

**TWO STEPS BACK: REFLECTIONS ON THE SEARCH
FOR SYNTHESIS**

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John Schultz, ed. *Writing About Canada: A Handbook for Modern Canadian History*. Scarborough: Prentice-Hall Canada, Inc., 1990. Pp. 282. \$20.00.

In recent years, historians have increasingly focused on the “problem of synthesis.” Many factors explain why synthesis is now viewed as a “problem” but one of the most important involves the development of new sub-fields of historical research. Initially, most observers agreed that these new sub-fields (such as working-class, women’s, and ethnic history) were “adding” to previously established general understandings. In the case of Canada, for example, historians were said to be offering a more complete portrayal of the past by going beyond a definition of historical actors as elite white men. The result, it was hoped, would be a new synthesis in which the thoughts and behaviour of all members of specific societies could be situated within their appropriate contexts and integrated into the familiar interpretations based on political and intellectual history.

Since the early 1980s, Canadian historians have indeed strived to produce syntheses. Encouraged by the enthusiasm of publishers, researchers have produced a new generation of survey textbooks and thematic studies which attempt to make sense of Canada as a collection of diverse individuals and communities. Authors seek to say “enough” about each region, each social group, about men and women, about each ethnic group, and so on. And their results are criticized on this basis. Reviewers point to holes in the puzzle such as the frequent ignoring of native groups after the “contact” period or a failure to place the Maritimes in proper perspective.

John Schultz only touches upon such epistemological issues in his brief introduction to *Writing About Canada*, although he does lament the “loss, as

specialties have tended to become solitudes, of the cohesiveness that was integral to traditional history" (p. ix). Schultz hopes that this volume contributes to the rediscovery of such cohesiveness by showing that

feminist historians, regional historians, labour historians, economic and agricultural historians, all share a common goal: to map one portion of Canada's historical landscape....[thus] what appears at first glance to be fragmented has a unity of both purpose and effect. Whatever their special field, the contributors and their colleagues are all in search of a single national experience.

In this spirit, Schultz asked leading scholars (for the most part) to prepare original essays for history students on the origins and development of their fields. Given this audience, the authors were asked to reach back to earlier writing on Canada in order to situate the emergence of "modern" perspectives. The book includes ten chapters as well as an appendix that offers a list of key historical and historiographical "events." This appendix is presented without comment.

For historians of education, the Schultz collection shows that a great deal of recent research has not yet penetrated the consciousness of those working in other sub-fields. Not only is education not included as one of the chapters but, more revealingly, even the major studies in educational history are consistently ignored throughout the book despite their direct relevance to the various literature surveys.

The volume opens with Reg Whitaker's essay on politics. While asking a political scientist to offer an historiographical piece reaching back through the decades might seem odd at first glance, the choice must have seemed quite attractive given Whitaker's own work as well as recent interdisciplinary activity. And indeed, the chapter begins promisingly by emphasizing the importance of "bringing the state back in" within discussions of social change. However, Whitaker then gets lost in a rehash of studies associated with the conventional approach of political history. No mention is made of the work of social historians who have offered fresh looks at political figures (for example, Brian Young's study of Cartier) or educational historians who have examined the process of state formation (for example, Bruce Curtis). In the end, Whitaker should be congratulated (and sometimes commiserated with) for having read all those studies of various political figures, but his chapter will certainly not permit students to understand the intensity and focus of current debate.

To help students of modern Canadian history learn about the theme of economics, Shultz again reached outside the discipline to include Ian Drummond. Not surprisingly, Drummond frames his discussion of economics by citing the enduring impact of Harold Innis. Historians will have some sympathy for this approach but many will wonder about the absence of any discussion concerning the now well-developed field of the social history of economics (for example, the extensive research on occupational structure). Similarly, educational historians

will search in vain for a reference to the relationship between economic change and other processes such as institution-building (not to mention taxation).

The result of selecting Doug Owram to focus on intellectual history suggests the wisdom of turning to active participants within the given field. Owram has established himself as a major figure in the Canadian literature, and he offers a very useful treatment of the twists and turns in the development of intellectual history. Owram defines the field as one which "gives central place to the role of the mind in the historical process," and he emphasizes American historiographical influence. Overall, he is quite positive about the emergence of the various sub-fields, which he feels have been mutually enriching. His review particularly reveals the importance of research on political and religious topics. Educational historians will appreciate his attention to work on higher education as well as his passing reference to Alison Prentice.

John G. Reid is surely one of the finest historians at work in Canada today, and his essay on regional history confirms his sophisticated understanding of (and contribution to) current research. No direct attention is given to education but Reid's comments have considerable relevance in an implicit way. He addresses the problem of definition including appropriate attention to the Quebec literature. Reid is particularly effective in showing the actual and potential links between regional history and other fields such as ethnic history. The essay encourages comparative work, and students will undoubtedly profit from both Reid's analysis and his endnotes.

