

HISTORY MATTERS: TWO VIEWS ON HISTORIANS AND THE MEDIA

For the past three years Jean Barman, who teaches at the University of British Columbia, has been a regular contributor to CBC Almanac, a two-hour midday radio program broadcast from Vancouver. Why? Why should historians become involved with the media? Why should the media want to involve historians? Two perspectives follow.

History as a Common Good

Jean Barman

University of British Columbia

In the summer of 1998 I got a phone call. A local CBC producer invited me to participate in a new feature being planned for the midday radio show, 'Almanac,' heard across British Columbia. 'In Search of BC' would have a Monday slot of about ten minutes with six contributors alternating weeks to introduce aspects of the province in their areas of interest. I would be the historian and could talk about what I wanted to each time I was on the air with host Mark Forsythe.

The arguments for and against historians popularizing their craft played over in my mind. I recalled one of my mentors warning me of the dangers of becoming too accessible, for I wouldn't then be respected as a scholar. 'Community service' paled, I was well aware, beside 'Teaching' and 'Research' as criteria for promotion and merit within the university. But whose history was it anyway? Did it, should it, just belong to the self-selected few able to talk to each other using a language they themselves had constructed to be, almost purposefully, narrow and exclusive? As a social historian, I drew on the lives of everyday people to tell my stories. Did I not have an obligation to return research whence it came? In making my decision, these high minded arguments counted for less than did the potential fun of it all. The challenge not to make a fool of myself on live radio was too enticing to resist.

Three years later, I have become more reflective. The main argument for historians becoming involved with the media rests, to my mind, on history being a public good. The past belongs to all of us. We as academics hack off only one small part. Unless we are very careful, we then represent that part as some larger whole rather than only one small view of the proverbial elephant. Almost every time I have been on the air, I have had feedback in one form or the other from listeners with another part of the elephant in their possession. There was the woman who, after I talked about medicine on the frontier, put her father's memoir of his medical practice in the mail to me. Another time it was a whaler's descendants who got in touch to invite me to a family reunion. Often it is only a comment in passing from someone I did not think would even have listened, much less have an observation to share.

I have become convinced that history matters among a broad general public. Those of us who are privileged to have jobs that pay us to do what it is we love do have an obligation to return our research and understandings to the communities in which we live. The ways in which we do so need to respond to the opportunities available to us. It is not a matter of 'talking down,' but rather of our making the effort to 'talk across' to particular audiences. The rewards in doing so are enormous, both to ourselves and to the well being of the profession.

History on the Air

Mark Forsythe

BC Almanac, CBC Vancouver

Northern Doctors Withdraw Services. Treaty Talks Stall. Company Town In Mothballs. Current Affairs programs like BC Almanac on CBC Radio have an insatiable appetite for something new to report, whether it be the latest twist in the health care crisis, the rescue of a lost hiker or what's behind a native roadblock. This is what people discuss at the dinner table, on the bus or in one of B.C.'s ubiquitous coffee shops. But do we pause often enough to consider how these events fit into the larger story of British Columbia - a province with a distinct past, present and future? Probably not, but weekly radio features like "In Search of BC" draw lines to other people, places and events in a history too often met with indifference.

When academics like historian Jean Barman or ethnobotanist Nancy Turner step into the studio, they breath life into history, through stories of how people lived. Individual examples we all relate to. Recently Jean reminded us that fifty years or sixty years ago, health care in our province was delivered only to those who could afford it; a visit by the doctor meant a month's wages. One doctor often covered a vast area; most people made do with folk remedies. This places today's headlines into a more meaningful context, helping us make sense of where we've come from, where we may be going. As coal mines close and towns like Tumbler Ridge go on the auction block, we're reminded how resource industry boom and bust cycles have shaped our history.

Communities like Powell River survive these swings, others like Ocean Falls enter our collective memory, swallowed up by the rainforest. Ethnobotanist Nancy Turner interprets First People's traditional uses of plants like camas, whitebark and cedar over the millenia, reminding us today's urban sprawl or forest harvest plans still have a direct impact on lives. What other values must be considered before we forge ahead?

"In Search of BC" concludes with a quiz question based on that day's subject; usually the phone rings off the hook. In addition to answering the question, CBC British Columbia listeners are eager to share an anecdote about a great-great-grandfather who may have been the first country doctor in Kamloops or served as chief factor at Fort Langley's Hudson Bay Company trading post.

Last fall Harbour Publishing released its long awaited *Encyclopedia of British Columbia* - the only provincial encyclopedia of its kind since Joey Smallwood's history of Newfoundland. Response was imme-

diante, and this \$99 publication went into a second printing two weeks after it hit the market. BC Almanac also published a book of stories about British Columbia places, people and local history - with contributions from Jean Barman, Nancy Turner, and maritime historian David Griffiths. It includes listener's stories like that of the Chin family who spoke Carrier and Tsimshian, and were the first Chinese permitted to become merchants and grocers in Prince Rupert. Both books went onto the BC Bestsellers List. It seems British Columbians aren't so indifferent to their history after all - it's all in the telling: accessible, compelling stories that give meaning to our lives in the here and now. We hope historians like Jean and others continue to rise to the challenge!

NOTE: The two books mentioned are Daniel Francis, ed., *Encyclopedia of British Columbia* (Madeira Park: Harbour, 2000) and Mark Forsythe, *British Columbia Almanac* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2000).

HISTOIRE SUR LE WEB / HISTORY ON THE WEB

L'Institut canadien de microreproductions historiques (ICMH) est fier d'annoncer l'expansion du site *Web Notre mémoire en ligne* (NML) à l'adresse www.canadiana.org qui donne accès à plusieurs publications anciennes, des *Voyages* de Champlain au *Roughing it in the Bush* de Susanna Moodie.

L'ICMH a récemment inauguré le *Canada en devenir*, un nouveau projet en ligne axé sur l'histoire de la gouvernance au Canada. L'appui du Patrimoine canadien permettra à l'ICMH d'ajouter 250 000 pages cette année à *Canada en devenir* de NML. D'ici trois à cinq ans, 1 250 000 pages seront ajoutées dont les lois, les débats, les journaux et les documents parlementaires choisis, allant de la période coloniale jusqu'à 1900.

The Canadian Institute for Historical Microreproductions (CIHM) is pleased to announce the expansion of *Early Canadiana Online* (ECO), a Web site at www.canadiana.org that provides access to a wealth of early publications, from Champlain's *Voyages* to Susanna Moodie's *Roughing it in the Bush*.

CIHM recently launched *Canada in the Making*, a new online project focusing on the history of governance in Canada. With this support from Canadian Heritage, CIHM will be able to add 250,000 pages to *ECO Canada in the Making* this year. Over three to five years, 1,250,000 pages will be added. These will include selected Acts, Debates, Journals and Sessional papers from the Colonial period to 1900.

