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National Unity and the Uses of History

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Article abstract

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MARGARET PRANG

Précis

Alors que beaucoup de ses prédécesseurs ont défini les devoirs des historiens canadiens en termes de nécessité d'expliciter des termes reliés au concept d'unité nationale afin de la mieux défendre, l'auteur croît plutôt que leur rôle doit surtout être axé sur un effort constant de compréhension des structures réelles et de la constitution des communautés humaines qui forment le pays. Elle fait une brève revue de l'historiographie canadienne récente et constate que les historiens canadiens se sont déjà bien acheminés sur cette voie.

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National Unity and the Uses of History

The traditions of the presidential address to this association allow wide discretion (or indiscretion) in the choice of subject on which the person you have honoured with the presidency must endeavour to cast whatever light is in her. Some of my predecessors began their addresses by recounting the variety of subjects they had contemplated discussing and then set aside. I indulged in that process only briefly since it soon became clear that in 1977 the choice of the general area of my remarks is almost mandatory. It will perhaps not surprise you if I embark on the far from easy task of trying to share with you some thoughts on the responsibilities of historians in relation to our present national discontents. Out of respect for the Francophone members of the association and in the interests of holding the country together I will not attempt to give any part of my remarks in French, a necessity I greatly regret.

The last time this association heard a presidential address explicitly on the service history and historians may render the nation, was, fittingly enough, in centennial year 1967 when Professor R.M. Saunders discussed the persistence of Canadian historians in perceiving their scholarly obligations as including the explication of the conditions of nationhood, past and present. Canadian historians have correctly understood this obligation, according to Professor Saunders, not simply as a personal one, but as "a duty that the discipline and profession of history . . . owes to the nation, to Canada."[1] If we needed any demonstration of how pervasive the national theme has been in the work of Canadian historians it has recently been provided in Carl Berger's brilliant discussion, which is a landmark in the intellectual life of this country. Berger's book shows too, with compelling force, the enormous influence exercised by contemporary social and cultural climates in determining the character of the questions asked and the interpretations offered by our leading historians.[2] Without the benefit of any sophisticated comparative content analysis it seems safe to claim that there can be few countries in which scholars working in the national history have been so pre-occupied with "nationhood", "national identity", and "national unity". That tells the world a good deal about the character of "the precarious homestead"[3] we inhabit on the northern half of this continent, as well as illustrating the essentially contemporary or presentist motivation of historical enquiry.

If we were to judge by the great increase in historical activity of every kind

in recent years we would reach a highly flattering forecast about the contributions historians may be expected to make to our national life. Since 1950 the number of historians teaching Canadian history in our universities has more than doubled, while the total in all fields has at least tripled. Although the number of historians working in the Canadian field has increased so dramatically their proportion in relation to other kinds of specialists has probably declined, a development we should all applaud as representing a maturing of the historical discipline as a whole in this country; our capacities for understanding our own society cannot be enhanced by ignorance of others. Further, more doctoral theses in history were written in the last two decades than in the whole previous span of graduate studies in Canada; the total number of theses undertaken in Canadian history and related areas almost quadrupled between 1966 and 1977, expanding from about 350 to nearly 1200. Even when one makes allowance for the increasing comprehensiveness of the register of dissertations published jointly by the Public Archives of Canada and this association, the rate of growth is truly remarkable. At the same time we have witnessed the proliferation of new historical or interdisciplinary journals, both regional and thematic in emphasis, and ranging from *Acadiensis* to *B.C. Studies*, and from *Social History* to *Labour History, Canadian Ethnic Studies*, and the *Urban History Review*, and we have rejoiced in the continuing triumph that is the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*. During the period of this great academic explosion the financial resources available to historians and to their conferences and publications, mainly from the Canada Council, have been bountiful beyond the imagination of our predecessors. Yet are there many of us who would quarrel with Michael Cross's recent observation that "the period was one of promise more than of accomplishment",[4] or would deny a feeling of restlessness and uncertainty among members of our profession about the value of much of this activity?

