

## **Fifty Years of the Canadian Historical Association: What Next?**

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# FIFTY YEARS OF THE CANADIAN HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION: WHAT NEXT?

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Like many of my predecessors I have spent much time and suffered some pain seeking a subject for this address. A year ago an old friend and former colleague inquired whether I would talk about the history of Estonia. I responded by stating that I would rather speak about French-English relations in Canada — in Estonian: the only language in which I could possibly hide my ignorance about the subject from this audience. Upon further consideration I rejected this idea: while such a talk would indeed cause me to lose my audience at this august meeting somewhat earlier than otherwise, the Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism might seize upon it as an unexpected Estonian contribution to Canadian problems. I then thought of any relevance that Senator Maurice Lamontagne's Special Committee on Science Policy might find in my research efforts in German history before 1914 — Bismarck's policies, military and economic considerations in German diplomacy or, more recently, the role of the navy in Germany's defense. I found some topics in my research which might, in the light of the Lamontagne Recommendations, merit some support on grounds that they are "relevant to the Canadian scene": The British North America Act and the Constitution of the North German Confederation both became law on July 1, 1867; Otto von Bismarck and John A. Macdonald both introduced protective tariffs during the so-called "Great Depression"; there was a Canadian-German tariff war in the first decade of this century; the Anglo-German naval rivalry affected Canadian internal politics; and in case of war the German cruiser squadron was at one point instructed to raid the Canadian west coast while the German ships in the Atlantic would attack French fishing fleets off the coast of Newfoundland. I concluded, however, that these subjects would be too disappointing for tonight's audience. Were I talking to an American group, I might discuss at some length the German plans to invade the United States at the turn of the century; I cannot, however, tell a Canadian audience anything about a German invasion plan of Canada before 1914, but can only point out that in case of a war between Germany and the United States Halifax was seen as a refuge for the German ships at the East African station! I therefore dismissed any notion of relating tonight's address to my research. I also soon rejected any temptation to talk about the work done in Canada by specialists in German, European or non-Canadian

history. It is fortunately no longer true that "Canadian historians never write anything except about Canada" and that "one sign of... colonialism in our intellectual world is to be seen in the present state of Canadian historiography. The guild of Canadian historians confine their activities very largely to the writing of studies in local national history", as the late Professor Frank Underhill told this Association in 1945 and 1946.<sup>1</sup> While an impressive number of studies on non-Canadian themes are written by historians teaching in Canadian universities, there is, nonetheless, no distinctive Canadian interpretation of non-Canadian history.

Instead I decided to be fashionable and relevant, something that I have more cautiously refused to do in the past. When asked a few years ago by a theologian — and some theologians are prepared to be very relevant — why as a historian I refused to concern myself professionally with the problem of pollution, I responded that if I did so I would be talking about something of which I knew nothing and would expose myself as a charlatan. Since then I have grown older if not wiser. I have sat for three years on the Social Science Research Council of Canada, I have listened to representatives of the Ministry of Science and Technology, read reports of SCITEC and perused both volumes of Senator Lamontagne's *Science Policy for Canada*. I have found out that there now exists a science for the future which would indeed justify "the establishment of a special committee for the future...looking more especially to the years 2000 and 1985 [with relief I noticed that it was not 1984!] and attempting to project various possible environments that would emerge from the extrapolation of identifiable Canadian trends within the international context." I also learned that our supposedly participatory democracy of today should become the anticipatory democracy of tomorrow.<sup>2</sup> Although after a recent meeting involving the discussion of futurology I responded to a query about my unusual silence with the remark that I was taking notes for the purposes of writing a history of it all, I felt somewhat uneasy. I thought about the future of history in recollecting the response made by Karl Robert Nesselrode, former Russian representative at the Congress of Vienna and foreign minister, to Bismarck in 1861, when the future German Chancellor introduced to him the later "gray eminence" Friedrich von Holstein as a diplomat of the future: "In the future there will be neither diplomats nor diplomacy",<sup>3</sup> a significant comment in the light of Holstein's statement in 1900 that the invasion of Belgium was a decision for the military, not for the diplomats.<sup>4</sup> Recalling my reading of J. H. Plumb's *The Death of the Past* and of several rather alarmist presidential addresses of the American Historical Association, and bearing in mind the recent decline in history enrolments in high schools

and in several Canadian universities, I decided to live dangerously and to pose as a charlatan before this illustrious gathering of my peers.

