FORTY YEARS ON: AN INTERVIEW WITH THOMAS H.B. SYMONS



Professor **TOM H.B. SYMONS** is a teacher and writer in the field of Canadian Studies and public policy. He has written extensively on intellectual, cultural, and historical issues, and on international academic and cultural relations. He is the Founding President of Trent University, serving as its President and Vice-Chancellor from 1961 to 1972, and since that time as Vanier Professor and Vanier Professor Emeritus. He was appointed to the Board of Directors of the Ontario Heritage Trust in 2006, and became Chairman in 2010.

Professor Symons served as Chairman of the Commission on Canadian Studies from 1972 to 1984 at the request of the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada (AUCC), and as Chairman of the Commission on Commonwealth Studies from 1995-1996 at the request of the Commonwealth Secretary General. He was Chairman of the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada for the decade from 1986 to 1996, and Chair of the Canadian Polar Research Commission in 1988. He is a Member of Council of the Historica Foundation, a Member of the Council of Advisors of the Heritage Canada Foundation, and a Governor of the Fathers of Confederation Buildings Trust in Charlottetown. Professor Symons is Honorary President of the Peterborough Historical Society, Past Chair of the Council of the Canadian Canoe Museum, Founding Chair of the Canadian Association in Support of the Native Peoples, Chair Emeritus of the Peterborough Lakefield Police Services Board, and served on the Panel appointed by the Canadian Government to report on the Future of the Trent-Severn Waterway, 2007-2008.

He has also served as Chair of the National Library Advisory Board, Chair of the National Statistics Council, Vice-Chair of the National Capital Planning Committee, Chair of the Ontario Human Rights Commission, Chairman of the 500 plus-member Association of Universities of the Commonwealth, and Chair of the International Board of United World Colleges.

Professor Symons became an Officer of the Order of Canada in 1976 and a Companion of the Order of Canada in 1997. He was appointed a member of the Order of Ontario in 2002. In 2012, Professor Symons was awarded the Queen Elizabeth II Diamond Jubilee Medal, and received a Knighthood from the Vatican in the Order of Saint Sylvester.

ON THE COMMISSION

The Commission was a great team of mostly young people who genuinely cared about what we were doing, all talented and bright individuals, mostly serving on a voluntary basis.. We would often talk about our work half way through the night, about how best to address issues or to resolve problems. We had fun, we enjoyed each other's company, we cared about what we were doing, and we thought it was worthwhile.

There was also a large Advisory Panel of experts in various fields. Liaison Persons at universities and colleges across Canada, and often beyond, were also asked to serve as reference points to assist the Commission with its work.

THE CONTEXT FOR THE COMMISSION

First of all, I certainly was aware, when I was asked by the AUCC, to Chair a Commission to examine the state of teaching and research about Canada, that there was quite a bit of indifference about the subject and about the proposal to have such a study undertaken. A number of colleagues, university presidents, and other academic leaders, were surprised that I accepted the invitation to lead the Commission, and that I would devote my time to such a "shallow and pointless endeavour", as several described it.

Many thought the subject was not actually worthy of serious examination. Indeed, one colleague thought it was very parochial, very provincial: "it's rather like collecting postage stamps," he told me "and a grave misuse of your time". Certainly, this was one of the most prevalent attitudes towards the Commission on Canadian Studies. History itself was pretty unfashionable then, but at least American and European histories were perceived as dealing with great broad-ranging issues, whereas Canadian affairs were seen to be small potatoes, a minor footnote.

There was indifference but there was also hostility. The response to the Commission was much more politically charged than perhaps anticipated. There were people who felt very strongly that it was dangerous and anti-intellectual, indeed unscholarly in fact, for a country to be preoccupied with itself, or paying too much attention to itself. And there were those at the other end of the scale, the very 'hyped up' Canadian nationalists, who said the Commission should burn the American flag on the steps of Parliament and declare our independence from Fortress America..

But there was also an atmosphere in which quite a few people increasingly thought it was important to look at the question: how much attention and what sort of attention were Canadians devoting to the study, understanding, teaching, and research about their own affairs? In the vast middle between the extreme nationalists, and those who felt indifference or hostility to Canadian Studies, we found there were a great many people in every province, and in every institution, who had a growing concern about whether the country was doing itself justice with the amount of education and research it devoted to its own affairs.

In short, there were, broadly, three kinds of attitudes towards Canadian Studies at the time of the Commission's appointment: indifference, antipathy, and growing concern.

RESPONSES TO THE COMMISSION AND ITS WORK

The response, not only to the Commission's report, but in terms of the help we received throughout the process, was extraordinary. It went far beyond anything anybody had expected. This incredible response told us very quickly that the Commission was timely and that it was dealing with something that needed and deserved attention from the education community.

