

Abstract/Résumé analytique

Conscripting Canada's Past: The Harper Government and the Politics of Memory

Yves Frenette

In this critical commentary on the political uses of memory in contemporary Canada, the author examines the conscription of the Canadian past by the Harper government since it came to power in 2006. He shows how the conservatives' reconstruction of the nation's past serves their broader project of reconstructing the nation tout court. Moreover, he presents the various strategies they have deployed to remake Canada's history in their own image: the increased emphasis on military history and on the ties that bind Canadians to the monarchy; the endeavour to cast the War of 1812 and the First World War as foundational events in the making of modern Canada; the creation of the Canadian Museum of History. The author also discusses the dismantling of Library and Archives Canada, the main repository of the nation's memory.

Keywords: Stephen Harper; politics of memory; history and memory; history of Canadian conservatism; Canadian Museum of History; Library and Archives Canada; Canada and the monarchy; Canadian military history

Dans ce commentaire critique sur les usages politiques de la mémoire dans le Canada contemporain, l'auteur se penche sur l'embrigadement du passé canadien par le gouvernement de Stephen Harper, depuis son accession au pouvoir en 2006. Il montre comment la reconstruction du passé de la nation s'inscrit dans la volonté réfondatrice des conservateurs et il présente les stratégies déployées par ces derniers pour refaire l'histoire du Canada à leur image : mise en exergue des liens unissant les Canadiens à la monarchie et de l'histoire militaire, tentative de faire de la Guerre de 1812 et de la Première Guerre mondiale des événements fondateurs du Canada moderne, création du Musée canadien de l'histoire. En parallèle, l'auteur présente le démantèlement dont est victime Bibliothèque et Archives Canada, le principal dépôsitaire de la mémoire canadienne.

Mots-clés : Stephen Harper ; politiques mémorielles ; histoire et mémoire ; histoire du conservatisme canadien ; Musée canadien de l'histoire ; Bibliothèque et Archives Canada ; le Canada et la monarchie ; histoire militaire canadienne

Yves Frenette

CONSCRIPTING CANADA'S PAST: THE HARPER GOVERNMENT AND THE POLITICS OF MEMORY¹

I

The text that follows is intended as a commentary on the political uses of the past in contemporary Canada. It takes as its subject the mobilization of the Canadian past by the conservative government of Stephen Harper, in power since 2006, and thus represents an exercise in current history (*histoire immédiate*), with all of the possibilities and dangers inherent in the genre.² For one thing, I do not know how the story will end, nor even whether this government will last beyond the 2015 election year. Nor do I know whether the conservatives' re-fashioning of the nation's historical memory will continue in the same direction. I do not even know what impact their politics of memory will have on Canadian identity. All of this lies beyond my knowledge — and this is a plus. Indeed, the Harper government's actions with regard to national memory constitute what we might call *l'histoire à chaud* — history that is hot, controversial, of burning concern, and in-the-making. As a historian faced with this situation, I am more than just a witness; I am an actively engaged participant. And not so much for reasons of ideology — though these necessarily influence my perspective — as for reasons grounded in how I view the historian's professional role and the place of historical knowledge in society. History for me has three essential and

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¹ I presented earlier versions of this paper in French at the Université de Rennes 2 in June, 2013, as well as at the Université de Poitiers and the Université de Strasbourg in November, 2013. I am grateful to Hélène Harter, André Magord, and Jean-Noël Grandhomme for inviting me to their respective institutions, and to the three audiences for their stimulating questions and comments. I also appreciate the suggestions of the three anonymous readers for the *Canadian Journal of History/Annales canadiennes d'histoire*. Dr. Norman Cornett provided an English translation that was much improved by Mark Meyers, editor of the journal. Lyle Dick, Lisa Dillon, Michel Duquet, Dominique Marshall, Nicole Neatby, and Martin Pâquet graciously assisted me in a variety of ways. It is worth noting that I wrote the final version of this article in December 2013.

² Jean-François Soulet, *L'histoire immédiate. Historiographie, sources et méthodes* (Paris, 2012), pp. 43-66.

intersecting functions: to cultivate informed citizens prepared to ask tough questions regardless of their political affiliation or that of their government; to foster openness to other people, regardless of the era in which they lived or the continent they might inhabit; and to highlight the complexity of historical phenomena and the actors that drive them. To be sure, these three functions of history are, more often than not, quite far removed from the minds of politicians when they make use of the past. In the case of the Harper government, we see a fundamental opposition to them.

As previously indicated, this essay is a commentary. I would not know how to approach the subject otherwise, being neither a theorist of memory nor an expert on the relationship between history and memory. Although I have occasionally researched commemorative practices among Francophone minorities in North America,³ the perspective I bring to this essay is above all practical. As Chair of the Advocacy Committee of the Canadian Historical Association (hereafter CHA) since June 2012, I follow the government's commemorative and heritage policies closely. I have been particularly involved in discussions about the new Canadian Museum of History (hereafter CMH), which was built upon the ashes of the Canadian Museum of Civilization (hereafter CMC).⁴ Convinced that one cannot leave commemoration to those who might be tempted to celebrate the past uncritically, I have also over the years taken an active part in various commemorative projects, especially those of the Ontario Heritage Trust and the National Capital Commission (hereafter NCC). I currently serve as Chair of the latter's External Advisory Committee of Experts on Commemoration.

II

It is well known that Canada, like the rest of the Western world, is experiencing a period of profound transformation. For more than twenty-five years neoliberalism — sometimes slowly, sometimes rapidly — has steadfastly increased its hold. In the context of this general sea change, the coming to power of Stephen Harper's conservatives in 2006 marked a turning point, as did their 2011 parliamentary majority victory.

