Document generated on 04/23/2024 5:56 p.m.

Journal of the Canadian Historical Association
Revue de la Société historique du Canada

Presidential Address: The Personal and the Historical

Judith Fingard

Volume 9, Number 1, 1998

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/030489ar
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7202/030489ar

See table of contents

Publisher(s)

The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada

ISSN

0847-4478 (print)
1712-6274 (digital)

Explore this journal

Cite this article

Fingard, J. (1998). Presidential Address: The Personal and the Historical. *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association / Revue de la Société historique du Canada*, *9*(1), 3–13. https://doi.org/10.7202/030489ar

Article abstract

In her 1998 Presidential Address to the Canadian Historical Association, Judith Fingard poses a question which has been on our collective minds for some time: “Does the personal history of the historian determine the choice of her or his subject matter, approach, and ongoing professional development?” By delving into the personal reflections of celebrated Canadian historians, Fingard has been able to shed light on this contentious issue. According to Fingard, the personal and professional intersect at several key points (or at least have for her sample of historians working in Canada in the past twenty years). The obvious, it seems, is true. Gender, class and stage of life all influence scholarly pursuits whether it be in terms of subject matter chosen or the amount of time one is able to devote to research and writing. Certainly the past twenty years has seen great change in Canadian academia; particularly, one can argue, in the field of history. It is clear that those sampled in Fingard's survey drew upon their personal backgrounds not only to forge a passion for the past - sometimes against all odds - but a professional identity based on the study of history of the margins. Ultimately, we can conclude that social historians of the past twenty years personify the field they played such a role in developing. To varying degrees, the profession is indeed personal.

All rights reserved © The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada, 1998

This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/

érudit

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

https://www.erudit.org/en/

JUDITH FINGARD

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS
DISCOURS DE LA PRÉSIDENTE

The Personal and the Historical

JUDITH FINGARD

> *Looking backwards is of course, an historian's profession; to do so in individual terms is, however, a deep personal pleasure.*
>
> Marcel Trudel (1982)

I began this investigation of the connection between the personal and the historical with one major question in mind: Does the personal history of the historian determine the choice of her or his subject matter, approach, and ongoing professional development? In order to attempt to answer this question I consulted the group of historians whom I assumed represented our most committed writers of scholarly history, namely the Canadians who have won the major CHA prizes since their inception some twenty years ago. (By major prizes I mean Macdonald, Ferguson and Garneau)

Surely, I thought, the experiences of the most celebrated authors, encompassing two generations, must reveal instructive patterns of training, professional experience and personal influences. In addition to my reliance on published memoirs and reflections, about half of our prize winners gave me information about their lives – most of them very modestly and somewhat guardedly in typical Canadian fashion. For example, from one: "my answers, I fear are terribly mundane"[1] from another, as he reflected on his training: "I went to Harvard mainly to eliminate the inferiority complex that I felt as a Canadian."[2] Luckily there were a few British, European and American-born and raised historians among my sample who do not suffer from Canadian self-effacement.

Despite my informants' failure generally to be candid about their private lives, since they tended to define "persona" as strictly "professional." I have nonetheless been able to deduce that personal circumstances led to accidental or fortuitous events which provided crucial opportunities or turning points especially early on. These included trips abroad for personal reasons which resulted in historical interests; a sports scholarship which led to classes with an inspiring history instructor; the denial of access to archives for political reasons which led to a rewarding change of topic; a teaching assistantship in a new

1Respondent 1
2Respondent 2

scholarly field which encouraged the trainee historian to undertake work in that field. I discovered that there is no point in trying to make the lives of Canadian historians conform to a blueprint. They form a mosaic beyond categorising except in the most basic respects: those of gender and stage of life.

