

## **Church History for Wider Publics**

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Like many academics, I've shaped the contours of my career according to the expectations and values of the university world. I've taught courses for registered students, published articles and book reviews for scholarly journals, written books for university presses, and included in my CV my service to my college and to scholarly guilds. And because I've taught at a church-related institution, I've also written for church publications and church presses, and added denominational participation to my CV as well.

But it was only late in my career that I began to think about how my field of Christian history might usefully engage wider publics. In particular, my own area of interest, the historical engagement of settler and Indigenous Christianities in Canada, is in principle of quite considerable importance to wider publics in Canada in 2020. Our country is generally committed to following up recommendations of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of 2014, which raised questions about the churches and Indigenous peoples that are far more complex than they may at first appear. And it is not so easy for the public to find credible and useful information about this broad topic.

In seeking to engage wider publics on this issue, I believe that, like most church historians, I have some significant previous experience doing history outside my academic guilds and schools. Many of us, maybe most of us, who participate in the Canadian Society of Church History understand ourselves to be loyal, not in an institutional or hierarchical way but in a moral way, to our churches. For instance, many of us have spoken to non-expert layfolk about our subject, helped with an exhibition in a

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church hall, or written a historical piece for a congregation or a larger denominational unit. And on these occasions I expect that we've all tried to summon both the "sympathetic imagination" that H.H. Butterfield recommended to historians, as well as the more critical skills, the temper of deconstruction, that our discipline has taught us. These skills and attitudes which we bring to our research and teaching in church contexts can also prepare us to be historians among wider Canadian publics.

The model (or set of interlocking models) that has commended itself to me for the exchange and mobilization of knowledge in this area is public history.<sup>1</sup> Here I want to share some thoughts about the attractions and challenges of public history for me as an academic church historian, and to say something about some of my own mistakes and discoveries in my recent modest steps along this path.

### ***What's Public History?***

From one point of view history was a public activity until the mid-nineteenth century. Recalling the past and telling stories about it publicly are what human beings do. Even if the story-tellers were constructing the past on the basis of a systematic and critical use of source material, as Herodotus apparently did, and as those who put together the historical books of the Hebrew Bible seem to have done, they were doing history with and for the public.

The rise of historical study as an academic discipline and scholarly guild in the western world in the mid-nineteenth century changed that landscape. It created credentialed historians whose work was certified by other credentialed historians as being appropriately respectful of the norms of their guild. Academic historians identified historiographical issues, located relevant primary source material, applied approved technical methods of evaluating and understanding evidence, investigated contexts, probed historical processes, engaged alternative interpretations, reached qualified conclusions, and were especially likely to earn a respectable reputation if they exploded traditional ideas and stories. Perhaps few of these traits appealed to a wide readership.

Without wanting to draw unrealistically tidy boundaries, we can identify two other kinds of historians since that time. There were (and are) the popularizing historians who typically stressed biography, generalized broadly about social contexts and forces, favoured simple historical explanations, slipped into anachronism, passed judgment freely, and

sought to entertain. And there were the conscientious amateur historians who usually worked with small-gauge topics such as family histories, parish histories, local histories, and organizational histories. Economics reinforced these differentiations. Credentialed historians published their work with the help of funding subventions (or else they wrote very expensive textbooks that thousands of students were required to buy). Popularizers wrote for trade publishers or mass-media magazines that required them to appeal to the marketplace. Amateurs self-published or were published by the groups they wrote about.

But there was indeed a fourth group, not so numerous, which in the 1970s began to be called public historians. In 1909 some talked about their vocation as “applied history.”<sup>2</sup> Some people in this group belonged to academically based but democratizing community history projects. An early example was the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, established in 1915 by Carter Woodson and others; a later example was the History Workshop movement in Britain, launched in 1967.<sup>3</sup> And, beyond these, there were historians employed to give interesting talks, write accessible guides, and mount engaging displays for government-sponsored historical sites, or to curate museum exhibitions, or to produce documentary films, or to do research for heritage departments, or to consult on corporate histories. For these historians working outside the academy, the first academic program in public history was created in 1976 at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Now there are dozens of these programs, including at least four in Canada (Victoria, Western, Carleton, Concordia).

