

## National Histories and Ethnic History in Canada

Roberto Perin

Number 20, 1993

Ethnicité et nationalismes. Nouveaux regards

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1002193ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1002193ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Département de sociologie - Université du Québec à Montréal

ISSN

0831-1048 (print)

1923-5771 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Perin, R. (1993). National Histories and Ethnic History in Canada. *Cahiers de recherche sociologique*, (20), 113–128. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1002193ar>

Article abstract

National history is out of fashion in Canada. Since the 1960s the constitutional crisis which has challenged the unitary character of the Canadian State has had a profound impact on its historiography. It is in this troubled context that social history emerged. In seeking to reconstitute the internal history of social groups, it broke the "national" consensus that had been created around not only the interpretations, but the periodicity of traditional history. The question now arises as to whether national history still exists as a category. If so, how many national histories does Canada have? Where do the First Nations and immigrant groups fit into to this (these) national history (histories), or do they have national histories of their own?

# National Histories and Ethnic History in Canada\*

---

Roberto PERIN

National history has been out of fashion in Canada since the 1960s. Perhaps the best and most accomplished exponent of this kind of historical writing in English Canada was Donald Creighton with his emphasis on national figures (John A. Macdonald and Donald Smith), national institutions (parliament, the CPR, and the banks), and national issues (the National Policy)<sup>1</sup> But Creighton by no means exhausted the expression of this historiographical current which in Canada flourished with the rise of the Keynesian state.

National history took many forms. Harold Innis, whose major works in the field appeared in the inter-war years, emphasized the impersonal forces that brought Canada into being and that both fostered and restricted its development<sup>2</sup> While attentive to such objective factors as geography and economics, Creighton, for his part, was more interested in agency, in the historical actors who defied the limits of their environment. Writing over a thirty-five year period roughly beginning with the Second World War, he conceived of history as high drama peopled by heroes and villains. An avowed English Canadian nationalist, Creighton was

---

\* Lecture given to the Conference of Ethnic Chairs "New Challenges to Ethnic Studies: the Responses of University Chairs" held in Toronto on November 1-2, 1991 and first published by the Robert F. Harney Professorship and Programme in Ethnic, Immigration and Pluralism Studies in *Lectures and Papers in Ethnicity*.

<sup>1</sup> D. Creighton, *The Commercial Empire of the St. Lawrence*, Toronto, Ryerson Press, 1937; J. A. Macdonald, *The Young Politician*, Toronto, Macmillan, 1952; *The Old Chieftain*, Toronto, Macmillan, 1955; *The Road to Confederation: The Emergence of Canada 1863-1867*, Toronto, Macmillan, 1964; *Canada's First Century*, Toronto, Macmillan, 1970.

<sup>2</sup> H. Innis, *A History of the Canadian Pacific Railway*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1971, first published in 1923; *The Fur Trade in Canada*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1930; *The Cod Fisheries*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1954, first published in 1940.

intolerant of centrifugal forces which he invariably depicted as so many obstacles on the road to nationhood<sup>3</sup>.

A contemporary of Creighton's, W.L. Morton, on the other hand, acknowledged diversity in Canadian society. But he did so above all because he wanted to incorporate diverse economic groups, cultural communities, and regional interests into the national fabric<sup>4</sup> This stress on the integrity of the Canadian state was again taken up by a newer generation that emerged in the twilight of the Creighton era. These historians, P.B. Waite, Ramsay Cook, Jack Granatstein among others, rejected the overtly heroic elements in Creighton's conception of history and were largely indifferent to the socio-economic premises that informed English Canadian national historiography since Innis. Their histories were focused on the centre, on Ottawa, on policies, institutions, ideologies, and the framework of government<sup>5</sup> Like Morton, they had a pluralist conception of Canadian history and refused to use class, ethnicity or gender as analytic tools of their craft. They were not, as historian Carl Berger has observed, social activists. But their works betrayed a strongly defined political perspective. "Canada to them was a political creation in which conflicts of races, religions, and economic interests had been mediated, on the whole successfully, through the political process. Their

---

<sup>3</sup> For an excellent example of a history peopled by heroes and villains see D.G. Creighton, *The Forked Road: Canada, 1939-1957*, Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, 1974. See his article, "Confederation: the Use and Abuse of History", *Journal of Canadian Studies/Revue d'études canadiennes*, 1, May, 1966, for an attack on bilingualism and on Confederation as an agreement between two founding peoples.

<sup>4</sup> W.L. Morton, *Manitoba, A History*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1957; *The Canadian Identity*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1961; *The Critical Years: The Union of British North America 1857-1873*, Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, 1964. See also his article "Confederation, 1870-1896: The End of the Macdonaldian Constitution and the Return to Duality", *Journal of Canadian Studies/Revue d'études canadiennes*, 1, May, 1966.

