# ON THE SYMONS REPORT

**JULIE PERRONE,** Assistant Director of the Association for Canadian Studies

One of the themes for this special edition of Canadian Issues is the fortieth anniversary of the Association for Canadian Studies. Inevitably, our reflection took us to the founding of the ACS, which we attribute in large part to the Symons Report. Hence, to mark our fortieth anniversary is also to celebrate Tom H.B. Symons' critical work on the state of the knowledge which Canadians have about their country. Encouraging Canadians to know more about "themselves" has been and will continue to be a dominant objective of the ACS.

Because the articles in this issue begin with a reflection on the Symons Report, some background on the report and its recommendations will serve as an introduction.

The Commission on Canadian Studies was appointed by the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada on June 28 1972, to conduct "a careful examination to determine whether the country's universities were paying adequate attention to Canadian conditions and circumstances, and to the needs and problems of this country, in their programs of teaching and research."[1]

At the head of the Commission was Thomas H.B. Symons, founding president of Trent University. Although the work of the Commission has come to be known as the Symons Report, there was a sizeable team working under Professor Symons. As research associates, the Commission appointed Marcel Caya, Ralph Heintzman, Thomas McMillan and Lucien Michaud. The research coordinator was Michael Jenkins. Jamie Benidickson, James Colthart, James Fulton, Brian Greer, Marguerite Maillet, Pierre Marin, Donna McGillis, Ian McLeod, Robert Stephenson and Dixon Thompson were research assistants. James Page acted as consultant for community colleges, William Young for audio-visual and John Martyn for schools.

To proceed with its inquiries, the Commission organized public meetings across the country, surveyed university departments and curricula, reached out to different constituencies within Canada, and contacted Canadian scholars living outside of Canada.

Based on this outreach, as well as extensive research, the Commission provided insight into the state of Canadian Studies in Canada. As the Report states, the first difficulty encountered was the very definition of the term 'Canadian Studies' which differed greatly from one individual to the next. In line with its mandate, the Commission provided this definition: "teaching or research in any field that, as one of its major purposes, promotes knowledge about Canada by dealing with some aspect of the country's culture, social conditions, physical setting, or place in the world."[2] The definition of Canadian Studies as laid out by the Commission has continued to evolve over the past 40 years.

The Report itself featured eight sections: curriculum, science and technology, the Canadian component in education for the professions, Canadian Studies abroad, Canadian Studies in the community colleges, archives and Canadian Studies, Audio-Visual resources and other media support for Canadian Studies, and, finally, the private donor and Canadian Studies. The Commission provided in-depth analyses of each of these sectors as well as several recommendations.

With regard to curriculum, the Commission found that universities did not consider the topic of Canadian Studies significant enough to give it much attention. So much so that it concluded: "there are few other countries in the world with a developed post-secondary educational system that pay so little attention to the study of their own culture, problems and circumstances in the university curriculum."[3] To remedy this glaring disregard, the Commission made several recommendations, ranging from the creation of a committee in each university mandated to consider the Report and to find ways to implement some of the recommendations; to a greater focus on local and regional studies; more support for the arts; more interactions between levels of education; further development of bilingual capacities; and the recruitment of faculty "sensitive to the academic and cultural environment of Canadian society."[4]

In science and technology, the Commission argued that there was a frequent lack of consideration of Canadian matters. The Report stated, "…although science is international in scope, there are aspects of both science and technology that are particularly pertinent to Canada."[5] Scientific research, when paired with the consideration of specifically Canadian issues, could help Canadians learn more about their physical environment and find ways to better use and protect its resources. To this end, the Commission made recommendations which included the conduct of environmental impact studies for development projects, the creation of a university of the north, better access to, and better dissemination strategies for, research and data, the inclusion in curricula of a course on the history of science and technology in Canada, and more funding for science museums.

In terms of professional education, the Commission argued that no matter how specific the professional program, it needed a Canadian component to prepare future professionals for the Canadian context. As Professor Symons wrote, "In order to be able to make their best contribution, members of the professions in Canada must know this country well – know its institutions, culture, history, and problems – and be prepared to meet its needs and circumstances."[6]

The Commission widened the scope of its study to examine knowledge about Canada elsewhere in the world. It argued that for Canadian Studies to flourish abroad, there needed to be a conscious effort on the part of the Canadian government to "take a new and more active approach to the cultural aspects of its international relations."[7] To address the situation, the Commission made general recommendations including, for example, to give more attention to Canadian Studies in the activities of the Department of External Affairs; hire more cultural officers and attachés; create university chairs in Canadian Studies at selected locations abroad; and encourage academic travel and student exchanges. In addition to these, the Report listed a number of country-specific recommendations.

