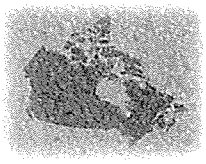
Checking the Pulse



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How interested, in fact, are Canadians – or others – in teaching or learning about Canada?

This is the provocative question with which Canadian Studies laureate Thomas H.B. Symons undertakes his most recent reflection on Canadian Studies. "The State of Canadian Studies at the Year 2000: Some Observations" appears in the latest issue (35:1) of the Journal of Canadian Studies. The JCS is Canadian Studies' veteran publication. It has recently established a formal relationship with the Association for Canadian Studies. Under another initiative by the Journal's editor Robert M. Campbell, the JCS has dedicated a millennial volume to reviewing the accomplishments in Canadian Studies over the last three decades and to constructing a new agenda for the next decades. The millennial volume's first issue comprises a dozen essays offering both retrospective and prospective analyses of Canadian Studies as it stands at the outset of the new century. Premier among these is Symons' essay. The author of the seminal 1975 study To Know Ourselves shares some sobering thoughts about the state of the Canadian Studies in Canada today, as well as a number of positive observations on developments in the field. Symons' reflections have relevance for the ACS and its members as we too head into new times.

The current state of Canadian Studies in Canadian universities is far from satisfactory or secure. This is Professor Symons' reluctant conclusion from his update on programs across the country. "At best, Canadian Studies as an organized field of study is in a holding mode," Symons states, "and if it is in only holding mode in this period of fast and great change, then it is in decline." This is despite apparent strength at a few universities, despite the energetic efforts and enthusiasm of many individuals in the field, and despite a few significant developments in recent years, such as the creation of the McGill Institute for the Study of Canada in 1994.

Symons identifies a number of factors contributing to the situation that confronts Canadian Studies in Canada today. A key concern is insufficient funding for its programs. Exceptionally, the McGill Institute is the result of an extraordinary $10 million donation from the CRB Foundation to be matched by McGill University. Elsewhere in the country, however, lack of adequate funding has inhibited the development of many existing programs. Concomitant with lack of funding is the level of institutional and governmental commitment to Canadian Studies within Canada. Few educational spokespersons have declared Canadian Studies as their priority. It is still not a recognized subject on the curriculum of most of the universities in Canada, nor have provincial ministries of education instituted Canadian Studies as a teachable subject. Such anaemic attitudes are apparent in the amount of government funding for Canadian Studies within Canada as compared to Canadian Studies outside the country.

A few welcome developments serve to counter these less than uplifting observations on the state of Canadian Studies in Canada. For example, following McGill, the University of Ottawa and the Collège universitaire de Saint-Boniface in Manitoba have recently taken positive steps towards the establishment of Canadian Studies as a priority area of study. Especially noteworthy is the dramatic growth in resources outside the universities that support the study of Canada. These include archives, heritage sites, museums, galleries, libraries, foundations, and publications of all sorts. Symons' review of some of the more prominent of these resources, such as the National Library and the National Archives, makes a compelling case for increased, not diminished, study of Canada by Canadians. As informational resources about Canada and Canadians expand in tandem with advances in technology and globalization, the need is ever more imperative for solid programs of study and investigation into the explosion of information. The importance and value of knowing ourselves as a people become more, not less, pressing in a country which, as Symons writes, "is facing all the great issues of economic change, regionalism, and cultural and geographic diversity while Americanization proceed apace." Herein lies the raison d'être of the Association for Canadian Studies. There are many areas in which work waits to be done and many ways in which we can associate productively among ourselves and with other groups and organizations.

How interested, in fact, are Canadians – or others – in teaching and learning about Canada? Very interested, provided, as Symons notes, our universities and education system devote sufficient attention to fostering knowledge and understanding about Canada in teaching and research and in programs reaching out to the wider Canadian public. ■

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