MEMORY LAPSES: THE USE AND ABUSE OF HISTORY

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ABSTRACT

Too often it is assumed by advocates and readers alike that certain facts, dates or events comprise a body of objective knowledge that can be tested precisely through true/false or multiple choice questions in order to ascertain the nation's grasp of history – what might be described as the national quiz or Trivial Pursuit approach to our past. On closer examination, however, the questions posed reveal much more about the attitudes of the examiners than they are likely to show about the awareness of the respondents. With different (and often contradictory) definitions and purposes, history seems to have survived its eulogists and accusers alike. If Canadians can survive the well-meaning but wrong-headed attempts to verify and then correct their ignorance of the past, as well as the multiple efforts to employ images from history, whether reliable or not, to shape their views of the present, they may just find that history has a lot to offer the curious, even it its "lessons" are often uncertain or ambiguous.

In the four decades since the founding of the Association for Canadian Studies, laments about the teaching and understanding of history in Canada have been persistent and, at times, prominent. Interwoven with this concern have been worries – and sometimes dire predictions – about the neglect or undervaluing of archives, libraries and other key custodians of our national heritage. Especially in times of fiscal restraint and preoccupations with current budgets at all levels of government, it is difficult for policy-makers to assign a priority to programmes or purposes whose impact is longer-term rather than immediate. Archivists and historians have always had to contend with contrary arguments about the relevance and the consequences of their work, contentions which are magnified when public funds seem scarce. For its part, ACS has been part of the solution, not the problem. Through its conferences and publications, as well as its surveys of public opinion, it has raised awareness of the diverse interpretations of Canadian history as well as its impact on education to contemporary public policy without overstating the need for remedial action.

From the perspective of a professional historian working in the federal public service, with numerous contacts in the academic community in Canada and abroad, it seems that some aspects of the perpetual crisis may be overblown, while some of the remedies (or, more accurately, actions proposed or taken in response to the expressed anxieties) may be problematic.

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Where history and myth intersect, there is no shortage of pundits who are certain that Canadians need to know more about their favoured topic (and how it is understood by supposed experts) in order to be better citizens – rather than believe heroic legends or subscribe to outmoded beliefs. So much of the ink spilled or bytes consumed simply prove that history lacks the certainty or exactitude that so many would prefer it possessed.

Perhaps understandably, this employment of questions about the past as a civics test has been embraced by those in government who deal with immigration and citizenship. Questionnaires for new Canadians may be the ultimate expression of this belief that knowledge of specific details betokens a grasp of fundamental values and national experiences. Perhaps inevitably, the broader question of how to interpret Canada's history also appeals to various agencies and departments of government and their ministers, who may seek justification for current priorities and policies in precedents selectively drawn from what has come before. With or without elaborate programmes to this end, every government since Confederation has viewed history through the lens of current policy needs or biases. Commemorations and other memorials, including monuments as well as glossy publications for mass distribution (or, nowadays, web-based dissemination) again often have said more about contemporary priorities or stances than about Canadian history. However regrettable to historians, this tendency is neither exceptional nor especially objectionable. Every government understandably views the past through the lens of the present, as background, justification or precedent for its policies and programmes.

As recent polling by ACS has demonstrated, however, citizens do not always subscribe to the official views of the past or remember the appropriate "lessons" from the "communications products," even when the messages have been conveyed consistently and pervasively through a myriad of media. Canadians have many paths available to an understanding of history, with popular culture and inexactly recalled lessons from school likely more powerful influences than government programmes or campaigns (while these still have greater sway than academic scholarship). Moreover, when commerce intersects with history or myth, the combination frequently trumps other forms of public education. Thus, Laura Secord is still best known to Canadians as a confectionary brand rather than a celebrated heroine of historical vignettes on television or the dignified statue near the War Memorial in Ottawa, let alone as a real person in the past.