We received over 1 000 briefs, and approximately 2 500 people attended public hearings across the country. The Commission travelled right across Canada, visiting every province and the northern territories. It also corresponded extensively with scholars from Canada and abroad. Close to 30,000 letters were sent our way, all of them acknowledged, in fact, a great many of them actually received detailed replies from the Commission. The response was massive, and quite positive. Many of these letters came from Canadians who were abroad, Canadians living elsewhere but looking in, who were in a position to compare the situation in Canada to similar concerns in another country, another way of living. Responses also came from virtually every cultural group in Canada and from every part of Canada.

We were swamped. Those who were indifferent or hostile to the study thought it would wrap up in 6 weeks to 6 months. In reality, it took a few years! It was a very substantial, worthwhile, and significant exercise.

I should mention that the response continues through to today, some 40 years later! It's a rare day when I don't have at least one letter, email, or telephone call arising from the work of the Commission asking for information, help, or guidance. Every month or two, one or two new files are created, which keep track of what's going on in the field of Canadian Studies in Canada and abroad. The Commission has had a huge tail! In consequence, there is a very substantial body of papers pertaining to the Commission at the Trent University Archives. Recently, I transferred additional papers, which filled some 22 large boxes, organized into about 1,125 files.

EXPECTATIONS AND RESULTS

What I most hoped for, from our work at the Commission and the ensuing report and its recommendations, was an increased awareness of the validity, the value, and the necessity of looking at the Canadian dimensions in every aspect of education and knowledge. Even when dealing with Ancient Greece, for example, you need to know the history of Canadian scholarship and activity in that field, and you need to understand what the Canadian role in such study and research has been, as well as understanding the immense and pervasive legacy of the classical world in our philosophy, culture, language, literature, and political institutions. Similarly with the study of moon rocks: in which a number of Canadians and Canadian institutions have been engaged. There is always a Canadian dimension in the exploration of knowledge. It may not be as large in some areas, it may vary in others. But it should be constant and pervasive. This fact is much better recognized now, some 40 years after the Commission began its work, and this is due, in part at least, to its work.

I was also hoping for more concrete things: for more resources to be devoted to the enlargement of knowledge about Canada and about Canadian affairs, about its spiritual, educational and cultural world. That happened, too, and it often happened as a fairly direct result of the Commission's work. Let us look at some of these results.

The Commission helped to create a great surge in the support for archives. This new interest developed in fields which had otherwise never paid much attention to the value of archival materials. The Commission put forward 31 recommendations for action related to archives. Almost all of those recommendations have been implemented, many of them very quickly, and some of them on a surprisingly substantial scale. We also saw increased support, as hoped for and urged in the Report, for reference materials. *The Dictionary of Canadian Biography* (DCB), an invaluable tool for Canadian scholars and students in any field, was very largely a response to the Commission's Report, and I was asked to serve on its founding Advisory Board. *The Encyclopedia of Canadian Music*, a marvellous and authoritative work, was also encouraged as a concept by the Commission's Report, based on the remarks made on the cultural life of the country, and, again, I was invited to serve on its Advisory Board.

In several instances special programs and initiatives were created as a result of the Commission's Report. For example, citing recommendations in *To Know Ourselves*, the Canada Council created the Canadian Institute for Historical Micro-Reproductions, which launched a huge initiative to record and preserve copies of Canadian print newspapers, from the beginning, providing an initial two million dollars for this purpose. This has been an utterly vital development in Canadian Studies, significant for every one concerned with anything to do with the historical life and development of the country. This recommendation was acted on within months of the publication of the Commission's Report.

There were 61 recommendations made with regard to curriculum and most of them have been implemented.

There were 46 recommendations with regard to science and technology, which were reviewed in a series of meetings by the Science Council and the National Research Council which I was invited to attend.

In regard to education for the professions, one predominant general concern emerged which led to a major recommendation, calling for a conscious and deliberate attention to be given in a balanced way to the Canadian components in any program of professional education.

For Canadian Studies Abroad, we proposed 88 recommendations, a very large number. We paid strong attention to this particular question, and received good briefs or communications from Canadians living in 30-40 different countries. The Department of External Affairs, after some fudging, did implement support measures to encourage teaching and knowledge about Canada abroad and I would give them great credit for doing that. The Provinces of Ontario, Quebec, and Alberta were also very helpful in this matter.

