piece published in the *Journal of Canadian Studies* in the winter of 1991-92 ("Privatizing the Mind: The Sundering of Canadian History, the Sundering of Canada"), he claimed that the enthusiasm for social history had implications well beyond the history departments in which it had gained ascendancy. Confusing the cause with the effect, he argued that by focusing on "limited identities," social historians were contributing to the "sundering" of the nation. His comments brought a sharp response from a group of feminist historians (Linda Kealey et al. 1992) and touched off discussions in history departments across the country. The appearance of our text and one produced by Jack Bumsted with a title remarkably similar to ours – *The Peoples of Canada* – fed into the growing frenzy about the role of Canadian history in shoring up a badly divided nation.

That many scholars were eager to incorporate the new social history into their teaching became clear when in the first year we grabbed nearly a third of the Canadian survey textbook market. If it is true that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, we realized that we had hit the mark when our major competition – Douglas Francis, Richard Jones, and Donald Smith, *Origins and Destinies* – subsequently came out with a new edition that mimicked our text in nearly every respect: illustrations, footnotes, selected readings, and historiographical debates, as well as more regional and social history. Suddenly, we found ourselves in a race for textbook dominance.

We also had a leg up on our competition because we approached history as a discipline requiring critical skills rather than as a narrative of received truths that students needed to ingest.

Over the past decade there has been some convergence among the two main competitors for the Canadian history survey market about what issues should be covered in an introductory text, but they each present rather different narratives on the nation's history. While our view of "limited identities" emphasizes structural oppression and popular struggles, Francis et al. focus more attention on consensual changes, and on powerful individuals and groups. Because of our approach to the past, it was our text that inevitably became the epicentre of a firestorm regarding the role of historians in national life. How far could historians go in revealing the warts on our national past without compromising national unity? Should they worry about such unity in the first place? Did they have the right to suggest that the so-called "losers" in the human struggle for power and dominance deserved equal time with the "winners?"

In 1998, Jack Granatstein in *Who Killed Canadian History* (1998) committed to print what our detractors had been saying. Chapter 3 of Granatstein's book, entitled "Professing Trivia: The Academic Historians," argued that textbooks such as ours ignored or simply denounced John A. Macdonald, Wilfrid Laurier, and others of their stature, a statement that was patently untrue and leads us to believe that he had not bothered to read the text which had competed so successfully with his own. Lamenting that there was not enough Canadian history taught in universities and what was taught was misguided, Granatstein concluded that "university graduates, like those who enter the labour force directly from high school, emerge into the market place culturally illiterate, ignorant of the basic details about their nation and their society that every thinking citizen requires" (65-66). Granatstein's view that history's major role is to support national citizenship is embraced by many people, past and present. What is unclear to us is why he and others would want to shield the young citizens in our classrooms from acquiring a complex view of the past and a critical eye regarding claims made in the name of history.

By the time that Granatstein's book was released, the second edition of our text, which addressed many of the problems in the first, had been published. Nevertheless, the first edition still gets trotted out by anyone looking for a straw man or woman to flog. In our second edition, we restructured the text – using political history to drive the narrative, expanding the coverage of the First and Second World Wars, focusing more on cultural and environmental history, and correcting the egregious errors that are likely to bedevil any first edition. Our flexible response to criticism meant that we were not nearly as hidebound as our detractors claimed, but there are few people involved in the textbook wars who will admit this. In the most

recent round of revisions, one of our reviewers claimed that the chapter on the Second World War was totally inadequate, most likely because the reviewer thought that Margaret wrote it. The truth is that we had help from a very accomplished military and diplomatic historian. Had his name been attached to the text, it might well have elicited a different response from the hyper-critical reviewer.

What many reviewers perhaps do not realize is that textbooks get more critical evaluation than most academic endeavours. Before making revisions – we are currently preparing for our fourth edition under our most recent publisher, Addison-Wesley Longman – our editors solicit reviews from eight or more critics, most of them professors who teach introductory Canadian history. Then the first set of revisions for each edition gets a once-over from another set of critics, leading to revisions of revisions. If nothing else, the extensive review process makes us firm subscribers to reader-response theory. While one reviewer finds too much material on the North, another claims that there is not enough on the region. One reviewer finds a particular section well done, another thinks it should be scrapped. After more than a decade in the textbook business, it is clear to us that there is no perfect text that will meet the expectations of everyone teaching Canadian history. This, incidentally, is a good thing. Who would want a definitive text? Such a product would signal nothing else than the much-touted "end of history."

