CONTESTING CLIO'S CRAFT: ACTIVISTS, TRUE PROFESSIONALS AND THE DEBATE OVER GENOCIDE RECOGNITION IN CANADA

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"While it is crucial to better understand how Indigenous peoples were affected by these genocidal systems, over the course of more than a century, it is also essential to acknowledge that settler Canadians have benefited from these colonial policies. We are all embedded in the structures of Indigenous dispossession in what is now known as Canada and we understand that while these tough conversations need to be had, it will be our actions that define who we are and what kind of communities we want to build and strengthen and what kinds of histories we research."

— Canadian Historical Association, "The History of Violence Against Indigenous Peoples Fully Warrants the Use of the Word 'Genocide," (1 July 2021).[1]

When I was asked to contribute to this special edition of Canadian Issues on "Reconciliation and

1 Canadian Historical Association, "The History of Violence Against Indigenous Peoples Fully Warrants the Use of the Word 'Genocide," *Active History* (1 July 2021). http://activehistory.ca/2021/07/canada-day-statement-the-history-of-violence-against-indigenous-peoples-fully-warrants-the-use-of-the-word-genocide.

Reckoning: Contesting Canada's Past, Framing Its Future", it was suggested that a "notable manifestation" of these debates was the Canadian Historical Association's 2021 recognition of the genocide of Indigenous peoples in Canada: mainly because it resulted in a "high profile dispute among scholars." It therefore seemed to dovetail other recent controversies over the toppling of old statues, the renaming of streets or schools, and the ongoing debate about how history should be taught in our schools. History wars are essentially debates over public memory: the past, like the present, divides us as well as unites.[2]

I think the CHA statement from our governing council is crystal clear, grounded as it is in recent historical scholarship as well as the definition of genocide found in the 1948 Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. Nor were we the first to draw this conclusion. The Final Report of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls as well as Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission on residential schools both concluded that genocide occurred, though the TRC couched this in terms of "cultural genocide" — a distinction that does not exist under the UN definition.

Even so, it is no easy thing to recognize genocide in one's own country. It is far easier to recognize it in some distant place, historically perpetrated by somebody else. Nobody here batted an eye a year earlier when the CHA wrote a strong statement in support of a Canadian-based historian of Poland who was being prosecuted in that country for telling an uncomfortable truth about complicity in the Holocaust that enraged nationalists there.

Fundamentally, our responsibility, as professional historians, is to ask the difficult questions and speak the hard truths even when they make people feel uncomfortable.

And yet, the 53 signatories of the open letter published in *The Dorchester Review* protesting the CHA's Canada Day Statement took strong exception to the recognition of the genocide of Indigenous people in Canada, suggesting that we had somehow violated the "ethics and values of historical scholarship" and thus "fundamentally broken the norms and expectations of professional scholarship." For them, the CHA was "acting as an activist organization and not as a professional body of scholars. The turn is unacceptable to us." No matter that only five of the signatories were actually members of the CHA. They went on to say that the association "should honour its best traditions and act as a truly professional organization that stands unreservedly for the protection of objectivity, doubt, debate."[3]

This is very strong language, to say the least.

2 Ian Rocksborough-Smith, 'History wars' in the U.S. and Canada provoked by a racial reckoning with the past," *The Conversation* (October 11, 2021) https://theconversation.com/history-wars-in-the-u-s-and-canada-provoked-by-a-racial-reckoning-with-the-past-168639

3 Open Letter, "Historians Rally vs. 'Genocide' Myth," *The Dorchester Review* (originally published 9 August 2021). https://www.dorchesterreview.ca/blogs/news/historians-rally-vs-genocide-myth. It was updated afterwards, but Twitter provides an effective timestamp for its original publication date. See also, Christopher Dummitt, "The Canadian Historical Association's fake 'consensus' on Canadian genocide" *National Post* (13 August, 2021). https://nationalpost.com/opinion/christopher-dummitt-the-canadian-historical-associations-fake-consensus-on-canadian-genocide .