With respect to gender, the prize winners include both men and women obviously, and for some of them gender has been a decisive factor. Unlike the men, the majority of the women went through considerable life experiences before embarking on the degrees and careers which led to their prizes. These included employment in other fields of endeavour, sometimes for many years, as well as the responsibilities of wife and mother – child rearing not being something that many women of the generation now in their 50s or older could readily do in tandem with academic pursuits. While the late start always makes catch-up difficult, if not impossible, it can also deprive women of the very chance of securing academic positions. One of them watched the "promising young scholars" snap up the jobs for which, on a level playing field, she would have been entitled because of "excellent teaching evaluations and more publications."[3] For her the prize was a bittersweet reminder of what might have been. Even when academe was not the goal, obstacles intruded. Maria Tippett's aim was to become a writer, unshackled by an academic post, but her memoirs reveal the travails as much as the triumphs of the fledgling private scholar.[4] Student experiences also had gendered implications especially at a time when graduate schools were still largely the preserve of men. One woman admitted that "It wasn't until I got to graduate school that it occurred to me there were problems with the way history was taught and the attitudes to young women. Earlier I have to say I probably benefited from some of these same attitudes."[5] What she is alluding to is a sexism to which she had been largely oblivious because of her need to succeed in an unfamiliar cultural context where her best strategy was to be conservative, compliant and conformist and no doubt, in those by-gone days, wear a mini-skirt to good effect.

As for the men, several of them had not chosen history or the university as their subject and workplace but found history more congenial than careers in the natural sciences, the more theoretical social sciences, the language-based humanities or the rich professions on which they first embarked or intended to embark.[6] Concern about the job market was a pressing consideration for them too. One was discouraged by mentors from pursuing his first love, medieval history, because of the lack of job prospects;[7] another expected that the romance

3Respondent 3

4Maria Tippett, *Becoming Myself: A Memoir* (Toronto: Stoddart, 1996)

5Respondent 4

6 Respondents 1, 5, 6, 7, 8; Marcel Trudel, "Un historien se penche sur son passé." Canadian Historical Association, *Historical Papers*, 1982, 132-3

7 Respondent 6

of undergraduate history would be followed by a job in business, assuming, as he did, that "only geniuses became university professors."[8]

The other category relates to stage of life. Prize winners included people at the beginning of their careers – many of the prizes going to revised doctoral dissertations – and people at the height of their careers. For those prize winners in mid career or those who went on from their prize in the early stages of their career to further productive scholarship, financial assistance in the form of research grants has been indispensable, especially for non-Canadianists. As one wrote, with respect to his prize, "as a young faculty member with three children and a mortgage, I could never have taken on the subject that brought me that success if I had not had financial backing for regular research trips."[9] Another claimed that research funding was "as essential as good teachers, good students and good colleagues. All of my work, directly or indirectly, has been made possible through grants." His Ferguson Prize book would have been impossible without six years of SSHRC research funding which permitted extensive work in European archives.[10] While men tended to stress financial assistance against the background of family obligations, women recalled the importance of scholarships which enabled them to attend university in the first instance or the need to attend university near home because of poverty, a reminder that the generation now in mid middle age includes people who had no strong sense of entitlement to higher education, because of class or gender or some combination of the two.[11]

As a social historian used to studying collectivities, I reviewed a number of standard variables to try to determine the kind of personal influences which might impact on behaviour. These influences at the front end (so to speak) relate to family, ethnicity, religion, place of birth and residence, schooling, and, especially in the case of this focal group, mentors. It is perhaps not surprising that most of our prize winners shared a childhood or adolescent passion for reading. The inclusion of history or historical fiction in their library books or the books pulled from the bookshelves of their own homes sparked an interest in things historical which it was impossible to extinguish although some school teachers apparently did their best to try.[12] Many young history fanatics found their interest encouraged by parents or other family members of a similar bent.[13] The wide-ranging topics approached through recreational reading did little, of course, to determine future specialisations. Nor did all prize winners find their childhood experiences to be so nurturing. Whether it be anti-Semitic

8 Respondent 9
9 Respondent 5
10 Respondent 10
11 Respondent 4; Tippett, *Becoming Myself*
12 Respondents 5, 11.
13 Respondents 3, 4, 9, 11.

bullying or the identity crisis of an orphan's life in a foster or adoptive home, personal pain contributed as much to the moulding of some historians' perspectives as did a passion for the past.[14]

