



## CANADIANS AND THEIR PASTS: Exploring the Historical Consciousness of Canadians

BY MARGARET CONRAD, DAVID NORTHRUP AND JOHN POLLARD

Over the past two decades, a new field of study has emerged that seeks to understand individual historical consciousness and collective memory as it develops across time and space. To aid them in their efforts to explore how ordinary people engage the past in their everyday lives, historians have turned to surveys, a methodology not commonly associated with the discipline of history. Surveys have their limits, of course, but they also offer compelling evidence that people orient themselves to the past in different ways and that academic understandings of the past compete for acceptance with narratives derived from a variety of locations outside of the academy.

The Canadians and Their Pasts project (PASTS) exemplifies this new kind of approach for historians using surveys and

focus group discussions to probe the historical consciousness of ordinary Canadians. Inspired by previous studies

### Content of the PASTS Questionnaire

Following numerous pretests and cognitive testing sessions from September 2006 to March 2007, the final PASTS questionnaire asked Canadians about their:

- general interest in the past
- activities related to the past
- understanding of the past
- trustworthiness of sources of information about the past
- importance of various pasts
- sense of the past
- biographical data

conducted in Europe, the United States, and Australia, it is funded in part by a five-year Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council Community-University Research Alliance (CURA) grant. The CURA team includes seven academic investigators and ten community partners stretching from one end of the country to the other. Such a rich collaboration, including our partner projects designed to add depth to our research, made it possible for us to construct a shorter telephone survey (averaging 22 minutes of inter-

view time) than the ones administered by the Americans, Australians, and Europeans. It nevertheless remains the centre-piece of our project and probes most of the issues included in the earlier surveys as well as two topics that have a particular Canadian resonance: linguistic and regional identities. The variety and depth of some responses to the survey's 11 open-ended questions during pretesting led us to record answers to these questions and transcribe respondents' comments for later qualitative analysis.

The national sample consists of 2,000 interviews equally divided among five 'regions' of the country (Atlantic Canada, Quebec, Ontario, the Prairies, and British Columbia). In addition, 100 supplemental interviews will be conducted with each of three groups: Plains Cree in the Saskatoon area, Acadians in north and eastern New Brunswick, and immigrants in the Region of Peel (just west of Toronto). An urban supplemental sample of 900 interviews

*continued on page 2*

### IN THIS ISSUE

	Page
Canadians and Their Pasts . . . . .	1
Institute for Social Research Scholarship Winners . . . . .	3
Recent Research at the Institute . . .	4
SCS Winter Courses . . . . .	4

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# Canadians and Their Pasts

continued from page 1

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will focus on Montreal, Toronto, Edmonton, Calgary, and Vancouver. Interviewing for the national survey began in March 2007 from York University's Institute for Social Research and at the point of writing we have completed about 75% of the interviews.

The preliminary data indicate that most Canadians, like people elsewhere, engage the past in a variety of ways and often do so regularly and systematically. An impressive number of Canadians are making conscious efforts to preserve the past by passing on heirlooms, preparing scrapbooks, keeping diaries, writing family histories, researching genealogies, or visiting places from their family's past. Many Canadians also visit museums and historic sites, read books about the past, and enjoy movies based on historical events. Although Canadians report that they see a number of different pasts as important, including the past of the country, the past of their family was most often rated "very important" by our respondents (66%). One person from Ontario

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told us that her family's past was very important because it held within it all of the other pasts we had asked about: she said family "encompasses everything . . . religion, province, country, ethnic background, everything." Less than half (42%) of the Canadian-born respondents rated Canada's past as being very important to them, while 56% of those born outside Canada rated the past of their country of birth as very important.

In making their family the lens through which they engage the past, Canadians are not always indulging in navel gazing and are eager to research the larger historical context in which their

## The PASTS Academic Investigators

### Principal investigator:

- Jocelyn Létourneau (Université Laval)

### Co-investigators:

- Margaret Conrad (University of New Brunswick)
- Kadriye Ercikan (University of British Columbia)
- Gerald Friesen (University of Manitoba)
- Delphin Muise (Carleton University)
- David Northrup (ISR, York University)
- Peter Seixas (University of British Columbia)

