

Brief to the Ontario Royal Commission on Learning

presented by

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Member, CHA Council You might wonder why the Canadian Historical Association has sent two members of its Council here to make a presentation to the Royal Commission on Learning in Ontario. In case you do, we should begin by explaining what our association is. The Canadian Historical Association is both a learned society, promoting original writing and research on all aspects of history by Canadian scholars, and also the professional organisation for historians from across the country. We have a membership of about 1700 historians both French and English-speaking, mostly in the universities and colleges, but also including school teachers and independent writers and scholars, from across the country.

In recent years, our membership has become increasingly concerned with the position of history in the schools, particularly in secondary schools. In 1990-91, our Council decided to assign one of its members a specific portfolio dealing with history in the schools, and last spring we set up a National Advisory Committee on History in the Schools. This Committee is made up of high school history teachers and people involved in provincial history teachers' associations from across the country, along with some representation from our Council. It is an attempt to find out what is going on in history classes in Canada, to find out what the needs and concerns of history teachers in the schools are, and to provide links between the university and schools sectors, and between high school history teachers and their associations in different parts of the country. Last spring at our annual meeting, the Committee arranged for a session on "What's going on in the Classroom?". We have also laid plans for a national newsletter and will be holding another session next year on the subject "A Pan-Canadian Curriculum for History in the Schools?". During this spring's meeting, we were also invited to meet with the Right Honourable Mr. Joe Clark, who wanted very much to discuss with us his concerns about the difficulties he encountered in public discussions during the referendum campaign because of Canadians' ignorance of their own history.

All of these activities are testimony to our belief, which reflects a wider concern among our members and, among the educated public, that history must continue to be taught, and its position reinforced, as an independent subject in the schools. The first on the list of questions which your Commission has set out as its concerns asks "How do we create a community of learners who are able to cope with the challenges of a constantly changing environment?" We say that one sound answer to this is "By a **healthy dose of history** in the school curriculum, taught as an **independent subject by properly formed teachers**".

Why give this special place to history? One answer is that history is a way of thinking and knowing which is natural, unique and accessible. The child who asks a question of a parent, or the reporter writing for his newspaper automatically tries to get a sense of how things got to be a certain way. This is what we do when we ask, for example, why the present crisis in the Balkans is so intractable. In asking these questions, we use a certain approach to reality which challenges us to look at human events in time, ascertain what pattern we can in them, and communicate, in straightforward prose, that pattern to other people. The more training of this kind a child can get, the better that child is equipped for life.

So besides answering our questions about what happened and what is happening, acquaintance with history gives us a way to understand the world around us and discuss it with others. Reading and writing history at all levels, from the schoolchild to the professional historian, is a continual training in critical thinking, problem solving, synthesis and direct communication. Skills learned in writing about human activity in the past, such as the planning of research, the collection of information, analysis and synthesis, the organisation of materials for an essay or paper, and the production of a coherent, accessible and literate explanation are an excellent training for almost any subsequent professional or vocational training. More than specialised technical or professional skills, which can come at a later stage and which will have to be re-learned over and over in the course of a lifetime, these abilities are among the most important which our school system can give young people preparing for life as adults and citizens. On these grounds alone, history as a distinct subject deserves an important place in the classroom of this province.

But these are not the only reasons. History as a discipline is more than a toolkit or intellectual training. It is also the collective memory of humanity.

It is a natural human need to situate ourselves in time and in the world. As in our individual lives, so in our collective life, it is vital to be able to profit from what has gone on before. All the more so in a time when our ties with people outside our own community and our own country are more intense and numerous than ever before, and when the fates of people far distant from us, and the actions of their leaders, impinge so much on our own lives. To understand and deal with these challenges, young people need to know something of the history of the world and where they fit into it.

