WANTED DEAD OR ALIVE?

The State of Interest and Knowledge in Canada's History and Its Relationship to National Pride

ABSTRACT

Jack Jedwab offers a statistical look at the importance that the Canadian population attaches to knowing and understanding our history. While many studies suggest that Canadians know little about important historical moments, a closer look reveals that this lack of knowledge varies along generational, linguistic, and ethnic lines. Finally, the author compares our apparent lack of knowledge to a similar phenomenon taking place in the United States, concluding that Canadians are not so indifferent about, or ignorant of, Canadian history.

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How important is knowledge of history towards the effective exercise of one's citizenship? This question has been the focus of much attention both in Canada and abroad. Over the past decade academics and policy-makers in Canada have paid considerable attention to improving the population's knowledge of history. Celebrating our historical achievements and telling our stories have become central objectives in the ongoing effort to promote Canada's heritage and identity. Recently, those national institutions assigned with the task of preserving and promoting our heritage have significantly enhanced their educational mission so as to promote more public conversation about Canada's past. The education departments of most provinces have undertaken reviews of history teaching and in so doing have stressed the importance of transmitting such knowledge to future generations of Canadians.

Electronic and print media have also devoted more space to the issue of historic knowledge amongst the Canadian population. Since the past several years, nearly every July 1st comes with a reminder of the population's relatively low degree of knowledge about the time and place of some of the most important events in the country's past. Widely reported in the media, public opinion surveys appear on our country's birthday, giving Canadians a failing grade on the annual history quiz.

But the effort to enhance understanding of our national past is also connected to the idea that doing so will strengthen national pride and unity. No doubt, knowledge about history has become intertwined with debates over Canadian identity. Nationalists insist that knowledge of history is crucial to the understanding of their aspirations. It is something with which many English Canadian, Quebec and Aboriginal leaders concur. Such views, however, tend to be more closely related to content and interpretation of the historical narrative rather than to the more limited yet valid objective of improving historical knowledge to create informed citizenship. Underlying the nationalist perspective is the idea that those persons with a strong knowledge of history will possess a stronger national attachment. Jack Granatstein's book *Who Killed Canadian History* generated considerable controversy about the purportedly limited importance directed at our historical knowledge by academic and non-academic leadership alike, and the possible threat that this represented to national identity. Granatstein suggested that insufficient attention was being given to Canada's political and military history. While the book was the object of much criticism, it served as a useful reminder of the need to enhance knowledge about Canada through the teaching of its history.

Insistence upon the strong relationship between knowledge of history and patriotic feeling is often accompanied by a number of assumptions. The lack of emphasis on political and military history results in presenting the past in a manner that is uninteresting to the population. There is, however, a tendency to overestimate the extent to which the history recorded in learned journals is conveyed to the population outside the academy. There is also a belief that there is too extensive a focus on social history – women's history, labor history, and immigration and multicultural history. In sum, the presentation of Canadian history in a manner that is purportedly not interesting results in the population's lack of knowledge about our past. It is further contended that the large focus on social history detracts from the adoption of a common story or a national narrative. By dividing our attention between many stories about the past, the national fabric, some believe, is purportedly weakened. Those supporting this notion consider it so self-evident that they regard as unnecessary the presentation of empirical evidence to demonstrate its validity. In his recent publication on immigration, Daniel Stoffman (2002) maintains that: " In the name of multiculturalism, the achievements of Canada's founders have been all but eradicated

from school books. Multiculturalists believe that English-Canadian schoolchildren should not be allowed to have English historical heroes." Any serious examination of those history textbooks most widely distributed in Canada would permit us to dismiss this casual observation.

Examining the Relationship Between Knowledge and Interest in Canada's history?

When asked to evaluate their knowledge of Canada's history, some three-quarters of the population believe that they possess a good knowledge of the country's past (10% believe that it is 'very good' and 62% believe that it is 'good'). The biggest gaps in self-evaluated knowledge of our history are generational (82% of persons over 60 say they have good knowledge versus 69% between the ages of 18 and 29) and European (71%) versus non-European immigrants (48%). While public versus private sector employees similarly rate their knowledge of Canada's past, at 14% the former report the highest degree of 'very good' knowledge amongst all the sub-groups measured by the survey.

