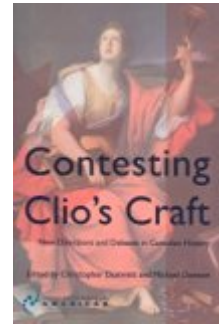


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## The New Political History in Canada

At the close of the last century the Canadian historical profession became embroiled in a debate that pitted social historians, who studied previously neglected groups like women or ethnic minorities, against national historians, who defended traditional political narratives. While this debate was also taking place within the international historical profession that was facing the postmodern challenge, it was particularly wrenching in Canada in part because the Canadian historical community is so small but also because Canada was experiencing a constitutional crisis in the early nineties that saw the country come closer to dissolution than at any time since the sixties. Michael Bliss, one of Canada's most eminent historians, drew a link between the emergence of social history and the political crisis that Canadians were facing in the nineties. Bliss argued that the public was largely unprepared to deal with the crisis in part because historians had failed to promote historical literacy.[1]

While Bliss had begun his career calling on historians to explore the private world's sexuality, he ended it by calling for a return to national history, believing that historians can be important players in producing a sense of shared citizenship and community. In this call Bliss was not only extraordinarily optimistic about the influence that historians have on the general public, but also not all that different from the social historians he had come to criticize. Social historians, after all, also believed that they were performing a public good by including long-neglected groups in their historical studies. In doing so

they were attempting to rectify past shortcomings in the profession while political historians were seeking to address current shortcomings in the public's civic engagement by focusing on political history. In the end, both sides were engaging in advocacy history in an attempt to produce a particular end. Both were seeking to emancipate the reader either from past errors and thus an incomplete history or from present-day ignorance as a means of producing a more united national community.

This debate was also frustrating because as both sides talked past the other few recognized that everyone was essentially striving for the same end. Both sides were seeking relevance, and presented their version of the past as being a fuller and more complete, and thus a more truthful portrait than the other. For social historians, the inclusion of previously neglected groups rounded out the picture of the past and created new avenues of investigation. Political historians, for their part, warned that the history of private lives and ordinary people could do little to illuminate the truth about societies in the past. Both sides, it seemed, were seeking to get closer to the truth about the past; they simply went about it in different ways.

The fact that both sides shared a number of assumptions was lost in the noise of the debate. The vehemence with which Bliss and then J. L. Granatstein, a noted political and military historian, attacked social historians meant that anything of value that they might have had

to say was ignored.[2] It had become too easy to caricature Bliss and Granatstein and all the others they represented as aging warriors defending a rapidly vanishing world of exclusive and elitist political history. At the same time, so convinced were some political historians that the new social history was a threat to the type of history that provided the broad historical literacy they said was necessary to sustain a healthy and democratic community that they failed to recognize that this type of community could not reasonably be created on a the basis of a historical narrative that excluded much of the population. In retrospect, this debate was a lost opportunity for both sides. It turned out to be less a serious exchange of ideas on the role of the historian than a settling of scores between two groups who appeared unwilling to even acknowledge the legitimacy of the other side's arguments.

The outcome of the debate was largely foreordained. While much of the public tended to side with Granatstein and Bliss, political historians were becoming increasingly marginalized within a professional historical community dominated by social historians. And while social historians continued to produce academic studies, political historians appeared more intent on complaining about social history and producing polemics about the evils of social history than in actually producing first-rate political history. The debate, it turned out, was to be a last stand for the likes of Granatstein and Bliss, who would soon retire from academic life. It appeared that the old political historians were moving on, ceding the academic ground to the social historians. Perhaps unfairly, Granatstein's career came to be defined by his attacks against social history rather than his contributions to Canadian intellectual, diplomatic, and military history. In the end, a generation of serious historical production and an entire academic community training a new generation of social historians proved to be too formidable for the older political historians, who were simply pushed off the stage by a more energetic community of scholars.

But if neither side showed much interest in listening to the other, the passage of two decades, and the training of a new generation of historians has altered the terms of the debate somewhat. The idea that both sides may have had a point is at the heart of a new collection of essays edited by Christopher Dummitt and Michael Dawson. What this collection shows is that if Granatstein's polemics represented his parting shots to a profession that he no longer believed in and that no longer seemed welcoming to his type of history, his exit from the scene did not spell the end of his type of history. If the war

was to be won by the social historians, Christopher Dummitt is not so sure that it needed to have been won so decisively. Dummitt suggests that the national narrative might be useful after all and wonders what all the specialized studies being produced by social historians amount to if they are not synthesized to make larger points about Canadian life. And in perhaps his most damning indictment of the social historians of the past three decades, Dummitt suggests that they were not as inclusive as they had thought they were. Claiming that social history was at least partly conceived and practiced to include those who had been previously excluded from the narrative, Dummitt now says that other areas, including military and political history, are now being excluded. This collection highlights the cyclical nature of such debates, showing that the social historians, those supposed rebels of the past, have now become the establishment, defending a school of history against a new generation of scholars defending their own interests and priorities.