To this dual definition of a public historian – a credentialed historian working outside the academy, and a historian working collaboratively with a group to gather, interpret, and construct its own experienced pasts – some would add a third category, historians with sophisticated skills in research and writing who write for a wide market. Barbara Tuchman and Ron Chernow come to mind.<sup>4</sup>

### ***Public History and the University***

Canadian research universities, and the funding agencies that support so much of their work, want academics to be useful to the world, but they also want them to demonstrate their academic credibility. Doing both has become fairly common in some disciplines, including medicine, public health, engineering, the arts, and those sciences and applied

sciences where professors invent things that can be patented. In history, however, serving the wider world while also establishing oneself academically can be trickier.

Useful scholarship is important to the modern research university because it has forsworn the “ivory tower” model where a scholar focused on a topic so arcane that only a couple of dozen other scholars in the world understood it or could even take an interest in it. It has also repudiated the kind of unaccountable and strictly inhumane research that Vine Deloria, Jr., memorably, but bitterly, lampooned in his essay about the annual summer field research projects of the anthropologists in Indian country: “the fundamental thesis of the anthropologist is that people are objects for observation, people are then considered objects for experimentation, for manipulation, and for eventual extinction.”<sup>5</sup>

Arcane “pure” scholarship, scholarship disengaged from the world, began to be reprehended in the 1970s. Ethnographers critiqued the colonial scholarship which studied non-white groups for the edification of whites, without practical outcomes for the objects of their investigation.<sup>6</sup> At the same time health professionals were recognizing that, in addition to treating medical symptoms in marginalized communities, they needed to work with local leaders to address the social determinants of health in community health centres.<sup>7</sup> By the 1990s the collaboration of scholars and communities in ethnography, public health, and some other areas came to be called community engaged research.<sup>8</sup> Also in the 1970s, administrators in the public sphere were advocating for partnerships between academic and non-academic researchers with a view to evidence-based public policy and professional practice.<sup>9</sup> Originally called “research utilization,” this principle is now more often called “knowledge mobilization.” Both community engaged scholarship and knowledge mobilization have become well established in the grant programs of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.<sup>10</sup>

In the academic discipline of history, however, single-authored, peer-reviewed publications that construct new knowledge and that are addressed to an academic audience remain the gold standard for demonstrating one’s eligibility for promotion, tenure, distinctions, and awards.<sup>11</sup> Historians don’t typically develop community partnerships, perhaps largely on the assumption that non-historians have no real expertise to contribute, other than to be informants for oral history – which many historians would in any event prefer to leave to the ethnographers, who are trained in it. Publishing in blog posts, on websites, and in popular journals

adds no value to a professor's publication record; these may even be seen as blemishes.<sup>12</sup> Teaching the world takes time away from teaching paying students.

There are, however, some openings in the high defensive walls that the history guild, and probably most humanities guilds, have erected around themselves. Many Canadian universities now recognize a teaching-stream professoriate, acknowledging what Ernest Boyer, a chancellor of the State University of New York, argued powerfully thirty years ago: that scholarship is not rightly restricted to discovering new things.<sup>13</sup> The advent of digital humanities has left disciplinary walls a bit more porous as well, partly because searches on Google and in journal databases will produce scholarship on any given topic from a variety of academic disciplines, and even from outside academia.<sup>14</sup> And some institutions have made room for "open peer review," promoted by Kathleen Fitzpatrick in *Planned Obsolescence, Generous Thinking: the University and the Public Good*,<sup>15</sup> and other writings, and practiced by her as well. This is a system where academic publications are reviewed after publication, not beforehand, and by anyone who would like to do it, not just by three anonymous people appointed by an editor. Fitzpatrick gives evidence that our current system of peer review has very uneven and undependable results. And she notes that it is not really necessary to select a small number of articles for publication, given huge amounts of available data storage. What we do want for our scholarship, she suggests, is the endorsement of trustworthy scholars, and the constructive feedback of knowledgeable people, but that can happen after publication. Fitzpatrick has found that open peer review can promote a sense of collaboration, and what she calls generous thinking, in contrast to the competitive, often negative, sometimes nasty process of anonymous pre-publication peer reviews.