<sup>5</sup> Among their major works in this genre are, P.B. Waite, *The Life and Times of Confederation, 1864-1867*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1962; *Canada 1874-1896: Arduous Destiny*, Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, 1971; *The Man from Halifax: Sir John Thompson, Prime Minister*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1985. R.C. Cook, *The Politics of J.W. Dafoe and the Free Press*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1963; *Canada and the French Canadian Question*, Toronto, Macmillan, 1966; *Provincial Autonomy, Minority Rights and the Compact Theory, 1867-1921*, Ottawa, Queen's Printer, 1969; *The Maple Leaf Forever: Essays on Nationalism and Politics in Canada*, Toronto, Macmillan, 1971; *Canada, Quebec and the Uses of Nationalism*, Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, 1986. J. Granatstein, *The Politics of Survival: The Conservative Party of Canada, 1935-1945*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1967; J.L. Granatstein and J.M. Hitsman, *Broken Promises: A History of Conscription in Canada*, Toronto, Oxford University Press, 1977; *A Man of Influence: Norman Robertson and Canadian Statecraft, 1929-1968*, Ottawa, Deneau Publishers, 1981; *The Ottawa Men: The Civil Service Mandarins, 1935-1957*, Toronto, Oxford University Press, 1982; *Pirouette: Pierre Trudeau and Canadian Foreign Policy*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1990.

sympathies were with the moderate men of the centre - the architects of Confederation, or the conciliators of the middle way, Laurier and King..."<sup>6</sup>

As we have seen, national history as practised in English Canada is not necessarily nationalist history. In fact, some historians, such as Ramsay Cook, have rejected this equation. Still, its practitioners all firmly believe that the fundamental task of history and historians is to reveal Canada, its origins, its formative influences, its character to Canadians. Not only have these historians shared a common conception of the historical narrative and its high points, but in the interests of Canada's integrity they have increasingly come to subordinate discordant elements in the narrative. And it is perhaps for this reason that this historiographical current lost its vitality in the late 1960s. The historians who emerged at the time found it to be too narrow and constricting. Too many constituencies were left out, such as workers, women, First Nations, immigrants, the exploited periphery. They rejected the role of historian as visionary and prophet. They even challenged the historical narrative itself.

Historiography necessarily reflects contemporary events in a given society. The questioning of the established historical canon in the 1960s occurred at a time of crisis in the country's development, a crisis that has pursued Canadians relentlessly to this day. At the heart of the crisis is the constitution. The Québécois were the first to challenge the country's constitutional structure, claiming that it did not accommodate their distinct economic, social, and cultural needs. But over the last thirty years and because of Quebec's challenge, diverse and even divergent groups have come to the fore, demanding that the constitution also reflect their aspirations. Rightly or wrongly, the constitution has become the focus for a number of constituencies that have felt excluded from power or from participation in Canadian public life. These are the very constituencies about whom historians have been writing since the demise of national history in English Canada.

As a result, Canadian historiography has witnessed the burgeoning of "social history", a catch-all term meaning many different things to its various practitioners. Generally, however, a new generation of historians has earnestly sought to right the wrongs of their forbearers, to give voice to groups that were neglected in the past and therefore remained silent or absent. Writing history "from the bottom up" became their rallying cry. Women, workers, First Nations, immigrants, the inhabitants of the periphery were no longer to be seen as stiff backdrops to the national drama, as barriers to the national dream, or as even as passive victims of nation-building. They would be presented as active agents with their own "internal" history, that is with a structure reflecting their perspectives, strategies, interests, and aspirations. The apparent result of this reorientation has

---

<sup>6</sup> C. Berger, *The Writing of Canadian History. Aspects of English-Canadian Historical Writing since 1900*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1986, p. 260.

been not only the fragmentation of Canadian historical writing, but the formulation of interpretations that directly challenge the central assumptions of national history.

A few examples will suffice to illustrate this point. Whereas Creighton presented railways and tariffs as essential nation-building instruments, the new historiography associates them with regional disparities, the death of thousands of indentured Chinese labourers, and the repression of Natives and the working class<sup>7</sup> What was once regarded as a triumph of national life, indeed the manifestation of a mature collective national will, has become the source of discord and disunity. The national dream has turned into a nightmare. Similarly, historians celebrated World War I as Canada's coming of age in the international community. And although the war gave women the franchise, it also caused Quebec's profound alienation from English Canada, humiliated immigrant groups who came from enemy lands, and sparked a brief working class insurrection crushed by force and subtler forms of intimidation<sup>8</sup> Mackenzie King, for his part, while perhaps never portrayed as a hero by historians, was at least considered by some to be an accomplished architect of Canadian unity. Others, however, have vilified him for betraying Quebec over conscription, for his ambivalent and enigmatic relations with women, and for his racist attitudes towards, among others, Chinese, Japanese, East Indians, and Jews<sup>9</sup>.

---

<sup>7</sup> See among others, D.J. Bercuson, *Canada and the Burden of Unity*, Toronto, Macmillan, 1977; P. Philips, *Regional Disparities: Why Ontario Has So Much and The Others Can't Catch Up*, Toronto, James Lorimer and Co., 1978; D.G. Alexander, *Atlantic Canada and Confederation: Essays in Canadian Political Economy*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1983; P. Li, *The Chinese in Canada*, Toronto, Oxford University Press, 1988, chaps 1-2; P. Roy, *A White Man's Province: British Columbia Politicians and Chinese and Japanese Immigrants, 1858-1914*, Vancouver, University of British Columbia Press, 1989, chap. 3; M. Robin, *The Rush for Spoils: The Company Province, 1871-1933*, Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, 1972, chap. 1; G. Friesen, *The Canadian Prairies, A History*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1987, chap. 10; J.R. Miller, *Skyscrapers Hide The Heavens: A History of Indian-White Relations in Canada*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1989.

