HISTORY AND HERITAGE: WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?

Dr. SEIXAS' research investigates young people's historical consciousness, the relationships among disciplinary and extra-disciplinary approaches to thinking about the past, the education and professional development of history teachers, history curriculum and instruction, and school-university collaboration. He has received research grants and fellowships from the Canada Research Chairs, the Canada Fund for Innovation, the British Columbia Knowledge Development Fund, the Spencer Foundation, the American Council of Learned Societies, the Hampton Fund, and Killam Research Fellowships.

ABSTRACT

In some ways, "history"—as the scientific, evidence-based investigation of the past—and "heritage"—as the emotion-laden commitment to our national, familial and personal inheritances—are incommensurable approaches to understanding the past. When it comes to planning public commemorations or setting goals for school curricula, they are frequently at odds. This paper explores the relationship of history and heritage in the current moment in Canada, after the demise of the Historical Thinking Project, and in anticipation of Confederation commemorations. It lays out the educational potential of a careful and conscious reconciliation between the two agendas.

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INTRODUCTION: A DICHOTOMY OR A DIALECTIC?

David Lowenthal has supplied a clear, dichotomous definition of the difference between history and heritage as approaches to the past. History, according to Lowenthal, is universally accessible and testable. Heritage is "tribal, exclusive, patriotic, redemptive, or self-aggrandizing." Heritage counts "not on checkable fact but credulous allegiance." [1]

This dichotomy deserves a closer look. In common parlance, heritage includes the valuing of relics and historic sites, the sensory "experience" of the past that contact with those relics and sites can generate, and therefore a focus on the value of preservation.[2] Perhaps most crucial in the values of the heritage project, is a notion that these objects and sites belong to "us," that is, to a group defined either by nation, region, ethnicity or family. It is this *belonging* of "the tangible past" that gives heritage the power to confer and confirm group identities. "Heritage" is, in this sense, "inheritance": a past that is bequeathed to "us," (however defined), and that we, therefore, have an obligation to preserve for those who come after us. These are powerful emotional forces. Indeed, we might call the individual and social impulses to approach the past in this way, the "*heritage imperative,*" which achieves its power from the quest for identity in an unstable, rapidly changing world. As Dutch historian Maria Grever and colleagues have expressed it, "Heritage refers to direct

encounters, emotions and veneration, not to arguments or examination."[3]

In contrast, those engaged in the discipline of history expect to criticize and be criticized, to question and be questioned: those processes are part of the deal. Evidence, not authority, is the critical test of historical interpretation. Moreover, we expect historical interpretation to change—with new issues, new questions and new evidence.

Two developments in Canada over the past decade have brought national heritage promotion and history education into sharp contrast. First, a Conservative government has overseen the expansion and re-branding of Canada's national museums. Thus, the successful Canadian War Museum (first opened in 2005) is being joined by the transformation of the Canadian Museum of Civilization into the Canadian Museum of History. There is also planning and unprecedented funding for a series of national commemorations: the War of 1812, the outbreak of World War I, the Charlottetown Conference, Canadian Confederation, 1867, and the battle of Vimy Ridge, 1917. One might see these developments as a major move towards promotion of a potent national heritage to counter regional and global identities.

At the same time, on the other hand, there has been a remarkably successful national campaign, whose epicenter was the Historical Thinking Project (HTP), for building critical historical thinking into school curricula. In one form or another, over the past three or four years, explicit definitions of historical thinking have been incorporated into the school curricula of a majority of Canadian provinces, and into most of the new school history textbooks.[4]

The latter development appears to be on the other side of the celebratory heritage/critical history divide. An exploration of the contemporary situation in Canada can serve as the beginning of a discussion of relationship of the two big ideas heritage and history. Do they fit together? Can they? Should they? The goals of history education are framed by these questions.

CANADA'S STORY

Canada's status as a nation is, like most others in the twenty-first century, complex. For those wishing to promote a heritage agenda infused with emotion, this poses a problem. Within the borders of the sovereign state of Canada lie the francophone *nation* of Quebec (formally recognized as such by Parliament in 2006) as well as multiple aboriginal First *Nations*. While it is thus a multinational state, its non-Quebecois, non-Aboriginal citizens do not have a nation other than Canada to call their own. On top of this, Canada's rates of immigration—approximately a quarter of a million annually since 2006—are among the highest in the world.[5] For those who look to a variant of heritage education to solidify a coherent Canadian identity that belongs to all of "us," this demographic situation might lead either to redoubled efforts, or to abandoning the project altogether."[6]

