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Résumé de l'article

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Presidential Address
"To the Stars in the Twinkling Foam"[1]: A Consideration of the Act of Making History in History-Breaking Times

P. E. BRYDEN

Abstract

In this presidential address to the CHA, Penny Bryden considers the ways historians research, write, and use history. She argues that when the structure of our output changes, so too does the way audiences understand it.

This past year has been a long one.[2] While my corporal presence has remained, as an uninvited interloper, on the traditional territories of the WSÁNEĆ, Esquimalt, and Lkwungen peoples, my intellectual wanderings feel much less grounded even if they are equally trespasses. We have spent too long in the same places. We have spent too long living with grief and anxiety and uncertainty. We have spent too long barred from the places we love (with a small "l") — our classes, and libraries and archives—and too long with the people we love (with a capital "L") — our quirky partners, our worrisome and worrying parents, our sullen and sniggering teenagers, and our fretful babies. We have spent the year on a roller coaster of emotions, hoping the ride will end soon. And while the world has suffered, and is suffering still, in asymmetrical ways, historians have carried a particular burden. Indeed, our scholarly sufferings may have been greater than most in this long pandemic year because we have had to live so purposefully in the present, and we are used to living, at least occasionally, in the past.

So, I will begin by disappearing for a moment into my own past, and recall the ruminations of one of my professors who suggested that the historian was like someone with a net catching butterflies. My peers and I joked about this particular image, perhaps all the more so with this particular professor, but it nevertheless still resonated. Surely, what we seek as historians is, like the butterfly, elusive, beautiful, prone to flitter around in apparently chaotic trajectories. For years, I have thought about those butterflies. I tracked them, sought them in libraries and archives and in people's memories, acknowledged how often the one I thought I wanted wasn't the one at all, been

dumbstruck by the magnificence of the ones I stumbled across. Those butterflies drive us all. But today, I want to talk about the net. [3]

I will contend that one of the most important things we do as historians — if not *the* most important thing — is to weave those nets. We take them with us into the field, and we bring them back out again. Whether these are nets or buckets or boxes, or something else altogether, they are what we use to scoop out the past, and then to display those butterflies that our research has identified. Without the containers, we are left staring into an infinite abyss, impotent, unable to catch anything at all, and unable to show it to anyone else.

That vastness of the past is what makes those nets so important, even if we are often oblivious to our own role in choosing them, shaping them, and repairing them. Rather than imagine that character and circumstance are the starting points of history, I'd like to start today with form. It's that net — whatever the nature of the butterflies it contains — that gives form to the past and to the process of making sense of the past. The size and contours and weaknesses of our nets, whether they are the nets we use to collect information, the nets we use to display the past, or the nets we wrap around ourselves, all exert an extraordinary effect on the work we produce. Those nets not only dictate how we and others understand the past, but also how we talk to the future. They shape the form of our research, of our output, and of our knowledge. We ignore those structures at our peril.

It's remarkable, in many ways, that we should pay such little attention to our various disciplinary structures given how much attention we give the structures we study in the past. Our claims of relevance in a contemporary environment that demands relevance are usually rooted in the suggestions that the present must know the past, and confront it. Those lessons are often negative, about what should not be repeated, but there are also aspirational moments in the past. While we know the way the past can aid the broad present — the present of pandemics, and university closures, and uncertain labour markets, and government policy — we have somehow forgotten to apply the lessons about the importance of form, of structure, of *nets*, in the past to our own work in the present. In all of the varied work we do — in Canada and elsewhere, in the recent past and in the past more distant, listening to silences and to shouts, to the forgotten, the forgettable, and the forgetful — we regularly demonstrate that it is structures in the past that shape experience in the past. And we also regularly show how accidentally some of

those structures were built, whether they were real walls or imaginary boundaries.

The nets used to encircle a space or an idea have been ubiquitous. Our histories have shown borders being drawn, fields being enclosed, jails being built, parks being defined, towns being moved — the list is endless once we start looking for the packages that the people of the past used to delineate, include, exclude, and define their worlds.[4] Intellectual nets were just as abundant. Constitutions drew borders between federal and provincial jurisdictions, and laws between corporations and unions, between men and women, between indigenous and settler, between foreign-born and locally-born.[5] Religions drew nets around followers, excluding non-believers. The idea of family drew a net around a group of people, varying over time who would be included on the inside, who would be kept on the outside.[6] To consider the histories we write as a continuous contemplation of the nets that have been used is to recognize the omnipresence of boundaries.