Studies that explain the party's electoral successes and ideological principles have proliferated, intersected, and sometimes clashed.⁵ For some, we are facing the continental spillover of the American Right's influence⁶; for others, Canadian

³ Yves Frenette, "La grande semaine des Franco-Américains et le tricentenaire de la découverte du lac Champlain (1909)," in Mickaël Augeron and Dominique Guillemin (eds.), *Champlain ou les portes du Nouveau Monde. Cinq siècles d'échanges entre le Centre-Ouest français et l'Amérique du Nord (XVIe-XXe siècles)* (La Crèche, France, 2004), pp. 323-26; "La pucelle de Pembroke ou la construction d'une héroïne franco-ontarienne," paper presented at the conference, "Produire et reproduire la francophonie en la nommant," University of Ottawa, September 2007.

⁴ Although this essay is informed by my duties at the CHA, it reflects my views alone.

⁵ See in particular Linda Cardinal and Jean Michel Lacroix (eds.), *Le conservatisme. Le Canada et le Québec en contexte*, Paris, Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2009.

⁶ Louis Balthazar, "La portée du conservatisme américain au Canada," in Cardinal and Lacroix, *Le conservatisme*, pp. 89-98. See also the conclusion of Gérard Boismenu's chapter, "Le conservatisme: Une valeur transcontinentale?" in the same collection, pp. 114-15.

conservatism carries its own distinctive features rooted in a long tradition⁷; still others maintain that it represents a synthesis.⁸ In this debate, no one is completely wrong; however, no one is completely right either. The Conservative Party of the early twenty-first century represents a sometimes-uneasy coalition in which various strains of the Right come together. What's more, the party's strategists, including Harper himself, have proved to be very savvy. Wishing to maintain power for as long as possible, they strive to gauge and adjust to public opinion. When the government feels in tune with it, it moves quickly; when it senses it is out of synch, it remains patient; it temporizes. This is the strategy of "incrementalism" advocated by Tom Flanagan, without a doubt the intellectual who, both as a political scientist and close adviser for several years, has most influenced Harper.⁹ This strategy also partly explains the Prime Minister's reticence toward the so-called "social" agenda of the American Right, and specifically his reluctance to reopen debates over abortion and same-sex marriage. The acceptance and promotion of multiculturalism, aside from the electoral benefits it brings, appear to be part of the same strategy. Indeed, the fact that Harper has been able to garner a portion of the ethno-cultural vote is no small accomplishment given that for almost fifty years such support went consistently and *en bloc* to the Liberals.¹⁰

As a disciple of the Calgary School marked by the teachings of Friedrich Hayek, Stephen Harper believes in the market economy; in limited, non-interventionist government; and in taxes that have been reduced to their lowest possible level.¹¹ If it is true, as Donald Ipperciel maintains, that the Conservative Party does not represent the only Canadian political formation to practice fiscal restraint and that those farther to the Right have criticized it for not going far enough in dismantling the State,¹² the reasons lie in the realities that come with the exercise of power. In a period of market instability and global financial crisis, it would be dangerous for any government to rock the boat in a way that could risk capsizing it. Here too the policy of incrementalism prevails.¹³

Further, the Conservative Party stands apart in Ottawa by virtue of its effort to disentangle national identity from the values that "the Liberals shaped as it wished for half of a century, notably by adopting the law on multiculturalism in 1971. Indeed, it has sought to bring Canada's collective identity in line with

⁷ Donald Ipperciel, "Le tournant conservateur au Canada et le nouveau *Nation Building* canadien," *Études canadiennes/Canadian Studies*, n° 73 (2012), pp. 25-46.

⁸ Frédéric Boily, "Un néoconservatisme à la canadienne? Stephen Harper et l'École de Calgary," in Cardinal et Lacroix, *Le conservatisme*, pp. 35-49.

⁹ Tom Flanagan, *Harper's Team: Behind the Scenes in the Conservative Ride to Power* (Montreal and Kingston, 2007).

¹⁰ Darrell Bricker and John Ibbitson, *The Big Shift: The Seismic Change in Canadian Politics, Business and Culture, and What it Means for our Future* (Toronto, 2013).

¹¹ Friedrich A. Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom* (Chicago, 1944). Concerning this thinker's influence on the Calgary School and Harper, see Boily, "Un néoconservatisme à la canadienne?" pp. 42-44.

¹² Ipperciel, "Le tournant conservateur," pp. 25-46.

¹³ See conservative commentator Adam Daifallah's assessment of the Harper government, "Rescuing Canada's Right Five Years Later," *Options politiques — Political Options* (June-July 2011), pp. 109-12. <http://irpp.org/assets/po/the-winner/daifallah2.pdf> (consulted 10 December 2013).

the conservative principles that prevailed during its pre-liberal past, with militarism and monarchism as the main anchorage points.”¹⁴ The Conservatives have devoted significant financial resources to this project, despite the budgetary constraints they have imposed on Canadian society.