National narratives potent enough to consolidate identities rely on at least three elements. First, there must be characteristics and values that can be credibly claimed as having persisted over the vicissitudes of time.[7] A people well defined by language and ethnicity has a significant advantage here. A nation defined by its civic ideals has a different kind of challenge. Canada does not fit in the former group, yet a set of distinctive and persistent civic ideals of Canada is not obvious either. In such a situation, national identity may reside for most citizens in the unstable symbols and icons of popular culture, with obscure, if any, historical reference at all (viz. the widely embraced beer commercial, "I am Canadian."[8])

A consensually held point of national origin is a second element in the creation of a potent national narrative. Again, this is problematic for Canada. First Nations claim their presence on their lands "from time immemorial." This mythic claim poses the challenge of the relationship of myth to history and heritage. In any case, Aboriginal migrations and settlement potentially give Canada a long history, though one that is problematic in terms of its modern identity.[9] Quebec celebrates its own national origin with Champlain's founding of the colony in 1608.[10] The origin of Canada is often traced to Confederation in 1867, but, as Barbara Messamore has pointed out, not much really changed at that point: the date does not mark a dramatic change in Canadian autonomy and self-government; it was not the point at which French and English Canada came together constitutionally (the Act of Union had done so in 1840); nor was it the point at which many separate colonies united—only Nova Scotia and New Brunswick joined the previously united Canada East and West.[11]

The successful resolution of threats, struggles, wars and conflicts, and the heroes responsible for them, comprise a third element necessary for a good national story. Thus, the Canadian contribution to a victory at the Battle of Vimy Ridge in 1917 is widely remembered *within* Canada as a moment of national self-definition. But it, too, has an ephemeral quality, in that it rests to a degree on the proposition that others outside of Canada recognize this victory as a key turning point in World War I, which they do not (even Word apparently fails to recognize it).[12]

In 2012, the Conservative Canadian government innovatively promoted the War of 1812 as the origin of Canadian national identity. What the nation *is not* is crucial in defining what it *is*, and wars provide clear and concrete answers. The enemy—the United States—is what we are not. But commemorations of 1812 as the origin of Canada were problematic. Ambiguity surrounds not only the "victory" retrospectively, but also the protagonists at the time: Alan Taylor has called it "the civil war of 1812," pointing to deeply divided loyalties on both sides of the border.[13] Moreover, as Taylor points out, the British war against the American republicans resulted in the ascendancy of anti-democratic elements in the Canadian colonial regimes, political stultification, and economic retardation, at least until the anti-elitist Rebellions of 1837: hardly a proud moment upon which to base a definition of national identity.

But the Conservatives were onto something: moving beyond 1812, there are many opportunities to define Canada against its closest ally and largest trading partner, the United States. Indeed, Canada as *not-the-United-States*, most perfectly satisfies the quest for identity as continuity over time in the face of change: (whether the United States had surfeits of democracy in the eighteenth century, or imperial ambitions in the nineteenth and twentieth, or private healthcare and uncontrolled guns in the 21st). Yet even this bears a certain irony, in view of Americans' geographic and cultural proximity across an undefended border.

NATIONAL IDENTITY, TRADITION, HERITAGE, HISTORY AND HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

As this brief account of the conundrum of Canadian identity suggests, a discussion of the relationship between *celebratory heritage* and *critical history* requires the introduction of some other key terms. The value of heritage in the modern era is its potential to convey and define collective *identities*. We see this clearly in the resources devoted to the preservation and display of objects in museums, the restoration of historic sites and buildings, and the climate-controlled care of founding documents. National monuments and memorials located in political centers are designed to inspire contemplation and awe at the persistence not so much of the power of a particular administration, government or regime, but of an underlying identity which has managed to survive and triumph over external threat, adversity and injustice. When they work as they are meant to, they link the individual visitor to a larger collective that has persisted from some moment of origin in the past through struggles into the present. Their visceral solidity, scale and mass, moreover, offer the hope of continuity into the future. The Washington Mall, London's Parliament Buildings, Tiananmen Square and, yes, Canada's Parliament Hill, all function in this way. Protest marches and demonstrations, as well, gravitate towards these sites because they express the national identity materially and spatially. When the nation goes off course, when leaders have seized illegitimate power, when there are wrongs to be righted, these sites become the loci of public expression and conflict.

