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What's the Use of History?

EDITOR'S NOTE

Did you know that **Sir John A. Macdonald**'s 'sexual potency' was 'undermined' by a *Grip* cartoon showing a 'large phallus wielded by' a 'feminized figure, which challenges the patriarchal gender order and introduces the threat of castration'? That's what *The Canadian Historical Review* expects you to believe. **John Pepall** responds in our regular feature, 'Beaver Pelts' (page 3).

— from the Spring/Summer 2016 issue.

MANIFESTO (2011)

The Dorchester Review is founded on the belief that leisure is the basis of culture. Just as no one can live without pleasure, no civilized life can be sustained without recourse to that tranquillity in which critical articles and book reviews may be profitably enjoyed. The wisdom and perspective that flow from history, biography, and fiction are essential to the good life. It is not merely that 'the record of what men have done in the past and how they have done it is the chief positive guide to present action,' as Belloc put it. Action can be dangerous if not preceded by contemplation that begins in recollection.

Every historian and every writer has an agenda, frequently political and often unadmitted. To the entrenched complacencies of much professional scholarship and literary journalism, one antidote is corrective and restorative history, engagingly written. There are too few critical reviews published today, particularly in Canada, and almost none translated from francophone journals for English readers. *The Dorchester Review* has no political agenda but a robustly polemical one. The 'pure Canada' nationalism that began with the 1920s centre-left has in some ways produced a narrowing effect on the country's imagination, squeezing out elements of tradition and culture inherent to Canadian experience that fail to conform to a stridently progressivist narrative. While the centre-left has contributed in certain ways to the progress and advancement of civilization, the tendency to assume that theirs are the only valuable ideas — that history moves in only one direction — is to be resisted.

We confess another potentially unpopular belief: that, at its core, Canada's strength and advantage — that of a British liberal society with a strong French national enclave, resilient aboriginal communities, and a vital pluralism born of successive immigrant arrivals — would be void if polemically separated from its European, Judeo-Christian and Classical traditions, which is another answer to: why history. We are conscious and grateful heirs to an invaluable if variously pressured tradition of free expression and criticism that is found and defended with particular seriousness in the North Atlantic societies, and this we think should be recognized, protected, and always enhanced.

In our choice of a moniker and historical patron we take the name of a bewigged British soldier, an astute and unapologetic colonial governor from the pre-democratic era, in order to underline that history consists of more than a parade of secular modern progressives building a distinctively Canadian utopia. That the King praised **Sir Guy Carleton**, **1st Baron Dorchester**, as 'a gallant and sensible man' is no small recommendation.

What's the Use of History?

History should not be the property of a few academics but for the general public — writes John Pepall

We know the use of chemistry. It gives us all kinds of useful products and keeps us safe and healthy. We don't need to know any chemistry for it to be useful, for us to have the benefits of it.

But what would be the use of history if only historians knew it, as only chemists know chemistry, apart from a few dribs and drabs we remember from school. What products can historians produce, what services provide, to match what chemistry does?

The only product or service historians can provide is our own knowledge and understanding of history. We can have the benefits of chemistry if we know no chemistry. If we know no history, if only historians know it, it is useless.

Some historians evidently disagree. Some years ago Andrew Gow, in the course of upbraiding Jonathan Kay for praising narrative history in the *National Post*, wrote:

> ... academic historians are paid by universities (and in Canada, that means we are paid largely by public money) to research and write about serious historical issues and problems, not to be stylists who entertain our readers so as to make history less 'boring.' Dozens of popular historians do so and some even make a living at it, which is wonderful. But their work stands in the same relation to academic history as CBC's Quirks and Quarks stands to actual science.

Again, is physics or chemistry or biology or sociology entertaining? No, but books, articles or shows about them can be.

Though Gow has had a distinguished career, he has missed the point of what he is doing. And he is evidently not alone in this.

The use of history, the only use of history, is its being known and understood by the general public, those of us who are not historians, not producers of history, but consumers of it one might say. History, as it is practiced in universities, is failing, even unwilling, to produce history for public consumption. What it does produce is more often than not adulterated and not fit for public consumption.

Wherein tendentious, superficial, and inane writing about Canada's history gets its hide tanned.

Universities now have practically a monopoly on history. There are few independent scholars left. History written by people not in universities is "popular history" to be sneered at as Gow does. Academics publish hundreds of books and thousands of articles a year, for each other.

It was not always thus. History only became a university subject in the 19th century. Hume, Gibbon, Macaulay and Lecky never taught in a university. And they wrote for the general reader.

