

TABLE RONDE / ROUND TABLE

The Professionals and the Public: Responses to *Canada: A People's History*

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ONE OF THE MOST interesting aspects of the reaction to *Canada: A People's History*¹ has been how divergent it is, and I thought it might be useful to examine some of these differences in the hope of making a little headway in the continuing dialogue about the popularization of history.²

The series has been a major hit with the television audience in Canada. In the first season, each episode had an average audience of 1.2 million on the CBC's English network and 360,000 on Radio-Canada; when repeat broadcasts are included, the weekly total is more than two million. One of our main goals in making the series was to reach a mass audience — to prove that Canadian television viewers would sit down week after week to watch what is, in television terms, a fairly dense two-hour programme on a serious subject — and these figures indicate that we exceeded our fondest expectations. The ancillary products have done equally well: the first volume of the series companion book³ has sold about 65,000 copies (as well as winning a

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1 The first nine episodes of *Canada: A People's History* were broadcast in English on CBC television and in French on Radio-Canada in the fall and winter of 2000–2001. The remaining eight episodes were broadcast beginning in September 2001.

2 There is an extensive and growing body of literature on this subject. See, for example, Gary Edgerton and Peter C. Rollins, eds., *Television Histories: Shaping Collective Memory in the Media Age* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2001), especially Edgerton's "Introduction"; "Canadian History in Film", *Canadian Historical Review*, vol. 82, no. 2 (June 2001), pp. 331–346; Robert Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995); Natalie Zemon Davis, *Slaves on Screen: Film and Historical Vision* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000); Robert Brent Toplin, ed., *Ken Burns's The Civil War: The Historian's Response* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996). For an entertaining and thought-provoking polemic about the failures of television generally, see Pierre Bourdieu, *On Television* (New York: New Press, 1998).

3 Don Gillmor and Pierre Turgeon, *Canada: A People's History*, vol. 1 (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 2000); Don Gillmor et Pierre Turgeon, *Le Canada : une histoire populaire*, t. 1 (St-Laurent, Québec: Éditions Fidès, 2000).

National Book Award for non-fiction from the Canadian Booksellers Association), and the French-language edition of 10,000 published by Fidès has sold out. We have also sold more than 20,000 videos and DVDs of the series.

Before examining the response from academic historians, it may be useful to present some background information about how the series was organized and conceived. One of the first decisions was that it would be produced and broadcast simultaneously in French and English, with the same historical content in both language versions. Most of the episodes were to be produced by mixed teams from CBC and Radio-Canada. Of the five people in the senior editorial group, two were from CBC, two were from Radio-Canada, and the executive producer represented both networks. Of these five, only one (the author of the present article) has an advanced degree in Canadian history. The other four all had taken undergraduate courses in the subject, but this was more than 25 years ago. All five are career journalists and television producers, each with more than 20 years' experience in the national media.

The series was conceived first of all to reach a large, non-specialized audience of Canadian television viewers. We began with the assumption that prospective viewers did not have a particular interest in Canadian history. We believed that Canadian history has an unfair reputation among the general public as being dull or (by comparison to the history of the United States, Britain, or France, for example) lacking connections to the great currents of world history. We believed that these preconceptions were not well founded; our fundamental challenge, therefore, was to demonstrate this. Our strategy for reaching a popular audience was to emphasize narrative storytelling and to relate the main events of Canadian history as far as possible through the experiences of identifiable individuals.⁴ This approach was also consistent with our many years of collective experience in producing television documentaries and current-affairs programmes.