The concept of *tradition* works in the same way as national identity in its handing down of continuity in the face of change. At any given moment in time, tradition's power rests on its claim to persistence and longevity. And yet, dispassionate historical investigation challenges much of what popular culture presents as long-established: tradition is, in fact, the product of slow accretions of change over time, if not outright invention.[14] But the more people experience the conditions of life as changing, the more they grasp for something that appears not to. Tradition, like heritage, consists of ideas, customs, and things that are handed down within a community across generations, establishing a natural-seeming, continuous line through time, maintaining identities and familiar patterns of life.[15] Traditions are thus the practices that hold collective identities together. The most important quality of a tradition is to seem to not have changed.[16]

By contrast, *historical consciousness* arises in the "unnatural" state of modernity, where ties that bind generations and communities are torn asunder

by capitalist relations of production, political and technological change, and the displacement of migrant populations: all that is traditionally solid melts in the modern air. Historical consciousness is the awareness that tomorrow's world cannot replicate yesterday's. Ossified, unreflective tradition will be inadequate as a guide for understanding and living in that kind of future. In Gadamer's words, historical consciousness is "very likely the most important revolution among those we have undergone since the beginning of the modern epoch […] a burden, the like of which has never been imposed on any previous generation." And what is this burden? It is "[…] the privilege of modern man to have a full awareness of historicity of everything present and the relativity of all opinions." Understanding our distance from the past, and being aware that those who lived in other periods were "in a foreign country," whose values and beliefs were radically different from our own, creates this "relativity of all opinions."[17] Because we understand that those forebears could not see beyond their own limited world-views, we come away from the study of the past with the realization that those who come after us will look back on our "enlightened" era, as similarly limited, historically bound and partial.

And so, paradoxically, historical consciousness liberates its subjects from tradition, at the same time that it demonstrates to them that they are not free at all. Even modern, historically conscious people, remain immersed in the changing course of history, whose beliefs, customs, understandings of the world are, in some fundamental way, impervious to critical, distancing analysis. In looking at the past, we can never escape the lenses of our own particular historical moment: they're all we have to look with.

If "tradition" forms a "natural relation" to the past in which collective identities are apparently passed from generation to generation, then "heritage" can be seen as the practices that aim to solidify those relations in times—like our own— when tradition threatens to change too quickly.[18]

Recapitulating the argument: the continuity of tradition supplies the bonds of community solidarity, both horizontally at a given moment in time, and vertically, across generations. As long as tradition's changes are less apparent than its continuities, it can function in this way. Modernity's pace of change, the mixing of different cultural groups, and, since the late twentieth century, the dizzyingly accessible global exposure provided by new technologies, pose seemingly crippling threats to "natural" tradition. Historical consciousness arises in this context, promising a degree of freedom from traditions, a critical lens that includes understanding change—even radical change—in the past, and thus into the future. The flip side of that freedom is instability and uncertainty. But historical consciousness does not free its subjects from history: rather it offers the possibility of an *orientation* in a history that is undergoing rapid change and that, as a result of human agency (*inter alia*), will continue to do so.

What, then, are the possibilities for history education, as we examine the divide between celebratory heritage and critical history? The "history wars" that gripped the United States, Canada, Quebec, and Australia, among other jurisdictions in the late 1990s, might be seen as a battle between these approaches. The stakes are high. On the one hand, school history can demonstrate to young people how a critical approach to the past can provide the most powerful tools for orienting ourselves in time. Internationally, there are a number of initiatives aimed in this direction.[19] They miss the mark, however, if they only supply the critical tools without addressing the identity issues, what Rüsen calls the orientation of practical life in time, and which heritage and tradition, either within schools or outside of them, target so directly.[20]

Coming at the history/heritage problem from the other direction, commemorations and museums provide another kind of opportunity for the intersection of heritage practices and critical history. Bringing a critical, disciplinary component to public celebrations and museum renovations could provide a series of events and institutions far more historically meaningful than the beer commercials and Olympic flag-waving.

CONCLUSION

In a world of accelerating mobility, distraction and dislocation, celebratory heritage offers a simple but alluring promise of roots, solidarity, belonging and identity. But it is precisely the forces that generate the need that make ahistorical heritage solutions inadequate in the twenty-first century. Heritage would segment "ours" from "not ours" and lay special claim, privileged knowledge, exclusive access, to the former. It would help us to feel good by separating "us" from "them." Collapsing past and present, it dangles the promise of preservation and tradition as solutions to accelerating change.

In our own era, these are false promises: the world is headed in the opposite direction. Ours and not ours are mingling; we and they are cohabitating. What young people need to comprehend about identity is not a question of purity of blood or spirit, but of heterogeneity and multiplicity. Under these conditions, only an understanding of malleability and change over time will satisfy the quest for roots. Solidarity will have to be built on a platform both more global and more local than the nineteenth century nation.

