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Presidential Address: The Future of the Past in Canada on the Eve of the Twenty-First Century

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Article abstract

In the past half-century, the historical profession in Canada has broadened its attention significantly beyond the political, diplomatic, and military concerns that were dominant as recently as the 1950s. This came about in particular by three challenges: from Marxists who insisted on the study of history from the bottom up and on the importance of class and class conflict; from feminists, who focussed attention on the history of women and gender relations; and from scholars who shifted the historical study of politics from political systems to political cultures. Other methodological innovations also helped broaden the study of history, most noticeably the use of statistics in historical analysis.

This "opening" of the profession has, however, made it more sectarian and fractious. Moreover, the attention of historians continues to be paid to the western world and is now largely focussed on the last two-and-a-half centuries. A longer and much wider view of human history is necessary. Accordingly, the paper briefly discusses examples drawn from daily life - paper, food, flowers, and the environment - as evidence of the global nature of history and of the importance of the *longue durée* in it. The paper concludes by arguing that it is essential for historians to enlarge their conception of the past, for by examining much earlier times and very different cultures, we may come to recognize what is distinctive or peculiar about ourselves as well as others. Such imaginative travels through space and time provide a deeply humanizing and liberating experience.

PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS DISCOURS DU PRÉSIDENT

The Future of the Past in Canada on the Eve of the Twenty-First Century

JAMES A. LEITH

Résumé

In the past half-century, the historical profession in Canada has broadened its attention significantly beyond the political, diplomatic, and military concerns that were dominant as recently as the 1950s. This came about in particular by three challenges: from Marxists who insisted on the study of history from the bottom up and on the importance of class and class conflict; from feminists, who focussed attention on the history of women and gender relations; and from scholars who shifted the historical study of politics from political systems to political cultures. Other methodological innovations also helped broaden the study of history, most noticeably the use of statistics in historical analysis.

This "opening" of the profession has, however, made it more sectarian and fractious. Moreover, the attention of historians continues to be paid to the western world and is now largely focussed on the last two-and-a-half centuries. A longer and much wider view of human history is necessary. Accordingly, the paper briefly discusses examples drawn from daily life – paper, food, flowers, and the environment – as evidence of the global nature of history and of the importance of the longue durée in it. The paper concludes by arguing that it is essential for historians to enlarge their conception of the past, for by examining much earlier times and very different cultures, we may come to recognize what is distinctive or peculiar about ourselves as well as others. Such imaginative travels through space and time provide a deeply humanizing and liberating experience.

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Au cours de la dernière moitié de ce siècle, la profession historique canadienne a élargi la portée de son attention de manière significative, au delà des préoccupations politiques, diplomatiques et militaires qui l'avaient dominée jusqu'à tard dans les

années 1950. Trois défis en particulier ont facilité cette évolution: celui des marxistes qui ont mis l'accent sur une histoire du bas vers le haut et sur l'importance des classes et des conflits de classe; celui des féministes qui ont concentré l'attention sur l'histoire des femmes et des relations sociales de sexe; et celui des analystes de la politique qui ont remplacé l'étude des systèmes par celle des cultures politiques. Des innovations méthodologiques ont contribué à cette extension, dont la plus notable est sans doute l'utilisation des statistiques historiques.

Cette « ouverture, » cependant, a rendu la profession plus sectaire et plus fracturée. Autres problèmes, les historiens n'ont pas cessé de porter le gros de leur attention sur le monde occidental et ils réservent dorénavant la plupart de leurs travaux aux derniers deux siècles et demi. Une conception plus large et plus longue de l'histoire humaine est pourtant nécessaire. Cet essai aborde des exemples tirés de la vie quotidienne, ceux du papier, de la nourriture, des fleurs et de l'environnement, comme manifestations de la nature globale de l'histoire et de l'importance qu'y détient la longue durée. Il conclut qu'il est essentiel pour les historiens assouplir leur idée du passé. L'examen de temps plus reculés et de cultures très différentes peut aider à identifier ce qu'il y a de particulier et de spécifique chez soi et chez les autres. Enfin, de tels périple de l'imagination à travers le temps et l'espace procurent des expériences profondément humaines et libératrices.

