Historian Urban Holmes once suggested that the early Christians expected the Parousia; what they got was the church. It is sobering to think about what those early Christian martyrs, many of whom have lain for nearly two millennia in their final earthly resting place, might think of the way the church has unfolded. And yet, although the history of the church is fraught with failure, it is still the best reflection of the hope of the resurrection.

Now we are historians, not theologians. But still, the variety of anniversaries being marked in 2017 is significant to the history of Christianity and to the hope that Christians place in the resurrection. Whether we are practising Christians or not, the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, the 375th anniversary of the founding of Montreal, the 150th anniversary of Canada’s Confederation, 100 years since Canadian forces won Vimy Ridge, fifty years since the successful Science and Faith exhibit at Expo 67 are all significant to us as practising scholars and teachers of Canadian church history. I do not know about you, but, in Montreal, we have been inundated with celebrations. And each one is a significant marker for Christianity as it has played out in Canada.

In the class on Canadian church history that I have been teaching for the past fifteen years at McGill University’s Faculty of Religious Studies,
now School of Religious Studies, I begin the term by requiring students to read an article written by one of our Society’s founders, the Presbyterian historian John S. Moir. “In Search of a Christian Canada” is based on a three-part lecture series that Professor Moir addressed to McGill University’s Faculty of Religious Studies twenty-five years ago. He argued that addressing Canada’s Christian origins and context is necessary as we attempt to come to an understanding of who we are as a nation. Moir was concerned with the influence of Christianity on the development of the Canadian nation, but he was uneasy with what he termed “the balkanization” of Canada’s history, separating it out in its various parts as social historians are wont to do.

For healing to be honest, to move forward in a healthy way, it is necessary to consider the history of the many Canadians who have been affected by a variety of manifestations of intolerance: Indigenous Peoples, Chinese Canadians, Japanese Canadians, Canadians with roots in Eastern Europe, Africa, and South America, to say nothing of women of every cultural origin who still make up more than half the population.

Congress this year is appropriately themed “On Indigenous Lands.” And alongside John A. Macdonald and Georges-Etienne Cartier, founding fathers of Confederation, Canada’s commemorative ten dollar bill, that was released yesterday, features James Gladstone, the first Indigenous senator, and Agnes Macphail, Canada’s first female Member of Parliament.

I want to look more closely at the two groups symbolized by Gladstone and MacPhail: Indigenous Peoples and women. I have devoted much of my career to researching and writing on both women and Indigenous Peoples, and I have worked at integrating both into my teaching. We are acknowledging our complicity in colonialism and coming closer to recognizing women’s contributions to Canadian society and the churches; commemoration is another important step, to celebrate alongside the blanks and the ugliness of the past. Four decades of scholarly work have shown me that without the contributions of women, and Indigenous Peoples, we would not have a history. Those histories are our histories as much as the leaders who have shaped the churches and our country.

In the next few moments I wish to make some suggestions about why the history of Indigenous Peoples and women is necessary for us as Canadian church historians. Why it is essential to incorporate these histories into our writing and our teaching. I know many of you have been
So Why is This History Necessary?

There are many reasons why the history of Indigenous Peoples and women is necessary, but, for purposes of this talk, I will suggest three: (i) because we avoid it; (ii) because history is essential in identity building; (iii) because the multi-faceted histories of Indigenous Peoples and women are necessary if we are to have fuller understandings of who we are as a Canadian people.

As Canadians we are known to avoid discussing controversial topics – possibly none more than religion. Some of you will remember Clifford Kraus’s article published in 2003 in the *New York Times*, “In God we Trust . . . Canadians aren’t so sure.” When Yann Martel changed the way he wrote his *Life of Pi* to accommodate Canadian preference to be quiet about religion, it made news. Kraus cited two of our own society members – Marguerite Van Die and David Marshall – in an attempt to explain the Canadian reluctance to speak about religion. As Canadians, we do not like controversy. Our tolerance means that we avoid controversial and divisive aspects of our history. We do not talk about them. But at what cost?

Three summers ago as I was heading down my street to do some errands, a student stopped me. She was studying at the Montreal School of Theology, where students are required to take Canadian church history; she had recently completed the class. She stopped, plunked her bag on the sidewalk and took out a book. You have to read this, she said as she thrust it into my hands. The book? Thomas King’s *The Inconvenient Indian*.