In the end, however, the main reason why I feel free to spend a considerable amount of time working on a public website that I have created, one that is not peer-reviewed, not agency-funded, not catalogued in a library, not even stable from day to day, one that will not survive me, is that I don't need to demonstrate my academic respectability any more. I'm tenured and near retirement.

#### *A Public History Website*

Four years ago, I taught a course in the history of settler and Indigenous Christian encounter in Canada. It was easy enough to find

source materials to fill a semester course, but I wanted some kind of survey, or narrative spine, to give my students an overview of the topic. The only text of that ilk was John Webster Grant's *Moon of Wintertime*.<sup>16</sup> And I liked how he appreciated the sincere intentions of the settler missionaries while deprecating the profound ignorance of so many of them, and how he acknowledged their incapacity to separate their culture from their faith while recognizing that Christianity had its own appeal to Indigenous peoples. But the book, thirty years old, was so obsolete as to be unusable, given so many subsequent writings and oral testimonies that demonstrated hidden inculturations, Indigenous agency in evangelization, the thoroughgoing distortions of colonialism, and the resilience of Indigenous cultures.

So, I decided to construct a website. It would be a useful work in progress, not a finished authoritative product. Indeed, given the fluidity of scholarship in the area, and given my own limited perspective as a settler person, I could never expect to reach the point where I could say, "*This is now ready to be published.*"

My website will never be finished. I keep revisiting it, and it keeps expanding. It's now, in respect of the number of words, the size of a modest-sized book, and it has come a little closer to covering the ground that I intended, but it always needs changes. It will never be complete, and since it's a website and not something printed on paper, it will never need to be complete.

And although only I can currently edit it, people visit it, read it, and critique it. As others correct me and offer additional information, it will gradually become a collaborative work. In other words, it's in process of growing into a website in public history. It has begun: it's publicly available at <http://individual.utoronto.ca/hayes/indigenous>; it's intended to be accessible to non-scholars, aesthetically inviting, readable.

Let me share briefly some challenges I've faced, some mistakes I've made, and some decisions I've reached. First, I had to decide where to put the website. The University of Toronto server was an easy choice; it was free to me, and it reflected my academic connection. But it has none of the built-in web design tools that commercially available websites offer. I had to learn some basic html coding and develop some familiarity with Dreamweaver, which, most people say, is the most functional and most flexible html program. Dreamweaver has a pretty steep learning curve, but there are quite a number of free resources on the web.<sup>17</sup>

Second, I wanted an attractive, inviting sort of design. Unfortu-

nately, I have very little taste. My original design was rightly the object of considerable mockery. But friends gave me good advice about putting clean readable fonts on a white background without vertical column lines.

Third, I wanted a writing style that was direct, clear, as free of jargon as possible, and friendly without being patronizing. Fortunately, my mother raised me on Strunk and White's *Elements of Style*, which is all about using fewer words to say more, putting verbs in the active voice, and writing directly. Even so, from draft to draft, I've found myself having to make lots of changes to keep things simple.

Fourth, I wanted to avoid large blocks of type. Whenever a paragraph begins to look long, I break it up into two paragraphs or I introduce indented commentary or bullet points. In addition, I insert images as frequently as I dare. (You can't cram too many pictures onto a webpage, because mark-up text shows up differently on different browsers, and if images are too large or too close together, they run this risk of producing a mess on some screens.)

Fifth, I try to use a lot of hyperlinks to other webpages. Some hyperlinks serve as citations, and some just help readers follow up points that interest them. Almost always the pages I choose to hyperlink are publicly available, such as Wikipedia, the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, open access journals, and primary documents available from sites like Canadiana Online, and national, provincial, and state archives. I don't hyperlink articles or books that are only available to people with university library accounts, but I identify them in a bibliography in the left-hand column. Also, on each of the pages of the website, I give a brief introduction to the sources.