Those nets, however, take multiple forms and exert multiple and contradictory pressures. I'd like to look at just one with which I have some familiarity, but in your own work you will be able to think of other comparable examples. My net is the invisible mesh of an office that encloses, protects and eventually starts to tip the balance of power in real and unanticipated ways. It is both a real structure and an idea; like Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, this is, in many ways, an imagined office.

The Prime Minister's Office, which we recognize now with those three capital letters that announce it as something greater than the sum of the words, began in the nineteenth century as just an office — with a lower case "o" and a desk. There were shelves, to be sure, and chairs, but the enclosure that those four walls created was understood simply as an office. When the prime minister was in it, as he often was, it was the prime minister's office. But it was not until the occupant was Mackenzie King that it began to transform into something else altogether.

By the 1920s, the office that the prime minister occupied had more than one room — the net had expanded. It had gatekeepers who guarded the entrance. They did that both physically, by literally guarding the entrance, but they also had to guard the intellectual entrance. They managed correspondence, typing responses that the prime minister dictated. They managed scheduling, protecting the prime minister's time as much as possible. But where changes had

been made in the years since the first occupant of that office had put his feet up on the desk, they were superficial and definitely external. Inside that net, life continued much as usual for its sole occupant. The container was pervious, to be sure — cabinet ministers and visitors and even the occasional family member would join the prime minister for brief periods, but the office itself remained a home for just one person.

Until, that is, Mackenzie King moved into it. Fancying himself not only a prime minister, but also something of a man of letters, King gave considerable thought to his correspondence. So much thought, indeed, that in the mid-1920s, he was finding it difficult to do much of anything other than reply to letters. He needed help. He also, probably, needed company. The men who served as his secretaries, the most trusted of whom would assist with his diaries, were invariably chosen because of some combination of intelligence and companionability. They rarely lasted long, as King was a demanding taskmaster, prone to working late, and never attentive to other people's family or personal commitments, having none himself.[7]

By 1927, King believed that the solution to all his problems lay in securing the services of what he called a "deputy minister." What that meant was a bit of a question. King was probably envious of the deputy ministers on whom cabinet ministers could lean for assistance, but he was definitely modelling his quest on the cabinet secretary in Britain where Maurice Hankey had "tremendously impressed" King on his last visit to London. But Hankey was not a deputy minister, nor was his a position devoted to attending to the prime minister's needs, as was clear King wanted. Hankey had instead established the Cabinet Secretariat, and built an administrative structure that served not just the prime minister but the entire executive of government. The secretariat ensured that agendas were circulated, supporting documents made available, minutes kept, and that the business of cabinet was both coordinated and recorded. This wasn't what King wanted, but he persisted in describing the position as akin to the role that Hankey played in Britain.[8]

The person King tapped for the job was the Warden of Hart House at the University of Toronto, the son of a Canon of Canterbury, and a well-connected Brit bringing a veneer of gentility to the sons of the aspiring classes of central Canada. Burgon Bickersteth had, according to King, "the capacity of knowing people and getting on with them." The prime minister himself did not, so bringing someone

like this into the net of the prime minister's office would guarantee that King would be in office for another 15 years. Or so he claimed.[9]

Bickersteth didn't want the job. He couldn't understand its parameters. King wasn't very clear himself about where the boundaries of this job might fall; if it was a net, it was an expansive one. After a great deal of consideration, some investigation into the way things were organized in Britain, and some soul-searching, Bickersteth declined the offer and King dropped the subject altogether.[10] His office retained the shape it had held for half a century — a business office full of clerks and receptionists, and an inner sanctum with only one real occupant.

King may have dropped the idea in 1927, but back in power in the 1930s, he was still concerned about the amount of work that fell on his shoulders. He offered a detailed accounting sometime in 1935. In the office alone, there were engagements, and interviews and correspondence to attend to; there were relations with the press and public to manage; there was the "preparation of special messages, tributes and addresses," public appearances, conferences and deputations, and dealing with the governor general, a task so onerous, in King's estimation, that it deserved its own line. But that was merely the beginning of the prime minister's responsibilities — there was still cabinet, and the department of external affairs, which remained the purview of the prime minister until into the Second World War, Parliament, Commissions, the National Liberal Federation, and, not to be forgotten, the prime minister's own constituency. A bird's-eye view of the responsibilities of the job illustrated, in King's accounting, just how hard he worked. And his multi-page memorandum had not even included the time required for "exercise or leisure … reading … Travel … unforeseen emergencies … the writing of personal letters … the keeping of personal records … time for thought or meditation … visiting friends, outside social engagements, theatres, week-end rest … [or] vacation or holiday."[11] Having spent the time detailing all his onerous responsibilities, King was even more committed to expanding the capacity of his office.

