What has changed? Three decades in Canadian Studies

BY JANICE DICKIN

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THE STATE OF CANADIAN STUDIES, 1975–1996

When the Symons Report[1] came out in 1975, I was the student representative on the Canadian Historical Association committee charged with considering its implications for the profession. It was a pretty good time to be a beginning Canadianist: travel and accommodation costs were paid not just for anyone who had a paper accepted for the conference that is now called the Congress, but also for chairs and commentators; graduate students could get funding for original work, rather than settling for enforced cloning within their supervisors' targeted grants; and we did not yet know how scarce employment pickings were about to become.

By 1981, when James E. Page's *Reflections on the Symons Report*[2] came out, I had given birth to my first child, finished my PhD, and started a teaching career at Concordia in Montreal. Two years later, I had given birth to my second son and entered Calgary's law school, the young professor-to-be, without a position, turning her back on academe.

In 1996, David Cameron's *Taking Stock*[3] reported that the University of Calgary's Canadian Studies program, through which I had been coaxed back into the teaching profession in 1988 with the aid of a Canada Research Fellowship, had 65 to 70 students in 1990-91 and so much outside interest that courses had to be capped. By 1996, most of my own attention was going into building a much younger interdisciplinary program, Law and Society (LWSO), already with an enrolment of 55 majors, compared with Canadian Studies (CNST) at 35. The most recent data I could get for these two programs are for February 2007: 154 majors for LWSO, 69 for CNST. It seems important to state that the overshadowing of Canadian Studies by Law and Society (and more so, by Communications Studies, by far the largest undergraduate and graduate programs in our uniquely interdisciplinary Faculty of Communication and Culture) was accomplished completely without internal drivers, entirely according to student demand.

Symons put forth the view that "Canadian universities as a whole were devoting less attention to scholarly teaching, research and study about Canada than universities in most other countries were directing to the needs and conditions of their own societies."

What has changed? One suggestion could be the same one that is used to justify proposed dismantling of Women's Studies programs: you won! you made your point! Symons put forth the view that "Canadian universities as a whole were devoting less attention to scholarly teaching, research and study about Canada than universities in most other countries were directing to the needs and conditions of their own societies."[4] That certainly cannot be said today, across the majority of disciplines and programs, even in some parts of medicine and engineering. My students may be confused about what is law in Canada, formed as they are by media accessibility to the markedly different—in so many ways, not the least of all being terminology—American legal system, but they truly want to learn about their own society and its laws. They do not question the worth of the Canadian experience, no matter how ignorant they might be of it, and we teach it.

THE ROLE OF CANADIAN UNIVERSITIES IN THINKING ABOUT CANADA

Something else that has changed is the location of Canadian intellectuals within society and the conception that our neoliberal governments have about the role our universities are supposed to play. Northrop Frye lamented that Canada "has passed from a pre-national to a post-national phase without ever having become a nation." His whipping boy for what he obviously regarded as a "bad thing" is Pierre Trudeau, whose alleged adoption of Marshall McLuhan as one of his advisers triggered reversion of the country into "tribalism."[5] Jack Granatstein has also raised the hue and cry for the necessity of Canadians acting as a "nation." In his *Who Killed Canadian History?*,[6] he argues contradictorily that immigrants must become Canadians but then denigrates the attempts of scholars who are trying to figure out just what being "Canadian" might mean. He seems to believe that is a no-brainer and, given the last part of his pamphlet, has something to do with dying for one's country's "na-

What has changed?, page 6

What has changed?

continued from page 5

tional" interests. Collapsing culture, society, human existence, whatever, into the idea of nation is just too facile. The fact that we have been unable to come up with an answer that will replace this obsolete—and disingenuous—concept does not mean that Father necessarily knew best.

In *Globalization and the Meaning of Canadian Life*, William Watson starts his chapter "Virtually Canadian" with a wink: "The end of the nation-state is the most chronically foretold death of the 1990s."[7] I'll get back to the virtual part in a minute. The point I want to make here is one that returns to my slatternly bandying about of the concept of neo-liberalism. (I can't help imagining myself dancing around some boiling tribal pot here, in which I have immersed at last my clearly identified enemy.) The "Canadian government," I am told in a letter over the signature of Jean Labrie, Deputy Director, International Education and Youth Division (PCE) of DFAIT, has set Priority Issues for allocating resources through the Canadian Studies Program, born in a "need for a more focused and results-oriented approach." I will address these, rather than list them, since they are available elsewhere.

If one were trying to ward away the Grim Reaper from the door of the Canadian nation-state (assuming there is such a thing), surely some of these longbows would be in your arsenal. They address a variety of requirements for the uneventful preservation of status quo in a society (read economy) based on corporate control and human passivation, starting with Peace and Security and ending with that newly discovered darling of those who would save the world from capitalism, the Environment. Nowhere in the list is Health Care, *the* Canadian cultural icon. Nor is there any mention of surely what human life is supposed to be about and which any organization created for the good of humankind should take as its first priority: spiritual and psychological well-being.

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.

When Morgan and Burpee published *Canadian Life in Town and Country* at the beginning of the last century, they ended their assessment of Canadian attributes with a hope for the future:

> In these and other respects Canada has contributed at least something toward the strengthening and defence of Imperial interests, and when she assumes her rightful place, as a co-partner, on equal terms with England, in the common Empire, she will be found taking no niggardly share in the burdens of that Empire.[8]

A lot of what they have to say is jejune, but I'm now sufficiently old and established to no longer take umbrage with the sappiness of sentimental men. In fact, I find them rather endearing. At least they knew that women exist, having dedicated an entire precious chapter (out of 13, also including separate chapters on "The Militia" and "The Indians") to "The Canadian Woman." By contrast, William Metcalfe's 1982 collection *Understanding Canada*[9] includes not one woman author, addresses women only three times (references to Mazo de la Roche, Gabrielle Roy, and Dorothy Livesay) in "164 Questions for Discussion and Study," and specifically warns readers not to confuse Eileen Jenness with her husband, Diamond, whose work has more "richness of detail," no doubt due to Eileen's note-taking and secretarial skills, assuming they ran true to form as a couple of their era.

VIRTUAL POSSIBILITIES

But then there aren't really any men—other than individual authors—in Metcalfe's book either. There aren't really any people. And that brings me back to the virtual world and finally to where Canadian Studies would do best to look to for the future. Young people, and Canadians are no different, are interested in people. Just look at the World Wide Web. There are blogs, there are fansites (not just for those who are known for being known but for the sorts of personalities that would pass the Granatstein test of historical importance), and there is no shortage of people who contribute to Wikipedia! True, some of this material is inaccurate but the point is that there is an intellectual revolution going on in the world and it is fuelled by completely free labour! True, students want to have jobs at the end of expensive education careers, and they should have them. But it doesn't mean Canadian Studies need submit meekly to wearing the DFAIT straitjacket.

And this brings me to the last issue I identify as having introduced and not addressed and that is the role that universities are supposed to play within the current aspirations of those who would have Canada be a nation-state, and that role is to produce worker bees dedicated to maintaining a concrete hive of activity

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.

A victim of its own success?

continued from page 4

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.