So, using as my excuse the fact that this is the fiftieth anniversary of our Association, I chose as the subject for my address *Fifty Years of the Canadian Historical Association: What Next?* Do we advise our graduate students to take as one of their Ph.D. fields sociology, or do we request that they take courses in journalism if they are to find the inspiration apparently denied to historians to write about the *National Dream*? Then at least our students could more easily switch to forms of employment other than the teaching of history. Should I suggest that historical training which got its start in Canada so late and so slowly, as Professor R. A. Preston told us in his presidential address in 1962,<sup>5</sup> will die so soon and so fast? By no means. Wherever there are civilized men there will be an interest in their past. Whether this interest will be sustained by historians, scholars specifically trained to do so, is a matter for them to decide and for the Canadian Historical Association to help clarify. Otherwise, by default, the future of the past in Canada will fall into the hands of others, be they journalists, already maintaining so high a national reputation, or be they sociologists and political scientists, who appear to be more relevant to present-day, present-minded students.

This is the 50th regular annual meeting of the Canadian Historical Association, an association that grew out of the Historical Landmarks Association of Canada. As Lawrence J. Burpee told participants in the first regular annual meeting in 1923, the Association attempted "to encourage historical research in every field, here and elsewhere, ancient as well as modern, and it places the broadest possible definition on history."<sup>6</sup> Looking back after 50 years, the Association has done very well. It has greatly increased its membership; it has widely expanded the program of its annual meetings to include papers in virtually all fields of history; it has launched the publication of its historical booklets; it has maintained excellent connections with archivists, and it has more recently established contacts with the high school teachers. It has made it possible for its members to subscribe to several periodicals; it has struck a committee on statistics and another one on the problems of the historical profession in the 1970's. It has become the champion of academic freedom of historians in Canada and is their only official spokesman in the formulation of Canadian academic policy. Truly combining the interests in the future with the traditions of the past, it was for a while the owner of a supposedly haunted house in Victoria, B.C. At this point in time, however, the Canadian Historical Association must assume a more active role than ever before. To do so effectively, it has to convince all teachers of history at the university

level that it truly represents their interests. I still encounter many non-Canadian specialists, at my own university as well as at others, who find it more useful to maintain their membership in the American Historical Association than in the Canadian. And they are as often Canadians as non-Canadians. The Canadian Historical Association must maintain close liaison with the teachers in our high schools, listen to their problems and wishes, and help them when asked to do so. It must look more carefully than ever before at the interests of its no longer so captive audience in the university classrooms, not so as to succumb to student power, but to see that students of history can indeed receive the best possible training at all levels in the best of all possible disciplines, so as to equip them for the most challenging tasks that our society has to offer.

All points in time are critical, and I do not wish to suggest that the present one is more critical than others. I do want to emphasize, however, that we now live in the aftermath of the "great training robbery". To quote the Lamontagne Report, and to avoid the more extreme statements of newspapers, taxpayers and legislators: "When it came to social objectives we made another strategic mistake. We believed that we could succeed merely by devoting huge sums of money to them. Every year we are building more schools, more universities; we are providing easier access to education. And yet we have more student unrest and more parental concern that our children are not getting an adequate preparation for real life."<sup>7</sup> The universities attempted too much and they were expected to accomplish more: to increase the national product, to eliminate unemployment, to solve all problems of the present and the future, to give every student an education he considers relevant, to provide society with a sophisticated babysitting service, a graduate of which would immediately find a job of his choice at his terms. Obviously the universities failed in achieving all these objectives. The somewhat light-hearted attempt to build up Canadian graduate schools on a minimal material and intellectual base without any heed that employment opportunities of the 60's would diminish, if not end altogether at some point, has provided a glut of unemployed Ph.D.'s which even the Canadian Historical Association failed to foresee. In the meantime the universities obtained handsome grants to support graduate work and the professors were happy. From the honours B.A. or even a marginal B.A., an ambitious student, if encouraged by kind professors, moved on, often through a depreciated M.A., towards Ph.D. work. Now the glut in the market... now the disenchantment with history since it is not futurology and does not even provide jobs in the high schools... now the talk about cutting history faculties... now the AUCC Commission to rationalize research in

Canadian universities...now the Lamontagne Report, promising generous support to the social sciences and humanities in Canada only if they have Canadian relevance, and drawing rather vague and frightening distinctions between mission- and curiosity-oriented research.