I have to admit that she had already promoted King in class, and I really had no intention of adding him to my always-lengthy reading list. I saw King as a popular writer, a writer of fiction, someone that appealed to young people; I am a historian and, well, I have been studying and teaching native history for forty years. The book sat on my shelf for months – actually years. I lent it to my son to read; I bought a copy for my son-in-law for Christmas. But I avoided it. Then, finally, that student was coming up to graduation and I wanted to return her book. I wanted to
return it having taken it seriously; so I decided I must bite the bullet, and I read it.

“Novelist, short-story writer, essayist, screenwriter, photographer . . . Member of the Order of Canada and two-time nominee for the Governor General’s Award.” I discovered the truth in what the Canadian Encyclopedia says about Thomas King. Indeed, The Inconvenient Indian confirms King’s reputation as “one of the finest contemporary Aboriginal writers in North America.”

Addressing the penchant to avoid Indigenous history, King opines, “this sloughing off of history is not an idea I came up with on my own. It is an approach to North American Native history that has been around for awhile and appears to be gaining in popularity.” King goes on to describe a book that came out in response to the Mohawk land claim in my home community, Caledonia, Ontario: Helpless! Caledonia’s Nightmare of Fear and Anarchy and How the Law Failed All of Us. Globe and Mail journalist Christie Blatchford’s inflammatory journalism is something I usually avoid reading, but King’s citation from the introduction of Blatchford’s book underscores the point I am trying to make. What we do as church historians is necessary because many Canadians make a point of avoiding it, even outright ignoring it. Listen to Blatchford’s insistence that the best way to approach history is to avoid it:

This book is not about Aboriginal land claims. This book is not about the wholesale removal of seven generations of indigenous youngsters from their reserves and families . . . or the abuse dished out to many of them at the residential schools . . . This book is not about the dubious means of the reserve system which may better serve those who wish to see native people fail . . .

Instead, Blatchford chose to highlight the negative effects experienced by the occupants of the Douglas Creek Estates and non-Indigenous Caledonians – and how the law failed to protect them.

As King so poignantly expresses, “ignoring the past is certainly an expedient strategy.” Yes, the history of Indigenous Peoples and land claims is necessary for us as Canadian church historians, because most Canadians avoid it at best – at worst, they ignore it.

As recently as while I was writing this talk, I had several confirmations of this mindset that characterizes Canadians. I would like to share one. For our theology students in the three colleges associated with McGill’s School of Religious Studies – United Theological College, the
Anglican Diocesan College, and the Presbyterian College – Canadian church history is compulsory. Some students ask why? It seems irrelevant, they say. One student told me at the end of this past term that she wondered how we would ever put in a whole semester focusing on Canadian church history. Was not Canada only celebrating its 150th anniversary? she asked. What could be worthwhile enough to make it compulsory for students to spend an entire semester studying the history of the church in Canada? This student was surprised, and gratified, she told me at the end of the term, to learn that what has shaped us goes back hundreds of years, even millennia. And she acknowledged that she had gained a great deal – including what she learned about Indigenous history, and women’s history.

Another story: A few years ago a young man signed up for a course on women and the Christian tradition, which I also teach regularly. He sat in the very back of the classroom all term, a minority in a class sadly still mostly composed of women. Finally, towards the end of the term, he divulged why he was there. He was completing an honours History degree he told the class, and he realized he had learned almost nothing about women. He knew his education was incomplete and wanted to remedy that.

There are still students who worry that including Indigenous history and women will mean that some of the important aspects of Canadian history will be left out. At the same time, many of today’s students are hungering for more – some tell me that they want more Indigenous history; others say they want more women’s history. Why? Because they are sensing that the many histories of Indigenous Peoples and women are essential to understanding more deeply who we are as human beings; they are sensing that the many histories of Indigenous Peoples and women are essential to identity-building, as we broaden and deepen our understandings of Christianity and its place in the Canadian past.

II

About the same time as John Moir gave his lecture series “In Search of a Christian Canada,” Hugh Dempsey addressed the important question of Indigenous identity. An honourary Blackfoot chief, Dempsey had been curator and director of the Glenbow Museum for twenty-five years. With his background we can be quite certain Dempsey knew what he was talking about when he said: “Indians have good reason to be proud of
themselves and yet this pride is all too often lacking. I feel very strongly,” he insisted, that if the Indians are going to progress as a people, they must have this pride or they must regain it.  