And since most Canadian intellectuals do not espouse these ideas, there is a profound distrust on the part of the government’s inner circle for artists, journalists, scholars, and even top civil servants. The result is strict control over information, to the point where it has become increasingly difficult for scientists and other research professionals employed within the federal government to disseminate their work freely.¹⁵ A prime example of this kind of information control is the abolition, in May 2012, of the “Understanding Canada — Canadian Studies” program, which cut off funds to Canadian Studies programs abroad and thus ended a long tradition of cultural diplomacy.¹⁶

III

For Stephen Harper’s conservatives, it was the Liberal Party and its university allies, especially historians, who invented and then propagated the myths and symbols of contemporary Canadianness (UN peacekeeping missions, the Maple Leaf flag, bilingualism, multiculturalism, the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms). To turn the tide and make Canadians more conscious of their British roots, conservatives have appealed to an imagined past that simplifies history, makes it fast and easy to consume, and presumes a country free of social distinctions, including those of race and class.¹⁷

The Conservative programme to reinvent the nation draws upon the thought of Christian P. Champion, an historian who was associated with the now-defunct *Alberta Report* for several years before going to work on Parliament Hill in Ottawa for the Reform Party, the Canadian Alliance, and then the Conservative Party. When Harper became leader of the Opposition in 2002, he dismissed Champion, whom he considered too close to Stockwell Day’s “social conservatives.” After having defended his doctoral thesis at McGill University, Champion resurfaced as an adviser to Jason Kenney, Minister of Citizenship and Immigration from 2008 to 2013. At the same time, he wrote for conservative media outlets, particularly the *National Post* and the *Dorchester Review*.¹⁸ Champion sees Britishness as the cornerstone of Canadian identity and believes that Liberal Prime Minister Lester B. Pearson scrapped it during his minority government

¹⁴ Ipperciel, “Le tournant conservateur,” p. 26.

¹⁵ Lawrence Martin, *Harperland: The Politics of Control* (Toronto, 2011); Carol Linnit, “Harper’s Attack on Science. No Science, no Evidence, no Truth, no Democracy,” *Academic Matters. OCUFA’s Journal of Higher Education* (May 2013), pp. 3-7.

¹⁶ <http://www.iccs-ciec.ca/elimination-du-programme-comprendre-le-canada-eudes-canadiennes.htm> (consulted 11 December 2013). Although only created in 2008, the Canadian Studies Program had its roots in a tradition of cultural diplomacy that goes back to the 1970s.

¹⁷ Ian McKay and Robin Bates, *In the Province of History. The Making of the Public Past in Twentieth-Century Nova Scotia* (Montreal and Kingston, 2010).

¹⁸ Mark Sholdice, “The New History Wars,” *Toronto Review of Books*, 5 May 2013.

from 1964 to 1968 with the backing of a small group of “neo-nationalist” intellectuals. In its place, according to Champion, Pearson imposed new symbols on Canadians, even though he and his acolytes were just as enmeshed in the British tradition as their Tory adversaries. For Champion, this tradition has many variants: in Canada, as elsewhere in the Commonwealth, the Britishness of the motherland has been subject to a series of adaptations. After taking root after the Conquest of 1760, it subsequently evolved and diversified as a result of Loyalist, Scottish, English, and Irish immigration. Over time, in this narrative, even French Canadians accepted Britishness, while successive waves of immigrants from all over the world also adopted and modified it. The British tradition, in other words, is profoundly Canadian. As Champion tells the story, nearly all people living in Canada are steeped in it, even those who would deny it. In contrast, the contemporary symbols of collective identity fabricated by Pearson and Trudeau’s Liberals are artificial. This intellectual of the Right concludes his 2010 book with these words:

Canada was, after all, a sub-imperial Dominion developing its own myths, public pieties and blind allies . . . the country that emerged from the crisis of Britishness at the end of the 1960’s as an officially bilingual, increasingly multicultural liberal state, was the natural hybrid successor to a multiracial empire, a fulfilment and not a rejection, of British imperialism. Indignant publicists, steeped in neo-nationalist doctrine, will continue the Quixotic fight to be free of our “colonial past,” tilting at imperial windmills. But a British colony we shall ever be, to be precise; and that does not appear, from a twenty-first-century vantage point, to be such a bad thing. With all its fusions, diversities, and continuities, the *Res Canadiana* remains the product of a British world.¹⁹

Champion’s argument for Canada’s essential Britishness dovetails beautifully with Harper’s fascination with the monarchy and the Anglosphere. When he became Prime Minister in 2006 Harper began his inaugural address to the Canadian parliament by paying tribute to Queen Elizabeth II.²⁰ On many other occasions he has stressed the loyalty and devotion that bind the Canadian people to Her Majesty: “At the heart of our relationship is the golden circle of the crown which links us all together with the majestic past that takes us back to the

¹⁹ C.P. Champion, *The Strange Demise of British Canada: The Liberals and Canadian Nationalism, 1964-1968* (Montreal and Kingston, 2010), p. 231. Among the intellectuals he castigates for having sacrificed Canada’s British soul on the altar of “neo-nationalism,” Champion includes George Francis Gillman Stanley, who is considered the father of the Maple Leaf flag. Could one imagine a starker contrast with the author of *The Strange Demise of British Canada*? Stanley was a gifted historian and soldier for whom Canadians were essentially peace loving. He became Lieutenant Governor of New Brunswick in 1981.

²⁰ Jordan Michael Smith, “Reinventing Canada: Stephen Harper’s Conservative Revolution,” *World Affairs* (March-April 2012), pp. 21-28. <http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/article/reinventing-canada-stephen-harper%E2%80%99s-conservative-revolution> (10 December 2013).

Tudors, the Plantagenets, the Magna Carta, habeas corpus, petition of rights and English Common Law.”²¹

These have not remained empty words for Harper. Since he came to power the Queen has become more visible, whether in the Prime Minister’s office, in embassies, or in the Department of Foreign Affairs, where her portrait has replaced two paintings by Quebec artist Alfred Pellan. Also noteworthy is the revival of the designation ‘Royal’ for the Canadian Navy and Air Force, which had been removed by Pierre Elliot Trudeau’s Liberals in 1968. Further, the 2009 guide to Canadian citizenship opens with Canada’s ties to the British Crown.²² Finally, every Canadian may receive a poster of the British sovereign upon request.