I have indicated some problems we have to cope with. I do not wish to reproduce the brief that I drafted in co-operation with Professors W. R. Graham, F. Ouellet and L. G. Thomas on university rationalization; nor do I think that I should indulge in a detailed critique of the Lamontagne Report. I do, however, wish to emphasize that the Canadian Historical Association has to be more effective than it has ever been before. It has to lead the historians *in* Canada (you note that I do not say historians *of* Canada). Provisions have to be made for better clerical services and perhaps for relief of officers of the Association from some of their regular duties which might, I fear, lead to an increase in the membership fees of our Association. New committees will have to be struck and these committees will have the need of permanent secretarial services, not just those which the Public Archives of Canada or various universities — and during the past year, the Canadian Forces Headquarters — so generously provide. I recall the virtual breakdown of the routine of my departmental office, when I had to compose, revise and send out the brief on the Rationalization of University Research.

Given the problems facing us, what should be our objectives? I submit that our foremost task now should be excellence in teaching at the undergraduate level. It is here that the decisive battle for the future of history will be fought. It is here that we can impart to the largest group of people what Professor George E. Wilson so eloquently told this Association in his presidential address here in Montreal, in 1951:

“For me there is no greater subject than history. How a man can study it and not become a philosopher, I cannot tell. Questions the most profound and the most searching are forever being asked. History is poetry and art. It deals with the greatest story known to man — the whole story of his existence from the beginning of time down to the present. History is knowledge. Only by history and through history can we know the world in which we live. It does all this and yet leaves a man profoundly conscious of his own littleness, of his own ignorance, of the play of forces that he cannot grasp, a sense of mystery and tragedy that touches his heart but does not satisfy his understanding.”<sup>8</sup>

The undergraduates of today are the history teachers, graduate students, the reading public, and the decision makers of tomorrow. If we cannot make the past live and appear meaningful to them, it will be captured by others. But in order to win the struggle for the future of the past we must involve our best historians in teaching at the under-

graduate level. We must not leave discussion groups and tutorials predominantly in the hands of graduate students and introductory classes in the hands of junior faculty; we must dispel the notion that the teaching of one's narrow specialty is the ultimate aim of one's professional activity; we must bring our senior and experienced scholars and researchers away from their graduate seminars and put them before undergraduate and freshman audiences.

And yet we must, I am convinced, resist the suggestion that emerges from various sources, including the Lamontagne Report,<sup>7</sup> that we separate research from teaching. In the case of history, I fail to see any distinctions between curiosity-oriented, mission-oriented and education-oriented research. I fail to see how, in the case of history — to quote from the Lamontagne Report — “research on the existing stock of knowledge and directly related to the improvement of teaching has been downgraded and neglected in most universities” and how “the bias in favour of basic research” has had “an undesirable impact on the importance of the quality of teaching” as a whole. I also cannot see how, in the case of history, “increasing the stock of basic knowledge” “should be considered a secondary objective in our universities.”<sup>9</sup> While as members of this Association we should deplore “publish or perish” rather than “publish and flourish”, policies within our universities, we must insist that teaching and research be viewed as closely inter-connected activities of our university professors. Involvement in research invigorates a teacher of both undergraduates and graduates, sharpens the analytical powers which he needs as a teacher, and helps him realize his own limitations. The permanent removal of the best researchers from universities would greatly impoverish and downgrade these institutions. For teaching on the part of a scholar engaged in research makes it possible for him to communicate the excitement of his discovery to his students, broadens his perspective and enables him to relate his work to a wider audience. I sincerely doubt whether any significant number of members of this Association involved in teaching have, in the words of the Lamontagne Report, been “tempted to neglect [their] teaching and [their] students” when “deeply involved in a research project.”<sup>10</sup>