What do children – Indigenous and otherwise – see in the history books or in the media? As Thomas King has helped his readers see, indigenous children, like non-Indigenous children, grow up with movies of the Wild West, where the Indian is always the other, and often the bad guy. Images of Indians sell things, and their names are names of cities, parks, and recreational sites. In the area of southern Ontario between Caledonia and Brantford where I grew up, aboriginal images are everywhere. They are synonymous with towns: Brantford, Cayuga, Seneca; they are the names of colleges such as Mohawk College; they even sell gas – as the Mohawk gas stations across the country distinguished by the Indian headdress marker attest.

As Hugh Dempsey insisted, “lack of pride is one of the most serious problems facing the Indians today.” He goes on to cite a survey done among school children on the Côte Reserve in Saskatchewan. Given a list of ten ethnic and racial groups – English, German, Black, Indian, Chinese, to name some of them, these children were invited to order them in the preference of which they would choose to belong, if such a choice had been possible. Indians was at the bottom of the list for most of the Indigenous children of the Saskatchewan’s Côte Reserve who participated in the survey. As Dempsey declared: “when you have a group of people who consider themselves so inferior that they place their own race at the bottom of the list of what they would want to be, you can be sure that there is a very serious problem.”

This is a problem indeed. Women of all cultures face a similar problem. I do not know of any parallel studies on women for children, but psychologists tell us that the absence of strong models in history leaves a huge gap in women’s sense of identity. In my classes, I like to use psychologists Linda Tschirhart Sanford and Mary Ellen Donovan to illustrate this point:

Probably the field in which men have been the most thoroughly showcased and women the most thoroughly excluded is that of history. Women have been all but entirely wiped off the standard historical record . . . This is both a direct consequence of women’s subordinate status in a male-dominated world and an effective means of furthering it. Women were not deemed important, so women were not included in the history books, and the fact that women do not
appear in history books perpetuates the notion that women are not important – never were and never will be . . .

[T]he exclusion of women from history has a disastrous effect on our sense of worth. When a boy reads history, he is instantly validated; he finds strong images of male warriors, conquerors, explorers, inventors – images with which he can bond, and which enhance his self-esteem. When a girl reads history, she is instantly invalidated; she too, finds images of male warriors, conquerors, explorers, inventors. But these are not images with which the girl can readily identify. She looks, in longing, for strong female images, but does not find them . . . Conventional history gives the girl nothing, literally nothing. It is no wonder so many women feel “full of blanks” when the history of our sex is represented by blank spaces.17

Yes, *Women and Self-Esteem* could be categorized as a self-help book, and, similar to Dempsey’s article, it was published twenty-five years ago. But unfortunately, despite the hard work of historians of women over the ensuing decades, if my students have any credibility, their response to what Sanford and Donovan say about women and history suggest that their assessment still rings true for many.

Strides have been made since the 1990s when Dempsey, and Sanford and Donovan were insisting that history was necessary for identity building. And yet, I hear over and over from my students, that their courses rarely reflect that. Students sign up for “Women in the Christian Tradition,” which I also teach regularly for McGill’s School of Religious Studies, for a variety of reasons. And sometimes it is as straightforward as knowing that, in that class, they will finally get a solid understanding of the often still veiled and mysterious place that women hold in the Christian tradition. Many students are also looking for a balanced treatment that will include Indigenous voices.

What is missing for both women and Indigenous Peoples is the commitment to being intentional about portraying them as agents and actors in history. For both groups this historical portrayal is essential to identity building. This is why history is necessary.

But there is more and this brings me to my third point.

### III

In April 1982, Gerda Lerner, an American Jewish historian who is
creditable as the founder of women’s studies, spoke about the necessity of incorporating women into our understanding of history to the Organization of American Historians in Philadelphia. As Lerner would later point out in *Why History Matters*, although “women have been denied the power to define, to share in creating the mental constructs that explain and order the world, history shows that women have always, as have men, been agents and actors in history.”

Although she was addressing the need for women’s history, Lerner’s words ring equally true when considering Indigenous history. We do not have to look far to recognize this truth, for Canadian historians have provided us with excellent revisionist work on both Indigenous and women’s history.

Last year as a society we were fortunate to collaborate with the Canadian Catholic Historical Association and the Canadian Historical Association, to hear J.R. Miller speak. “Canada Confronts Its History: Residential Schools and Reconciliation” was a helpful review of the work Miller has done over many decades, put in the context of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s report. The revisionist work of Miller and numerous others “features prominently” in the TRC’s wrap up report and the earlier Royal Commission Report on Aboriginal Peoples. Scholars such as Miller, John Milloy, Sarah Carter, Bruce Trigger, James Axtell, Allan Greer, and our own Canadian Society of Church History co-founder John Webster Grant, among others, have rethought Canadian history to include Indigenous Peoples.

