

## MAKING HISTORY SING

As millenarists know, the end of a century is a good time for historians. In Canada, two great events have come along to give substance to this slightly superstitious view.

First, much of the state apparatus that Canadians built in the 20th century has come under renewed scrutiny and attack. Under cover of scepticism, public funding of that apparatus has fallen drastically. The effects are noticeable at street-level. In Vancouver, Ottawa, and Toronto, there are more beggars and buskers than in many decades. Everywhere the waiting lines for by-pass operations lengthen. More generally speaking, the institutions and practices of university public instruction and accessible higher education are in doubt, as are our arrangements for public and universal health care, for social welfare, and so on. The pressure on communities and community institutions (churches, family, and the rest) to "fill the gap" is enormous.

An unexpected effect of all this has been a growing demand for careful and *approachable* history. I continually meet people who would like to find readable and believable studies of the development of our collective attempts to build responsive and responsible community (what some call the "volunteer sector," or the "barely institutional" sector).

One reason for their strong interest in history is the worrisome condition of the country. That interest has so far led to histories of everything from hospitals and municipal bus systems to investigations of the history of the telephone company; from the history of local churches, of families, and of villages to inquiries about the fate of specialized provincial public services. And of late, it has produced a flood of biographies, often of people who pioneered the creation of community institutions, the very institutions suddenly at the centre of national interest and curiosity.

Even though books and articles on these matters are the bread and butter of many a local publishing firm, the underlying demand is far from being met. On one hand, the number of unexamined communities and community institutions is much larger than the number of persons able and willing to write about them.

On the other, too much good history on these things and people appears in forms and in places that make it inaccessible to large communities who want and need it. Our university presses roll out too many books that make the grade with peer reviewers, yet will be read only by fragments of the professional historical community. I will come back to this problem in a moment.

A second great "event" at this *fin-de siècle* is the public's fascination with its collective past. The fascination is with those elements of the past that give our communities (and nation) a feeling of cohesion. This same phenomenon justified Pierre Nora's enormous (and popular) series, *Les lieux de mémoire*, in

France. In one sense, we are talking here of the public's curiosity about the agreed meanings of symbols, institutions, language forms, and even buildings that populate the collective memory of our people/peoples. In another sense, we are talking of a movement calling on us to find out how our people/peoples fulfilled this same memory-work in past time. (An example would be a study in 1989 of how French citizens came in 1882 to understand the significance of the 1789 Revolution). There is something about the way the French do their memory-work, whether or not they bother to consult professional historians, that helps us and them to begin to explain French history.

Canadians, too, whether or not they bother to consult us professionals, cannot resist. They build museums, they hold centennial celebrations, they write brochures for the anniversaries of schools and churches, and they regularly remind politicians and newspaper editors about the power and value of past practice (Vancouver and British Columbia politicians have just found out about this in deciding what to do with the Lion's Gate Bridge.) These are just so many examples of people working out the contours of their collective and community memories, and asking whether the original sources are consistent with the "memory pictures" they have.

If they are lucky, the laypeople who hold the celebrations and write the brochures will be joined in their work by professional historians, willing and able to write in a straightforward and accessible way. The professionals have crucial advantages. They know the wide range of sources on which a good study must rest, and they understand the value of context—analogueous events, institutions, and people from across the country and the world, and surrounding social/cultural structures from past and present.

In British Columbia (as elsewhere in the country), a growing pile of books and articles by first-rate historians have as their cause and their goal the making of a useable and accessible history. They were written in close collaboration with laypeople, and have done well in the market.

Alas, laypeople are too often unlucky. Their neighbouring history department, whether in a university, a college, or a high school, cannot or will not offer the help of colleagues or advanced students to do the work.

Part of the difficulty, of course, is that history departments have not done well in the penurious 1980s and 1990s. Faced with massive teaching and administrative duties, compelled to publish or perish and reeling from budget cuts, they are not terribly open to requests from the community for help in writing and making history. Meanwhile, the professional historical associations rarely have the resources to do what their historian-members cannot.

To complicate matters, some historians say it is not possible to be both a responsible scholar, subject to the demands and standards of the field and the profession, and at the same time to participate wholeheartedly in the making of publicly accessible history. They wonder why they should give precious time and energy to writing that will not be reviewed by peers, or subject to competitive evaluation.

I think there are good answers to these questions. The crisis in scholarly publications will soon force us to take up the cause of accessible history. But surely we ought to think now about the reform of historical teaching, research, and writing as a matter of *choice*, and a matter of *policy*—rather than to be forced into it by circumstance and accident.

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In the course of my research for a biography of a well-known Canadian woman composer, Jean Couthard (b 1908), I have been asked any number of times whether my book will be publicly accessible, or whether I will allow myself to get lost in a million footnotes and a dozen theories. The usual inquirer is a music teacher, or a music lover, or a record store owner, or a journalist, each interested in the history of her or his community and institution and wondering what the future might be like. Each of these people knows the force of history, and understands intuitively why a good book would help.

My answer to each of these inquiries has been to say that I plan to survive, one way or another! But the point is, the demand for good, but useable history is as great as it has ever been.

I am reminded of the rise in the 1920s of *Gebrauchsmusik*, music designed to be socially useful and relevant, for example, music for film, radio, learners, and amateurs. It was sometimes called “community music,” and at first attracted the attention of few professional composers. Paul Hindemith, especially after his emigration to the United States, wrote quantities of music and textbooks that embodied the very best practices of professional composition, but in forms and in circumstances that invited whole new communities to do music, to make music, and to enjoy music as never before.

It seems to me that Canadian historians would do well to consider Hindemith’s example.

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