<sup>8</sup> J.-Y. Gravel, *Le Québec et la guerre*, Montréal, Boréal Express, 1974; J. Provencher, *Québec sous la loi des mesures de guerre*, Montréal, Boréal Express, 1971; J.H. Thompson, *The Harvests of War: The Prairie West, 1914-1918*, Toronto; McClelland and Stewart, 1978; F. Swyripa and J.H. Thompson (eds.), *Loyalties in Conflict: Ukrainians in Canada During the Great War*, Edmonton, Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies, University of Alberta, 1983; W. Rodney, *Soldiers of the International: A History of the Communist Party of Canada, 1919-1929*, Toronto; University of Toronto Press, 1968, chap. 2; D. Avery, *'Dangerous Foreigners': European Immigrant Workers and Labour Radicalism in Canada, 1896-1932*, Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, 1979, chap. 3; R. McCormack, *Reformers, Rebels, and Revolutionaries: The Western Radical Movement 1899-1919*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1977, chaps. 7-8; D.J. Bercuson, *Fools and Wise Men: The Rise and Fall of the One Big Union*, Toronto, McGraw-Hill-Ryerson, 1978.

<sup>9</sup> C.P. Stacey, *A Very Double Life*, Toronto; Macmillan, 1976; J. Esbrey, *Knight of the Holy Spirit: A Study of William Lyon Mackenzie King*, Toronto, University of

The great dates of Canadian history: 1760, 1783, 1812, 1840, 1867, 1939, and 1982 have been questioned by some groups as being inapplicable to their experience and by others as dates one would rather forget than commemorate.

What then is Canadian history? Is it the sum of the histories of disparate and at times hostile groups in Canadian society. Conversely, should people pick and choose from national history what they consider relevant to their group? This 'cafeteria' approach has found justification in an incorrect interpretation of multiculturalism. Ten years ago a mature student who was a recent immigrant to Toronto from Finland questioned the relevance of studying the United Empire Loyalists in a survey course of Canadian history. As far as she was concerned, the Loyalists were long dead and whatever they represented had absolutely no relation to her as a resident of a modern and pluralist Ontario. Obviously it is one thing to refuse to identify with the Loyalist legacy, it is quite another to ignore its impact on English Canada, especially at the cultural and emotional levels. We would do so at our peril and at the risk of making history the handmaiden of present-day needs.

In the face of this fragmentation, some historians pine for the innocent 1950s when the reign of national history was uncontested. In this spirit the authors of a recent historical survey of modern Canada<sup>10</sup> argued for the centrality of the state against the emphasis placed by the 'new social history' on daily life (what the French have called *le quotidien*). However, what these historians served up essentially was old-style political history with its familiar panegyric to national politicians. Their approach implied that the research generated by the new historiography had little bearing on the writing of national history. In effect, they tried to pick up where Creighton left off, as if thirty years of historical writing could largely be ignored. Academic and popular books on Canada and the two world wars are another example of this nostalgic trend. Such books tend to emphasize tales of valour and triumphalistically proclaim the key and vital role Canada played in the international conflicts of this century. Their purpose is to provide Canadians with essential national myths with which all can identify<sup>11</sup> The irony is that these efforts are doomed to failure because they do not even attempt to come to grips with the forces that bore the cost of what are represented as national experiences.

---

Toronto Press, 1980; P. Roy, *A White Man's Province*, p. 202-207, p. 233-235; H. Con et al., *From China to Canada: A History of the Chinese Communities in Canada*, Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, 1982, chap. 10; I. Abella and H. Troper, *None Is Too Many: Canada and the Jews of Europe, 1933-1948*, Toronto, Lester Orpen and Dennys, 1982; A. Gomer Sunahara, *The Politics of Racism: The Uprooting of the Japanese Canadians During The Second World War*, Toronto; Lorimer, 1981.

<sup>10</sup> R. Bothwell, I. Drummond and J. English, *Canada 1900-1945*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1987, preface.

<sup>11</sup> Two examples of this are: P. Berton, *Vimy*, Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, 1986; Bothwell et al., *Canada: 1900-1945*, chap. 8.

By focusing on constituencies that have been excluded, the new historiography challenges the selectivity of national history. It asserts that other interpretations of great men and great events are possible, that Canada's integrity need not be the supreme object of historical writing. It also releases Canadians from the burden of having to subscribe to monolithic national symbols.

