

# Losing the Hearts and Minds, or How Clio Disappeared from Canadian Public Schools

Leon Fink

J.L. Granatstein, *Who Killed Canadian History?* (Toronto: Harper Collins Publishers 1998)

Ken Osborne, *In Defence of History: Teaching the Past and the Meaning of Democratic Citizenship* (Toronto: Our Schools/Our Selves Education Foundation 1995)

Bob Davis, *Whatever Happened to High School History?: Burying the Political Memory of Youth: Ontario, 1945-1995* (Toronto: James Lorimer 1995)

VERY DIFFERENT IN TEMPER, purpose, and point of view, the three books under discussion (for I rather invoke them than review them below) converge around a seminal development: Canadian history, as taught in the schools, has changed drastically since the 1960s, and in ways disturbing to more than one side in the country's ongoing culture wars. On the one hand, J.L. Granatstein's *Who Killed Canadian History?* is the latest offering from a prolific author and retired distinguished professor of military history, known otherwise for his stinging neo-conservative critique of current Canadian higher education — including attacks on tenure and journal subsidies as well as multiculturalism and political correctness. On the other hand, both Ken Osborne's *In Defense of History* and Bob Davis's *Whatever Happened to High School History?* reflect the concerns of two educator/teachers who have grown up in liberal or left circles and who are by instinct much more sympathetic to the new histories of recent decades as well as the social democratic politics they inspire. Considering the books at their points of greatest overlap and fiercest differentiation offers a revealing window on problems that go to the heart of history's role within a democratic culture — in Canada and beyond.

Leon Fink, "Losing the Hearts and Minds, or How Clio Disappeared from Canadian Public Schools," *Labour/Le Travail* 43 (Spring 1999), 211-5.

In this heterogeneous field, it is perhaps surprising (at least to an outsider) that everyone can agree more or less on when and how things changed for Canadian history teaching, if not exactly on the whys and merits of the transformation. All three authors, for example, point to A.B. Hodgetts' 1968 report *What Culture? What Heritage?* as a pivotal moment in a great shakeup of history education in the nation's schools. A history teacher himself who generated a bully pulpit he called the National History Project, Hodgetts assailed a decline of national civic culture which he blamed on an antiquated educational curriculum and method. History was indeed a fat target to swing at. Up through the 1950s, according to Ken Osborne, the discipline had "enjoyed a prominent place in the curricula of most provinces," and by the early 1960s, as Bob Davis recounts, Ontario high school students were taking a required five-year history load. Yet, the substance of such a curriculum sagged from its own obsolescence. Osborne, for example, recalls without sympathy an "overwhelmingly traditional history, chronological, political, and patriotic." An avowed radical, Bob Davis goes farther than Osborne in his dissection of the old consensus. "By 1961 when I started teaching in Ontario, the earlier Aryan arrogance had been toned down considerably ... but the premise of superiority — white, male, European and wealthy — was clearly there." But even Granatstein (a "traditional" historian by almost anyone's standards) tends to agree: "[The Hodgetts study] pointed to stultifying teaching methods, the boredom of students, a dearth of good published work on Canada, and a glut of textbooks that offered bland consensus versions of the Canadian past."

Hodgetts's critique, addressing as it did a post-war generation of Canadian citizens at a moment of renewed national promise, touched a raw nerve. As Granatstein summarizes, "Hodgett's report sparked a growth of interest in Canada, something that fed on the nationalism unleashed by the centennial of Confederation, Expo 67, and the emergence of Pierre Trudeau, a very different kind of Canadian leader. Soon the study of Canada was firmly ensconced in the schools and universities."

Yet, here was the rub, as all observers again agree. Rather than the stimulus to a new history curriculum, post-1960s social studies wisdom swung away from Clio altogether towards a sociological emphasis on contemporary problems. "The boom in Canadian studies," laments Granatstein, "turned out to be very different from an interest in the Canadian past." "Canadian Studies," similarly explains Osborne, "became a major enterprise. What is intriguing in retrospect is its lack of attention to the systematic study of history." Bob Davis recalls a kind of intellectual Prague Spring during the late 1960s and early 1970s as the influence of worldwide popular movements was felt within the schools' program. "Scores of small extra study books and pamphlets were printed to take account of these new voices .... We could finally add units of study about these buried people and talk about the transformation of history that adding their story implied. But this excitement was short-lived. By the late 1970s and early 1980s a strange truth hit me. While we were confidently

debating what the new history should look like, the subject itself was disappearing under our feet."

In a rather shocking reversal, history all but disappeared from the schools' curricula. By the mid-1970s, only one history course (and this on 20th-century Canada and current events) was still required for high school students. "History," barely exaggerates Granatstein, "became the Latin of the 1970s and 1980s." The outcomes in Ontario, where history courses as a percentage of total high school courses dropped by almost 50 per cent from 1964 to 1982, apparently represent the sorry general trend.