Do Canadians find the country's history uninteresting? According to a 2001 ACS -Environics survey, some 47% of Canadians were very interested in the history of Canada and another 42% declared they were somewhat interested. Only one out of ten Canadians stated that they were uninterested in the country's history. There remains a gap between younger and older Canadians in terms of the strength of their respective interest in Canada's history. Some 58% of those over the age of sixty said they were very interested in Canada's history as compared to 38% of our youth. But does this imply that the type of history currently disseminated to our youth is less interesting or that our appetite for history increases with age? The survey demonstrates that interest in history rises from one age group to the next. But perhaps the more relevant indicator in this regard is the strong correlation between knowledge and interest in Canada's history. Those describing their knowledge of Canada's history as 'very good' are to a significant extent 'very interested' in our past. Conversely those with less declared knowledge of Canada's history tend to indicate a considerably lesser interest in the subject matter. Interest in Canadian history also increases with education. Of those with a high school degree or less, some 43% say they are very interested in Canadian history.

When compared to other countries most here find Canadian history interesting. According to a 2003 ACS-Environics survey, nearly 40% of Canadians find the country's history very interesting and another 44% somewhat interesting. Younger Canadians are less inclined to describe Canada's history as very interesting with some 31% saying so amongst the 18-29 age category. A slim majority of those over the age of 60 find Canadian history very interesting

The findings below suggest that like fine wine, history is something one appreciates more with age.

Table 1

Compared to other countries, do you think that Canadian history is very interesting, somewhat interesting, not very interesting or not at all interesting?

By Age

	Total	18 to 29	30 to 44	45 to 59	60 or more
Very interesting	39	31	34	42	51
Somewhat interesting	44	45	48	43	38
Not very interesting	12	17	12	12	7
Not at all interesting	5	7	5	3	3

English Canadians are more likely than francophones to say that the country's history is very interesting. In each case, more than eight out of ten said that the country's history was interesting when compared with that of other countries.

Table 2

Compared to other countries, do you think that Canadian history is very interesting, somewhat interesting, not very interesting or not at all interesting?

By Language spoken at home

	Total	English	French
Very interesting	39	41	32
Somewhat interesting	44	42	50
Not very interesting	12	12	13
Not at all interesting	5	4	5

Seeing Stars and Stripes

Those favorable to a national narrative emphasizing our political and military achievements tend to believe that the United States represents a model in fostering such thinking. They attribute the strong emphasis on that country's history and the existence of a national education department to the high level of patriotic feeling south of the border. Yet there is much evidence to suggest that when it comes to historical knowledge our neighbors to the south do not fare considerably better than Canadians. "American Teens Need a History Lesson," according to an analysis conducted by George and Alec Gallup. They observe that: "some basic facts of history are missing from the heads of a notable majority of American teens." These findings from a Gallup Youth Survey, conducted in the year 2000, showed just over four in ten teens surveyed (aged 13 to 17) aware that 1492 was the year of Columbus' discovery of America. An additional 22% gave some answer other than 1492; more than one-third (36%) said they do not know. For their part, most Canadians are unaware that the founder of Canada's first European settlement was Samuel de Champlain. In fact, only one out of four Canadians associate Christopher Columbus (13%) or Henry Hudson (10%) with Canada's first European settlement.

Less than four in ten teens (39%) knew that the Civil War dealt with issues of states' rights. About one in five (18%) gave some other answer, but a large minority (43%) said they don't know which war was fought over states' rights. The year of the United States' birth is apparently an even greater mystery to teens. Only one teen in four (25%) said that 1776 was the year in which the United States declared its independence. About one-fifth (19%) answered

with some other year. More than half of teens (56%) said they do not know the year of American independence. Boys are more likely than girls to know their country's birthday (30% of the boys know the year was 1776, compared to 20% of girls). When asked which document guarantees the right of a free press in this country, many teens are unsure about the answer to this question as well. Less than half (42%) gave some semblance of a correct answer, with 18% naming the Bill of Rights, 16% naming the Constitution, and 8% mentioning the First Amendment. Another 42% of teens said they don't know the answer.

Discovery, Exploration and War: The Areas of Canada's History of Greatest Interest

Canadians choose a diverse menu when they are asked about their preferred areas of Canadian history. Military history is the area of Canada's history that the younger segment of the population found most interesting; when asked what area of Canadian history they found most interesting, it was the first choice of those between the age of 18 and 29. Nearly one out of four persons over the age of 60 find discoverers and explorers the most interesting area of the country's history as compared to approximately one out of eight respondents between the ages of 18 and 29.

Table 3

What area of Canadian history do you find most interesting?

