CONFESSIONS of a History Major

BY Thomas S. Axworthy

"STUDY HISTORY, STUDY HISTORY," WINSTON CHURCHILL ONCE TOLD A YOUNG AMERICAN ADMIRER WHO SOUGHT HIS GUIDANCE, "HISTORY HAS ALL THE SECRETS OF STATECRAFT." HISTORICAL IMAGINATION WAS THE WELLSPRING OF CHURCHILL'S GENIUS: HE VISUALISED ENGLAND'S PAST, BROUGHT IT TO LIFE, AND SUMMONED HIS PEOPLE TO GREATNESS. AT THE CASABLANCA CONFERENCE IN 1943, IN A LULL IN THE PROCEEDINGS, HE TURNED TO HAROLD MACMILLAN AND REMARKED, "THE TROUBLE WITH CROMWELL IS THAT HE SPENT ALL HIS ENERGIES ON SPAIN AND NEVER RECOGNIZED THE GROWING POWER OF FRANCE." IN THE MIDST OF THE ALLIES' LIFE AND DEATH STRUGGLE WITH HITLER, CHURCHILL WAS ALREADY ALERT TO THE POTENCY OF STALIN. CROMWELL WAS HIS BRIDGE FROM THE PAST TO THE PRESENT, POINTING AT THE ROAD TO THE FUTURE.

Churchill's admonition to "study history, study history" should be the leit motif of the October 19th – 21st National History Conference in Winnipeg. In my view history is not a discipline, but a meta-subject, a key to unlocking the treasures of many disciplines. Understanding and applying the critical skills of historical scholarship are as useful in mathematics, or environmental studies as they are in the humanities. Every subject has a history, the story of how others before us have tried to get it right. We learn by examining the triumphs and mistakes of others. In mathematics, for example, what methods did Archimedes employ, what problems did he solve, and what limitations were there to his approach? How did Newton advance over Archimedes? What could Einstein solve that Newton could not? What can't we solve today? Why? History is relevant to all organized bodies of knowledge. The downgrading of history by our education authorities over the past generation is an assault on every discipline.

Winnipeg, the site of the 2001 National History Conference, is also the community in which I first came to love history. I was lucky enough to attend a small liberal arts college in downtown Winnipeg – United College then, the University of Winnipeg now. An undergraduate education in 1964 – 1968 was remarkably different from the University classes that I teach today. I never had a lecture class larger than 45 and by second year small seminars were the rule. No anonymity at United College: as I walked down the halls, Dr. Leathers, of the French Department, would tell me to tuck in my shirt. The College President, Dr. Wilfred Lockhart, moderator of the United Church, not only seemed to know every student by name but would regularly call you to his office to have chats about your progress or the lack thereof. Knowing his ecclesiastical bent, I told him that my plan to learn the French subjunctive heavily relied on prayer. Seemingly unimpressed by my new devotion to vespers, he told me the Lord had other things on his mind, so I had better see Dr. Leathers about tutoring instead.

The History Department of United College was blessed with excellent talent and from three instructors in particular, I learned vital aspects of the historian's craft. Dr. Vincent Rutherford, head of the Department, taught me that history was more than gossip. The famous French historian Marc Bloch, killed by the Nazis for his involvement in the French resistance, wrote that "history is the science of man in time." Historians were not automatons, Dr. Rutherford acknowledged: they had values, prejudices, and quirks like anyone else. But history, unlike gossip is produced with a high, not low, intent: it is an honest effort to ascertain the truth objectively. In his lectures on the British Empire, Rutherford demonstrated that different historians could review the same events and come to opposite conclusions but in each case the meth-

ods employed were rigorous and thorough. After one of my papers had been marked down for excessive rhetoric and skimpy evidence, Dr. Rutherford lent me his copy of Allan Nevins' book, *The Gateway to History*. Historians, Nevins states, are the servants of truth (although there are many truths). The scientific method requires that data should be collected thoroughly, observed impartially, organized logically and evaluated fairly. Every letter, memoir, foreign office minute or artefact should be put under cross-examination. Standards of evidence, Rutherford taught, made history different from mere opinion. Historians were not scientists but they were professionals.

