

# Bulletin

Canadian Historical Association - Société historique du Canada

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## UN-CANADIAN ACTIVITIES?

### Responses to a *Bulletin* survey

Is there a crisis in non-Canadian studies? In the Fall of 1996 the editors of the *Bulletin* asked readers to answer a series of questions about the challenges of scholarship in "non-Canadian" fields in Canada, wanting to know whether it was difficult for historians in such fields to find jobs, funding, or recognition. The value of Canadian history as a branch of good citizenship is clear enough, although it often receives no more than token recognition. What is the experience of historians in other fields?

The response to our "survey" was ambiguous. Several readers found the questions provocative and tendentious. The expression "non-Canadian history" was received with particular indignation by one respondent as evidence of the insularity of Canadian historians (the term was chosen merely for convenience). More than half our respondents said that they felt no difference in the degree of recognition they received from their departments as compared to Canadianists; half said that they had observed no difference in the way that funds were allocated.

If funding is the main criteria, SSHRC data seem to support the perceptions of our more positive respondents. SSHRC statistics suggest that funding over the last six years has, if anything, favoured "non-Canadian" studies rather more than Canadian ones. But these statistics may be misleading: they do not break down the data to indicate how many of these non-Canadian research projects are concerned with American or perhaps international diplomatic subjects, areas that are in no real danger of being neglected in Canadian universities. And there is the additional matter of what SSHRC refers to as "strategic themes", which are selected to direct attention to the issues that SSHRC and related agencies consider to be of particular importance. These strongly favour Canadian-oriented projects, to the neglect of other areas.

For non-Canadianists, there is also the problem of greater costs for historians who must travel to far-away archives and conferences. Scholarships for younger historians, in particular, are only sufficient to provide a living allowance and make travel and communication costs more or less unaffordable to those without another source of funding.

Moreover, younger scholars, not yet established, or those in more unusual fields, might not agree that funding and recognition are as readily allocated to non-Canadian as to Canadian subjects. Jacob Kovalio, associate professor of Japanese history at Carleton University, pointed out in his response to the *Bulletin's* survey that he was the only trained Asianist in the capital and that his position had been established with seed money from the Japanese government. Canadian and provincial governments set a low priority, it seems, on such initiatives.

There are many reasons why some specialists in fields outside Canadian history see themselves as an endangered species, although the feeling may as yet be more of an illusion than a reality. Students do not appear to be as interested as they should be even in Canadian history, let alone the history of other cultures. Government funding for education is less than it once was. Finally, Canadian nationalism encourages a Canada-first mentality among policy-makers who have to decide how to spend limited funds.

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## Editorial Policy Politique éditoriale

The CHA *Bulletin* is published three times a year by the Canadian Historical Association. Notices, letters, calls for papers and articles of two pages or less, double-spaced, are welcome on topics of interest to historians, preferably accompanied by a translation into the other official language. Deadlines for submission of articles etc. are the following:

**October 31, 1997** for the Fall issue

We reserve the right to edit submissions. Opinions expressed in articles etc. are those of the author and not necessarily the CHA. Direct correspondence to:

**Bulletion,**  
Canadian Historical Association,  
359 Wellington Street, Ottawa,  
Ontario, K1A 0N3  
Tel.: (613) 233-7885  
Fax: (613) 567-3110

Le Bulletin de la S.H.C. est une publication bilingue qui paraît trois fois par année. Les articles, les notes et les lettres de deux pages ou moins, dactylographiés à double interligne et portant sur les sujets d'intérêt pour les membres, sont les bienvenus, de préférence accompagnés d'une traduction. La rédaction se réserve le droit de couper ou de modifier les textes soumis. Les opinions exprimées dans les articles ou les lettres sont celles des auteurs. Les dates limites de tombée des articles sont les suivantes :

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**Bulletion,**  
Société historique du Canada,  
359, rue Wellington, Ottawa,  
Ontario, K1A 0N3  
Tél. : (613) 233-7885  
Télécopieur : (613) 567-3110

**Editor/Rédacteurs :** Lise Legault,  
Donald Wright  
**Rédactrice Française :** Guylaine Girouard  
**Transcription :** Joanne Mineault  
**Translation/Traduction :** Carole Dolan et  
Edwidge Munn  
**Layout/Mise en page :** Robert Ramsay

In June 1997, Angus Reid conducted a nation-wide survey on behalf of the Dominion Institute to determine whether Canadian high-school students had a sound knowledge of their nation's history. The results were discouraging, revealing an astonishing level of ignorance in Canada's young people. This is also bad news for those who specialize in other historical fields. The sense of outrage that many Canadians feel at the neglect of Canadian history in our high schools is such that concern over students' ignorance of other areas of history is less of a priority in the public imagination. This attitude may well have some effect upon public policy if it has not already done so.

But the problem of the status of non-Canadian history is more complex than it appears to be at first glance. University policy frustrates students' ability to learn the history of other cultures in many ways. The importance of grades, the pressure to graduate as early as possible, and the structure of history programs make it difficult for undergraduate students in history programs to acquire the language skills that might make it possible for them to specialize later in European or Asian history. Language classes are demanding and low grades in such courses jeopardize a student's chances of receiving funds later, although he/she might well have acquired an adequate reading knowledge of the language.