This collective memory is constantly being reorganised, but in whatever form it takes, it reveals to each generation a common fund of knowledge, tradition, values, and ideas which give some sense to human existence. In each generation, we try to learn from the mistakes of the past. In each generation we also take from the past knowledge and ideas, which we absorb and transform, creating a new culture and changing the world. The richness of a culture, the perceptiveness of our thinkers and the transmission of their ideas, the quality of human existence, the pertinence of our values, and our very survival as community depend on our ability to keep up this continuous relationship between ourselves and our human past. The teaching of history is therefore a duty which each generation owes to the next.

One of the paradoxes of today's world of communications, however, is that the more we learn about others, the more we learn, and need to learn, about ourselves. In the days when the nation-state was stronger, this need was not so evident, even in a country like Canada with a confederal system of government and in which regional identities have always been important. But now, in a country in which tariff boundaries are melting away, and in which geographic factors such as north-south communications links and a globalised economy have assumed such importance, shaking the old easy assumptions of a common national interest in keeping our country intact, we can more easily see what it is which keeps us together. That unifying factor is

our history, in the broadest sense: the human reality and traditions which ordinary men and women and their leaders have created in the northern half of North America. If we do not pass on this knowledge to the young, they will be unable to profit from it.

At the same time Canadian society has become more diverse than ever before. To the old divisions between English-speakers and French-speakers, Protestants and Catholics has been added the complex ethnic mix resulting from migration in the last fifty years, and the heightened awareness and demands of often marginalised groups such as women and native peoples. Again, the natural way to equip our young to deal with the challenges of building an inclusive society, and to allow these groups to come to terms with their condition, is to teach a history of Canada which includes them. This is not always an easy intellectual or pedagogical task, but it can and is being done at a university level, and can be done in the schools as well -- as long as there is a commitment at that level to teaching of history itself.

Finally, we can only stress once again what has been said by so many who have had a chance to measure the ability of the Canadian public to conduct a debate on its own future: the ignorance of Canada's past is a real obstacle to public discussion and a healthy political life in this country. Time after time, Keith Spicer's task force on national unity received presentations lamenting Canadians' weak grasp on their own history, and demanding more Canadian history in schools. A few years ago the Canadian Studies Association carried out a study of 1628 respondents, and the conclusions were that there is an overwhelming desire to know more about Canadian history on the part of the general public. In any event, the results of that deprivation have been around us for some time already in Canadian public life: the obsession with sectional and narrow group interest; the triviality of so much political reporting, which, rightly or wrongly, judges the public to be both ignorant and easily distracted; the fatal tendency to focus on personalities rather than issues; a pathetic ignorance of the forces in the larger world which impinge so greatly on our own fate. Here again, the next generation deserves a sharper and a better collective memory than we have given to the present one; here again, more and better teaching of history in schools offers a solution.

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We have taken some time in this presentation to argue in a general way, as practising historians, why knowledge of our discipline should be a vital part of the formation of young people. We also have some practical recommendations, based on our understanding of the current practices in high schools and on our experience in dealing with students in university who have gone through that system:

- a) One of the deficiencies of high school history teaching appears to be that many people teaching it do not have a specialist training in it to at least the B.A. or equivalent first-degree level. Although history is, as we have argued, a readily accessible subject to the layperson, it is also a skilled discipline and only those with advanced knowledge of the way historical research is carried on and conclusions are established are really equipped to teach it.
- b) At the same time, ironically, it is often the case that competent history specialists teaching in the secondary school system have to devote too much of their time to teaching subjects such as Family Studies, Law and Economics, which are only remotely related at best to the subject they have been trained for. This

seems a waste of good human resources. The solution to this is not, we would argue, to get rid of the history teachers, but rather, as we suggest below, to think again about the place given to some of the subjects which have been tacked on to the history and social sciences curriculum.

