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# 2011 Presidential Address of the Canadian Historical Association

## Historians without Borders

MARY LYNN STEWART

### *Abstract*

*Using her own experience as a window into the experiences of many historians, and especially women historians, who entered the profession in the 1960s, Mary Lynn spotlighted four barriers this generation crossed. First, many who came from working-class families benefitted from the expansion of university studies and financial support to take degrees, especially in the liberal arts as opposed to more practical diplomas that our parents and families preferred. They brought with them an interest in those who had been left out of conventional histories, thereby developing the fields of labour, social, and women's history. Second, many participated in the political and social protests of the 1960s and learned from this much about the operations of power and memory that would apply in historical research and analyses. Third, women and men who were involved in the women's movement in the 1960s and 1970s opened up the field of women's history and subsequently gender history. Fourth, they did more local, regional and, more recently, transnational historical studies and within history departments, pressed for more inclusive and representative faculty members to teach the more expansive kind of history that has emerged.*

When I let my name stand for President of the Canadian Historical Association/ Société historique du Canada, I knew that I had to give a presidential talk. After reading and thinking about that genre of talk, I decided that a theoretical or methodological address, full of references to French and gender theorists, might be demanding for a late afternoon talk in the middle of a conference. And I am not interested in defining the state of the discipline, which is too often an

exercise in boundary maintenance.<sup>1</sup> On the contrary, I freely cross over disciplinary boundaries, much as Doctors without Borders operate with modest regard for political borders.

Taking my cue from Carol Steedman's book, *Landscape for a Good Woman* (1986), which used the author's autobiography and the life of her mother to challenge some of the received wisdom of British social history, I am going to use some of my life in history as a window into my generation's practice of history and experience of political and cultural changes. By my generation, I mean those who began their careers in History in the long sixties and who continue to do historical research today. I follow Bryan Palmer, in his masterful history of the sixties in Canada, in defining the long sixties as the early 1960s through the mid 1970s.<sup>2</sup> In this talk, I contend that my generation has been very open to changing methods and interpretations. In this sense, we have been "Historians without Borders."

I begin with a personal story about disregarding class and gender barriers: my decision to go to university, as a working-class girl from an extended family in Western Canada that had only sent one member — an eldest son — to university. Although the extended family approved my initial choice to pursue the gender-appropriate and upwardly-mobile goal of an Education degree, they disapproved of my decision to switch into an Honours BA in History, which they considered impractical. Happily, I persuaded my parents that I should follow my heart. I have met other faculty women with working class origins whose families reacted in the same way to their decisions to major in the Arts. Although our families had little knowledge of the hiring situation in universities, they were right about how few women these departments hired in the early sixties. That has changed dramatically in the intervening decades.<sup>3</sup> Because we ignored class and gender barriers, we brought changes to history and other departments, not least by being willing to hire women and other former outsiders.

I am grateful that I had parents who admired education and did not have sons to send to university. Happily, the financial hurdles of going to university had been lowered, in so far as support for university education was expanding in the 1960s. When I entered what was then the University of Alberta, Calgary, in 1963, about 11 % of

Canadian high school graduates went on to university, and of these, about one quarter were women.<sup>4</sup> None of the girls and few of the boys I knew in high school went to university. I had small scholarships throughout my undergraduate studies, which only sufficed because I lived at home. Scholars studying how students from modest backgrounds make it through university, find that they have similar financial support and housing.<sup>5</sup> Like most of my contemporaries, I only worked summers in my four undergraduate years. We seem fortunate by comparison to today's students, many of whom work year round and take large student loans in order to get their degrees. I believe that our location in the borderlands, to extend my metaphor, or, if you prefer, our peripheral stand-point on history, made us receptive to new methods and subject matter. Our relative freedom from paid work and loan repayments let us approach history critically and engage in the protests of the long sixties.

By the time I graduated from the renamed University of Calgary in 1967, the gender ratio was closer to two boys for every girl, almost the opposite of today. I recall only one woman faculty member in the History Department, an American historian whose courses I did not take. I was curiously impervious to the not-so-hidden message in the gender composition of the faculty complement. But I *was* mentored by someone who did not dismiss me on the basis of gender or class. Because my senior supervisor in the Honours Programme encouraged me, I realized that I could go to graduate school. His assurances that I would get a scholarship overcame my parents' worries about financing graduate education — and a four-year Faculty Fellowship at Columbia University in New York City made a graduate education possible. Like other faculty from underprivileged backgrounds, I am grateful for open-minded mentoring and try to do the same for my students. I consider this paying backward and forward at the same time.