The Commission also underlined the value of foreign students coming to study in Canada and of sending Canadian students abroad, making 24 recommendations on this topic. People thought we would be focused inwards and were thus quite surprised that we examined this particular issue in such depth. But our argument was that, to be a good Canadian, one needed to know about everybody else, and about the place of Canada in the world. Canadians learn a great deal about their own country when they are elsewhere, or when they are with others from elsewhere, when they are in a better position to asses our differences. Not everyone can travel, so how wonderful to have students from all over the world coming to the school where you are and to have the opportunity to benefit from their presence.

The Commission noted, similarly, the value of an appropriate mix of faculty from outside of Canada and the importance of Canadian faculty gaining experience in other countries.

There were 28 recommendations for community colleges. I think that surprised people because they thought we were purely a university commission. However, we decided very early on that the postsecondary field was one large community with a great many shared problems and that the community colleges needed to be included in our reflection. My colleague James Page was the leader on this file and he did a fantastic job.

There were 23 recommendations concerning technological support, including audio-visual resources and media supports, as something which makes a significant difference to how extensively and effectively the tasks of education and research can be done in Canadian Studies as in any other area, but perhaps more so given the propinquity of such studies.

The need to stir up the private sector and to rally the support of private donors was another area of concern, and the Commission made 23 recommendations pointing to the needs and opportunities for benefactions, grants, and donations to support the enlargement of teaching and research about Canada.

I should also mention the development in museums, galleries, and heritage conservation, which has been extraordinary. The increasing presence and role of Canadian museums and art galleries, and the development of heritage programs and heritage trusts (both government and private) is a profoundly significant development. There are heritage programs or trusts in nearly every province and territory now, whose aim is to promote the preservation, the use, and the teaching about heritage in all its forms: natural sites, pioneer villages, inventions, discoveries, cultural and demographic foci, artistic achievements, battlefield sites, significant events and people, and much more. Heritage recognition is a major development that has expanded exponentially in the last generation.

The Commission paid attention, especially in its third volume, to the question of balance. Chapters focused on demography, and on the status of women in Canadian academic life. It argued that if an educational structure disadvantaged in any way half its population, this was a huge disservice to the field of knowledge about Canada, and, indeed, everything else! Both genders have to be fully in the picture. 30 recommendations were made to improve the status of women in Canadian academic life.

All this led to a degree of awakening and a shift in attitude: It reduced the indifference and hostility towards Canadian Studies, and it enlarged in a thorough and scholarly way the number of people who began consciously to think about the legitimacy of looking at their country's own problems and prospects.

ON THE STATE OF CANADIAN STUDIES PROGRAMS IN CANADA

In the early stages after the report, people started counting flags: how many universities had created departments or programs of Canadian Studies? And I think that's a mistake. The bigger question is whether or not there is an appropriate awareness of, and attention to,

the Canadian content, context, and dimensions in each department or program, to the extent that it is appropriate or desirable in that field. The gain in these terms has been significant. The actual number of formally designated Canadian Studies programs wavers up and down. For a while there was a steady growth, but several have dropped out. However, those which remain have grown stronger.

I think it is very important to have some programs that are specifically called Canadian Studies, because they can act as spark plugs. Some classes have 'Canadian' in their title, but that may mean little or nothing. Is the content that ought to be there effectively there? Is attention being paid to the Canadian contributions or to the Canadian needs? Are they receiving the full attention and support that they need and deserve? We've come a long way, but there is still a long way to go. I think it's important for people to sort out the difference between being simply critical and thinking critically. It's desirable to think critically in every area of knowledge, while it is tiresome and counterproductive to be simply critical. This applies in Canadian Studies as in every other field.

ON THE STUDY OF CANADA ABROAD

The overseas dimension of looking at the state of research and teaching about Canada became a major dimension of the work of the Commission on the state of Canadian Studies. And I think the situation has improved immeasurably. There are now numerous societies for the study of Canada in many other countries. They are doing a good job of keeping in touch with one another and with Canadian scholars in Canada. Canadian Studies used to be only in the United States and the United Kingdom and parts of Western Europe. It has now spread to Australasia, Latin America, Asia, Africa, Central and Eastern Europe. Many universities in other countries may not have full programs on Canadian studies, but Canada will be featured in some ways: through its history, its geography, its people, its attitudes, its culture. It will appear in one way or another in their programs and curriculum. While the situation abroad has changed greatly for the better, there is still more to be done.

The Francophonie and the Commonwealth are two examples of a very rich and very real connection for Canadian Studies. Many universities in communities with which we have old and special ties are quite active in the teaching of Canada.