Faced with the formidable task of giving the presidential address to the Canadian Historical Association, many of my predecessors have chosen to talk about some aspect of the field in which they have specialized. On the eve of the twenty-first century and at the end of nearly half a century of studying history, I have decided instead to reflect on the major changes which have occurred in that period, the gains which we have made, and the shortcomings that we shall have to overcome if we are ever going to serve our students well. My talk resembles one of those good news, bad news stories. I shall discuss the good news first. The fact is that we have made a lot of progress in broadening history far beyond the political, diplomatic, and military concerns which dominated the curriculum at the University of Toronto during the late 'forties and the 'fifties when I was a student there. Those were the days of Bertie Wilkinson, Michael Powicke, Richard Saunders, Chester Martin, George Brown, Ken McNaught, Gerald Craig, Ralph Flenley, Frank Underhill, Maurice Careless, and Donald Creighton. (Talk about the patriarchy!) When I told Creighton that I wanted to do a thesis on the relation between art and politics during the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, Creighton advised me, none too gently, that I belonged in the art department. Fortunately Richard Saunders saw the possibility of such a project.

The first major change early in my career, one which occurred largely under the influence of Marxists or those largely influenced by Marx, was the study of history from the bottom up instead of from the top down. In my own field of specialization, eighteenth-century France and the Revolution, historians produced a series of studies of the lower classes, the peasants, and the people in the cities – the poor, the *sans-culottes*, or the *bras nus*, as one historian called them. One of the pioneers in this movement was Georges Rudé who, excluded by his Communist Party membership from teaching in Britain or the United States, was forced to work in Australia before ending

his career here in Montreal. At the same time, this research was extended to the workers who appeared along with industrialisation. In this area, Canadians have made an impressive contribution. At the same time, there has been an attempt, led by the French, to understand the mentality of the lower classes who usually did not leave behind letters, diaries, and memoirs.

The Marxists, when I knew them early in my career, were mostly interested in class, rather than gender; however, in recent decades, as the feminist revolution gained momentum, the history of women and gender relations has become increasingly important. In my own field, where women were seldom mentioned when I did graduate work in the 'fifties, there are now a dozen good books and scores of revealing articles on women in the French Revolution. Despite the fact that women were denied the vote and the right to serve in the government, "citizens without citizenship," as Olwen Hufton puts it, their role has been recognized in the protest movements, in submitting petitions, in participating in revolutionary rituals, in attending political clubs, and in creating some political clubs of their own until the male government suppressed them. There were few feminists in the modern sense among the revolutionary women at the end of the eighteenth century but some individuals, such as Olympe de Gouges, Pauline Léon, or Théroigne de Mericourt, paved the way for later feminists. Similar progress has been made in women's studies in other countries, as the book displays at the Berkshire Conferences attest powerfully.

Meanwhile, political history itself has been profoundly changed by the emergence of the concept of different political cultures, rather than of different political systems. Again, this has been particularly marked in the historiography of the French Revolution. Recent decades have seen the integration of language, ritual, symbolism, drama, music, art and architecture into our analysis. Recent trends in literary criticism have also been very important in this development: where class conflict once dominated, revisionists such as François Furet have argued the Revolution was driven forward by the new *discours* which was formed in the early years of the Revolution. In his view, the Revolution was driven forward as leaders strove to make it consistent with its talk of national sovereignty and the general will. For Furet, the Revolution was primarily a linguistic event. In my judgement this ignores much of the important contribution of Marxists a generation earlier, but it also liberates us from the limitations of class conflict as the only valid explanation of historical change.

Other innovations in my lifetime can only be mentioned – the influence of semiotics, of experiments in psychohistory, of interest in the mass media, of research into the history of science and technology, of nascent study of the history of the environment, and the study of the contributions of diverse ethnic groups. One advance which deserves special mention is the application of statistics in history, or what some call cliometrics. This has been partly the result of the influence of the *Annales* school in France, whose adherents tried to quantify all aspects of history. Fernand Ouellet was responsible to a large extent for introducing this school's methodology into Canada. A wider cause of quantification has obviously been the use of mathematics in the sciences and social sciences, along with the ease in handling numerical data which has come with the advent of the computer. Some historians have become masters of making numbers talk, as the winners of this year's Garneau Medal and Macdonald Prize illustrate so well.

