INTRODUCTION

THE PAST — CONTESTED AND CONTROVERSIAL — CONTINUES TO SHAPE OUR PRESENT AND FUTURE

RANDY BOSWELL

Randy Boswell is an associate professor of journalism at Carleton University and a former reporter and editor with the *Ottawa Citizen*. He is also a former national writer with *Postmedia News* specializing in stories about Canadian politics, history and culture. He continues to write frequently about these subjects in various Canadian publications, and has guest edited several previous, history-themed editions of *Canadian Issues/Thèmes Canadiens*. Boswell has published scholarly articles on aspects of Canadian environmental history and on an ancient Indigenous burial ground across the Ottawa River from Parliament Hill that has helped inform the understanding of First Peoples' enduring occupation of today's national capital area. A column he wrote in December 2020 prompted the City of Ottawa to rename the Prince of Wales Bridge spanning the Ottawa River the Chief William Commanda Bridge to honour the memory of a revered Ottawa-area Algonquin leader.

The spark of inspiration for this special edition of *Canadian Issues/Thèmes Canadiens* was the controversy that ensued after the governing council of the Canadian Historical Association issued a statement on Canada Day 2021 formally announcing that "the long history of violence and dispossession Indigenous peoples experienced in what is today Canada" should be called genocide.

> *"We recognize that historians, in the past, have often been reticent to acknowledge this history as genocide," the CHA, which represents 650 professional historians in Canada, said in the statement. "As a profession, historians have therefore contributed in lasting and tangible ways to the Canadian refusal to come to grips with this country's history of colonization and dispossession. Our inability, as a society, to recognize this history for what it is, and the ways that it lives on into the present, has served to perpetuate the violence. It is time for us to break this historical cycle. We encourage Canadians to recognize this history for what it is: genocide."*

The CHA statement was released in the months following the discovery of hundreds of unmarked children's graves at former residential schools in

Canada. But there was — and remains — sharp disagreement with the association's statement among some Canadian scholars. A number of them issued an open letter acknowledging the gravesite revelations as "tragic evidence" of the Canadian government's attempted assimilation of Indigenous children into the broader society. But they rejected the CHA's claim of a "broad scholarly consensus" that this history amounted to genocide, and further argued that the CHA should not be issuing statements "in support of a particular interpretation of history," adding that by "insisting that there is only one valid interpretation, the CHA's current leadership has fundamentally broken the norms and expectations of professional scholarship."

Just before the summer 2021 uproar over the CHA's statement, New Democrat MP Leah Gazan — a member of Saskatchewan's Wood Mountain Lakota Nation — tried and failed to gain unanimous consent in the House of Commons for a formal declaration that the Canadian government should recognize what happened in the country's residential schools as genocide. Then Pope Francis came to Canada in July, and the pontiff commented to reporters at one point that "genocide" is indeed the right term to apply to the horrors perpetrated against Indigenous communities by Canada's residential schools.

In late October 2022, Gazan amended her House of Commons declaration to reference the Pope's statement about genocide. This time, the motion passed with all-party support.

History, of course, only happened once. But what exactly happened, what it means, which historical figures were heroes, which were villains and many other questions about the past — including what words should be used to describe certain events and policies and individuals and eras — continue to be hotly contested and subject to new information and evolving perspectives.

At a time when scholarly and popular narratives about this country's history are being challenged and rewritten with unprecedented vigour, the Association for Canadian Studies invited a range of contributors to share their thoughts on what might be described as this country's contemporary battleground over history, heritage and public memory of the past.

Several recent events have intensified the struggle over Canada's history, including the 200th anniversary of the birth of Sir John A. Macdonald in January 2015 and the release later that year of the multi-volume final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada — which, in fact, kickstarted the "genocide" debate long before the CHA weighed in on the matter last summer.

Then came the 150th anniversary of Confederation in 2017, accompanied by impassioned critiques from Indigenous leaders who insisted the sesquicentennial was no cause for celebration and reminded Canadians that the First Peoples of this land have been here for at least 150 *centuries*.

In 2020, further deep reflection about Canada's history was spurred by a North America-wide racial reckoning that followed the U.S. police killing of George Floyd, an unarmed black man in Minneapolis. The Black Lives Matter protests that reverberated in cities across Canada created waves of controversy over certain public tributes — in the

names of buildings, streets and towns — to historical figures who had owned slaves and resisted the abolition movement of their own time.

Finally, in the spring of 2021, the fresh revelations about unmarked graves at former residential school sites in British Columbia and elsewhere fuelled the movement to re-examine Canada's history, intensifying efforts to tear down tributes to figures such Macdonald, Father of Confederation Hector-Louis Langevin, Egerton Ryerson and others who played a role in the creation of the residential school system.

As one sign of how profoundly the ground is shifting beneath us in these tumultuous times, this publication was initiated when the namesake of Ryerson University was still honoured on that Toronto campus; today, the contentious statue of the 19th-century Upper Canada educator whose ideas helped create Canada's residential school system is long gone from the place now called Toronto Metropolitan University.

This volume of essays and transcribed interviews features a range of voices, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, reflecting on such changes, and how the past — often contested and controversial — continues to shape our present and future.