Canadian social history can be justly proud of what it has achieved over the last thirty years, but it must also acknowledge some shortcomings. Its practitioners have shown a marked reluctance to venture beyond certain narrow limits. While some women's historians have made a commendable attempt to link gender issues to ethnicity and class, the results of these efforts remain fragmentary and the field is still dominated by the study of white, English-speaking, bourgeois and professional women<sup>12</sup> On the other hand, working-class history which, after all, is the oldest branch of Canadian social history still has difficulty integrating concepts such as gender, ethnicity, and nation<sup>13</sup> For their part, immigrant historians, with some notable exceptions, have been so preoccupied with reconstituting the "internal" history of their subjects that they fail to show how this history connects with that of the wider society<sup>14</sup> As well, they have left the important theme of the relations between different immigrant groups largely unexplored<sup>15</sup> The intersection of class, gender, and ethnicity raises some very complex issues, and it may be argued that given the relative immaturity of these fields of social history, we should not place an unfair burden on the research that they have engendered. While this is true at the level of historical interpretation, it is also clear that social historians should make greater efforts to broaden their studies by including more constituencies. Otherwise, they stand to have a younger generation of historians accuse them of the sins they so were so quick to impute to Creighton and his colleagues.

---

<sup>12</sup> R. Frager, *Sweatshop Strife: Class, Ethnicity, and Gender in the Jewish Labour Movement of Toronto, 1900-1939*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1993, is a ground-breaking work in this respect. Other works that have recently provided a new orientation to ethnic women's history are: J. Burnet (ed.), *Looking Into My Sister's Eyes: An Exploration of Women's History*, Toronto, Multicultural History Society of Ontario, 1985; V. Lindström-Best, *Defiant Sisters: A Social History of Finnish Immigrant Women in Canada*, Toronto, Multicultural History Society of Ontario, 1988; F. Swyripa, *Wedded to the Cause: Ukrainian-Canadian Women and Ethnic Identity*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1993.

<sup>13</sup> This view is corroborated in J. Burgess, "Exploring the Limited Identities of Canadian Labour: Recent Trends in English-Canada and Quebec", *International Journal of Canadian Studies/Revue internationale d'études canadiennes*, 1-2, Spring-Fall/Printemps-automne, 1990, p. 154.

<sup>14</sup> For greater elaboration of this point, see my article, "Writing About Ethnicity", in J. Schultz (ed.), *Writing About Canada: A Handbook for Modern Canadian History*, Scarborough, Ontario Prentice-Hall, 1990.

<sup>15</sup> H. Troper and M. Weinfeld, *Old Wounds: Jews, Ukrainians and the Hunt for Nazi War Criminals in Canada*, Markham, Ontario, Viking, 1988, is a notable exception.

Not only should social history be more inclusive, it must also shed interpretations reflecting compartmentalized thinking. The issue of periodicity readily comes to mind here. Some social historians have tended to ignore or marginalize the great dates of national history. They argue that the groups they study have their own yardsticks for measuring the passage of time; their turning points may not in fact coincide with those of national history. Does this mean that the latter are unimportant to such groups? Are events only significant if generated by the group itself? The attempt to reconstruct the internal history of particular categories of the population is crucial, but it cannot be done hermetically by discarding factors outside the group<sup>16</sup>.

In addition to the uni-dimensional identities imposed on such groups, there is an implicit denial in these approaches that the state can influence their historical development. The process at work here is not much different from the Finnish student's 'cafeteria' approach. Affirming the importance of the state, however, should not signal a return to old-style political history. Rather than emphasizing the minutiae of *le quotidien* in politics, which is by and large what traditional historiography has done, social historians must seek out the structures of legislation and political life and study these in interaction with their specific group. By doing so, they will develop more sophisticated and broader analyses of Canadian history.

What we have witnessed in the past thirty years then is the fragmentation not of Canadian history, but of Canadian historical writing. Despite the understandable, but exclusive focus of social historians on class, gender, or ethnicity, and despite revisionist interpretations, the possibility of writing national history remains because the signposts of that history still stand. Whatever one might think of the National Policy, the War Measures Act, the Indian Act, or of federal political leaders, their parties, and the clients they serve, all are an integral part of Canadian history, and, directly or indirectly, all have an impact on the various constituencies brought to the fore by social history. Consequently, it is incumbent upon historians to transcend the confines of their compartmentalized field and integrate their subjects into the broader context.

---

<sup>16</sup> Confederation appears as an epiphenomenon in B. Palmer, *Working-Class Experience: The Rise and Reconstitution of Canadian Labour, 1800-1980*, Toronto, Butterworth, 1983, 347 p. The event is mentioned in passing three times (p. 61, 75, 77) in the relevant chapter, although the same chapter contains a section (p. 85-89) devoted to tavern life. Similarly, Collection CLIO, *L'histoire des femmes au Québec depuis quatre siècles*, Montréal, Quinze, 1982 seems to imply by its scant attention to the British Conquest of 1760 (mentioned fleetingly in p. 55-8) that it was not a significant event for les Canadiennes. The authors certainly made no attempt to assess its overall impact on the women of Québec. These two examples indicate the importance of combining the synchronic and diachronic aspects of history. See in this respect, E. Fox Genovese and E. Genovese, "The Political Crisis of Social History: A Marxian Perspective", *Journal of Social History*, 10, Winter, 1976.



There is, however, one real obstacle to the possibility of writing Canadian national history and that is Quebec. Quebecers have always rejected the concept of a Canadian national history that also encompasses them. Rather they have affirmed the existence of their own national history. Theirs is an irrefutable claim based on the distinctiveness of Quebec society. This distinctiveness comes from the perpetuation over four centuries of the French language, a legal system, and a strong religious culture that endured until the Second World War.