IV

The Canada idealized by Stephen Harper is not only monarchist, but also militaristic. The country, ironize Ian McKay and Jamie Swift, “was created by wars, defended by soldiers, and kept free by patriotic support of military virtues. It is a Warrior Nation.”²³ Canada thus enjoys a glorious military past that it must make known. It possesses great military traditions that it must preserve and promote. Along with the monarchy, this theme figures prominently in the 2009 citizenship guide: the section on the country’s history features thirty illustrations, of which two-thirds deal with war or the army. This stands in marked contrast with the 2005 version of the same guide, where not a single military image appears. The authors of the 2009 edition assign the world wars a primary role in the making of twentieth-century Canada and present the Battle of Vimy Ridge as a symbol of Canadianness par excellence. Along the same lines, the Governor of the Bank of Canada, Mark Carney, and the Minister of Finance, Jim Flaherty, unveiled in May 2012 the new twenty-dollar bill bearing the Vimy Memorial. Its image replaced that of Haïda sculptor Bill Reid’s famous statue “The Spirit of Haida Gwaii.”²⁴

It is worth noting that the militarization of English Canada (the case of Quebec is different) began slowly about twenty years ago, intensified after September 11, 2001, and gained even more momentum with the Conservatives’ 2006 victory. Annual Remembrance Day ceremonies have grown in pomp and circumstance while tributes to the brave soldiers who defended Canadians’ freedom have replaced references to the horrors of war. Moreover, instead of honouring only the veterans of the world wars and the Korean War, these ceremonies now treat as heroes those soldiers who fought in the colonial wars (the Crimean War in the 1850s, the Métis rebellions of the 1870s and 1880s, the Boer War at the turn of the 20th century).²⁵ Veterans of Afghanistan must also

²¹ Quoted in Ian McKay and Jamie Swift, *Warrior Nation: Rebranding Canada in an Age of Anxiety* (Toronto, 2012), p. 11.

²² *Discover Canada: The Rights and Responsibilities of Citizenship*. Ottawa, 2009, p. 1.

²³ McKay and Swift, *Warrior Nation*, p. xi.

²⁴ Ibid., pp. 15-18.

²⁵ Ibid., pp. 283-84.

be honoured, and to that effect the government plans to erect a monument, contrary to NCC directives stipulating that a certain number of years must pass before commemorating an event or individual. Furthermore, the government has incorporated the NCC's public programming division into the Department of Canadian Heritage and Official Languages, thereby centralizing decision-making about public forms of commemoration.

V

The exaltation of both Britishness and militarism has found consummate expression in the lavish and expensive (\$28 million) commemoration of the War of 1812. The government funded celebrations, exhibitions, historical re-enactments, commemorative stamps and coins, and an iPad application. It plans to unveil a monument on Parliament Hill in 2014.²⁶

The massive investment in the commemoration of this conflict represents a rather clumsy attempt to unite Canadians behind a common myth. According to the conservative version, the War of 1812 brought together Loyalists from the United States, British immigrants, French Canadians, and Aboriginal people to defend Canada, which, it bears mentioning, did not exist before 1867. Without this valiant defence, Canadians of all origins would have become Americans, including French Canadians, who fully understood that their language and culture had no chance of survival under Uncle Sam.²⁷ Stephen Harper himself explained the significance of this conflict on the Department of Canadian Heritage and Official Languages' website: "The war helped establish our path toward becoming an independent and free country, united under the Crown with a respect for linguistic and ethnic diversity. The heroic efforts of Canadians then helped define who we are today, what side of the border we live on, and which flag we salute."²⁸

This interpretation is both anachronistic and counterfactual.²⁹ Because of it the illustrator Francis Back declined an invitation to create four frescoes for an exhibit at the Canadian War Museum. The artist, whose work is widely solicited in Europe, the United States, and Asia for history books, storyboards, and museum and park illustrations, had in fact been previously disappointed by the federal government's distortions of history. After having invited him to submit a research dossier and preliminary sketches honouring historical figures from the War of 1812, Canada Post ultimately rejected his drawings, one of which featured the famed Aboriginal chief Tecumseh, who assembled three thousand

²⁶ McKay and Swift, *Warrior Nation*.

²⁷ Annie Mathieu, "Commémoration de la guerre de 1812. Un conflit, deux versions », *Le Soleil*, 17 June 2012. <http://www.lapresse.ca/le-soleil/actualites/societe/201206/16/01-4535683-commemoration-de-la-guerre-de-1812-un-conflit-deux-versions.php> (Consulted 7 June 2013).

²⁸ <http://1812.gc.ca/eng/1305743548294/1305743621243> (consulted 10 December 2013).

²⁹ See Bernard Andrès's perspicacious analysis (in collaboration with Patricia Willemain-Andrès), *La Guerre de 1812. Journal de Jacques Viger* (Québec, 2012), pp. 5-12.

men from various tribes to fight the Americans. In Ottawa, Back's Tecumseh was reproached for looking too vengeful.³⁰

VI

Harper's effort to reconstruct collective memory intersects with a historiographical debate that has gone on for fifteen years. It began in 1998 with the publication of retired York University historian Jack Granatstein's searing and influential book, *Who Killed Canadian History?*, which, among other things, accused university history departments of abandoning political and military history in favour of narrowly specialized studies of social history of little interest to the general public. Granatstein holds social historians partially responsible for Canadians' lack of historical consciousness and claims that they unduly emphasize the country's injustices over its accomplishments. Their negative perspective, he adds, has spread through provincial school systems:

Canada must be one of the few Western industrialized states that does not make an effort to teach its history positively and thoroughly to its young people. It must be one of the few political entities to overlook its own cultural traditions — the European civilization on which our nation is founded — on the grounds that they would systematically discriminate against those who come from other cultures. The effect of these policies on a generation of students are all around us...³¹