History, then, has become richer, deeper, and more varied in recent decades. The first piece of bad news is that the new methodologies and novel approaches which have enriched us have also made us very sectarian and factious. The defenders of more traditional areas of study are often just as intolerant in return; some Canadian historians are even forming a secessionist movement from this Association so that they can do national history as they think it should be done. It seems to me very ill-advised to form another organization when government funding for scholarly and learned publications is being drastically cut. While I personally welcome the advances made in social history, gender history, and labour history, I see no reason whatsoever to look down on political, military, economic, or diplomatic history, provided up-to-date approaches are used where appropriate. Have war, politics, economics, and diplomacy not played an important role throughout history? We should be working together to contribute to a synthesis in which we try to see how the pieces fit together into a complex but interrelated whole.

Two other pieces of bad news are that the vast majority of Canadian historians concentrate on the last two or two-and-a-half centuries and on the western world. We need to take a longer and much wider view of human history. There has been a lot of talk recently about globalization because of the growth of world trade, the emergence of Asia as an important economic force, the linking together of our own planet by telecommunications, and the growing awareness that we all share the same biosphere. Let me take a few minutes, however, to show that aspects of our daily lives reveal that globalization has been going on for centuries. I would like to discuss paper, food, flowers, and the environment.

Despite the advent of cyberspace, we all still depend on printed information – printed books, journals, magazines, newspapers, notices, conference programs, calendars, and so on. We owe paper to a Chinese invention made shortly after the beginning of the first century before Christ. The Chinese had long made felt for their tents and clothing by treading on animal hair until it matted together. When they shredded plant or rag fibres and passed the resulting mush through a sieve, they created paper. Paper proved to be an ideal material upon which to stamp images and words carved into blocks of wood. By the time of Charlemagne, the Chinese were printing pictures and words using woodblocks the way Europeans were to do six hundred years later. Here we see one of the earliest surviving woodcuts, an image of the goddess of Mercy, printed in the tenth century A.D. (Figure 1). The Chinese even used moveable stamps to change the denominations of paper money, probably the world's first mass medium. The technique first spread to neighbouring Korea and Japan, then slowly across central Asia via Samarkhand to Spain about 1150, then to Italy by 1275, and Germany in 1390. Europeans improved on Chinese technology by sizing paper with animal glue instead of rice paste, and speeding up the shredding of rags with water-powered hammers. Before Gutenberg, Europeans first made devotional prints like this one of Saint Christopher (Figure 2). And then compilations of prints into block books such as this *Biblia pauperum* (Figure 3). The availability of paper and the tradition of prints laid the foundation for Gutenberg's revolution, which produced something like 15 million to 20 million books between 1450 and 1500.



Figure 1: Kuan-yin (goddess of Mercy). Woodcut by Yen-mei, Tun Huang, A.D 947.



Figure 2: St. Christopher. Hand-coloured woodcut, south Germany, 1423.



Figure 3: Page of a Biblia pauperum, probably mid fifteenth century.



Figure 4: *Giovanni Arciboldo, Summer, Italy, 1563.*

As we sit down for dinner after reading the newspaper, we confront further evidence of the *longue durée* and globalization. We call our dishes “china,” because the Chinese were probably the first to bind a glaze to the body of pottery at a very high temperature to produce porcelain around the fourteenth century. In the late fifteenth century, potters began to produce porcelain in Italy and France; then it spread to the rest of Europe. What we put on our plates is often the product of meats, vegetables, spices, and fruits from around the world. In French, turkey is called *dinde*, from India, because French explorers thought that they had reached the east. Among the produce which spread from the New World was maize (a word originating in Cuba), potatoes, tomatoes, squash, lima beans, scarlet runners, red peppers, and chili pepper (Figure 4). Chili extracts were used to heat up the curries and other spices imported from India since Roman times. In return, many of our grains were imported from Europe to America. At the same time, Asian crops such as bananas, rice, and citrus fruits were imported into the so-called New World.