While one reviewer finds too much material on the North, another claims that there is not enough on the region. One reviewer finds a particular section well done, another thinks it should be scrapped. After more than a decade in the textbook business, it is clear to us that there is no perfect text that will meet the expectations of everyone teaching Canadian history. This, incidentally, is a good thing. Who would want a definitive text?

While we decided not to dignify Granatstein's comments by responding to them, other scholars felt obliged to call into question what they considered to be unsubstantiated claims and unfair comments about the direction of academic history in Canada. Graham Carr, a historian at Concordia University, concluded in a review published in the *American Review of Canadian Studies* in 1998 that *Who Killed Canadian History?* was "simplistically argued," "carelessly written" and served only "to raise the volume, while lowering the tone of the debate" about the role of history in society. We could not have said it better ourselves.

After hearing Granatstein present his arguments in a public lecture, A.B. McKillop, a historian based at Carleton University, also felt compelled to wade in. His extensive analysis of Chapter 3 ("Professing Trivia") drew masterfully on national and international sources to puncture what McKillop dismissed as a polemic and a bad one at that. McKillop addressed the nature of historical inquiry, argued that social historians had done their job in expanding the notion of citizenship, and concluded that Canadian history was neither dead nor dying. "What has died," McKillop concluded, "is the role of the academic historian as self-proclaimed public moralist and purveyor of conventional historical pieties that had long passed for the whole cloth of Canadian nationhood" (295).

This did not end the debate. In response to McKillop, Bryan Palmer in the *Canadian Historical Review* took up Granatstein's concern about the existence of a social history consensus that "seems to silence any critical engagement with contemporary historical writing" (678). Palmer claimed that "McKillop counters Granatstein and Bliss by joining them" (697), substituting a pluralistic national narrative for a narrow political one. As a result, Palmer argued, most historians, presumably Alvin and myself included, resist efforts to engage a discussion of social change as if "sundering," "fracturing," and "killing" the old political history constitutes a radical political act. The assumption, if from a very different ideological perspective than Granatstein's, is that our text simply deconstructs and does not pull the various components together again in any useful way.

Granatstein's focus on our text has made it inevitable that it would figure prominently in the continuing discussions of the state of Canadian history. Almost simultaneously, Jocelyn Létourneau used our text as an example in his critique of approaches to Canadian history (*Canadian Historical Review*, June 2000: 245-46); Timothy Stanley found both Granatstein and Conrad/Finkel Eurocentric and racist (*Histoire Sociale*, May 2000: 89); and Jacques Paul Couturier commented on the lack of depth in the coverage of Acadians (*Acadiensis*, May 2000: 108). In an effort to make a virtue out of the criticisms raised by people such as Granatstein, Palmer, and Stanley, we agreed that the one-volume abridgement of our text would be called *Canada: A National History* (Toronto: Longman, 2003). We had, after all, set out to write an introductory survey text on Canadian history, not a monograph on any of a number of important developments in the nation's past. Nor was it a call to revolution, except in the way that we approach the teaching of Canadian history.

That being said, all texts, *History of the Canadian Peoples* among them, may well be swept away in a tide of

technological innovation. In the future, Internet sources may well make print texts obsolete. If we are to be replaced as one of the leading textbooks in the field of Canadian history in the near future, it will probably not be by another hard copy text, but by some clever computer whiz who manages to post on the World Wide Web a compelling narrative, supplemented with readings, documents, images, links, games, projects, and assignments. As our generation shuffles into retirement, new professors will not be so likely to privilege textbooks. In Nova Scotia the department of education has created a Grade 11 Canadian history course that is 40% based on "learning technologies," 20% on texts. If this is the wave of the future, then the real question will be "What use are textbooks anyway?"

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