THE CBC PEOPLE'S HISTORY:

Some Notes for a Teacher's Manual

ABSTRACT

Gerald Friesen praises the CBC People's History series as valuable resource in the history classroom, not only because of its high cinematographic quality, but also because of the fact that it appeals to students – it is impossible to ignore that television stands as a crucial communication tool in our postmodern era. Yet, Dr. Friesen's endorsement of these filmic representations of historical events and moments is not without critical analysis. Indeed, he cautions us that certain of the video's messages, such as their stereotypical representation of women as spectators rather than makers of history, or the videos' reliance on melodramatic techniques, "must be debated" within the classroom.

The praise and criticism have died down but the CBC *People's History* must not be allowed to disappear from the consciousness of teachers of Canadian history. This high-budget series can constitute a valuable resource in the classroom if it is used selectively and critically. Having employed it for two years in our department's first-year survey of Canada, I would like to comment on its strengths and potential shortcomings as a part of the daily classroom schedule.

Ours is a culture built on stories, especially stories about individual characters, whether they act on sitcoms or sports fields or government benches. However, it is fair to say that Canadian students do not know many Canadian stories. Unlike their counterparts in Britain, France, or the United States, to take just these few examples, they are exposed to relatively little Canadian content in their popular culture. The most significant aspect of their preparation for the survey class is not their failure to pass the Dominion Institute's annual test on Canadian history but their comprehensive ignorance of all nation-related myths. Teachers have to acquaint their charges with such myths before they can commence the process of undermining the prejudices and making more complicated the debates confronting every citizen of the world.

These narratives are most persuasively communicated by television and film. The great merit of the *People's History* lies in its quality as a film experience and in its focus on the stories of individuals. Recognizing the nature and quality of the competition – ER and Survivor and other shows of that ilk – Mark Starowicz and his team sought an appropriate budget, roughly one million dollars per televised hour, for their series. The key components of camera work, music, and script continuity received the attention that such high-budget work can command. And the forgotten partner in such Canadian enterprises, marketing, also received the kind of budget and critical support reserved for blockbusters. The hype, which endures for years, and the on-screen quality of *People's History* make it a winner in today's classrooms.

The teacher's task is to use the CBC series wisely. I believe that the films should be used only in limited contexts and only with a larger purpose in mind. A showing should never be more that ten to fifteen minutes of an hour-long class. Its purpose should be to establish that there are authentic national stories. By definition, in our culture, these are stories worth the expenditure of a million dollars to make their telling seem colourful and dramatic. The specific sequence for classroom presentation can be selected by going to the CBC website (http://history.cbc.ca/histicons), and clicking on "teacher resources" and then on either "elementary school" or "high school" and, finally, on "Episode Index." This time code and subject guide list the entire thirty-two hours by video chapter and thus permits a precise selection of video material.

What can the video do? It can make any Canadian subject seem important. "No sequence in Canada: A People's History" is better able to illustrate the impact upon students of quality, marketing, and film itself than the 1759 battle on the Plains of Abraham. The moment has been described so often and the actual film event has been advertised so frequently that we all know something about it: the red and blue of the uniforms, the white smoke of the guns, the calm measured recital of facts by the narrator. This was one case where, at least in my classroom, I had no doubt that the students' attention was riveted on the story. In the Plains of Abraham scene, we encounter a number of aspects of the *People's History's* distinctive 'screen grammar': the film presents not a Hollywood

GERALD FRIESEN

Gerald Friesen is Distinguished Professor of History at the University of Manitoba. He is the author of many books, including River Road: Essays on Manitoba and Prairie History (University of Manitoba Press, 1996), The West: Regional Debate, National Ambitions published by Penguin Books in 1999, and more recently, Citizens and Nation: An Essay on History, Communication, and Canada, published in 2000 by University of Toronto Press.

sequencing of shots but a documentary approach wherein cameras occupy only a few vantage points as if they were operated by news teams in the field (the 'embedded' tv crews in the Iraq war provide an appropriate comparison); the shots present high quality digital technology (new in 1998-2000); the content of the scene is provided by ninety-eight individuals, authentically-clothed re-enactors, who are then multiplied into two armies of 4000 men by means of computer technology.

