

Does History Matter?

Pioneering research on Canada's attitudes toward bygone days.

IAN MILLIGAN

Canadians and Their Pasts

Margaret Conrad, Kadriye Ercikan, Gerald Friesen, Jocelyn Létourneau, Delphin Muise, David Northrup and Peter Seixas

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THE FIELD OF HISTORY DOES NOT SEEM TO BE doing well in Canada these days. We have polls on Canada Day or Remembrance Day indicating how little Canadians know about pivotal historical events. Historica Canada, formerly the Historica-Dominion Institute, found that only 37 percent of Canadians knew that July 27, 2013, was the 60th anniversary of the Korean War ceasefire (the “forgotten war”); that 32 percent do not know about Laura Secord and her importance to the War of 1812; and that 44 percent believe that Canada entered the Second World War after the United States. In many universities, history undergraduate enrollment is declining, perhaps as part of the general crisis of the arts, but also possibly because of this trend toward ahistorical thinking. Firsthand, I encounter undergraduate students who sheepishly explain that Canadian history bores them.

And if there was any doubt that we were in crisis, TV Ontario's *The Agenda* recently dedicated an entire episode to the question of historical literacy. Their teaser: “Sam Cooke may have sung the words ‘don't know much about history,’ but increasingly it seems more and more people are historically illiterate. *The Agenda* examines what has caused us to care less about the past, and what can be done to get people excited about bygone days.” As a history professor, it is easy to lose hope.

Yet declaring a society “historically illiterate” because its members do not know about Laura Secord's importance to the War of 1812, cannot rattle off the names of prime ministers or do not know the chronology of a now-distant war highlights a particular vision of history that is at odds with the one that many more Canadians evidently cherish. Turns out that we may have been asking the wrong questions and that, in fact, Canadians do

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care about the past and their histories in very deep and meaningful ways. As we move beyond questions testing surface knowledge of dates, facts and significant people, we see a society that is greatly shaped by and engaged with history and the past on a daily basis.

We know this thanks to the *Canadians and Their Pasts* project, now published by the University of Toronto Press. Authored by Margaret Conrad, Kadriye Ercikan, Gerald Friesen, Jocelyn Létourneau, Delphin Muise, David Northrup and Peter Seixas, a team of seven prominent Canadian researchers consisting of five historians and two specialists in surveys and research methods, and weaving throughout the voices of 3,419 Canadians who participated in their surveys, *Canadians and Their Pasts* is a necessary engagement with looming questions of historical knowing and unknowing. Clichés cannot be the basis for cultural policy in Canada, and the hard data from this project—soon to be released separately, and sure to be a continuing trove for research—should become a must-read for heritage professionals, historians, journalists and, well, Canadians who are interested in their past. If the authors' results are any indication, they will have a large audience.

An impressive sample of Canadians was consulted for *Canadians and Their Pasts*. The base sample of 2,000, split evenly among the five regions of Canada (the Atlantic provinces, Quebec, Ontario, the Prairie provinces and British Columbia), was

augmented by special samples of New Brunswick Acadians, suburban Greater Toronto Area immigrants in Peel Region and Saskatoon-and-area aboriginal people, as well as an additional sample of 1,000 urban Canadians in our five largest cities. The researchers asked questions (in a questionnaire reprinted at the back of the book), ranging from participants' general interests in history, involvement with activities relating to the past, schooling, the trustworthiness of sources (should one trust a teacher or a museum more, for example, than a television documentary) and, finally, their sense of whether history matters to their daily lives.

