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Accidents and Inevitability

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I once wrote an official history, dealing with the activities of a Canadian publicly owned and government-directed corporation.² It was a late arrival in the library of World War Two official histories, researched in the early 1980s and published in 1984. It was closely related to its American and British counterparts (the field was very broadly atomic energy) and as a historian specializing in international and bureaucratic phenomena, my training and perspectives seemed to apply.

Official history is a perilous discipline. The official historian runs the danger of becoming not just the pensioner but the prisoner of the entity employing him or her, and critics have good reason to be skeptical of the result, if not of the person producing that result. Money might seem to be an advantage, and it is true that some official histories have been lavishly funded, and have provided decades of job security for their employees. The government or the corporation then owns the resulting work, and sometimes intervenes in the process, or censors the result. In one case, a historian of my acquaintance toiled for three or four years, only to find that the employer, a government department, did not like the result. And that was that. No notch on the CV; no promotion.

I did not suffer that indignity. I am not sure that my employers knew what they were getting when they took me on, but I had to assume that they did, and got down to work, applying my perspectives and training as a diplomatic and institutional historian. In my generation, any serious diplomatic historian studied not just exchanges of paper or hot air at conferences, but organizations: foreign offices and/or the military, and sometimes, though far less frequently, trade diplomats. At any rate, I produced a volume that when I look at it now, was mostly pure diplomatic and institutional history, coupled with the creation and encouragement of a mineral, uranium, that in 1960 was Canada's second largest export, after wheat. Today I am more conscious of what it was *not*: environmental, social, or 'bottom-up' history. To write it, I reasoned at the time, it had to be top-down, though also lateral at the top, reaching out to other similar organizations in other countries. Unsurprisingly, I found that nationality sometimes counted for less than professional and economic similarities.

My undergraduate work at the University of Toronto had trained me in what I later learned were called 'area studies'—in our case, national histories, mainly of Europe and within Europe, Great Britain and the British Empire. (Our teachers had been trained this way, and they saw no reason to change it.) Canadian history was compulsory, and it needed to be, because the majority of undergraduate history students found it dull if not outright repulsive, having suffered from it in high school.

¹ I would like to thank my friend Sam Williamson, who guided me through my generals at Harvard, for reading and commenting on this essay. He is of course not responsible for any erroneous opinions therein.

² Robert Bothwell, *Eldorado: Canada's National Uranium Company* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984).

This is still the case, but it does stimulate me to prove to the students that Canadian history is not dull per se, but because of the virtuous sheen with which generations of bien-pensants have laminated it.

The year 1984 was on the cusp of change in historical technology—but the change had not yet arrived. I used tape recorders or notepads when I interviewed and wrote up the results. When I visited the Public Record Office or the U.S. National Archives, which were still mainly housed in downtown Washington, it was pencil or Xerox or my trusty Smith-Corona (a variety of 'typewriter' which younger historians may have seen in museums of technology). I tried out several plans for the book which, because it incorporated some of the atomic histories of three countries—the U.S., the UK, and Canada—as well as international organizations, conferences and the like, was structurally complex. At one point my editor told me to go back to square one, which meant figuratively ripping up half the manuscript and going back to the notes, which by then were fortunately abundant, filling a filing cabinet.

Any diplomatic historian will have confronted the task of blending the policies and actions of different countries, taking the circumstances of each into account. Diplomats of course are trained and paid to do that, which sometimes means that at some point in the past some clever clerk will actually have done your work for you.

Time passed. Computers arrived. My next book was written on a computer and I started to take notes on discs instead of paper, and the manuscript eventually sat on floppies—how many I cannot remember. In the early nineties the Internet appeared, for good or ill. I used it in my work as everyone did. Even the memory of typing on paper, threading ink ribbons, figuring how many times carbon paper could be used for copies, the paraphernalia of research, was fading. Hundreds of books sat on my Kindle, notes resided in Dropbox, consultations with distant historians or interview subjects took only minutes to arrange.

From micro-history I went on to macro, longer studies of larger subjects. But recently, at the instigation of a younger historian and lawyer, and a former student, Patricia McMahon, I looked into the subject again. My notes were a physical reminder of what I had once done, and how, long it had taken to assemble them. (Answer: three years.) The difference was considerable. One thing at a time, the way I did my work had moved into the digital age. Some tasks that had taken days, weeks, months, or that could not be done at all, now took seconds. Was someone alive or dead? If the person was prominent enough, the answer was no more than a few keystrokes away. Don't know Dutch? Well, there's a translation program that would at least tell me whether I was reading a manual for tulip fanciers or a history of uranium mining in Katanga. Perhaps best of all, the passage of years obliterates the fear of libelling some individuals with deep pockets and a propensity to sue. The dead, fortunately, are unlikely to litigate, and the result is a much more colourful and complete narrative.