The Canadian Historical Association should, I think, emulate its sister association in the United States in undertaking a close examination of our involvement in graduate teaching. Unlike the Ontario Department of University Affairs we cannot enforce any policies, but we can advise governments and our members and influence the administrators of individual institutions. My predecessors Professors Wallace K. Ferguson and Richard A. Preston expressed their concern, respectively in 1961 and 1962, with the development of graduate studies

in Canada. Professor Ferguson claimed that graduate study did not encourage synthesis, but led to over-specialization,<sup>11</sup> while Professor Preston maintained that "Canadian universities, in attempting to add American type graduate schools, are moving away from that former emphasis upon undergraduate teaching which they inherited from Britain."<sup>12</sup> Since then Canada Council support, formulae for university financing, and an understandable ambition on the part of administrators and faculty, have caused graduate schools to burgeon so that, according to one calculation, the Canadian output of Ph.D.'s has increased from approximately 200 in 1959 to about 2000 a year from now.<sup>13</sup> The United States, with a population ten times that of Canada and even greater wealth, has between 15 and 20 outstanding graduate departments in history; in Canada Ph.D. programs in history have been introduced or proposed by the same number of universities. While duplication of historians and library resources has been a relatively minor — and in our opinion the most salutary — part of the "great training robbery", we can nonetheless ask ourselves to what extent better programs could have been introduced through greater co-operation. I strongly urge the Canadian Historical Association to take the lead in initiating such co-operation between history departments, particularly those located in the same area. The University of Toronto and York University have taken the lead in offering a common interdisciplinary program in English studies. Carleton University, Queen's University and Trent University have participated in an informal exchange of faculty known as the "Three Ring Circus". But these are mere beginnings and possible examples for others.

I hope — naive as I may be — that through the help of the Canadian Historical Association, historians in Canada can, on a voluntary basis, co-operate in introducing high-quality Ph.D. programs that would not require either Bismarck- or Macdonald-type protective tariffs to make possible the placement of their graduates in Canada.

I wonder too whether we have been producing the type of Ph.D. that is most suitable to present day Canadian needs. Having looked through the Ph.D. field requirements of Canadian universities I find them rather narrow. Often they correspond very closely to the graduate courses that are offered. I suspect that, when followed by a dissertation of narrow scope the end result is a rather overspecialized program designed to fit a student for teaching his specialty in another university and little else. I also query whether in the interest of job opportunities outside universities for those Canadian Ph.D.'s whose specialization is not in Canadian history it might not be wise to require at least one field in the history of their own country.



Lastly, I want to say a few words about the rationalization of research in Canadian universities and the establishment of centers of excellence. I do not think that at this point any one university in Canada can qualify as a center of excellence in history insofar as its faculty and research resources are concerned. I fear, however, that in the name of rationalization research resources and graduate work may be divided up between Canadian universities with one university specializing in one field and another university concentrating in a different area. Historical studies at the graduate level could thereby easily become fragmented with one specialty raised to the exalted position of involvement in graduate work and other specialists relegated to undergraduate teaching. Such arrangements, I fear, would further downplay undergraduate teaching and unnecessarily exalt the role of teachers at the graduate level whose opportunities to do research would be greatly enhanced at the expense of their colleagues. Over-specialization would thus be encouraged to the point of absurdity, and the totality of human history fragmented completely. In making a submission with my colleague, Professor Peter G. Bietenholz, to the AUCC Commission on the Rationalization of University Research last fall we recommended, as an alternative to this type of rationalization of research and graduate work, the establishment of two or three national centers in the humanities and social sciences which would exist separately from present universities, obtain outstanding research collections, and draw as their members on a rotational basis competent researchers from all Canadian universities. We also suggested that these centers undertake the responsibilities for Ph.D. work, and that in time they might become the main Ph.D. granting institutions in Canada. Through this proposal we hoped to avoid fragmentation, distinctions between have and have-not faculty, and distinctions between have and have-not universities, as well as the stifling of research in existing universities. We hoped that these centers could in time compete with the best centers of graduate training in the world and allow the best scholars in Canada to participate in them. In the submission which I made on behalf of the Canadian Historical Association to the AUCC Commission, this rather immodest proposal became a recommendation for the establishment of a post-doctoral research center in Ottawa co-operating with the Public Archives and the National Library, which was to become the main research library in Canada. Now Volume II of the Lamontagne Report also suggests the establishment of a research academy, comprising three major institutes, one of which would be the social sciences. Unfortunately, it is proposed that these institutes involve themselves primarily in mission-oriented research and gaps between it and curiosity-oriented research. Provisions, however, are made for staff exchanges between these institutes and universities. I think that the

