

TEACHING HISTORY L'ENSEIGNEMENT DE L'HISTOIRE

“Ropes and Pulleys”: Reflections on a Conference on the Preparation of History Teachers

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Which of the students in an introductory history survey course are planning to go on to be history teachers in secondary schools? Which in an advanced seminar have such plans? Do the professors teaching these classes know? Do they care?

A reasonable guess is that most history professors do not know the career plans of most students. We do know, however, that a substantial number of history students will, in fact, head towards faculties of education. It is in the self-interest of history departments that those who end up teaching history at the high school level have the best preparation: students who have had engaging classes in secondary school are more likely to consider post-secondary history courses; and students who have been well-prepared in secondary school enter those first year courses with a better background in the discipline. Beyond self-interest, of course, history departments should also be providing the best preparation for future history teachers as an aspect of their obligation to provide history's benefits, through these proxies, to the vast numbers who make their way through high school history but will never enter a university history lecture hall.

But what is “the best preparation for future history teachers?” What role can history departments play? Furthermore, under what conditions would a history department and its members care enough to address this question?

Let us start with the last question. It is inevitable that historians find themselves stretched between academic commitments and opportunities for more public engagement. Most of the time, for most of the profession, the academy trumps the public: incentives of tenure, promotion and professional stature tilt the field pretty uniformly in one direction. From time to time, however, conditions and events lead historians into the public arena, sometimes only for a few op ed pieces in the *Globe and Mail*, but sometimes for more sustained work on a public issue for which historians' expertise is indispensable.

Jack Granatstein managed to scare Canadian historians out of their academic trenches, if only to refute his charges in *Who Killed Canadian History?* And a few years later, the

CBC/Radio Canada production, *Canada: A People's History* brought historians into the public realm, both as collaborators and critics. But neither of these examples comes close to what has happened south of the border over the past two decades which saw a sustained engagement of many historians in issues involving the place of history in secondary schooling. In 1987-1988, the Bradley Commission on History in Schools assembled nine top historians from the most prestigious departments along with five history teachers and a few representatives from schools of education to develop a program of history education reform. A few years later, came “national standards in history.” Gary Nash, eminent U.C.L.A. historian, and subsequently president of the Organization of American Historians, argued that, whatever threats the “standards” movement posed, historians needed to be “at the table.” He co-chaired the initiative and brought other leading historians into the public debate on K-12 (Kindergarten through grade 12) history education. More recently, the U.S. Congress has allocated two thirds of a billion dollars to “Teaching American History” grants. These provide a million dollars or more to local collaborative projects to support the professional development of history teachers, with the proviso that academic historians must be part of the team. Notwithstanding another requirement — that the projects be oriented towards “traditional American history” — historians from across the political spectrum have come on board. Looking at the American case, it appears that the example of those at the top of the field and the availability of funding both help to move historians into the realm of the schools, despite other disincentives.

At the end of June (2006), Edward L. Ayers, Hugh P. Kelly, Professor of History at the University of Virginia and Dean of its College and Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, assembled 50 American historians, teachers, and history teacher educators to raise the participation bar once again. (I was present as an interested observer from across the border.) “How,” he asked through the conference title, “can college history departments produce the best K-12 history teachers?” The challenge was not for an occasional workshop for teachers, nor for expressions of opinions in editorial news columns. Rather, it was for systematic, sustained engagement with the critical problem of improving the teaching and learning of history in schools. Ayers argued (from his perspective as Dean) that the institutional impediments of tenure, pay and so on, were actually quite secondary to the values and expectations held within history departments: the key to change was the located at the department level.

The conference found it difficult to address the perennial curriculum question: which topics should be covered. While there was consensus that students should emerge from a history program with a broad framework of topical knowledge over a large span of history, both of the nation and of the world, generally participants did not take this up as the core issue. There was support, impelled in part by a convincing presentation of a U.S. History survey course by Fritz Fischer of the University of Northern Colorado, for surveys organized around contentious issues which would give students insight into historiographic controversy.