Beyond an overall finding that the past looms large in the everyday lives and activities of Canadians, the survey reveals many fascinating stories about how Canadians engage with historical memory. It becomes clear that we have been asking the wrong questions: “While they may recall few details about supposed touchstones of the country's political history, [Canadians] nonetheless draw upon impressions gathered from a myriad of sources to construct their multiple versions of imagined communities.” Through a series of well-formatted tables, this project teaches us that Canadians engage with the past by looking at old photographs (83 percent of us), passing on heirlooms (74 percent), scrapbooking with our families (56 percent), watching historical movies or TV shows (78 percent), reading history books (53 percent), visiting museums (43 percent), creating family trees (20 percent),

visiting archives (15 percent) and surfing the web for historical information (40 percent). And we care: most value history—family histories most of all, but also national and more general pasts. Yet numbers alone do not do this project justice. The authors, while backing up qualitative claims with quantitative evidence as appropriate, draw on the voices of their 3,419 participants throughout. Giving too much time to the voice of others is dangerous in a book like this—block quotations being one of the great scourges of academic writing—but here, it makes sense (even if, as I note below, it has the side effect of occasionally crowding out the authorial voice).

There are surprises throughout. Going in, I would have assumed that Quebec—with its licence plates declaring “*Je me souviens*,” politicians who invoke a collective history and a sense of “nation”—would top the charts in terms of engagement with the past. However, the opposite actually held true in this analysis. Breaking down the ages of their respondents, the authors postulate a root cause: due to the Quiet Revolution and its association of the past with conservatism and oppression, “the future rather than the past became the central preoccupation.” Similarly, despite overblown pronouncements of the divide within Canada between urban and rural, the differences in terms of historical engagement were minimal; what difference there was may be traceable to the lower percentage of immigrants in rural Canada. Indeed, the study found that immigrants were—while unsurprisingly more interested in their own national and faith pasts—quite similar in terms of their emphasis on family, cultural visits, heirlooms and a general appreciation for the past. *Canadians and Their Pasts* also discovered that “the longer-settled immigrants ... were more interested in all types of history than were recently arrived immigrants,” speaking to the crucial role that history and the past play in their integration process into Canada.

Finally, as an educator, I found the authors’ section on the trustworthiness of information about the past especially insightful. Of course, internet sites rank low, perhaps unsurprisingly and soon to change given the 2007–08 timeframe of the survey. But (I almost feel as if I need to lower my voice to a whisper, as an author of a historical monograph myself) it was not books that ranked the highest. Museums and historical sites, not teachers, overwhelmingly dominate in the “very trustworthy” category. As one respondent noted: “I walk in there; I look at the historical facts—they’re right there”; another: “someone can look at the pictures and make up their own mind.”

This echoes another fascinating section of the book: how do Canadians respond to competing narratives of the past? Disputes over the past often spill over into the public sphere. Was the strategic bombing of Germany in the waning days of the Second World War a war crime, for example, and how should we remember it today? Nearly half of the respondents noted that they would try to get more information (consulting more books, trying to “get more facts,” consult the internet more), whereas the rest split between either taking the accepted story on faith or active engagement—interrogating sources, verifying their claims, evaluating their trustworthiness themselves. In this, we see stark differences in approaches as educational levels rise, leading to a concrete recommendation by the authors that we need to continue to develop

an active approach to understanding the past. The results of this study make that all the more urgent. Museums, too, can see the value of putting out real artifacts, showing controversies and thus better equipping our citizenry to draw their own conclusions and critically assess their pasts. “Citizens exposed to these practices are more likely to understand the necessity of consulting multiple sources, the value of interrogating the traces of the past, and what to do when confronted with conflicting accounts”—an analytical skill set that should not, incidentally, be limited to trained historians.

I would push the *Canadians and Their Pasts* team in a few areas. First, the internet has a woefully meagre presence in the book. Part of this is a result of the timeframe in which the survey was carried out, between March 2007 and July 2008. I suspect matters have dramatically changed in the last six years. When it comes to trust, websites come last “by a large margin,” the complete opposite of our trust in museums and historical sites. Fair

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enough. But of course, websites come in all different categories: in some ways, this is like asking if “paper” sources are more trustworthy (actually, stop: I have heard this declared by faculty members in the Canadian academy). The question asked respondents “what about Internet sites, in general [as sources of the past], would you say they are...” with responses being very, somewhat, not very or not at all trustworthy. Given the growing influence of this source, both as a means of public history and also as academics reach out to the public, I wish further follow-up questions could be asked (museums and historic sites, for example, received separate questions).