It is not entirely a story of expanding opportunity. Some of the files and documents that I freely used in the 1980s are closed in the 2020s. I am not talking about Moscow and the Russian archives, but about London. The British government in act of outstanding folly—a microcosm of Brexit—closed all its atomic files dating back to 1940 if not beyond. This probably has to do with the privatization of much of Britain's nuclear industry. Along with the reactors, the British government threw in the records of their official history, which have now also been closed. There is a promise to eventually reopen the files, but it will be slow and painful to implement. The notion that the public should know what it pays for seems, by comparison with private interest, quaint. But I still had my notes, in pencil on foolscap, or in the absurd giant format Xeroxes produced by the old Public Record Office at 50p a page—an investment that I can see was very worthwhile. And, to my relief, the notes and the topics they cover were still pertinent, and still useful. This may be evidence of a static mind, of course, and evidence as well of a mind that still views facts as the building blocks of history.

Time, distance, expense, all very relevant factors in historical research, certainly have not disappeared, but they have shrunk. This past is not another country, not yet, but its dimensions are qualitatively different. I found I could scratch an old itch, but with new tools that added depth as well as breadth.

This might seem like an all's well that ends well story, with appropriate comic relief for researchers at the UK National Archives provided by Brexiting Britain. On another level, research is not a particularly cheering subject. Research can be

made a tangible, usable skill: undoubtedly true. At my university the authorities have decided that one thing we must teach is research skills: the *how*, not the *why* or the *what*. This policy, admirable in theory, is one of those that eventually devolves into the larger question, what do and what should students get out of history, or, more fundamental still, why should they take it? Research by itself is not a sufficient motivator. And even if the research has legs, and the legs carry it into a university press and on into a book, the question then becomes, who will read it? Seen from that perspective, it becomes part of the crisis of historical studies in the university.

That crisis, however, has antecedents, and the antecedents splinter into facets. “Who lost History?” is the question. We all know the answer: *They* lost history. Somebody else did it, usually just across the room or down the hall. Every department of history that I know of has had factional debates, although by now they are less interchanges of ideas than of words describing discrete non-communicating universes.

To borrow the title of a recent book, “It’s worse than you think.” Academic, professional history has been declining for quite some time. The roots of the decline stretch some distance into the past (this is the kind of deep history assertion that drives *today’s* political scientists into a frenzy). Age has few advantages, but many vantages, and from my vantage point there has been a profound change within my lifetime, and perhaps just within the parameters of my career as a diplomatic historian.

History, and especially the international relations end of history, has slipped considerably since Sir Charles Webster advised the Paris Peace Conference or William L. Langer and S. Everett Gleason³ guided the Office of Strategic Services. And we must not forget Henry Kissinger, of a slightly later generation but still mostly a historian. Ambition made him a political scientist, but his talent kept bringing him back to international relations history—a history, be it known, of a particularly classical kind. There was once little difference between large parts of political science and history—you could read one to get to the other. To this we could add national histories, which informed political and policy approaches to current problems.

The politics of IR history varied a bit. William Appleman Williams and his disciples occupied one side of the church and emitted dissonance. (Nevertheless, it was a mild dissonance. Williams was read even by those who disagreed with him.) But the choir basically sang from a liberal-internationalist hymnbook—the consensus that had emerged after World War Two. The consensus was so massive that it sometimes seemed oppressive, even boring, and so, within this broad church, variations and heresies emerged, criticisms of this folly or that: there were plenty to choose from. For the Canadian sub-set of liberal internationalism there were occasional nationalist eruptions designed to prove or disprove that Canada was too much influenced by the United States. Canadian historians, preoccupied with small differences between their country and the United States, sometimes lost sight of the bigger picture, or discounted it as stale nostrums—international order, international law, multilateral institutions, all sustained by a domestic democratic consensus and propelled by a common respect for reason supported by evidence. It took President Donald Trump to put these nostrums into context. As the saying goes, ‘You only miss it when it’s gone.’