A second major challenge was to present a version of Canada's past that would be recognized as credible, balanced, and reasonably complete. To achieve this we needed the active involvement and advice of professional historians. In trying to determine which themes and events should be included in a 32-hour television series — which should be treated extensively, which mentioned in passing, and which omitted entirely — one of our first steps was to ask two senior historians, Ramsay Cook and Jean-Claude Robert, for their suggested outlines of such a series. While these outlines were not adopted in detail, they were extremely valuable in guiding the senior editorial group as we made our initial choices. When we had worked out among ourselves a preliminary outline of the first eight episodes (which covered the period from the first human occupation of the territory that became Canada until 1870), this was submitted to the two advisors and to Olive Dickason, a specialist in Aboriginal history, for their detailed com-

⁴ For further discussion of the narrative approach adopted by the series, see my contribution to the round table discussion of "Canadian History in Film", pp. 332–334.

ments. For subsequent episodes, the series advisory group was expanded to include Gregory Kealey (Memorial University of Newfoundland), Judith Fingard (Dalhousie University), Gerald Friesen (University of Manitoba), Veronica Strong-Boag (University of British Columbia), and Tina Loo (Simon Fraser University). While we retained the ultimate responsibility for the editorial choices we made, we solicited the opinions of these advisors at every stage of the production and took their advice seriously. Dozens of additional advisors with expertise in specific periods and topics were recruited to assist with individual episodes.

Before beginning production, we made a number of important decisions about our basic style and approach. We decided to proceed chronologically rather than thematically, although the goal was to identify two or three major themes for each episode. After much discussion, we concluded that an attempt to organize the entire series around a single theme would be too restrictive and would not adequately reflect the changing nature of Canada over long periods of time. Instead, we chose to emphasize several different themes (some of which emerged more strongly than others in each period): the encounter between Aboriginal people and Europeans; the French-English dynamic; the emergence of regional, class, ethnic, and gender divisions beginning in the mid-nineteenth century; and the shifting patterns of Canada's relations with Britain and the United States.

While we did not wish to present anything like a textbook, which we felt would be disastrous in terms of reaching a popular audience, we believed that this cluster of themes would allow us to address most of what we and our advisors had identified as the key events of Canada's past, providing an acceptable balance of flexibility and coherence. We also embraced the idea that this could not purport to be a definitive version of Canadian history, but that other interpretations based on different organizing principles had been and would continue to be put forward; this is why we described the series as "a" history of Canada rather than "the" history.

When the first episodes of the series were broadcast in the fall of 2000, there was a wide range of response from academic historians. Many of the scholars who acted as our advisors, for instance, were fairly tolerant of the demands for compression and the framing of the story as a straightforward narrative which the people who make television programmes consider necessary. However, the tenor of the comments at the May 2001 meeting of the Canadian Historical Association was generally strongly negative.⁵ While good ratings do not by any means overcome all objections, it is nonetheless surprising that professional historians do not respond with at least some enthusiasm to the idea that very large numbers of people are willing to spend

5 See, for example, Margaret Conrad, "My Canada Includes the Atlantic Provinces", and Patrice Groulx, "La meilleure histoire du monde", papers delivered at the annual meeting of the Canadian Historical Association, May 2001, Laval University, Quebec, and which appear in this edition of *Histoire sociale / Social History*.

several hours a week paying attention to Canadian history. This, I believe, reflects a tendency in the historical profession simply not to think seriously about what is involved in connecting to a broader, general audience.

The essence of the professional historians' critique is expressed in some of the comments sent in response to a survey conducted by a group of graduate students at Carleton University, under the direction of Professor Del Muike.⁶ "History is presented as a series of facts," one respondent wrote, "with no recognition that different interpretations are possible, or that these different interpretations have themselves shaped subsequent historical events." Others commented:

The approach reflects the state of historiography from 25 to 30 years ago — there is no reflection of recent interpretations of events, there is little of the "new" social history, etc.

To date, the emphasis of the series has been very much on central Canada. The prairie West and Atlantic Canada have not been well represented, and the North has been absent entirely.⁷

The producers share the CRB Foundation's belief that a better knowledge of history will help Canadians to want to hold the country together. The idea is to make us feel good about ourselves. As someone who is very uncomfortable about the value of nationalism in the modern world, I worry about this kind of agenda.