Even though it was concerned primarily with Canadian universities, the Commission broadened its scope by also including community colleges. To prepare their students for the Canadian job market, the Report argued, colleges needed to "relate their curricula and their planning to Canadian requirements."[8] The recommendations made with regard to community colleges included, the need for greater knowledge of college programs in universities and vice-versa; more provincial funding for college libraries; greater collaboration with museums and art galleries; and making Canadian studies an "integral part of formal college education."[9]

In the Archives and Canadian Studies section, the Report focused mostly on access to and funding for archival institutions, as the Commission believed that archives are the foundations of the study of Canada. Indeed, the Report states that "…the future quality of Canadian Studies is directly linked to the condition and resources of Canadian archives. It is not too much to say that Canadian archives are the foundation of Canadian Studies."[10] Among the recommendations issued by the Commission were the creation of a national network of regional archives and a national guide of resources, the development of a public awareness program, the implementation of archival services in every university, courses on archival procedures, and the creation of a permanent film archive.[11]

The Commission also considered media support for Canadian Studies, noting already in the mid-1970s that the use of non-print media was fast developing. The section on Audio-Visual resources and other media support for Canadian Studies sought to make teachers and scholars aware of these resources, which were at the time often rejected as teaching devices. To change this way of thinking, the Commission made such recommendations as reviewing educational budgets to allow for the acquisition of audio-visual materials, the inclusion of media production companies in academic conferences, the organization of a national conference with a view "toward achieving a standard Canada-wide classification system for media materials,"[12] greater communication between museums, art galleries and universities, and a request for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation to make its materials available at a lower cost to universities.

A last section of the Report focused on the private donor and Canadian Studies. Given the context of increasing government cuts, the Commission looked at private donors as a potential source of funding for Canadian Studies initiatives. Stating that "emphasis in the past has perhaps been too much on raising money for bricks and mortar,"[13] the Report suggested that donors may now be interested in teaching and research projects. On this particular aspect, the Commission recommended, among other things, the seeking out of private sector support, greater availability of information on Canadian foundations, and greater balance in regional funding.

All in all, the Report touched upon a great many areas where Canadian Studies did not receive the attention they deserved, and where there existed significant opportunities to increase the knowledge of Canadians about their own country. There were significant changes implemented by universities, community colleges, libraries and the national government in response to the Symons Report and at least two subsequent reports taking stock of these changes. The great influence this report has had on Canadian Studies is unquestionable, and the articles featured in this publication touch upon the many places to which this influence has spread.

**NOTES**

1 T.H.B. Symons, To Know Ourselves. The Report of the Commission on Canadian Studies, Volume I, Ottawa: Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, 1975, 2.

2 *Ibid*., 5.

3 *Ibid*., 128.

4 *Ibid*., 134.

5 *Ibid*., 141.

6 *Ibid*., 180.

7 T.H.B. Symons, To Know Ourselves. The Report of the Commission on Canadian Studies, Volume II, Ottawa: Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, 1975, 45.

8 *Ibid*., 58.

9 *Ibid*., 66.

10 *Ibid*., 69.

11 *Ibid*., 82-85.

12 *Ibid*., 104.

13 *Ibid*., 113.

**REFERENCES**

The subsequent reports:

James Page, Reflections on the Symons Report. The State of Canadian Studies in 1980, Report prepared for the Department of the Secretary of State of Canada, 1981.

David Cameron, Taking Stock: Canadian Studies in the Nineties", Montreal: Association for Canadian Studies, 1996.

For more on Canadian Studies, visit the Canadian Encyclopedia website at: http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com/articles/canadian-studies

For more on the Commission on Canadian Studies, consult the archival fonds at Trent University: http://www.trentu.ca/admin/library/archives/86-031.htm

For more on Thomas H.B. Symons, visit his archival fonds, searchable at: http://www.trentu.ca/library/archives/97-019.htm. A new anthology entitled *Tom Symons: A Canadian Life*, edited by Ralph Heintzman and published in 2011 is also available.