Over time Quebec also enjoyed an important element of autonomy that allowed this distinctiveness to take root and flourish in North American soil. Distance from the metropolises of France and Britain, the vagaries of international diplomacy, and isolation from the surrounding British and American populations promoted this process. As well, French Canadians enjoyed partial control over political structures with the Constitutional Act of 1791, the power-sharing arrangements of the Union period (1840-1867) and beyond, and the creation of a provincial legislature in 1867 where French Canadians held a decided majority, despite constitutional restrictions conceived to protect the privileged position of the powerful Anglo-Quebec elite.

More importantly they exercised complete control of their religious structures which, in the absence of a strong state apparatus in Canada until World War II, spawned a multitude of social, economic, and cultural institutions unique in North America. We forget too easily that the Mouvement Desjardins, the Confederation of National Trade Unions, the Quebec Farmers' Union, the cooperative and nationalist movements, if not established by the Catholic Church, at least benefitted from its indispensable support. Because until recently the French Canadians lacked control of economic structures, however, their culture developed in subordination to the dominant Anglo-Protestant cultures of North America. Still, the essence of their distinctiveness was preserved and they succeeded in integrating people from varied backgrounds, people with names such as McNichol, Dunn, Malouf, Micone, Wyczinski, and Kattan.

From this centuries-old distinctive culture sprang a French Canadian historiography some 150 years ago. In the 1840s François-Xavier Garneau, the father of this historiography, began to publish his *Histoire du Canada*, a national history of the French Canadians. Garneau was a nationalist; but over time, a number of ideological schools have come to characterize French Canadian historical writing. No matter how anti-nationalist the historian, however, none has questioned the national structure or character of French Canadian history. Since the late 1960s, however, this historiography, too, has undergone a process of fragmentation, as historians began to explore gender, class, region, and ethnicity within a Quebec framework.

There are therefore two and perhaps even three national histories in Canada. Despite centuries of oppression and marginalization, the First Nations are making a concerted effort to recover their autonomy. It is too early to predict whether they

will succeed in reestablishing a distinct national identity through autonomous political, legal, and institutional structures. If they do, a distinct national historiography will undoubtedly emerge.

The question then arises as to what is immigrant history and what is its relation to the broader Canadian context?<sup>17</sup> Given the complexity of the issue, it might be easier to proceed by process of elimination, by examining what immigrant history is not. Immigrant history is not simply about immigration policy, as some historians believe. For such an approach tells us nothing about the immigrants' identity, their hopes and aspirations, the strategies they used to come to this country, to acquire basic amenities, and to improve their living conditions. Nor does immigration policy necessarily cast light on such crucial themes as the nature of the labour market, the vagaries of social mobility, and the pervasive racism encountered by immigrants. At times in fact, discussion of immigration policy has been nothing more than a justification of government actions. In the face of scholarly accusations that politicians were inspired by racism, insensitivity to refugees, and simply by the immediate, implacable needs of the capitalist labour market, some historians have projected the image of Canada as a tolerant and accommodating society<sup>18</sup> It is necessary to emphasize that a complete immigrant history cannot ignore immigration policy, including the way in which government actions often diverged from officially stated objectives. At the same time, however, the study of policy cannot pretend to be immigrant history.

---

<sup>17</sup> My conversations with German immigrant historian, Dirk Hoerder, helped me to better articulate what follows. For lack of a better term, I prefer the word "immigrant" to "ethnic". Traditionally the term "ethnie" refers to all the members of a specific nation irrespective of whether they live within the borders of the state which is the embodiment of that nation. The German nation transcends the borders of Germany and includes "ethnic" Germans living in Romania and Russia, for example. Historically, ethnic groups managed to maintain their identity even if they were far removed from their homeland. This usually happened because their isolation from the surrounding peoples allowed them to develop a large degree of institutional autonomy. In the Ottoman Empire, such autonomy was even encouraged and given official recognition. In some cases, however, ethnic identity was maintained and strengthened because of persecution.

What distinguishes ethnic groups from the immigrants who came to Canada is that the latter never possessed the autonomy (both in spatial and temporal terms) to preserve their distinct identity. They did not occupy a well-defined territory, both in geographic and cultural terms. By and large, they functioned within the economic, social, and cultural institutions of Canada. Over two or three generations, the distinctive elements of various immigrant groups, language, religion, endogamy, were eroded. Since it is misleading to use one term to refer to two distinct realities, I prefer to speak of "immigrants" and "immigrant culture". These terms refer not only to the first generation of immigrants, but to successive generations until the visible signs of their identity are no longer identifiable.

<sup>18</sup> See Bothwell et al., *Canada 1900-1945*, chaps 4 and 13.

Nor is immigrant history simply the extension of the history of the immigrants' country of origin. Recent scholarship in Canada, but especially abroad, has correctly emphasized that immigrant history does not begin in the country of adoption<sup>19</sup> It is a seamless process whose origins lie in a study of the economic, social, and cultural conditions prevailing in the homeland, particularly in the specific region of emigration. Immigrants to Canada have a past which very often conditioned their behaviour, their choices, their strategies, their conscious and unconscious responses in the New World. To neglect this essential dimension is to rob the immigrants of their identity, to treat them as "foreigners", as rootless.