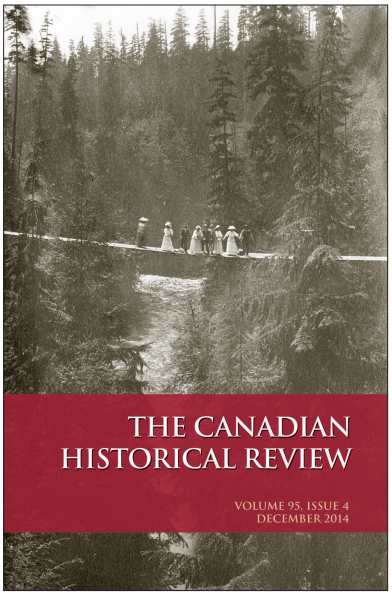
Professor Gow would presumably think reading the great historians made no more sense, at best, than a chemist reading Boyle, Priestley or Dalton. They might be allowed something for their prose style, as belles lettres. But so far as that appeals they might as well, or better, have been writing fiction. Almost all the great his-

torians wrote superbly, while modern university historians generally write badly, unembarrassedly, almost proudly.

As universities began to take over history and claim to tell it "as it really happened," they did not immediately withdraw into writing for themselves. Ranke wrote for the educated public. *The Cambridge Modern History* of 1910 is a mixed bag, not entirely written by academics, but intended for the general reader.

In Canada the leading historians, Lower, Underhill, Creighton, also wrote for the general reader. Academic journals were few and publish or perish had not yet fully set in. *The Canadian Historical Review* was something someone like my father, a lawyer, might subscribe to.

There are still a few university historians who write for the general reader. Michael Bliss and Jack Granatstein are perhaps the most eminent in Canada. Abroad, Simon Schama, the late Tony Judt, and Niall Ferguson come to mind. Perhaps many more would like to, but most must have a successful academic career without the fame and extra money that writing for the general reader brings. They would risk becoming "popular historians," their work as irrelevant to the real work of history as Carl Sagan's work was irrelevant to the real work of cosmology. Perhaps they might serve to interest young people in history so that some would become university historians, as some were inspired to study cosmology at university by reading Sagan. And perhaps they encourage lay people to keep supporting university history with public money even though they don't understand what "serious historical issues and problems" are.



NO LONGER FOR THE GENERAL READER

Of course the history that we may know and understand is the product of historians processing a vast amount of raw material. Records kept by anonymous clerks, inscriptions made to give the news and show who was in charge, family archives, the collections of antiquarians, the discoveries of archeologists, the works of early historians and chroniclers must be preserved, organised, often published, or now put online, and then reviewed, selected from and studied before history can be written.

This work is beyond the purview of the general reader of history who may not even skim the footnotes and the bibliography, if they are there, in a history book. It is now the work of university historians.

But university historians could not be content to be little more than archivists. As the German inspired concept of the progressive research university slowly took hold and then universities expanded, simply teaching the history that the great and the good historians had given us, with occasional updates, became unthinkable. As chemists continually made new discoveries and their textbooks were revised every decade and replaced every generation, historians must make history new. What I learned in high school and what popular historians who just want to make that "interesting" write is out of date, not really history at all, more entertainment. Historians have moved beyond that to things that are none of our business, because they concern "historical issues and problems" that are beyond us.

The institutional and professional deformation represented by Gow assures that little of this work is aimed at adding to public knowledge of and understanding of history. University students who do not go on to become university historians themselves will be given a look in. A few will go on to teach history in schools equipped with new ways of making history boring.

As in all the humanities "theory" is available to make history new. The status and use of such theory, though widely contested for a while, has been uncritically accepted. It has its roots in abstruse new philosophy. Though philosophy of some kind has always been a university subject, it too has succumbed to the compulsion to make everything new. University historians have respectfully received the deliveries of post-modern philosophers and put them to work as "settled theory."

To the outsider theory may appear like scientific theories, making history like chemistry after all. Theories are advanced and tested. And then what? The chemist produces a new material. We needn't know how. What does the historian produce?

Post-modern theories are not there to be tested, to be proved or falsified. They are applied, like a lens or a filter, to something in the past, not some new discovery in the archives that might prove the theory, but something quite ready to hand, like old magazines, to show people in the past quite cleverly but perhaps unconsciously, or was it deceitfully, doing something naughty.

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Post-modernism is widely criticised for moral relativism. But as applied in the humanities it is relentlessly moralising. Its various theories are applied to furrow through culture and history and expose the racism, sexism and boundless wickedness of people gazing at others.