The routes by which our prize winners arrived at their initial fields of research interest were as varied as the many subjects that the prizes have recognised over the years. Many were captivated by current fashions in historical analysis. Those who studied in France fell under the influence of the *Annales* School;[15] many of those who studied in Britain and the United States were subject to various influences emanating from the New Social History.[16] A number of our historians of Canada became interested in the Canadian experience only after they had gone abroad.[17] Their distance and reflection on comparisons with other societies encouraged them to begin to ask some hard questions about the Canadian past. Others chose to study subjects which were close to their own experience. Let me cite a few examples. People were inspired by their relatives' work as trade unionists, civil servants, or businessmen.[18] One informant who, unlike most, had been brought up in a rural, story-telling environment turned to oral history as her method and stories as her focus.[19] Those whose studies have centred on other countries and other cultures were often drawn to their subject matter through family influences: a language spoken at home or an immigrant experience which raised questions about origins.[20] Some of the most seminal experiences which determined subject matter centre on belonging to a minority or a refugee group, often with a history of oppression.[21] Modris Eksteins' four years as a young child in a German refugee camp after World War II, to say nothing of his Latvian family's horrific experiences in the two world wars, meant that he could not "help seeing war as the historical, cultural, and moral fulcrum of our century. . . . War has marked us all. Is there anything more urgent to write about?," he ponders.[22] Some of the female historians were motivated to study the background to the feminist movement in which they participated. One recalled that her early research into first-wave feminism was merely tolerated by her otherwise exemplary mentor at the University of Toronto who believed she would "fill the 'gap' in the field and then move on to more serious stuff."[23]

14 Respondent 7; Tippett, *Becoming Myself*; Micheline Lachance, 'Les vérités de Marcel Trudel,' *L'Actualité*, 15 juin 1997, 45

15 Respondents 11, 14

16 Respondents 5, 15

17 Respondents 11, 14; Tippett, *Becoming Myself*

18 Respondents 2, 7, 12

19 Respondent 13

20 Respondents 5, 16

21 Respondents 7, 17

22 Modris Eksteins, 'Growing Up in the Crossfire,' *Saturday Night*, May 1995, 43-48

23 Respondent 4

As this comment implies, the experience with mentors was not uniformly encouraging. One informant had no mentors at the University of Toronto because no one was interested in his two major research areas and some were downright opposed. "Finding a thesis supervisor," he claimed, "was difficult since most faculty found my topic distasteful."[24] Another identified the same attitude towards a much neglected topic on the part of U of T's senior historians "who seemed allergic to religion and enamoured of booze," at least historically.[25] The unquestioning acceptance of the U of T approach by other graduates of that illustrious institution is summed up by Gerald Friesen: "Whatever our backgrounds, we students must have assumed that we could respond to the intellectual agendas of our professors simply by supplementing the Canadian historical narrative they had created" until, that is, the winds of change of the 1970s.[26] Another respondent, outside Toronto this time, had to seek out a mentor in order to legitimise her topic because "The reaction of the Graduate Studies committee was based in the general belief of the time that Amerindians had no history."[27]

Several informants took the opportunity to trace the origins and development of their ideas and ensuing choices and changes of subject matter. Donald Davis was one. It was only on reflection, long after his dissertation on the automobile elites in Detroit had become the Ferguson Prize book and garnered many favourable reviews, that he realised that the study of "the negative consequences of status-seeking" addressed "the issues of my childhood. My father could be regarded as a status seeker."

> I became aware of the fine status distinctions between neighbourhoods and golf clubs because my parents made much of these. One of the most traumatic moves for me was the first across a provincial boundary; from Etobicoke to Westmount. I disliked the Westmount house since it was old and there was no yard. I wondered openly why we did not live in a house with more grass around it. Of course the answer was that Westmount had lots of status and that my father, who grew up in Notre Dame de Grace, had always wanted to live there. I was very aware that we lived only half-way up the hill. The other students in my public school were very aware of where each of us lived (i.e., our precise elevation). The social pyramid became a very real thing to me.