If after dinner we stroll in our garden or take a walk in a nearby park, we again shall confront evidence of the *longue durée* and of globalization. In the spring, we shall probably see tulips, originally wildflowers in Persia and Afghanistan, subsequently cultivated in Turkey in the sixteenth century, then brought to Vienna by the Holy Roman Emperor in the second half of that century. Since the Habsburgs controlled the Lowlands at that time, tulips reached Holland later in the sixteenth century and became the centre of a mania among the Dutch. Rare bulbs fetched enormous prices. Most seventeenth-century still-lives of flowers by Dutch artists, such as this one by Roelandt Savery in 1613, prominently featured tulips (Figure 5). Or we may see hyacinths, another common spring flower popularized by the Dutch, originally a native of the Balkans, Greece, and Asia Minor. Later in the summer, probably the commonest flower in Canada is the Busy Lizzy or Impatiens, originally an east African plant, which has now been bred into a wide range of types and colours. The lovely, cascading white and purple lobelia originally grew high in the mountains of Kenya. Or perhaps we shall see some roses, many varieties of which are derived from Europe, but many others of which originated high in the mountains of China alongside tea plants, earning the name “tea roses.” By autumn, we may see chrysanthemums, flowers that can be traced back to China five centuries before Christ, although it was the Japanese who developed them to perfection. The imperial flag of Japan, the one with a white circle in the centre from which sixteen bars radiate out, is not another symbol of the rising sun, but an abstract version of a white chrysanthemum, the emblem of the court.

Admittedly, the problems of the environment have accelerated in recent decades, but the human impact on the environment, often adverse, has also been long range and global. Almost as soon as agriculture became highly developed around the Euphrates in the neolithic period, problems began. Overgrazing and the repeated planting of the same crops on the same land led to exhaustion of the soil. Simultaneously, irrigation of the soil over long periods led to salination. Later, centuries before Christ, the Greeks denuded the hills of Greece to get lumber to build ships which were the basis of the Athenian empire, leading to incurable erosion. As the Romans expanded their power, they too destroyed their forests, not just to build ships, but to make charcoal to forge



Figure 5: *Roelandt Savery, Flowers, Dutch, 1613.*

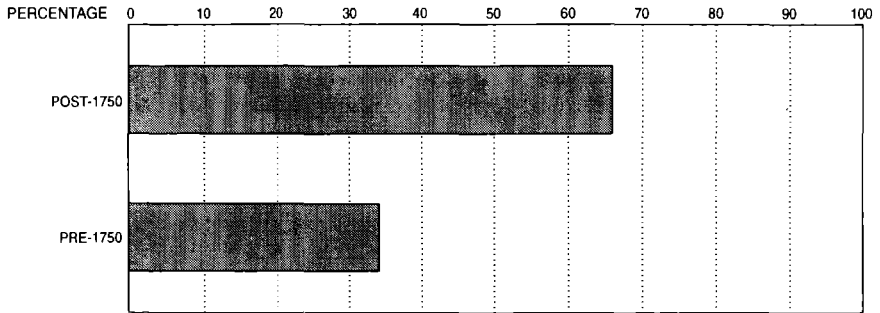


Figure 6: *Chronological Concentration of Canadian Historians.*

weapons for their legions. Much later, the English used up their forests, forcing them to exploit Canada as their “woodlot,” as Arthur Lower put it. Moreover, as Farley Mowat showed in his *Sea of Slaughter*, the impact of Europeans on animal life along the coasts of Newfoundland, Labrador, and the Gulf of Saint Lawrence was enormous. Among other effects, the European settlers *made* polar bears, which had ranged as far south as the Saint Lawrence, “polar.” This indiscriminate slaughter of animal life along our eastern coast laid the foundation for the recent crisis of the “cod that failed.” Meanwhile, the erosion of topsoil has been long term and global: The Yellow River in China gets its name from the millions of tons of soil from cultivated hillsides that it has been carrying into the sea for centuries, very much like the Mississippi River today.

I could choose many other examples of the *longue durée* and globalization. For example, our terminology implies that world wars began early in the twentieth century, whereas any competent historian knows that some wars have been fought around the world since the age of Louis XIV. Or we could sketch the globalization of disease over the centuries. But instead of multiplying examples, I wish to conclude by reporting how Canadian historians stack up when tested by the chronological depth and geographical scope of what we study and teach. My report is based on analysis of almost one thousand historians in thirty-five universities across Canada, as revealed by their calendars. I have tried to analyse the various types of history which we practise (although environmental history is conspicuously weak), rather than how we treat the more distant past and alien cultures. My findings are summed up in three bar graphs.