The passage of time, then, might accomplish what Granatstein and Bliss had been calling for two decades ago: the return of political history and the national narrative. The political history that the social historians were fighting to overturn has become so thoroughly displaced and distant in the historical consciousness that it has become othered and now attractive to a whole new generation of historians. Younger historians, like those who contribute to this collection of essays, have little, if any, direct connection to the sixties and can take another look at the political and national history that dominated until that time. Just like earlier social historians adopted political histories as their foil, this new generation has picked social history as its foil. This new generation of historians is not interested in turning its back on the findings of social historians. Rather, it is attempting to integrate the findings of social historians into their works on political or national history. It is seeking to present a new national narrative informed by social history rather than some type of whiggish interpretation of the past.

In the opening essay in this collection, Magda Fahrni points to some of the problems that have developed with rise of social history in Canada. Fahrni notes that the relentless focus on the local, a hallmark of social history, has meant that the larger themes that dominated in the past like French-English relations have been pushed aside. The same might be said of French-Canadian historians, whose focus on the local, or micro-history, has nudged them away from larger Canadian questions. At the same time, the focus on the international context, and even the French Atlantic, has lured some Quebec his-

torians away from the local context toward an international perspective that has tended to marginalize English-speaking Canada in their narratives. And so, the persistence of local history as well as the rise of international history has tended to exclude English Canada and made any type of national perspective ever more elusive.

It should be noted that Fahrni pleads with English-speaking historians to pay greater attention to Quebec less out of some desire for a return to national history than for what it can do to incorporate new developments in the field, such as the new imperial studies and studies of memory. Fahrni notes, quite correctly, that English Canadians who have focused on such fields have shown a great willingness to join international historical debates but they have also tended to miss the manner in which these issues have played out in the full Canadian context. English-Canadian historians are thus squandering an opportunity to see how issues of imperialism, race, and power played out under their noses in Canada. The irony is that Canadian historians have become somewhat more provincial in their work, much less interested in the Canadian context as they pursue greater internationalism. This might not be worth noting if this failure did not also seriously weaken their studies of imperialism.

If Fahrni chides Canadian historians for their international perspective, Adele Perry criticizes Canadian historians for their failure to fully embrace an internationalist perspective. Perry rightly points out that few Canadian historians have sought to position Canada within the imperial context. Social historians had for years shied away from questions of empire either for nationalist reasons or because such histories appeared overly political or elitist. The problem, however, according to Perry, is that this neglect of empire has meant that Canadian historians have failed to take into account the vibrant studies of imperialism being produced elsewhere in the world. As a result Canada, as part of the British imperial system, has been under-theorized.

Both Perry and Dummitt make the important and often overlooked point that social historians only rarely moved beyond the nation as an organizing principle for their studies. The shift in focus from the whiggish story of the rise of liberty was replaced by one that emphasized the state's complicity in the oppression of certain members of society. The tone of the narrative might have changed, but historians were still looking at the ways in which the state, on behalf of a supposed national community, used its powers to oppress individuals.

The question of empire is at the heart of many of the

essays in this collection. While Andrew Smith argues that much of what makes Canada a successful country derived from its membership in the empire, others are less interested in determining whether British imperialism was good or bad and more in how Canada fit into the larger imperial system. The question of Canada's place in the empire is the focus of no fewer than half of the articles of this collection, offering proof that young historians are once again willing to take on older paradigms, if not older assumptions.

Steven High's contribution to this collection moves beyond questions of empire or politics to explore the issue of authorial voice in the writing of history. While the other articles in this collection do not exactly fail to criticize political historians, High directly punctures some of the larger assumptions that lay at the heart of political historical writing. In offering an overview of some of the challenges that oral historians have faced over the past three decades, High positions oral history in the context of the larger postmodern ideas about the instability of truth. Certainly such oral historians as Barry Broadfoot might have chuckled at the suggestion that he produced works that fundamentally challenged national history and that his work threw into doubt the nature of truth; his oral histories nonetheless raised the ire of professional and political historians because they appeared to be placing as much value on the recollections of ordinary people as historians would place on archival records. The angry reaction to Broadfoot's work from the academy reveals the extent to which they saw him as a threat to the idea of history. If oral history is valued just as highly as archival history then the authority of the traditional historian is dissolved and the whole concept of historical truth is thrown into question.

This collection represents a plea on the part of some of the profession's younger historians to catch up with the rest of the world. With their internationalist outlook, and their willingness to tackle such issues as imperialism and politics, these historians recognize that the history wars of the nineties did little to advance the profession in Canada in any meaningful way. This collection is an appeal to historians to apply thirty years of social history to the traditional national narrative to produce a new history that is both inclusive and national in character. This collection argues that social history has remained largely divorced from the political narrative in a manner that has left us with only a partial image of the past. But these historians are hardly calling for the return of national history as part of some larger nationalist endeavor. Rather, their plea for a return to traditional

narrative and events is a sign that a new generation of historians is answering the call made by social historians for greater inclusiveness and signaling that Canadian historical writing is about to be radicalized in the way that social historians have been urging. The return of the empire, politics, diplomacy, and war might thus represent a radical moment in the writing of Canadian history. It is a radicalism that social historians as well as political

historians just might endorse.

#### Notes

[1]. Michael Bliss, "Privatizing the Mind: The Sundering of Canadian History, the Sundering of Canada," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 26, no. 4 (1991-92): 5-17.

[2]. J. L. Granatstein, *Who Killed Canadian History?* (Toronto: HarperCollins, 1998).

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