Another of Davis's topics grew out of a different personal experience, this time quite consciously explored: his use of the bus service in Ottawa. When the hitherto excellent service was reduced, he was left to freeze at his bus stop, giving

24 Respondent 7

25 Respondent 3

26 Gerald Friesen, *River Road: Essays on Manitoba and Prairie History* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1996), 232

27 Respondent 17

him "considerable time to reflect on the fact that this bus service, which was letting me down, was winning an award for its superior service."[28]

Another Ferguson prize winner, Robert Young, whose political biography received extremely favourable reviews, reflected on his interest in France during the period of the Third Republic (1870-1940).

> I have moved from fairly conventional diplomatic history into military history..., and from there into biography and the social history of the republican elite. More recently, I have worked in the area of cultural propaganda, public and press opinion, and the administrative organization of the French Foreign Ministry... So one project leads to another, in ways less serendipitous than they might first appear. Certainly I would not have thought of doing a biography of Louis Barthou, a one time foreign minister, had it not been for my earlier work on French foreign policy; and I would not have thought of doing something on French cultural propaganda, had it not been for Barthou, a connoisseur and an advocate of French culture in its broadest sense.[29]

At the other end of the spectrum of this analysis one has to try to discover how personal disposition, options and training shaped the historical personality of the individual. For this reason, I want to consider five historical choices suggested by the life experiences of my informants. I am going to pose these as dichotomies for the sake of emphasis, though they are by no means necessarily binary, oppositional or mutually exclusive. These choices also enable us to reflect on the role of history and the métier of the historian.

The first centres on historical research versus historical synthesis. John Beattie, who won both the Ferguson and Garneau prizes, loves to study hitherto unexplored topics, leaving to others the important business of synthesis, suggested that the disposition to do one or the other was a "deeply personal matter." He elaborated: "I have come to think that this is an important matter of temperament. It is to my mind neither a good nor a bad thing in itself to work on subjects that have not been much studied. The negative side of my interest in new areas of work is that I have never been particularly adept at synthesizing the work of other historians and of finding ways of taking an established body of scholarship in a fruitful direction. I am much more attracted to the detective-like activity of piecing an account of something together from fragments of material . . . virtually nothing had been done on the subjects that came to interest me."[30]

---

28 Davis to Fingard, 30 Sept. 1997

29 Young to Fingard, 2 Sept. 1997

30 Beattie to Fingard, 5 January 1998

Others referred to "so many topics that had scarcely been touched" and "something in need of doing."[31] They comprise the majority of the prize winners, it undoubtedly being the case that, on the whole, it is the research, not the synthesis that receives the research grants and the recognition. There are exceptions. Gerald Friesen's *Canadian Prairies* and Olive Dickason's *Canada's First Nations*, for example, which won Macdonald prizes, were greeted by reviewers as suitable books for teachers and students. Which makes one wonder about the historian's audience. Are historians reaching a range of readers? Do we write for ourselves, for students or for the reading public? Should monographs as well as overviews be written to attract a broad readership?

The second issue centres on a critical mass or community of scholars versus independent study in a more isolated environment; or if you prefer, the big city versus the small; the research and graduate university versus the liberal arts college. Evidence of the pleasure and stimulation derived from a critical mass turned up in many of the responses including the importance of scholarly seminars, specialized research institutes, adoring and generous graduate students. One informant commented that "southern Ontario became in the 1970s a superb centre of historical research and writing."[32] Very few of our prize winners come from any setting other than the large university in, or close to, the large city. One who does claims: "There is something to be said for being in a smaller place, where the intensity of activity is less than what I would guess it is somewhere like Toronto, and where one may be more free to enter and withdraw from the main stream. And I suppose it is true that the smaller the pond the bigger the fish may seem to be. Sometimes, that too is gratifying for the fish in question."[33]

Gregory Kealey, who consciously chose for political reasons to live in a peripheral region rather than in the central Canadian core, found that such a location was as important to his intellectual development as was his commitment to the study of class and gender.[34] We also have examples of people situated in the smaller centres who have created their own critical mass; for example, the seven-university Institut interuniversitaire de recherches sur les populations directed from the Université du Québec à Chicoutimi by Gérard Bouchard. Of course, none of the prize winners outside the major centres is really isolated. What they lack in their own universities, they make up for through what one masochist describes as the "stimulating" experience of serving on national committees. "I have delighted in the variety of perspectives and the openness of discussion that such venues can inspire," he enthused.[35]