While all history-minded clinicians may agree as to the course of the disease, *historia diminuida*, its etiology, let alone prescribed treatment, remain very much in dispute. Sticking closely to changing education school theory, for example, Osborne convincingly links "progressive" methods which came of age in the late 1960s and 1970s directly to a devaluation of the chronologically-rooted, narrative-oriented, and fact-focused nature of the historical enterprise. Most interesting, perhaps, is his convincing (if largely implicit) critique of educational psychologist Jerome Bruner and social studies education theorist Edwin Fenton, both of whom had enormous influence on new school curricula. The "scientific model" favoured by Bruner (best known for his *The Process of Education*, 1960) for student learning emphasized discovery of the "structure" or key ideas of a given discipline as framed around explicit concepts, laws, and generalizations. But history, as Osborne explains perhaps a trifle too defensively, "seemed to lack the logical sequence and coherence of subjects such as mathematics or science where what students learned depended upon their previous learning and also provided long-term problem-solving skills." Even Fenton, whose progressive approach to history education was heralded with *The New Social Studies* in 1967 and widely applied in Canada during the following decade, may have inadvertently contributed to the anti-history tide. While Fenton's "inquiry"-centered approach to social studies education, with its heavy reliance on primary sources, may appear as a perfect stimulus for whetting the historical appetite, in practice it substituted a segmented treatment of "public issues" rather than any comprehensive, sequential history programme. Following such logic, Canadian school systems by the 1970s were tossing out boring old history textbooks in favour of patchwork curricula in "moral education" and "values clarification." Indeed, by the time Hodgetts and a colleague in the Canada Studies Foundation updated *What Culture? What Heritage?* with *Teaching Canada for the 80's* (1978), economics, politics, and the environment had replaced historical studies as the centerpiece of a civic education.

One senses that Bob Davis does not disagree with anything Ken Osborne says about changing education theory and methods; indeed he summarizes well the latter's argument in pointing to "the current rationale for history [in which] certain techniques for studying and writing it are substituted for the substance of history, as if the former could be learned by young teenagers with very little of the latter."

Davis, however, is determined to cut through educational rhetoric to get at root causes; he implicitly links the superstructure of changing educational practices to a base of socio-economic necessity. To Davis, for example, all the inquiry-centered talk of concepts and values amounts to a "skills mania" reflecting "the new needs of restructuring global business and industry [where] 'learning how to learn' must replace learning content." Alongside the needs of the "new capitalism," Davis finds such other exogenous forces putting the squeeze on history education as "the increased erosion of Canadian independence," "the decline of faith in historical progress"; the multicultural challenge to the traditional white, male canon; and television. In the last category, Davis voices his "hunch" that "the government of Ontario no longer needs history and civics as core curriculum because their main function of yore, that is, teaching that we have the best of all possible political and economic systems, is now being carried out more directly and cheaply by television.

Of course, Davis may be right on all counts. He is particularly acute in ferreting out the socialization agenda for a new workforce masked by the neutral tones of the Ontario government's new skills emphasis. A humanistic passion for his subject comes through in his wise insistence that "the simplest justification for history is still the best — to know where we came from ... that is to know where we came from in order to toss off the inhibiting part of the past, to affirm the helpful part — and to build the future from there." One would like to be present in his class when he recites "this famous prayer of Pope Gregory: Lord, help me to change the things I can change/ To accept those things I cannot change/ And give me the understanding to know the difference." Yet, for a humanistic historian, it must be said that Davis adopts a narrowly functionalist view of society. With capitalist culture operating as a kind of ex-cathedra bogeyman, he seems to suggest, there is no need to bother with educational policy makers on their own terms. Political conviction, in short, threatens to short-circuit if not subvert an otherwise shrewd historical argument.

Unfortunately, the same complaint may be made in spades for J.L. Granatstein. Indeed, by the time one has finished reading the author's denunciations of: "whole-child" and anti-elitist namby-pambies among ministry bureaucrats; the multicultural "con" game; the "trendy pap" of political correctness; a scandal-mongering media manufacturing cynicism instead of heroes; "university presses" "that subsidize professors for publishing unreadable books on minuscule subject"; and finally, a poisonous academic culture spawned mostly by feminists and those "vituperative Marxists" who maintain "complete control of the labour history field, including the journals and the students"; and one might well have forgotten that the book began with concern for the decline of Canadian history in the public schools. Since Granatstein himself allows that the "weak nationalism" of the Canadian state retarded national historical consciousness since the 19th century and that from the 1880s "nothing much changed over the next seventy years," his shock over latter-day sinners who substitute regional or otherwise particularistic historical

interests for the awe of national sacrifice visible at the Great War's Battle of Vimy Ridge seems curiously misplaced. Whatever its transgressions from an intellectual or political point of view, just how the "multicultural mania" can be held responsible for a national identity which never crystallized in the first place is a mystery. Less mysterious is the ironic remedy which Granatstein seeks to build a new national mythology. In the end his model for Canadian cultural regeneration is built on the use of state power to promote an official ideology — as practiced already in Québec and the United States! The specific measure Granatstein proposes seem benign and innocuous enough — national history standards, a Canadian History Day, five "national history" chairs in Canadian universities (one can imagine the recipients) — although how they will avoid the pitfalls of "boring Canadian history pedagogy" that Blodgett exposed long ago is unclear. Surely no magic bullet, Granatstein's suggestions might nevertheless offer worthy talking points if any of his rancorously condemned colleagues were still listening.

This is not to say that there are not other reasons than those Granatstein raises for holding university historians to account. Although he unfortunately does not pursue what he blandly calls "developments in the teaching of history" much beyond a stimulating foray into education school theory (afterwards veering off into an out-of-date paean to social history and a how-to guide for using source materials in the classroom), Ken Osborne does provide one final suspect for an inquest into *Who Lost History in Canada*. As Osborne ever so kindly puts it, "perhaps the most surprising feature of the debates and developments of the last twenty-five years is how little historians have been involved in them." As late as the mid-1960s, as Osborne notes, textbooks for school classrooms were written by university historians; yet, "by the end of the 1970s ... hardly any academic historian's name was on the covers of a school textbook." University departments, as Osborne documents, attached little or no importance to work in the schools, most professors were too busy with their own professional development to intervene, and even the Canadian Historical Association remained silent on issues of school curriculum and pedagogy. Rather than casting around for their favourite ideological sparring partners, therefore, today's historians with an authentic interest in what passes for historical education in the schools should perhaps first pause and look inward. When it comes to history in the schools, Canada's "higher" educators recall Pogo's wisdom that "We have met the enemy and it is us."