Canadian Historical Association, as well as the entire social science and humanities community in Canada, should closely observe developments along these lines, try to guide them according to its own interests and at the same time try to avoid the dangers so well pointed out to us last year by my predecessor, Professor W.R. Graham, remembering "that what is needed is the re-affirmation of the principle that, as far as the world of scholarship is concerned, the public interest is best served by protecting to the greatest possible extent the freedom of the scholar, provided that it is coupled with a sober sense of responsibility... to use that freedom, and with it the public funds that support him, judiciously and well."<sup>14</sup>

The Canadian Historical Association must thus be better organized and more active than ever before; it must drive home the point that it is concerned with teaching and research in all fields of history; it must through the teaching and writing of its members convince our present-minded generation that our past is inescapably with us and that when responsibly treated it will present valuable lessons for the understanding of the present and the future. The Association must both respond to and where necessary react against all sorts of attempts to rationalize us and to harness us to vague national priorities; it must assist us in doing our best in our research and teaching activities and insist that as scholars we must remain free.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Frank H. Underhill, "Some Reflections on the Liberal Traditions in Canada" (The Presidential Address). The Canadian Historical Association, *Report of the Annual Meeting Held at Kingston, May 23-25, 1945. With Historical Papers*. Edited by R. M. Saunders. [Toronto, the University of Toronto Press: 1945], p. 13; *ibid.*, *Report of the Annual Meeting Held at Toronto, May 23-24, 1946. With Historical Papers*. Edited by R. M. Saunders, Associate editor R. A. Preston. [Toronto, the University of Toronto Press: 1946], p.7

<sup>2</sup> *A Science Policy for Canada. Report of the Senate Special Committee on Science Policy*. Chairman: The Honourable Maurice Lamontagne, Volume 2. *Targets and Strategies for the Seventies* [Information Canada: Ottawa, 1972] pp. 407-408.

<sup>3</sup> N. Rich and M.H. Fisher, eds., *The Holstein Papers*. Volume I, *Memoirs and Political Observations*. [Cambridge: At the University Press, 1955], pp. 20-21.

<sup>4</sup> Gerhard Ritter, *Des Schlieffenplan. Kritik eines Mythos* [München, Verlag Oldenbourg, 1956], p. 96.

<sup>5</sup> R. A. Preston, "Breakers Ahead and a Glance Behind" Presidential Address, The Canadian Historical Association, *Report 1962 of the Annual Meeting held at Hamilton June 6-9 of this year. With Historical Papers*. Edited by John P. Heisler and Fernand Ouellet, esp. pp. 5-11.

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<sup>6</sup> Lawrence J. Burpee, "Presidential Address", The Canadian Historical Association, *Annual Report 1923* [Published by the Canadian National Parks Branch, Department of the Interior, Ottawa, 1923], pp. 9-10.

<sup>7</sup> *A Science Policy for Canada*, Volume I. *A Critical Review: Past and Present*. [Queen's Printer for Canada, Ottawa: 1970], p. 283.

<sup>8</sup> George E. Wilson, "Wider Horizons", Presidential Address, The Canadian Historical Association, *Report of the Annual Meeting held at Montreal, June 6-8, 1951. With Historical Papers*. Edited by R.A. Preston, G.F.G. Stanley and L. Lamontagne, p. 11.

<sup>9</sup> *A Science Policy for Canada*, Volume II, pp. 433-434.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> W. K. Ferguson, "Some Problems of Historiography", Presidential Address, The Canadian Historical Association, *Report, 1961 of the Annual Meeting held at Montreal June 7-10 of this year. With Historical Papers*. Edited by John P. Heisler and Paul E. Dumas, pp. 8-9.

<sup>12</sup> R. A. Preston, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

<sup>13</sup> *A Science Policy for Canada*, Volume I, p. 171.

<sup>14</sup> Roger Graham, "The Scholar and the State: A Word of Caution", Presidential Address, The Canadian Historical Association, *Historical Papers*, 1971, Edited by Jay Atherton, J. P. Heisler and Jacques Monet, s.j., p. 11.