However, having come to Canada, these immigrants functioned in a totally different context from their country of origin, which gave new meaning to their actions and their identity. They were not simply nationals who lived their culture intact abroad. In time, their habits, speech, lifestyle, outlook would be altered by the New World. If they returned to their homeland for a visit, they often perceived the distance that separated their culture from that of the friends and relatives they left behind. While their own children assumed many aspects of this immigrant culture, they also negotiated with their parents the addition of North American values absorbed at school, in the street, and at work<sup>20</sup> Consequently, the features that distinguish immigrant culture as a collective expression from the culture of the country of adoption gradually diminish and, after three or four generations, are largely imperceptible. The study of immigrant history is therefore limited in time. It is also quite distinct from the history of the country of origin, except for ethnic revivalists and those wishing to use immigrant groups as instruments of the homeland's state policy.

Is immigrant history national history? Can it be written in the same way as the histories of Canada and Quebec? This question has been obscured over the last thirty years by the myth of the two founding peoples of Canada. While the concept had a certain appeal when it was first enunciated, with time it has shown itself to be exclusivist and racist. Today, one can no longer pretend that Europeans discovered Canada, knowing that the First Nations lived in this land for tens of

---

<sup>19</sup> For Canadian examples of this approach, see B. Elliott, *Irish Migrants in the Canadas: A New Approach*, Montréal-Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 1988, chaps. 1-3; B. Ramirez, *Par monts et par vaux: migrants canadiens-français et italiens dans l'économie nord-atlantique 1860-1914*, Montréal, Boréal, 1990, chaps 2; F. Sturino, *Forging the Chain: Italian Migration to North America 1880-1930*, Toronto, Multicultural History Society of Ontario, 1990, chaps. 1 and 2; S. Hryniuk, "'Sifton's Pets': Who Were They?" in L. Luciuk and S. Hryniuk (eds.), *Canada's Ukrainians: Negotiating an Identity*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1990.

<sup>20</sup> I would like to thank Enrico Cumbo for this insight. Cumbo is preparing a doctoral dissertation at the University of Toronto on the second generation of Italian immigrants to Toronto in the period 1910-1940.

thousands of years and explored its outer reaches<sup>21</sup> Still, the initial attraction of the two nations idea came from the fact that it tried to express a socio-cultural reality about Canada, the dominance of two large cultural areas, the French and the British (we should now perhaps speak of three such areas with the inclusion of the First Nations). Had the concept been articulated in these terms, it might have caused much less misunderstanding and controversy, particularly among immigrants.

But such was not the case and the idea prompted writers from immigrant communities to claim founding nation status for their group<sup>22</sup> This was especially true for the Ukrainians and Germans who comprise significant elements of the Canadian population. Recently, a Canadian Senator, Peter Bosa, staked the same claim for the Italians. In a talk surveying Italian Canadian history, the senator began with Giovanni Caboto (also known as John or Jean Cabot), whom he regarded not only as the founder of Canada, but the father of the Italian presence in this country. He then went on to speak of the great military men and administrators of New France who were of Italian origin. These were followed by the merchants and scholars of the nineteenth century who were themselves succeeded by the great entrepreneurs of our age. Wittingly or unwittingly, the honourable gentleman was making a case for Italian-Canadian history as national history. He was presenting us with the makings of a complete history which began with the "founding" of Canada and stretched unbroken to the present. By participating in important events, prominent Italians were shown to be making a significant contribution to the development of this country<sup>23</sup>.

The earlier volumes of the Generations Series, which are book-length histories of specific immigrant groups commissioned by Multiculturalism-Canada, all partake of this mythology<sup>24</sup> They genuflect before early ancestors who may have been Irish monks, a lost tribe of Israel, the Vikings, or lone figures such as a Greek explorer, a Portuguese navigator, or Hungarian sailor. This desperate search for *titres de noblesse* was analyzed by historian Robert Harney in a sophisticated

---

<sup>21</sup> The First Nations in fact have every right to call themselves Americans. They spanned the two continents of the Americas and gave birth to brilliant cultures in Mexico and the Andes. They are the true Americans. We are the hyphenated Americans: European, African, Asian.

<sup>22</sup> This issue is addressed in J. Burnet, "The Policy of Multiculturalism Within a Bilingual Framework: A Stock-Taking", *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, 10, 2, 1978; R. Harney, "'So Great a Heritage as Ours': Immigration and the Survival of the Canadian Polity", *Daedalus*, 117, 4, Fall, 1988. Also see G. Bassler, "Silent or Silenced Co-Founders of Canada? Reflections on the History of German Canadians", *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, 22, 1990 for an assertion of founding-nation status for German-Canadians.

<sup>23</sup> Paper given by Senator P. Bosa at a conference entitled "Venezia e i Caboto" held at the University of Venice, May 21-23 1990.

<sup>24</sup> For a more extensive critique of the early volumes in the Generations Series, see my "Writing About Ethnicity" in Schultz (ed.), *Writing About Canada*.

essay using the Greek concept of *atimia*<sup>25</sup> Most immigrants, Harney noted, occupied the lower rungs of the socio-economic ladder on their arrival in Canada. As such, they were the victims of exclusion and of class and racial prejudice. In order to wipe out the original sin of place of origin, they sought to establish their pedigree in the new land by looking for illustrious forebearers. In this way, they sought to avoid being categorized as second fiddles to the founding nations.

The Generations Series has also accredited the notion of immigrant histories as national history. These studies tend to project the image of the immigrant group's institutional completeness with chapters on the family, the church, the media, politics, cultural and social agencies. Little attempt was made in the earlier volumes to relate these institutions to the wider society. Can we, for example, speak of the ethnic press in the same way we do of the *Toronto Star* or Montreal's *La Presse*? As well, these early works not only equated immigrant culture with the culture of origin, but also created the impression that this culture remained intact over successive immigrant generations in Canada. Although in their conclusions some authors worried about cultural persistence, we are left with the picture of complete societies, evolving not within, but side by side with Canadian society.

Precise terminology is vital in the study of immigrant history in order to avoid its mistaken association with national history. John Zucchi recently published an excellent and detailed study of the Italians in Toronto<sup>26</sup> whose primary focus was on the concept of identity. Zucchi argued that Italians who immigrated to Canada at the turn of the century had a very limited sense of identity which was bounded essentially by their villages of origin. He attributed this phenomenon to the relative lateness of Italian unification. However, Zucchi found that in Canada, Italian immigrants developed a sense of community with Italians from other villages and regions because all generally occupied unskilled and low status jobs which made them easy targets of discrimination by the receiving society. As a result, Zucchi concluded, an Italian national identity emerged in the country of adoption, rather than in that of origin. While the thesis is intriguing, it is also ambiguous. Surely the Italian national identity that evolved in Toronto was different from that which was emerging back home. In fact, implicit in Zucchi's analysis is the recognition that this was much more of a North American or Canadian Italian identity. But he does not say so and this omission plays into the hands of those who would have us believe in the existence of an Italian Canadian national history.

---

<sup>25</sup> R., "Caboto and Other Parentela: The Uses of the Italian-Canadian Past", in R. Perin and F. Sturino (eds.), *Arrangiarsi: The Italian Immigration Experience in Canada*, Montréal, Guernica Editions, 1989, p. 37-61.

<sup>26</sup> J. Zucchi, *Italians in Toronto: Development of a National Identity 1875-1935*, Montréal-Kingston, McGill-Queen's Press, 1989. See especially the Introduction, p. 3-10.

Historians should not study immigrants in isolation. They must not depict them as the faithful remnant of a culture that has miraculously survived in North America, as interesting specimens speaking their language perfectly and faithfully practising their religion according to the norms of the country of origin. This approach is static and condemns immigrant culture to the museum display case. Important as it is to understand the material and psychic universe from which they came, it is also vital to situate these immigrants squarely within the Canadian context. Their presence must be linked to specific moments of Canadian history. Thus, while it is important to analyze the conditions in the country of origin that triggered emigration, we must also know what factors in the different regions of Canada favoured the immigration of particular groups at particular times? How did the shift in the Canadian labour market from primary to tertiary employment after World War II affect the nature of immigration? How did Canadian immigration policy promote or hinder this movement? How did immigrants overcome such obstacles to immigration?

What networks facilitated their insertion into the Canadian labour market? In this respect, the extent to which immigrant groups occupied specific economic niches is striking. How did this happen? Was there an ethnic hierarchy in the workforce, what position did various groups occupy in the vertical mosaic? What skills and what economic strategies did they bring with them or learn here in order to help them survive? How difficult was it to break out of job ghettos, and what were the avenues that permitted this to happen? How did the economic cycle influence prospects for social mobility; were immigrants affected differently from native-born workers?

The role of the family has been very important in immigrant history. How did the culture of origin conceive of the family structure, and what was the relationship between image and reality? Did this image and reality change in North America, and, if so, how and why? Historians have been giving more attention to the role of women, both inside and outside the home. What economic, social, cultural, and psychological roles did women play in the family and in the immigrant community? What was the relationship between immigrant women and their culture of origin and did the new environment alter it? Inter-generational studies are also vitally important. What meaning and what uses does the immigrant culture have for the second and subsequent generations?

The emergence of social differentiation in the immigrant community and the way this process relates to the wider Canadian social structure are very important, if neglected aspects of immigrant history. What effect does job segmentation along ethnic lines have on the structure and ideology of the labour movements of Quebec and Canada? What is the relationship of the immigrant middle class to its larger Canadian counterpart? Can one speak of the segmentation of the middle class along ethnic lines?

The interaction between immigrants and the institutions of the receiving society has received some attention, particularly in relation to schools, social service agencies, the trade union movement, and the churches. The picture, however, is still far from complete. Political parties are an institution that clearly deserve more attention in this respect. As far back as Macdonald and Laurier, the mainstream parties were actively trying to woo the "leaders" of various immigrant communities through patronage and public office. Did this intervention shift the relations of power within these communities? What civic culture did the immigrants come from, and how did this influence their insertion in Canadian life? What political traditions did they bring with them, and were these meaningful in the Canadian environment? Did the mother country maintain political contacts with immigrants in Canada and if so, what role were they expected to play? How were the politics of the country of origin used in the Canadian context?