Granatstein's Canada abounds with genuine heroes, such as Prime Minister John A. Macdonald, who are unknown or unrecognized by Canadians because their teachers have instead sung the praises of "bastardized ones" such as Métis leader Louis Riel.³²

As head of the Canadian War Museum from 1998 to 2001, Granatstein had the opportunity to put his ideas into practice, and to this day he does not mince words with opponents. In October 2013, he declared that "Obviously I am generalizing, but historians are all NDPers, they hate the Tories with a passion, and they're all social historians, so they think any government that's going to commemorate the War of 1812 — which they have all said is unimportant, which is just silly — is a war mongering government." He fears that the country will not celebrate as it should the centenary of the First World War, despite the fact that French-Canadian participation in this conflict was half-hearted to say the least: "I am told they're only putting in as much money for World War

³⁰ Isabelle Paré, "Guerre de 1812 — Un illustrateur refuse de cautionner les distorsions historiques des conservateurs," *Le Devoir*, 15 June 2012. <http://www.ledevoir.com/culture/actualites-culturelles/352551/un-illustrateur-refuse-de-cautionner-les-distorsions-historiques-des-conservateurs> (consulted 7 June 2013).

³¹ Jack Granatstein, *Who Killed Canadian History?* (Toronto, 1998), p. 14.

³² Ibid., p. xvi.

One as they did for the War of 1812, about \$30 million or something, and that's just pathetic.”³³

VII

Tensions over the nature of Canadian history lie at the heart of the controversy over the transformation of the Canadian Museum of Civilization into the Canadian Museum of History.³⁴ On October 16, 2012, The Honourable James Moore, Minister of Canadian Heritage and Official Languages, made the announcement, along with the promise of \$25 million for the project. During his speech, Moore repeatedly stated that all lovers of Canadian history, regardless of their political affiliations, should applaud this initiative. He went on to say that preparations for the 150th anniversary of Confederation represent “an unprecedented opportunity to celebrate our history and those achievements that define who we are as Canadians.”³⁵ To create this new institution, the Harper government undertook major changes to the Museums Act. On November 6, 2013, after several raucous debates, Parliament passed on its third reading Bill C-49, “An Act to Amend the Museums Act in order to establish the Canadian Museum of History and to make consequential amendments to other Acts.” The law passed in the House of Commons 149 to 121. It stands before the Senate at the time of writing this article.³⁶

Several journalists and historians who attended the official announcement remarked that the massive injection of funds into a new museum was suspicious to say the least, coming as it was from a government that has not hesitated to impose drastic budget cuts on Parks Canada (\$29 million for fiscal years 2012-2014 alone) and on Library and Archives Canada (\$19 million for the same period).³⁷ On top of this, in 2010 the Harper government abolished the

³³ Quoted in Lee-Anne Goodman, “Is government trying to reshape Cdn history?” *The Canadian Press*, October 16, 2013. <http://durhamregion.com/news-story/4158674-is-government-trying-to-reshape-cdn-history-/> (consulted 26 October 2013). Various commentators have rightfully compared the late twentieth-century “culture wars” in the United States to debates about the nature of Canada and the opposition between the proponents of national history and those who promote social history (see, for instance, the special issue on this topic in the *Journal of Social History*, “Social History and the American Political Climate — Problems and Strategies,” vol. 29). France also provides parallels, especially if we consider president Nicholas Sarkozy’s effort to create a Maison de l’histoire de France or the pseudo-histories proffered in the rants of actor Lorànt Deutsch and journalist Patrick Buisson. For a vigorous critique of these last, see William Blanc, Aurore Chéry and Christophe Naudin, *Les historiens de garde. De Lorànt Deutsch à Patrick Buisson, la résurgence du roman national* (Paris, 2013).

³⁴ See the website <http://www.historyapplied.com/2013/03/canadian-history-wars-some-links.html>

³⁵ Government of Canada, “Harper Government to Create the Canadian Museum of History,” 16 October 2012. <http://www.pch.gc.ca/eng/1350400008284/1350400786417> (consulted 17 October 2012).

³⁶ <http://www.parl.gc.ca/Content/LOP/LegislativeSummaries/41/1/c49-e.pdf> (consulted 14 December 2013).

³⁷ Lyle Dick, “Where are Canada’s Historical and Heritage Programs Following the Federal Cuts of 2012, and How Should the Historical Community Respond?” *CHA Bulletin de la SHC*, vol. 39, n° 2 (2013), p. 41.

mandatory long-form census, thus depriving future historians of a potentially rich source of information.³⁸

It is true, as noted by Deborah Morrison, head of Canada's National History Society, that the Conservatives have invested substantial sums in the Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21 in Halifax and in the future Canadian Museum of Human Rights in Winnipeg. Morrison, whose organization promotes an approach to Canadian history that emphasizes momentous dates and great men, likewise reminds critics that the Conservatives established the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to address the various abuses suffered by generations of Aboriginal children in residential schools.³⁹ It is also worth mentioning that the CMC, whose origins go back to 1856, has not significantly changed its prevailing conceptual framework since its creation in 1986. According to several sources, the CMC's Board of Trustees believed that the time had come to rejuvenate the institution.