There are other obstacles that stand in the way of junior scholars wishing to pursue careers in non-Canadian history, of historians wishing to teach it, and of undergraduates wishing to sample it. Universities press their history departments to specialize in those fields in which they already have a good reputation, in order to make the best possible use of their resources. This policy is easy to defend as a cost-saving measure, and may do no harm to graduate students who have decided to specialize in a particular area of history and chosen a history department with this in mind. From the perspective of an undergraduate who seeks not to specialize but to obtain some knowledge of the world outside Canada, it is disastrous.

Nor are these difficulties confined to students "majoring" in history. It is difficult for undergraduates from outside a history department, especially from outside the arts faculty, to take a course in, for example, business history or the history of the Pacific Rim, although these might be valuable in their chosen fields. As a result, the unworldliness of many students of commerce or administration is startling and does not reflect well upon the Canadian education system. This is not an argument for making history a more practical discipline, bowing to the will of the market, but for producing more knowledgeable, less parochial students.

All of these factors discourage students from developing either a broad-based knowledge of history at the undergraduate level or a graduate-level specialization in perhaps esoteric fields. This in turn frightens away those who might be capable of acquiring the necessary skills for a doctorate in some field of European or Asian history but who fear that the demand for such specialists is too limited.

Is there a solution to these difficulties? Many can be traced back to the more limited resources made available for education, and to students' wish to prepare themselves for the working world as fast as possible, problems that will not soon be resolved. But there are small, practical measures that might help.

One possible approach might be to make it possible for students who wish to take courses outside their major field to do so without suffering any academic penalty as they struggle with unfamiliar methodology and materials. This might be achieved by allowing them to take non-major courses on a pass/fail basis, which would not "count" in the calculation of their grade-point average. Some historians (or professors of literature or business) might object to this approach on the grounds that it would discourage effort among their students, but a pass/fail system should prevent this. Others might be distressed to see the concept of a core curriculum in history further threatened by dabblers, but it should be possible to prevent this too, with some planning.

This proposal may seem too modest to be of much value, but it might be helpful both to history specialists who wish to learn languages and other skills essential to the study of foreign cultures, and non-specialists who might want to learn a little history. If historians, and other scholars in the liberal arts, truly wish to promote broad-based knowledge in the general public and not merely to re-produce academics like our-selves, we must make

it possible for undergraduates to sample a variety of different kinds of knowledge as the first step towards doing so. We might even discover, then, that the demand for undergraduate classes in such subjects as sub-Saharan history might rise, with a corresponding rise in the demand for people qualified to teach them.

*Lise Legault, Co-editor, CHA Bulletin*

## SURVEY QUESTIONS AND RESPONSES

1. In your experience, do non-Canadianists receive the same degree of recognition within their departments as Canadianists do?

- Of our respondents, 66% said yes, the level of recognition was the same. The remainder said that it was not, or that they felt “intellectually isolated”.

2. Do you believe that scholarship and research funding are allocated fairly between Canadianists and non-Canadianists?

- 50% answered with an unqualified yes; others mentioned that internal funding was evenly distributed between Canadianists and others, but that SSHRC funds related to special themes (“block funding”) were more readily available to Canadianists. Others stated that funds were not allocated fairly.

3. What are the primary difficulties of researching non-Canadian subjects (e.g. travel; funding; lack of institutional interest and support)?

- All respondents mentioned travel costs as a serious difficulty; some also mentioned the costs of communicating (by phone, fax, letter) with their peers. 66% described feeling isolated or irrelevant, “thanks to the determination of the department to treat history as an adjunct of public policy and business”. One respondent said that he was not a member of the CHA because of its attitude to non-Canadianists.

4. As a historian, why do you believe that the study of non-Canadian historical subjects is important to college and university students in Canada?

- This question was inserted to give respondents the option of explaining their positions and their allegiance in more detail, if they wished. The answers cannot be broken down into percentages. But most people mentioned the importance of avoiding parochialism and the need for us to understand Asia, for example, if we are to thrive as a nation. One irate respondent said the question was too absurd to answer; one suspected the CHA of playing “political games” in asking it; one said that students arrived in university ignorant of World History but full of contempt for the sins of their dead white ancestors. Thanks to university policies which cynically promoted Canadian history as an adjunct of public policy and business, they were able to remain ignorant.

5. Is your department still committed to hiring non-Canadianists?

- 66% of our respondents said that their departments were still committed to hiring non-Canadianists, although some pointed out that this was difficult given budget cuts. Others insisted that this was not the case, and that history departments tended to show a preference for Canadianists.

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## BULLETIN UPDATE

Guylaine Girouard has joined the small but dedicated team that produces the *Bulletin* as French correspondent. Her task is to solicit short articles, gather information and keep us abreast of the goings-on among historians in French Canada. Ms. Girouard is a senior doctoral candidate at Université Laval. Her research focuses on women entrepreneurs in Quebec in the first half of the twentieth century.

## NOUVELLES DU BULLETIN

Le *Bulletin* a une nouvelle rédactrice française : Guylaine Girouard a en effet accepté de se joindre à la petite, mais très dévouée, équipe de production. Son rôle sera de solliciter de courts articles, d'amasser de l'information et de nous tenir au courant des activités des historiens au Canada français. Madame Girouard est candidate au doctorat à l'Université Laval. Sa recherche porte sur les femmes entrepreneurs au Québec dans la première moitié du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle.