

Gossip in History

Susan Mann Trofimenkoff

Volume 20, Number 1, 1985

Montréal 1985

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/030929ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/030929ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada

ISSN

0068-8878 (print)

1712-9109 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Trofimenkoff, S. M. (1985). Gossip in History. *Historical Papers / Communications historiques*, 20(1), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.7202/030929ar>

Article abstract

Comment résumer un discours bilingue sur le commérage? What a task! The author dares to suggest that what really goes on at the annual meetings of the CHA is gossip. Que les historiens préfèrent V appeler "le parler boutique" indique leur malaise devant le commérage. And yet gossip, rich in information, evaluation and entertainment is much more descriptive of what historians actually do at the CHA. In order to explain the uneasiness surrounding the word gossip the author traces the origin and changing meanings of the word gossip /commérage. In both French and English the word follows an identical etymological course through history and somewhere around the sixteenth century, the word acquires the modern sense of a chattering woman. The author links this new meaning of the word to a series of other changes, associated with the Scientific Revolution of the same period, the results of which were the subordination of women. Gossip became a language of powerlessness. But it is also a language special to women, revealing a rich oral culture. Without quite knowing it, historians use aspects of that culture in their own work for they are constantly analyzing the changing norms of any given society. The author illustrates the importance of gossip for premodern societies but argues that as many illustrations can be found for the twentieth century, even in Canada. She concludes by suggesting that gossip may be the historian's clue to deciphering what was really going on in Canadian history which, for ease of reference, she divides into three chatty parts. Une histoire du commérage pourrait tout révéler. . .

Gossip in History

SUSAN MANN TROFIMENKOFF

Résumé

Comment résumer un discours bilingue sur le comméragé? What a task! The author dares to suggest that what really goes on at the annual meetings of the CHA is gossip. Que les historiens préfèrent l'appeler "le parler boutique" indique leur malaise devant le comméragé. And yet gossip, rich in information, evaluation and entertainment is much more descriptive of what historians actually do at the CHA. In order to explain the uneasiness surrounding the word gossip the author traces the origin and changing meanings of the word gossip/comméragé. In both French and English the word follows an identical etymological course through history and somewhere around the sixteenth century, the word acquires the modern sense of a chattering woman. The author links this new meaning of the word to a series of other changes, associated with the Scientific Revolution of the same period, the results of which were the subordination of women. Gossip became a language of powerlessness. But it is also a language special to women, revealing a rich oral culture. Without quite knowing it, historians use aspects of that culture in their own work for they are constantly analyzing the changing norms of any given society. The author illustrates the importance of gossip for premodern societies but argues that as many illustrations can be found for the twentieth century, even in Canada. She concludes by suggesting that gossip may be the historian's clue to deciphering what was really going on in Canadian history which, for ease of reference, she divides into three chatty parts. Une histoire du comméragé pourrait tout révéler. . . .

* * * *

How to write a résumé of a bilingual speech about gossip? La belle affaire! L'auteur a osé suggérer que ce qui se passe véritablement aux réunions de la Société historique du Canada, c'est du comméragé. Historians' preference for the word shop-talk to describe their personal communication is an indication of the disdain for gossip. Et pourtant, le comméragé, riche en information, évaluation et amusement décrit beaucoup mieux ce que font les historiens lors de leurs congrès annuels. Pour expliquer cet écart, l'auteure retrace les origines et les changements survenus à travers l'histoire du mot comméragé/gossip. Les deux, tout en ayant des antécédents linguistiques différents, ont exactement le même sens et poursuivent le même chemin étymologique à travers les siècles. Au même moment, aux environs du seizième siècle, les deux mots commencent à signifier une femme bavarde et l'auteure lie ce changement à une série d'autres survenus en même temps, qui ont eu pour résultat la subordination des femmes. Le comméragé devient le langage des impuissantes. Mais il est aussi un langage particulier aux femmes et révèle une culture orale d'une grande richesse. Sans le savoir, les historiens utilisent cette richesse dans leur propre oeuvre car ils sont toujours à la recherche des normes d'une société donnée, du moment de ses change-

ments et des moyens qu'ils empruntent. L'auteure offre plusieurs illustrations de l'importance du commérage dans les sociétés dites prémodernes mais elle en trouve aussi en plein vingtième siècle canadien. Elle termine en suggérant de prêter l'oreille aux commères du passé pour permettre une meilleure compréhension de ses trois divisions de l'histoire canadienne. A history of gossip might tell it all.

Quel délice et quel honneur que de prononcer le discours présidentiel à la Société historique du Canada réunie à l'Université de Montréal¹. Car c'est ici où, en 1966, j'ai débuté comme enseignante et historienne, une des premières anglophones à traverser la frontière linguistique qui caractérisait le Canada de l'époque. Cette témérité n'est pas à mettre à mon crédit mais plutôt à celui de Michel Brunet et de Ramsay Cook. Le premier cherchait à ce moment-là quelqu'un qui pourrait enseigner l'histoire du Canada anglais en français et il osait penser à une anglophone pour le faire. Et le deuxième, qui avait suscité mon intérêt pour l'histoire du Canada français en anglais, osait suggérer mon nom. Quant à moi, en pleines études doctorales à Laval, je me suis dit: "Quelle aventure! Une expérience de la sorte n'arrive pas tous les jours" et j'ai remis la rédaction de ma thèse sur l'Action française pour entreprendre ma propre action française. Il faut admettre, à vingt ans de distance, que les étudiants, dont certains, dans l'ancien système de licence, étaient plus âgés que moi, m'ont parfois effrayée mais il se peut que la réaction ait été réciproque car je soupçonne que bon nombre d'entre eux n'aient jamais vu ni une Canadienne anglaise ni une professeure auparavant. L'expérience m'a fourni les leçons de nationalisme — on le respirait avec l'air du Mont Royal — que je n'aurais jamais apprises dans les livres. Et le tout m'a tellement emballée que je n'ai même pas noté au cours de la première année pendant laquelle je passais tout mon temps à la bibliothèque, dont la tour suscitait les commentaires désinvoltes, que les jupes ont raccourci de trente centimètres!

Un début de carrière assez exotique quoi, et je remercie tous ceux qui l'ont facilité.

But I have another reason for being delighted to be here. Since before my election as vice-president of the Canadian Historical Association two years ago in Vancouver, I have had a topic in mind for just such a speech. It was a topic that one could not get away with in any other setting, for here there are no commentators, no questions and no footnotes. Moreover the topic also coincided with the two pieces of advice I received over the past two years: "Make it short" and "Make it nonacademic." The implication was fairly clear: "Make it up." I did not register that implication until the computer at the National Library, a very friendly but totally indiscriminating chap called DOBIS, tossed out at me a children's book with pop-out pictures on my topic. At that point I gave up my original intention of absorbing and synthesizing into a thirty-minute speech all of world history since the twelfth century and decided just to make it up. Or speculate, if you prefer.

-
1. Et d'avoir un de mes premiers collègues historiens, Jean-Pierre Wallot, à la batterie dans le jazz quartet qui accompagne cette réception. À lui et à ses collègues musiciens — Jean-Jacques Beauchamp (piano), Jean-Denis Dubuc (saxophone) et Normand Bouchard (contre-basse) — tous mes remerciements.

The topic nonetheless does have something to do with history and historians and I will try to convince you of that. As far as I can gather, however, it has nothing to do with previous presidential addresses² which generally have discussed what historians do as individuals — research — or what historians ought to be doing as a group — haranguing governments and granting agencies. Seldom do presidential addresses explore what historians gathered at the annual meetings of the CHA actually do. Oh, we all know what we tell the Dean and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council about scholarly communication. But we never say what we are really intending to do at our annual meetings. Allow me therefore to quote what I believe to be an anthropological viewpoint: “Some small societies hold annual ceremonies for the express purpose of permitting the group members to say *anything* about one another.”³

What historians gathered at the CHA actually do is GOSSIP. Who’s doing what? How is he doing it? Why is he doing it? Is it appropriate historical behaviour? Et d’ailleurs, nous le faisons dans les deux langues. Le COMMÉRAGE est de loin le meilleur argument pour le bilinguisme: Qui fait quoi? Quel est l’utilité de faire ça? Qu’est-ce qu’untel va penser de ça? Quand nous essayons de poser les mêmes questions ailleurs, ce n’est jamais trop réussi. Le bulletin de la Société historique du Canada est terne justement à cause du manque de ce genre de renseignement. Les pages de la *Canadian Historical Review* qui révèlent la dernière localisation ou promotion ne sont jamais ni complètes ni à jour. Les salons de professeurs dans les départements d’histoire à l’échelle du pays sont trop isolés. Et même les paragraphes d’introduction à tout article historique qui se respecte, où l’auteur prétend avoir trouvé la vérité qui a échappé au pauvre diable qui a osé parler du même sujet avant, sont trop rigides et formels. None of those settings is as satisfactory as the CHA annual meeting for a good exchange of gossip/commérage. Here we can enjoy the three elements of gossip: information, evaluation and entertainment. Here we can admit people to the inner circles or exclude them. We can establish rank and reputation. We can maintain ties among ourselves and with colleagues who may not be present.

But I hear you objecting already. “It’s not gossip we’re engaged in, it’s shop-talk.” “Nous ne sommes pas en train de commérer, plutôt nous parlons boutique.” Around that distinction hangs an interesting tale, which no one seems to have told, at least not from an historical perspective.

To acquire any scholarly perspective at all on gossip one has to turn to the social scientists — sociologists, psychologists, anthropologists and linguists — and to some barely audible feminist scholars. The social scientists have been eavesdropping on gossip since at least the 1920s and they recognize it as serving a valuable social function. But they tend to go to far-away places among strange-sounding people to confirm their views: the Makah Indians, the Sarakatsani shepherds, and even the

2. Not that I read them all either.

3. J. Levin and A. J. Kimmel referring to Rebecca Birch Stirling, “Some Psychological Mechanisms Operative in Gossip,” *Social Forces* 34 (1956), pp. 262–7 in “Gossip Columns: Media Small Talk,” *Journal of Communication* 27 (Winter 1977), p. 169; emphasis mine.

Newfoundlanders (whose ascent, part of the process of modernization, from gossip to alcoholism may also parallel the activities of the CHA). Moreover, the approach of the social scientists tends to be rather condescending. Look at what these premodern people do: they chat among themselves and behind each others' backs and thus maintain their values and their community. And depending on whether the social science observer is male or female, the "chat" is evaluated differently.⁴ As for the feminist scholars, they have only just begun to listen to gossip and they do so by staying very close to home in order to observe, and participate in, the "chattering" of women. There they discover "a form of unarticulated female power," "uncoded and savage," an information network controlled by women, language patterns distinctive to women.⁵ The two approaches, one condescending and the other celebrating, are indicative of the ambiguous attitudes toward gossip. It is idle chatter and yet it seems to serve some useful social purpose; it is woman-talk and therefore suspect and awesome at the same time.

Pour expliquer cette ambiguïté il faut procéder à une étude historique. Il faut remonter à l'origine du mot *gossip* et du mot *commère*, voir les changements à travers le temps, déceler la signification de ces changements et essayer de les expliquer. Même si l'origine des deux mots est différente — *gossip* remontant à l'anglo-saxon et aux langues scandinaves, et *commère* au latin — les deux ont exactement le même sens: *godparent* ou *marraine*. Même si la langue française sépare les sexes déjà, avec le mot *compère*, le sens reste le même: *godparent* ou *parrain*. Et de là, les deux (ou trois) traversent le même chemin étymologique à travers le moyen âge et le début de la Renaissance pour vouloir dire, successivement, une voisine, une compagne, une personne qu'on connaît bien, a crony, a pal, a chum, sometimes a drinking partner, the female friends of a woman attending her during childbirth. And then, by the middle

-
4. See, for example, M. Gluckman, "Gossip and Scandal," *Current Anthropology* 4 (June 1963), pp. 307–16; M. Gluckman, "Psychological, Sociological and Anthropological Explanations of Witchcraft and Gossip," *Man* 3 (March 1968), pp. 20–34; R. Paine, "Gossip and Transaction," *Man* 3 (June 1968), pp. 305–8; R. Paine, "What is Gossip About? An Alternative Hypothesis," *Man* 2 (June 1967), pp. 278–85; R. C. Rosnow and G. A. Fine, *Rumour and Gossip. The Social Psychology of Hearsay* (New York, 1976); A. Rysman, "How the 'Gossip' Became a Woman," *Journal of Communication* 27 (Winter 1977), pp. 176–80; J. M. Suls, "Gossip as Social Comparison," *Journal of Communication* 27 (Winter 1977), pp. 164–8; J. F. Szwed, "Gossip, Drinking and Social Control: Consensus and Communication in a Newfoundland Parish," *Ethnology* 5 (1966), pp. 434–41. None except Rysman (whose title made my heart sink, fearing as I did that he might have said it all) touches on the male–female dynamic at work here and his approach, though enormously suggestive, is quite undeveloped.
 5. A. Oakley, *The Sociology of Housework* (London, 1974), p. 15; B. Goddard, "Translating and Sexual Difference," *Resources for Feminist Research* 13 (Nov. 1984), p. 13. Other feminist studies of language include the following: D. Jones, "Gossip: Notes on Women's Oral Culture," *Women's Studies International Quarterly* 3 (1980), pp. 193–8; M. Z. Rosaldo and L. Lamphere, eds., *Women, Culture and Society* (Stanford, 1974); D. Spender, *Man Made Language* (London, 1980); B. Thorne, C. Kramarae and N. Henley, eds., *Language, Gender and Society* (Rowley, Mass., 1983).

of the sixteenth century, a new meaning appears: "a person, mostly a woman, of light and trifling character, especially one who delights in trifling talk; a newsmonger, a tattler."⁶ Ce sens fait également partie du mot *commère* au seizième siècle, même si on peut en trouver une illustration plus tôt, chez Christine de Pisan à la fin du quatorzième siècle: "femme curieuse et bavarde qui veut tout connaître et colporte les nouvelles partout".⁷

The etymology of both words traces a curious pattern of change then from a person of either sex with whom one has a spiritual affinity (and responsibility for the next generation), from a friendly, close, companionate being to a loose-tongued, irresponsible, probably untrustworthy woman. And just as the latter becomes part of the meaning, *compère* se distingue plus nettement de *commère*, voulant maintenant dire vif, résolu, adroit, fort,⁸ tandis qu'un homme qui parle trop est surnommé *commère*, ce qui constitue une insulte. These meanings, established sometime between 1500 and 1700, are still with us and help to explain why many of you would prefer to make a distinction between gossip and shop-talk. The former is illegitimate because it is woman-talk; the latter is sanctioned because it is talk about men's work.

Obviously it takes more than a few dictionaries to implant notions that are still with us three and four hundred years later. Something else must have been going on at the same time to reinforce this "semantic denigration of women."⁹ The something else that I can discern is the Scientific Revolution, described by one historian of science as the time when God became an engineer and Nature a housewife.¹⁰ The political, social and economic ramifications of that revolution appear to have resulted in a clear separation of, and hierarchy between, male and female functions. For example, the development of central authority — a state with a male monarch — entailed a struggle for power with a equally male-dominated Church. Whether the struggle was a confrontation with ecclesiastical power or a courting of it, the implication was the same: power of any other sort than monarchical or ecclesiastical was illegitimate. The power of personal experience, the power of women, expressed through their voices, became improper and inferior. Gossip became a woman.¹¹ The most notable illustration of the silencing of women's voices is in the witchhunts occurring at the same time as monarch and priest were vying for supremacy. The two joined forces in warring against a competing power, one so diffuse that the opponents had to swallow their mutual

-
6. *Oxford English Dictionary* (1933); *Webster's Third New International Dictionary; Dictionnaire Oxford français-anglais*.
 7. *Grand Larousse de la langue française; Dictionnaire Bélisle de la langue française au Canada*.
 8. *Dictionnaire Bélisle de la langue française au Canada*.
 9. Barbara Goddard uses the phrase in relation to the different usage of the word witch and wizard. "Translating and Sexual Difference," p. 13.
 10. Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature* (New York, 1983), p. 272.
 11. Rysman's title but not his argument. The sexual ambiguity that surrounds the use of the word gossip in Shakespeare (*Twelfth Night, Midsummer Night's Dream*) places us in the midst of the changing sense of the word but may also stem from the fact that the centralized monarchy in England was then in the hands of a woman.

distrust and collaborate with an energy and enthusiasm that served to measure the perceived strength of the witches. One never knew just where a witch might appear or just what she might do. Witches were known to gather together and cackle, their words, as in *Macbeth*, able to invoke spells. They had power over birth since they frequently acted as midwives (and hence could be found in the company of “gossips”) and they had power over death since they were often healers. No wonder they had to be silenced. Burning them was the most effective means of doing so but ridicule worked almost as well. Witches became hags and subsequent portrayals of gossips depicted them as frightful, witchlike beings.¹²

Other occurrences of the time were equally effective in undermining the power of women. The professionalization — and masculinization — of medicine coincided with the disappearance of midwives and gossips as birth attendants. Forceps may well have been the most powerful instrument in fashioning the modern sense of the word gossip as the chatter of the birth attendants became secondary to the doctor’s scientific discourse and mechanical manipulation. The doctors of course derived their expertise from books, books emerging from the newly invented printing press. One of the results of the invention was to give the printed word a status and significance which it retains to this day. Historians still acknowledge this in their uneasy reaction to oral history: something learned by word of mouth is not real knowledge. In the sixteenth century the printing presses gave the edge to the written word and at the same time confirmed women’s oral culture since most women were denied access to book-based education. As women received less formal education than men, their conversation was increasingly denigrated. The printing presses recorded that too by noting the increasingly derogatory label assigned to the language women used to express their culture. Gossip now meant the idle chatter of women.

No sooner had that occurred than another new character appeared on the seventeenth century stage: the enterprising capitalist of the publishing and education trade. Some of his early bestsellers were etiquette books solemnly informing women (or their educators) that they should not gossip.¹³ What they should talk about instead was the new scientific theory of the day. Francesco Algarotti’s *Newtonianism for the Ladies* (1737) was a latecomer in a long series of popular science manuals and magazines whose purpose — besides making money for the publishers — was to gather a female audience for the new scientific theories and discoveries. Women were to be part of the Scientific Revolution after all. But *Newtonianism* was in fact merely intended “to enhance women’s abilities as salon conversationalists,”¹⁴ presumably because men found their personal chatter about family, relatives and morals too “gossipy.” The moral the men and their publishers had in mind, however, was that any talk by women other than that prescribed by men is inferior. If women speak of other matters, they are gossiping.

12. I would appreciate any reference to artistic representations of gossip.

13. Chris Kramarae, *Women and Men Speaking* (Rowley, Mass., 1981), p. 95.

14. C. Merchant, *The Death of Nature*, p. 273.

The “semantic denigration” of women was thus reinforced by the social ramifications of the Scientific Revolution. Women were expected to maintain family ties and status through proper behaviour but their only tool for doing so was their tongues which, if they exercised them too much, were labelled *mauvaises langues*. C’est ainsi que *gossip* ou *commère* rejoint d’autres mots qui déprécient ou dévalorisent la langue des femmes. En anglais, chatter, whine, prattle, nag, bitch, natter¹⁵ ne servent que pour décrire le langage des femmes (ou parfois des enfants). En français, on constate la même chose: papoter, babiller, cantonner n’ont qu’une connotation féminine ou enfantine. Ces mots reflètent donc la vie restreinte et restrictive imposée aux femmes. *Gossip* et *commérage* révèlent un langage d’impuissantes.

But if gossip is a language of powerlessness it is also one of power. Gossip constitutes an information network among women controlled by its own informants. It is much speedier than computers and it never requires questionnaires. As an information network (known in French as “le téléphone arabe” whereby surely hangs another tale), it lies outside male control by priests, scribes, kings, town criers, professors, politicians or journalists. Gossip also defines a code of behaviour by women and for women, with very strict sanctions against transgressors. “What will people say?” is a much more powerful deterrent than any man-made law. Gossip is also a means of expressing female authority, an authority that draws on the original sense of the word as meaning responsibility for the spiritual welfare of the next generation; based as it is on knowledge and judgment, it is authoritative. And finally gossip provides a link to society other than through men; for women therefore it is a means of overcoming isolation. That kind of powerful language produces a running commentary on morality, courtship, childrearing and family relations. When one adds to that the forum for grumbling that gossip provides, one comes very close to the language of women’s work. Gossip is women’s shop-talk. “Parler chiffons” ou commérer est une forme féminine de “parler boutique”.

But what, you are wondering by now, does all of that have to do with History? I would contend that it has everything to do with History. As historians we have called ourselves, jokingly, “Peeping Toms” bordering on the risqué because of the peeping but still respectable because of Tom. In fact, what History really is is a Glorious Gossip. What else are we doing but identifying the norms of the past, studying the definers of the norms, the institutions that solidified them, the deviants from them, the political, economic and social upheavals that either disrupted them or through which people passed unscathed because of them, and how the norms changed over time. Could one imagine, for example, the American, French or industrial revolution without the gossip? “All that tea in the Boston harbour...such a waste!” “Le roi s’enfuit vers Varennes...quel lâche!” “As-tu vu les nouvelles robes de Marie? Elle les a achetées avec les gages gagnés à Fall River!” How indeed could preliterate societies, immigrant societies, geographically far-flung societies, premixed schooling or mixed workforce societies or premanagement societies have functioned without gossip? Where else would the news come from? How could standards be defined? And what would be the

15. D. Spender, *Man Made Language*, p. 107.

source of entertainment? Gossip ensured the ebb and flow of each, providing the means for both assimilation and ostracism. It was the glue of social cohesiveness, matching couples to each other and to jobs in the labour market. Without gossip, there would be no history.

Lest one think, however, that gossip can be relegated to premodern times, let me suggest a few twentieth century Canadian examples of the significance of gossip. In the 1920s a business magazine entitled *Gossip!* began weekly publication in Montreal, subsequently moved to Toronto as a bimonthly and then monthly, and survived more than fifty years with “one ear permanently glued to the pavement at the corner of Peel and St. Catherine.” The magazine described itself as “up-to-the-minute talk”¹⁶ and it chatted about parties, books and debutantes, travel, theatre and restaurants. But most of the copy was advertising, presented in a novel and catchy way in response to the editor’s (a woman) query: “Some advertising was dreadfully dull, and some editorial copy was entertaining. Why not combine the two?”¹⁷ The following example links the informative, evaluative and entertaining aspects of gossip, all for the purpose of selling something:

Face powder is bad for the skin, one is told — and most of the pleasant things that help to give life a bit of bloom possess the same drawback. There is one ugly thing, however, that it is healthier to hide beneath a pleasing exterior — the radiator. Nash’s will install decorative radiator covers, with humidifiers enclosed, will finish them to match any room and make to order for as low a charge as \$20.00.¹⁸

The power of talk — whether to sell things or to control others — both intrigued and troubled people throughout the twentieth century. In the 1930s an Anti-Gossip Society was formed in Uxbridge, Ontario because certain of the townsfolk were “convinced that gossip is high in the ranks of society enemies.”¹⁹ During the Second World War “alien enemy ears” were presumed to be omnipresent and “Gossip control” was considered to be a legitimate government undertaking.²⁰ “You never know,” warned a patriotic writer to her largely female audience, “even in our country where you think we are comparatively secure, whether or not a Fifth Columnist has ears wide open to hear what you say and to send it by devious ways where it may do the greatest harm to us and be of the utmost benefit to our foes.”²¹ Even as upright a person as Frank Scott had to contend with gossip as a means of discrediting the CCF in Quebec in the 1940s. Scott, a member of the Bloc Populaire is reported to have said, was “married to a millionaire’s [sic] daughter and his father-in-law finances the CCF...[he] does not

16. *Gossip! The Montrealer*, back cover, 27 February 1931.

17. Mona Clark, who seems to have been with the magazine for more than thirty years, as quoted by Kay McMullen, “Toronto’s ‘Gossip,’” *Saturday Night* 65 (11 April 1950), p. 33.

18. *Gossip!* 27 February 1931, p. 22.

19. “We’re putting an end to rumors, pass it on,” editorial in *Globe and Mail*, 16 March 1985.