He followed a similar strategy to that which he had adopted nearly a decade earlier. He consulted with associates, neighbours, and friends. Eventually, he alighted on an Oxford-educated Rhodes scholar who was, in the 1930s, working at a well-regarded Montréal law firm, and who seemed to personify the skills the prime minister was seeking. Arnold Heeney was bright, devout, and circumspect. Like Bickersteth

before him, however, he was just as baffled about what exactly it was that the prime minister wanted. King's invitation, to join his staff as Principal Secretary, a "position which would correspond in a way to that of a Deputy Head of a Government Department,"[12] left more questions than answers.

Heeney was interested enough in the position, however, to define it for himself, and, in doing, so began to give a shape and structure to the Prime Minister's Office that King had only imagined. The net that Heeney pulled around the office was designed partially in response to King's needs, but it was also woven in order to give Heeney an escape. Initially, Heeney would be "appointed Principal Secretary to the Prime Minister" and would, "as a liaison between the Prime Minister and the other Ministers of the Crown, assist the PM in general and particularly with the business of the Cabinet and exercise a general supervision over the work of the Prime Minister's Office." Before the next election, though, he would be given a civil service appointment, and would commence work as the Clerk of the Privy Council and Secretary to the Cabinet.[13] Heeney's definition of the position — his drawing of boundaries — satisfied everyone at the time. King got a private secretary in the PMO who would be more than just a clerk, and the general administration of government would soon become considerably more organized with the introduction of minutes and agendas and such, all prepared by the Secretary to Cabinet.

All of these conversations and negotiations and eventual decisions in 1938 were designed to define a new space, or perhaps several new spaces. They laid out boundaries, identified responsibilities. They cast nets around particular functions — the Prime Minister's Office was contained in one package, the work of cabinet in another. There would be overlaps, for sure, but King and Heeney and Bickersteth and others before that had made decisions about structure.

These decisions taken in 1938 were driven by personality. Heeney, for example, was the sort of person who needed order, so he laid down some parameters. King was self-centred and lonely, and acted accordingly. It was also driven by misunderstanding. King misunderstood the role of British officials, so kept asking for something he really didn't want. There was some sense that the form was arrived at by accident, at least in part. But once in place, the shape of the office — the form that had been adopted half by design and half by chance — began to exert an extraordinary influence on the function of that office. The net began to affect the contents.

In this case, Heeney did what he set out for the prime minister in 1938. He did his best to impose some order on the work of the Prime Minister's Office, he served as a go-between with other cabinet ministers, he advised on all matters of subjects, and, figuratively speaking, he held the prime minister's hand. And then he left.[14] Others filled the space, because now there was a space. They were not elected. They were not civil servants. They were hand-picked by the prime minister of the day to do what Heeney had laid out in his memo of 1938. They liaised. They assisted. And they exercised general supervision.

As time went on, the net around the prime minister's office grew bigger, but it also became more opaque. The netting was woven more tightly. Those on the inside exerted — and indeed still do — enormous power. They had access to the prime minister, they were trusted by the prime minister, and they increasingly came to advise on policy, on politics, on just about every aspect of the 10-page document Prime Minister King had prepared in the 1930s outlining his responsibilities.

Having built a space, it came to be occupied. The form dictated the function.

Historians are keen observers of these sorts of developments. We find nets being used, both literally and metaphorically, to protect, distinguish, and exceptionalize people or spaces or ideas. Much of our task as historians is to identify those nets and examine the ways in which those resulting forms then influenced the trajectory of events.

We are not so attentive to our own nets, despite using them to collect, to display, and to organize our work and ourselves. The nets we take into the field are the ones perhaps most familiar. These are the ones we chose consciously. The decision to conduct our research in particular collections, or to talk to particular people, unquestionably affects the results of our labours. And in this peculiar COVID-19 world of archival closures and social distancing, we have all become familiar with the randomness of those decisions. We do what we can, with whom we can. Lost collections and closed fonds and missing documents, not to mention lengthy freedom-of-information requests and taciturn witnesses and red herrings and wild goose chases have always been a part of the historian's lot in life, but this year has seen the roadblocks multiply exponentially.[15] We may start with a large net, but circumstance and choice conspire to reduce it.