When we look at the chronological periods of concentration by historians across Canada (Figure 6), we can see clearly that we are heavily concentrated in the period since 1750. Interest in ancient civilizations, the beginnings of agriculture and the rise of cities (the very source of the word “civilization”) is almost non-existent. We are also very weak in classical, mediaeval, and early modern history. Despite the fact that the early modern period saw the invention of printing, other signs of emerging technology – witness this portable bridge designed in the late Renaissance (Figure 7) or this reversible waterwheel used in mining in the mid-sixteenth century (Figure 8) – schism

in western Christendom, the beginnings of capitalism, the coming of the Scientific Revolution, the emergence of the modern state, the evolution of the diplomatic system, growing western awareness of the rest of the world, and other developments of fundamental importance, only a fraction of scholars specialize in that period. The number of early modern historians could be increased if one added those who specialize in the period between 1750 and 1800, since a large number of our colleagues concentrate on the late Enlightenment, the British conquest of New France, the American Revolution, and the French Revolution. In my judgement, these specialists actually belong among the modern historians who dominate our profession in Canada at present. Unfortunately the membership of the Canadian Historical Association and its annual program reflects this foreshortening of the past all too clearly.

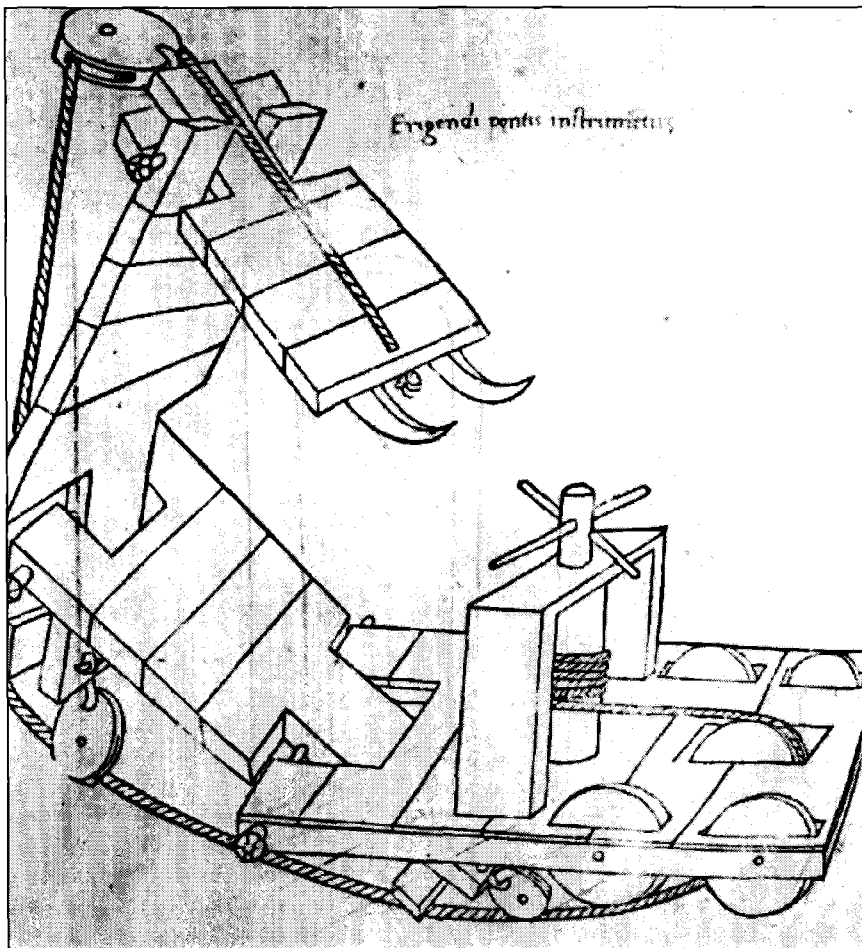


Figure 7: *Portable bridge*. Woodcut in Robertus Valturius, *De re militari*, Verona, 1472.