The signatories of the protest letter represent an interesting confluence of Canadian and Québec *nationalist* historians, mostly of an older generation, long retired, with only a few with recognized subject expertise on Indigenous history or settler colonialism amongst them. Many were heavily invested in the history wars of the 1990s which pitted some military and political historians against some social historians. These wars raged mostly before my time in the academy (and I am 54 years old). The signatories are also white, even though the demographics of the history discipline in Canada are changing (albeit belatedly). As always, who is in the conversation matters.[4]

As historians, we regularly look at such patterns to help us understand the underlying logic of what is going on. So, too, here.

My point is not to equate people with sweeping categories; that would be reductionist. But it is essential that we make visible underlying structures of power and exclusion. For example, to help my undergraduate history students at Concordia understand the deep structures of race in Canadian history, I regularly assign Constance Backhouse's *Colour-Coded* as my de facto textbook.[5] It is a brilliant book and it generates insightful and very thoughtful conversations about the underlying politics of the Canadian state and legal system. One of Backhouse's most effective strategies in showing how the legal system is highly racialized is to identify the race of the lawyers, judges, juries, and politicians each time they are mentioned. In effect, it means being constantly confronted by the whiteness of the system. It can be an abrasive experience for some white students unused to thinking of themselves in racialized terms.

Likewise, it seems to me that the collective profile of open letter signatories helps explain their heavy emphasis on objectivity and scholarly distance. In their bifurcated world of activists and true scholarly professionals, a real historian is detached, dispassionate and far removed from the history being examined. To be in close proximity to that history is to be politically compromised and at risk of being tarred as an "activist" or even worse: "woke" (whatever that means now). Yet nationalist historians in Canada and Québec have proven largely immune to accusations of "activism." That they get a pass is no coincidence.

On the genocide issue, historians of Indigenous origin are thus dismissed as "activists," while white historians are assumed to be disinterested and therefore more objective. These deeply entrenched assumptions need to be challenged for reasons that, I would hope, are obvious. See, for example, the strong response of seven influential Indigenous historians to the publication of the protest letter.[6]

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4 For a balanced viewpoint on this point, see Ira Basen, "The past is present: What role should Canada's historians play in reconciliation? The question has proved surprisingly controversial," *Globe and Mail* (13 May 2022). https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-the-past-is-present-what-role-should-canadas-historians-play-in/#comments

5 Constance Backhouse, *Colour-Coded: A Legal History of Racism in Canada, 1900-1950* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999).

6 Shekon Neechie Board, "Open letter to the Council of the Canadian Historical Association and the Canadian Public," (13 August 2021). https://shekonneechie.ca/2021/08/13/open-letter-to-the-council-of-the-canadian-historical-association-and-the-canadian-public/

Personally, I believe the ideal of the detached scholar is an illusion that actively suppresses the fact that we are all socially and politically located in one way or another. Historians may study the past but we are part of the present. That is not to say that we don't constantly strive to be true to our historical sources: we do. An essential part of today's scholarship is a commitment to being highly reflexive and transparent about who we are and what we are doing.

And this is the rub. What concerns me most is not so much the contents of the open letter, though I think it misleading and over-the-top, as there is a genuine conversation to be had about the role of a professional association. It is their decision to publish it first on an online platform that has a history of mocking residential school survivors. There is simply no excuse for reproducing old photographs of seemingly happy Indigenous children playing in school yards and claiming that this somehow proves that the underlying violence is fake.[7] It is hateful stuff. As far as I can tell, nobody has owned the decision to publish there or felt the need to distance themselves. Naturally, the *National Post* and other right-wing media outlets picked up the protest letter as it fit right into their long running culture war narrative.[8]

The driving force behind the open letter is Trent University's Chris Dummitt. I like him — he speaks his mind. In fact, I contributed a chapter to his 2009 co-edited volume, ironically entitled *Contesting Clio's Craft: New Directions and Debates in Canadian History*.[9] The premise of the book was that a new generation of historians was shaking up how we understood Canada's past.

Since then, Dummitt has spent a great deal of time campaigning against the lack of "viewpoint diversity" in the history discipline. He believes that university history departments are stacked with political progressives and this has threatened the academic freedom of those with more conservative political views. Last year, he presented a brief to Quebec's *Commission indépendante sur la liberté académique* where he called for legislation requiring universities to remain politically "neutral."[10] In our polarized times, the result of such a law would be anything but neutral in my opinion.

