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CanadaWatch

PRACTICAL AND AUTHORITATIVE ANALYSIS OF KEY NATIONAL ISSUES

CANADIAN STUDIES: A FUTURE?

INTRODUCTION

Son of phase one

BY SETH FELDMAN

Seth Feldman is the director of the Robarts Centre for Canadian Studies.

As many of the articles to this special issue of *Canada Watch* dedicated to Canadian Studies incorporate the personal histories of their authors, I am afraid that I will have to come clean with mine. I was in the process of completing my doctorate in a rather innovative media studies program at SUNY/Buffalo when, much to my surprise, I was hired to teach Film Studies at the University of Western Ontario. Yes, I had to find London, Ontario on a map.

When I arrived in 1975 and took my place as a newly minted New Yorker/Canadian, I was in for a bit of a culture shock. My knowledge of Canada was largely limited to my field, though no small thing that. McLuhanism was in its heyday, the National Film Board and the CBC

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Canadian Studies: A victim of its own success?

BY COLIN COATES

Colin Coates is coordinator of the Canadian Studies program at Glendon College, York University and holds the Canada Research Chair in Canadian Cultural Landscapes.

CHALLENGES FACING CANADIAN STUDIES PROGRAMS IN CANADA

In theory, Canadian Studies should be a thriving academic pursuit across the country. Today, an unprecedented number of scholars focus on Canadian issues. We Canadians have good reasons to be interested in the issues we face as individuals and as a collectivity: because of the series of challenges facing the country as a whole, ongoing concerns about Quebec's place in the country, the historical inequalities experienced by Aboriginal peoples, women, ethnic and racial minorities, and the differently abled, and current fears about economic and environmental change, Canadian concerns are very much as relevant and important as they are in any other country.

Yet Canadian Studies as an academic enterprise faces difficulties. In many programs, the number of students choosing to major in the "multidiscipline" remains low, even while demand for specific classes

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FEATURES

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self-esteem. Perhaps too much time has been wasted in the struggle against the oppressor (something else the Americans supplied). Or perhaps it is only in Canadian Cinema that it has taken so long to arrive at the point where we may dismiss some of our work as unworthy and a few well-intentioned policies as really bad ideas.

Still, the end hasn't done badly in justifying the means. Canadian Cinema now has that rich critical literature once in such short supply. From time to time, we catch the notice of the world's top thinkers in our field. And for good reason. It would now be simple to program any Canadian Cinema course with feature films that have won prestigious prizes at international festivals—not that many of us would wish to deprive our students of the old and obscure works.

I can only guess at what, if any, correspondence my experience with Canadian Cinema has with the more general development of Canadian Studies. But I am certain that, ten years from now, Sesquicentennial Canada will celebrate an imagined community that Centennial Canada could barely imagine. Whether that community is a true post-modern nation or a hollowed-out brand will have to be settled by a very different generation—a generation shaped by the emergence of intellectual tools that, in the last half-century, have turned the humanities and social sciences inside out. The future of Canadian Studies as a victim of its own success or as a more subtle conscience for a mature (or post-mature) Canada will be up to the students we have seen come and go all these years.

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The contributors to this issue of *Canada Watch* are a cross-section of scholars from the early, middle, and later moments of Phase One Canadian Studies. *Canada Watch* and the Robarts Centre are grateful for their thoughts about turning this historical page. We are especially grateful that Colin Coates, a tireless contributor to and organizer of such inquiries into Canadian Studies, has agreed to guest edit this issue for us. And we thank our readers in advance for the thoughtful responses they may wish to share.

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remains high. Few institutions outside of Carleton University, the University of Calgary, Trent University, and Mount Allison University are willing to make designated appointments to Canadian Studies programs; most rely on more cost-effective individual faculty enthusiasms and cross-listings to cobble together a suite of courses. The majority of Canadian universities do not provide a program labelled "Canadian Studies." Moreover, the first generation of Canadian Studies supporters has reached retirement age, leaving a new cohort to establish and enhance the programs, if they are indeed able to survive. We have arrived at an historical moment when reflection on the future of Canadian Studies is not just of passing interest, but is mandatory.

This Robarts Centre publication examines important issues related to the current state of Canadian Studies in Canada, with a few glances abroad. In some lights, Canadian Studies is healthy; in others it is in difficulty—hence the differences of opinion expressed in these pages. Some of the contributors call for a return to the origins of the Canadian Studies project, while others celebrate the new directions that the field has taken of late.