This can be done without theory. For there is no doubt that there was a lot of racism, sexism and wickedness in the past. And without the pomp of theory much academic history is devoted to exposing it. And then there is the general pursuit of the underdogs of history, those who can be cast as oppressed, unheard voices. Though a problem with unheard voices is that they are usually unrecorded, or are represented by statistics and other anonymous remains, which make them, well, a bit boring.

A kind of rigorous egalitarianism is applied. We've heard far too much about Sir John A. Macdonald. What about that housemaid in Belleville? If we are all now entitled to 15 minutes of fame, everyone in the past must be allowed 15 seconds of history.

When the academic historian has done his work to the satisfaction of his peers, the result is seldom anything that can be transferred to the general stock of public knowledge and understanding of history. Despite the exposure of a generation or more of undergraduates to cod post-modernism, with deconstruction, closure and the Other common currency, theory laden history must remain opaque to the general reader. The record of previously unheard voices may seem a chronicle of trivia, as if instead of news of what famous people are doing TV networks broadcast nothing but the conversations of commuters going to and from work. For university historians it is the fault of the benighted general readers if they will not interest themselves in "serious historical issues and problems." So much the worse for them. The university historians will get on with resolving them. And then what? Who beyond them will know and who should care and why should the benighted public pay them to edify themselves?

Occasionally the work of academic historians will erupt into the news, usually when they try to take down a prominent dead white male. This happened recently as the 200th anniversary of Sir John A. Macdonald's birth approached and Richard Gwyn's biography, written by a layman but with resort to original sources, was completed.

Stanley Turner denounced Macdonald as an Aryan supremacist, basing his case in part on remarks recorded in *Hansard* available to anyone to read. And James Daschuk accused Macdonald of "outright malevolence" in order to "starve uncooperative Indians onto reserves and into submission." Both charges were more anti-history than history. They relied on ripping

tendentiously selected facts out of the full context of the past and judging them by the correct standards of the present. To understand "how it really happened" we have not only to know what happened but how it seemed to those who made it happen. To get at how things seemed in the past we must not only get at as much as we can of how things were in the past but also abstract from hindsight.

Good history paradoxically teaches both humility and confidence. Humility because what seems obvious to us now did not seem obvious to people in the past, to the most decent and intelligent people. Perhaps it is not as obvious as we think, and even if it is right we should understand how we came to see it as right and not take it as obvious.

And confidence because much of the past is a record of misery and muddle and yet we have come through.

I am enough of a Whig to think that to have put slavery and torture and racism, largely, behind us is a kind of progress. But I cannot be confident in this *acquis* if history will not teach us why they were so long accepted and how experience turned us against them. And I am enough of a Tory to reflect that future generations may not judge us as kindly as we judge ourselves, not only for what further "progress" we have failed to achieve but for much of what we do now in the name of progress but get wrong.

The Dominion Institute made a name for itself back in the nineties by running an annual survey of what Canadians knew of their history. Many professed to be shocked at the level of ignorance revealed. But we have no surveys from the past to show what our ancestors knew. Everyone knew about Confederation and who Sir John A. Macdonald was in 1867, but many may have been woefully ignorant of the War of 1812. People then probably generally knew much more about the events of 1837 than Canadians do now.

Historians of the past did not presume to put their readers in their place as if they were writing for ignorant school children.

In ancient times, before Herodotus, even the literate elite had no more history than living memory and what little there was was in legends.

After Herodotus an elite, not always fully literate, had access to some history and all that historians and chroniclers recorded was intended for them. There was no closed world of historians writing for each other. Whatever they took from it, whatever use they made of it, those who governed had history.

When democracy set in, and we had "to educate our masters," the mass of people came to learn some of "how it really happened." But when the universities expanded and some of the mass went to them only a few read history and history became the property of the universities. Only a tiny few could know how it really happened.

I have used the phrase "general reader" to describe the people who "use" history. And I have allowed that even before history, a proto-history in legends was used by all. And I believe that all but the most ignorant of us actually know more history than common people knew two centuries ago. But I do not mean to say that all of us must use history, know history, as all seven billion of us use chemistry, without knowing it.

All of us are subject to and factors in politics. But many people, to the consternation of some, are not interested in politics. And the arts, we are told, are crucial to a good life, but many aren't interested, or are only interested in stuff that is beneath the notice of the "arts community," only fit to be examined under the rubric of sociology or "cultural studies." And all of us are part of history. But only some of us are much interested in it.