As for the recent major cuts to Canadian Studies abroad, I will say that a mature and intelligent country should realize that a good foreign policy involves academic and cultural dimensions. I think it is a great mistake even in this current economy of some degree of recession to cut back on that which supports a well-informed knowledge of Canada abroad. Such knowledge supports business, exports, foreign policy, diplomacy, defence. Cutting back on the support of Canadian Studies abroad is exactly the wrong direction to take, and this needs to be said loud and clear.

CANADIAN STUDIES AND INTERDISCIPLINARITY

Interdisciplinarity remains a good approach to Canadian Studies, but I would suggest that whether it is the best approach really depends on the circumstances – on the students and teachers and their preferences, needs and resources. But the idea of looking at Canadian things in the whole when you can is a good one. Knowledge of any subject can be enriched by looking at it from every side. I think it is a mistake, for example, to concentrate our energies only on history. To limit the viewing of Canada through an exclusively historical lens leads to unbalanced and stunted scholarship.

KNOWLEDGE OF HISTORY AND ATTACHMENT TO COUNTRY

I think this is a very deep question. Do Canadians need to know their history? They don't have to but they ought to, because their feeling for, and understanding of, their country will be greatly informed and enriched. We are lucky in Canada because it is such a beautiful land that one could just look around and feel great pride without knowing a damn thing about it! Love of country is simpler than history. In a very simple not jingoistic way, the love of your home and native land is a first level of knowledge. The second level is to learn about the country, its nature, its problems, its potential. Greater knowledge leads to greater understanding and greater affection for the country. It will make it possible for a country and its citizens to make better future decisions. Knowledge about Canada allows Canadians to better understand their country and to better serve it.

I feel the need to quote here what I ventured to write on page 12 of the Commission's Report: "the most valid and compelling argument for Canadian Studies is the importance of self-knowledge, the need to know and to understand ourselves, who we are, where we are in time and space, where we have been, where we are going, what we possess what our responsibilities are to ourselves and to others."

DO CANADIANS KNOW THEMSELVES BETTER TODAY?

I would say, in many ways they do. At least they know more about one another now, and that knowledge embraces more than the community they live in. People in southern Ontario, for example, are, I believe, better informed about what's going on in the Maritimes, or in Quebec, or in the North or the West, than was the case 40 years ago.

But we need a broader vision. Canada is a complex country, and in many ways it is becoming even more complex, and definitely not simpler. With the development of new territories in the north, with Canada's increasing international role, with the demographic changes in age, ethnic background, language, etc., it has become a more challenging, but also more interesting place.

SHOULD EVERYONE KNOW A MINIMAL SET OF FACTS ABOUT OUR HISTORY?

Every Canadian should know the broad history of the country. That doesn't mean just of one part or one element of the country. I am a little suspicious when a government wants to tell me what I ought to know. I think it's very desirable for people to have a sufficient knowledge of the nature, problems and identity of the country, in order to be a good citizen. The question of education for and about the country is very, very important. I would back away, however, from anything that would lead people to believe that there is one true story. Canada's history and experience is a broad and complex thing, with a lot of shaky episodes that we need to face up to.

WHOSE RESPONSIBILITY IS IT TO KEEP OUR HISTORY AND TO DISSEMINATE IT TO LATER GENERATIONS?

It is both an individual and a collective responsibility. I wouldn't want to live in a country where a chosen few, a special few, no matter how good their intentions, are the custodians of our identity and our self-knowledge. It is so important that it be something in which all individuals participate and which then results in a collective responsibility. Having said that, there is a need, which we have to recognize, to have spark plugs, some active practitioners whose job it is to remind us of what we need to know and what we need to do, what the facts are, what research has been done, and what research needs to be done. These will often find their place in education, and in entities like boards of education, but ultimately it's for all us. But you do need to have some centres, some programs, which will provide a continuing focus on the study of Canada.

The concept of citizenship is really important here. One cannot be a good citizen, something we should all aspire to be, without endeavouring to learn how the country works; to know the apparatus of government; and to be well enough informed to be able to know and understand, and to debate and decide, on policy issues. Civic knowledge and civic membership are utterly fundamental.

CONCLUSION

We face clearly a great many challenges, in an increasingly complex country in an increasingly complex world. But I'm very optimistic looking at the future. I think Canadians have the ability, the track record, and the opportunity to acquire, and to develop the knowledge to be good citizens and to make a good contribution to the rest of the world. Balance, perspective and resilience, I think those are qualities that are abroad in our land. The situation calls also for a deep affection for our remarkable country and a growing recognition of the importance of our rich heritage – cultural, natural, and built. Heritage is at the heart of everything and from it we should take pride and pleasure in our diversity and in our growing confidence about our place in the world. I think a Canadian degree of self-knowledge and ability to contribute usefully to the world is progressing pretty well, very nearly as it should. But we have more to do.