20. M. J. Lawrence, “Gossip control,” *Canadian Home Journal* 37 (June 1940), p. 2.

21. E. Dare, “Door on your lips,” *Canadian Home Journal* 39 (August 1942), p. 52.

personally believe in socialism and privately makes jokes about it.”²² One of the prominent targets of Scott’s own political and legal venom, Maurice Duplessis, was a masterful manipulator of gossip. He used his intimate knowledge of the private lives of people all over the province of Quebec to bind people to him and the Union Nationale.²³ It may have been cheap gossip — it certainly was cheaper than the equally vast network of electoral bribery — but it was politically immensely powerful. The power of such talk has even been recognized by the teachers of management as their textbooks identify gossip as a major information network in large companies. There the analysts prefer to dub the talk “the grapevine” and the key people along it “liaison individuals” but gossip it is. And employees who do not engage in it are “probably maladjusted!”²⁴ Whether we will soon have computers telling us the same thing is another matter but even the “banque de données” which the Presses de l’Université du Québec has put at the disposition of its subscribers — updated every week so that one will be constantly tempted to “log on” in order to find out what’s new — is merely a sophisticated form of gossip/comméragé.²⁵ And, as a final indication of the power of gossip, large business firms rely far more on hospitality suites at conventions than on formal seminars or even industrial spying to discover what’s going on among their competitors.²⁶

“What’s going on?”/“Qu’est-ce qui se passe?” is precisely the historian’s question. The ear of the gossip is thus perhaps the historian’s first tool. Turning that ear to Canadian history, one can suggest a division of our past into three periods, for each of which gossip may provide the audible clue. From the earliest days of white settlement until about 1880, Canadian history is the story of political and economic control over geography and people. How to produce some wealth out of this country was the question that kept people coming and trying. The measure of their success could well lie in the gossip the powerful among them elicited. All the historian has to do is listen, not to the clink of metal into a *coffre-fort* or the ring of a last spike, but to the sometimes spiteful, sometimes entertaining chatter of people about people. The same open-ear technique could be applied to the second division of Canadian history, the period from the 1880s to the 1960s, when the story becomes one of the distribution of wealth. What to do with the wealth produced was the question that kept people wondering over guns and butter — and their peacetime equivalents — for nearly one hundred years. To gauge whether the right thing was being done and how far the distribution of wealth actually reached, one could listen to popular grumbling (or

22. Canada. Public Archives, Frank Scott Papers, Jacques Casgrain to F. Scott, 26 July 1943. Following the custom of gossip, Casgrain did not name his source.

23. Conrad Black’s *Duplessis* (Toronto, 1977), Georges-Émile Lapalme’s *Le Vent de l’Oubli* (Montréal, 1970) and Pierre Laporte’s *Le Vrai Visage de Duplessis* (Montréal, 1960) all refer to this particular aspect of Duplessis’s power, without calling it gossip.

24. K. Davis, *Human Behaviour at Work: Organizational Behaviour*, 4th ed. (New York, 1972), pp. 339 and 336.

25. “Les Presses de l’U.Q. lancent la première banque de données ‘grand-public’,” *Le Devoir*, 12 mai 1984.

26. I have this on good authority, overhead at a conversation at lunch between officials of the University of Ottawa and a major chemical company, Spring 1985.

bitching, in the gossip's lexicon). The extent of social injustice could be measured by the amount of bitching. Once the historian's ear is attuned to that, he can move on well-prepared for the babel of tongues that characterize the period since the 1960s. "Hey, what about us?" is the question that begins with the Québécois and then goes on to be asked in succession by workers, Indians, women and various ethnic groups. Here too, by listening to the gossip within and about those different groups of people, a historian could assess the extent of participation in or alienation from the Canadian community.

Mais pour comprendre tout ça, pour être à l'écoute de tout ça, il se peut que les historiens soient obligés de prêter oreille aux femmes!

By now, you may be finding all this a little hard to take. You are no doubt resisting being lumped among the Gossips of the World. You are probably uneasy about relinquishing shop-talk as the label for your verbal communication at these annual meetings, in spite of the fact that the label is barely a century old, not very interesting and even somewhat derogatory to our discourse because of the analogy to commercial transaction. By naming our discourse for what it is — GOSSIP — we can thereby be engaged in something of much richer historical, intellectual, emotional, even sexual significance. Moreover, and as a last word, let me remind you of what a Canadian psychologist claimed in 1908: that there is "an essential identity between the gossip and the genius."²⁷

27. J. D. Logan, "The Psychology of Gossip," *Canadian Magazine* 31 (June 1908), p. 106.