This year’s Congress theme, “The Next 150 Years: on Indigenous Lands,” is well chosen to reflect the Truth and Reconciliation Calls to Action, specifically the section addressing “Education for reconciliation.” As historians, we are called on “to integrate Indigenous knowledge and teaching methods into [our] classrooms.”

Canadian historians of women – Alison Prentice, Wendy Mitchinson, Margaret Conrad, Lynn Marks, Franca Iacovetta, and from our society Marguerite Van Die, Marilyn Whiteley, Linda Ambrose, and many others – have made historiographical shifts that demonstrate beyond a doubt that it is essential to include women, if we are fully to understand our history.

And yet, despite the energetic research, how much influence have these historiographic shifts in aboriginal and women’s history had on how Canadian history is done? How much influence have they had on how Canadian church history is being approached through research and in the classroom? My students’ concerns suggest not nearly enough.
As historians of Christianity, we need to be intentional about including these histories. They are necessary because the histories of Indigenous Peoples and women are essential to understanding what we are as Canadians. They are not just their stories; they are our stories.

As I contemplated over the past year on what I would talk about today, my desire to highlight the necessity of incorporating women’s and Indigenous histories into how we research and teach was confirmed, of all things, by the commemorative bank note that came out yesterday. Whatever we make of the political intent of representing diversity on this ten dollar bill marking Canada’s 150 years, it does symbolize the significance of women’s history and the history of Indigenous Peoples.

Some of you may be familiar with Palmer Parker’s work. In *The Courage to Teach*, Parker has suggested that “knowing of any sort is relational, animated by a desire to come into deeper community with what we know. Why does a historian study the dead ‘past’?” he asks: “To reveal how much of it lives in us today.” A significant question for us as church historians, in addressing the necessity of history, is how much do the histories of women and Indigenous Peoples live in us today?

Curious about how the lives of James Gladstone and Agnes Macphail expand our knowledge of Canadian history, I decided to explore their stories. What do their contributions suggest about the necessity of including women’s and Indigenous history in the way we research and teach church history? Is their history our history?

I found Hugh Dempsey’s biography of James Gladstone, *Gentle Persuader*, published in 1986, and Terry Crowley’s *Agnes MacPhail and the Politics of Equality*, published four years later in 1990, helpful in thinking about these questions.

Hugh Dempsey, whom I have already introduced as the curator of the Glenbow museum, was also James Gladstone’s son-in-law. As a young man he fell in love with Gladstone’s daughter Pauline, and they enjoyed a long marriage. Is Dempsey’s account objective? Not fully. It takes an insider-outsider perspective, relating the difficulties Gladstone faced growing up in southern Alberta, in a Cree-Scots-French family, neither white nor Indian. It is a story of mixed race, mixed culture – Indigenous – Scottish-French; mixed religious background – Anglican and practitioner of the Sundance; it is a story of suffering as a young child in a residential school, of seeking belonging through joining the Blood Indians; it is a story of difficulties transformed to make the Canada of the mid-nineteenth century a more hospitable place for Indigenous People.
As president of the Indian Association of Alberta, Gladstone devoted his life to bettering the situation for his people; with his ability to bring different groups together, he fought for improved education, increased respect for treaty rights, and encouraged Indigenous People to involve themselves in administrating their own governing structures and land. 

Terry Crowley’s biography of Agnes Macphail is also “relational.” Crowley wrote it in response to his students’ desire for more women’s history. Crowley adapted his teaching priorities and offered the first women’s studies course at Guelph University. He carved out the time to research and write the life of a woman who distilled the challenges she faced as she defied the conventions of the rural Ontario community where she was born, a woman who turned to unorthodox Christianity – the Church of the Jesus Christ and the Latter Day Saints – to fuel her own deep heart for justice. She became a champion of rural Canadians.

Like Gladstone, Macphail transformed her particular struggles to improve the lives of her people. For Macphail, the desire to escape the conventions of rural Ontario became a lifetime of working for justice for rural Canadians from east to west. Strongly influenced by the Social Gospel of James S. Woodsworth, the former Methodist minister and Labour Member of Parliament from Winnipeg, the Alberta Progressives, and “members of the Independent Labour Party, Macphail was a pacifist.” Deeply involved with the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, well ahead of her time, she was also known for her commitment to inter-racial relations and rights, and prison reform.