CANADIAN STUDIES IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

As many of the writers indicate, there is no doubt that Canadian Studies receives weak institutional support in many parts of the country. In many universities and colleges, it depends on a small number of academic enthusiasts (and of course students!). Moreover, Canadian Studies does not really have a counterpart in francophone Quebec (even if the challenges facing the graduate program in Études québécoises at the Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières will resonate with anglophone Canadian Studies administrators). Canadian Studies remains, at heart, an English-speaking Canadian endeavour. Even if Canadian Studies was never intended to be unremitting flag-waving patriotism, for some colleagues the future lies in a more critical and theoretical approach to Canadian issues, focusing on First Nations and multicultural critiques of the Canadian nation. For other contributors, institutions must provide better support for their Canadian Studies programs. A few writers point out the vital contributions of Canadianist scholars and students based outside the country, international reminders—borne of the necessity of providing a venue for a wide range of scholars—of the importance of interdisciplinary exchange.

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As some of the contributions suggest, each of us involved in Canadian Studies has arrived through a unique route. I am a product of the English-Canadian response to the rise in Québécois nationalism in the 1970s. I undertook my undergraduate studies in Ottawa, far from my home in British Columbia. Although I had considered pursuing a Canadian Studies degree, at the MA level at least, in the end all my degrees were in History. Completing my PhD and entering the job market at an unfortunate point in the economic and academic cycle, my best prospects for a permanent position were outside the country. In 1994, I moved to Scotland, a country I first visited at the time of my job interview, where I was hired as a lecturer in the Centre of Canadian Studies of the University of Edinburgh, the oldest such unit in the United Kingdom.

The comparisons between area studies in Canada and in the United Kingdom are instructive. Students at Edinburgh asked the same questions that they ask in Canada—what is Canadian Studies? In our case, Canadian Studies provided an interdisciplinary introduction to key Canadian concepts and concerns: regionalism, multiculturalism, bilingualism, economic and environmental change, aboriginality, multilateralism, gender disparities, and so on. My colleague in the Centre, Ged Martin, and I were both historians, and our course tended to the social sciences, but similar courses at Birmingham and Nottingham taught by colleagues with backgrounds in English Literature covered precisely the same topics through more of a literary approach.

Since almost every Scot I met had a relative in Mississauga, Ontario, there were many personal links to the country. We had healthy enrolments in our courses, and we contributed to the broader American Studies degree, which included courses on Canada, Latin America, and of course the United States. In many British universities, American Studies took the form of cultural or media studies, but in Edinburgh it was rooted firmly in the History and English Literature Departments. American Studies—a program built on cross-listings—had almost no institutional backing, only a portion of one secretary's time. Nonetheless, it always filled its available spaces for student enrolment.

In Canada, as in the United Kingdom, Canadian Studies courses and programs rise and fall depending on the presence of key individuals and their commitment to the topic.

At the University of Edinburgh, there was no British Studies degree—although a course with that title was developed for visiting students. Edinburgh students did not need such a course. In their first year, students chose from a limited number of fairly broad classes. They could choose, among others, British History I, Economic History I (essentially British), Social History I (entirely British), Politics I and Sociology I (largely British), Scottish History I and English Literature I (it proved difficult to introduce an American literature component to this course). The extent to which classes reflected Scottish perspectives was the subject of some debate—perhaps shown best in the fact that Scottish History was constituted as a separate department from History. I sometimes thought that outside of the Social Anthropology and foreign language courses, one of the few first-year courses that provided geographical breadth was the introductory Canadian Studies course. (I should note that this has changed somewhat in the last few years.) The concept of British Studies would not make sense to a British student—in the time I was in Edinburgh (and long before that), the whole curriculum pointed in that direction.

While Canadians—and the current federal government—sometimes express concern about the resources invested in Canadian Studies overseas, when I arrived in Edinburgh in 1994, the university employed 33 percent of the complement of UK academics hired specifically because of their Canadianist expertise—that is, two out of six (the others being in Birmingham, Nottingham, Hull, and Sussex). Today, there are only four such appointments. There are many more Canadianists, of course, in the United Kingdom, but their involvement largely reflects personal enthusiasms and expertise, not university priorities. Some Canadian funding contributed to the salaries of this small number of six scholars, a key support but seldom the majority of the money—and most of it was not from the government itself.

