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# Variations on the Theme of Remembering: A National Survey of How Canadians Use the Past

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### Résumé de l'article

Cette étude de remémoration collective s'appuie sur une enquête téléphonique menée auprès de 3,419 adultes résidant au Canada. Comportant plus de 70 questions et nécessitant des entretiens de plus de 20 minutes, l'enquête, effectuée dans le cadre du projet Les Canadiens et leurs passés, vise à évaluer l'utilisation du passé dans la vie de tous les jours. Combien de Canadiens et de Canadiennes se livrent à des activités liées au passé, telles que lire un livre, regarder des photos ou visiter un musée ou un lieu historique? Comment évaluent-ils les différentes sources d'information sur le passé? Quels types de passé priment pour eux : celui de leur famille, de leur province, de leur pays, de leur groupe ethnique? Le présent article avance l'idée que la construction et la reconstruction du souvenir autobiographique sont des aspects fondamentaux de l'utilisation du passé. Il affirme que les passés collectifs sont tout particulièrement importants chez les membres des minorités et des groupes divergents. Et il laisse entendre que le passé de l'État-nation est beaucoup plus présent dans les réflexions de ces citoyens que ne l'ont constaté Roy Rosenzweig et David Thelen dans leur étude semblable, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (1998).

# Variations on the Theme of Remembering: A National Survey of How Canadians Use the Past

GERALD FRIESEN, DEL MUISE, AND DAVID NORTHRUP

## **Abstract**

*This paper in collective remembering is based on a telephone survey of 3,419 adult residents of Canada. The questionnaire contains over 70 questions. The interviews average over 20 minutes in length. Part of the Canadians and Their Pasts project, the survey seeks to assess how Canadians use the past in daily life. How many engage in activities related to the past, such as reading books, viewing photos, or visiting museums and historic sites? How do they evaluate different sources of information about the past? What types of past — family, province, nation, ethnic group — are most important to them? The paper suggests that the construction and reconstruction of autobiographical memory is a fundamental aspect of one's uses of the past. It also proposes that wider collective pasts are particularly important among members of minority and alternative groups. And that the past of the nation-state figures more prominently in these citizens' reflections than Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen observed in their similar study, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (1998).*

## **Résumé**

*Cette étude de remémoration collective s'appuie sur une enquête téléphonique menée auprès de 3,419 adultes résidant au Canada. Comportant plus de 70 questions et nécessitant des entretiens de plus de 20 minutes, l'enquête, effectuée dans le cadre du projet *Les Canadiens et leurs passés*, vise à évaluer l'utilisation du passé dans la vie de tous les jours. Combien de Canadiens et de Canadiennes se livrent à des activités liées au passé, telles que lire un livre, regarder des photos ou visiter un musée ou un lieu historique? Comment évaluent-ils les différentes sources d'information sur le passé? Quels types de passé priment pour eux : celui de leur famille, de leur province, de leur pays,*

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This paper was written in collaboration with the other members of the Canadians and Their Pasts alliance: Jocelyn Létourneau (principal investigator), Margaret Conrad, Kadriye Ercikan, and Peter Seixas. We would also like to acknowledge and thank our research assistant, Jeremy Wiebe, now a doctoral student at the University of Waterloo.

*de leur groupe ethnique? Le présent article avance l'idée que la construction et la reconstruction du souvenir autobiographique sont des aspects fondamentaux de l'utilisation du passé. Il affirme que les passés collectifs sont tout particulièrement importants chez les membres des minorités et des groupes divergents. Et il laisse entendre que le passé de l'État-nation est beaucoup plus présent dans les réflexions de ces citoyens que ne l'ont constaté Roy Rosenzweig et David Thelen dans leur étude semblable, The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life (1998).*

## Introduction

Historians are familiar with the arguments concerning their discipline's present state: a growing gulf between academic writing and non-professional audiences; a global cultural tendency wherein societies ignore the past as a means of understanding the present; and yet an apparent boom in peoples' interest in the past.<sup>1</sup> A recent research project, *Canadians and Their Pasts*, responds to these differing diagnoses by exploring citizens' uses of history. The project can be seen as a belated reply to Carl Becker's famous warning to American historians: "Berate him as we will for not reading our books, Mr. Everyman is stronger than we are, and sooner or later we must adapt our knowledge to his necessities."<sup>2</sup> In responding to Becker's stricture, this paper employs a national survey to assess the types of memories that accompany citizens in

1 In his entry on historical writing in *The Oxford Companion to Canadian History*, which summarized the outpouring of scholarly publications after 1970, Carl Berger wrote, "Despite this vast elaboration of Canadian history in all its richness and complexity, many observers (especially academics) detected a malaise, a sense that what had once been a coherent story of nation building was fragmented beyond repair, and an awareness that to the public history seemed to matter less and less." He added: "Pronouncements about the death of Canadian history were premature, however, as the popularity of the CBC's television series, *Canada: A People's History* (broadcast 2000-2001) indicated. It should provide some small comfort to note that the development of Canadian historiography since 1970 mirrored the growth of modern history writing everywhere." Carl Berger, "History and historians," in *The Oxford Companion to Canadian History*, ed. Gerald Hallowell (Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press 2004), 289. Berger, whose books were central to the study of Canadian historical writing for a generation, had been one of the first to identify (in 1986) another important cultural trend: "The expectation of the reading public regarding a work of history and the practice of most academic historians were closer a generation ago than in the last decade." Carl Berger, *The Writing of Canadian History: Aspects of English-Canadian Historical Writing since 1900*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 1986), 268. Also Margaret Conrad, "Public History and its Discontents or History in the Age of Wikipedia," *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 18, 1 (2007): 1-26, esp. 24.

2 Carl Becker, "Everyman His Own Historian," *American Historical Review* 37, 2 (January 1932): 221-36; in this approach, the individual citizen becomes the first subject of study (not "history" or "memory" in the abstract); the present becomes the reference point; and phenomenology's perception of a past — present — future continuum serves as the philosophical background.

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daily life.<sup>3</sup> It first outlines the survey and questionnaire and then examines three aspects of the findings: autobiographical remembering, collective remembering, and remembering as it relates to the nation-state.

### The Survey

The Canadians and Their Pasts project is being conducted in the wake of several other large investigations. A European group, Youth and History, surveyed over 30,000 students in the early 1990s and published an influential discussion of the findings in 1997.<sup>4</sup> In the same period Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen tried to discover “the actual content of popular historical consciousness — the ways that Americans use and think about the past and whether or not Americans are, in fact, disengaged from or indifferent toward the past.”<sup>5</sup> Their widely-cited book, *The Presence of the Past*, appeared in 1998. A year later, Paul Ashton and Paula Hamilton began to investigate “How Australians think about, evaluate, and use the past.”<sup>6</sup> Their published report appeared in 2003. The Canadian planning commenced just after the Australians completed their survey and funding from SSHRC’s Community-University Research Alliance program permitted seven co-investigators to link with 15 community partners in the project.<sup>7</sup>

The Canadian researchers followed the path established by the previous studies. The American approach involved 30-minute interviews with 1,400 individuals. The Australians spoke to fewer people, but conducted more extensive interviews, by phone with 350 people and face to face with 150 more. In our project we chose to rely on a briefer telephone survey and to obtain a more representative national sample of respondents that paid careful attention to linguistic

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3 We are indebted especially to Bernard Eric Jensen, “Usable Pasts: Comparing Approaches to Popular and Public History,” in *People and Their Pasts: Public History Today*, eds. Paul Ashton and Hilda Keen (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009).

4 Magne Angvik and Bodo von Borries, eds. *Youth and History: A Comparative European Survey on Historical Consciousness and Political Attitudes among Adolescents* (Hamburg: Körber-Stiftung 1997).

5 Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* (New York: Columbia University Press 1998); Roy Rosenzweig, “How Americans Use and Think about the Past: Implications from a National Survey for the Teaching of History” in *Knowing, Teaching, and Learning History*, eds. Peter N. Stearns, Peter Seixas, and Sam Wineburg (New York: New York University Press 2000), 262–83, esp. 263.