To go to Columbia University, I crossed more than a national border. I moved from a conservative and homogeneous mid-sized Prairie city to the Upper West Side of Manhattan, a relatively radical and culturally-diverse neighbourhood. I chose Columbia because it offered a four-year fellowship and a great location. I applied to Canadian universities but only the University of Calgary offered

more than one year's financial support, and I was advised not to get three degrees from one institution. Other Canadians who had to have scholarships to go to grad school tell similar stories about getting more support outside Canada. To this day, I advise students, especially those who have lived all their lives in the Lower Mainland of BC, to go away for graduate school. Fortunately, there are more opportunities for financial support at Canadian universities today.

My decision to specialize in French history was another way of ignoring national borders. I give academic credit for my fascination with French history to Honours Supervisor, Harvey Mitchell, who made French history engaging and contentious, filled as it was with revolutions yet stubbornly persistent economic and social structures. To this day, much of my work grapples with the coexistence of change and continuity.

At Calgary, I read what was not yet called "history from below," the history of the ordinary people who were left out of the diplomatic and political history that dominated departments of History in the early 1960s.<sup>6</sup> Harvey introduced me to the works of the British Neo-Marxist historians, notably Edward P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*. Note that Neo-Marxists like Thompson went beyond any simple "economic determinism" or base/ superstructure hierarchy by paying attention to working class cultures, including ritual, songs, and sociability. I remember vividly feeling that my generation was entering a new frontier of historical research, acknowledging agency in the working class crowd and developing the idea of working class culture. I was fascinated by the oppositional history of the French working class during graduate school and published my first monograph on an aspect of the topic in 1981.

For more than a decade, class was the main tool in my intellectual tool box. It remains important, but has been joined by other analytical constructs, many of them drawn from cultural studies. I see similar accumulation of analytical constructs in the work of my peers, as they too go beyond their initial intellectual paradigms.

Neither the historiography course nor our advisors at Columbia defended the ramparts of historical research. Instead, they suggested taking courses in the social sciences and adopting some of their

methods. One result was that many dissertations and first books were micro-histories. Many still are, though the more recent ones, at least in my field, situate their material in the growing body of knowledge generated by previous micro-histories, a process that begins to coalesce into a more variegated version of history. These micro-histories undermined national narratives that had prevailed since the late nineteenth century — and in the case of France, were selected and implemented by a centralized education system. As these micro-histories accumulate and interact with one another, they assuage fears about the fragmentation of historical studies.

I did my dissertation on the silk workers of Lyon between their insurrection of 1834 and the fall of the Second French Republic in 1852. With other grad students, I participated in a study group on demography and learned Fortran to use the computer, in my case to analyze the occupations, addresses, arrest records, and charges of nearly twelve hundred silk workers arrested for protests in Lyon between 1834 and 1852. But I never abandoned my search for the thoughts, feelings, and personal lives of these workers. I analyzed their poetry, pamphlets, and newspapers and researched their families, neighbourhoods, and workplaces. Over the decades, like most of my cohort, I have done less quantitative history, but I see no reason not to combine quantitative and qualitative data, as long as both words and figures are subjected to critical scrutiny.

E.P. Thompson's legacy played a role in this bifurcated approach,<sup>7</sup> as did the example of the *Annales* School, with its goal of universal history. I was particularly influenced by Fernand Braudel's *Capitalism and Material life, 1400-1800*, with its attention to the relationships between capitalism, consumption and material history.

Being interested in French history meant an early introduction to Foucault in study groups for ten years after graduate school. In the late 1980s, the French theorist *du jour* changed. First in line, and still foremost for me, was Pierre Bourdieu, with his grounded notions of social and cultural capital, which helped me understand the importance of taste, whether in personal appearance or household decor, for bourgeois women. This was essential for my latest monograph, on French fashion. But I'll stop listing French theorists now, having promised not to go on about them. The point is that much of our

theoretical education was the result of extra-curricular study. We did not confine ourselves to education within the halls of academe.