By Age

	Total	18 to 29	30 to 44	45 to 59	60 or more
Discoverers and Explorers	19	13	19	20	24
Military – Wars	13	18	12	12	10
Early history / Pre-20th century	7	4	8	8	10
Aboriginal history	7	10	7	7	3
The first settlers – early development	6	6	6	6	7

Canada's discovers and explorers are of particular interest to francophones, whereas anglophones tend to be slightly more interested in settlement and aboriginal history.

Table 4

What area of Canadian history do you find most interesting?

By Language spoken at home

	Total	English	French
Discoverers and Explorers	19	17	30
Military – Wars	13	13	13
Early history / Pre-20th century	7	9	3
Aboriginal history	7	7	5
The first settlers – early development	6	8	2

European immigrants tend to show a great interest in discoverers and explorers whereas the non-Europeans show a slightly higher than average interest in aboriginal history.

Table 5

What area of Canadian history do you find most interesting?

By Non-British immigration

	Total	Europe	Other
Discoverers and Explorers	19	24	14
Military – Wars	13	6	11
Early history / Pre-20th century	7	6	5
Aboriginal history	7	4	10
The first settlers – early development	6	8	6

Leaving History Behind?

In Canada, popular history packaged for the population has achieved considerable success in recent years. Whether it is CBC's *People's History* or the History Channel, there is definite interest in the country's past amongst an important segment of the population. The runaway success of David McCullough's John Adams biography or the popularity of cable's History Channel confirm that interest in history has enjoyed similar popularity south of the border. In a commentary on the place of history in the classroom, entitled "Should History Class Be Left in the Past?" Gary Gordon (2002) notes that when American adults were asked in a Gallup Poll which school subject has been most valuable to them in their lives, only two courses, math (34%) and English/literature/reading (24%), scored in double digits. History came in a distant third place, with 7 percent.

According to the results of the 2003 Gallup Youth Survey*, math (23%) and science (14%) are mentioned most often as American teens' (aged 13 to 17) favorite courses in school. Yet according to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), mathematics and science assessment results for tests conducted in 2000, 83% of 12th graders are not proficient in mathematics show that 82% of 12th graders are not proficient in science. Ray (2003) wonders why, if math and science top the list of teens' favorite school subjects, aren't more teens proficient in these areas? This raises the issue of whether liking something necessarily makes you good at it? Clearly, when it comes to the study of history in the United States, the level of interest does not correlate with strong proficiency. History is tied for third place with English/literature on the list of favorites – 10% of teens named this subject as their favorite. Unfortunately, American teens seem to be even less proficient in history than they are in math or science. According to the 2001 NAEP U.S. history assessment, just 11% of 12th graders score at or above the proficiency level.

Despite all the patriotic verve of the US, it does not appear to be putting the improvement of knowledge about

American history on the national education forefront. In 2002, the adoption of 'No Child Left Behind (NCLB)'– the federal legislation's adoption designed to increase student achievement in America's public schools – reinforced the perceived importance of English and math over other subjects such as history. NCLB mandated that all states establish achievement standards for reading, math and science, but not for history or social studies. Gallup polling shows that the majority of Americans approve of the legislation, and of the more standardized national curriculum that could result from it.

According to Gary Gordon, "[t]oo often, history is presented as a lifeless subject with no relevance. When asked to memorize names and dates that possess no intrinsic meaning, students frequently respond with a resounding chorus of "Boring!" History is too often a chronicle of political and military events with little discussion of the cultural context in which the events took place. Without meaning, it is easy to see why the American public sees little value in this brand of history." Such eminent American education theorists as E.D. Hirsch Jr. have stressed the need to teach history from a broader perspective that helps us understand present behaviors and events.

The Politics of History or the History of Politics

All this brings us back to our initial question. Those who believe that healthy citizenship is measured by the extent to which patriotic feelings are aroused may be unsatisfied by the impact of improving historical knowledge in pursuing this objective. Still, empirical evidence suggests that improving historical knowledge does indeed have an impact on generating better informed citizens without necessarily arousing such sentiment. Canadians reporting higher degrees of knowledge of the country's history were far more supportive of diversity, support for official language minorities, recognition of Aboriginal land claims and universal public health care. Moreover, 91% believe that it is important to have a good knowledge of Canada's history to address some of the previously mentioned issues. Of course, some may believe that a good knowledge of the country's history should lead to different conclusions about the aforementioned policy issues. Resolving that question will require determining the respective importance of the politics of history and the history of politics. Fortunately, space does not permit us to offer an opinion in this regard.

Sources:

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