And, of course, all those decisions, whether taken clear-eyed, or foisted upon us, will determine the outcome of our work. Take this case from more than half a century ago. During the communist purges

of the 1950s in the United States, Natalie Zemon Davis and her husband Chandler Davis had their passports rescinded. He was held in prison and was fired from his academic position at the University of Michigan. Her fate was just as dire if less punitive — she was unable to return to the archives in Lyon to continue the research on her dissertation. The size of her research net shrunk, which inevitably shaped the final product—not reducing it, but changing it. The result was not what she imagined when she began, but it set off a career rich in the consideration of a particular type of manuscript.[16]

All of our research nets change shape thanks to circumstance — perhaps not so dramatically as Davis's, although all the COVID-curtailed researchers today may dream of a Martin Guerre in their future as well. We also all chose to take our nets into very particular places in our quests, sometimes alone, but increasingly with knowledge partners who can share in the task of using that net to collect the past.

Then armed with a net full of whispers, we build our histories. These histories also have shape. It's a shape that is partly chosen purposefully, woven by the historian with intention, but like the other steps in this messy process, also dictated by chance. And like the containers we've already seen, these historical shapes also affect the outcome.

Our attention recently has been occupied by the medium in which our history is presented. Does history come in a book or on a screen? Is it tactile? Can we walk through it or around it or experience it ourselves? Is it tweeted or sung? Printed or encoded? The digital turn that our profession and others have taken makes these questions of medium more pressing than ever, and reminds us of the continuing relevance of Marshall McLuhan, but regardless of the means we use to bring history into the minds of our audiences, whoever they may be, the shape of those histories has remained remarkably constant, although they need not be.

In deciding upon the actual structure of our histories, we are copiers, replicating shapes that are familiar and using forms that are universal to contain the information we offer. Like a scientific method — with question, hypothesis, method, analysis, and conclusion — there tends to be a historical method as well. Hardly as tightly defined as that followed by our scientific colleagues, our structures still have recognizable forms. But why? Surely this is simply habit rather than regulation. We have designed the space that is the product of our work so sturdily that it rarely alters. Whether delivered as poetry or oral tradition, in print or on film, with many words or with few, our

work as historians is linear. The boundaries that surround the finished product — announcing that "this is it! A piece of historical work!"— demarcate a track that has a beginning and an end.

Even without the rules of science, the historical method has an identifiable form. There's a literature in which to situate everything, an intellectual lineage at which to nod; there's the central noun — whether proper, like "Montréal" or "Kishizo Kimura," or common, like class, or war, or whales — and its context; there's the change over time, which can be either enormous or minuscule; and there's a commentary on why anyone would care.[17] The historical method follows a path that is largely, if not entirely, chronological, and as a result is largely, if not entirely, linear. Just like a line (or at least, like a line segment), our histories extend from one point to another.

Even histories that purport not to follow a chronology still embrace the idea of beginning. Maybe the beginning is the one the historian makes, consciously bringing readers into archives or traditional territories. Or the ones that follow a form that is not specifically chronological, yet really is — like a life, which has a beginning, even if it is the inanimate life of a political movement or a piece of technology.[18] We dip into the past with our researching nets, and then offer the results in another sort of container — a presentation net, of sorts, that contain the fragments in a particular order. And with all of these packages, these containers that are recognizably history, an outcome is created. Sometimes accidentally, sometimes with purpose, the shape of that historical container determines — at least in part — the way it is understood.

Did we mean for the form to indicate that there was a beginning, a middle, and an end to the past? Sometimes, but surely not always. Did we mean to imply inevitability? Definitely not, but the form itself makes it difficult for the audience to come to any other conclusion.

That has implications for how we understand the past. If we present it as linear, with a beginning and a middle and an end, then the result is that history is something that happened. The form in which we present our histories determines the way it is understood. What does that look like in practice? It looks like school curricula that neglect history, or treat it as peripheral, or merely emphasize the linearity of history through dates. It looks like public policies that leave the lessons of the past in the past, insistent that progress moves forward only. It looks like the continual marginalization of the past as then, and the privileging of science, technology, and engineering as "now." Presenting the content of our nets along a line encourages peo-

ple to understand the past as a sequence, one that had a beginning but also an end. It encourages the understanding of history as something that happened, rather than something that we live every day.

But unlike a bucket, that net we hold up to show the results of our quarry is flexible. It billows and rolls in on itself, twisting and knotting, endlessly shaping and reshaping the space that is contained within it. The butterflies that one catches need not stay in a particular order within the net. The historical method need not be so tightly wedded to beginnings and endings. The contents of that net may remain the same, but the result for the observer can change dramatically.