What seized the attention of my students? First, as the camera zoomed in on individual soldiers, the narrator outlined their careers in capsule biographies, a form borrowed from the great 1960s documentary *Culloden* by Peter Watkins. The portentous music and clipped prose emphasize that these are individuals with whom one can identify and whose fate will soon be made plain. Second, the military strategy of the era is utterly shocking to today's students; though they claim to be worldly and to know how the past unfolds, my students actually gasped when the troops lined up, marched forward, and then fired directly into the opposing line from a distance of mere metres. Third, the power of a community's collective historical memory, as well as of present-day hype, should not be ignored: my students brought to this moment their unconscious recognition that an important turning point in history was unfolding in this brief sequence. The narrator reinforces this sense of drama by declaring that huge decisions are about to be made: empires are fighting for dominance in Europe and for advantage in world trade and, in northern North America, the fate of the French and English communities hangs in the balance. Thus, a film that puts ordinary individuals into an historic moment for just six or eight minutes can galvanize the viewer; it can create a sense of involvement and identification, and it can command not just interest but commitment. Herein lie some of the strengths of *Canada: A People's History.*

As everyone who has followed the professional historian's reaction to the series knows, however, there is much debate about whether the CBC has done the student any favours. The basic dispute is over the messages that viewers will take from the series and whether students, in particular, can discern the ways in which they are being manipulated by the movie makers. To illustrate, consider the presentation of the murder of Thomas D'Arcy McGee in 1868, which represents approximately seven minutes of the three hours on the Confederation era directed by Jim Williamson.

One should recall that the members of Starowicz' team decided to ignore a common feature of today's historical documentaries, namely the historian commentator. Instead, they chose to rely on a single synthesis-like narrative read by a female announcer – god's secretary, said one of the film makers – whose voice carries the entire 32-hour story. Moreover, in the 16 pre-photography hours, they hired actors to speak directly from historical documents. In the McGee sequence, several letters written by Agnes Macdonald, wife of the Prime Minister, about Sir John's learning of the assassination and about the trial of the alleged murderer, Patrick Whelan, provide the focal point for the narrative. The actor playing Lady Macdonald reinforces the shock of the moment and establishes that she recoiled from Whelan when she saw him in the courtroom. It is an effective believable account of history in the making and, of course, the actor is reading – or speaking, or emoting – from an authentic document written by an eyewitness.

As in any melodrama, the chapter on McGee's murder wins our attention by evoking an emotional response. My students reported in a questionnaire that the drama of such events – in all of the sequences in which actors appeared – was conveyed more effectively because the actor's emotions were so clearly on display. Being creatures of the television age, the students welcomed this kind of communication. And Starowicz knew it, referring often to his teenage daughters and to the viewers of the American television drama, *E.R.*, as his target audience.

These thoughts are enough to cause the historian and teacher to worry about the series. Is it properly critical or reflective? Why are there no historian-commentators to offer alternative viewpoints? True, the McGee assassination demonstrates that Canada isn't immune from such passions and tragedies. Moreover, the story is told accurately and the document is quoted accurately. The pictures of the funeral procession are a dramatic testimony to the very different nature of public culture in the centuries before mass media, a culture built on pedestrians and face-to-face encounters in the street. Moreover, this chapter introduces the crucial theme of Protestant-Catholic, Irish-English hostility, and demonstrates that terrorism is an old story. It also depicts American involvement in the Irish opposition to England. All this is positive.

On the negative side, one must ask about the messages that are never considered frankly by the film maker. For example, the chapter follows a too-common melodramatic pattern in reducing the lead woman to spectator rather than history maker. Agnes Macdonald emotes about the death by violence of a wonderful man but is not able to intervene in any way. By choosing her account, the film reinforces the common and sexist theme of women's passivity within a limited domestic sphere. Moreover, the conviction and execution of Whelan on the basis of circumstantial evidence and in the face of his strenuous denials are noted in passing but then are submerged in the drama evoked by Lady Macdonald's beautifully-reenacted words. And the top-down view of the conflict presented in this clip not only criticizes violence (an easy point to make), but it obscures the peoples' causes. Neither the Irish cause within the Empire nor the cause of the Métis resistance in Red River is treated with as much respect as is the Prime Minister's viewpoint. By talking about Sir John Macdonald's abhorrence of violence, the narrator seems to absolve him of any guilt in the rush to judgment in Whelan's case and even in his subsequent treatment of Riel in Manitoba; indeed, the last line of this chapter prejudges Riel's 1869 resistance movement. Thus, we are given not a people's interpretation of McGee's murder but the establishment's interpretation of popular violence.

