

J.L. Granatstein, *Who Killed Canadian History?*

Harper Collins, 1998: A Review by David Frank

I received this book in a package labelled “extremely urgent”, and the provocative title inside certainly sounded a note of alarm. In several short, forceful chapters the retired York University historian Jack Granatstein argues for the restoration of Canadian history to its proper place at the centre of public discourse in this country.

He begins with a quick review of some widely reported surveys about the dismal state of knowledge of Canadian history. Among 18 to 24-year-olds last summer a set of 30 basic questions about the Canadian past produced an average score of 34 per cent. Most of these young people could not identify the Loyalists or the Acadians, the significance of D-Day or the year when women won the vote. Most Canadians did not do much better, but there was at least one reassuring feature in the results: the most recent surveys have shown a general feeling that something is wrong about a country where citizens know so little about their common past.

According to Professor Granatstein, Canadians have been victims of an “unthinking conspiracy to eliminate Canada’s past”. First on the list of culprits are the public schools, or more correctly the provincial departments of education, who have been steadily removing Canadian history courses from the curriculum. These are now replaced with various kinds of social studies and skills courses that have little historical content and often no Canadian content either. By his estimate only two provinces, Ontario and Quebec, currently require a senior course in Canadian history for high school graduation. Actually his description of the New Brunswick situation is both better and worse than stated. In this province Canadian history is a required subject for graduation in the French-language schools and an optional subject in the English-language schools. If one of the purposes of teaching history is to prepare us for the responsibilities of sharing citizenship with fellow Canadians, this is perhaps the worst possible combination.

Second on the list are the university history departments. Here Professor Granatstein’s complaint is that historical research, writing and teaching at the university level has become too specialized. In his view there is too much regional history, women’s history, ethnic history and labour history — and not enough political, constitutional, diplomatic or military history. Interestingly, he commends the University of New Brunswick for its prominent part in teaching military history but is silent about the university’s equally distinguished contributions to regional history in Atlantic Canada. The Maclean’s Guide to Canadian Universities was a little more generous and mentioned both. An interested critic (such as this writer) would add that the emergence of all these new kinds of research has made Canadian history a lot more interesting to a lot more people than it used to

be. History should be about inclusion not exclusion, and the best of today’s general histories of Canada are finding ways to integrate the variety of the Canadian experience into a unified narrative of the country’s development.

The third group of suspects are to be found in the media. According to Professor Granatstein, publishers have been bringing out watered down textbooks that sometimes are little better than printed television programmes. Meanwhile, his fellow scholars have been producing too many unreadable books and articles on trivial subjects. With rare exceptions, newspapers and magazines spend more time lamenting the condition of Canadian history in their editorials than they do providing space for book reviews and popular history in the field. He is also unhappy with the work of film-makers, especially in one of his own research areas, military history. He does, however, have good things to say about projects such as The Heritage Minutes, which have produced some 60 one-minute “info-mercials” about Canadian History that also function as advertisements for Canadian unity.

The book concludes with a number of proposals for the resurrection of Canadian history. Chief among them is the restoration of Canadian history as a required subject in the high school curriculum. Along with that he proposes that national standards be established and that students’ expectations be raised. The federal government should provide scholarships for high school students and support innovative ways of doing history. There could even be a Canadian History Day. All of this will depend on the engagement of the Canadian public, especially parents — “who must tell their teachers and principals, their school trustees and school boards, and their provincial governments that they want their children to learn the history of their country”.

What history should be taught? Thirty years ago an earlier survey by a group called the National History Project concluded that Canadian high school students know more about the United States than they did about Canada and that Canadian history seemed to consist of little more than a list of major political, constitutional and military events. It was, they concluded, “a shadowy, subdued, unrealistic version of what actually happened — a bland consensus story, told without the controversy that is an inherent part of history”. From this perspective there is a little too much of the Mr. Gradgrind spirit about Professor Granatstein’s prescriptions. If we follow him too closely, we run the risk of ending up back where we started — with “a too-nice, straightforward, linear, dry-as-dust account of uninterrupted political and economic progress”.

Who Killed Canadian History? The answer is probably a lot more complex than Professor Granatstein suggests. The problem

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of cultural amnesia and historical illiteracy is bound up with the disconnected condition of the public realm generally at the end of the 20th century. Today it is as much a feature of the United States (where American history is taught heavily) as it is of our own country.

On the whole this little book succeeds less as a reliable guide to the condition of Canadian history than as a kind of personal call to arms. History remains important for what it tells us about

human behaviour and social organization. Most readers will probably also find themselves in agreement with the author that history has a public purpose in helping us to understand our past and to participate in making our future. More than this history cannot promise.

David Frank, UNB. This article originally appeared in the *New Brunswick Reader*. It is reproduced with the permission of the *Telegraph-Journal*.

CHA NATIVE HISTORY STUDY GROUP FIELD TRIP TO KAHNAWAKE *Saturday June 5, 1999*

The day before the Canadian Historical Association Annual Meetings at the Université de Sherbrooke/Bishop's University, Sunday June 6 to 8, 1999, the CHA Native History Study Group is arranging a field trip of Kahnawake (Caughnawaga) with MOHAWK TRAIL TOURS. They operate a walking heritage tour, with a Mohawk guide, of this important Iroquois community immediately south of Montreal.

The walking tour will begin at the Cultural Center, at which the guide will provide an introduction to the history of the Six Nations. Wendell Beauvais, the Executive Director of the Kanien'kehaka Raotitionhkwa Cultural Centre (also a member of the Board of the Canadian Museum of Civilization) will welcome the tour group. The Native History Study Group hopes to arrange for a catered lunch (for say, less than \$10) in the community. The tour (for approximately two hours after lunch) will include a walk along the streets of the old village, where the stone houses date back to the French Regime; as well as a visit to Fort St. Louis which dominates the river; and, the St. Francis-Xavier Mission, site of the cult of the blessed Kateri Tekakwitha. The visit will end at the longhouse, the meeting place of the traditionalist people. Throughout the tour the guide will comment on the traditional and contemporary way of life at Kahnawake.

Mohawk Trail Tours has generously given the Native History Study Group an individual group rate of \$7.50. If transportation from downtown Montreal is required that can be arranged for \$10.00 per person (both there and back). The meeting point is Peel St., corner northwest of La Gauchetiere, facing St-Georges Church. Exact times will be determined closer to the event. Probably the best meeting time would be 11 o'clock at Peel St., corner northwest of La Gauchetiere — if a ride is needed; or, if you have transportation, 11:30 at the Kanien'kehaka Raotitionhkwa Cultural Center at Kahnawake (a map will be supplied). Those travelling by bus to Sherbrooke would be free to leave Montreal late that afternoon.

At this stage we need an indication of numbers, not payment. If you are interested in attending the tour on Saturday June 5th— en route to the CHA meetings which begin Sunday June 6th— please drop a note (indicating as well whether you will need transportation from downtown Montreal to Kahnawake) to:

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