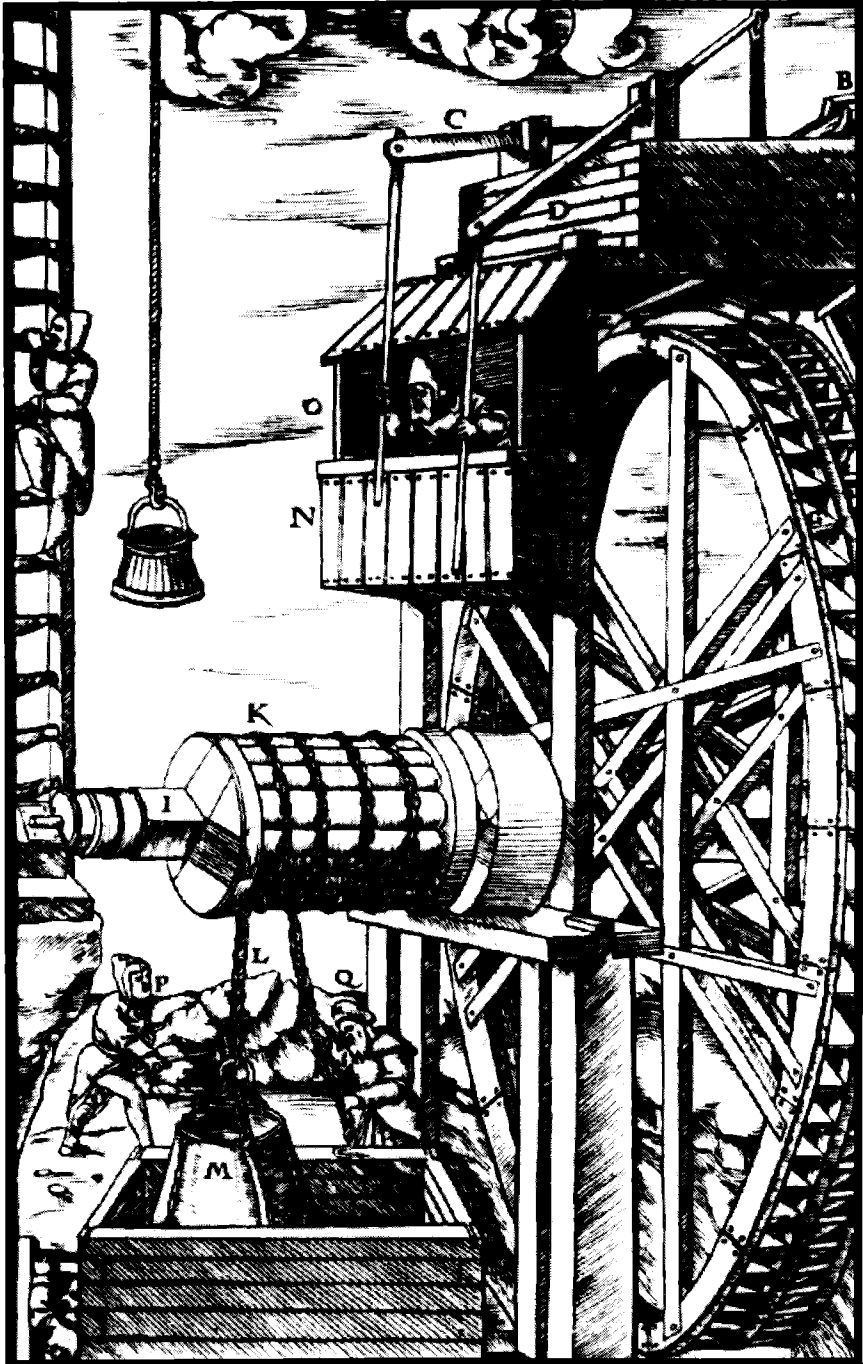


Figure 8: *Reversible waterwheel*. Woodcut by Basilius Wefring in *Georgius Agricola, De re metallica*.

Not only as historians have we lost much of our sense of the *longue durée*, but our geographical range is largely confined to Europe and areas heavily colonized by Europeans, such as Canada, the United States, Latin America, Australia, and New Zealand, although the last two do not get much attention (Figure 9). Our specialists in science, technology, and medicine reinforce this emphasis. Over ninety percent of our historians concentrate on the West and its offspring, leaving under ten percent to study the rest of the world (Figure 10). Only 2.4% study China, Japan, and East Asia. Still fewer, 2.3%, study Africa. Even worse, .57% study India, .47% study the Middle East, and .16% study the Islamic world elsewhere. Those who might be called "global" – specialists in world history, comparative religion, conflict studies, international relations, and slavery – total barely over 1%. In a world that has long been global, and is becoming increasingly so, we are not preparing our students for the twenty-first century.