I fully acknowledge the connection between my interests in historical research and my anti-war and free speech activism in the long sixties. Although left-wing activism at the University of Alberta, Calgary, rarely makes it into the history books, I want to record that I began four decades of marching in demonstrations at that very university, first in a small protest against the Vietnam war and then in a larger protest against the University and other local venues that refused to host the San Francisco Mime Troop, an irreverent troop of Afro-American actors. At Columbia, I continued my involvement in the Vietnam War demonstrations and joined the student occupation of Columbia University in 1968 over the University's involvement in the Vietnam War. As a participant-observer of the reaction of New York City policemen to student occupiers — a police riot — I recognized the class basis of policemen's anger at privileged youth. I was on the other side of a barricade, but the barricade did not fit my idea of the barricades in French revolutions. I rethought my naive assumptions that barricades are necessarily material barriers erected by left-wing radicals.

After the student occupation, I participated in organizing efforts among caretakers at Columbia University and nearby St Paul's hospital. Reading the media coverage of the student occupation of the buildings at Columbia, which said little about a police riot, and noting their utter indifference to efforts to organize caretaking staff, we had another learning moment, this time about the selectivity of the media's definition of "all the news fit to print." This insight reinforced my historiography course, with its instructions not to rely heavily upon printed sources and to scrutinize all sources for bias.

My participation in anti-war and peace demonstrations, as well as my support for striking workers at Simon Fraser University, where I taught from 1977, continued through the 1980s. I think this activism informed and improved the quality of the scholarship I produced, notably my 1983 book on gendered labour legislation in France. Colleagues report similar benefits.

In Canada, the Student Union for Peace Action was active in the years leading up to 1968, both in anti-war protests and community

organizing, and students for a Democratic University were occupying universities in 1969. For those who became historians, I suggest that these generational experiences may have had a similar impact on their practice of history. Of greater import, for women like me, was the publication of Maggie Benston's "Political Economy of Women's Liberation." I was delighted to join the Women's Studies program at Simon Fraser University in 1977, because Maggie was there. But I did not follow up her insights about women's unpaid labour in my research until my present research project, which includes a content analysis of columns and letters to the editors of the woman's pages of French newspapers.

The tipping point in my conversion to women's history occurred in New York, in a non-credit, off-campus graduate seminar in history conducted by pioneers of women's history like Gerda Lerner and Joan Kelly Gadol. This was the most demanding and rewarding course I ever took, because we all devoted a lot of time to finding elusive reading material and came to each session prepared to debate our interpretations of what was very fresh material. To those who dismiss this period of women's history as mere recovery history, without any theory, I agree that we searched high and low for documents and secondary sources, but I disagree about not using theory. In my case, I drew heavily on Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex*, with her useful notions of women's situation and historical contingency.

We were explorers in nearly uncharted territory. I say nearly uncharted because we quickly uncovered an earlier generation of historians whose superb scholarship on women had escaped our notice, since these works had not been assigned in any course or been included on any comprehensive exam bibliography. I understand that other historians excavating what they thought were untapped lodes of historical data, have also discovered predecessors who have been excised from the historiographical record.

In marathon negotiations with the departmental curriculum committee at Columbia, we concentrated on including women in Western Civilization courses. The progressive narrative that was history considered women ahistorical, so women barely played a cameo role in history courses. When they entered the scene, they were identified as exceptional women; on the rare occasion that anyone alluded



to femininity, it was eternal, or the negation of history as progress. Most of us refused to focus on “exceptional” women or accept the notion of an eternal feminine.<sup>8</sup> We were grappling with essentialism, but did not have that language to talk about it. Here again we bumped up against the issue of continuity and change, now articulated as a problem of patriarchal structure versus women’s agency.<sup>9</sup> It would take several years to develop the concepts of patriarchy as flexible, patriarchies in the plural and structured choice, an articulation of ideas about the coexistence of structures and limited agency.

We grappled with the need for multiple histories, not just a single narrative. (We did not have the term master narratives). We ran into the “fear of plurality” that still informs efforts to be more inclusive, fears that still lead to the near exclusion of women in, for instance, the recently imposed national historical canon in Holland.<sup>10</sup> Other excluded groups have encountered resistance when they argued for a more representative history. To me, expanding historical coverage is a positive development, though the notion of multiple histories does raise concerns about the fragmentation of historical knowledge. A curriculum that includes diversity in the survey courses, and sets requirements to explore alternative histories in the course of a history degree, addresses some of these concerns.