What are the sources of this uneasiness? I believe they are both psychological and intellectual, although it is difficult to make a clear distinction. The dominant direction of Canadian historical studies recently has been away from the old well-worn national themes, from the unifying interpretation offered by "the Laurentian thesis" and toward the exploration of regional and local history. This direction reflects in part the contemporary realities of this country, just as the approaches of earlier historians revealed the facts of economic and political power and the anxieties and aspirations of their times. That current Canadian realities highlight fragmentation, dissension, and the growth of regional consciousness that comes close to adding to our two traditional nationalisms, throws many of us into some doubt about the wisdom of our current orientation. When to this is added the demand of many of our politicians for more decentralization as the automatic solution to most of the problems of a country which is already probably the most decentralized federal union in the world, it is little wonder if we are plagued by the fear that our pursuit of "limited identities" may contribute to the divisiveness most of us would like to ameliorate. On occasion it is tempting to return to the faith of our fathers and to see overwhelming merit in a retreat into the old, reassuring nation-building perspectives of central Canada.

Historians are not alone in this dilemma. Although Canadian economists seem to be relatively free of the need to agonize, at least in public, over the possibly disruptive consequences of their exposures of regional economic disparities and their questioning of the efficacy of national economic policies, the political scientists have not escaped. The expansion of provincial powers within the Canadian federal system has, not surprisingly, been accompanied by a burgeoning of interest in provincial political parties and institutions. In urging scepticism about "the new conventional wisdom" which sees provinces as the most relevant units of study, Donald Smiley takes strong exception to the conclusion of a fellow political scientist, John Wilson, that "Canada is in reality a loose coalition of 10 distinct political systems . . . [possessing] . . . at least 10 political cultures".[5] In Smiley's view Wilson is both misleading and alarming since he "defines away the *eleventh* political system — that of Canada".[6] Nor is he any happier with the infinite flexibility of Edwin R. Black's "Special Status for All" solution to Canadian constitutional problems, based on the assumption that provincial values are "agreed and explicit" but that there can be no acceptable definition of a national interest.[7] More dispassionately, in an article of considerable interest to historians, Richard Simeon discusses the phenomenon "regionalism" and warns against too readily defining it in political terms. To "institutionalize the regional dimension" sets up "a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy" which finds what we are looking for — regionalism. When regions are equated with provinces we may be prevented from seeing that some regional differences — economic, social, or cultural — "are not so much the cause of regionalized politics, but are the result of a regionalized political structure."[8]

Whatever the present conventional wisdom of our colleagues in political science, historians can scarcely be accused of plunging headlong into regional or provincial subjects of investigation. Our present direction has been taken only slowly and with apparent reluctance. More often than not, at least until very recently, we have given the impression that we hoped regionalism might go away if we were careful not to dignify it with too much attention.

You may recall that a decade ago this association celebrated Canada's centennial by sponsoring five interdisciplinary seminars across the country on the theme "Regionalism in the Canadian Community, 1867-1967". The title is an accurate reflection of the caution with which we have espoused regional approaches, and of the continuing desire to emphasize the varieties of Canadian experience without abandoning the concept of "a Canadian community" and the commitment to "national unity".[9] As we all know, an interest in regionalism pre-dates those centennial seminars. In some degree we have always had regional history and Confederation itself was an instrument for accommodating regional interests. Regional diversity has always been the stuff of Canadian history. Geographic distance, conflict arising from differences in economic resources and interests among regions, tension between the two founding cultures, and the growth of regional cultures based on variety in historical traditions are not recent discoveries. What is new is the increasing disposition to see merit in trying to understand this diversity from the perspectives provided by study of the regions

or localities themselves rather than from the centre only. W.L. Morton's frequently cited attack in 1946 on the limitations of national history based on the Laurentian thesis is often taken as the beginning of the active interest in regional history.[10] Yet in the two decades following Professor Morton's plea little regional history was published. The two most notable departures from this pattern were the excellent provincial histories of Manitoba and British Columbia by Morton and Margaret Ormsby respectively.