But the transformation of an anthropological museum into a museum of history is no small task, and so it is surprising that neither the museum's management team nor its Board of Trustees felt the need to consult the experts, especially historians, before deciding to undertake it. Even the CMC's own highly qualified employees were the last to learn the news, though rumours had been circulating for several weeks. Also caught off guard were those with a stake in the National Capital Region's economy and tourist industry: with 1.3 million visitors per year, the CMC was one of the region's major attractions. For his part, Victor Rabinovitch, who headed the CMC from 2000 to 2011, fears that the change of name and mandate reflects a "narrow" and "parochial" vision.⁴⁰

Indeed, the establishment of the CMH raises several questions. Its mandate as formulated in Bill C-49 does not appear very different from the mandate of the CMC; however, the goal of fostering "critical understanding" has disappeared. Moreover, as Rabinovitch notes, the research mandate — whose fulfillment required one-third of the CMC's budget — has also changed. Whereas previously it included fundamental and theoretical research, it appears that CMH professionals must concentrate their future research on exhibitions alone.⁴¹

And what history of Canada will be presented at the new museum? In recent decades the practice and study of history has become multidimensional, taking into consideration the experience of many different groups and incorporating perspectives that sometimes clash. Historians now study a range of topics: indigenous peoples, colonization, settlement, agriculture, natural resources, industrialization, gender relations, sexuality, migration patterns, ethno-cultural cooperation and conflict. In short, they have taken to heart Marc Bloch's characterization of

³⁸ Munir A. Sheikh, "Good Government and Statistics Canada: The Need for True Independence," *Academic Matters* (May 2013), p. 13.

³⁹ Deborah Morrison, "Avoiding the Name Game: Is the Rebranding of the Civilization Museum a Nasty Plot? Not really," *Canada's History* (February-March 2013), p. 62.

⁴⁰ "Ex-Museum CEO calls proposed mandate 'narrow and parochial,'" CBC News, June 6, 2013. <http://www.cbc.ca/news/arts/story/2013/06/06/ottawa-museum-civilization-history-rebranding-new-mandate-concerns.html> (consulted 8 June 2013).

⁴¹ Ibid.

the historian as an ogre who feeds on every imaginable human activity.⁴² The history of Canada is complex. And a museum of “national” history aimed chiefly at creating a grand, mythical history (*mythistoire*) is irremediably destined for failure.⁴³

Officials at the CMC rightly insist that Canadians and foreign visitors need a venue where they can grasp the diverse political, military, economic, social, and cultural forces that have shaped the fabric of Canadian life. On several occasions, President and CEO Mark O’Neill has underscored the inclusive orientation of the CMH, and David Morrison, who is devising its new permanent exhibition, has stated in reference to certain “obscure” events of Canada’s history: “We’re taking what we call a multi-perspective approach, because there is no single way to view some of these events. Your view depends so much on who you are. We’ve got to tell a lot of these stories from the different points of view of these different communities.”⁴⁴ However, for the government, the role of the CMH will be to incubate “a strong sense of Canadian identity” and pride.⁴⁵

Another concern stems from the fact that the CMH is looking for partnerships with the private sector, as public funds will not be sufficient to ensure its smooth operation. It took a first step in this direction by announcing a partnership with the Canadian Association of Petroleum Producers (hereafter CAPP) on November 27, 2013. This five-year agreement offers the museum \$1 million in exchange for giving visibility to the association in its major exhibits until 2018. For Mark O’Neill, the “CAPP is an important sector organization in Canada and its support is going to help us do things for Canadians that we would not be able to do over the next five years.”⁴⁶ While in a context of budgetary cuts and restrictions such public-private partnerships are virtually inevitable, they can imperil the independence of public institutions. Indeed, numerous examples exist of sponsors attempting to influence the programming of organizations to which they give money. In 2011 the CAPP itself did so with an exhibition on energy at the Canada Science and Technology Museum.⁴⁷ We would do well to heed the warning of Allan Megill, a Canadian historian working in the United States: “The demand that the past should be remembered *in the right way* is an insistent

⁴² Marc Bloch, *Apologie pour l’histoire ou le métier d’historien* (Paris, 1952), p. 18.

⁴³ I borrow the concept of “mythistoire” from Jocelyn Létourneau, « Mythistoires de Losers. Introduction au roman historial des Québécois d’origine canadienne-française », *Histoire sociale — Social History* 39, n° 77 (2006), pp. 157-80.

⁴⁴ Don Butler, “Museum of Civilization lifts veil on its new Canadian history hall,” *Ottawa Citizen*, 28 November 2013. <http://www.ottawacitizen.com/travel/Museum+Civilization+lifts+veil+Canadian+history+hall/9220793/story.html> (consulted 30 November 2013).

⁴⁵ Goodman, “Is government trying to reshape Cdn history?”

⁴⁶ Don Butler, « Oil-industry money won’t influence exhibits, museum of civilization CEO vows », *Ottawa Citizen*, 26 November 2013. <http://www.ottawacitizen.com/travel/Canadian+Museum+Civilization+gets+sponsorship+deal+from/9210141/story.html> (consulted 30 November 2013). See also Don Butler, “Museum of Civilization changes driven by clashing visions of Canada, former CEO says,” *Ottawa Citizen*, 26 November 2013. <http://www.ottawacitizen.com/travel/Museum+Civilization+changes+driven+clashing+visions+Canada+former+says/9216059/story.html> (consulted 30 November 2013).

⁴⁷ Butler, “Oil-industry money won’t influence exhibits.”

one, and historians are expected to do their part, by those who pay them and by those who feel that their own political, social, and cultural ‘imperatives’ are the deserving ones.”⁴⁸

For its part — and for the reasons given above — the CHA treated the announcement of the CMH’s creation with circumspection. However, as the months went by, it felt somewhat reassured by the composition of the six advisory committees charged with conceptualizing the museum’s permanent exhibition, whose members represent diverse historiographical perspectives. Moreover, the museum invited the CHA to name four members of these committees, and to have representatives at the brainstorming sessions (*charrettes*) for the new Canadian History Hall.