This matters, and the web receives far too short shrift. For example, Wikipedia, the biggest public history project in existence, receives only a brief mention. While the democratic potential, the accessibility of digital collections and so forth are all lauded, the authorial hesitancy strikes me as too conservative: “some scholars express concern that amateurs can easily circumvent the customary gatekeepers in editorial offices and publishing companies by placing their historical material directly online. That some of this production is unreliable adds insult to injury by calling into question hard-earned academic authority.” The book’s authors do not come down firmly on either side of the debate between those who see the web as a democratic force and those who view it as a profound danger to the historical profession, leaving readers only with the suggestion that “all citizens need to be active in shaping how the digital revolution plays out in our lives.”

This hesitancy to take an argumentative stance leads into my second gentle critique. Perhaps because of the nature of the book—the unique (for history, which is still largely wedded to the sole author model) authorial structure, the presence of the voices of 3,419 Canadians—analyses were not always pushed as far as they could have been. The chapters barrel through interesting question after interesting question, table after table, well-chosen

quotation after quotation ... and then too sharply drop off in the concluding sections, which range from as short as a paragraph to a single page, rarely two. Perhaps large or deep analyses were not the intention of the book, and the structure of balancing seven authorial voices and 3,419 contributors is always a tricky one, but some more concrete policy recommendations beyond encouraging hands-on explorations in museums, or general statements about how “there are more chapters to be written on historical consciousness and on how it might aid us in developing life-affirming ways of living together on this planet” would have helped. That being said, the overall conclusion of the book does have recommendations, and educators in particular will find the authors’ suggestions around developing critical historical thinking as a way of tapping into the deep connections they found especially useful.

My hope is that *Canadians and Their Pasts* is not the definitive statement in this area of investigation, but a starting point. It supplements other similar national studies, which are contextualized in this book, notably the 1998 American study *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life*, by Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, and a 2003 Australian survey carried out by Paul Ashton and Paula Hamilton. We now have a snapshot of how Canadians engaged with the past in 2007–08, and

there are some disquieting points that appear in the data. Looking at the basic question of whether Canadians are interested in the “past in general,” we see that 45 percent of 65–75 year olds and 37 percent of those older than that said that they were “very interested”; as opposed to 20 percent of those aged 18–29, 30 percent of those aged 30–39, 33 percent of those 40–50 and 35 percent of those aged 51–64. The big shift in this happens between the 18–29 cohort and 30–39 one, with a rise of 10 percent. The data, at the time of this snapshot, suggest in some ways that as Canadians age they become more interested in the past, although there is the drop for those oldest Canadians, perhaps due to lower levels of education and mobility difficulties preventing them from attending historical sites. We will need more data to see if these ups-and-downs are replicated across subsequent generations of Canadians—in which case we can see them as part of the historical lifecycle—or whether generational differences are emerging. In ten years, I hope a follow-up study is conducted, which will give insight into this question. That way we could see what is really going on with young people and historical knowledge today.

Canadians and Their Pasts deserves wide readership among educators, policy makers and those who are interested in the past. While it is an academic work, written accordingly, it provides a backdrop for our discussions. As Canadians move through the impending anniversaries (the First World War, the country’s 150th anniversary), and the next bout of historical worrying takes place, this work needs to be read to contextualize those anecdotal discussions. The next time that a journalist rhetorically asks what has caused us to care less about the past, rather than resorting to individual stories, we need to respond with this work. The past does matter, to many Canadians, and in ways far deeper and more engaging than the trivia of John A. Macdonald’s life or the date of the end of the Korean War. Traces of the past are with us every day, fostering a life-long engagement with history.

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