James Gladstone and Agnes Macphail – these two leaders whose images accompany those of Macdonald and Cartier on the commemorative bill put out to mark Canada’s sesquicentennial – were non-conformists; neither fit in neat categories. Although Gladstone supported the Sun Dance, he remained a strong supporter of the Anglican Church throughout his lifetime. Despite difficult conditions in residential schools, he sent his children to his own alma mater St. Paul’s.

For her part, Macphail took “biblical injunctions against undue concern with material wealth seriously,” and was known to be “charitable to a fault.” Late in life, she became active in the local United Church, teaching Sunday School, and recalling how many a time as she stood in the House of Commons, she “prayed for direction on how to vote.” As much as Macphail’s belief in God undergirded her strong sense of justice and her call to work for the little person, Gladstone also was known to make leadership decisions on what he knew of the Bible.
At Agnes Macphail’s unexpected death on 13 February 1954 at the age of 63, Prime Minister Louis St. Laurent lamented that he had hoped to appoint her to the Senate. Four years later, James Gladstone became the first Indigenous person to become Senator.

Gladstone and Macphail are much more than convenient symbols on a commemorative ten dollar bill. Their history is much more than women’s history and Indigenous history. Their images hold the potential to alter the way women and Indigenous People see themselves. As a Canadian people, they represent our history. As Canadian church historians, they represent our history.

As anyone who has worked at incorporating Indigenous and women’s history into research and teaching knows, it is not obvious or easy. It means making decisions. What do we leave out, so we can add in? Who makes the decision about what is important, and what is not? How do we move beyond awkwardly adding to our already full agendas? How do we integrate histories of women and Indigenous Peoples, as well as other non-mainstream histories, into the big picture?

Until we have textbooks that provide balanced history, it may be messy and awkward at times. As we teach Canadian church history, as we search for a Christian Canada, do we look at how much our Indigenous past lives in us today? Highlighting treaty making, and of course the history of the church’s complicity in residential schools, is important. But how has the resistance of Plains Cree and Blackfoot leaders also influenced the history of Christianity? Are there precursors to the Social Gospel as it played out in the history of Indigenous resistance in the Canadian West? Wallace Stegner, Ralston Saul, D’Arcy Jenish have provided memoirs, philosophical ideas, and histories that are suggestive in thinking about the Indigenous roots of the Christian Canada that has evolved post-1867.

As we teach Canadian church history, as we search for a Christian Canada, do we explore gender roles, how much women’s contributions live in us today? I have found Marguerite Van Die’s “A Woman’s Awakening,” Elizabeth’s Muir’s work on Methodist women preachers, and Randi Warne’s study of Nellie McClung’s use of literature as pulpit, to name a few, to be thought-provoking and helpful in exploring the female face of Confederation and post-Confederation Canada.

Why is the history of women and Indigenous Peoples necessary? It is necessary in building a healthy past that includes those who were first on this land, and the women who have always been there. It is necessary for healing of individuals and of our nation. It is necessary for healing in the
churches. Underneath it all, the bottom-line, is that the history of women and Indigenous Peoples is necessary, because it is our history.

As we seek ways to explore the contributions and influence of Indigenous Peoples and women, we may find ourselves changed. I was struck hearing Allan Greer speak on the process of writing his bio-history of Kateri Tekawitha, the Mohawk Saint. His research led him to the conclusion that her confessor Jesuit priest Claude Chauchetière was converted by her witness. And he confessed, I changed, too, as I did this research.

Coming back to Parker Palmer, the past live in us today. The hope of the early Christians has not yet arrived. Many still await the Parousia or Second Coming. But as we celebrate 150 years since Confederation, as church historians we have the opportunity to take a fresh look at women’s history, to take a fresh look at Indigenous parousia history. As church historians, a significant part of our task is to continue to explore just “how much of it lives in us today.”

Endnotes


5. For a helpful discussion, see Allan Levine, “Slow Road to Tolerance,” Canada’s History (April-May 2016): 41-47.


15. King discusses the contemporary image of the Indian in Inconvenient Indian, 21ff.


27. Crowley, *Agnes Macphail,* 73.


33. Crowley, *Agnes Macphail,* 204.