This was, roughly, the situation as I saw it when I decided that my path to history would travel via international relations, as imparted by the talented and broad-gauged Ernest R. May at Harvard. In retrospect, the world May inhabited and where I took up intellectual residence was already on the decline. May had few students, relatively speaking. Even in May’s own Institute of Politics, abstraction was gathering steam and spreading fog. Theory was being rigorously tested in Vietnam, and failing; the answer to that was, of course, more theory.

Area studies were on the skids, so that part of political science most congenial to history was being retired. I would later learn this to my cost as director of the International Relations program at the University of Toronto, which was based on the old links among history, political science, and economics. The program was appraised by an up-to-date political scientist, whose

³ They are forever linked by their war service and their subsequent two-volume study of American foreign policy: William L. Langer and S. Everett Gleason, *The Challenge to Isolation, 1937-1940* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1952) and Langer and Gleason, *The Undeclared War, 1940-1941* (Harper & Brothers, 1953).

mind dwelt on a higher plane that soared above parochial considerations like national histories or inter-state relations. As director of the undergraduate IR program, I had not really understood until then that history was no longer a social science, but one of the ‘humanities,’ nor up to the best social science standards. Our program survived, but it was plain that political scientists had moved on. They moved, many of them, to a new flagship master’s program in IR. History took a subordinate role there, though there was also a scramble to make up for enrolees’ difficulties with economics. Soon after, the last historian left the program.

I don’t want to suggest that my conception and practice of international relations remained just as I was taught by May. At Harvard, James Q. Wilson’s course on bureaucracy was an equally strong influence. Thanks to the Kirkland House common room, I met George Homans and learned at least a little about group sociology.

After Harvard, economic history, and economics more generally, became part of my practice, thanks to the economist Ian Drummond, while John English’s studies of political organization demonstrated another application of sociology. We combined forces in two studies of Canadian history in the twentieth century, one pre-1945, the other post.⁴ The post 1945 volume (1981) was well received outside academia and sold very well, probably because nobody else had thought to tackle the subject. Inside the academy, it was largely a question of whether it fitted into preconceived notions. (Nothing new in that, of course.) It was, certainly, written to counteract the pious negativism of the neo-Marxists of the day. In all of this, I (we) treated history as a branch of the social sciences, though long experience confirms Homans’s view that one cannot be too engaged or too formulaic (too scientific, in other words) without falling into the pit of irrelevance.

A concentration on undergraduate teaching and its satisfactions can be a huge morale-booster, if the students are good. (I have in mind the early retirement of a very talented friend for whom teaching at his university was at best dreary and whose academic life, year in and year out, seemed to be a grind. His publishing career, on the other hand, flourished. Hence the early retirement). It also insulates you from the history wars, or at least turns down the volume. Undergraduates take little interest in what one historian thinks of another’s ideas. Though graduate students are often willing fodder in the quasi-religious disputes among professional historians that have disfigured the last thirty years, undergraduates are not, and in the end, that is the *charm* of an undergraduate focus.

Undergraduate teaching led me in a different direction. The need for a comprehensive course took me back, generation by generation. Eventually my lectures included the eighteenth century: demography, economy, politics, and especially the Whig foundations of those politics. For that, my own undergraduate training in British history helped, but so did current events. Reading reports of the legal opinions of the George W. Bush presidency, I found them strangely familiar. “I’ve seen that before!” And so I had, in the constitutional theories and unconstitutional conduct of Charles II and James II. James liked to ‘dispense’ with laws that he didn’t like. Bush Jr issued ‘signing statements’ that in many cases allowed him to do the same. (Trump, of course, simply ignores them.) Long discredited in most English-speaking countries, divine right has returned, zombie-like, to haunt the American presidency, where, it appears, the king can do no wrong. In the seventeenth century, the English sent James II packing, divine right—executive privilege—or no, to live out his days as the pensioner of an absolute monarch. It’s hard not to think that regime change in the seventeenth century was handled better, and more expeditiously, than it is 331 years later.

Undergraduate teaching can also work in reverse, as the students help steer the teacher in different directions. I teach at an immigrant university; my classes have included students from all continents; my teaching assistant in my Canadian foreign relations course last year was a Nigerian. The subject, of course, is Canadian foreign relations, and the motivation for taking it is (to me) unsurprising: an attempt to understand Canada in order to fit into it. The students’ approach is most often positive, even optimistic. What it is not is grievance history. In the history I teach, virtually everyone has cause for grievance—Hurons, Canadiens, Loyalists, Fenians, the enemies of World Wars One and Two, and so forth. It is, after all, a

⁴ Bothwell, Ian Drummond, and John English, *Canada since 1945* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press: two editions, 1981 and 1989); *Canada 1900-1945* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987)

history of wars, conquests, and frequently monstrous behaviour. Revanchism is a frequent topic. Under the circumstances, I teach the limits of history, which sometimes means drawing a line in global society between retired burglars and active ones. Put another way, there is a time when history should be taken off the active agenda of daily life. Too bad the British Brexiteers and American Trumpistas have not followed that maxim.