What happens when we eliminate the beginning and end? Or at least consider structuring those histories differently? Perhaps, as the example of the past has shown us, if we alter the structure, the results will change as well. If we change the structures of our histories, perhaps our audiences will read them, or view them, or live them differently.

Scholars have already shown us a number of ways that the beginnings and endings — and, as a result, the linearities — of our histories can be altered. In Wendy Wickwire's recent award-winning book, *At the Bridge*, she takes us into archives and song circles, she introduces silences and mysteries, she shows us the wrong turns and misunderstandings that both held and shaped the life of anthropologist James Teit. The life is not linear, but circular, and the reader stands within that circle, at the titular Spences Bridge and the metaphorical bridge between settler and Indigenous, past and present.[19] There may be an implicit beginning and ending — it is a life, after all — but the form of the telling is not straight, not linear. Nor is it straight in poet-historian Afua Cooper's groundbreaking life and death of Marie-Joseph Angélique.[20] Cooper also builds uncertainty into her history, folding the present onto the past, considering motive and marginalization, testimony and theory. The history circles the story, bringing present-day readers back into the slave ships and courtrooms and beyond.

Historians don't have to write a life to play with form and experiment with new ways of structuring what is widely regarded as the straight line of history. Environmental historians, like Matthew Evenden and Stephane Castonguay, have followed rivers along winding paths; others, like Sean Kheraj with pipelines or Liza Piper and Heather Green with coal mines, have followed ostensibly linear targets but allowed their historical arguments to develop in non-linear ways.[21] Adele Perry and Mary Jane Logan MacCallum took the death of Brian Sinclair, alone and ignored in the corner of the Winnipeg

Health Sciences Centre, and traced the multiple trajectories of history backwards and then forward again and again, each time arriving in that same corner of the hospital, spinning the *Structures of Indifference* into a spider's web of complicity and tragedy.[22]

Nor is the form that can be disrupted necessarily that of the central disciplinary marker — the book, or exhibit or documentary. Tania Willard and Paige Raibmon's recent review conversation about five Secwépmic histories points to the possibility of woven histories that disregard conventional chronology in favour of a more fluid structure through relational discourse.[23]

Following a historian into the past is another way to disrupt the beginnings and endings that give form to our work, in the process dictating the purpose to which it is put. The historian needs to take your hand, though, and walk you through the places in the past that classicist Mary Beard has recently argued provide a "safe space" for us to "stand outside ourselves" and question some of our contemporary assumptions.[24] Many historians have done this. Long ago, Viv Nelles took us first into the archives where he saw an "unexpected burst of colour from a Union Jack and the brilliant scarlet and white uniform of an eighteenth-century British soldier" flashing into view in the depths of a grey archival box, and then into the dining halls and pageants and council chambers of Québec's Tercentenary. He was there, and so were we, watching the spectacle unfold around us.[25] Listen to Shirley Tillotson more recently, as she lures us into a consideration of taxes and democracy, telling us that she has "been disappointed more than once but also impressed more than once by the political actions of individuals"; that she has "often thought how clumsy Canadian political institutions were."[26] Tillotson the historian is right there beside the history, commenting, considering, convincing. Or enter the past through the chamber of shared sentiments — of betrayal and grief and shame — that are layered through Eric Reiter's recent study of emotions and the law in nineteenth and twentieth century Quebec, leaving an analysis without an end because the sentiments continue to resonate.[27] The heart still beats; the present folds over onto the past.

Those historians who take their readers, or their listeners, or their viewers into the spaces they are examining upend the idea that history has a beginning and an end. It is not so much that they are insisting that there are lessons in the past, or that there are parallels in the past, but rather that they are showing us those lessons or parallels. To write a history that unsettles beginnings and endings by eliminating linearity

shows the audience that history is around us, not behind us. The history remains the same, but the form or structure of its presentation alters. The historian, in Natalie Zemon Davis's words, no longer "stares at [their] subjects like gormless tourists," but instead "converses with them," an approach implicit in the title of the recent edited collection *Talking Back to the Indian Act*.[28] And in changing the form that we use to present our work, we can change the way it is used. We can change the function. Just like the way that creating a Prime Minister's Office shaped the very power of the prime minister, by producing histories that experiment with shape — that fold the beginnings and endings into something other than a straight line — we can point to different uses of history. Not the study of things long past. Not the study of things that may have contemporary parallels but which nevertheless have already had their endings. Not the study of something that can be ignored. By altering the shape of our histories, by letting the nets that have encircled our subjects billow into non-linear formations, we can begin to build a different kind of history.