6 Paul Ashton and Paula Hamilton, “At Home with the Past: Background and Initial Findings from the National Survey,” *Australian Cultural History* 23 (2003): 5–30, esp. 7; and Paul Ashton and Paula Hamilton, “Connecting with History: Australians and their Pasts” in *People and Their Pasts*, 23–41.

7 The Canadians and Their Pasts alliance commenced its activities in mid-2006. Margaret Conrad, Jocelyn Létourneau, and David Northrup, “Canadians and Their Pasts: An Exploration in Historical Consciousness,” *The Public Historian* 31, no. 1 (February 2009): 15–34.

and regional identities. We planned to contact 2,000 randomly-selected people (five regions, 400 respondents in each), plus three special samples (100 Acadians in New Brunswick, 100 Aboriginal people in and around Saskatoon, 100 new immigrants in Peel Region west of Toronto). When Parks Canada joined the project we were able to interview an additional 1,000 people in Canada's five biggest cities (Montréal, Toronto, Calgary, Edmonton, and Vancouver). By the conclusion of this phase of the project in mid-2008, roughly one in every 10,000 Canadians had responded to the questionnaire — 3,419 individuals, 3,119 in the national sample and 300 more in the special samples. The interviews were conducted by the Institute of Social Research at York University and Jolicoeur et Associés of Montréal. This is a very large sample and can be trusted to be representative of adult Canadians' perceptions in 2007–2008.

Our survey is not designed to test citizens' factual knowledge about Canadian history, as the Dominion Institute has done, nor is it addressing their interest in professionals' academic research, except tangentially. Rather, it seeks to understand how citizens employ "history," or "the past," or "history and the past," in the construction of personal and collective identities.<sup>8</sup> It has the advantages and disadvantages of any such instrument.<sup>9</sup> The questionnaire contains 11 open-ended questions and 60 (the numbers varied depending on follow-ups to the respondents' answers) restricted-choice questions. In the latter, the answer scales ranged from "yes/no" and "how many," to "very important" and "not at all important." The interviews averaged 23 minutes in length, parts of which were taped and transcribed, and the rest stored by interviewers' key-strokes. The result is a quarter-million distinct observation points, some simple and quantifiable, others complex and requiring more careful analysis of prose.<sup>10</sup>

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8 We recognize that the use of the terms "history" and "past" raises issues among professional historians. Rosenzweig and Thelen suggested that "history" was an alienating term for ordinary Americans and that asking about "the past" enabled them to investigate citizens' thinking more reliably. As a direct consequence, the Canadian survey asked one-third of respondents about their interest in "history" and "the history" of the family and Canada; another third about "the past" and "the past" of the family and of Canada; and the final third about "history and the past" and "the history and the past" of the family and Canada. The Canadian finding, based on the three opening questions, and on a similar sequence near the end of the survey, was that the choice of words made no difference to the answers. See Peter Seixas, Kadriye Ercikan, and David Northrup, "History and the Past: Towards a Measure of 'Everyman's' Epistemology," unpublished paper presented to the American Educational Research Association, March 2008.

9 The questionnaire can be consulted on the internet at the Canadians and Their Pasts website, <http://www.canadiansandtheirpasts.ca/index.html>. Readers can complete the survey by going to the Institute for Social Research website, <http://www.isr.yorku.ca>.

10 David Northrup's discussion of survey design and data collection, entitled "The Survey," is at <http://www.canadiansandtheirpasts.ca/index.html>.

### Testing the Approach

How deeply does such a telephone interview probe the thoughts of Canadians? How accurately do people report on their own activities? Can we as analysts read their responses effectively? Some of us had doubts. To address this unease with the research method, Gerald Friesen invited Masako Kawata to go through the questions with him. He had worked with her for a quarter-century when she had been an administrative secretary. After she retired he asked her to interview her parents, both one-time residents of Japan, for a study of immigrant integration in western Canada. Because of their long relationship, he believed that he could better assess the reliability of the survey and the validity of the results by first-hand observation of her responses to the questions. Her replies to the questionnaire also serve as an introduction to the survey itself.<sup>11</sup>

Asked how interested she was in history in general, Ms. Kawata chose the second of four categories, "somewhat interested." Asked how interested she was in the history of her family and the history of Canada, she chose the first category, "very interested." She considered the two categories carefully before choosing in each case and, as we shall see, the distinction is important. The pattern was duplicated by many respondents to the national survey.

Part B of the questionnaire addresses Canadians' history-related activities within the previous 12 months. Ms. Kawata replied yes to the first question, she had looked at old photos in a family group; yes, she was preparing a photo album and a family history to pass on. And why is this meaningful? "Connecting with the past," she said. In answer to further such questions, she replied that in the last 12 months she watched historical movies on television, but did not consult history-related internet sites, did not play history video games, did not read history books or visit museums or historic sites. She had visited two places from her family's past, her parents' North

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11 The questionnaire was developed over many months and subjected to six pre-tests and four cognitive group interviews. Friesen would like to thank Masako Kawata for her participation in this project. One might wonder whether she would have participated in our survey if she had been phoned out of the blue. Illustrative of what has happened to the survey discipline in the past decade, she is too busy and cherishes her privacy too much to accept such intrusions in her life. Like increasing numbers of others, she is simply refusing to acquiesce when strangers approach her with telephone surveys. In order to achieve the 53 percent response rate, ISR made repeated call-backs, sent letters to evaders and resisters appealing to their generosity, and then called them again. Just under one-quarter of the interviews required ten or more call attempts and just over one-fifth were completed in a household where, on an earlier call, a household member had refused to participate. For a review of declining response rates in survey research see: Richard Curtin, Stanley Presser, and Eleanor Singer, "Changes in Telephone Survey Nonresponse over the Past Quarter Century," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 69, no. 1 (2005): 87-98; and Robert M. Groves, Don A. Dillman, John L. Eltinge, and Roderick J. A. Little, *Survey Non-response* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2002).

End Winnipeg house and a cemetery. She had not worked on a family tree or visited archives. But she engaged in “other activities related to the past,” origami and sushi making, which enabled her to maintain connections with her local cultural community: “if you don’t go to the [Japanese Canadian] centre,” she said, “you don’t have the connections [or] see people from your past.”

The third section of the survey tries to establish a rough estimate of the depth of the respondent’s connection to the past. Did Ms. Kawata’s work on the photo album help her to *understand the past* and to understand *who she was*? Faced with a five-point scale, she rejected the bottom three (“not at all,” “a little,” and “some”), and the top, “a great deal,” in favour of a middle-plus category (“a lot”). And to the next question, she replied that working on the album made her feel “very connected to the past” — the highest category.

Section D deals with one’s trust in a variety of sources of information about the past. Respondents are asked whether they *trust*, as sources of information about the past, teachers, family stories, books, museums, and historic sites. They are also asked what one might do in a case where people disagreed about something that happened in the past. Ms. Kawata’s answers did not have implications for the patterns discussed later in this paper.

Section E asks about the importance of various pasts (very, somewhat, not very, or not at all): Ms. Kawata said the past of the family is the most important past, in her view, because it underlies “who you are.” The past of the ethnic or cultural group she placed next in line in degree of importance, “very important.” All the other pasts, of her spiritual tradition, of the province in which she lives, and of Canada, she ranked slightly lower, “somewhat important.” Is there a particular region of Canada that she identifies with? “Yes — Western Canada.” And its past, too, is “somewhat important” to her. Are there other places related to the past that are important? “Yes, the past of Japan is *somewhat* important” because of her “family roots” and its history in relation to Canada.

Section F concerns one’s sense of the past. For Ms. Kawata, the past is part of her everyday life, but it is also something that she especially thinks about when in a museum or otherwise participating in activities related to history: however, she wasn’t willing to choose between those two alternatives, as we had invited respondents to do. Are conditions in the world improving or getting worse? Again, she avoided the simple alternatives and answered “both.” She composed a list of things getting better (living conditions, technology, health), and worse (environment, violent conflicts). What should be handed down to the next generation? She said that history is important and that it would be nice if we could learn from history, but “we don’t always heed [its lessons and we] tend to repeat mistakes, try to reinvent the wheel [,] do not always consider the

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ramification of decisions [for the] ... environment, population health, economics, world relations.”<sup>12</sup>

Ms. Kawata's answers increased our confidence in the survey as research tool. True, the questionnaire had been field-tested on dozens of citizens and was the subject of “think-aloud” or focus groups, but she represented another step because Friesen knew her reasonably well and recognized that her answers, both the fact-based and the opinion-based ones, fit the person he knew.