A fairly wide gulf is thus apparent between popular success and professional scepticism. I think a fruitful approach is to look at this gulf as a kind of puzzle to be investigated, and the work of the historian David Lowenthal offers a potential starting point.⁸

Lowenthal is concerned with the difference between history, by which he means academic history, and heritage. Heritage is a complicated notion for Lowenthal, but basically it refers to popular, non-professional versions of history — everything from serious museums, to theme parks, to films like *Pearl Harbor*. The crucial point for Lowenthal is that heritage is explicitly intended to produce certain effects in the present, mainly the strengthening of group identity. "History explores and explains pasts grown ever more opaque over time," Lowenthal writes — that is, the past is a foreign country

6 I am grateful to Professor Muike and his students for making available some of the detailed but anonymous responses to their survey. Their entire research study about the series can be examined at www.carleton.ca/historycollaborative.

7 Without wishing to dispute every specific point raised by our critics, I should point out that Episodes 1 and 2 of the series did have substantial segments dealing with the North.

8 David Lowenthal, *Possessed by the Past: The Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History* (New York: The Free Press, 1996).

and fundamentally unlike the present — while “heritage clarifies pasts so as to infuse them with present purposes”.⁹

Lowenthal does not think — and this is equally crucial — that heritage is therefore something to be stamped out or otherwise discredited. It is not necessarily “a worthless sham, its credos ... fallacious, even perverse”.¹⁰ On the contrary, he says that, in an era when people have less and less real connection with their past and the future seems more and more unpredictable, the presence in our culture of greater and greater amounts of heritage is inescapable. Lowenthal thus writes, “Heritage of every kind accumulates to counter the transience of everything else.”¹¹ We find ourselves in a situation where the conflicting claims of “heritage” and “history” do not cancel one another out, but must, more or less messily, co-exist:

Its many faults are inseparable from heritage’s essential role in husbanding community, identity, continuity, indeed history itself. ...At its best, heritage creation is both creative art and act of faith. By means of it we tell ourselves who we are, where we came from, and to what we belong. ...We cannot escape dependency on its motley and peccable heritage. But we can learn to face its fictions and forgive its flaws as integral to its strengths.¹²

With these thoughts in mind, I would like to look in more detail at some of the audience response to the series. We received about 2,400 e-mail messages from viewers in response to the first series of programmes, and I have read most of them. Some were critical, but the great majority were positive, often highly positive.

One of the threads that emerged was the question of familiarity versus unfamiliarity. For instance, several messages about our episode that dealt with the War of 1812 struck a similar note:

I am enjoying your series very much, however, since I was born and raised in St. Catharines, Ont., around where the War of 1812 took place, I was a little confused at why Laura Secord was not mentioned in episode 5. I looked at your synopsis for Episode 6 and she wasn’t mentioned there either. What gives?¹³

After watching episode 5 I am concerned about the lack of mentioning Laura Secord. I did notice that she was mentioned as Laura Ingersoll but I did not see any mention of her walk to warn of an imminent American attack. Please advise me if I missed a segment, or was there an oversight?

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. xi.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. xi, xiii.

¹³ This and all subsequent examples are viewer responses sent to the CBC’s web site for the series, www.cbc.ca/history.

Why was Laura Secord left out of the history? Every man who had a cow was mentioned, but not the women. Do you think only men did anything brave during this time in history?

These messages are interesting because they indicate that the writers already know the story of Laura Secord — it is not a question of wanting to be provided with new information, but of having something familiar acknowledged as significant.

This question of how the notion of familiarity applies to the television audience has recently been studied by Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen.¹⁴ They carried out a detailed survey of 1,453 Americans to look at how they acquired knowledge of history and how they assessed the different kinds of historical knowledge available to them. One significant finding was that family connections were among the most important ways of connecting to the past. Most people had a sense of the past as something intensely personal, which intersected at the outer edges, if you like, with the kinds of public events and processes that are usually considered “History”. In this conception of things, information from family members was considered one of the most reliable ways of learning about history. When it came to assessing the trustworthiness of historical material from other sources, what mattered most was “how well a given source held up against their other knowledge”.¹⁵ For our series, the response of “Hey! Where’s Laura Secord?” is an example of that testing of new material against what is already familiar.

