

## HSTC Bulletin

Journal of the History of Canadian Science, Technology and Medicine  
Revue d'histoire des sciences, des techniques et de la médecine au Canada

hstc  
bulletin

## Commentary

Tom Nesmith

Volume 3, numéro 1 (9), november 1978

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1082199ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1082199ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

HSTC Publications

ISSN

0228-0086 (imprimé)

1918-7742 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce document

Nesmith, T. (1978). Commentary. *HSTC Bulletin*, 3(1), 5-7.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1082199ar>

COMMENTARYREFLECTIONS ON THE STATE OF THE HISTORY  
OF CANADIAN SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

In 1965 Alan Wilson, a business historian, invited Canadian historians to turn their attention to the "forgotten men" of Canada's past, or the "bit players, the props: men, the persons in the pit" as well as the Macdonalds, Browns, and Lauriers. He included among the neglected figures such scientists as Sir William Dawson of McGill University, Admiral Bayfield the surveyor, and Sir William Logan of the Geological Survey. Professor Wilson's appeal, however, was for more Canadian biographical work in general rather than for a distinct place for the history of science and technology. (1)

This nod in the direction of science and technology came at the beginning of renewed efforts to diversify approaches to the study of Canadian history. Also in 1965 S. R. Mealing of Carleton University argued for the application of the new techniques of social history to Canadian historical work. (2) The growing acceptance of social history greatly broadened concepts of what is relevant to an understanding of past societies. Said one social historian, everything "from love letters. . . to cooking-pots" provides insight into the nature of society. (3) Social history stimulated work in new areas of study. Professor Mealing saw it as the access point to "lower-class history." This view shapes recent interest in working class history. Meanwhile, Veronica Strong-Boag considers social history a valuable asset in the effort to establish women's studies. (4).

In 1970 the Canadian Historical Review welcomed the increasing variety of historical writing in Canada but argued there were still significant omissions in approaches to Canada's past. Not enough was being done in the history of science and medicine to name only two of the areas the editors mentioned. J. M. S. Careless made a similar point when urging historians to balance traditional interest in political topics with research into urban, business, ethnic and "technological history." (5) Even as the appeal went out for work in the history of science and technology advances were being made. As if in response to Professor Wilson's suggestions came Don Thomson's Men and Meridians (Ottawa, 1966-69), a three-volume history of mapping and surveying in Canada, Morris Zaslow's Reading the Rocks: The Story of the Geological Survey of Canada, 1842-1972 (Ottawa, 1975), and Sir William Dawson: A Life in Science and Religion (Philadelphia, 1971) by Charles O'Brien.

Despite these signs of progress, the Symons Report spoke for those concerned about the field when it deplored the low priority Canadian universities give the history of science and technology. Thus, the first Conference on the Study of the History of Canadian Science and Technology met at Queen's University in early November to consider ways of improving its status. The number of delegates and their enthusiasm exceeded even the most optimistic predictions. Surprisingly, however, only two professional historians of Canada

participated in the sessions, and both in relatively minor roles. The resources of the Queen's history department had not been tapped, although Professor Crowder of Queen's, a mediaevalist by the way, was noticed among the interested spectators. Might not Professor Tulchinsky have been asked to speak on approaches to the history of technology since his recent book, The River Barons: Montreal Businessmen and the Growth of Industry and Transportation, 1837-53 (Toronto, 1977), explores the impact of the mid-nineteenth century transportation revolution on the Montreal business community.

Clearly then, the major and crippling weakness of the Kingston meetings was the absence of professional historians of Canada. The presence at Queen's of archivists and social and pure scientists demonstrates that the history of science and technology has the attention of the essential support structure for historical research. But links must now be established with those who will make the greatest advances for the field--professional Canadian historians. (6)

In the past decade the reorientation of Canadian historical studies has caused the historical profession to place greater stress on the importance of the history of science and technology. The expanded dimensions social historians in particular are giving Canadian historiography ought to encourage those demanding a place for the history of science and technology. They can also be heartened by the example of working class and women's historians who find the new social history an appropriate vehicle for their fields. Canadian scientists and inventors will continue to be the "bit players" and "forgotten men" of our history as long as the history of science and technology remains on the fringe of Canadian historical study. If, on the other hand, "technology lies close to the centre of the Canadian experience," its history must be fully integrated into the mainstream of Canadian historical work.

--Tom Nesmith  
Archivist, Social/Cultural  
Archives, PAC

#### NOTES

- (1) Alan Wilson, "Forgotten Men of Canadian History," CHA Report (1965), 76.
- (2) S. R. Mealing, "The Concept of Social Class and the Interpretation of Canadian History," CHR 46 (Sept., 1965), 201-18.
- (3) H. J. Perkin, "Social History," in H.P.R. Finberg (ed), Approaches to History (Toronto, 1962), 75.
- (4) G. S. Kealey and P. Warrian (eds.), Essays in Canadian Working Class History (Toronto, 1976), and Veronica Strong-Boag "Raising Clio's Consciousness: Women's History and Archives in Canada," Archivaria 6 (Summer, 1978), 70.
- (5) Craig Brown and Michael Cross, "At the Beginning of Year 51,"

CHR 51 (March, 1970), 2, and J. M. S. Careless, "The Review reviewed or Fifty Years with the Beaver Patrol," Ibid. , 67.

- (6) A good example of the cooperation suggested is Century One: A History of the Ontario Veterinary Association, 1874-1974 (Guelph, 1976) written by M.A. Evans of the University of Guelph department of history and C.A.V. Barker, D.V.Sc., of the Ontario Veterinary College.
- (7) B. Sinclair et al., (eds.), Let us be Honest and Modest: Technology and Society in Canadian History (Toronto, 1974).

\*Ed. Note: The BULLETIN welcomes commentaries and opinion pieces from its readers. These remarks do not necessarily reflect the views of the editors. We also welcome brief letters commenting upon such articles.

### MUSEUMS

#### SHOT COMMITTEE ON TECHNOLOGICAL MUSEUMS

As a result of interest expressed by various people at last year's conference of SHOT held in Washington, DC, a meeting was set up to discuss the problems of Technology Museums, including Pioneer Villages and Technological Historic Sites. It became obvious very quickly by the number of people at this meeting and by the discussions relating to this area and that the problems, such as funding, research, collection, interpretation and display, encountered by people working in this field were in many instances the same. The general feeling of those present was that there was at this time no organization that encompassed their requirements for information and for a forum. Having recently attended the museum workshop at the conference on the history of Canadian science and technology at Kingston, I can also say that the problems noted above are not limited to the United States alone. As SHOT for many years has had a low-profile committee on Technology Museums it was decided to reactivate it. Ted Penn of Old Sturbridge Village was asked to be secretary and two other members present, myself being one of them, were asked to serve on the committee. A decision was made to put out a newsletter to be distributed initially to those present at the meeting and those who could not attend but had expressed interest in the area. Subsequent discussions that took place over several days brought forth the idea of having a session at next year's conference, to be held in New Jersey, dealing specifically with Technology Museums and all of the problems associated with them, from interpreting to finance.

As the programme for next year's conference is still open and will be for some time to come, I would appreciate hearing any suggestions for such a session. As in all probability very few of us in Canada will attend, this should not prevent us from having input, since this session would benefit those here working in the field.

--Arnold Roos  
Parks Canada