### Autobiographical remembering

If the answers to the questionnaire seem valid, what can one learn from them? The brevity of Ms. Kawata's replies illustrates how the telephone survey must inevitably be limited in how much it can uncover.<sup>13</sup> For example, the time criterion in Section B — “activities related to the past during the last twelve months” — was a severe restriction because, though she had been quite active in other years in a variety of history-related pursuits, her year had been consumed by family responsibilities. Ms. Kawata's relations with the past become evident, however, when the interview is considered in its entirety. The photo album, a family oral history that she has prepared, and her community's cultural centre sit at its heart. She may engage in many other pursuits but, in her relations with the past, these particular activities associated with her family and her cultural group are pivotal.<sup>14</sup>

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12 Ms. Kawata was exceptional in her answer to the first of these questions (does she think about the past when in a museum or as part of everyday life): she answered “both.” Only one percent of our respondents chose this response. But she joined a larger fraction, about 20 percent, in choosing “both” to the question about conditions “improving or getting worse.”

13 The impact of the mode of data collection, for example, telephone versus face-to-face, as well as the effect of the interviewer on how respondents answer questions has long been the subject of survey research methodologists. For a recent textbook review of mode and interviewer effects, see: Robert M. Groves, Floyd J. Fowler, Jr., Mick P. Couper, James M. Lepkowski, Eleanor Singer, and Roger Tourangeau, *Survey Methodology* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2004), chaps. 5 and 7. For a review of the question and answer process in surveys, see Norbert Schwarz “The Psychology of Survey Response,” in *The Sage Handbook of Public Opinion Research*, eds. Wolfgang Donsbach and Michael W. Traugott (Los Angeles: Sage, 2008), 374–87. For an examination of the advantages and disadvantages of formal versus informal styles of interviewing, see Nora Cate Schaeffer, “Conversation With a Purpose — or Conversation? Interaction in the Standardized Interview,” in *Measurement Errors in Surveys*, eds. Paul P. Biemer, Robert M. Groves, Lars E. Lyberg, Nancy A. Mathiowetz, and Seymour Sudman (New York: Wiley, 2004), 367–92. For an argument on the need for interviewer standardization in large-scale general population surveys, such as the Canadians and Their Pasts survey, see Floyd J. Fowler, Jr., and Thomas W. Mangione, *Standardized Survey Interviewing: Minimizing Interviewer-Related Error* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1990).

14 Ms. Kawata had worked carefully, over a period of years, to create an annotated album of family photos. When the subject came up in our conversation, she retrieved it from its resting place, a small fireproof safe in a closet. The pages included sections for each of her parent's

As Masako Kawata's story makes clear, the family is a crucial site of history-making and of peoples' reflecting on the past.<sup>15</sup> When asked why she had decided, a few years ago, to prepare some notes on family history, she said:

I never really knew much [about their reaction to the 1942 internment and relocation to Manitoba], except generally. You don't really think about these things. I wanted a better understanding of my family, who you are, I suppose. There isn't much I didn't know, in general — how my parents struggled, and how they coped. I knew it, sort of, because that whole generation had to do it, and move on, but I was interested in how they did it, how they coped. It was satisfying to know more — it's long past, but those are victories, yes ....

Her own identity, her inheritance from her parents, and the experience of an entire generation are all reflected in her past-related activities.

The Canadians and their Pasts survey and the conversations with Ms. Kawata underline the significance and ubiquity of family-related activities concerning the past. The first question concerning activities, "During the last twelve months, have you looked at old photographs of buildings, places, family members, friends, and so on?" provoked a remarkable country-wide response. More than four in five Canadians (83 percent) said they had reviewed such photos in the past year, and many mentioned family photos in particular.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, at Carleton University, where Del Muise asked a class of nearly 60 senior undergraduates to take the survey on-line, almost all responded that they had recently reviewed a photo or film or video collection, typically in the company of family members. In other words, such moments were often social events.<sup>17</sup> As Martha Langford has written, family albums are keys to our

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siblings and their offspring, with annotations, including childhood photos, weddings, and the like. The first pages of this striking volume feature photographs and records gathered by a relative during an extended research trip to Japan. This research had brought some remarkable discoveries, including a record from a cemetery in which the family's seventeenth-century ancestors are buried (a photocopy of this record sits first in the album along with photos of the cemetery and grave marker). Masako's brief comment about why she found the album meaningful ("connecting with the past"), especially given her elaboration in conversation, illustrate how surveys can be at once accurate and yet inadequate to capture deeper meanings.

- 15 The American and Australian findings emphasize that ordinary citizens do find ways of encountering the past and of mobilizing these encounters in their daily lives. As Roy Rosenzweig wrote: "Almost every American deeply engages the past, and the past that engages them most deeply is that of their family." He added: "Through the past, they find ways to understand and build relationships to those close to them and to answer basic questions about identity, morality, mortality, and agency." Rosenzweig, "How Americans," 266.
- 16 Unless otherwise specified, the figures are weighted and drawn from the national sample of 3,119 adult Canadians.
- 17 Tessa Morris-Suzuki, *The Past Within Us: Media, Memory, History* (London: Verso, 2005), 82–9.

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domestic remembering, and the context of that remembering is “showing and telling”: “Our photographic memories are nested in a performative oral tradition.”<sup>18</sup>

The family past cropped up in the responses to many questions on the national survey. Three-quarters of respondents (74 percent), like Masako Kawata, are keeping heirlooms to give to the next generation. Many, perhaps most, of these items are freighted with family history. Just over half of the respondents (57 percent) visited places from the family’s past in the preceding year. Just over half (56 percent), are producing a scrapbook, diary, cookbook, family history or home movies dealing with the past. One in five survey respondents (20 percent) said they are actually conducting research on a family tree and a slightly lower proportion (15 percent) claimed to have visited an archival collection, often an on-line site for family history.<sup>19</sup>

The preparation of local histories in communities across Canada should be seen as a variation on the family theme. One of the alliance’s partner projects is an initiative by the Newfoundland Historical Society and Association of Heritage Industries of Newfoundland to interview “memory-keepers,” individuals who have taken on the task of documenting and preserving the history of their communities. All of them elders, none prompted by heritage groups, they have been working for years, even decades, on this self-imposed task. Terry Bishop-Stirling, who is part of the Newfoundland project, estimates that 75 percent of their activity is devoted to recording the history of families.<sup>20</sup> These memory-keepers are matched in prairie Canada by local historical committees that have published literally hundreds of titles on villages, school districts, and

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18 Martha Langford, *Suspended Conversations: The Afterlife of Memory in Photographic Albums* (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press 2001), viii, 5, 21; Martha Langford, *Scissors, Paper, Stone: Expressions of Memory in Contemporary Photographic Art* (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2007). Marianne Hirsch, ed., *The Familial Gaze* (Hanover: University Press of New England 1999) defines the “familial gaze” as “the conventions and ideologies of family through which they see themselves,” xi. Also see John Tagg, *The Burden of Representation: Essays on Photographies and Histories* (London: Macmillan 1988); Joan M. Schwartz and James R. Ryan, eds., *Picturing Place: Photography and the Geographical Imagination* (London: I.B. Taurus, 2003). We would like to thank Susan Close for her advice about these issues.

19 ISR doubted that 15 percent had actually visited an archival collection. To check the results they added a question posed to about 100 respondents and concluded that the website sources for family history, such as Ancestors.ca and Ancestors.com, were largely responsible and, to that extent, corroborated the finding.

20 Emails to the authors from Terry Bishop-Stirling, 11 and 13 May 2009; she is working with a partner organization within the CURA investigation, the Newfoundland and Labrador Project, and chaired the sub-committee on the oral history project, “Keepers of History.” She writes: “A large proportion (maybe as much as 75%) [of the material collected by the memory keepers] is family-based IF you mean families within the community, that is, it is not all about the keeper’s own family.”

municipalities in which family histories, prepared by the families themselves, constitute at least half of the pages.<sup>21</sup> It may seem self-evident that, especially in rural and small-town Canada, the stories of specific named families are inseparable from the histories of the communities in which they live. Given the specialization of theme and field in scholarly work, however, it is appropriate to underline the connection between family and local history in citizens' historical practice.