Just as we wield our nets and hold them up for viewing, we are also wrapped in our own net — one of our own creation, but just as capable of shaping outcomes as the containers that we use to catch and hold and display the past. The Canadian Historical Association is one hundred years old, or just about. The net it has cast around historians for the last century has had an open weave; if it brings historians together, it does so fleetingly and occasionally. Historians are not as fragile as butterflies, and far more likely to come and go as they choose. Still, the size and shape of this net will also exert its influence on the role of historians, or how the world understands that role. The CHA has always aspired to cast that net widely, more successfully sometimes than others. "Historians" can be elusive, their markings altering to suit the occasion; there have been times when the female variety has been hard to spot, or when the sort that finds its natural habitat in the museum or high school or corporate archive has been particularly elusive. But within a structure that encompasses all those who call themselves historians — not just some, but all — there is an opportunity to upend the linearities of our profession just as we have disrupted the chronology of our histories. Far from a progression from one sort of history, and one sort of historian, to another better sort, the structure of the CHA enables and encourages connections between historians — historians, indeed, with little in common other than being historians. Those connections — across historical approaches and periods and

places, and between historians of all sorts and all experiences — lay the groundwork for different outcomes. It makes possible vibrant, surprising histories that are not all one thing, but many. The form affects the result.

The world, I hope, is opening up. The circles we have drawn around ourselves, two metres from the person next to us, will soon be lifted. The nets will open. But as they do, I hope we will all remember to notice the net as well as the "stars in the twinkling foam," to recognize its capacity to determine the outcome of our research, to acknowledge the ways in which the shape we give to the past affects the way that it is understood, and to appreciate our own net — expansive and elastic — and the outcomes that it makes possible.

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P. E. BRYDEN is a Professor of History at the University of Victoria, and was President of the Canadian Historical Association between 2019 and 2021. One of Canada's pre-eminent political historians, she has published widely on the welfare state (*Planners and Politicians: Liberal Politics and Social Policy,1957-1968*, MQUP 1997 and *The Welfare State in Canada: Past, Present and Future*, Irwin 1997); federalism (*'A Justifiable Obsession' : Conservative Ontario's Relations with Ottawa, 1943-1985*, UTP 2013 and *Framing Canadian Federalism*, UTP 2009) and Canadian politics (*Canada: A Political Biography* Oxford, 2016).Her current projects include a history of the Prime Minister's Office in Canada, and a broad study of Canadian political scandal.

Endnotes

1 Eugene Field, *Wynken, Blynken, and Nod* (Boston, MA: Boston Music, 1889): "All night long their nets they threw | to the stars in the twinkling foam – "

2 A case of COVID-19 was first identified in Canada in late January 2020. I first wrote about the disruptions of COVID-19 for a piece in *Intersections*, commenting on the cancellation of the Canadian Historical Association Annual conference 2020, in which I noted "more than 170,000 people have been infected with COVID-19 [and] the coronavirus that has already taken 7000 lives," volume 3, issue 1 (2020). On the day that I delivered this presidential address, sitting at my desk in front of a Zoom camera, the death toll *in Canada* was approach-

ing 26,000; globally, it was over 3.5 million. See "COVID-19 Data Explorer," Our World in Data, https://ourworldindata.org/coronavirus-data?country=~OWID_WRL, < accessed 22 April 2022 >.

3 My professor was probably not alone in making the observation about butterflies and nets; nets seemed to be all the rage in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Julian Barnes's cerebral novel *Flaubert's Parrot* was popular at the time, and included this commentary: "You can define a net in one of two ways, depending on your point of view. Normally, you would say that it is a meshed instrument designed to catch fish. But you could, with no great injury to logic, reverse the image and define a net as a jocular lexicographer once did, as a collection of holes tied together with string. You can do the same with a biography. The trawling net fills, then the biographer hauls it in, sorts, throws back, stores, fillets and sells. Yet consider what he doesn't catch: there is always far more of that … But think of everything that got away, that fled with the last deathbed exhalation of the biographee." Tina Loo played with this idea as well in her 1992 article "Dan Cramner's Potlatch: Law as Coercion, Symbol, and Rhetoric in British Columbia, 1884–1951," *Canadian Historical Review* 73, no. 2 (June 1992): 125–65. Reconsidering Foucault's notion of power as decentred and like a net that surrounds rather than like a commodity that is controlled, Loo posits the implications of considering that net as a collection of holes that reveals "power's repressive aspect … to be less than absolute" (p. 165, fn. 106). Thanks to Donald Wright and Jordan Stanger-Ross for the reminder of these two net references, both of which would have been floating around the academic world about the time my professor was ruminating.