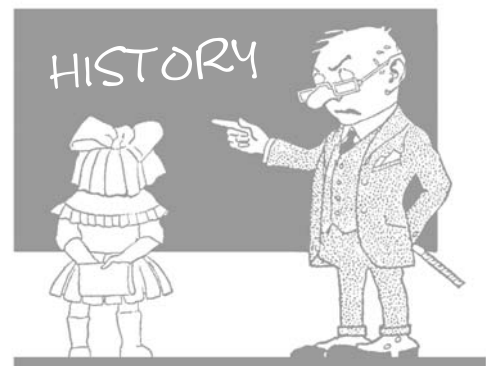
But more central to the recommendations was an approach to teaching and learning history first articulated at the conference in Ayers' opening talk. He noted how professors needed to "draw back the curtains to reveal the ropes and pulleys" behind the discipline of history. By this he meant that students in history classes needed not only to become familiar with the products of the most current historical research, but also to have a sense of the processes that historians go through in order to arrive at their finished product. They needed to understand what the Bradley Commission called "history's habits of the mind." Those who would be going on to become teachers would also need the vocabulary and approaches to be able to explain "behind the curtains" to their own students. On a similar note, historian Lendol Calder, borrowing from educators Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe, recently wrote of the goal of teaching history as less "coverage," and more "uncoverage."

British history educators have been at the forefront of exploring procedural concepts in order to have a vocabulary to uncover the "ropes and pulleys." These concepts, in the words of Peter Lee, are "not what history is 'about' [like prime ministers or rebellions or treaties] but they shape the way we go about doing history." "Evidence," "continuity and change," and "historical significance" are among them. While historians may or may not use them explicitly in their writing on the benefits of Confederation for Prince Edward Island or aboriginal longshoremen on Burrard Inlet (to draw from a recent *Canadian Historical Review*), they are implicit and lie at the very foundation of historical thinking. Consider this: historians have a sense when a topic is trivial. We have the word "antiquarian" to describe those whose delving into the past is of no possible consequence and we distinguish that work from *significant* history. Furthermore, we understand that topics that might once have been considered trivial (like aboriginal longshoremen on Burrard Inlet) can come to be historically significant; or that contending schools of historians may have different criteria for significance. Without a comprehension of the concept of *significance*, students have no tools for thinking about how and why certain people and events made it into their courses and textbooks while most did not. Nor can they move beyond the blunt and inadequate instrument of "bias" to criticize inclusion and exclusion.

So, all history students need historians' conceptual tools for understanding the past. Those who are going on to teach history need them even more than their classmates who are going on to careers in law or real estate: they have the job of helping others to think historically. The irony is that historians have generally been less than forthcoming about how they do what they do.

Heading back from Virginia to Vancouver, I pondered the situation in Canada. Some of the conditions we face are even more challenging than those faced by American historians. We don't have massive federal support for history education. With some notable exceptions, few leading Canadian historians have taken leading roles in K-12 history education. Our organization of academic historians has not had an active teaching committee for many years. Our language divide means that an intense controversy over history curriculum can take place in Québec, as it did this past spring, with hardly a mention in the English-Canadian press. Moreover, as Ken Osborne has noted, we simply don't know much about the education of history teachers in Canada. On the other hand, there are a few hopeful signs. The Association for Canadian Studies has followed Desmond Morton's lead in bringing together people from school social studies, university history departments, and public history institutions. Ruth Sandwell, John Lutz, and Peter Gossage have initiated The History Education Network/Histoire et Education en Réseau (THEN/HiER). And the Historica Foundation potentially offers a pan-Canadian infrastructure to address these concerns.

Can Canadian history departments take further steps towards producing the best possible history teachers? Certainly. First, they can establish collaborative relationships between history teachers and history teacher educators. Sustained discussion across these groups — a potent and productive mix in Charlottesville — and the thoughtful coordination that might emerge from it are perhaps the critical next steps in improving the preparation of history teachers. Second, they can develop institutional supports for historians who choose to take a more active role in the preparation of history teachers. Finally, they can insure that every history major — and particularly those who intend to teach — has extended



exposure to and practice in history's methods, procedural concepts and habits of mind—history's “ropes and pulleys.”

Les manuels universitaires d'histoire sont-ils devenus désuets ? Bien sûr que non !