I am not very optimistic about how we shall overcome these shortcomings. I have seen no signs that we are about to abandon sectarianism for the sake of a more ecumenical approach to history. Some of us will think the current situation, as I have depicted it, is not as unsatisfactory as I have made it out to be. Some of us will be quite happy to continue to do what we are doing now and to turn out graduate students very like ourselves. In any case, it will be very difficult for departments to change direction in the foreseeable future because of the scarcity of money. Moreover, the whole ethos of modern society, with its emphasis on the latest technology, makes many of us think that interest in the distant past is merely antiquarianism. Finally, studying cultures other than our own involves mastering foreign languages, including difficult languages, languages such as Hebrew, Arabic, Hindi, Chinese, or Japanese. Despite these difficulties, we could offer our first-year students a survey of world history before zeroing in on more specialized themes. There are several remarkably good textbooks available.

Above all, many of us seem convinced that by studying the immediate antecedents of our own culture, we learn more about ourselves. My contention is that we must learn about much earlier times and very different cultures in order to recognize what is distinctive or peculiar about ourselves. We are all born into a tiny piece of space, even in the second largest country in the world, and for a short period of time. We need an anti-environment to understand our own environment and the rich variety of human experience through the centuries. Only by trying to understand "the other" can we really understand ourselves and the limitations of our world. I see the possibility of travelling imaginatively through space and time as a deeply humanizing and liberating experience. By offering our students a longer view of history and a more global scope, we would be offering them this deeper understanding of themselves, as well as a better preparation for our multicultural society and an increasingly global world. That is my challenge to my colleagues on the eve of the twenty-first century.

THE FUTURE OF THE PAST IN CANADA

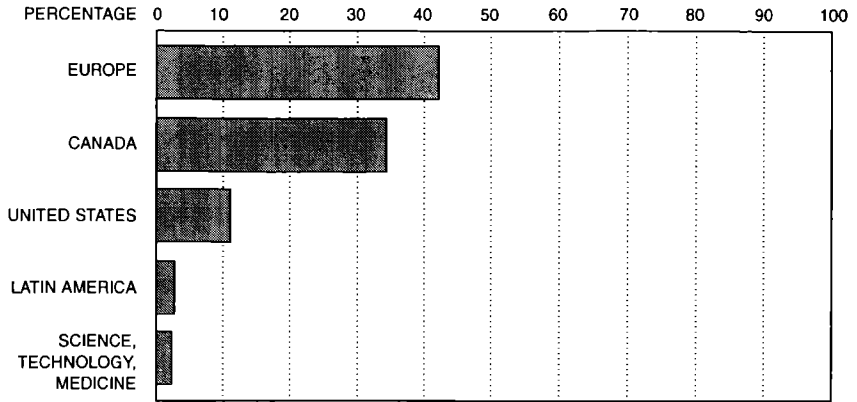
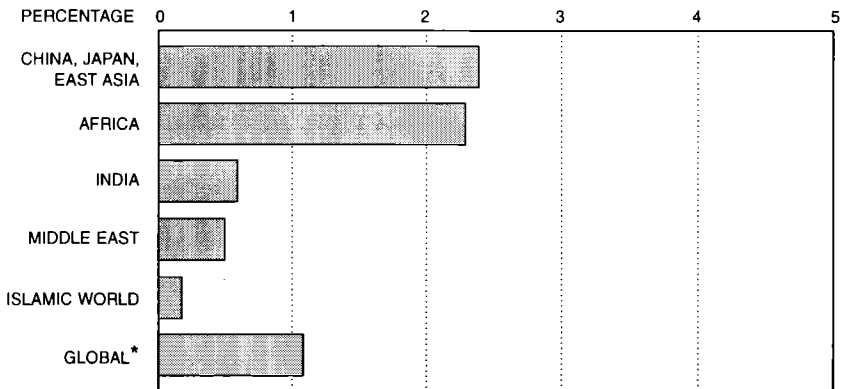


Figure 9: *Canadian Historians Specializing in Western Civilization.*



* SPECIALISTS IN WORLD HISTORY, COMPARATIVE RELIGIONS, CONFLICT STUDIES, INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS, AND SLAVERY

Figure 10: *Canadian Historians Studying the Rest of the World.*