The concept of "autobiographical memory" is central to this story. It is one of at least five distinct types of memory now distinguished by scholars in the several disciplines addressing the subject of memory. Bernard Eric Jensen explains:

Humans do not have one kind of memory. They make use of different inter-related kinds of memory. They have a 'procedural' memory (remembering how to perform certain activities), as well as a 'semantic' memory .... They have an 'emotional' memory (remembering the feelings different experiences evoked), as well as an 'episodic' memory (remembering specific or types of events). However, the kind of memory that appears to be most relevant when examining points of convergence with the theory of historical consciousness is termed 'autobiographical' memory.<sup>22</sup>

The centrality of personal and family history in the lives of Canadians is the first lesson of the survey. While we had expected such a result because of the findings from earlier surveys in the United States and Australia, it still delighted us to discover that so many of the people we interviewed are undertaking com-

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21 These committees received much encouragement from the Saskatchewan and Alberta governments' sponsorship of historical research before the 1955 golden anniversary celebrations. During the next generation, hundreds of titles appeared, each the product of great effort. Many of these books, ranging from the two-volume, 800 page giant produced in Rosburn, Manitoba, to slimmer, less ambitious works, contain mainly family histories of a few hundred to a few thousand words, plus numerous pictures, and should be seen especially as extensions (in terms of audience and content) of peoples' interest in family. They are statements about a family's presence in a community and contribute to that broader portrait, but their role is equally to record for members of the family itself an important documentary statement of its own history. Rosburn History Club, *On the Sunny Slopes of the Riding Mountains: A History of Rosburn and District* (Rosburn, Man., 1984).

22 In "Usable Pasts," Bernard Eric Jensen focuses our attention on "how the subjective experiences of time operate in human life, a decisive element in regard to the ways people relate to their pasts." Jensen also cites H. J. Welzer and H. J. Markowitsch, "Towards a Bio-Physical-Social Model of Autobiographical Memory," *Memory* 13, no. 1 (2005): 73; and K. Nelson and R. Fivush, "The Emergence of Autobiographical Memory: A Social Cultural Developmental Theory," *Psychological Review* 111, no. 2 (2004): 486-511. A history of the term is presented in Kerwin Lee Klein, "On the Emergence of Memory in Historical Discourse," *Representations* 69 (Winter 2000): 127 - 150. A fine collection of writings is Harriet Harvey Wood and A. S. Byatt, *Memory: An Anthology* (London: Chatto & Windus 2008).

mitments to past-related family milestones and memories. They are cultivating “autobiographical memory,” a personal version of history that is a first step in their development of a “usable past.”

### **Connections between autobiographical and collective remembering**

Autobiography is not really history, some professional historians say. It is nostalgia, or anti-social individualism, or evidence of our society’s cultural amnesia, or all three. At best, it is a distinctive genre of literature that differs utterly from the historical discipline because of the latter’s focus on process, change over time, and broader connections.<sup>23</sup> Again, these are opinions worth examining and the Canadians and Their Pasts study casts some light on them.

Both the interview with Masako Kawata and the survey demonstrate that some people, at least, do make a connection between personal/family history and broader collective themes. One survey question asks about “a time in your life when a person, event or something else about the past might have been very important or meaningful to you.” Ms. Kawata spoke immediately about her attendance at the meetings of the Japanese Canadian movement for redress of the 1942 resettlement: “when all the groups from across Canada met, they needed a couple of people to write down the motions and minutes. I was there, heard everything going on .... People like David Suzuki were there .... It meant a lot — two from each province, four from some, 30 people at least. It makes you understand what they wanted to accomplish and how they would do it. It was an important moment for our group — an important moment in our history.” This opportunity to sit in on the deliberations leading to the redress movement is central to Ms. Kawata’s thinking about her own life. As she put it, these activities clarified “your group’s part” in the national story because “the evacuation [of 1942] is *part* of national history.” In reflecting on her relation to the past, she asserts both that her recent activities help her to understand who she is, a question of personal identity, and that it helps her to locate her ethnic group and herself within the wider public sphere, a matter of social consciousness.

Interest in broader histories cropped up in response to various questions in the survey and among some, but not all of the respondents. A 40-year-old Saskatchewan Métis woman who has earned a second university degree described her family photo collection, and her interest in a round dance and pipe ceremony, and then said, in reply to a question about “other activities related to the past,” that she enjoyed “informal discussions with my father. We traveled through the area where his great-grandfather homesteaded, and he

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23 A valuable statement of this position is Michael Kammen’s critical review of *The Presence of the Past* in “Carl Becker Redivivus: Or, Is Everyone Really a Historian?” *History and Theory* 39, no. 2 (May 2000): 230–42.

showed me landmarks and told me stories of family members, and we visited three graveyards to look at family headstones and take care of the graves.” Asked if there was a time in the past that was especially meaningful to her, this self-identified Métis said:

To me 1885 is very significant because it marks a time ... in linear time, when the Canadian government ordered troops to attack Aboriginal people. It’s not so long ago, you know, for some of us, just a few generations, and it was a time when people — culture was changing rapidly ... and people had to adapt to changes. So 1885 is as significant to me as 1867, the confederation of Canada.<sup>24</sup>

In these brief comments, she juxtaposes family history (father, great-grandfather), and a collective Métis past without missing a beat.

The Rosenzweig and Thelen survey discovered that Oglala Sioux on the Pine Ridge reservation in South Dakota and African Americans who lived in a variety of locations both possessed a powerful consciousness of their group’s collective past. Similarly, the Canadian survey of 100 Acadians residing in New Brunswick and of 100 Aboriginal people in Saskatchewan recorded many individuals’ consciousness of the group’s distinctive history. This “remembering” forms a vital part of collective identities.<sup>25</sup> We found, too, that gender and education are strong predictors of citizens’ engagement with the past whereas other categories of analysis, such as residence in rural or urban areas, are less important (see note 43).

Sceptics might assert that such group consciousness does not matter to people in their daily life today. The Canadian survey offers many rebuttals, including the following: asked whether things have improved over time, or have become worse, or not really changed much, 62 percent of respondents in the special sample of Acadians said things have improved. Among non-Acadian New Brunswick respondents, slightly less than one-third of whom had Acadian heritage, only 35 percent agreed. The large gap (27 percent) is statistically significant and provides a striking measure of cultural change in recent decades. It also illustrates how questionnaire-derived “objective” data can be compelling: this representative sample provides scholars with a means of measuring the impact of official bilingualism, of the numerous well-publicized commemorations of the Acadian past, and of increased opportunities for advanced

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24 Canadians and Their Pasts #1200008.

25 This material relies on Margaret Conrad’s study of the sample of 100 people who identify themselves as “Acadian” and who reside in three largely-Acadian communities in New Brunswick. It is also informed by Del Muike’s reading of Acadian respondents’ responses to the open-ended questions. And it draws upon Winona Wheeler’s and Mary Jane McCallum’s observations on the Saskatchewan Aboriginal respondents’ answers.

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education that empowered respondents in three predominantly Acadian communities and permitted them to select from a wider range of options their paths through life. In contrast, the range of options for other New Brunswick citizens may have seemed to them to have narrowed or stayed the same. The survey result constitutes an emphatic statement about citizens' awareness of their broader historical (and social) context.

A similar gulf between two populations was evident in Saskatchewan. The proportion of Aboriginal respondents who had visited a museum in the past year was almost identical to that of the general population in the province. But Aboriginal respondents' regard for the trustworthiness of museums as a source was considerably lower. Asked to choose the most trustworthy source of information about the past, 45 percent of Aboriginal respondents chose family stories. Only 17 percent of non-Aboriginal Saskatchewanians chose that option. Where 37 percent of non-Aboriginal respondents chose museums, only 13 percent of Aboriginal respondents did so. These huge differences in survey response (gaps of 28 percent and 24 percent), provide a measure of the two cohorts' different perspectives on the past.<sup>26</sup> They also attest to differences in Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples' perception of cultural institutions. And, of course, they demonstrate the Aboriginal group's consciousness of a broader collective historical context.

