Does History Matter?

Pioneering research on Canada's attitudes toward bygone days.

IAN MILLIGAN

Canadians and Their Pasts
Margaret Conrad, Kadriye Erçikan, 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.

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 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 Erçikan, 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 Saskatchewan-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),

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visiting archives (15 percent) and surfing the web for historical information (40 percent). And we can see: 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 crowing out the authorial voice).

There were 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 in 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 crowing out the authorial voice).

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