When markets are awash with undifferentiated products of uncertain comparative merits, some firms have discovered the commercial advantages of history as nostalgia or reassurance, with sepia-toned footage (anachronistically recording eras that pre-date motion pictures) of undoubtedly virtuous founders proclaiming the integrity of their goods before a narrator affirms that the company, however dubious the claim, still makes things the same way and upholds the same values. Clearly, in this reckoning, older is better. Even when confronting the habitually hyperbolic world of sports, this triumph of the brand over the historical figure is not unknown: after all, Tim Horton is undoubtedly better known today as a provider of coffee and doughnuts than as a skilled defenseman for the Toronto Maple Leafs, even though he played in that bygone age – certainly in the realm of myth for modern fans – when that team won the Stanley Cup.

As a counterpoint to complacent nostalgia, significant complaints have been raised over the years about the exclusion or marginalization of some groups from the dominant accounts of Canadian history, particularly those reproduced in school texts over the years. Governments have sometimes found history to be somewhat ungrateful for attention paid to it, as critical glances are cast at romantic or idealized versions of the past, with the resulting discussion providing ample evidence of unintended consequences. Indeed, the whole notion of what constitutes "evidence" or historical record has been justifiably challenged for its privileging of the approach and stances of the dominant groups in society. As the past has been reconsidered, governments have been obliged to apologize for past misdeeds, for which they bore no direct responsibility – though saying sorry sometimes generates political benefits for the apologisers.

Appeals to right past wrongs now invariably include a demand for an apology and usually a claim for compensation. All too often, grievances may be asserted and apologies made without regard for the circumstances in which the original action was taken and with the victims treated as definite martyrs, however much that characterisation may misrepresent their actual role or conduct as seen at the time. Politically, there is much to be gained from magnanimity and a great deal to be lost by questioning too closely and pointedly the validity of the complaints or the need for redress. For scholars, ambiguity or uncertainty may be commonplace and welcome, but for politicians doubt can be dangerous.

Of course, there are major cases involving justifiable condemnations of former conduct – in Canada, the most prominent examples have been the treatment of Canadians of Japanese descent during and immediately after the Second World War and the grotesque catalogue of abuses of First Nations' children in the residential school system, as well as the treatment of Canada's aboriginal peoples more generally. In the latter case, this has prompted a process, not unlike that which dealt with apartheid and its consequences in South Africa, aiming for "truth and reconciliation" – both worthy, if elusive, goals. Other aggrieved parties, with less convincing cases for remedial action, nonetheless treat the past as a repository of evidence for indictment, with contrary information and assessments treated as mean-spirited heresy or malicious falsehood. While this one-sided approach may be appropriate for litigation and lobbying, it should not be confused with an un-blinkered quest for historical understanding. Even so, this phenomenon does reflect an interest in the past that may prompt broader inquiry.

For some commentators about current events, minor short-term shifts in political allegiance or variations in responses to questions about values and beliefs – the daily bread of polling firms – may be transformed into major realignments with great and lasting significance. In this reckoning, a selective rendering of history becomes background or preamble, simply the stock onto which the vine of assertion is grafted.

Of course, another way in which Canadians relate to history is through the contemporary variation on ancestor worship, genealogy. If the space devoted to this pursuit at facilities such as the National Archives of the United Kingdom and the frequency of research inquiries at Library and Archives Canada are reliable measurements, then this pursuit of our forebears is certainly thriving, thus creating a major constituency in favour of the preservation of government records and the effective provision of access to them. Rather than scoff at their sometimes wayward and often naive stumbling through the undergrowth of our recorded past, historians and archivists would do well to enlist these keen amateurs as allies in the struggle to save our documentary heritage and make it available to all who may wish to consult it, whatever their motivation or training. After all, it seems likely that the genealogists are more numerous and probably also more influential than the professionals whose interests and advice are all too easily, and with little political cost, ignored by mandarins.

Thus, in various forms, with different (and often contradictory) definitions and purposes, history seems to have survived its eulogists and accusers alike. As the various endeavours of ACS demonstrate, history is not only a durable subject but also a remarkably diverse one. If Canadians can survive the well-meaning but wrong-headed attempts to verify and then correct their ignorance of the past, as well as the multiple efforts to employ images from history, whether reliable or not, to shape their views of the present, they may just find that history has a lot to offer the curious, even if its "lessons" are often uncertain or ambiguous.

There is certainly more than enough of it to keep the ACS busy and productive for another four decades – and more.