Similarly, John Herd Thompson is an ideal selection to write about "rural life and agriculture." The inclusion of this topic is commendable, and as would be expected, Thompson displays his comprehensive grasp of the evolution of what have been quite distinct research areas such as agricultural history. Gracefully moving through the diverse studies on all parts of the country, Thompson argues optimistically in favour of using local and regional pieces as building blocks for a national synthesis. Educational historians may be reluctant to embrace Thompson's enthusiasm for modernization as the preferred theoretical framework, and they will lament the inattention to rural schooling. However, Thompson stresses the importance of comparative work, and his approach would be very useful to students in various fields.

The addition of a chapter on business is also most welcome, and Graham Taylor is an obvious choice to review this field. In contrast to Schultz (and certain other authors), Taylor is rather pessimistic not only about the proliferation of sub-fields but also about fragmentation *within* research on business history. He perceives a "multitude of solitudes" within the field, and he gives little reason to hope for better integration. Greg Kealey, a familiar surveyor of the field entitled "labour," in this book also emphasizes disparity within this research area. For Kealey, the disparity results (at least in part) from the difficulty some scholars had in finding or staying on the "right" historiographical path. Happily from Kealey's point of view, he feels that even the most wayward of scholars a decade ago (David Bercuson) now appears to be "gaining ground" and, in contrast to

Taylor, his review ends on a quite optimistic note. However, students would rightly conclude from these chapters that the work of educational historians has failed to gain the attention of the leaders in these fields. These students would have to learn somewhere else that the history of education can be studied as "business" (for example, educational businesses ranging from secretarial and hairdressing schools to computer classes) or as "labour" (for example, the Workers' Educational Association).

While all the chapters were written expressly for this book, the content of some, such as Veronica Strong-Boag's survey of "writing about women," goes well beyond the authors' previous historiographical work. The innovative component of this survey is the proposal of a "counter-syllabus" designed to specify the ways in which the appropriate integration of female experience "into the whole" would reconfigure the "predictable periods and developments." While this valuable exercise should provoke considerable debate (is Strong-Boag far too cautious?), students will note that educational history does, indeed, appear to have become part of this field. In fact, this is the only field of the Schultz collection where the topic of education is given more than passing reference.

Roberto Perin's essay on ethnicity reinforces his earlier definition of this field as the study of immigrants. Perin updates his survey of the origins and development of interest in meaning and experience of migration to Canada, and his extensive footnotes will certainly help students find their way in this burgeoning research area. In contrast, Donald M. Schurman's discussion of "writing about war" includes a quite modest list of references partly because he defines the topic very narrowly and ignores any work beyond the framework of those like C.P. Stacey. The important contributions of scholars such as Ruth Roach Pierson and Jean-Pierre Gagnon have no place in this truly internalist discussion.

As some of the contributors to this collection recognize (most obviously, Strong-Boag), historians who seek synthesis must come to grips with a central conclusion of research in the new sub-fields: research on women, various ethnic groups, and previously ignored social groups and regions of Canada cannot simply be attached to earlier findings to construct a holistic picture of the past. The arithmetical assumptions of writing syntheses based on saying "enough" about specific individuals and groups now appear increasingly problematic. Rather than simply adding new dimensions, the sub-fields developed since the 1960s have been forcing historians to rethink both the conclusions of earlier research and the ways in which the new fields themselves interrelate. The challenge of this rethinking goes far beyond the anticipations of scholars who first constructed the sub-fields, and helps explain why synthesis is now seen as a "problem."

Thus, Schultz' opening remarks about a united "search for a single national experience" fly in the face of the content of most of the chapters. As authors such as Reid suggest, research results in the new sub-fields have undermined established concepts of historical coherency. These results challenge the notion that the historical process can be "fit together," that explanations of ideas and

behaviour can be generalized, or that an apprehendable logic drives all aspects of change over time. In contrast, recent research can be said to have exposed the pretentiousness of this perspective by pointing to the infinite possibilities of human thought and action. These possibilities include those which any one perspective might view as "illogical," "irrational," "serendipitous," "chaotic," "incoherent," and "contradictory."

By no means, however, can the sub-fields be said to reinforce a definition of history as a series of unique individuals and events. Rather it calls for historians to develop syntheses which draw upon the new perspectives and detailed research of recent decades in order to address two fundamental questions: 1) what were the structural constraints which framed the lives of individuals and groups in past societies and how and why did these structures change over time? and 2) given these constraints, what were the ranges of ideas and behaviour which can be observed among these individuals and groups and how and why did the relative importance of their specific ideas and behaviour change over time?

Educational historians have been working in increasing numbers to address these questions, and their findings contribute significantly to the diverse sub-fields represented in this book. However, if judged by the various chapters, their contribution does, indeed, remain largely unrecognized. All the essays confirm that historians of education must continue working to make explicit the connection between their field and other processes of historical change.