Par Mélanie Méthot, Département d'histoire,
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Les habitués de H-Canada sauront que dernièrement certains ont commenté l'allure des manuels d'histoire du Canada de niveau universitaire, en critiquant plus particulièrement leur manque d'attrait iconographique, faisant d'abord référence aux images en blanc et noir, abandonnées ici et là à travers des pages et des pages de texte imprimé sur du papier recyclé et, au dire de certains, même les couvertures de ces briques du savoir seraient des plus ennuyantes. Laissant de côté les aspects esthétiques des manuels, on s'est interrogé sur l'utilité de ces derniers comme outils pédagogiques. En effet, en pleine ère informatique, alors que plusieurs d'entre nous ont accès par le biais de l'autoroute électronique à d'excellentes encyclopédies, au *Dictionnaire Biographique du Canada*, à des cartes géographiques interactives, sans parler des documents d'époque tels que *Les Relations des Jésuites* (du moins l'édition de Twaites), des journaux datant des 18^e, 19^e et 20^e siècles, ou encore des lettres manuscrites adressées au Relief Bureau of the Halifax Explosion, quelle est la valeur didactique de ces manuels que, supposément, plus souvent qu'autrement nos étudiants ne prennent même pas la peine de déballer ?

Une première rectification s'impose : lorsqu'on demande à mes étudiants de mesurer l'utilité de leur manuel, la plupart encerclent « excellent », certains commentent même combien ils les ont aimés. De plus, en dix ans d'enseignement, je ne me souviens pas d'avoir lu des commentaires sur le manque d'images ou sur leur faible qualité. Par contre, j'ai eu beaucoup de plaisir à lire l'analyse d'une de mes étudiantes portant sur la nature des images incluses dans différents manuels d'histoire du Canada publiés au cours des six dernières décennies. Inclure des images en couleur pour impressionner la galerie ou même pour attirer l'attention des étudiants ne me semble pas sérieux, mais comme le fait John Herd Thompson dans *Forging the Prairies West*, questionner, commenter, analyser l'image, la remettre dans son contexte, c'est une toute autre paire de manches. Si les auteurs ne le font pas, c'est à nous les professeurs de saisir l'occasion. En effet, n'est-il pas révélateur de constater que les couvertures de la cinquième édition de *Destinies* (2004) et la troisième de *History of the Canadian People* (2002) arborent toutes deux des photos de familles d'immigrants ? Que penser du tout récent manuel d'histoire du Canada de Francis, Jones et Smith, *Journeys. A History of Canada*, qui superpose en couverture une photographie d'Amérindiens de la côte ouest, cordés dans un beau bateau à voiles, sur une autre photo de

deux jeunes femmes en robe pédalant sur leur vélo ? Ces autochtones et ces femmes en couverture ne rappellent rien des portraits traditionnels de nos premiers ministres. Manifestement ces images témoignent des dernières tendances historiographiques.

Après tout, les manuels d'histoire universitaires (contrairement à ceux destinés aux écoles primaires et secondaires qui possèdent un tout autre mandat) se veulent avant tout une synthèse des recherches spécialisées. Ils présentent ce que l'on pourrait appeler un consensus sur le passé canadien. Mais avec leurs bibliographies qui se trouvent à la fin de chaque chapitre, leurs adresses de sites électroniques pertinents et leurs suggestions de lecture, les manuels sont bien plus qu'une simple synthèse. Lorsqu'on les utilise habilement, ils se révèlent d'excellents outils pédagogiques. En effet, il ne suffit pas de recommander la lecture des chapitres sans y revenir en classe. Personnellement, j'aime beaucoup m'attarder sur les débats historiographiques, maintenant disponibles dans presque tous les manuels universitaires. De même, les collections d'articles qui accompagnent souvent les volumes permettent d'approfondir le questionnement historiographique. On peut se demander si ou comment le contenu de l'article suggéré par les auteurs se retrouve dans les pages du manuel ? Il ne faut surtout pas fuir l'Internet, qui de plus en plus met à notre disposition des sources primaires extraordinaires et des sites académiques très bien construits. Ainsi, les manuels remplissent définitivement une fonction éducative importante, ne serait-ce qu'en servant de point de départ à la connaissance et à la pratique historique.