With the publication in 1963 of the first volume of the Canadian Centenary Series came the declaration over the names of Professors Morton and Creighton that the general theme of the series was "the development of those regional communities which have for the past half century made up the Canadian nation." No attempt was made to define a regional community although the character of the volumes covering the years to the mid-nineteenth century shows that sometimes a community was defined politically, as in the case of an individual colony such as Upper or Lower Canada, and sometimes geographically as in the volume on the Atlantic provinces. In the later volumes the most obvious political landmark, Confederation, is carefully avoided in determining the chronological boundaries of the volumes, thus attempting to give due emphasis to the regional, economic, social and cultural forces behind national political developments. That the attempt has been successful only to a limited degree is a commentary not so much on the skills, organizational or interpretative, of the authors, as on the limitations of the scholarship on which they were able to draw. Moreover, despite the commitment to an understanding of Canada's regional communities, the series has, perhaps inevitably, an overall centralist and national bias which has conditioned the allocation of attention to subjects and regions and sometimes distorts historical significance in an understandable desire to impose intellectual and literary unity on a many-faceted story of continental dimensions. For example, the treatment of Nova Scotia as compared with that accorded Upper Canada may reflect the political power of Nova Scotia vis-a-vis Ontario in twentieth century Canada, but it does not reveal accurately their relative importance in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Similarly, except in the volume by Morris Zaslow, the reader of the series gets only the foggiest impression of British Columbia. When the Pacific province comes into view at all it is a sea of mountains through which the CPR must be driven for the realization of the national dream or as the mysterious domain of obstreperous politicians out to thwart the omniscient designs of Ottawa. In suggesting that the Centenary Series has severe limitations as a history of the "regional communities which have . . . made up the Canadian nation" I do not wish to underestimate its strengths, which are many. Perhaps one of them is, paradoxically, its very provocativeness concerning regional subjects which await study.

The investigation of many of these subjects is already under way and now the pace of regional studies is clearly being accelerated. This development is strongly reinforced by the growing interest in social history which is of necessity regional and local in focus. Perhaps the association with social history, so eminently respectable these days, will help to cure our persistent inhibitions

about local and regional history. I do not want to give the impression that our reluctance to engage in an all-out search for "limited identities" is entirely psychological in origin. We all recognize the conceptual problems that are involved here in defining regions and localities in meaningful ways, and thus avoiding the perils of parochial, parish pump history unrelated to wider contexts. How limited is too limited to be significant? For many of us intellectual difficulties in confronting that question are still compounded by the haunting vision, rooted in long tradition, of explicitly national history as the only ultimately important history and the only one that serves "national unity". That vision encourages us to believe that studies of individual communities are of little value unless they lead directly to comprehensive generalizations about "the Canadian community" and "the Canadian identity". Of course when we listen too much to our colleagues in the social sciences, especially to sociologists wedded firmly to comparative studies, doubts on this score are likely to be confirmed to the point where we are in danger of abandoning the historian's peculiar role as illuminator of the particular. But when we are true to our own best insights as historians it is evident that a study of Swift Current[11] is well worthwhile for what it tells us about the growth and character of a small Saskatchewan city and its environs even if we have to wait indefinitely for comparable studies of Yorkton and Weyburn, or are never able to compare Swift Current with more disparate communities such as Prince Rupert, Smiths Falls, Riviere du Loup or Edmunston. Hamilton, Ontario may not bear close comparison with any other Canadian city but what we now know about it is still worth knowing.[12] And would any of us want to be without Louise Dechêne's splendidly researched and richly textured study of seventeenth century Montreal? Even if it were to remain one of a kind it will stand as a model of regional social history.

Moving to other kinds of study, who among us does not sing the praises of the historical geographers, Cole Harris and John Warkentin, for bringing fresh form and meaning to our understanding of human settlement and social development in the regions and communities of pre-Confederation Canada?[13] George Woodcock's *Gabriel Dumont* shows how biography may be social history when it places a leading figure clearly in the setting of a region and its peoples. H.V. Nelles' superb study[14] of relations between business and government in the development of Ontario's natural resources spearheads a revival of the best in the venerable tradition of Canadian political economy and encourages the hope that it will inspire similar studies of other provinces. Even in the unlikely event that it does not, Nelles' work together with the recent collection of essays, *Oliver Mowat's Ontario* and the volumes that have been initiated in the Ontario Historical Studies Series may enable us at long last to begin to see "the empire province" as something other than a society writ only slightly smaller than the nation.

None of us would have any difficulty in adding to this brief list a substantial number of other titles that remind us that the sixties and seventies, if full of promise, have also been years of some solid achievement. The reality of progress becomes clear if we ask whether the writing of a social history of Canada is a

more feasible enterprise today than it was in the fifties when A.R.M. Lower published what he and his critics all recognized as an experimental and pioneering work.[15] The answer is obviously in the affirmative, although even now it is unlikely that the job would be undertaken by anyone much less audaciously individualistic than Lower himself. So far as I know there is none among us who meets that requirement.

But the essential, specialized studies on a host of subjects — thematic, regional, and local, are gradually being done. To mention only a few — now we begin to know something about the social context and the social consequences of education in both French and English Canada, about the condition of the working class in several urban centres, and about some aspects of the life and work of women, "the neglected majority", in Canadian history. Urban history moves slowly forward despite the continuing debate and confusion about what to study and how to do it, while the complexities of the relationships between the vertical and ethnic mosaics in our history are being explored, and a handful of intellectual historians convinces us that Canadians *have* had ideas about the world around them and that we do have an intellectual history.

Occasionally we are rewarded with a work that is both exploration and synthesis, such as Fernand Ouellet on Lower Canada,[16] or Craig Brown and Ramsay Cook on early twentieth century Canada,[17] volumes which enable us to see how specialized and limited studies contribute to the construction of new and stimulating interpretations. Then it becomes easier to be confident that the prevailing trends in Canadian historical studies are in the long run compatible with the central traditions of Canadian historiography and with the survival of Canada. To quote Professor Careless, who is primarily responsible for bringing the term "limited identities" into the daily vocabulary of students of Canadian history, some lines that are becoming increasingly familiar:

> ". . . the true theme of the country's history in the twentieth century is not nation building but region building. . . . all this does add up to a characteristic and persisting Canadian pattern, largely differentiated from the United States — and the whole may indeed be greater than the sum of its parts, producing through its relationships some sort of common Canadianism. . . . the distinctive nature of much of Canadian experience has produced a continent-wide entity identifiable in its very pluralism, constraints, and compromises."[18]

Thus far the sharpest and most convincing portrayals of the identities which together constitute this common Canadianism come not from historians but from our poets, novelists and short story writers. The unprecedented growth of a genuinely Canadian literature in both French and English during the past two decades has strong regional roots, yet the creative writers, especially the poets have a strong sense of community, very often know one another, and frequently enjoy a reading public extending across the country. Both the general reader and the social historian find their sensitivity to the impact of place and history on the Canadian consciousness heightened by John Newlove's prairie spaces and the

trials of those who inhabit them, by Susan Musgrave's exploration of the meaning of west coast Indian myths, and by the similarities and differences between the communities of Alice Munro's rural Ontario and Margaret Lawrence's Manawaka, Manitoba. The physical and cultural environments of Roch Carrier's Gaspé villagers and Jack Hodgin's Vancouver Islanders are markedly different but their responses to the advance of the outside world's technology on their isolation place them in the same world. James Reaney's western Ontario farmers and feuding Irish are as far removed culturally from Michel Tremblay's oppressed and disinherited working class in east end Montreal as the two playwrights are distinctive in dramatic style and language. Yet Canadian readers and theatre audiences from St. John's to Victoria recognize these diverse, limited identities as part of their own. For they give us, in John Newlove's words

> the knowledge of
> our origins, and where
> we are in truth,
> whose land this is
> and is to be.[19]

Our capacity to comprehend and feel these regional identities provides firm ground for the hope that we are creating a nation which can continue to be home for all of us.

Historians, and not only those who are Canadian specialists, have a part to play in strengthening that capacity. To the extent that we contribute to an understanding of the structure and texture of human communities and of how they have lived together or failed to live together in the past and to the degree that we are able to illuminate the tensions and compromises that must characterize a pluralist society we will honour our obligations to Canada. Canadian historians will do that only if we can fully accept, intellectually and emotionally, the remarkable diversities of this country and finally abandon our apologetic stance toward regional and local history. To do otherwise is the true divisiveness. A thoughtful and provocative contribution to the current debate about Canada's future is made in the recently published volume of essays edited by David Bercuson under the title *Canada and the Burden of Unity*. The book is what the editor frankly calls "anti-national history", written from the perspectives of Maritimers and Westerners, in the hope that the old burdens of unity may eventually be laid down in a renewed federalism that accommodates more fully than our present union the experience and aspirations of Canada's varied communities. In common with these authors, most of us understand that our present circumstances demand that we reject exhortations to treat the constitutional arrangements of 1867 as the epitome of Canadian political wisdom and imagination for all time to come. If the Fathers of Confederation had been as bound by their history as Professor Creighton seems to think we should be by ours,[20] would there ever have been a Canadian nation?

Still, we understand too that the ideal of a "political nationality" of the

kind that Cartier, Macdonald and the others wanted to create, allowing people of diverse historical and cultural experience to live together in freedom and order and mutual advantage, is as relevant today as it ever was. It is a happy circumstance that a Fredericton historian, A.G. Bailey, long associated with this university, has put the heart of the matter so well, showing us how, from the beginning, it has been possible for limited identities and local loyalties to be caught up in larger commitments and the vision of a new nation. Dr. Bailey, of course, is no ordinary historian, but a poet as well, and I expect the poem from which I am about to read is known to many of you.

In eighteen sixty-six on the floor of the House
Billy Needham said "Mr. Speaker . . ."
and the Union men knew what was coming.
Wary of words, drumming fingers on desks,
their faces went bleaker.
White-haired David Wark called them to action
for the Province's and the Empire's good:
admonished the visionless and the factional,
sounding the changes on obstructionism and rejection;
stultification and penury written in ledgers
with statistical precision; the timber shipments
that might last the century out — with prayers;
prayers and a question of hard cash,
a typical New Brunswick contingency.
. . . . . .
But there was more than trade reports that made men dream.
There were those like old David Wark who would
live to be a hundred, and even Mitchell and Tilley,
men who many supposed were shy of the
far-fetched , the grandiose, the insubstantial,
who seemed to see something else, something beyond them
that even gave pause to the prophets
of the economically, financially,
and politically disastrous.
Even Billy Needham with his statistics was
ultimately unable to cope with it.
. . . . . .
Perhaps it was partly a sense of the largeness of things, of the land:
although they could not actually see
a gull flying over the Strait of Georgia,
another ocean, the roll of the Pacific,
the beaten smoke-stacks and the freight of China:
dimly beyond the Lakes, the summer prairie,
and Palliser's Triangle, someday to be celebrated
by those trained to read landscapes.
Perhaps it was something that could not be put into words
like a railway advertisement
of a sequence of magnificent vistas;
but a way for men to live in peace and freedom,
with mutual forbearance,

speaking in half the languages of Europe and Asia,
with rights grounded in law.
Whatever else it was it could have been all of these things
but there were not very many who could see this
in the session of eighteen sixty-six,
and not many the year after.[21]

There were not many then, but there were enough. There are many more now, but it is far from certain that there are enough. As historians let us do all we can to ensure that there are enough, refusing to draw back from that obligation out of fear of being charged with what elsewhere is easily accepted as simple love of country, but in Canada is so often labelled chauvinism or a menacing nationalism. Is it chauvinistic or unworthy of the profession of history to believe that tho' we Canadians are less than one per cent of the earth's peoples, our experience of the varieties of ways of being Canadian, yet living together, is worth understanding and perpetuating, both for ourselves and our children, and for a divided humanity that must share an ever smaller planet? If we cannot answer that question firmly and in hope, then what *are* the uses of history?

NOTES

[1] R.M. Saunders, "The Historian and the Nation", Canadian Historical Association, *Canadian Historical Papers, 1967,* p. 5.

[2] Carl Berger, *The Writing of Canadian History: Aspects of English-Canadian Historical Writing, 1900-1970* (Toronto, 1976).

[3] The phrase is from Abraham Rotstein, *The Precarious Homestead: Essays on Economics, Technology and Nationalism* (Toronto, 1973).

[4] Michael S. Cross, "Canadian History", in Carl F. Klinck *et al.*, eds., *Literary History of Canada* (Second Edition, Vol. III, Toronto, 1976), p. 63.

[5] John Wilson, "The Canadian Political Cultures: Towards a Redefinition of the Nature of the Canadian Political System", *Canadian Journal of Political Science,* VII, September, 1974, p. 444.

[6] Donald V. Smiley, *Canada in Question: Federalism in the Seventies* (Second edition, Toronto, 1976), p. 226.

[7] *Ibid.*, pp. 226-7.

[8] Richard Simeon, "Regionalism and Canadian Political Institutions", *Queen's Quarterly,* 82, Winter 1975, p. 503.

[9] Some of the papers are published in Mason Wade, ed. *Regionalism in the Canadian Community, 1867-1967* (Toronto, 1969).

[10] W.L. Morton, "Clio in Canada: The Interpretation of Canadian History", *University of Toronto Quarterly,* XV, April, 1946. Reprinted in Carl Berger, ed. *Approaches to Canadian History* (Toronto, 1967).

[11] Don C. McGowan, *Grassland Settlers: The Swift Current Region during the Era of the Ranching Frontier (Regina, 1975).*

[12] Michael B. Katz, *The People of Hamilton, Canada West: Family and Class in a Mid-Nineteenth Century City* (Cambridge, 1975).

[13] R. Cole Harris and John Warkentin, *Canada Before Confederation: A Study in Historical Geography* (Toronto, 1974).

[14] H.V. Nelles, *The Politics of Development: Forests, Mines, and Hydro-Electric Power in Ontario, 1849-1941* (Toronto, 1974).

[15] A.R.M. Lower, *Canadians in the Making* (Toronto, 1958).

[16] Fernand Ouellet, *La Bas Canada 1791-1840: Changements structuraux et crise* (Ottawa, 1976).

[17] R.C. Brown and Ramsay Cook, *Canada 1896-1921: A Nation Transformed* (Toronto, 1974).

[18] J.M.S. Careless, "'Limited Identities' in Canada", *Canadian Historical Review,* L, March, 1969, p. 9.

[19] John Newlove, "The Pride", *Black Night Window* (Toronto, 1968) p. 110. Also in A.J.M. Smith, *Modern Canadian Verse* (Toronto, 1967), p. 395.

[20] Donald Creighton, "The Myth of Biculturalism" and "History and the Constitution" in *Towards the Discovery of Canada* (Toronto, 1972).

[21] A.G. Bailey, "Confederation Debate", *Dalhousie Review,* Winter, 1968-69 pp. 521-2. Reprinted in *Culture and Nationality: Essays by A.G. Bailey* (Toronto, 1972).