4 The list really is endless, but for a smattering of scholarship in the Canadian context, see Benjamin Hoy, *A Line of Blood and Dirt: Creating the Canada-United States Border across Indigenous Lands* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2021); Joshua MacFadyen, *Flax Americana: A History of the Fibre and Oil that Covered a Continent* (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2018); the contributors to Lyndsay Campbell, Ted McCoy, Mélanie Méthot, eds., *Canada's Legal Pasts: Looking Forward, Looking Back* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2020), masterfully illustrate the way that both jails and the legal system have drawn barriers between people, but also how scholars have perpetuated some of those barriers. See especially Ted McCoy's chapter, "Writing Penitentiary History"; Ronald Rudin, *Kouchibouguac: Removal, Resistance and Remembrance at a Canadian National Park* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016); Selena Couture, *Against the Current and into the Light: Performing History and Land in Coast Salish Territories and Vancouver's Stanley Park* (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2019); and Jeff Webb, *Observing the Outports: Describing Newfound-*

land Culture, 1950–1980 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016). My point is that there are real and imagined borders whereever you look, in these books, and pretty much everywhere else.

5 Peter H. Russell, *Canada's Odyssey: A Country Based on Incomplete Conquests* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017) and John Borrows, *Freedom and Indigenous Constitutionalism* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016) both consider the constitutional divisions in different ways; the development of legal boundaries is examined in Philip Girard, Jim Phillips, R. Blake Brown, *A History of Law in Canada, volume I* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018).

6 Both religion and the nature of family are addressed in David Rayside and Clyde Wilcox, *Faith, Politics and Sexual Diversity in Canada and the United States* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2011).

7 H. Blair Neatby, *William Lyon Mackenzie King: The Lonely Heights, 1924–1932* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1963), 230; on being hard on his office staff, see J. W. Pickersgill, *Seeing Canada Whole: A Memoir* (Toronto: Fitzhenry and Whiteside, 1994) 151–6.

8 University of Toronto Archives (hereafter UTA), John Burgon Bickersteth Fonds (hereafter Bickersteth Fonds), B2001-0018/001 – Bickersteth B1 03.03.03. Memo, "Private and Confidential," 30 May 1927. See also, John F. Naylor, *A Man and an Institution: Sir Maurice Hankey, the Cabinet Secretariat and the Custody of Cabinet Secrecy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

9 UTA, Bickersteth Fonds, B2001-0018/001 – Bickersteth B1 03.03.03. Memo, "Private and Confidential," 30 May 1927.

10 UTA, Bickersteth Fonds, B2001-0018/001 – Bickersteth B1 03.03.03, memo of conversation with WLM King, 12 and 13 June 1927; Library and Archives Canada, William Lyon Mackenzie King Papers, MG 26 J1, reel: C-2295, p. 120051-120057, Bickersteth to King, August 1927.

11 Queen's University Archives, John Buchan Papers, vol. 7 file: Correspondence, Dec. 1935. "Bird's Eye View: The Prime Minister's Responsibilities, n.d.

12 J. L. Granatstein Archives (JLGA), A.D.P. Heeney Papers, King to Heeney, 13 July 1937.

13 J. L. Granatstein Archives (JLGA), A.D.P. Heeney Papers, Heeney to King, 24 August 1938; see also J. R. Mallory, "Mackenzie King and the Origins of the Cabinet Secretariat," *Canadian Public Administration* 19, no. 2 (June 1976): 254–66.

14 See A. D. P. Heeney, "Mackenzie King and the Cabinet Secretariat," *Canadian Public Administration* 10, no. 3 (September 1967): 366–75 and *The Things that are Caesar's: Memoirs of a Canadian Public Servant* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1972), 61–75.

15 See, for example, Karen Dubinsky, "Canada's public archives are vital. We must reopen them," *Toronto Star* (13 October 2021); "Recent service cuts at Canada's national archives hindering research, historian says," *Globe and Mail* (23 October 2021). On the other side of the pandemic, however, we face what Ian Milligan calls an "era of historical abundance" thanks to social media and digitization. See his talk at the American Historical Association annual meeting just weeks before the COVID-19 disruptions began: Ian Milligan, "AHA Talk: The Promise of WebARChive Files," Ian Milligan: Digital History, Web Archives, and Contemporary History, https://ianmilli.wordpress.com/2015/01/29/aha-talk/, accessed 22 April 2022 and *History in the Age of Abundance: How the Web is Transforming Historical Research* (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2019).