The survey has not established similarly decisive statements about the country's classic regional generalizations. Some material does correspond to the traditional stereotypes: in reply to the question, "how important is the history of your province to you," for example, 75 percent of respondents in Newfoundland and Labrador chose the highest category, "very important," (as opposed to "somewhat," "not very," and "not at all" important); nearly 50 percent of respondents in the three Maritime provinces and 46 percent of Québec respondents also chose that category. About one-third of respondents in Ontario and the western provinces selected "very important." One might ask: is this east-west distinction (half or more in provinces east of the Ottawa River; but one-third west of it) rooted in perceptions of the past?

Cole Harris' picture of spatial differences within northern North America is intuitive, not empirical, but he reaches a similar conclusion: "in the older set-

26 When asked to identify the most trustworthy source of information about the past, the most popular choice by Saskatchewan respondents was museums (37 percent), followed by family stories (17 percent), books (11 percent), and historic sites (eight percent). Asked the same questions, the respondents in our Aboriginal sample chose family stories (45 percent), museums (13 percent), and historic sites (10 percent). In the national survey, museums were identified as the most trustworthy source (32 percent), followed by family (15 percent), books (14 percent), and historic sites (11 percent). (Other responses: school teacher (five percent) and websites (one percent); six percent of respondents said two or more sources were very trustworthy, while 16 percent said no sources were very trustworthy and, thus, did not choose a "most trustworthy" source.

tlements of the Maritimes, the rhythms of the land, the traditional ways that earned a living, and the people who lived nearby comprised the context of most experience. Even today, genealogical conversation is a Maritime staple, a reflection of communities whose people have known each other through the generations.” By contrast, he says, the West is not so rooted in history: “In the West such conversation is rarer, for the local texture has been different, having less of custom and the generations and more of movement, technology, markets, and memories of other places.”<sup>27</sup> It is possible that other questions will reveal similar patterns of response, suggesting perhaps that the deepest divide in the Canadian community does not occur at Thunder Bay, or between Québec alone and the rest of Canada, but, rather, between East and West, between seventeenth and eighteenth century settlements and those of the nineteenth and twentieth century, and between individuals in the East who have not migrated recently as opposed to individuals in the West who have.

One certainty is the strong connection between some individuals and the place where they live. A woman in her early fifties in a Newfoundland community told the interviewer:

... Newfoundland was basically settled by [a] handful of people .... it took a lot of struggling and perseverance and hard will and desire to [eke] a living out of here .... with the climate and ... the environment ... [people were] coming here and ... doing the fishery and then they leave, and then after a while, people ... stayed and ... it was a hard go .... unless you’ve ... experienced the elements that these people had to toil with ... in order to keep the living up ... they’re survivors, they’ve always struggled, but they always maintain a sense of humour. And they’re hard workers and .... I think there’s ... a certain loyalty ... because they survived it .... you have a ... certain loyalty ... and responsibility ... to take care of what they’ve managed to eke a living out of.<sup>28</sup>

This person’s awareness of a particular historical narrative, and her ready assertion of community values — “loyalty” and the acceptance of “responsibility” — as she reflected upon her life in the present make her statement about place and past all the more powerful. Her words illustrate that “consciousness of place” can have deep roots and can reflect a profound awareness of the past’s existence in the present.

Such expressions of identity raise Ramsay Cook’s suggestion, elaborated upon by the late Maurice Careless in 1969, that Canada should be perceived as a country of “limited identities.” In their thinking the concept referred to region,

27 Cole Harris, “The Emotional Structure of Canadian Regionalism” in *The Walter L. Gordon Lecture Series 1980-81* vol. 5, *The Challenges of Canadian Diversity* (Toronto, 1981), and republished in slightly altered form in Larry D. McCann, ed., *Geography of Canada: Heartland and Hinterland* (Scarborough, Ont.: Prentice Hall 1982).

28 Canadians and Their Pasts #1400081.

class, and ethnic group. Given the survey results, one might add race and perhaps gender, religion, politics, and place to the list of factors that seem to be intimately tied to one's sense of a personal and family past.<sup>29</sup> By combining these stories – the Newfoundlander's awareness of place, the Ottawa River divide, the Saskatchewan Aborigines' distrust of museums, and the Acadian view of social improvements – we have the makings of another aspect of remembering, one that reaches beyond the autobiographical focus to a wider community.<sup>30</sup> This is a second finding of the *Canadians and Their Pasts* project: limited identities are alive and well in Canada. As Rosenzweig and Thelen discovered among African Americans and Oglala Sioux, the individuals who profess these loyalties are demonstrating an interest in the past of collective identities and broader communities.

### Nation-states and “collective remembering”

Autobiographical remembering represents one aspect of an individual's past. The notion of collective “limited identities” represents a second. The former is intensely personal and the latter only slightly less so. Neither has an obvious connection to one's citizenship. What about citizens' awareness of the past of the nation-state?

One bluntly-stated observation in the American volume, *The Presence of the Past*, is that white Americans, at least, do not make strong connections between their personal pasts and broader group history. Rosenzweig and Thelen write: “White respondents rarely spoke about their family history as a microcosm of the history of the nation, their region, their local community, or their ethnic group”; whereas black respondents did link their family to the broader “black experience in America.”<sup>31</sup> The statement should be viewed with scepticism. Their survey was not designed to test this hypothesis and neither were the Canadian and Australian questionnaires which followed the American example and were similarly focused on peoples' domestic activities rather than on their view of the nation. What is clear is that the Americans' bold assertion is undermined by the Canadian survey findings about limited identities, as noted above,

29 And we should read the respondents' comments in light of what Mikhail Bakhtin calls “hidden dialogicality.” James V. Wertsch, *Voices of Collective Remembering* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 113; Michael Holquist ed. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981).

30 J.M.S. Careless, “‘Limited Identities’ in Canada,” *Canadian Historical Review* 50, no. 1 (March 1969): 1–10.

31 Rosenzweig and Thelen *Presence of the Past*, 150. Rosenzweig and Thelen themselves depart from the blunt statement about the narrow outlook of “white ethnics” on several occasions: *Presence of the Past*, 22, 71, 72, 116, 180. Michael Kammen noted their statements about what he carefully depicted as “the apparent absence of historical contextualization among white ethnics” and cited other works that ascribed greater interest in various collective pasts to white Americans in “Carl Becker Redivivus,” 232, 237–8.

but also by numerous hints about Canadians' awareness of national context. Whether these hints constitute evidence that citizens were participating in acts of national collective remembering is more difficult to assess.

Canadians have often been told that they know little of their national history. The Dominion Institute has employed fact-based surveys, for example, to demonstrate that Canadians are ignorant of the nation's past. They make this plausible claim despite the fact that national identity and the nation-state have played a large part in professional historians' writing on Canada for over a century. Only in very recent days has an interest in the liberal individualist project, for example, or the transnational experience, challenged the nation as the lens through which historians have viewed Canadians' history. Moreover, given the centrality of the nation-state in school, museum, and public broadcasting, one must wonder how citizens have managed to ignore or forget all these nation-based messages. One might even conclude, on the basis of Rosenzweig and Thelen's observations about the absence of the national dimension in American conversations, that Canadians simply do not care about the past of their nation-state and are not shaped by it. If this is so, then historians' writings and museum curators' displays and teachers' lessons and public broadcasters' documentary programs about the national past have been, from the standpoint of public education, a waste of energy.<sup>32</sup>

Cook and Careless, as noted above, conclude that the Canadian identity resides in the absence of an overriding national identity, an insight that enables them to celebrate limited, group-centred memories and to dismiss discussions of national memory. Their ideas resonate with another interpretation from the 1960s and 1970s, one that did not evade the national question. This is Northrop Frye's oft-quoted observation about citizens' two pressing concerns in that era: their consciousness of a collective identity and their perception of threats to the unity of the nation-state. "Identity is local and regional, rooted in the imagination and in works of culture," Frye writes; "unity is national in reference, international in perspective, and rooted in a political feeling." He adds: "The essential element in the national sense of unity is the east-west feeling, developed historically along the St. Lawrence-Great Lakes axis .... The tension between this political sense of unity and the imaginative sense of locality is the essence of whatever the word 'Canadian' means."<sup>33</sup>

Frye's distinction between feelings that link the qualities of a given space with an individual's imagination, on one hand, and feelings that tie spatial iden-

32 Jean-François Constant and Michel Ducharme, *Liberalism and Hegemony: Debating the Canadian Liberal Revolution* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press 2009); the Dominion Institute's website is <http://www.dominion.ca/>.