## The PASTS Community Partners

- The Association of Heritage Industries, Newfoundland and Labrador, St. John's
- Musée acadien, Université de Moncton
- Musée de la civilisation, Quebec City
- Association for Canadian Studies, Montreal
- Canadian Museums Association, Ottawa
- Historica, Toronto
- Canada West Foundation, Calgary
- The Kamloops-Thompson Regional Historica Fair Committee and Thompson Rivers University's Centre for the Study of Multiple Literacies, Kamloops
- Union of British Columbia Indian Chiefs, Vancouver
- Parks Canada

family is located. One respondent from Alberta explained:

*In 1986 I returned to the village where my maternal ancestor left in France, in Tourouvre, west of Paris . . . they were building a small museum, L'Immigration Percheronne, a small museum to commemorate the departure of 80 families from Tourouvre in 1624 for New France . . . I went there and met with . . . a very small museum staff.*

*And I went and I saw the home . . . of my maternal ancestor . . . it was my pilgrimage back to my source.*

Most respondents, however, do not rate family stories as particularly trust-

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worthy but rather look to museums, historic sites, and fact-based books as sources of accurate information. Although 20% of our respondents reported using the Internet to explore the past, fewer than 10% rated it highly as a trustworthy source. Our survey results suggest that many Canadians understand that the past is difficult to access and that there may be more than one explanation to account for how events unfolded. This finding supports the growing body of evidence challenging the widely-held academic assumption that most members of the general public are gullible consumers of the past.

Our expectations about regional differences in Canada also seem to be borne out by the data, but there are a few surprises. While respondents from Quebec might be expected to be the most likely of all Canadians to rate the past of their province as being very important to them, this was not the case. The residents of Newfoundland and Labrador, many of whom lived in the province before it joined Confederation in 1949, were the most likely (68%) to rate the past of their province as being

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# Canadians and Their Pasts

continued from page 2

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“very important.” Only 50% of the respondents from Quebec rated the past of their province as very important, about the same percentage as for residents of the three Maritime provinces. Lower percentages of residents from Ontario (32%), the Prairie provinces (28%), and British Columbia (29%) rated the past of their province as very important to them.

Since this is the first study of its kind in Canada, it is difficult to determine if the historical consciousness of Canadians has increased in recent years. It may well have done so, due in part to the explosion of public history as manifested in such capital-intensive projects as CBC’s *Canada: A People’s History*, the History Channel, and *Historia*; the founding of Canada’s National History Society (1994), the Dominion Institute (1997), and *Historica* (1999); and the construction of the new Canadian War Museum. History seems to be all around us. As many as 250,000 children annually are engaged in *Historica* Fairs. Aboriginal treaty claims, a nationwide phenomenon, are rooted in historical documentation, and heritage industries are a major staple of a burgeoning tourist sector. Like other peoples faced with rapid globalization, cultural pluralism, and equity issues, Canadians generally seem to be turning to history as a way of rooting themselves in time and place. One respondent from British Columbia recounted a trip to Scotland to explore her

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family’s past by going through graveyards, looking at headstones, and getting up the courage to knock on the doors of possible relatives. This journey into the past seemed to be very meaningful for

this person – she told us that “even crossing into Scotland . . . I had this amazing sort of emotion come over me.”

Our study has sparked a lot of interest and its findings will be put to many uses. In addition to establishing a benchmark against which to compare Canadians to peoples elsewhere and to measure change over time in historical conscious-

## Canadians and Their Pasts Web Site

For further information about the PASTS project, please visit the project Web site at:

[www.canadiansandtheirpasts.ca](http://www.canadiansandtheirpasts.ca)  
or  
[www.lescanadiensetleursepasses.ca](http://www.lescanadiensetleursepasses.ca)

ness, it will give academics much to ponder with respect to significant differences we see emerging across age, class, ethnicity, gender, language, and region. For Parks Canada, the findings will serve as a foundation for future historic site development, especially in large urban areas, where interest in Canada’s past seems to be declining. Teachers who draw on the family history of their students to illustrate the larger historical context will be confirmed in their pedagogical approach. Our findings may also require some rethinking about the role of national

history, narrowly defined, in developing citizenship.

As the surveys conducted elsewhere revealed, ordinary people are drawing upon history to establish identity, morality, immortality, and agency. History’s place in developing responsible citizens or pan-national patriotism is not as clear. This is not a cause for alarm. Instead, it points to the importance of creating better processes to enable academic historians and the general public to enter into a fruitful dialogue about best practices for exploring the past and the goals that inspire us to do so. We find it encouraging that more than 75% of our respondents agreed to participate in follow-up interviews, an indication that the interview itself sparked reflection on uses of the past and whetted appetites for more discussion.