16 On the explanation of events that led to the redirection of Davis's dissertation research, see Alison Mackeen and Ben Rogers, "Tricks of History," *The Independent* (5 February 1995) and Regional Oral History Office, "Natalie Zemon Davis," interview by Ann Lage, 2003, https://digitalassets.lib.berkeley.edu/roho/ucb/text/davis_natalie.pdf, accessed 22 April 2022, p. 19; one of many results was, of course, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983).

17 Michèle Dagenais, *Montréal et l'eau. Une histoire environnementale* (Montréal: Boréal, 2011); Jordan Stanger-Ross, "Telling a Difficult Past: Kishizo Kimura's Memoir of Entanglement in Racist Policy," *BC Studies*, no. 181 (Spring 2014); Julie Guard, *Radical Housewives: Price Wars and Food Politics in Mid-twentieth century Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019); Sarah Glassford and Amy Shaw, *A Sisterhood of Suffering and Survice: Women and Girls of Canada and Newfoundland during the First World War* (Vancouver : UBC Press, 2013); Jason Colby, "Cetaceans in the City: Orca Captivity, Animal Rights, and Environmental Values in Vancouver," in *Animal Metropolis: Histories of Human-Animal Relations in Urban Canada*, ed. Joanna Dean, Darcy Ingram, and Christabelle Sethna (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2017), 285–308.

18 Recent memoirs often mix both – the structure that a life gives, with the structure that the actual research or act of discovery gives. See Jesse Wente, *Unreconciled: Family, Truth and Indigenous Resistance* (Allen Lane Canada, 2021) and Jesse Thistle, *From the Ashes: My Story of Being Metis, Homeless, and Finding My Way* (Simon and Schuster Canada, 2019). Innovations like these point to exciting new possibilities for historians.

19 Wendy Wickwire, *At the Bridge: James Teit and an Anthropology of Belonging* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2019).

20 Afua Cooper, *The Hanging of Angélique: The Untold Story of Canadian Slavery and the Burning of Old Montréal* (Toronto: Harper Perennial, 2006).

21 Matthew Evenden, *Fish versus Power: An Environmental History of the Fraser River* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Stephane Castonguay and Matthew Evenden, eds., *Urban Rivers: Remaking Rivers, Cities and Space in Europe and North America* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2012); Sean Kheraj, "A History of Oil Spills on Long-Distance Pipelines in Canada," *Canadian Historical Review* 101, no. 2 (June 2020): 161–91; Liza Piper and Heather Green, "A Province Powered by Coal: The Renaissance of Coal-Mining in Late Twentieth Century Alberta," *Canadian Historical Review* 98, no. 3 (September 2017): 532–67.

22 Adele Perry and Mary Jane Logan McCallum, *Structures of Indifference: An Indigenous Life and Death in a Canadian City* (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2018).

23 Tania Willard and Paige Raibmon, "A Relational Discourse through Secwépemc Authorship: A Review Conversation," *Canadian Historical Review* 102, no. 1 (March 2021): 152–67.

24 David Marchese, "Ancient Rome will never get old. Take it from Mary Beard," *New York Times* (31 May 2021), https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/05/31/magazine/mary-beard-rome-interview.html?searchResultPosition=1, 22 April 2022.

25 H. V. Nelles, *The Art of Nation-Building: Pageantry and Spectacle at Quebec's Tercentenary* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 3.

26 Shirley Tillotson, *Give and Take: The Citizen-Taxpayer and the Rise of Canadian Democracy* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2017), 316

27 Eric Reiter, *Wounded Feelings: Litigating Emotions in Quebec, 1870–1950* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019).

28 Mackeen and Rogers, "Tricks of History"; Mary-Ellen Kelm and Keith D. Smith, eds., *Talking Back to the Indian Act: Critical Readings in Settler Colonial Histories* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018).

I have benefitted from decades of conversations about the past and the craft of history with students and scholars both young and old, and thank them all for their contribution to this long intellectual journey. Most recently, I have enjoyed an anonymous dialogue with this journal's three readers. I have not taken all their advice, but this piece is unquestionably stronger as a result of those suggestions that I have incorporated. Whoever they are, it has been delightful to share a net with them.