At any given time, only a minority of people will have the education, in the broadest sense, to understand the world and take a lead in their communities. People who call themselves democrats fret at the elitism implied by this — though they are the first to condemn the ignorant masses who troop out

ROCAMADOUR, LOT, FRANCE: WHERE JACQUES CARTIER MADE HIS PILGRIMAGE IN 1536

to support a Trump. We should all know more history than most do. It has been sidelined in schools. Or drained of the facts, dates and names, which must be the basis of understanding, while children are invited to imagine what it would have been like to live in a past they cannot imagine because they have not been taught how it really was.

None of us can know more than a tiny fraction of history. It is one of the appeals of history to some that you can know a lot that no one you know knows. You may know a lot about the Crimean War when most of the others at dinner don't even know that the Charge of the Light Brigade was part of it.

The sneer of university historians against "popular history" has some basis in reality. Many of us like to know history that others don't to be know-it-alls, and many just find it a pleasure, so many interesting stories. That it actually happened is secondary.

Game of Thrones is, as I understand, set in a purely imaginary world, though one curiously inspired by the Wars of the Roses. For hundreds of millions it is the most history they know, even though it is not how anything really happened.

Such fantasies occupy space in the imaginations of many people with a "college education" where history should be. And for the university historians "popular" history is little different from such fantasies. Yet they will not apply themselves to capturing that space for history "as it really happened."

READING HISTORY CAN be a great pleasure. I know. I have read much of the best. Laughed with Lecky and been moved by Hume. But the value of history is not that. It is knowing where we are in time and space. The pleasure comes from the confidence. An understanding that is not scientific but humane.

There is some history we should know and some we can get on without.

We should know our history. But that raises, while it may answer, the question: "Who are we?" It is perhaps generally accepted that Canadians should know Canadian history. Though how much and what is contested, particularly as immigrants arrive. But Western history? Should we be as ignorant as I am of much of China's history? Is that not a Eurocentric, even racist, wrong?

History ends with each of us and goes out and back from there. I can only guess at the history of Kapuskasing and do not intend to bull up on it. But if I were from Kapuskasing, I should want to know more.

As I am a Canadian I am a late product of Western civilisation, which goes back to the Near East of 5,000 years ago. Sumer is barely more than a name to me, but I know that some of what happened there is with me still, while what happened under the Xia dynasty in China, while it is with the Chinese still and is worth some of us knowing about, is too remote not just in time but in the order of things, to be something I should know about.

History puts us in our place in the world in which we live. As it becomes more remote from who we are it becomes useless.

The presumption of university historians is that, if we may be allowed occasional reports on the results of their work, we must take these as deliverances from the experts and not presume to question them. But this misplaces historical understanding. It is not for university historians to understand history and report their understanding to us as a kind of "settled science." It is for us to understand history on the basis of our knowledge of it and arguments that we have as much right to engage in as the university historians.

Historians of the past did not presume to put their readers in their place as if they were writing for ignorant school children. They assumed their readers shared their interest in the past, knew a good deal of history and were as capable as they of understanding it. Of course they had done their research and set out a great deal that their readers did not know. But they treated their readers as equals, to be persuaded. Their readers would read other historians and arrive at their own understanding of the past, taking issue with historians and arguing about it amongst themselves and in print.

Once the university historians had appropriated history for themselves even the best educated were cut off from history. Most in Canada know no more than Liberal mythology and Heritage Minutes.

Looking at the claims of the Ontario Ministry of Education it is hard to understand how this can be. As I understand, every high school graduate is required to have studied the history of Canada. And those who choose to study more history, to judge by the curriculum, would be ready to step into a chair at any of our universities. They will learn:

The Historical Inquiry Process

... historical inquiry process, guiding students in their investigations of events, developments, issues, and ideas. This process is not intended to be applied in a linear manner: students will use the applicable components of the process in the order most appropriate for them and for the task at hand....

The following chart identifies ways in which students may approach each of the components of the historical inquiry process.

Formulate Questions

Students formulate questions:

– to explore various events, developments, and/or issues that are related to the overall expectations in order to identify the focus of their inquiry
– to help them determine which key concept or concepts of historical thinking are relevant to their inquiry
– that reflect the selected concept(s) of historical thinking
– to develop criteria that they will use in evaluating evidence and information, making judgements or decisions, and/or reaching conclusions

Gather and Organize
Students:

– collect relevant evidence and information from a variety of primary sources and secondary sources, including, where possible, community sources
– determine if their sources are credible, accurate, and reliable
– identify the purpose and intent of each source
– identify the points of view in the sources they have gathered
– use a variety of methods to organize the evidence and information from their sources
– record the sources of the evidence and information they are using
– decide whether they have collected enough evidence and information for their investigation