Toutefois, pour moi, les manuels d'histoire sont encore plus. Que de plaisir j'éprouve lorsque je feuillette le manuel d'histoire du Canada que ma mère a annoté alors qu'elle était étudiante chez les Ursulines de Québec au début des années 1950. Cette curiosité envers les livres d'école de mes parents, jumelée à l'exaspération ressentie chaque fois que je lis des travaux de « recherche » basés uniquement ou largement sur des manuels d'histoire (malgré la consigne qu'ils doivent être évités à tout prix dans ce genre de travaux), m'ont portée, il y a quelques années, à prendre le taureau par les cornes. J'ai eu l'idée de demander à mes étudiants d'utiliser des manuels comme sources primaires. Libre à eux de choisir un personnage historique, une époque, une région ou un événement, les étudiants analysent comment les auteurs des manuels ont traité du sujet choisi. Incorporant toutes sortes de variables telles que le temps (date de parution), le lieu (de quelle région du Canada ou de quel pays proviennent les manuels), l'objet (de quel pays le livre traite), le niveau (primaire, secondaire, universitaire), les étudiants relèvent les différences et les similitudes, pour ensuite remettre les volumes et leurs auteurs dans leur contexte historique. Certains s'étonnent de voir que la guerre de Sept Ans ne soit pas couverte avec la même ampleur dans les manuels

d'histoire de France que dans ceux du Canada, alors que d'autres s'offensent du portrait des « Sauvages » que les manuels d'histoire de la première moitié du vingtième siècle peignent; d'autres encore réalisent que longtemps l'histoire du Canada se résumait à l'histoire du Québec et de l'Ontario.

Sans passer en revue tous les avantages de cet exercice, quelques-uns méritent d'être soulignés. D'abord, les étudiants commencent à comprendre la distinction entre le manuel et l'ouvrage spécialisé (la monographie). Ils approfondissent leurs connaissances sur un sujet qui les intéresse (malheureusement, lorsque je leur demande à l'examen final quel est l'évènement le plus marquant de l'histoire du Canada, inmanquablement ils élaborent sur le sujet choisi; ainsi beaucoup croient que la Guerre de 1812 a marqué le cours de l'histoire canadienne !) Ils pratiquent l'histoire puisqu'ils analysent et interprètent des documents d'époque, mais le plus important reste qu'ils réalisent que même le manuel d'histoire, un outil soi-disant objectif, n'échappe pas à la subjectivité de l'auteur. Ils comprennent que le passé ne change pas, mais le récit, lui, peut prendre plusieurs formes. Ainsi, les étudiants saisissent que bien qu'on les utilise comme instruments de référence, il faut toujours garder un regard critique vis-à-vis ces mêmes manuels. N'est-ce pas là d'ailleurs un des buts fondamentaux de l'enseignement de l'histoire : développer la pensée critique ?

En bout de ligne, l'utilité des manuels dépend beaucoup plus de l'usage qu'on en fait que de leur charme iconographique. D'ailleurs, on peut se demander si le débat sur le manque d'attrait du « contenant » et du « contenu » de l'histoire canadienne ne relève pas du traitement qu'on en fait. Il serait grand temps d'améliorer ledit traitement de cette histoire injustement considérée rébarbative.

Textbooks: Past Imperfect?

By Graham Broad, Department of History at Kings University College at the University of Western Ontario.

One easy way of reviewing a textbook is to show that its authors have devoted insufficient attention to the things that you consider important. Then you accuse them of being enemies of civilization. You can actually publish whole books doing this. Noam Chomsky does, as does James Loewen, author of the bestseller *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, and this is essentially what Jack Granatstein did in *Who Killed Canadian History?* But the problem with most textbooks isn't the omissions, errors, and biases. These we can teach with. I personally wouldn't want to teach without them. It is the banality, not bias, that's hard to overcome.

"Textbooks are the enemies of education," the late Neil Postman wrote in his polemic *The End of Education*, adding, "we can improve the quality of teaching and learning overnight by getting rid of all textbooks." I'm not prepared to go that far, but having assigned four different Canadian history textbooks in the past six years I've reached the conclusion that there are no good ones — just varying degrees of bad ones. Their authors may be fine historians, but this only makes their weary prose and unexciting presentation all the more frustrating.

Since I teach both Canadian and American history surveys, I receive a small avalanche of textbooks from publishers every year. Some of the American textbooks, such as Eric Foner's *Give Me Liberty*, are beautifully written, and nearly all of them are beautifully illustrated. Color paintings, photographs, maps, and diagrams explode off of every page. In this regard, Canadian textbooks can't hold a candle — not even a votive candle — to the textbooks streaming forth from an immense number of American publishers. The standard Canadian history textbooks are both sparsely and poorly illustrated, with bland maps and puny black and white photographs.