This notion of familiarity applies not only to the audience, but to the producers of the series as well. For example, when we were discussing what events to include and what weight to give them, one of our senior producers argued forcefully for substantial treatment of the War of 1812. In his words, the War of 1812 was “the crucible of Canadian nationalism”, the event that defined us as separate from the United States. This probably reflects what he learned in university in the 1960s, and it is a belief that has in some ways shaped his life since then. For him, a history of Canada without extensive attention to the War of 1812 did not feel like a proper history of Canada at all. As another example, a colleague from Radio-Canada was very interested in the question of why the West did not become bicultural and bi-national in the early twentieth century. He was strongly of the view that French Canadians had been prevented from going there by Clifford Sifton and others of that ilk — again, probably something he had learned in university many years ago and a belief that had in some important ways shaped his subsequent understanding of what Canada is and his place in it. This man is an open-minded, curious person, but when he read Arthur Silver’s book arguing that French Canadians had not gone West mainly because they did not want

14 Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

15 *Ibid.*, p. 92.

to,¹⁶ his reaction was simply, “I don’t believe it.” Here again we have the criterion of familiarity being applied — the idea that “this sounds like (or doesn’t sound like) what I recognize as my history.”

It seems to me that, short of spending a couple of years in the intellectual boot camp known as graduate school, that it is very difficult for anyone to modify these deeply held beliefs. I would suggest to professional historians who work with popularizers that one of the biggest challenges is to communicate new evidence and new interpretations in ways that will strike a chord with them. My colleagues on the series were very hard-working and always willing to read more, but much of what they read in the more recent academic literature did not shake their long-held beliefs. As in Rosenzweig’s survey of the public more generally, they often compared the new material to what they had already learned and found it unconvincing by that standard.

To complicate matters further, the notion of familiarity has a whole different meaning when it comes to professional historians. The job of historians is, in effect, to come up with new evidence about the past and new interpretations — nothing is more damning than to call something “traditional”. This is not to say that academic historians are never prisoners of what they already know, but that the profession as a whole is geared toward overcoming that kind of inertia.

Let me leave this idea of familiarity for the moment and look at some of the other themes that emerged from the viewer e-mails we received. One that came through very clearly was dissatisfaction among many viewers about what they had or had not learned about Canadian history in school.

This is a magnificent series and I never knew that Canadian history is so exciting. I found history as taught in school (I’m 65) very boring and we are enjoying the series tremendously.

Lord, how I wish Canadian history had been taught in this vibrant manner when I was in school. What a wonderful opportunity you have created for the enrichment of our multi-cultural nation.

When I was in school during the 50s and 60s I’m sure I didn’t learn as much about Canada’s history as I am now because of this presentation. ...Canada is my adopted country, having been born in Europe. I am very proud to be a part of this great country.

What can I say, I am blown away. I feel that I must have been sleeping in social studies in high school. There is so much more in-depth information here....

This series is a wonderful piece of television. I believe that it is something we

16 A. I. Silver, *The French-Canadian Idea of Confederation, 1864–1900* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982).

should all be proud of. I have learned more about my country in the last few months than I did in 20 years of school!!

I have very much enjoyed watching this series. It is education without the pain of studying. I emigrated to Canada when I was an adult, and therefore did not receive any education in Canadian history at school. Because history books are very dull, I made no effort to research Canada's history — therefore, most of the content of your series so far is new to me.

We have seen several of the episodes and we have enjoyed them immensely. What an undertaking! We will need to see them again, so that some of this history sinks in! So much we were never taught in school, or never knew, or have forgotten.

Even the anonymous academic critic of the series quoted earlier picked up on this: "Many of my students, their friends, and families report that they are regular viewers and they find the series fascinating, mainly because they didn't know any of the history. If Canadians more generally are watching, then clearly some historical knowledge is better than none...."¹⁷

These responses echo some of the other findings of the Rosenzweig survey. His respondents were generally quite disdainful of the education in history they received in primary or secondary school — about 60 per cent said it was "irrelevant, incomplete, dry or boring".¹⁸ While these e-mails offer no particular prescription as to how history should or should not be taught in Canadian schools, they do indicate a fair degree of dissatisfaction among those who are taught and suggest that important opportunities exist to reach them in other ways.