As I have written elsewhere, I am a firm believer in viewpoint diversity. My PhD advisor was a member of Canada's right-wing Reform Party. Though I did not share his politics, he was a great historian and we enjoyed discussing politics. I have also published across the old battle lines of the history wars throughout my career. But to speak of viewpoint diversity without taking seriously cultural diversity or the ways that the discipline itself is enmeshed in

7 "More children forced to smile at gunpoint" Dorchester Review Tweet, https://twitter.com/DorchesterRev/status/1410324712492834819

8 Barbara Kay, "Historical association's genocide statement 'brazenly unscholarly'" *National Post* 16 August 2021. https://nationalpost.com/opinion/barbara-kay-historical-associations-genocide-statement-brazenly-unscholarly

9 Christopher Dummitt and Michael Dawson, eds. Contesting *Clio's Craft: New Directions and Debates in Canadian History* (New York: Brookings Institute, 2009).

10 Marie-Michèle Sioui, "La commission sur la liberté académique a invité un historien qui falsifiait ses recherches," *Le Devoir* 24 August 2021 https://www.ledevoir.com/societe/627111/liberte-academique-la-liberte-illimitee-pour-les-idees-controversees.

wider structures of power is shallow in my opinion.[11]

This year is the centenary of the Canadian Historical Association, which affords us a unique opportunity to step back and reflect collectively on disciplinary structures, key historiographical and methodological developments, the changing place of theory, and our ongoing relationships with wider publics as well as the communities we study. As Mount Allison University's Andrew Nurse recently wrote, the historian's craft is not frozen in time. Nurse believes we are now seeing "the reconsideration of Canadian narrative frameworks."[12] I agree with him. Across the humanities and social sciences, we are working hard to move beyond the extractive approaches of the past.

In part, this is a reflection of social movements forcing Canadians to reckon with the past in the present. It is also a product of changing demographics within the history discipline itself. A more socially diverse professoriate unsettles the kind of normalized assumptions about scholarship and the scholar's place in society that underpin the particular viewpoint expressed in the open letter.

We are living in a time of extreme political polarization, when history itself has become weaponized. Now more than ever, I am convinced that historians, working individually and collectively, have a wider role to play. We do not suddenly stop being true "professionals" when we step out of our ivory towers or heritage institutions and go public with our findings. Specialists in genocide studies, settler-colonialism, and Indigenous history in Canada are providing urgently needed context and depth.[13] So, too, are those studying other subjects of pressing public concern.

11 For more see: Crystal Gail Fraser and Allyson Stevenson, "Reflecting on the Foundations of Our Discipline Inspired by the TRC: A Duty to Respond during This Age of Reconciliation," *Canadian Historical Review* 103, 1 (March 2022), 1-31.

12 Andrew Nurse, "Reflections and Conjectures: Postcolonial Historical Practices," *Scholarly and Research Communication*, 12, 1 (2021), 12 pp.

13 Sean Carleton and Andrew Woolford, "Ignore debaters and denialists, Canada's treatment of Indigenous Peoples fits the definition of genocide." *The Conversation* (October 25, 2021). https://theconversation.com/ignore-debaters-and-denialists-canadas-treatment-of-indigenous-peoples-fits-the-definition-of-genocide-170242; David Webster, "Optons pour la transparence en ce qui concerne les génocides" *Le Devoir* (31 July 2021). https://www.ledevoir.com/opinion/idees/621786/idees-optons-pour-la-transparence-en-ce-qui-concerne-les-genocides; Karine Duhamel, "Unmarked Graves Are a Moment of Truth for Canada-Indigenous Reconciliation" *World Politics Review* (Tuesday, Sept. 28, 2021). https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/29996/with-unmarked-graves-at-residential-schools-canada-faces-a-moment-of-truth; Karine Duhamel and Adele Perry, "A season of historical reckoning," *Winnipeg Free Press* (12 July 2021). https://www.winnipegfreepress.com/opinion/analysis/a-season-of-historical-reckoning-574813912.html; Daniel Heath Justice and Sean Carleton, "Truth before reconciliation: 8 ways to identify and confront Residential School denialism" *The Conversation* (5 August 2021). https://theconversation.com/truth-before-reconciliation-8-ways-to-identify-and-confront-residential-school-denialism-164692