*Margaret Conrad holds the Canada Research Chair in Atlantic Canada Studies in the Department of History at the University of New Brunswick and is a co-investigator of the PASTS project. David Northrup is Associate Director of the Institute for Social Research at York University and a study co-investigator. John Pollard is a senior project manager at ISR and the study director for the survey component of the PASTS project.*

## INSTITUTE FOR SOCIAL RESEARCH Scholarship Winners

The 2006-07 Institute for Social Research Scholarship has been awarded to:

**Erin Furukawa**, Faculty of Health, Psychology, 2nd year, and  
**Silvia Neagu**, Glendon College, Psychology, 2nd year.

This award, valued at \$1,000, is given to the full-time continuing undergraduate student majoring in sociology, psychology, political science, geography, economics or anthropology, who has achieved the highest grade point average on a minimum of five full courses, at least one of which is in the major, completed in the previous Fall/Winter.

Congratulations Erin and Silvia!

## RECENT RESEARCH AT THE INSTITUTE

### Ontario Election Study

Over the course of the recent election campaign in Ontario, the Institute conducted approximately 1,350 telephone interviews with adults in randomly-selected households across the province. The study was conducted on behalf of Dr. Fred Cutler (University of British Columbia) and Dr. Patrick Fournier (Université de Montréal), with funding from these universities. The study will help the researchers to understand why Ontarians elect the people and parties they do, and how important such issues as funding for education and health care are to people across the province. The rolling cross-section sampling strategy of interviewing about 45 people per day will shed light on how public opinion changes over the course of the campaign. The study also looked at issues relating to electoral reform as there was a referendum on Mixed Member Proportional Representation in this election. David Northrup, ISR's Associate Director, managed this project at the Institute.

### Universal Influenza Immunization Project (UIIP)

This project was undertaken to estimate the proportion of Ontario children up to age 11 who had a flu shot in the most recent flu season, to determine how many were "at risk" (under 24 months of age and with a chronic health condition like asthma), and to see if school-based flu shot programs increase the inoculation rate of children. Over the spring and summer of 2007, ISR conducted interviews in about 4,000 households in which children live, and about 200 of these households included an "at risk" child. The information from the survey will be used to improve the Ontario flu inoculation program and hopefully decrease the number of people who suffer from the flu each year. The study was carried out on behalf of principal investigator Dr. Doug Manuel of the Institute for Clinical Evaluative Sciences (ICES) at the Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre with funding from the Canadian Institutes of Health Research. Co-investigators included Dr. Jeff Kwong of ICES, Kathy Moran, Chair of the Rapid Risk Factor Surveillance System Steering Committee from the Durham Health Unit, and ISR Associate Director David Northrup, who also managed this project at the Institute.

### Women's Political Participation Survey

The primary purpose of this national study was to examine how feminist beliefs and religious values shape the political attitudes and behaviour of women. While women's political behaviour has come to mirror that of men in many domains, some gender gaps continue to exist and were explored in this research. Over the summer and fall of 2007, the Institute conducted approximately 1,200 interviews with randomly-selected adult Canadian women in all provinces except Quebec (which may be undertaken at a later date). Funding for the study came from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) of Canada. The principal investigator for the study was Dr. Brenda O'Neill (University of Calgary), and her co-investigators were Dr. Elisabeth Gidengil (McGill University) and Dr. Lisa Young (University of New Brunswick). David Northrup directed this study at the Institute.

## STATISTICAL CONSULTING SERVICE WINTER 2008 COURSES

### An Introduction to SPSS for Windows

Thursdays: February 7, 21, 28 and March 6, 2008  
1-4:30pm  
Room 021, PC Instructional Lab,  
Steacie Science Library  
Instructor: Lisa Fiksenbaum, MA

### An Introduction to SAS for Windows

Tuesdays: February 5, 19, 26 and March 4, 2008  
9am-Noon  
Room 021, PC Instructional Lab,  
Steacie Science Library  
Instructor: Nikolai Slobodianik, Specialist

**Other courses will be announced on the ISR Web site soon.**

Please enrol online at [www.isr.yorku.ca](http://www.isr.yorku.ca) or contact **Anita Valencia** at 416-736-5061 for further information.



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