It should also be noted that, while the respondents to Rosenzweig's survey did not think much of their teachers in elementary or secondary school, they had quite high regard for professional historians.¹⁹ Historians are seen as a very trustworthy source of information — people like the idea that historians are disinterested, that they know how to assess the validity of different sources, that they rely on original research, and that their work is subject to rigorous peer review.

During the discussion portion of a session about *Canada: A People's History* at the 2001 Canadian Historical Association meeting, David Frank reported the experience of having several non-historians come up to him after having watched an episode, saying they liked what they saw, but was any of it true? Professor Frank diplomatically refrained from saying what answer he gave, but his report illustrates that the audience for popular history is quite concerned about quality control, if you like, and academic histo-

¹⁷ Response to Carleton University survey.

¹⁸ Rosenzweig and Thelen, *The Presence of the Past*, p. 31.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 21, 102.

rians are well placed to play that kind of role. I think that, as popular history proliferates on the Internet, on television, and elsewhere, there will be a corresponding demand for specialists who are recognized as credible to separate the wheat from the chaff. This is not necessarily the kind of integral role in shaping popular history that many academic historians consider appropriate, but it is an important function and something that most producers of this kind of material recognize they need.

One further idea came through very forcefully in the remarks of viewers of the series. It is not a word I would have chosen, and it gets us into some quite controversial waters, but it came up spontaneously too often to be ignored. The word is pride, and it takes us back to what David Lowenthal said about heritage — that is, popular history — and group identity. In some cases, there was simply a sense that Canada's history is in fact interesting:

I have been watching this series since it first aired last year and am enjoying it very, very much. Canada's history is as captivating and interesting as that of any other country.

You have succeeded in breathing life back into our country's story, bringing it back from the graveyard and textbook onto the street. Although I feel I know our history fairly well, I am constantly surprised by the fascinating anecdotes and impressed by the quality of the story telling.

Personally, this was the kind of reaction for which I had hoped. One of the academic respondents to Del Muijs's survey said the purpose of the series "seems to be to demonstrate that Canada does have an interesting, compelling history",²⁰ and I would be delighted if that were the prevailing view. In the event, though, we got many responses that were more emotional and overtly patriotic than I had expected. One viewer wrote:

I have watched with absolute fascination all of the history series to date. I was so moved, nearly to tears, by the friendship of Macdonald and Cartier, our Fathers of Confederation. I knew nothing of the Fenian Brotherhood before, I did not know the origins of the French/English conflicts. This series has helped me understand so many things about this land I love. ...In school we learned little or nothing about our history. ...I am very grateful for your balanced portrayal of all sides: our native peoples, the French, the English, the Metis, etc. Well done! Finally, our national public broadcaster is doing what it should always have been doing. Telling our own stories. Telling our philosophy. Canada an idea, an idea of diversity co-existing in peaceful harmony. It is not perfect but we are trying!

One woman spoke about watching with her husband and 11-year-old son:

²⁰ Response to Carleton University survey.

Without exaggeration, Sunday nights everything is put on hold while the three of us watch the series together. My son's usual bedtime is ignored. ...I personally have only one other time felt such pride in Canada, and it coincided with the series — Mr. Trudeau's funeral. The surge of emotionalism and pride I feel after each episode is startling. ... Thank you from a proud Canadian.

Both my husband and I watched your program in wonder. We are of the Baby Boomer era and while we were taught Canadian history in school, so much of it was glossed over. ... Your program has reaffirmed what has always been in our minds and hearts, how lucky we are to be Canadian.

I think it is about time that Canada starts to show and be proud of her history. When I went to school many years ago there wasn't very much Canadian history and we seemed to study the U.S. more, even learning all the states and capitals and had to locate them on a blank map of the United States.