33 Northrop Frye, "Preface" in *The Bush Garden: Essays on the Canadian Imagination* (Toronto: Anansi, 1971), ii–iii.

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tification to political context, on the other, is important for several reasons. First, it focuses attention on the nature of such spatial identifications as they are recorded and revived in the brain; second, it identifies autobiographical remembering and national collective remembering as potentially different — if related — aspects of a citizen's historical consciousness, and, given recent developments in the neurosciences, permits us to wonder whether they are located in different parts of the brain and animated by different impulses; and third, it raises the obvious complicating factor that collective remembering relies heavily upon the association of place and state, whereas autobiographical remembering may and often does not. Translated into the scholarly context of citizens' remembering, Frye is implying that autobiographical remembering and national collective remembering are quite different aspects of a citizen's historical consciousness. The types of feeling invoked by cultural activity are associated with imagination and spontaneity; feelings invoked by the state can be associated with reason and compromise. What has confused thinking about the two sensations, however, is that both autobiographical and collective remembering have been affirmed by scholars' mistaken assumptions about citizens' identification with particular places. As Frye suggests, the sentiments may not be identical though they may be described in similar terms and analyzed in similar ways.

The *Canadians and Their Pasts* survey did not set out to estimate the relevance of national memory to Canadians' sense of identity, but the questionnaire asked several open-ended questions that respondents could use to comment on any type of past. Of these, the last substantive question elicited interesting and relevant replies. The question reads: "Some people think it is important for the next generation to know about history and the past. What is it about history that you think should be handed down to the next generation?" The interviewers' additional prompt, if needed, reads: "It could be anything, from your personal past to the past of your community or even the world. Just anything that you think, in any aspect of life, should be handed down to the next generation." If Rosenzweig and Thelen's generalization applied north of the border, there would have been few comments on Canada as nation-state. In order to test this thesis, we picked a random batch of 345 interviews according to date of transcription and systematically read respondents' replies to this question. From these 345 interviews we find a quite different picture than that sketched by the Americans: though nearly half of respondents offered platitudes, the other half was split three ways, between autobiographical, global, and national observations. Many of the national references concerned Canadians at war, including the sacrifices made by individuals and families, but also statements about a Canadian way of life, opportunities that had been made possible by previous generations, and so on. That one in seven respondents in this sample chose the nation-state, unbidden and unprompted, as an aspect of the past, personal or

general, to be “handed down to the next generation,” suggests that collective remembering of the country itself is much more common than one might have expected.<sup>34</sup>

An illustration of the responses to the question about what the next generation should know about history was provided by a British Columbia man:

Well, there should be love and respect for it [history] ... a clear understanding that it plays a crucial role in ... who you are ... how we got here, and therefore where it is that we're going or likely to go .... this is all cliché ... [you] probably picked that up [from other respondents] but those who don't know history are doomed to repeat it .... Say we forgot something like ... the Holocaust, or, say, people came to Canada and didn't know the genesis of this country and about the founding peoples ... how democracy developed .... That could have hugely negative repercussions. So, not knowing history I find extremely disturbing. What about labour [history]? ... People are forgetting things ... Why do we have a 40 hour work week? ... there are just so many examples ... and if you don't know the background of it ... you could ... it can be lost you know.<sup>35</sup>

This respondent was on a roll, as is readily apparent, but we would like to emphasize that, in this increasingly emphatic speech, he was moving from specific issues to national context and back again.

A number of restricted-choice questions also elicited references to broader historical subjects. Respondents said they participated in many other types of activities besides the family-related ones discussed earlier: in the preceding year they had frequently watched movies and television shows about the past

34 We grouped the responses in four categories: a) general and platitudinous references, not specifically national in context — 50 percent; b) autobiographical references — 19 percent; c) thematic (e.g.: religion, gender) and global references — 14 percent; d) national references — 14 percent. The analysis is based on the second batch of transcripts which includes interviews collected in the broad middle rather the beginning or end of data collection. The batch is not representative in terms of place of residence or socio-demographic characteristics. It does contain interviews from across the country, however, including interviews with men and women, those with high and low levels of education, and those who reported that they were very interested (or not so interested) in history. While a stricter sampling of the transcripts might alter the relative ranking of the categories, it is unlikely that important ideas have not been identified in our exploratory effort.

35 Canadians and Their Pasts #1409810. Other responses to this question that illustrate the type of reference to nation include an Ontario woman's reply: “What is it? All the facts I guess. What creates the country. What makes the things happen, or what creates the change. And it's good to know, you know, why the country is the way it is.” [#1404072] And a woman in Alberta who said: “The knowledge of how our country became to be a country, the freedoms and privileges we have within our countries, what other countries do and don't have and as well as some sort of connection to the past if it's, like a lineage or whatever because most of the people in Canada have immigrated here at one point or another.” [#1406220].

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(four in five [78 percent] watched at least one); they read books less frequently but still in considerable numbers — over half (53 percent) read at least one. They looked up information on the internet (40 percent), and had visited museums (43 percent) and historic sites (49 percent). With very few exceptions, almost everyone had participated in at least one activity that brought them into contact with aspects of a broader, or collective, past.<sup>36</sup> The answers for these questions in the United States, Australia, and Canada sketch a very similar picture of an active citizenry paying attention to past-related media.

Three aspects of these responses stand out: first, people participate as a matter of daily life in activities related to the past of groups and are conscious of the fact. Second, when offered an opportunity to sum up their sense of history and the past in the widest frame, they employ the nation-state as an aspect of their collective remembering. And, third, they “learn about the past from a multiplicity of media.” Novels, photographs, films, museums, heritage sites, and school lessons are just a few of the communications vehicles they employ.<sup>37</sup>

This last generalization introduces a complicating factor concerning the elusiveness of national memory. As Tessa Morris-Suzuki suggests, the many media that carry messages about the national past “increasingly interact with one another.” Photographs become embedded in films, books provide the narrative spine for museum exhibits, school lessons involve expeditions to historic sites, and now websites can combine film, photograph, music, text, interview and teaching syllabus all in one. Morris-Suzuki notes, “Each medium has its own history, its own conventions, its own store of memories.” Each has its own “form and power” — “certain subjects and images” that are turned to again and again — and each shapes “our imaginative landscape of the past .... [making] particular parts of history familiar ... [and] others distant and unknown.” Moreover, each medium has a branch of scholarly study devoted to it, confounding the observer’s attempts to estimate the influence of the media in general, all the media, upon citizens’ relations with the past.<sup>38</sup>

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36 Respondents watched movies and television shows about the past very frequently: half (48 percent) of respondents saw more than five in the preceding year. They also read numerous books: one in six (16 percent) read more than five in the year. Conrad, Létourneau, and Northrup, “Canadians and their Pasts,” 27–33.

37 Tessa Morris-Suzuki, *The Past Within Us: Media, Memory, History* (London: Verso 2005), 15–21.

38 Morris-Suzuki explains that in order to understand how these “imagined landscapes are created, reinforced or transformed, we need to look both at the political and at the aesthetic economy of the mass media .... novelists, publishers, filmmakers and others are constrained by the economic rules of the market in which they operate.” In a world shaped by “cultural capitalism,” how do producers make their estimates of audiences, their interests and incomes, the cost of production and distribution, while also working within the constraints of aesthetic conventions?: “how the visions of the past which ... [we] encounter in the popular media are moulded by the nature of the media themselves”? Morris-Suzuki, *The Past Within Us*, 21.

