TEACHING FORUM / FORUM SUR L'ENSEIGNEMENT

Editor's note: These two articles, one by Bruce Daniels and the other by Scott See, are part of a joint initiative by the *CHA Bulletin* and the *OAH Newsletter*. As such, both will also appear in the August 2000 *OAH Newsletter*. I would very much like to thank Dr. Gary Reichard, Contributing Editor for Teaching, *OAH Newsletter*, for agreeing to pursue this project. May there be more like this in the future! And, of course, many thanks to Bruce and Scott. Despite other deadlines they both enthusiastically agreed to put down on paper their thoughts on teaching.

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PARALLEL NARRATIVES: TEACHING AMERICAN HISTORY TO CANADIANS

Canada's nine English-speaking provinces look and sound remarkably like the northern regions of the United States. Other than the nuisance of a customs check, no exotic stimuli alert travelers from Minneapolis to Winnipeg that they have crossed an international boundary. Wars and diplomats, not geography, drew the line between the two countries; it is artificial and manifestly flies in the face of an economic reality that favors north-south communications over east-west ones. Political considerations created the Canadian-U.S. border, and political considerations, abetted by modern technology, are shredding it. In the years since World War Two, Cold-War politics, aggressive marketing, radio, television, computers, and, the globalization of trade, have dramatically reduced the barriers to the flow of goods, people, and ideas between the two countries. Canadians have always feared Americanization but with the economic gates swung nearly open, fear may turn to fact. Canadian cultural distinctiveness lies in danger of being washed away by the relentless American tide surging north or dried up by the steady stream of Canadian talent draining south. Some Canadians perceive more danger than do others, but virtually all Canadians believe that there is something about Canada that is fundamentally different from the United States and that–whatever that something is–it is worth preserving.

Thus, Canadians view the United States through many more filters than the United States uses to see Canada. Americans glance northward only occasionally and usually like what they see; Canada does not figure prominently in American intellectual life and is seldom mentioned in the media. Canadians, on the other hand, stare southward, are bombarded with American news, and are extraordinarily conflicted about what they see. Feelings of admiration and contempt, superiority and inferiority, gratitude and anger, swirl ambiguously through Canadian perceptions of Americans. The United States not only plays a major role in the Canadian economy, it plays an equally important role in the Canadian mind. Canadians cannot avoid thinking about the United States and cannot avoid having opinions on American power, government, foreign policy, race relations, cultural institutions, and social problems. Canadians contemplate the meaning of America because doing so is necessary for contemplating the meaning of their own country – Canada is the not-America. And because English Canada looks so much like the United States, the process of discovering what makes Canada the not-America is difficult and hidden beneath the surface of the visible similarities. History becomes one of the best places to look for the elusive, deeper meanings of the two nations.

I began teaching American history at the University of Winnipeg in 1970 at the height of the student revolt in the United States and at the hightide of an invasion by American academics into Canadian universities. The department I joined was evenly divided – eight Canadians, eight Americans – not an unusual ratio for Canadian universities at the time although a decade earlier it would have been unthinkable. Anti-Americanism was rampant in the world, among Winnipeg students, and among many of the young American professors–including me. Ironically, students vented little of this hostility on the new American professors and tended to see them more as romantic expatriate radicals than as cultural imperialists. Also, ironically, classes in American history bulged with enrollments: students were fascinated by the threatening bully to the south who appeared to be coming apart at the seams.

Aside from the need to be sensitive to Canadian nationalism, I did not realize at first that the teaching of American history to these students required a different set of reference points than I had used as an instructor at the University of Connecticut. Like many American travelers, I had been misled by the similarity of sight and sound into thinking I was in familiar cultural territory. Wrong. Professors on both sides of the border whine about student ignorance of history but I soon realized that all ignorance is not the same nor is it only students who are ignorant. Some professors are/were–me, for example. Through a process of osmosis, people who have never taken a course in history in their lives, nevertheless learn a version of history that arises from other educational processes and from popular culture. Events and peo-

ple in the American past often connoted things to Canadians that either had not occurred to me or I had heretofore placed little emphasis on. Loyalists from the American Revolution were courageous nation builders who mutually pledged their lives, fortunes, and sacred honor to defend peace, order, and good government. The Canadian triumph in the War of 1812 handed the Americans their only defeat and preserved Canada from the fate suffered by Mexico thirty years later. A proud and respectable socialist tradition in Canada bespoke a tolerance that made McCarthyism seem all the more outrageous and xenophobic. And so it went–I became educated in Canadian history and on the effect that a different national identity had on Canadian perceptions of American history. Every topic I lectured on evoked comparisons that would not have occurred in an American classroom. It was thrilling. It also meant that a course in American history taught in Canada inevitably required a parallel narrative: what effect did the American Civil War have on the creation of an independent Canada? How did Canadian and American immigration differ? Is racism less or more virulent in Canada than in the United States? Undoubtedly, teaching American history as a foreign history anywhere in the world–or perhaps even in differing regions of the United States–also produces parallel narratives; but Canada's history seemed uniquely positioned to offer a reasonable alternative to the development of the United States. If America's history was Plan A then Canada's was Plan B: the evolutionary model instead of the Revolutionary one.

Canadians are engaged in perpetual soul-searching for the state and fate of their national identity–a Sisyphean task that has informed every course I have taught in American history for thirty years. Not surprisingly, as the ongoing search looks in new places and under new circumstances, the parallel narratives get compared at new points. Pierre Trudeau's decision to enshrine a charter of rights in the Canadian constitution provoked discussions that contrasted the effects of judicial review on American history to the effects of Parliamentary supremacy on Canadian history. In the Reagan years, the relative strengths of the two nations' social safety nets were frequently compared as were the historical forces that allowed Canada to create a program of publicly funded medical insurance that became a national shibboleth, while the wealthier United States argued such a program would not work and was unaffordable. With the signing of the North American Free Trade Agreement, doomsayers among Canadian nationalists predicted that the two lines of historical development might not continue parallel but instead would meet and merge. As of yet, they have not, but the two lines do seem less far apart and, once again, this fuels historical discussions and comparisons. Does the narrowed space reflect a trend or a cycle?

Under the freeflowing traffic of NAFTA and in the absence of American Cold War posturing, Canada seems less preoccupied with the harmful effects of American power on Canadian sovereignty. Certainly, overt anti-Americanism, which grew into nasty proportions in the late 1970s, has receded into small constituencies. This waning of anger can be interpreted in at least three plausible ways: (1) Canada has matured intellectually and culturally and is sufficiently confident in its destiny that it no longer needs to beat the drum of false assurance; (2) Canada has become so Americanized that it now reluctantly resigns itself to a fate as a politically independent but culturally and economically dependent region of the United States; (3) Canada is in the cool part of an historical cycle that will again heat up under new circumstances. I place no bets on which of these or other alternatives is correct but I will bet that Canadian students will be discussing them in American history classes.

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Teaching Canadian History in the United States: Problems and Possibilities

Like weather maps in American newspapers, with their bland white spaces where a country of thirty million people should be, the history of the United States typically ends abruptly at the northern Border. For many Americans, Canada invokes images of endless expanses of snow, fearsome hockey players, decent and affordable beer, scarlet-coated Mounties, and perhaps memories of a camping trip to a magnificent lake in British Columbia. These playful stereotypes provide an important segue to the serious business of teaching the history of Canada to an audience of American college students. Poorly understood and pockmarked by superficial impressions, Canada presents some rather daunting pedagogical challenges to professors south of the forty-ninth parallel. These will be distilled into two basic points in this brief essay. American students need to be convinced that carving three credit hours out of their college careers to study Canadian history is worth the binder, and they should see beyond the obvious - and useful - comparative value of Canada's past to gain an acceptance of the country's history on its own terms.

Having been asked to address the "problems and possibilities" of this exercise, I am tempted to trot out anecdotes accumulated through sixteen years of teaching Canadian history at the Universities of Maine and Vermont. Working in two Eastern border states has no doubt given me a certain perspective that might not be shared by colleagues who ply their trade in Virginia or Idaho. Nonetheless, my activities with the Association of Canadian Studies in the United States has brought me into frequent contact with the surprisingly large number of historians who regularly teach some aspect of Canadian history at their institutions.

The first important dimension in coming to grips with teaching Canadian history in the United States is that in virtually every case an important "hook" is needed to bring a student into the course. The problem is almost the exact opposite of the one faced by Bruce Daniels, who points out that his Canadian students are perpetually inundated with American culture and ideas. In many

cases, the students themselves provide the motivation that brings them to the threshold of Canadian history. Memories of a trip to historic Quebec City or the spectacular Banff National park, family connections to Canada both distant and close, familiarity with television and radio programs from the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, and bits of information on Canada's interrelated history with the United States from a high school course: all can and do kindle an interest in exploring Canada's past among America's college population. Each semester I ask student to articulate the factors that brought them to pre- or post-Confederation Canadian history. After jettisoning the common "this was the only class available in the time slot" - a perfectly legitimate reason to take a course, in my opinion - I have gathered responses that run the gamut from insightful to frivolous. "I was curious about why Canadians didn't join in the Revolutionary War," an example of the former, shares space with "I want to know why they drive like hell in Quebec," an obvious illustration of the latter. Over the years my classes in Maine and Vermont have been populated by Franco Americans and students with English- and Scots-Canadian roots. Colleges and universities in the northern tier of states, as well as in Louisiana thanks to its Acadian heritage, are filled with students who have genealogical ties to Canada.

In the cases where students do not generate their own motivation for taking a Canadian history course it falls to the professor, and often the school, to provide the "hook." Teachers involved in Canadian Studies in the United States have long fancied themselves of the missionary ilk. My sense is that successful Canadianists probably have to put a little extra into the effort to capture and hold the interest of American students. Here I am not suggesting pandering to the students, nor am I encouraging the dilution of subject matter to heighten its appeal. Instead, I think that enthusiasm and creativity are especially important qualities for the professor of Canadian history to possess, or at least to acquire. After a great deal of experimentation I have fashioned a series of discussion groups (six to eight) that are dispersed throughout the semester. Each session targets a theme in Canadian history that is lively and important enough to have engendered a critical mass of contradictory historical interpretations. The role of Louis Riel in the Red River and North-West uprisings is one example. Another popular topic is Canadian anti-Americanism in the 1960s. Students receive a list of targeted readings in advance of the sessions, and each is responsible for an essay on a question that addresses the material at hand. To be sure not all of these discussion sessions have been smashing successes over the years, but on the whole they have been instrumental in keeping the students' interests at an acceptable level. Institutions can also assist in providing the "hook" by steering students to Canadian history courses through international or multicultural curriculum requirements. Before American readers guffaw at the last point, consider the fact that Toronto was recently deemed one of the most multicultural cities in the world. Universities with comprehensive Canadian Studies programs are clearly at an advantage in this context. Still, even the smallest college can encourage students to take Canadian history courses by embracing them in the curriculum as a broadening experience.

The second essential challenge of teaching Canadian history in the United States is a bit trickier. Canada's comparative value looms large. If the professor is not careful, it will subordinate other subject matter and become the only important message in the course. Several dynamics contribute to the comparability issue that makes teaching Canadian history especially problematic, perhaps more so than one finds in courses on the Middle East or Italy. For one, American students often bring an inherent sense of superiority - not arrogance - to classes in Canadian history. Typically they believe that if the United States is the sole remaining superpower, then Canada should be viewed favorably but nonetheless as a secondary player in a North American partnership.

Canadian history is often quite familiar to Americans, even if they bring the proverbial blank slate to the exercise. Colonial conflicts, women's issues, immigration patterns, Native peoples, Western development, labour struggles, the Great Depression: the list of themes that appear so strikingly familiar to American students is almost endless. This is both a blessing and a curse for the professor. The comparisons are both pedagogically sound and useful for maintaining interest levels (a return to the "hook" idea here). On the other hand, a danger lies in suggesting that Canadian history is a pale reflection of American history, or even worse, that it is only meaningful as a comparative tool. There is no easy way to avoid this pitfall. Constant attention to the distinctiveness of Canadian history, taking the country's past on its own terms, helps to counterbalance the comparative impulse. Thus many topics, such as the treatment of Native peoples in the late nineteenth-century West, can be addressed by asking questions that get at what is familiar about the Canadian case as well as what is unique. This point is inevitably reinforced when Canadian-produced texts and materials are used in the course. It is a wonderful moment, for example, when American students are introduced to a Canadian interpretation of the Revolutionary War. The message of distinctiveness can be transmitted short of waving the Maple Leaf in class or reciting the wildly popular Molson's advertisement known as "Joe's Rant." One need to be a nationalist or ideologue to get the point across about the intriguing characteristics of the Canadian saga.

The joys of teaching Canadian history, to even the most skeptical of American students who demand to know what - if anything - is worthwhile about studying their northern neighbor's past, clearly trump the niggling problems. Indeed the perennial challenge of coming to grips with a nation, one that is at once both familiar in its North American orientation and so different in the ways in which its citizens have fashioned their lives, is an excellent way for history professors in the United States to revisit and test some of their most cherished notions and interpretations.

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