- c) History as a subject in Ontario high schools is in the process of being marginalised and this trend must be reversed. At present, only one history credit with historical content, (Contemporary Canada: Life in the Twentieth Century) is required for high-school graduation. This course is taught in Grade Nine or Grade Ten, and even there, the history has to compete with a heavy civic education component whose links with the historical part of the course are often non-existent. Contrast this with the situation in the province of Quebec, where, in addition to other optional and compulsory courses in a narrowly-defined area of history and the social sciences there is an obligatory general history course in the second year of high school and an obligatory course in the history of Quebec and Canada in fourth year. Contrast this, too, to the situation in some western provinces, where history, although disguised under the once-trendy designation of Social Studies, is obligatory in more than one high-school year.
- d) One obvious way in which this trend should be reversed is by introducing an upper-level compulsory course, required for high-school graduation. This would make it possible to build on the skills and knowledge acquired on the lower level (in the Contemporary Canada course) in order to give students at a more advanced level, richer historical content and a chance to develop the critical thinking and writing skills fostered by historical study. One possible example would be a course focusing on twentieth-century world history, with some attention to the role of Canada.
- e) One of the advantages of theme-oriented courses in Canadian history is that they make it possible to escape the old simple-minded chronological course, where analysis was sacrificed to the learning of large amounts of facts and dates. But in the process, students have been deprived of a proper sense of the broad sweep of Canadian history. University teachers are particularly aware of this lack. At some point in high school, students should be given a course which treats topics, but set in a framework sufficiently chronological to permit them to grasp that broad sweep.
- f) The process by which curriculum guidelines are developed requires re-thinking.
 - i) Adequate time should be set aside for conceptualisation and planning, in order to avoid the kind of programme which, for lack of choice or clear purpose, incorporates too many different objectives and materials in order to satisfy the particular enthusiasms of its various designers.
 - ii) More attention should be given, in the process of conceptualisation and planning, to the views and experience of teachers working in the classroom and to those of professional historians.

- iii) When a programme has been adopted it should be properly evaluated and working teachers should be consulted as to its merits and defects, before it is altered again or scrapped.
- g) You should carefully reconsider the grouping of subjects in the present Social Sciences block in the high school curriculum. Some of these (e.g. Family Studies) should probably be moved into another area, and the content of the Social Sciences block redefined in way more in conformity with the accepted notions of social science disciplines.

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In conclusion, we should like to remind the Commission of the fifth question it lists in its introductory document: "Should [students] learn a specialised body of knowledge, should they learn general education and learn skills that will prepare them for their future work, should they learn the values that will make them "good citizens", or all three?"

History as a distinct discipline in the high schools offers a way of attaining all of these objectives. More and more today, those who employ the students who go through our educational system recognise the need for a liberal education. By that we mean an education which sharpens the mind and its apprehension of reality, which introduces the young person to the wide range of human culture and which improves the ability to classify, to analyse, and to express ideas in writing and speaking. Such an education should give the student that adaptability and flexibility which speed the acquisition of the many professional and technical abilities needed in a lifetime of rapid technical and economic change. And what better liberal education than history? Without being dominated by them, it makes ample use of the insights and methods of the different social sciences and humanities. It provides an initiation in subjects as diverse as law, economics, politics and culture, to name only a few. History trains the mind and touches on an extraordinary range of human experience. Our children deserve a fair chance to profit from that experience.

Prizes / Prix

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Desmond Morton has been awarded the **Charles P. Stacey prize**, conferred by the Canadian Committee for the History of the Second World War, for his book When Your Number's Up. When Your Number's Up is a multi-faceted study of the First World War as experienced by the ordinary Canadian soldier from the time of recruitment, through the endless horrors of the trenches, to his death or discharge. The next C.P. Stacey prize will be offered in 1996 for books published in the calendar years 1994 and 1995.

Desmond Morton s'est mérité le **prix Charles P. Stacey**, du Comité canadien d'Histoire de la Deuxième Guerre mondiale, pour son livre When Your Number's Up. When Your Number's Up est une étude de la vie du soldat canadien durant la Première Guerre mondiale, entre le moment de son recrutement et celui de sa démobilisation ou de son éventuel décès en passant par les horreurs des tranchées. Le prochain prix Charles P. Stacey sera offert en 1996 pour les livres publiés en 1994 et en 1995.

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