

IF HISTORY IS BUNK?

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Library Paper #1, 3 pages, 5 minute read.

If history is useless, and the record of the past is merely bunk,ⁱ then why have archives?ⁱⁱ Do communities have legacies worth preserving, or should they just fade away? Most people seem happy to forget their past, in the hope that the future will be better. Around 630 CE, the Muslim ruler Caliph Omar was asked if the army should burn down the fabled Library of Alexandria containing 40,000+ scrolls. He reputedly replied, "They will either contradict the Koran, in which case they are heresy, or they will agree with it, so they are superfluous." Now there was a clear viewpoint about record keeping.

In Western society, historians are the keepers of the record, the interpreters of the past and the creators of the narratives. Recently ⁱⁱⁱ Rex Murphy noted that "History is now the catalogue of the sins of any western nation." The monochrome wokism ideology controlling today's education establishment has made it clear that any attempt to provide even a balanced view of the development of education or economics or literature or anything else is tarred and feathered as racism, sexism or just plain heresy. Even Shakespeare cannot escape the ire of the zealots - a university in Britain has just cancelled the Bard's sonnets from its literature courses. An Ontario school board has banned Agatha Christie novels for being anti-Semitic. Sadly, the list of myopic curriculum mutilations will grow until the education establishment reaffirms heterodoxy as a policy framework rather than moral purification.

Today, defending historic personalities on the grounds that they were part of their time, that their behaviour reflected moral normalcy in their culture, is no longer accepted. Even worse, anyone defending the culprits will be labelled complicit and denounced. It is guilt by association. The fashionable approach to history and other subjects calls for a narrative exposing all vestiges of systemic oppression, colonialism and patriarchalism. This cleansing has the result of greatly simplifying the complex historical record. It also stops historical research and the fear of reprisal stops debates.

Ryerson University in downtown Toronto has just changed its name to Toronto Metropolitan University. This came after a student mob tore down the statue of Egerton Ryerson on Gould Street because he was "one of the architects" of the Residential Schools in Canada. Once Ryerson was linked to the evil imperial system, no one bothered to investigate his positive relationship with the indigenous people in Upper Canada. He supported the British Empire and Queen Victoria as he happened to be living in the 19th

century. The fact that he supported building schools on the reservations seems to be an inconvenient truth. In short, the full historical record does not support the condemnation.

It is often said that in war, the first casualty is truth. In a culture war, the second casualty appears to be open research and honest debate. Once life is turned into a contest between good and evil, then an easy way to simplify the past is to close the Libraries and burn the Archives. Incidents of book banning and speaking censorship in the schools are happening all over North America, especially in public schools. Today the fault line is over race and sex. In the past it was over religion.

My view about the importance of record keeping reflects my view about society. I have been a strong advocate for the structural plurality of institutions, worldviews and cultures^{iv}. As educator, it was my mission to let the richness of Creation and the diversity of human development speak through the curriculum and the imagination. I believe historians should bravely construct complete stories about the cultural accomplishments of the previous generations in Western Culture. Amid the recurring tragedies of war and conquest, there were many good and noble accomplishments. Civilization is not grey. It might be the color of the rainbow.^v

Canadian historian Charlotte Gray noted^{vi} in 2017 that “today history is not perceived as an intellectual process of inquiry (into the past) but as a warehouse of ammunition to dominate the (political) narrative (of the present).” Gray was commenting on the notably negative attitudes toward the traditional Canadian Identity “celebrated” at our 150th anniversary in 2017. That year Canada Day was virtually cancelled. Flags were lowered. It was clearly evident that the media attitudes to Canada had changed. Nationalism and multiculturalism were out. Apologies were in. Newly elected PM Justin Trudeau was committing the federal government to join the new world order, or what Alexandre Kojève has called “the universal and homogeneous state.”

Today’s radical revisionism is in contrast to the older tradition of Canadian historians like Arthur Lower, Donald Creighton, David Cook, J.M.S. Careless, etc., who thought it was their duty to create and refine the narrative of the development of the Canadian Nation. Yes, they were British and yes, they showed their bias, but they debated their critics, dug up evidence, and established norms for the field. Most of all, they thought the building of confederation was an achievement worthy of understanding and celebration, even for members of an (exploited) minority. It was faith in general human progress, a Scottish Enlightenment ideal^{vii}, that infused life in 19th Century North America.

In that positive vein, this paper explains why the recording and storing of the materials related to the legacy of Christian Education is important. The school system set up by the Dutch Reformed immigrants in Canada and the USA is an actual, working illustration of another way to do schooling. This hybrid model - not public and not private - is good enough to merit study and emulation. Creating these schools was a major feat of faith, and the pioneers deserve to be remembered.

As explained in my recent book, *Creating a Third Way*, there were many who did not support these schools. The majority of Ontario citizens were upset about these start-ups and officials were not helpful in the beginning. The public schools were already Christian. Religious minorities should accept the official policy, namely, sectarian instruction should be given after school and on Sundays. Assimilation is good for you, they said.

The conflict between immigrants and officials revealed a deeper clash of worldviews. There were also different views of "the community" hidden in the political background. But to everyone's credit, many discussions were held and many problems were gradually ironed out. Except for the funding, most obvious injustices were solved through accommodation, and court cases. Once the common rules of the game were clear, solutions could be achieved. That was before 2005, when all sides had a common understanding of schools, and diversity among educators was still acknowledged. All that changed after 2010. Tolerance was exchanged for orthodoxy.

Given today's animosity to traditional views, it is even more important to have good records. There will be lots of pressure to misconstrue the intent of the previous generation. To debate the merits of each valid vision, there is a need to archive historical records.

A good archive contains the raw memory of the community, which is key to its identity. There is no communal identity without a living memory which is encoded in traditions. While traditions do carry on the evolving institutions, human memory is fickle. Even collective events can be gradually repositioned. There is a need for original documents to keep all of us on the straight and narrow when it comes to speculating about the motives of our predecessors. Yes, we need to sort the good, the bad and the ugly! Foremost, we need to have the data accessible so we can verify our narratives.

The Monarch Board is currently engaged in creating an education archive at Redeemer University about the cultural activities of the Dutch Reformed Subculture in the period from 1950 to 2010 in Canada. This subculture was motivated by a strong tradition and guided by a clear vision. Both of these are now fading, but the memories of the actions to

set up Christian schools to implement a *Third Way in Education* are still vivid. Monarch firmly believes that these memories deserve to be recorded and stored for future analysis and appreciation.

Monarch asks for your support. Please send us your stories and pictures to build our archives. Check the website. As this is a volunteer project, we naturally appreciate donations as well. Finally, please read the books and help us record the immediate past of a meaningful project with a future.

ⁱ The concept 'history is bunk' is attributed to Henry Ford, inventor of the Model T auto-mobile.

ⁱⁱ Here is what Ford actually said: "History is more or less bunk. It's tradition. We don't want tradition. We want to live in the present and the only history that is worthwhile, is the history that we made today."

ⁱⁱⁱ National Post, May 27, 2022

^{iv} Plurality is not the same as relativism.

^v See Genesis 9:3

^{vi} Globe and Mail, Dec 30, 2017.

^{vii} Read the best seller by Arthur Herman: *How the Scots invented the Modern World*. New York: Three Rivers Press, 2001. The Dutch are more modest - they invented the tulip and the first modern stock market crash.