It used to be when I was young that I was happy I lived in Canada but this show has kindled a pride in my heart that I am Canadian.

Of course I realize that these responses and this kind of language lead us directly to one of the most controversial aspects of the series: the different reaction it received in English and French Canada.

It is not that we did so badly on Radio-Canada — the average audience was 364,000, compared to an average of 1.2 million on the English network. This is a similar share of the audience in proportional terms, but really popular shows on Quebec television tend to get much higher ratings. The difference in the press reaction to the series was more telling. In English Canada, we were treated very well by reviewers and columnists for the most part — even the crusty panel assembled by the *National Post* could not find too much to get upset about.²¹ In the Quebec press, the reaction was almost exactly the opposite: accusations of having distorted the country's past for purposes of federalist propaganda dominated,²² but French-speaking writers also found the series substantially more boring than did their English-speaking counterparts. The acting, the music, the cinematography — every aspect of our work seemed less warmly received.²³

21 For a survey of press reaction in English Canada, see the Carleton University research study's web site: www.carleton.ca/historycollaborative.

22 Christian Dufour, "Où est passée la Proclamation royale de 1763?", *Le Devoir*, November 11, 2000, p. A13. The front-page pointer to this item is revealing in its tendentious tone: "Fraude intellectuelle au petit écran?" For responses to this article, see Mario Cardinal, "Radio-Canada défend son histoire", and Jean-Claude Robert, "La Proclamation royale de 1763, mythe et réalité", *Le Devoir*, November 16, 2000.

23 See, for example, Nathalie Petrowski, "Recherche désespérément Mel Gibson", *La Presse*, January 16, 2001; Franco Nuovo, "Le Canada : histoire plate", *Journal de Montréal*, January 11, 2001.

If I may insert a personal observation: many francophone Quebecers whom I have met assume almost without question that we were ordered by the federal government to undertake this series to promote national unity — to “save Canada”. This is simply not true. It was dreamed up by a group of CBC and Radio-Canada producers and has been paid for out of the CBC and Radio-Canada’s regular budgets. We have received no additional funds from the federal Heritage Ministry, Millennium Bureau, or anyone else. It is true that the top management of CBC, which is not unconnected to the world of federal politics, liked the idea and supported it, but there has not been one iota of political interference or scrutiny from above. Anyone who does not like the series is free to blame the producers, but we are not paid propagandists for anyone.

In assessing the different reactions in French and English Canada, another aspect of Rosenzweig’s survey findings is suggestive. He found that, in the United States, minority groups are much more sceptical of “mainstream” historical sources than Americans of white European background.²⁴ Obviously, Québécois in Canada are in a very different position than American minority groups, but a certain predisposition to doubt may apply here as well.

The notion of familiarity may also be at work to some extent. Most Québécois are used to hearing about the history of French Canada rather than Canada as a whole. Even though we worked hard to include substantial treatment of Quebec history in the series, it does not feel like “their” history in the same way that Jacques Lacoursière’s *Épopée en Amérique : une histoire populaire du Québec* did, for example. Nor should we forget that, over the past 20 years, the very word “Canada” has become something like a federalist brand name in Quebec. In this highly politicized environment, there is a degree of scepticism and a readiness to attribute political motives to a project with “Canada” in its title that does not apply to anywhere near the same extent elsewhere in Canada.

The various threads that I have pursued are intended to open up a subject for exploration rather than lead to firm conclusions. My opening premise was that it is important to recognize the different responses to the series and try to find out what is valid in each of them. Good ratings do not and should not eliminate concerns about what kind of history is being presented, but neither are they irrelevant. History and heritage, to use Lowenthal’s terms, will both be present in our culture whether we like it or not. I would argue that the possibility of constructive engagement between the two depends on investigating and accepting (rather than ignoring or denouncing) their deep-seated differences in intention, approach, and method.

24 Rosenzweig and Thelen, *The Presence of the Past*, pp. 27–28.