

SIGNIFICANT DEVELOPMENTS IN THE WRITING OF HISTORY IN CANADA DURING THE PAST EIGHTY YEARS

There have been so many developments in the writing of history in Canada during the past eighty years that it is difficult to identify one as the most significant. Before noting some of these developments, I should make two things clear. First of all, I am interpreting “the writing of history in Canada” to mean the writing of Canadian history in Canada, though of course many historians in Canada write on the history of other countries. Secondly, I should emphasize that I am, for the most part, commenting as an outsider looking in. Though my original training was in history (Ph.D., University of Toronto, 1953), my principal occupation during most of my working life was that of a law librarian. I had some connection with the Department of History at the University of Western Ontario, but it was in a specialized area, involving individual reading courses, thesis supervision, and examining, all of these on legal and constitutional topics.

One of the main developments during the past eighty years has been the professionalization of history. Actually this had started somewhat earlier when Canadian universities began in the late nineteenth century to establish history departments, but it became more apparent in the years under review as greater emphasis came to be placed on sources such as letters, diaries, other personal papers, and newspapers in the writing of history. This was in one sense a good thing, for it brought historians closer to the times of which they were writing; the most enthusiastic of them probably were and are reliving in their minds the thoughts and events of the past. This has led to more accurate and generally more interesting historical writing. But the professionalization of history has had its downside. University historians have tended to look down on other historians, no matter how talented the latter may be. When Orlo Miller, best known for his book, *The Donnellys Must Die*, and for his writing on the history of London, Ontario, died in 1994, it was mentioned in an obituary that he was never affiliated with a university department and that he had paid a price for this in terms of acknowledgment from the academic community.

The professionalization of history was especially hard on women who, even if they had professional qualifications, were rarely appointed to university history departments. Having to seek other employment which did not include academic vacations or sabbatic leaves, they found it difficult to undertake major research projects. In my own case, I had the good fortune to obtain interesting employment in another field which taught me much about legal research, and I managed to adapt my research interests to what I could do in my spare time. When I chose to take early retirement in order to have more time for research and writing, I joked that I was having all my sabbaticals at once.

This brings us to another development. From the 1970s on, there has been a gradual acceptance of women in academic positions. This is by no means unique to history; it is part of a movement affecting all university departments.

But by the time the 1970s arrived another major development had taken place in university history departments and in the writing of Canadian history. Until the 1960s, the emphasis in both teaching and writing had been on exploration and settlement, wars, and, especially in relation to more modern times, political and constitutional development. But from the 1960s on, other types of history became popular, as, for example, social, cultural, intellectual, and women’s history. Extending historical interests in this way was commendable, but unfortunately it led to political and especially constitutional history being neglected. Many history departments used to offer excellent courses in constitutional history, but now many of these courses have been dropped. Women historians have tended to concentrate on women’s history, doing some excellent writing in this field. However, I would like to see more of them extend their writing into the traditional areas of history.

Another significant development in the writing of Canadian history, though it was initiated by lawyers rather than historians, was the establishment in 1979 of The Osgoode Society, now called The Osgoode Society for Canadian Legal History. Founded at the initiative of The Honourable R. Roy McMurtry, a former attorney general for Ontario, now Chief Justice of Ontario, and officers of the Law Society of Upper Canada, its purpose is to encourage research and writing on the history of Canadian law. To date it has been remarkably successful, providing financial assistance to researchers, and publishing, in cooperation with established Canadian publishers, many excellent books, often several a year, some written by lawyers, others by historians.

I hope that in the twenty-first century there will be a return to a more balanced approach to the teaching and writing of Canadian history, with the newer areas continuing to play a part, but with political and constitutional developments restored to their rightful place and with legal history regarded by university history departments as a worthwhile area of study.

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