Soon after announcing the creation of the CMH, minister Moore expressed in several forums the opinion that teaching Canadian history should become mandatory in all of the country’s schools. However, because education falls under provincial jurisdiction, no one took him very seriously. Yet behind closed doors, on April 29, 2013, the House of Commons Standing Committee on Canadian Heritage decided, apparently despite objections from members of the opposition parties, to conduct a comprehensive review of the teaching of “significant aspects” of Canadian history, and especially of the armed conflicts of the twentieth century. The committee would also devote some attention to the government institutions and programmes that disseminate historical knowledge and preserve the country’s heritage, including the national museums, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, and the National Film Board. When this initiative raised hackles, particularly in Quebec, government spokespersons quickly confirmed that they would respect the lines of provincial responsibility and authority.⁴⁹ One week later, the committee modified its mandate so as to exclude schools from its review.⁵⁰ It held hearings in May 2013. At the moment that I write these lines, we have yet to hear anything more about it.

Meanwhile, on June 11, 2013, Moore announced \$12 million in funding for a series of measures designed to promote Canadian history. As part of this initiative, the government replaced the Canadian Studies Program of the Ministry of Canadian Heritage and Official Languages with the Canada History Fund, which aims to support the development of activities and other material celebrating “the important historical events and people that shaped the country in which we live today.” It also launched the Government of Canada History Awards, which honour outstanding students and teachers who show an interest in “celebrating” Canadian history. These awards will be administered by Canada’s

⁴⁸ Allan Megill, *Historical Knowledge, Historical Error: A Contemporary Guide to Practice* (Chicago, 2007), p. 18.

⁴⁹ Mike de Souza, “Canadian history comes under Conservative review in Parliament,” *Calgary Herald*, 3 May 2013. <http://www.calgaryherald.com/Canadian+history+comes+under+Conservative+review+Parliament/8333191/story.html> (8 June 2013).

⁵⁰ “Ottawa ne fera pas d’histoire dans les écoles,” 6 May 2013. <http://www.radio-canada.ca/nouvelles/Politique/2013/05/06/005-patrimoine-histoire-recul-federal.shtml> (consulted 8 June 2013).

History, “an independent national organization with a mandate to make our nation’s past relevant and accessible to all Canadians.”⁵¹ Judging by its website, Canada’s History appears to be a reincarnation of Canada’s National History Society, with Deborah Morrison as President.⁵² Moore also announced that the government would partner with the Historica-Dominion Institute to create two new Heritage Minutes each year between 2013 and 2017. Other measures include the designation of July 1 to 7 as Canada History Week; improved access to funding (in the context of existing programs) for institutions and groups wishing to promote Canadian history in their communities; increased assistance to programs that bring veterans and active-duty soldiers into classrooms; and enhanced financial support for the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* and *The Canadian Encyclopedia*.⁵³ For her part, Shelly Glover, who succeeded James Moore as Minister of Canadian Heritage and Official Languages after a cabinet shuffle in summer 2013, launched consultations across Canada to prepare the celebration of the 150th anniversary of Confederation in 2017 on December 11, 2013.⁵⁴

VIII

Taking the full measure of the politics of memory under the Harper government requires at least some discussion of Library and Archives Canada (LAC), which responded to drastic government-imposed budget cuts in 2009 with a thorough-going review of its acquisitions practices. Four issues have driven LAC’s re-orientation: the advent of the digital era; the need to set up an “objective and transparent” framework for institutional analysis; accountability; and the imperative to develop a collaborative approach on a national scale. In the first instance, the process of evaluating and acquiring materials has been revised according to the so-called “pan-societal” approach developed under the leadership of Daniel Caron, Librarian and Archivist of Canada from 2009 to 2012. This approach would have apparently made it possible to schematize the relationships between various social actors in a way that rendered them intelligible to specialists tasked with preserving and disseminating the nation’s documentary heritage. Further, the pan-societal approach was to have provided “a clear, up-to-date, relevant, and as complete as possible portrait of Canadian society” that would have allowed LAC “to build, collaboratively, a documentary heritage whose contents reflects society as faithfully as possible.”⁵⁵ To capture the complexity of human activity, the pan-societal framework divided society into four general domains, each of which was then divided into fifteen subdomains.

⁵¹ “Minister Moore Announces New Programs to Support Canada’s History,” 11 June 2013. <http://www.canadianheritage.gc.ca/eng/1370873738331/1370873756081> (consulted 2 September 2013).

⁵² <http://www.canadahistory.ca/>

⁵³ “Minister Moore Announces New Programs to Support Canada’s History.”

⁵⁴ <http://www.pch.gc.ca/eng/1386771180955/1386771260959> (consulted 14 December 2013).

⁵⁵ “Synthèse de l’approche pansociétale d’évaluation et d’acquisition du patrimoine documentaire de Bibliothèque et Archives Canada” (Ottawa, October 2012), pp. 1-3 (citation p. 2).

Problematic in many respects, this approach may have died with Caron's departure in May 2013, when a more realistic model replaced it. It nonetheless contributed to the implementation of budget cuts so devastating that LAC has been nearly dismantled. Consider the following list of impacts: a twenty percent reduction in personnel; de-professionalization; a pronounced slowdown in the acquisition of books and private archives; shorter business hours; the closure of on-line portals; the end of interlibrary loan services⁵⁶; the termination of the \$1.7 million National Archival Development Program, which for twenty-six years had served as a lifeline for 800 small repositories; the abandonment of consultative processes with major stakeholders in Canadian libraries and archives; the forfeiture of the institution's role as an international leader in the field of archival theory and practice. As for the archival digitization program that had been presented as a universal panacea, it has yet to yield results.⁵⁷