There follows an astonishing hundred pages in which it is required that students "analyse" almost everything that has happened in the last five hundred years, implying without assuring that students will know "how it really happened." So:

D3.2 analyse how nationalism affected identity, citizenship, and/or heritage in various regions during this period (e.g., with reference to the Italian Risorgimento; the unification of Germany; independence struggles in Cuba and the Philippines; the independence of Greece and Serbia from the Ottoman Empire; Chinese nationalism

and the question of who belongs to the Chinese nation; the Indian National Congress and the idea of Swaraj or self-rule; Pan-Slavism in Russia; the Zionist movement)

The curriculum is based on the patronising conceit that schools can and will teach students to think. Giving them something to think about is secondary, suspect as "rote learning." It is simply incredible that in two years, in a fraction of their time, students learn as much as 1% of the actual history that is suggested by the curriculum as material for "the historical inquiry process." What they can do is learn the steps of the process by rote and scrupulously and ostentatiously apply them to projects they or their teachers fancy.

In the classroom things may still go on much as they did fifty years ago, going over dates and names and events with a little discussion of what it all means. But those who graduate in history from Ontario high schools are not so many Actons. And the general ignorance of Canada's history revealed by the Dominion Institute's surveys indicates that the similarly conceived compulsory course in Canada's history leaves high school graduates with very little,

Unless the student who learns "the historical inquiry process" goes on to become a university professor what he learned will be of no use to him. Though Herodotus managed pretty well without the benefit of an Ontario High School education. The Greek root of "history," first used by Herodotus for his *History*, means something like inquiry. Herodotus had cottoned on to the "historical inquiry process" almost twenty-five centuries ago. And so had all his successors, whatever their failings and prejudices. Failings and prejudices from which university historians, who are as human as Froude, are not exempt.

Something has to be done to break the universities' attempted monopoly of public discourse. It is not just with history that they have succeeded so malignly.

What are the "serious issues and problems" historians investigate? They might just be obscure or neglected periods where the sources are limited and questionable and it may be difficult to figure out what really happened. If when the historians have figured that out, as best they can, they would report it to some of us who may be interested in the time and place, however obscure, or it might add something to the larger picture of history we should all be interested in, and they would present the results of their labours in good prose, we might be grateful to them. But they won't.

Perhaps historians think they can give us rules to live by in our common affairs. We do not need to know the history. They know that and reviewing it all, down to the most obscure details that would bore us but they conscientiously study, they can offer us "lessons from history." It will be enough that we accept these on the authority of the experts without actually knowing the history.

A crude but popular example might be poor Neville Chamberlain and Munich. "Don't try to appease dictators." history teaches us. There's something to the idea, but, put baldly, it is useless and even dangerous without a knowledge and understanding of a lot of history besides the lead up to the Second World War but including that in some detail. And it's not even a rule that university historians offer us. Who are the dictators and what is appeasing them if not just abstaining from a policy of "regime change"? Only someone who has read widely in history is likely to be able to learn the lesson of Munich, if there is one.

The form in which most of us get history is narrative history. What Henry Ford reportedly dismissed as "one damn thing after another" has been what most of us interested in history have always wanted. History is what people did in the past. First they did this and then they did that. It is a narrative. Of course we need to know the circumstances in which they did this and that. But those who dismiss narrative history wrongly discount how much of that context, social history they might call it, the old historians gave. I think of the wonderful description

of the state of the United States in 1800 at the beginning of Henry Adams' *History of the United States under the Administrations of Jefferson and Madison*.

And we need to know what kind of people did this and that. One of the great strengths of old history was its characters. They were brought to life with all their social and personal background. For the university historian they can only be types from a theory from Marxism to feminism.

Narrative history is objected to because it seems, indeed is, to its credit, the farthest thing from the science university historians aspire to. History is still, in most universities, a separate discipline, one of the humanities rather than a social science, though, as the faculties are generally combined, the distinction can be politely ignored. But historians are keen to apply social sciences, economics and sociology, to the past, though they may not have much training in those disciplines, such as they are. Theory provides an ambiguous substitute for the principles of the social sciences.

Apart from its offence to egalitarianism, the narrative history's attention to the activities of prominent people is suspect to the university historian as implying a "great men" theory of history. But one does not have to settle the vexed question of how far individuals direct the course of history or are just the means by which it cunningly proceeds to want to know what prominent people did and leave the forgotten mass forgotten. Whether or not it would have made any difference if Hitler had been killed in the First World War, we cannot understand German history from 1919 to 1945 with Hitler left out. Only by knowing what Hitler got up to can we know how he made any difference.