The Canadians and their Pasts project focuses on two institutions that serve as media of communication, schools and museums, both of which are likely to illustrate the nature of collective remembering and, perhaps, of nation-state memories. For at least a century, the nation-state has been a preoccupation of Canada's school systems, which gave responsibility for such instruction especially to history and social studies classes. The curriculum planners saw history's mission as a civic one, connecting individuals to a national past.<sup>39</sup> But did it ever achieve its goal?

The American survey claimed to have found very little student interest in history classes. They represented merely "fact- and textbook-driven instruction," wrote Rosenzweig, and could be likened to a filling station. History class, said one respondent, was "just a giant data dump."<sup>40</sup> One can attribute the negative tone of the American study to the orientation that its authors brought to their research: they intended to show how broad peoples' interest was in the past and that school history was just the narrowest of slices. But similar criticisms have been made in Canada.<sup>41</sup>

The Canadian survey asked three questions about classroom history: when you studied history in school, was there a teacher, class, or event that you found particularly interesting? The respondents who said yes were asked to elaborate on which of the three was meant and, if a teacher, whether elementary school, high school, college, or university? About half of respondents (53 percent) said yes to the first question — not a resounding vote of support, but still worth noting. Of those, half answered that a teacher was particularly interesting and, of those who chose a teacher, high school was most often the venue (68 percent). And the lessons probably contributed to students' awareness of national history, since these were often the themes of school history classes from the 1950s and 1960s on.

The Canadian survey also asked, following the American study, which media people find trustworthy? Museums around the continent and farther afield have taken heart from the Rosenzweig/Thelen finding that respondents chose museums as the most trustworthy source of information about the past.

39 Conrad, Létourneau, and Northrup, "Canadians and their Pasts," 22; Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth About History* (New York: W.W. Norton 1994), 91–128; Ken Osborne, "Teaching Canadian History: A Century of Debate" in *History Teaching and Learning in Canada: The State of the Art*, ed. Penney Clark (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, forthcoming).

40 Rosenzweig and Thelen, *Presence of the Past*, 111–12; also Paul Ashton and Paula Hamilton, "Facing Facts? History Wars in Australian High Schools," *Journal of Australian Studies* 91 (2007).

41 Roy Rosenzweig, "How Americans Use and Think about the Past," 276, 275; Ken Osborne, "One Hundred Years of History Teaching in Manitoba Schools. Part 1: 1897–1927," *Manitoba History* 36 (Autumn/Winter 1998–1999), 3–25. We are indebted to Peter Seixas for his contributions to the writing of these paragraphs.

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Like most surveys of museum visitation, the Canadian investigation found that a significant number of respondents (32 percent in Canada), picked museums as the most trustworthy source. Among the same group, books and family stories and historic sites were selected by 11 to 15 percent each, and the internet by only a handful.<sup>42</sup> How should these results be interpreted? A little history provides some illumination and a conundrum.

As Brian McKillop has demonstrated in his excellent biography of Pierre Berton, the boom in peoples' access to the Canadian cultural industries' versions of national memory occurred between the mid-1960s and the mid-1980s, not before.<sup>43</sup> In previous decades Canadians had had much less opportunity to sample text, sound, or moving images of the national past. Professional histories existed, of course, but were not widely read. Cultural production was confined to the press, the radio (notably the CBC) and, in some grades in some provinces, the schools. But Canada, as a smaller nation-state, was simply inundated by the products of the British and then the American cultural industries.

The public policies that amplified the Canadiana boom after 1970 focused particularly on museums and historic sites, as well as schools and universities. Given this historical context, the "museum as most trustworthy" finding of our survey raises a chicken and egg problem. Those respondents who visited museums and historic sites in the last 12 months (nearly half of the total), say they are very or somewhat interested in the history of Canada and that they regard the history of Canada as very or somewhat important. Those who do not visit regularly are less interested and rate national history as less important. And those who do visit are sharply skewed to the baby boom generation, respondents aged 40 to 64 years today. Their maturing years coincided with the boom in national memory cultivation of the 1970s and 1980s. This leaves a difficult question: is their responsiveness due to the merits of museums as cultural institutions? Was a Canadian collective memory simply coming into being with the passage of time, the occurrence of state-testing events, such as the world wars and depression, and the maturing of cultural production? Or did the government money buy the boomers' interest in state-directed agendas? There is more to be discovered in this sequence of questions, much more than a single survey can hope to reveal.<sup>44</sup>

42 Note that 16 percent of respondents said none of the sources offered was "very trustworthy."

43 A.B. McKillop, *Pierre Berton: A Biography* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart 2008). Topics selected by Pierre Berton during his long career as the most popular nationalist historian included the War of 1812, various Norths, the CPR, the West, Vimy, the Dionne Quintuplets, and Hollywood's Canada. As McKillop makes clear, the remarkable marketing of the Berton juggernaut, and the brilliant editing of the late Barbara Moon, among others, should also be mentioned in relation to Canadians' collective remembering.

44 This analysis is the work of Del Muijs and will be the subject of forthcoming studies. By focusing only on the nation-state, these pages neglect many other potential points of entry into the data collected by the survey. To illustrate, consider the matter of gender: though it is not as

The nation-state figures more prominently in the results of the Canadians and Their Pasts survey than the American study leads one to expect. The political feeling that Northrop Frye described as a part of the Canadian outlook cropped up often, as the testimony of the British Columbia respondent illustrated. The range of media carrying messages about national history reinforced popular awareness of talismanic events in the decades between the mid-1960s and mid-1980s. Schools and museums were just two of the institutions that communicated such messages with increasing effectiveness during that generation. Like the works of such popular historians as Pierre Berton, they contributed to the dissemination of narratives and perspectives that became the fodder for collective remembering. A similar phenomenon occurred in Québec.<sup>45</sup>

## Conclusions

The Canadians and Their Pasts study proposes some extensions and some revisions to the well-known work of its American predecessors. First, the decade of scholarship following the appearance of *The Presence of the Past* has made it possible not simply to put a name to the primacy of personal and family history, a phenomenon identified by Rosenzweig and Thelen, but to assert that what they found among their American respondents, and was duplicated in Australia, is a universal aspect of individuals' mental processes, autobiographical remem-

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important as education in explaining differences in participation in activities related to the past, it is more important than all other socio-demographic variables. The surveyors interviewed more females (57 percent) than males (43 percent) and, in the process, uncovered some interesting differences in responses:

women (59 percent) are more likely than men (42 percent) to be "very interested" in their family's past;

women (79 percent) are more likely than men (67 percent) to be keeping an heirloom for someone in the next generation;

women (64 percent) are more likely than men (46 percent) to be preparing a family scrapbook or a similar type of volume;

more men (55 percent) than women (42 percent) watch "more than five" history videos a year; more men (44 percent) than women (37 percent) use the internet to look up information on the past (but the difference is small);

more men (28 percent) than women (20 percent) use the Internet to explore the past more than 5 times a year;

more men (12 percent) than women (5 percent) play history computer games;

in ranking an individual's important pasts, only "family" scores high in differences between women (60 percent) and men (42 percent), but both men and women place family history above all others, by a considerable margin. This list is the work of co-investigators Margaret Conrad and Kadriye Ercikan.

- 45 Jocelyn Létourneau and David Northrup, "Québécois et Canadiens Face au Passé: Similitudes et Dissemblances," forthcoming. As we expected, Québec was an outlier in many of the questions we asked, but in almost every case it was a question of *degree* of interest, engagement, or reflection rather than of substantive differences.

bering. The insight directs our attention beyond the discipline of history toward psychology and the neurosciences, where memory has been the subject of intense research during recent decades. Such a shift in focus encourages us to think about remembering, and the past itself, as less fixed and stable than one might previously have assumed.<sup>46</sup> It may enable historians to link their work to that of social psychologists and neuroscientists and perhaps even to the professionals working on medical and psychological approaches to aging and palliative care.

