

*Historical Studies in Education / Revue d'histoire de l'éducation*  
BOOK REVIEWS / COMPTES RENDUS

Penny Clark, ed.  
*New Possibilities for the Past:  
Shaping History Education in Canada*

Vancouver: UBC Press, 2011. ix, 393 pp.

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The lament for the failures of Canadian history education is getting pretty old. As Penny Clark reminds us in the introduction to a new book on the subject, it dates from the introduction of social sciences into school curricula and exploded into the national consciousness in the 1990s with the accusations of Jack Granatstein and the creation of the Dominion Institute and *Historica*. As editor of *H-Canada* at the time, I had a front-row seat to some of the best and the worst of these debates. For instance, in late November 1997, then Ontario premier Mike Harris inadvertently kicked off a debate on *H-Canada* over the value of studying History, when he said that he saw little value in academic degrees in the humanities, geography, and sociology, in which “graduates have very little hope of contributing to society in any meaningful way.” Some twenty responses from the membership of *H-Canada* concluded, not surprisingly, that history education was indeed valuable. This thread was picked up in subsequent years as historians and educators interested in history repeatedly affirmed what they already believed to be true. Not surprisingly, public interest in the debates has fizzled (74).

Now, along comes a book that attempts to move the discussion beyond claims about citizen education and the teaching of critical thinking. *New Possibilities for the Past* is the first product of a \$2.1 million SSHRC Strategic Knowledge Clusters Grant awarded to The History Education Network / Histoire et éducation en réseau (THEN/HiER). THEN itself formed in 2005 to connect scholars and professionals from a variety of fields, united by their shared interest in history education. The network promotes collaboration and dissemination of research into how historians and educators teach about the past. This book is a collection of seventeen essays by twenty different contributors, most of whom hold advanced degrees in History

or in Education. Their essays range in topics from an overview of the History curriculum to how History is taught in a variety of contexts, to the use of video games to teach about historical processes. It is all fascinating work and many readers of this journal will no doubt find wonderful ideas for improving their awareness of the possibilities for teaching. Indeed, despite the two concerns I raise below, this is an intriguing book.

Uniting the collection is a focus on what the authors call historical thinking. Historical thinking, as Peter Seixas informs us, highlights concepts like historical significance, primary source evidence, cause and consequence, perspective, and ethical judgement (141-2). These are the tools of the practice of History and of historians. Yet, however open-minded the various contributors to this volume may be about approaches, methods, and sources of history, the collection as a whole takes as a given that historical thinking is a good thing. *New Possibilities for the Past* turns away from a critical analysis of the discipline, its practices, or its place in society. But many of the concepts associated with historical thinking, in fact the very notion itself, are steeped in relations of power and ideology. What evidence is valid, how sources can be read, and who determines the standards of the discipline are all ideologically charged and very much entwined with the hegemonic culture in ways that can never be fully unwound, but that should be critiqued. It is a shame that this book has not picked up these challenges.

One way to address these issues of power would be to take the discussion of history education outside the training of historians. My concern with revitalizing History through a focus on historical thinking is that historical thinking is too closely tied to the discipline itself. Indeed, it is discipline centred. Historical thinking is a task to be performed. It is a task connected to the academic approach to History and is relevant mainly to practitioners of History. It will never convince the Mike Harrises of the world that History has any purpose beyond generating more historians. However, if we adapt the term slightly, we find the phrase “thinking historically” (which does appear inadvertently on p. 15), through which we can imply an alternative objective. Unlike historical thinking, thinking historically is not bound to the discipline and its practices. It does not throw out the teachings of the discipline, but remembers that very few people will ever master its techniques. It addresses the exercise of power inherent in historical thinking by offering students a perspective from which to think rather than a method for refining their thoughts. Thinking historically describes how people might interact with the past every day as they go about their lives. By thinking historically, we grasp the processes of historical selection and of change and continuity that produce the present, as well as those that had produced the presents of the past. And it would help us to anticipate how our actions today could have bearing on the future. Thinking historically allows for a mature relationship to develop between the people of the present and their inheritance from the past. This relationship between the past and the present, as Jocelyn Létourneau has described it (although not in his contribution to this volume), is one of mutual respect between the living and their ancestors. It could help the millions of Canadians who will never sit through a formal History lesson past

secondary school or a university elective to understand the balance between such concepts as preservation and progress. In short, however valuable historical thinking is for practitioners, and as these essays argue it should be central, it holds little appeal for a public facing difficult choices about public dollars.