Sixth, I've tried to avoid the all-knowing tone of a lot of textbook writers, acknowledging my fallibility and my dependence on elders, and the claims of alternative historical interpretations and perspectives. I think of the website not as a place where I tell people what's true, but a place where I share my uncertain process of learning. I do start with certain premises and with a "positionality" that I make clear, but one of these premises is simply that the interplay of settler and Indigenous Christianities is a complex thing not susceptible to generalizations (although there are recurring patterns). There are many varieties of Christianity, many distinct Indigenous cultures and subcultures, and many distinct settler cultures and subcultures, and no one can know much about even a fraction of them.

Finally, a principle reason why I think of this website as an attempt at public history is that it's oriented to the mobilization of knowledge. It

is intended to increase public understanding of the ongoing costs and hurts of settler colonialism and the treasures of Indigenous cultures in ways that, in some measure, will help move our churches, our society, our law, and our land towards decolonization. It is public history because, in a small way, it is intended to assist the peoples of this land towards a greater mutual understanding, and to give us the will to do justice. I want to do my small part in the direction that I've felt led to bring church history to wider publics.

### ***Endnotes***

1. Good general introductions to public history are Thomas Cauvin, *Public history: a textbook of practice* (New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2016), and James B. Gardner and Paula Hamilton, *The Oxford Handbook of Public History* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).
2. Cauvin, *Public History*, 5 (quoting Benjamin Schambaugh).
3. On the history of the History Workshop, see their website, <https://www.historyworkshop.org.uk/the-history-of-history-workshop>, accessed September 15, 2020.
4. David F. Trask, "Popular History and Public History: Tuchman's *The March of Folly*," *The Public Historian* 7, no. 4 (1985): 79-85.
5. Vine Delora, *Custer Died for Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto* (Norman: University of Oklahoma, 1988), 81.
6. An example of such a critique is J.A. Barnes, "Some Ethical Problems of Modern Fieldwork," in *Qualitative Methodology*, ed. W.J. Filstead (Chicago: Markham, 1971): 235-251.
7. Dennise Albrecht, "Community Health Centres in Canada," *International Journal of Health Care Assurance Incorporating Leadership in Health Services* 11, no. 1 (1998): v-x.
8. Centers for Disease Control, *Principles of Community Engagement* (Atlanta: CDC, 1997), synthesized existing literature and established the commonly accepted understanding of community engaged scholarship.
9. Carol H. Weiss, "The many meanings of research utilization," *Public Administration Review* 39, no. 5 (1979): 426-431.



10. See, for instance, Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, "Guidelines for Effective Knowledge Mobilization," 16 June 2019, [https://www.sshrc-crsh.gc.ca/funding-financement/policies-politiques/knowledge\\_mobilisation-mobilisation\\_des\\_connaissances-eng.aspx](https://www.sshrc-crsh.gc.ca/funding-financement/policies-politiques/knowledge_mobilisation-mobilisation_des_connaissances-eng.aspx)
11. See, for instance, Seth Denbo, "Whose Work Is It Really?: Collaboration and the Question of Credit," *Perspectives on History: The Magazine of the American Historical Association*, February 1, 2017, <https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/february-2017/whose-work-is-it-really-collaboration-and-the-question-of-credit>
12. Li-Shih Huang, "Whose Priorities Are We Working For?" *University Affairs*, September 19, 2012, <https://www.universityaffairs.ca/opinion/in-my-opinion/whose-priorities-are-we-working-for>
13. Ernest L. Boyer, *Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate* (Princeton: Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1990).
14. Daniel J. Cohen and Tom Scheinfeldt, eds., *Hacking the Academy: New Approaches to Scholarship and Teaching from Digital Humanities* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013).
15. Kathleen Fitzpatrick, *Planned Obsolescence, Generous Thinking: The University and the Public Good* (New York: New York University Press, 2011).
16. John Webster Grant, *Moon of Wintertime: Missionaries and the Indians of Canada in Encounter since 1534* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1984).
17. The best that I found was by Christopher Heng at <http://thesitewizard.com>