I prefer to let it work the other way—to encourage daily life to creep in. As my students become more varied, less homogeneous, that impacts the history I teach them. Naturally, I use the area studies technique that makes most sense to me and, I believe, to them.

I have said little about publication. It's there all right. It sits like a vulture on the shoulder of frantic lecturers and assistant professors. They know that if they do not appease it with its chosen fodder, a BOOK, it will tear out their entrails. Once appeased with a book, however, it loses much of its ferocity. It merely croaks reproachfully when a tenured associate professor reports, one more time, that the current research project has taken longer, is more complicated, whatever. The dog ate my homework. There is always next year. Every year there are more books, paper or electronic, and we hope that somebody reads them. Hope is essential, manic optimism better still. Over time I, like many of my colleagues, have reached for a snort of Dr Pangloss's hair tonic. But for some the tonic is not enough. The first book is also the last.

Who buys? Who reads? No-one knows for sure. One duly subsidized book in Canada, with the imprimatur of one of the granting councils, is reported to have sold only one copy. Certainly it is a fact that most university press books sell in the three digits, and usually at the lower end of that spectrum. I have had happy relations with all my publishers, University of Toronto Press, University of British Columbia Press, Oxford, and Penguin among others—usually a four-digit relationship, but a few times in the mid-fives.

That leaves the question, who reads, or more broadly, who reads history? Since some bookstores have somehow survived the Kindle onslaught, it is still possible to do a visual survey. Since I do have a good bookstore around the corner, it carries history from (mainly) the United States, Great Britain and Canada, in descending order of frequency. The subjects are predictable—World War Two, World War One, other wars, royalty, spies, murders and, today, Margaret Thatcher, representing biography. Perhaps eighty percent of the authors are not academic historians, though many have historical training. There are a few who do practise in the academy and yet manage to write for a larger, literate audience—the Canadian historian Margaret MacMillan comes to mind. It was a nice mix, stretching over a couple of generations. Some live by their wits; often the authors are less writers than they are the CEOs of book factories.

When Ernie May celebrated his seventy-fifth birthday, his graduates returned for the fête. It was a pleasant, low-key occasion, for Ernie was a pleasant, low-key chap. The ex-students were scattered over a couple of academic generations—with the line between generations drawn somewhere around 1975, give or take a year or two. There was even another Canadian (Timothy Naftali). We exchanged stories of life, and employment. It was like the parable of the loaves and fishes—the diet consisting of triumphs, tragedies, the job that got away. For those with doctorates before 1975, my cohort, it was tales of life at more or less prestigious universities, books, students of our own, and so forth. For the next generation the narrative was different—fewer loaves, and if there were fishes, it was sardines, not sea bass. (Naftali, however, got not just a loaf, but a cake.) For some of my colleagues and junior contemporaries, it had always been so. Agog, we listened to the tale of the Harvard Ph.D. who was hired at some truly improbable institution on the edge of the Sonora desert and who one day walked out the door and kept on walking. History seldom deals in legal or scientific proof and the story may well be apocryphal. One of the few consolations of history's current 'humanities' status is that it can leave room for a Byronic figure—the wandering historian, cursed by fate like the Flying Dutchman. In the legend, the Dutchman does eventually find redemption, but only in heaven. Back in the comfortable Hell of the Harvard Faculty Club and Ernie's party, I listened to a neighbour at dinner who told me how difficult it was keeping word of his (Harvard) doctorate from his employers. He was not alone: There were enough such stories to provide a grim undertone to what was otherwise a happy event.

The fate of May's students, considered in generational terms, is sobering. Not all their problems are unique to history, or the social sciences. Or even the humanities (though those have shot themselves in the foot with their own post-modernist ammunition). Politicians and university administrators have seized on the science, technology, engineering and mathematics

(STEM) mania, as a means to cement an alliance based on fashion and funding. As historians we know (or should know) that this will pass, perhaps to be succeeded by something worse. Or, since we are overdue for some luck, something better.

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