I do not have to think Donald Trump is a great man, still less a good one, to want the media to tell me what he is doing, rather than give me daily briefings on how Sue Wong is getting on in Markham.

R. G. Collingwood used the analogy of the detective story to explain historical understanding. Historical understanding is not a special technique that only university historians know. We can all achieve it if we have the facts. It is really no different from how we understand our lives from day to day. How we make sense of the people around us and what happened last week. There are not "public ways of speaking" and "historical ways of speaking." There are only different things to speak about: our lives, politics, art, sports, history.

Then there is specialisation, a commonly lamented deformation of the universities. What history do even university historians know? Having lost sight of the use of history the university historian stuffed with the details of working conditions in late 19th century Hamilton may know less about the general history of 19th century Canada than a well read layman.

Because history is not a natural science like chemistry its structure is different. A chemist who spends his whole career studying boron and its compounds must still understand the periodic table and the whole of general chemistry to pursue that speciality and fit what he discovers into it. The academic, and perhaps the local, historian can zero in on one aspect of one time and place and record all the details while knowing nothing of the wider world at the time and what went before or came after.

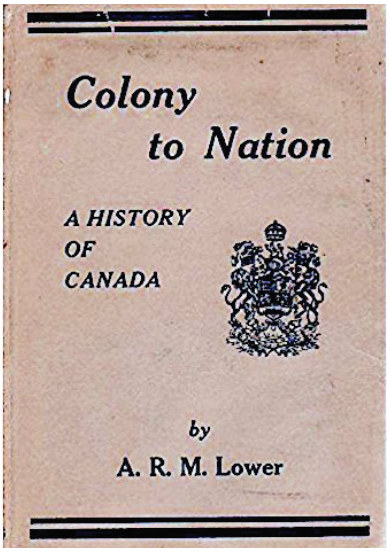
For the local historian this may not matter very much. He and his interested neighbours can put what he learns into the context of local lore and perhaps a surprising amount of general history. The university historian is more likely to put what he learns in terms of a theory. Once you learn that people are prone to gazing malignly at others you can find them doing it almost anywhere, anytime and the context doesn't matter.

The whole structure of the academic industry compels specialisation, which is as rife and damaging in all the social sciences and humanities as it is in history. Hundreds of historians hoping for jobs, tenure and promotion must publish. That no one will want to read their work and only a few feel they must to show that they have kept up with the literature in their field does not matter. Nor does it matter whether the tyro historian is interested in the subject, has something to say or can envisage anyone who might want to read the work beyond a few who are being paid to as peer reviewers or others in universities trying to make their way. Anything written for the general public will get no points in the university game.

Undergraduates can move with breathtaking speed from first year survey courses to upper year courses based on their professors' research specialties. Graduate students are expected to specialise themselves, perhaps in a speciality within their supervisor's speciality. The professor who sticks to the big picture may be suspected of ambitions to become a popular historian.

The self-conscious pursuit of history from below encourages minute specialisation. The public events that people in the past experienced, cared about and remembered must be ignored in an effort to get at the something like their private lives, often only accessible by reducing them to categories of class and gender and ethnicity.

The wholesale abandonment of big picture, narrative history has left Canada's history about where it was fifty years ago, fixed in a largely Liberal consensus represented by Lower's *Colony to Nation*, despite the contributions of conservative historians such as W. L. Morton and Donald Creighton. The time is ripe for a revisionist Tory history of Canada. But we shan't get that from university historians.



LITTLE CHANGE IN THE NARRATIVE SINCE 1946

Universities, at least in the social sciences and humanities, are generally, and rightly, judged a left wing force. For many in universities this is not a worrying bias, rather a proud claim. Partly this is because they think they know best and left is best. Partly it is follows from their claim to be useful by showing us the way forward, how to reform, if not revolutionise the world. They must always be discovering something new to lay the basis of change.

How committed many academics are to the ideological implications of their work is a nice question. Some are loudly so and politically active on the left, even the quaint communist or Marxist left. Many quietly know what's best for their careers. Peer review, complacently promoted as assuring scholarly quality, can operate as a rigorous ideological screening.

The left wing bias of university history leads to a paradox. For those outside universities an interest in history is generally a sign of some conservatism. A conservatism that may be compatible with support for the NDP and generally does not make them Conservatives, but involves a respect for the past, for prominent figures in the past, for the way our forebears coped with trouble from wars to depressions and built the world we know today. This is at odds with university history's narrative of rarely intermitted wickedness and oppression.