31 Respondents 3, 10

32 Respondent 5

33 Respondent 10

34 Gregory S. Kealey, *Workers and Canadian History* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995), xv

35 Respondent 8

The third obvious choice is disciplinarity versus interdisciplinarity. In fact the majority of my respondents are immersed in interdisciplinarity. Not only were many profoundly influenced by other disciplines as students, but also association as mature historians with colleagues in centres and institutes of an interdisciplinary nature has provided considerable scholarly stimulation. "I have learned a great deal that I would not have as a solitary scholar," one informant claimed.[36] Un autre historien a écrit: "je me suis toujours efforcé de pratiquer mon métier dans un cadre interdisciplinaire."[37] Some would not think of themselves primarily as historians even now; the CHA has indeed given its awards to other social scientists and humanists, knowing full well that people, certified as historians, do not have a monopoly on the practice of historical methods. Nor are all those who identify themselves first and foremost as historians employed in a conventional workplace like a department of history. Even within the university, historians have extended the influence of their methods and approaches by joining departments of interdisciplinary studies.

The fourth issue relates to objectivity versus subjectivity. Whatever the current wisdom is about objectivity, let me suggest that few of our prize winners would have been trained in any other circumstances but those where the creed of historical objectivity was the gospel. Several even went so far as to explain that what they studied was as far removed from their own personal experience as one could imagine. One rogue historian wrote: "I know many historians are drawn to the history of their own reference group . . . but with me it's just the opposite. Apart from the fact that I'm a Canadian studying Canadian history, all my subjects are remote from my own experience and identity. . . . I'm an urbanite who studies peasants; a law-abiding wimp who works on rebels; an atheist who tries to understand Counter-Reformation zealots."[38] Does this historical escapism make Allan Greer more objective? I expect the time warp involved in immersing oneself in a different era and a different location is another of those deeply personal factors determined by intangible personality traits. Intellectual curiosity can lead some people far from their own experiences and heritage. My informants differ on how involved one should become with the issues they explore. One wrote, "Some people have told me that you can't be a good historian if your emotions get in the way. I don't believe them."[39] Marcel Trudel's complaint with Michel Brunet's interpretation of the conquest was just that. At the same time, Trudel himself wrote in response to a suggestion that his own interpretation of the conquest is politically biased. Je cite: "Quand j'explique ces choses, je tâche d'exercer mon esprit critique. Si je ne montrais que les

36 Respondent 4

37 Respondent 14

38 Greer to Fingard, 28 Dec. 1997

39 Respondent 12

avantages de la Conquête, ce serait du parti pris. Or, je soutiens aussi qu'elle a été une triste affaire pour les Canadiens, qui ont perdu leur mêre patrie et leurs contacts avec la France. Mais j'insiste sur les avantages qui en ont découlé parce que les désavantages, on les connaît."[40] Another candidly admitted that he now studies a subject that he would have been reluctant to undertake as a doctoral student or a freshly-minted PhD because of his closeness to it. He wrote: "My interest in this whole topic is undoubtedly related to my own family background and history. Early in my career, when I was trying to establish my credentials as a professional historian, I might have felt inhibited about working on a subject with such a degree of personal resonance, but now I do not."[41] Others hold it as an article of faith that a historian chooses topics what she knows best through experience or identity. Veronica Strong-Boag indicated that her interest in women's work, especially within the home, "reflected the fact that I now also had young children and extensive household responsibilities."[42] Although not everyone can pursue their favourite topics – certainly language ability is extremely limiting in terms of world history – the fact that historians do make choices within a wide range of possibilities means that a degree of engagement occurs that is bound to influence the historian's way of knowing and bias the historical product.