In the United Kingdom and elsewhere, supporting the academic study of Canada abroad has provided Canada with a coterie of international experts, without the institutional costs of the Alliance Française, the Goethe Institute, or the British Council. As is the case in Canada as well, the Canadianist interests of individuals can develop and disappear as their careers develop. That is why centres for Canadian Studies, with some degree of investment and support, play an important role in the Canadian Studies enterprise abroad. But let's face it, Canadian Studies is not a route to academic prominence—it will always be a marginal topic in the United Kingdom and other countries, even if it is rather less prominent than Canada's world role would warrant. (In comparison, Australian Studies took a slightly different configuration in the United Kingdom

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dedicated to Priority Issues. Satisfying someone else's priorities did not provide the energy that drove Tom Symons and the Canadianists he represented. They wanted to find out who we were as people and as a people and they wanted that to inform our lives. We need to get back on track. The same students who want jobs also insist on leisure time to an extent we never dreamed of. I am personally connected with two young men who work day jobs in order to "do Canadian culture," one as a jazz musician, the other as a writer who self-publishes and runs an online literary magazine. They're leaving us all behind.

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We may be too quick to assume that the battles of the 1960s and 1970s have been won. Ruth Sandwell's research (Ontario Institute for Studies in Education) has shown that no undergraduate History programs in Canada require students to take even one Canadian History course.

Note:

1. T.H.B. Symons, *To Know Ourselves: The Report of the Commission on Canadian Studies* (Ottawa: Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, 1975).
2. James E. Page, *Reflections on the Symons Report: The State of Canadian Studies in 1980* (Ottawa: Ministry of Supply and Services, Canada, 1981).
3. David Cameron, *Taking Stock: Canadian Studies in the Nineties* (Montreal: Association for Canadian Studies, 1996), p. 79.
4. Symons, *To Know Ourselves*, p. 2.
5. Northrop Frye, *Divisions on a Ground: Essays on Canadian Culture* (Toronto: Anansi, 1982), pp. 5-6.
6. Jack Granatstein, *Who killed Canadian History?* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 1998). See particularly the chapter "Multicultural Mania," pp. 81-108. I actually agree that many of the things Granatstein identifies as problems are indeed problems. I just can't tell the good guys from the bad guys with his sense of accuracy.
7. William Watson, *Globalization and the Meaning of Canadian Life* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), p. 214.
8. Henry J. Morgan and Lawrence J. Burpee, *Canadian Life in Town and Country* (London: George Newnes Limited, 1905), p. 247.
9. William Metcalfe, ed., *Understanding Canada: A Multidisciplinary Introduction to Canadian Studies* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1982), at p. 596.

though the country has the advantage of appearing a bit more exotic than Canada; New Zealand Studies has no institutional focus whatsoever.)

THE FRAGILITY OF THE CANADIANIZATION OF OUR UNIVERSITIES

Returning to Canada, I have found the comparison between Canadian Studies at the University of Edinburgh and at Glendon College to be striking: similar levels of student interest particularly in the broad first-year course, institutional reliance on one full-time academic (but at Glendon also a number of very dedicated and experienced part-time instructors), and a fairly small program. Canadian Studies has disappeared from the much larger Faculty of Arts at York University, because it had no dedicated appointments and depended on faculty and student interest—and this, despite the fact that York University has a larger concentration of Canadianist researchers than most other universities in the country. In Canada, as in the United Kingdom, Canadian Studies courses and programs rise and fall depending on the presence of key individuals and their commitment to the topic.

The largest single program at Glendon College is International Studies, and the degree to which our students are passionate about world issues is to be celebrated. But it is entirely possible for social sciences and humanities students at Glendon and in most Canadian institutions to pursue their academic careers without taking a single course related to the country in which they live. This is a key difference to the conception of the role of the university in the United Kingdom and in Canada. Still, in the early 21st century, we are graduating many students without a critical and deep understanding of their country. We may be too quick to assume that the battles of the 1960s and 1970s have been won. Ruth Sandwell's research (Ontario Institute for Studies in Education) has shown that no undergraduate History programs in Canada require students to take even one Canadian History course. It is difficult to imagine many other countries where this would be the case.

As the contributors to this issue argue, there are many potential paths to a vibrant future for Canadian Studies—and there are some possible dead ends. Does the success of the Canadianization of Canadian universities justify the withering of Canadian Studies? Surely the answer is "no." Canadian Studies programs provide an institutional focus for the study of the country, and we must do a better job at selling the importance of the enterprise to administrators, colleagues, and students. There is still much to do to fulfill the goal of expanding the presence of Canadian issues in our university curricula. Canadian Studies, despite its many successes over the last three decades, remains a fragile enterprise.