This extracurricular women’s history course was the only occasion I had as a student to observe women as professors of history. Their enthusiasm and intellectual rigour inspire me to this day. Many in that seminar continue to teach women’s history or women’s studies. I spent twenty-eight years in a joint appointment with Women’s Studies and am now full time in the recently renamed Department of Gender, Sexuality and Women’s Studies at Simon Fraser University. In my thirty-eight years teaching career, I have tried to recreate the unadulterated pleasure in learning that I felt in that seminar. As the boundaries of historical inquiry opened to include other previously-unrecognized subjects, such as people of colour, disabled people, gays and lesbians, and most recently transgendered people, some of my students *have* experienced that joy of discovery.

The other impetus for my interest in women’s history was the women’s movement. During the campaign for abortion in New York State, I began attending what would later be called consciousness-

raising sessions at Columbia. However, our large group of university students, including such feminist luminaries as Kate Millet and Ti-Grace Atkinson, focused on practical issues like acquiring more women's washrooms (and liberating men's rooms, when we got no results), getting access to birth control pills (and occupying the student health centre when we were ignored), and lobbying for what became the first special police unit for sex crimes.

When I began teaching, I was further drawn to women's history, because I was realizing that history itself was gendered and that this was causally linked to the predominance of men in history departments. When I was first hired in a department of history at a women's college, Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts, I was impressed by the fact that the department employed three women and eleven men. I soon realized that there were informal gender barriers that I had not imagined. The most ironic and frustrating one was opposition to teaching women's history at a women's college — until influential alumni (or large donors) urged the department at least to offer a course during the centennial of the College in 1975. After I joined the History Department at Simon Fraser University in 1977, it was acceptable to teach women's history, because the first two tenure-track women — the other one was an earlier President of the CHA, Nikki Strong-Boag — were jointly-appointed with Women's Studies. For fifteen years, I was one of only two women in a department of twenty-eight tenure-line faculty members. At SFU, I bumped into the attitude that two tenured women were quite enough for a department, an opinion expressed in hiring battles when Nikki and I tried to persuade the department to hire promising women. Even after the walls of history departments had been breached, some tried to defend the perimeters from outsiders. These battles and attitudes prevailed until the early nineties, when a few more women were hired. *Not* incidentally, many more have been added since then.

Meanwhile, I benefitted from the inter-disciplinarity of Women's Studies, notably when I conceived of a book on the history of modern women's clothing that used symbolic anthropology to uncover the meaning of fashion along with a political economy of the couture business in interwar France. In the late 1980s, I helped form

Academic Women at SFU to organize other faculty women, many of whom felt very isolated in their departments. Although we lobbied for and got an employment equity officer and a pay equity review, we also attended each others' talks. These talks expanded our horizons and enriched our scholarship. To belabour the metaphor, we benefited from traversing disciplinary borders. Other multi-disciplinary societies serve the same purpose.

The title of my talk also reflects my current research project on the gender of newspaper journalism in Interwar France, a gender history combing a sociological approach to the careers of journalists with a linguistic approach to the style of French journalism. Like most gender history, it is both a social and a cultural history, whatever polemicists for both camps claimed about their incompatibility in the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>11</sup> After over a decade of controversy over theory and methods, I, like many in my generation, am flexible about methods.

In the current project, I am comparing the writing style and careers of two of the seven women who reached the pinnacle of national newspaper reporting, to the writing style and careers of two of their forty-some male peers. I am testing claims by historians who study women in American newspaper journalism that women penetrated the first page because their feminine style — a melange of personal reporting, sensationalism, and sentiment — suited a mass readership.<sup>12</sup> My hypotheses were that Frenchwomen writing on the front page wrote in much the same way as their male peers and that both sets of reporters regularly inserted their own opinions and exploited sensational topics. Ongoing research has confirmed these hypotheses.

For the moment, the question is: How did this project give rise to the title “Historians without Borders”? Clearly, the boundaries between genders, or at least the notion of gendered styles, will be breached in my research. I am drawing upon recent trends in Gender Studies, treating gender as a question, not a category, of historical analysis.<sup>13</sup>

Because my subjects investigated and wrote about different countries and continents, I am becoming a “Historian without National Borders.” All of my subjects wrote series of articles and books about French colonies, which has led me to study interpreta-

tions of the same colonies by their contemporaries and recent scholars and to delve into post-colonial theories to see if they can be applied to reporting on these colonies. My research agenda includes inquiring whether their variant of racism correlates with their gendered experiences of their occupation. In doing so, I am engaging in intersectional analysis, examining the intersections between gender, race and class,<sup>14</sup> a method many historians have borrowed from Women's and Gender Studies.