How historians decide whether to give priority to empirical findings or theoretical constructs is my fifth and final point. For many of our prize winners, there can be no doubt that student activism of the 1960s (when debates on the topics of war, racism and intellectual freedom riveted the attention of future historians) influenced profoundly those historians' receptiveness to Marxist theory and somewhat later, feminist theory. The receptiveness had both negative and positive effects. In the case of the latter, the theoretical discussions helped to inform the choice of topic, the nature of the critical inquiry, and the interest in promoting new approaches – leading to sub-committees of the CHA, new journals, specialised conferences and many publications. But their activity also fostered heated debates, personal rivalries, unseemly schisms, and no doubt encouraged some of the early enthusiasts to move on to less contested terrain especially when the theory became too blatantly ideological. Ideological disputation drove one prize winner out of his initial field into another relatively new field where "here too there were debates" but "far less heat and much more light."[43] The fallout has certainly affected the CHA and indeed this address lacks responses from some of the disenchanted, who either chose not to participate or refused to participate.

---

40 'Les vérités de Marcel Trudel,' 45-46

41 Respondent 16

42 Strong-Boag to Fingard, 30 November 1997

43 Respondent 7

Meanwhile the empirical, positivist approaches have continued their currency because of the wealth of new types of topics that have unfolded as the result of work done in other disciplines, the development of new methodologies – recall the long attachment to quantitative analysis which is well represented in the prize books – and the rejuvenation of older genres like biography. Unlike the CHA prize juries, reviewers often deplored the abandonment of the narrative in favour of poorly integrated case studies, number crunching and unreadable prose. Recently, prize winners have been forced to confront post-modernism and their attitudes range from a concern to incorporate what might be useful to condemnation of the French-inspired scholarship which has been so influential in other disciplines. Gerald Friesen is among the more receptive to what post-modernism might have to offer, suggesting that such "influences have ensured that the categories of our thought are being exposed to the same analysis that scholars once reserved for the 'characters' and the 'events' themselves."[44] He also cautions that dismissing post-modernism as a fad is dangerous because we do not know where it will lead or what destinies it might reveal. Another informant wrote: "My desire to study the concrete had made me totally unsympathetic towards the post-modernist approach, one which I associate with the proto-fascist and fascist irrationalism of the 1890-1940 period," a statement which perhaps confirms Friesen's concern with trying to understand in order to be prepared for the consequences.[45] Gregory Kealey also remains sceptical, contending that "the excessive claims of post-structuralist theory tend either to invalidate history completely or to entrap history into what Charles Tilley has aptly termed 'softcore solipism.'"[46]

Now to conclude. If we can learn any lessons from the personal experiences of these highly regarded historians let me suggest the following: First, in addition to our current concern about the teaching of history in the schools, we must recognize that many current historians, products themselves often of inadequate history curricula, got their zest for history from stories, mainly those they read. If there was one common denominator among the responses it was the crucial influence of youthful reading. We must therefore promote the reading of history and historical fiction. Vow right now that for the kids in your life – offspring, nieces, nephews, grandchildren, the kid next door, the paper boy, the baby sitter – your gifts will always include books. Nothing is as personal as the company of a book and if that is what helps to produce our historians it should also encourage the history-literate public of the future.

Secondly, research funding is gratifying and can help us to do some things faster and possibly some things we might not otherwise do. But the people who

44 Friesen, *River Road*, 235.

45 Respondent 2

46 Kealey, *Workers and Canadian History*, xviii

need research funding the most are those who have to travel great distances and stay at their destinations for prolonged periods. As a profession, we benefit from having our historians pursue many kinds of history in many venues. Let us endorse the idea that need should be added to excellence when it comes to the determination of research funding so that the international aspects of our profession can be protected – and by this I do not mean the Australian boondoggles currently favoured by Canadianists.

Thirdly, when we reflect on the hard times that some of our prize-winning historians had in pursuing their preferred research topics as graduate students, we are reminded that the study of history is determined by fashions in subject matter, methodology and theory. Let us, therefore, be open and receptive to those who want to try new approaches, however unpalatable they may sometimes appear to the old guard. Each generation develops new interests which are added to the existing ones, some of which survive, others of which disappear or at any rate hibernate. As long as rigour, integrity and accuracy are observed in the collecting and reporting of historical data, we can surely afford to give the new generation of historians, the space they need to follow their own muse.