University history presents a curious inversion of the Whig Interpretation of History. If under the Whig Interpretation history was the bright story of our forbears struggling to bring about the modern liberal world we enjoy, for the university historian history is a dark story of oppression still not defeated despite shining episodes of resistance, which must be celebrated, if only in the obscurest journals. The Whig historians carried their concerns into the past and recounted their progress. The university historians carry correctness into the past and give the past failing grades.

As an example of what university historians do, I take an article from the December 2015 number of *The Canadian Historical Review*. We can get the gist from the abstract:

> During the 1870s and 1880s, when cartoonists working for Britain's most popular satirical magazine, *Punch*, wanted to represent Canada visually, they drew on centuries' old artistic

conventions that depicted America, and, later, British North America, as a woman and an 'Indian.' During the same period, in Canada's most popular satirical magazine, *Grip*, normative portrayals of the embodied nation were unambiguously white. The visual trope of an indigenized, feminized body was enlisted instead to represent Manitoba and the North-West Territories. This imagery disavowed British depictions of Canada as a racialized and colonized subject and relocated the identity of the colonial Other onto the Prairie West. In other words, *Grip*'s images constituted a representational politics that involved both 'looking back' at Empire and directing the imperial gaze onto others.

Is this "how it really happened?'

The article reproduces nine cartoons from *Grip* and *Punch* and puts them in the context of its own caricature of the history of Manitoba and the North-West Territories from 1870 to 1890. But most of it consists of a processing of the cartoons through "theory."

> Caricatures of indigenized, feminized bodies acted as simulacra for distant territorial possessions that most Anglo-Canadians would never see 'with their own eyes.' …The indigenized, feminized body was a kind of map that could temporarily stand in for the geo-body of the Prairie West, bounded and simplified like its cartographic counterpart….The region was moved into Anglo-Canadians' visual compass by image practices, just as legal practices brought it into Canada's juridical compass….
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> Although images of racialized, feminized bodies as colonial possessions produced a homology between sexual mastery over Indigenous women and imperial mastery over land that is impossible to overlook, *Grip*'s depictions of Manitoba and the nwt suggest a more troubled and fraught relation to both the region and its peoples. These cartoons are illustrative of a deep ambivalence within colonial projects, what Sumathi Ramaswamy calls the 'messy business' of 'desiring-while disavowing and disavowing-while-desiring.' This body/territory was a source of pleasure, desire, and gratification; it was also a site of fear, abjection, and disidentification. …

The only *Punch* cartoon from the period I could find online in a quick search was a drawing of Lord Lansdowne on snowshoes captioned "In his new Canadian costume specially adapted to remaining some time out in the cold." Perhaps that does not qualify as one in which *Punch* "wanted to represent Canada visually."

Grip never knew that it produced "normative portrayals of the embodied nation." As Canada was largely white at the time, and *Grip* used little colour, it is not surprising that it was depicted as white. We may have made progress in becoming less white and conscientiously reflecting that diversity, and regret that black communities in Nova Scotia or Southwestern Ontario were marginalised, but we are not told anything we did not know, or might not have suspected.

"Empire" and "colonized" are not used as descriptors of institutions or processes to be analysed and judged in their particularity in a given time and place but as "boo words," their wickedness assumed. Macdonald himself is depicted in some cartoons as an Indian chief. This leads to fantastic somersaults of theory talk:

> Macdonald's portrayal as the 'big chief' is a powerful repudiation of Indigenous masculin-

> ity as well as the prime minister's political legitimacy. The image shifts meaning as viewers shuttle between what they 'know' (Macdonald as a white politician) and what they 'see.' The cartoon's humour is created by his foolishness and obliviousness. The racialized Macdonald is full of vanity and conceit and is insensible to the threat closing in upon him.
>
> He sports an elaborate costume: the top hat adorned with feathers mocks Indigenous appropriations of European dress, and his hatchet and animal-tooth necklace denote primitiveness. Macdonald's sexual potency is also undermined by the large phallus wielded by the feminized figure, which challenges the patriarchal gender order and introduces the threat of castration.
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> … The cartoon thus hails viewers into racial, sexual, and gender identities that are coded as superior to Indigenous masculinity, which legitimates Indigenous men's disempowerment and Canada's colonial project.

The author even manages to implicate, or should that be "imbricate," sexual orientation into the old West.

> Heteroerotic spectacles such as these were, however, capable of producing both desire and disavowal vis-a-vis interracial sexuality and colonial enterprises.

The content of this article, the fruits of one scholar's research, are slight, and all from well known published sources. The work is all in the application of theory. Translated into ordinary language some of it is vacuous or meaningless. The rest is what "in theory" was happening, but may or may not have been happening depending on a full context requiring an understand of how it really was back then. But the historian working with theory already knows how it really was. Edward Said and his cohorts explained all that over forty years ago. Wherever you look you will find people gazing malignly. It must be as tedious to write such stuff as it is to read it.