The McGee episode is cloaked in the soothing words of the narrator who has explained the events of the preceding thousands of years and will continue to deliver judgments for the rest of the narrative. It is cloaked, too, in the powerful music that has accompanied every other

event and speech during the entire 32 hours. Thus, even this brief excerpt communicates a subtle but powerful message of national continuity without drawing attention to the claim through the use of an explicit comment. But this unspoken message gently leads the viewer into a path that is paradoxically comfortable and dangerous – a path leading away from education and toward propaganda, away from critical thought about nation and toward passive acceptance of community norms.

The Epilogue of *Canada: A People's History* should be required viewing in every classroom that uses any portion of the preceding 31 hours and 55 minutes as part of its instructional activity. It summarizes all that has gone before and, simultaneously, in postmodern style, reveals that the reality it has been at pains to construct is, in truth, merely another communication device. In this five-minute sequence, we are given the strongest national message of the series, as well as a declaration of the movie-makers' self-awareness and of their wish that we be similarly aware in approaching their art. This example of what is called reflexive thought in today's humanities classes does not dilute the powerful impact of the CBC History Project. Instead, though we are reminded that the entire series is merely a very long movie, we also revel in the impressive images that its film makers have accumulated.

What does the Epilogue convey? First, it celebrates the land itself. In a powerful series of landscape images, it declares that this is a nation-state linked irrevocably to a particular piece of the globe. Second, it suggests that the Canadian state is composed of local and regional societies that are quite different from one another at any particular moment, and yet strangely of a piece, linked over a very long duration – even thousands of years – by the similarities of the peoples' responses to a shared global context. Third, it asserts the independent authority of "history" as the authentic record of a national past. This claim is powerfully shaped by music, narrator, and screen grammar as well as by an explicit textual message; because the musical soundtrack, narration, and film strategies are so consistent and so effective, they declare a commonality of purpose as well as experience in Canada. Starowicz's directors and producers may have been hard-bitten documentary film makers but they were also romantic nationalists: their work echoes the famous dictum of the 19th century French writer, Ernest Renan, who defined a 'nation' as a body of people who had done great things together in the past and hoped to do great things together in the future. One of those great things, Starowicz's staff would undoubtedly reply, was to make a great filmic record of the national past.

We live in an age that stifles thought about citizens' community obligations, that slights politics, and that undermines the relevance of party platforms and even of voting. Our postmodern condition has been shaped by global communication, by an economy now dominated by cultural products, and by the rapid pace of material and technological change that makes the past and memory itself seem a waste of time. As Canadians, we also live next to the television and film giant of the world whose roars drown out our own conversations and whose wiles seduce us all. In such a circumstance, knowledge of and attachment to the Canadian nation-state are very difficult to sustain. Effective, emotionally involving, televised history is one important means of meeting the challenge.

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If Canada cannot exist without such instruments of communication as this CBC *People's History*, neither can it be a viable community unless its citizens recognize the dangers of national loyalty. The 32 hours, and more than 200 chapters, of this remarkable television series provide an unprecedented opportunity to cultivate both historically-informed patriotism and critical knowledgeable citizenship in our schools. But we must be aware of the *People's History*'s tricks; we must challenge its assumptions; we must re-make its vision of the past because that is what our culture requires. Instead of living in a "sort of permanent present lacking any organic relation to the public past of the times they live in," Canadians may use the series as a spur to consider the relevance of memory. Like Aboriginal narratives and the stories told by a family's eldest members, the CBC's remarkable production is a powerful statement about humanity and community. Like those other family stories, it is a work of art; like them, too, it draws its power from its apparent authenticity and its claim to communicate effectively a semblance of the past. It demonstrates that history is not dead and that memory has not lost its relevance. But, in a visual capitalist age, when the cultural condition of postmodernity and the technology of communication have changed the context in which messages are conveyed within a community, the *People's History* also illustrates why changes in communication technology demand new vehicles for these histories. Neither the past nor memory itself can be taken for granted. Rather, they have to be conveyed by the vehicles and in the idioms of the age. Today, the crucial vehicle is the television and film narrative. However, the contents of these messages also have to be debated – as they have eternally been debated – because their meaning is not entirely clear and is never definitive. That is the task of the teacher in the classroom. The *People's History* can open the student's mind to the wonders of the past, but the teacher in the classroom must still provide the spur to ensure that its meanings are debated.