Dr. Cornelius Jaenen opened my eyes to another dimension of history – the thrill of primary sources. He taught a seminar on Francophones in the West. My assigned topic was the 1890 Manitoba school question. I handed in a first draft with careful notations (thank you Dr. Rutherford) from W.L. Morton's *History of Manitoba*. This is all very good, Jaenen said, but the Manitoba Legislature is only up the street, the Winnipeg Free Press is just down the way, and the Manitoba Archives are across from the Hudson's Bay Company. Why take Morton's word for it, why not look things up myself? It was at that moment that I began to evolve from a student into a scholar. I read the debates in the Manitoba Hansard, saw how emotions were enflamed by editorials in the Manitoba Free Press, read letters and memoirs of Francophones whose rights were taken away. Jaenen's insistence on primary sources allowed me to enter the Manitoba of 1890, to start using my historical imagination, as Churchill used his. And if Churchill's assessment of Cromwell's foreign policy in the 1650s, helped him assess his world in 1943, so too my immersion into the prejudices of 1890 helped me understand what was going on in my own time and place. As I was writing my paper Premier Jean Lesage of Quebec was travelling the West speaking on the then new topic, "What Does Quebec Want?". Lesage was booed down in Winnipeg, with garbage thrown at his car. Dalton McCarthy's spirit still bestrode Portage and Main in 1965. I realized then and there that bilingualism was the only hope for Canada. We had to make right the wrongs of 1890. It took a generation of effort but the 1982 Charter of Rights, with its protection of minority language rights, finally closed that particular circle.

History then, depends upon critical thinking and high standards. But it is much more than method. It is an art as well as a science. Great history requires great narrative. Dr. Walter Stein showed me the romance of history. Stein taught a course on Roosevelt and the New Deal and his living room cracked with jokes, jibes and passion. Stein was a born storyteller and his accounts of the Okies in California made real Cesar Chavez's 1967 efforts to organize farm workers, Huey Long was a funnier version of George Wallace, and Harry Hopkin's Civilian Conservative Corp was a more successful prototype of the Company of Young Canadians. Above all, Stein painted a picture of Franklin Roosevelt, smiling, plotting, experimenting, politicking; a liberal who actually made a difference.

Stein's storymaking led me to the great narrative historians; Gibbon, Macaulay, Carlyle, Michelet, Parkman, and Creighton. Great writers with an important theme have the ability to connect the dots, to focus on the critical, to educate us about their truths. Neil Postman, in his *Building a Bridge to the 18th Century* makes the excellent point that our age does not suffer from too little information. Yet information alone is useless, unless it has a context attached to a world view. We are, he writes, "starving for context, not information." Facts are transformed into information when we take note of them, knowledge goes further, it is organized information – information that is embedded in context. Wisdom, according to Postman is "the capacity to know what body of knowledge is relevant to the solution of significant problems." Knowledge must be judged by other knowledge. The problem of our new century is not how to move information – we've solved that – but how to transform information into knowledge, and knowledge into wisdom. The best way to do this, as Churchill urged, is to know history.

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As Executive Director of Historica, a not for profit education foundation dedicated to the better teaching of history, I have tried to follow the lessons I learned as a history major at United College. We believe in standards and the editors of The Canadian Encyclopedia, the writers of our lesson plans, and the organizers of our teacher's institutes are scrupulous in their dedication to the truth. We believe that the best way to learn history is to research it, not read about it, and our Heritage Fairs programme involves over 135,000 young people in creating, designing and researching their own projects. Above all, through the *Heritage Minutes* and our sponsorship of *The Canadians: Biographies of a Nation*, we try to deliver great stories in the medium of our time – film and television. We believe in narrative. Not a narrative – there is not one truth about Canada – but narratives. There are many truths about Canada but all of them should be well told. Standards, research and story telling: I learned them all at United College where good history teaching took root in the prairie soil. I am the beneficiary of that fruit of knowledge. Our purpose at Historica is to pass this gift along to others as it was passed along to me.

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