Religion usually was a significant, if not central component of immigrant communities. What happened to the old-world religious practices in the new land? What is the interaction between popular religion, the immigrant church and the institutional church? Similarly what is the connection between the laity, the immigrant clergy, and the indigenous religious authorities? What is the role of gender in religious practice? How do subsequent generations relate to the religion of the country of origin?

Finally, it is extremely important for historians to do comparative analyses. These comparisons might be spatial and analyze the experiences of a specific immigrant group in different Canadian regions, between Canada and the country of origin, or between Canada and other countries of immigration. They might be temporal with the focus on the periods before the First World War and after the Second World War. They can be cross-cultural by examining differences within the group or between immigrant communities. It is only with such comparisons that we can refine our knowledge of the immigrant experience.

The intention in listing a number of critical questions concerning immigrant history is not to pontificate on the field by insisting that these are the only possible approaches. Rather, it is to emphasize that immigrants cannot be studied in isolation without doing them violence. They must be understood within their culture of origin, but more importantly within the Canadian context because their lives and that of their children develop within this setting. In the final analysis, immigrant history is part of the national history. The two are inextricably linked. Immigrant history not only sheds light on a particular group, but also on the history of the national community.

Roberto PERIN  
Collège Atkinson  
Université York

## Résumé

L'historiographie canadienne a vu émerger les travaux d'"histoire sociale" de catégories particulières (femmes, travailleurs, immigrants, Premières Nations, Québécois) dans le contexte des années soixante. L'auteur examine comment cette nouvelle dynamique sociale a contribué à la remise en question de postulats centraux de l'histoire nationale. Cette nouvelle génération d'historiens a présenté des agents actifs, avec leur propre histoire interne, structurée selon des perspectives, des stratégies et des intérêts spécifiques. Ceci a eu pour résultat de fragmenter l'histoire canadienne, mais de permettre en même temps la réinterprétation de postulats centraux. La nouvelle historiographie a le défi majeur de lier des explications pertinentes relevant de la classe sociale, du sexe, de l'ethnicité et de la nation. La tentatives de reconstruction de l'histoire de catégories particulières de la population sont cruciales mais doivent être faites dans la prise en compte des facteurs affectant le contexte global. L'auteur évoque le rôle de l'État, des structures de la vie politique et de la législation. Deux cas font obstacle à la réécriture de l'histoire canadienne: celui du Québec et celui des Premières Nations. En conséquence, il affirme l'existence de deux, sinon trois histoires nationales dans le contexte canadien. L'auteur s'attarde enfin à l'histoire sociale des immigrants pour faire remarquer que cette histoire ne se réduit pas aux politiques d'immigration. Elle n'est pas non plus une simple extension de l'histoire des pays d'origine. Les immigrants ont fonctionné dans des contextes complètement différents de ceux des pays d'origine ce qui a donné une nouvelle signification à leurs actions et à leur identité. Cela amène l'auteur à se demander si l'histoire des immigrants est une histoire nationale, au même titre que l'histoire des Québécois ou des Premières Nations. En dépit de la tentative de certaines minorités de se réclamer du statut de "peuple fondateur", l'auteur s'objecte à ces thèses qui se fondent souvent sur la complétudes institutionnelle et le pluralisme structurel des minorités. L'auteur s'objecte aux approches folklorisantes et isolationnistes de l'histoire immigrée et prétend que l'histoire sociale doit apporter de nouveaux éclairages sur les groupes particuliers, mais aussi sur l'intégration de ces groupes à la communauté nationale.

Mots-clés: historiographie, histoire nationale, sociale, ethnique, nations fondatrices, autochtones, communautés culturelles.

## Summary

National history is out of fashion in Canada. Since the 1960s the constitutional crisis which has challenged the unitary character of the Canadian State has had a profound impact on its historiography. It is in this troubled context that social history emerged. In seeking to reconstitute the internal history of social groups, it broke the "national" consensus that had been created around not only the interpretations, but the periodicity of traditional history. The question now arises as to whether national history still exists as a category. If so, how



many national histories does Canada have? Where do the First Nations and immigrant groups fit into to this (these) national history (histories), or do they have national histories of their own?

**Key-words:** Historiography, national, social and ethnic history, founding nations, aboriginals, cultural communities.

### Resumen

La historia nacional no está más de moda en Canadá. La crisis constitucional que desde los años sesenta conmociona el carácter unitario del Estado canadiense ha tenido un impacto profundo en su historiografía. La historia social emerge en ese contexto conflictivo con el objeto de reconstruir la historia interna de los grupos sociales, quebrantando el consenso que hasta entonces existía en torno a las interpretaciones de la historia tradicional y su periodización. En la actualidad, el interrogante que se plantea es el siguiente: existe aún la historia nacional como categoría? De ser así, cuántas historias nacionales hay en Canadá? Las Primeras Naciones y los inmigrantes se integran a esta(s) historia(s), o poseen sus propias historias nacionales?

**Palabras claves:** historiografía; historia nacional; historia social; historia étnica; naciones fundadoras; autóctonos; comunidades culturales.