The Canadian study's second observation is that what Rosenzweig and Thelen viewed as an anomaly — African-American, Aboriginal, and perhaps evangelical group consciousness — is a facet of citizens' uses of the past in societies around the world. That is, consciousness of a distinctive history among such primary groups, often minorities based upon ethnic, racial, or political differences, but also groups for whom consciousness of place or some other defined community is important, constitutes another fundamental aspect of citizens' usable pasts. Not, as Rosenzweig and Thelen declare in an excessively-enthusiastic moment, that great swaths of "white America" cannot connect autobiographical memory to broader collective memories, but rather that collective remembering is an extension of one's autobiographical remembering and is most readily associated with minority positions such as the preservation or advancement of alternative or residual cultures. As Cook and Careless recognized, limited identities matter.<sup>47</sup> And, as our survey suggests, an

46 Ulric Neisser, a cognitive psychologist, explains that our memories do not possess the "levels of permanence and accuracy" that are implied when we liken them to media such as tape recordings and photographs. Instead of "memory," such scholars propose that we think in terms of "remembering." The verb implies repeated actions and opens the subject of imperfect recall: "Remembering is not like playing back a tape or looking at a picture; it is more like telling a story. The consistency and accuracy of memories is therefore an achievement, not a mechanical production. Stories have lives of their own. Some memory stories do achieve a kind of stability — especially if they have been frequently repeated — but their accuracy cannot be presumed simply because they are vivid and clear. With this in mind, it's always a good idea to take a memory with a grain of salt." Ulric Neisser, "Memory with a Grain of Salt," in *Memory: An Anthology*, Harvey Wood and Byatt, 80–8.

47 Societies have developed a variety of aids to assist them in remembering. Among these mnemonics, or reminders, are knotted strings, written texts, photographs, audiotapes, videotapes, and websites, all of which have shaped citizens' ability to recall the past. One of the most potent of these aids, as students of the humanities have known for centuries, is storytelling. Thus, to cite just one example, Eli Mandel, the Saskatchewan poet, writes of a child's first encounters with the wider world as pivotal in quickening the imaginations of prairie writers and thereby influencing the "regional" qualities in their work. As the encounters shape a literature, he says, the literature in turn shapes peoples' perceptions of their place and themselves. Stories make the people and their place "real." In other words, autobiographical remembering and collective remembering are connected. Eli Mandel, "Images of Prairie Man" in *A Region of the Mind: Interpreting the Western Canadian Plains*, ed. Richard Allen (Regina: Canadian Plains Studies Centre, 1973), 201–9.

individual's recollections and a group's collective remembering are not so far apart.

The survey suggests, thirdly, that the nation-state does figure in Canadian citizens' collective remembering. One might qualify such an assertion by noting that there appear to be generational differences in this version of the past. It is too early to attempt a categorical statement, but one wonders if there is a Depression and World War II generation, a nationalist baby boom generation, and a post-1960s generation hidden in the data. But, whatever refinements emerge in subsequent research, the basic principle remains: as Aleida Assmann explains, the discussion concerning a nation-state's citizens and their remembering "depends on transitions from history into memory that involve the framing of historical events in the shape of affectively charged narratives and mobilizing symbols." The memory discourse "takes its starting point from the recognition that we cannot think, communicate, and act outside of symbolic cultural frames. It is therefore no longer the constructedness of a collective memory as such but the use to which it is put that has become the basis for investigation, evaluation, and critique."<sup>48</sup>

The *Canadians and Their Pasts* survey accepts the principle that, as historians ranging from W.L. Morton to Raphael Samuel have suggested, history is "a social form of knowledge." And that the past is central to "the ongoing lives of ordinary people."<sup>49</sup> Accepting the strictures of Carl Becker, it constitutes a study of how Canadians shape the past, and out of what materials, as they carry on daily life. And it suggests that these uses include autobiographical remembering, the remembering shared by limited collective groups, and the remembering that is inherent in citizens' participation in the nation-state.

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48 Aleida Assmann, "Transformations between History and Memory," *Social Research* 75, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 49–72, esp. 67, 69.

49 Jensen, "Usable Pasts," 7–9, 14, 16. The citations are, first, to Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture* (London: Verso 1994); second, to M. Zuckerman, "The Presence of the Past, The End of History," *The Public Historian* 22, no. 1 (2000): 19.

VARIATIONS ON THE THEME OF REMEMBERING: A NATIONAL SURVEY  
OF HOW CANADIANS USE THE PAST

**Table 1: Engaging in the Past: Participation Rates over the Previous 12 Months\***

| Activity (listed in order as asked in the survey)                                                                                                                                                                                   | % yes |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|
| looked at old photographs of buildings, places, family members, friends and so on                                                                                                                                                   | 83    |
| is there something meaningful or important that you are keeping to pass on to your children, other family members or close friends as a reminder of the past                                                                        | 74    |
| preparing a family scrapbook, cookbook, keeping a diary, writing a family history, making home movies or involved in other activities to preserve the past                                                                          | 56    |
| watched movies, videos, DVDs or TV programs about the past including movies about a past event or a person, documentaries, biographies, dramas and so on                                                                            | 78    |
| used the Internet to look up or post information about the past including looking up your family history, searching for information about an historical person, event or place or posting information about these topics on the web | 40    |
| played video or computer history games such as Age of Empire, Civilization 1, 2, 3, and 4, games about WWII, Vietnam and so on                                                                                                      | 8     |
| read books about the past including historical events or persons, biographies, and memoirs, and historical novels                                                                                                                   | 53    |
| visited museums in Canada or elsewhere                                                                                                                                                                                              | 43    |
| visited an historic site including pioneer villages, forts, cultural and archeological sites, monuments and Aboriginal heritage sites                                                                                               | 49    |
| visited a place from your family's past that has special meaning such as an old house or neighbourhood, a family farm, a cemetery or burial ground, schools old fishing or hunting places                                           | 57    |
| worked on your family tree/completed any genealogical research                                                                                                                                                                      | 20    |
| written or visited a public archive or looked up information on an archive's website                                                                                                                                                | 15    |
| done any other activities related to the past such as crafts, hobbies or collections, or taken part in groups which study or preserve the past, etc.                                                                                | 25    |

\* Unless indicated otherwise, these tables are based on the results of the National Sample of 3,119 interviews. The data are "weighted" to reflect the population distribution of the country.

**Table 2:**  
**Interest in Various Pasts**

| question                                             | responses              | percent |
|------------------------------------------------------|------------------------|---------|
| how interested are you in the past                   | very interested        | 33      |
|                                                      | somewhat interested    | 52      |
|                                                      | not very interested    | 11      |
|                                                      | not at all interested* | 4       |
|                                                      | total percent          | 100     |
| how interested are you in the past<br>of your family | very interested        | 52      |
|                                                      | somewhat interested    | 39      |
|                                                      | not very interested    | 7       |
|                                                      | not at all interested* | 2       |
|                                                      | total percent          | 100     |
| how interested are you in the past<br>of Canada      | very interested        | 32      |
|                                                      | somewhat interested    | 54      |
|                                                      | not very interested    | 11      |
|                                                      | not at all interested* | 3       |
|                                                      | total percent          | 100     |

\* includes a very small number of “don’t know” and “refused to answer” responses

### Importance of Various Pasts

| past                               | level of importance |          |          |             | total<br>percent |
|------------------------------------|---------------------|----------|----------|-------------|------------------|
|                                    | very                | somewhat | not very | not at all* |                  |
| family                             | 66                  | 28       | 5        | 1           | 100              |
| religion or spiritual tradition    | 32                  | 33       | 21       | 14          | 100              |
| ethnic or cultural group           | 39                  | 41       | 15       | 5           | 100              |
| respondent’s province of residence | 35                  | 50       | 12       | 3           | 100              |
| Canada                             | 42                  | 48       | 8        | 2           | 100              |

\* Includes a very small number of respondents who were not sure how to answer

VARIATIONS ON THE THEME OF REMEMBERING: A NATIONAL SURVEY  
OF HOW CANADIANS USE THE PAST

Most Important Past

| past                               | % identifying this past<br>as most important |
|------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|
| family                             | 53                                           |
| religion or spiritual tradition    | 8                                            |
| ethnic or cultural group           | 3                                            |
| respondent's province of residence | 4                                            |
| Canada                             | 8                                            |
| no past rated very important       | 14                                           |
| other response*                    | 10                                           |
| total percent                      | 100                                          |

\* Includes respondents who rated two or more pasts as very important, those who rated another past they identified as very important, or the past of their country of birth (for respondents not born in Canada) as the most important past.

\* \* \*

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