Meanwhile, LAC established partnerships with private enterprise that caused controversy when knowledge of them became public. In June 2013, for example, the *Ottawa Citizen* revealed that LAC had signed a contract ceding to Canadiana.com the exclusive digital rights to millions of documents and books for ten years. When questioned by the opposition in the House of Commons, Minister Moore "agreed that Canadians shouldn't pay to access their own archives."⁵⁸ Two months later, on August 8, LAC, in partnership with the firm Ancestry.com, put the 1921 Canadian census online, accompanied by a geographical index. The firm would produce an index of names and hold exclusive commercial rights to it for three years. Users would have free access to the census and geographical index, but to consult the name index they would have to subscribe to Ancestry.com. Like the CMH, LAC alleges that in a context of budgetary restrictions, public-private partnerships enable it to disseminate documents and databases at a lower cost to Canadian taxpayers. This might be a defensible position, were it not for the fact that in the case of the 1921 census, LAC already possessed a digital version created with the help of Statistics Canada and university partners.⁵⁹

LAC has reached a crisis point. According to the website "Save Library and Archives Canada," its budget has decreased by \$36.5 million since 1990. When

⁵⁶ The CHA has compiled testimonials demonstrating that the termination of the Interlibrary Loan Service has had a devastating impact on historical research, particularly among historians in Atlantic and Western Canada.

⁵⁷ Progressive Librarian National Guild Toronto Chapter, "Statement on Library and Archives Canada," 17 May 2013. <http://plggta.org/archives/2013> (consulted 8 June 2013); Myron Groover, "Contempt for Values: The Controversy over Library and Archives Canada's Code of Conduct," *Academic Matters*, p. 10. In early 2013, LAC announced it would implement a code of conduct that severely limited the professional pursuits of its employees. When confronted by the Opposition about this in the House of Commons, Moore disavowed the policy. Perhaps this explains why it has yet to be implemented at the time of writing.

⁵⁸ Chris Cobb, "Anger greets secret private Library and Archives Canada deal," *Ottawa Citizen*, 12 June 2013. <http://www.ottawacitizen.com/news/Confusion+anger+over+major+secretly+brokered+deal+between/8517443/story.html> (consulted 15 August 2013).

⁵⁹ Lisa Dillon, "The 1921 Census of Canada, a (not so) hidden history," 2013. <http://professeure.tumblr.com> (consulted 20 August 2013).

the cuts planned for 2012-15 are added, the institution's budget, when adjusted for inflation, will represent no more than 58% of what it was in 1990.⁶⁰

The future of LAC will largely depend on the choice of a new CEO. When economist and information manager Daniel Caron took the helm in 2009, it marked the first time that the position of Archivist of Canada was held by someone without expertise in history or archival studies. The bureaucrat soon alienated specialists with whom he interacted. Seeking to establish himself as an internationally renowned guru of documentary heritage management, Caron did little more than weaken LAC over his four-year tenure. He resigned on May 15, 2013 after it came to light that his expense account for 2011-12 totalled \$170,000, including \$4,500 for Spanish lessons.⁶¹

IX

Without a doubt, the policies embodying the Harper government's politics of memory have done considerable damage. Two great institutions, Parks Canada and LAC, are no more than shadows of what they once were. As for abolishing Canadians' obligation to complete the long-form census every five years, all sectors of society, including business, have denounced this senseless move, which only succeeded in satisfying a few libertarians. In the case of the CMH, the direction it ultimately takes remains to be seen, so it is best to reserve judgement for now.

Broad transformations of collective identity are difficult to ascertain in the short term. However, if various opinion polls are to be believed, it appears that the population has to date remained cold to the effort to reconceive and rebuild Canadian identity along conservative lines. It seems, too, that despite the money spent on it, the commemoration of the War of 1812 has aroused little enthusiasm, with Canadians preferring to celebrate events they perceive as having had an impact on their lives, such as the centennial of women's suffrage or the 30th anniversary of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms.⁶² Although the Conservatives' policies have partially contributed to renewed interest in the monarchy, they may also have helped ignite feelings against it, as evidenced by the controversy about new citizens swearing allegiance to the Queen.⁶³

It is very difficult to predict whether the government will continue in its effort to reconstruct Canadian identity as part of the broader project of reconstructing the nation *tout court*. Weakened by a series of scandals midway

⁶⁰ <http://www.savelibraryarchives.ca/> (consulted 15 December 2013).

⁶¹ "Library Head Daniel Caron resigns as \$170,000 in expenses found," *Ottawa Citizen*, 15 May 2013. <http://www.ottawacitizen.com/news/Library+head+Daniel+Caron+resigns+expenses+found/8391614/story.html> (consulted 8 June 2013).

⁶² Steven Chase, "Harper's 1812 overture: Study shows Canadians unfamiliar with war's details," *The Globe and Mail*, 5 October 2011. <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/politics/harpers-1812-overture-study-shows-canadians-unfamiliar-with-wars-details/article556224/> (30 August 2013).

⁶³ "Questions Arise over Future King's Relevance to Canada," *The Globe and Mail*, 23 July 2013.

through his mandate, Stephen Harper shuffled his cabinet during the summer of 2013. To give it a kinder and younger image, he promoted James Moore to Minister of Industry, while moving Jason Kenney from Citizenship and Immigration to Employment and Social Development. Their respective successors, Shelly Glover and Chris Alexander, as well as the Prime Minister himself, may well remain cautious until after the 2015 election. Nevertheless, historians must remain vigilant. As Philippe Joutard writes in a recent book, “history still constitutes the only means of salving wounded memories, of allowing competing memories to coexist. It remains at once the best way to vanquish forgetting and to protect ourselves from the excesses of memory.”⁶⁴

⁶⁴ Philippe Joutard, *Histoire et mémoires, conflits et alliance* (Paris, 2013), back cover.