In such a world, a vision for heritage and history education starts to take shape. It is based on developing understandings of history's disciplinary tools and critical practices, while addressing the urgent questions posed by the needs for heritage and identity. If it is done right, the answers to those questions will be more open, complex and contested than they have ever been. Celebrations of national heritage will be open for critique; monuments will be sites of debate and contestation; museum exhibits will be self-reflexive; and school curricula will enable students to deal with this historical complexity in the public realm. Herein lies the educational potential for a reconciliation between heritage and critical history.

NOTES

1 Lowenthal, D. (1996) *Possessed by the Past: The Heritage Industry and the Spoils of History*. New York: Free Press, pp. 120-1. To be fair, though I use this as a set-up to draw the distinction, nobody—including Lowenthal himself—sees these as completely dichotomous.

2 Van Boxtel, C., Klein, S., & Snoep, E. (*eds*) (2011) *Heritage Education: Challenges in Dealing with the Past*. Amsterdam: Netherlands Institute for Heritage (Erfgoed Nederland).

3 Grever, M., de Bruijn, P., & van Boxtel, C. (2012) Negotiating historical distance: Or, how to deal with the past as a foreign country in heritage education. *Paedagogica Historica*, 48(6): 878.

4 Seixas, P. & Colyer, J. (2014) *Annual Report of the Historical Thinking Project*. www.historicalthinking.ca under "Research and Reports." Accessed 3 June 2014.

5 The total population during that period was in the mid-30 millions. Citizenship and Immigration Canada, Ottawa, 2 March 2012, "News Release—Canada continued to welcome a high number of immigrants in 2011." http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/department/media/releases/2012/2012-03-02a.asp.

6 See Kymlicka, W. (2001) *Politics in the Vernacular: Nationalism, Multiculturalism, Citizenship*. Oxford: Oxford University Press and Smith, A. (2007) Seven narratives in North American history: Thinking the nation in Canada, Quebec and the United States. In S. Berger (Ed.), *Writing the Nation* (pp. 63-83). New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

7 For an insightful exploration of historical identity as the challenge of persistence through changes over time, see Lorenz, C. (2004). Towards a theoretical framework of comparing historiographies: Some preliminary considerations. In P. Seixas (Ed.), *Theorizing Historical Consciousness* (pp. 25-48). Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

8 www.youtube.com/watch?v=BRI-A3vakVg) (accessed 07 01 2014).

9 John Ralston Saul (2008) has attempted to redefine Canada as a "Metis nation," a mix of Aboriginal, French and English. See also Bouchard (2000) on defining old and new nations.

10 On history, memory and narrative in Quebec, see Létourneau, (2004).

11 Messamore, B. (2012) *Teaching Confederation: the problem with simple*. Paper presented at the Association for Canadian Studies/OHASSTA. Toronto: 23-24 November.

12 Valpy, M. "Vimy Ridge: The Making of a Myth." *The Globe and Mail*, April 1 2007.

13 Taylor, A. (2010) *The Civil War of 1812: American Citizens, British Subjects, Irish Rebels, & Indian Allies*. New York: Vintage (Random House).

14 Hobsbawm, E., & Ranger, T. (*eds*) (1983) *The Invention of Tradition*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

15 Avishai Margalit (2002) locates the "ethics of memory" in the obligation to remember past generations as part of an ongoing community contract that will be fulfilled by being remembered by those in the future.

16 Note that this is a different meaning of "tradition," than that discussed by Gadamer below.

17 Gadamer, H.-G. (1987) The problem of historical consciousness. In P. Rabinow & W. M. Sullivan (*eds*), *Interpretive Social Science: A Second Look* (pp. 82-140). Berkeley, CA: University of California Press: 89.

18 Nora, P. (1996) *Realms of Memory: The Construction of the French Past*. (A. Goldhammer, Trans). New York: Columbia University Press: 1.

19 E.g., Reading Like a Historian in the United States; the new Australian National Curriculum; the Historical Thinking Project in Canada.

20 Rüsen, J. (1993) *Studies in Metahistory*. Pretoria, South Africa: Human Sciences Research Council (specifically, Chapter 9: Paradigm shift and theoretical reflection in Western German historical studies). Also see Megill, A. (1994). Joern Ruesen's theory of historiography: between modernism and rhetoric of inquiry. *History and Theory*, 31(1), 39-60. In the 1990s, key historians of popular memory—in the United States, John Bodnar (1992). *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.in the United States and in Britain, Raphael Samuel (1994). *Theatres of Memory*. London, UK: Verso —saw vernacular heritage efforts in a positive light as the democratization of history. I am discussing government-initiated, national heritage campaigns, which have a substantially different spin.