While the implication that Bengough running Grip was working like a Soviet ideologist to propagandise the masses on behalf of the great imperial project is ludicrous, the deployment of theory talk is consciously and expressly in the service of a political campaign.

From a blog post by the author, Carmen Neilson, we learn that she sees her work as a kind of political initiative to assist "Indigenous women's struggle to resist and replace negative and reductionist depictions … essential to dismantling colonial power relations in Canada."

It is not easy to see how dredging up old *Grip* cartoons can assist indigenous women's struggles today. Very few Canadians look at old volumes of *Grip*. I have a couple and confess I have never paused to reflect on its depiction of indigenous people, being more interested in its treatment of politicians. It is Nielson who has brought the images to the attention of a few beyond antiquarian book collectors, a benign lot generally.

But this is a use of history keenly pursued by university historians. To present indictments of people, famous men or just people generally who were getting on with their lives, as interventions in the politics of today. Even though, with rare exceptions like the attacks on Macdonald, their indictments are only read by other historians, who presume guilt, and never reach the court of public opinion.

If they were to, it would be a court of public opinion that knows little history For us to understand how people no worse than ourselves could have behaved as they did in the past would require that historians give us the big picture, history for its only proper use, our knowing and understanding it. They prefer a court in which they are judge, jury and executioner and the accused, usually dead, has no right to a defence. Where there is a presumption of guilt and all that is needed is to read in a statement of the crimes and a victim impact statement.

What is to be done?

Recent reports that some jobs with tenure might be created for professors simply teaching might offer some hope that "how it really happened" might be more taught in universities. But such professors would have to be the products of graduate schools where history for historians is taught and might not be up to the task. They might be the kind of "showboaters" featured on TVO's "Best Lecturers" series. They

might be looked down on by their colleagues beavering away at research in the time freed up by their teaching and scorned if they had the temerity to publish something for the rest of us.

Another hopeful development might seem to be "Public History," a specialty that has grown up in university history departments since the seventies. One of its aims is said to be to inspire "public engagement with the past." But public history does nothing to overcome the introversion of university history. Rather its emergence confirms that university history will not address and engage the public. It acknowledges the perhaps embarrassing fact that there are many people interested in and knowledgeable about history outside the universities indifferent to and neglected by university history:

> The term 'public history' is an admittedly awkward one. Public practitioners of history do not tend to call their work by the name (especially in Canada). And why does history need such differentiation anyway? — there is no 'Public Chemistry' or 'Public Anthropology.' It could be said, though, that the awkwardness of the name is appropriate: it signals how alienated the worlds of academic and 'public' history have become from one another ...

but does not accept the condemnation of university history that this is or propose its reorientation.*

Rather public history seems to want to assert university control in those areas where the public gets a look in on history: museums, public archives, genealogy, schools, movies and popular fiction, local history societies. And, as many, perhaps most, graduate students in history cannot hope to get jobs in universities, it offers them alternative employment opportunities.

Something has to be done to break the universities' attempted monopoly of public discourse. It is not just with history that they have succeeded so malignly. Law professors are telling us what the law should be. Politics professors are telling us how to run the country. "Global Affairs" professors are telling us how to run the world. All relying on the spurious prestige of the universities.

If university historians will break out of their ivory tower and address us they will be welcome. But they must not talk down to us or presume that they understand history better than we do.

Perhaps private foundations could support scholars writing for the general reader. There could be historical think tanks. Though they would have to be something very different from Historica, which has devoted ample resources to the "promotion" of a shallow, politically correct, Liberal history of Canada.

For the rest of us who have escaped the universities, we must educate ourselves. My high school history teacher used to say that self-education was the best education. We can read old books, most out of print, but still to be found. Old history books give us two for one: the history they recount, and how the historian saw the past, a piece of history itself.

And we can read the books of historians outside the universities from Conrad Black to Christopher Moore, not as lessons but as work we have as much right to question as they have to write.

If university historians will break out of their ivory tower and address us they will be welcome. But they must not talk down to us. Presume that they understand history better than we do. And that we cannot question their arguments, and their facts, without impertinence.

If they will not, the present generation of university historians can look forward in retirement to seeing their work dismissed as misconceived and even vicious as the imperatives of the academic industry and sheer fashion generate a new new history.

History is for us. Can we wrest it from the university historians who want to keep it for themselves?

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* The quotation comes from the website of the Department of History, University of Western Ontario, 'What is Public History.'