Perhaps the worst offender here is the second edition of Conrad and Finkel's *History of the Canadian Peoples*, where someone decided that adding a sepia wash to all the illustrations was a good idea. I suppose the intent was to make the photographs appear "old", though why it was thought necessary to do this with photos that actually are old is quite beyond me. Moreover, bleeding rust-coloured tint across paintings by members of the Group of Seven — noted colourists — is not just a bad editorial decision, it is in fact a kind of vandalism.

An informal poll I took last year indicated that a large majority of my students hardly cracked the spine on the textbooks I had assigned, and they found the accompanying readers — which they were supposed to read for credit in tutorial discussion — quite paralyzing. It's not that they wouldn't read. It was more a question of what they would read. Offered an

excerpt from Desmond Morton's *When Your Number's Up*, they gorged themselves and asked for seconds. But they became positively anorexic when a "CHR Dialogue" on the Maritimes and Confederation from Francis and Smith's pre-Confederation reader was set before them.

The problem, it seems to me, is that the straightforward "memorize-this-bill-of-facts" approach taken by most textbooks, and the selection of articles in most readers, suggests a lack of empathy for undergraduates. So take "Bob", one of my students. He is eighteen years old and is in second year. He is in university because he doesn't know what else to do, and is enrolled in history because it's easier than physical chemistry. He seldom reads unless he's forced to, he writes his essays the night before they're due, and he lists "video games" and "sports" as his interests. He finds most academic discussions mystifying and alienating. He's not sure what he wants to do after graduation — probably teacher's college. In short, he's a very typical undergraduate, and he's about as likely to actually plod through an academic debate on an historical controversy he's never heard of, as he is to strike up a conversation about Sophocles.

We complain incessantly about the Bobs and insist that this year we're going to get tough and start failing them. While I have no time for those professors who shed the light of the highest grades on work of the shadiest character, mass failings is not a viable option for those of us who slave under the whip of student course evaluations. Moreover, I have a job precisely because there are so many Bobs. This is the hand we have dealt ourselves, and now we have to play it.

Am I advocating a dumbing-down of course material? Not at all. What I am saying is that we have to enter education at the level of the learner. You don't teach people to swim by tossing them in the deep end, and telling the average undergraduate that he's going to just love that textbook reading on the Manitoba Schools Question is like telling your children to eat their brussels sprouts because they're good and good for you. No one is buying it.

Every year I seek to assure my students that what they've heard isn't true. Canadian history isn't boring, I say, and then I undermine myself by foisting quite boring textbooks upon them. For years I justified this as a cod-liver oil approach to education: "This is awful, but it's good for you". But I've concluded that I can hardly expect excellence from my students while I continue to employ the most unimaginative teaching methods. So this year I'm conducting a small experiment. Instead of a standard textbook, I assigned my class *Canada: A People's History*, the books that accompanied the television series. They are dramatically written and lavishly illustrated and the soft cover editions are cheaper than the standard textbooks. Sure, they have their problems, but being uninteresting is not one of them. Already I've noticed students thumbing through them. I suspect that some people will accuse me of pandering to my students, but we cannot simultaneously insist that our national history is important and then turn up our noses at every effort to make it more appealing. Instead, our goal should be to discover means by which we can produce better students. Better textbooks would, I think, go a substantial way towards achieving that goal.





Officers of the Fusiliers du Saint Laurent Regiment, religious figures, and local residents prepare for centennial celebrations in Grande-Vallée, Gaspé peninsula, 19 September 1943. A film crew and their camera stand atop a car in the background. The village celebrations will take place in full view of these three stalwarts of the World War Two homefront: the priests, the men in uniform and the men behind the camera who survey the scene from above.

Albert Fournier Collection. Photo courtesy of the Musée naval de Québec. The photo is part of a travelling exhibition that will open at the Canadian War Museum in December.

Des membres du régiment Les Fusiliers du Saint-Laurent, des représentants du clergé et des résidents de Grande-Vallée, en Gaspésie, s'appêtent à participer aux célébrations du centenaire du village, le 19 septembre 1943. À l'arrière-plan, une équipe de tournage s'est installée, avec sa caméra, sur le toit d'une auto. La cérémonie aura lieu dans la présence de ces trois ordres qui orchestrent l'effort de guerre sur le front domestique: les hommes en soutane, les soldats et les hommes derrière le caméra qui, du dessus de l'automobile surplombent la scène.

Collection Albert Fournier, Photo gracieuseté du Musée naval de Québec. La photo fait partie d'une exposition itinérante qui sera inauguré au Musée canadien de la guerre en décembre.