In addition, one of my subjects, Andrée Viollis, produced two newspaper series and three books about China and Japan. Her excursions in the East have been linked to her second husband's career as a curator of Chinese art, and her different responses to the two Asian countries have been interpreted as manifestations of Western fear of Japanese imperialism. Neither interpretation is an adequate explanation. To understand Viollis' polemical response to militaristic authoritarianism in Japan — she labelled it fascist — I am not only examining her reporting on Nazi Germany, but rereading germinal works on Orientalism and immersing myself in the war-torn history of Chinese-Japanese relations in the clearly misnamed interwar period. Accordingly, I am hurdling over intra-disciplinary fences and querying the utility of Eurocentric periodization. Like other members of my cohort, I am following the lead of a younger generation of historians.

One might expect European historians to destabilize national history narratives more directly than through the proliferation of village and regional histories. Nationalism, which has often aligned with racism and warfare in Europe, has a bad track record. However, with the exception of economic historians and specialists in international relations, few historians have written European history. Genuinely transnational histories of Europe are rare, and are fraught with internal difficulties such as differences in periodization (e.g. contemporary history starts with the Great Revolution in France in Western European countries, but with the First World War in Eastern European countries). Those who are seeking a method, begin by rejecting essentialist narratives, such as the shared heritage of the Enlightenment, and look to a truly transnational history, with the emphasis on interdependency and transfers between nations and other entities. The best insist upon a plurality of histories and what

the French call *histoire croisée*, meaning that transfers must be seen as multi-directional.<sup>15</sup>

Of course, some European historians have written transnational historical works. The stellar example is Natalie Zemon Davis, the 2010 winner of the Holberg International Prize for outstanding work in the arts and humanities. Although I cannot forebear mentioning that she began as a French historian, she has not been confined in national or disciplinary traditions. As she described her work in the Holberg interview, her “historical inquiry has ranged in space from early modern France and Western Europe to North Africa and the Caribbean and in theme from social and religious conflict to gift-giving, storytelling and festivity. But throughout I’ve especially sought the history of working people — artisans, peasants, and now slaves — and the history of women along with the men. I’ve tried to recapture their voices and visions of the world, and seen them not as mere victims of oppression, but as actors finding ways to survive, improvise, and even resist. I’ve tried to write decentred history, where what happens in a woman’s workshop or a villager’s hut or at a printer’s press can count as much as decisions at a king’s council or a meeting of a Faculty of Theology. I’ve tried to write a pluralistic history, where the poor are present along with the rich, and Jews and Muslims along with Catholics, Protestants, and other Christians.”<sup>16</sup> Few among us can hope to match her breadth, but her example of seeing links between local histories and the wider world, between everyday people and world-historical events, is manageable.

I wish to conclude with a few remarks on what this all has to do with Canadian history and the CHA/SHC?

I think that historians of Canada write exemplary history without borders. Consider two recent prize winning books. The 2010 MacDonald Prize went to Beatrice Craig’s *Backwoods Consumers and Homespun Capitalists. The Rise of a Market Culture in Eastern Canada*,<sup>17</sup> a micro-history of an isolated region that identifies links between local and international markets and queries conventional wisdom about capitalism in rural areas. Or the winner of the 2010 Harold Adams Innis Prize for Best English-Language work in the social sciences, *Makuk, A New History of Aboriginal-White Relations*, by John Lutz, a Council member. This is another micro-history, in this

case of two indigenous peoples, the Tsilhqot'in and the Straits Salish, in British Columbia, the different ways they responded to European colonialism, and how they were affected by the Euro-American construction of the "lazy Indian" and "vanishing" Indians.<sup>18</sup>

I also base my conclusion on my continuing reading in Canadian women's history and sporadic efforts to keep up with Canadian labour history. Not being able to keep track of all the scholarship in Canadian history, I asked colleagues in fields like environmental, aboriginal and western Canadian history to suggest recent surveys of the fields, and I thank all who responded. I also consulted the programs and papers of recent annual meetings and attended as many sessions at the last four meetings as I could.

There are many reasons to consider historians of Canada well positioned in the new and more interdisciplinary and international practice of history. The absence of a national history canon is an advantage: historians do not have to put so much effort into destabilizing a powerful and entrenched national narrative or, this being Canada, narratives. Second, scholarship about Canadian history flourished since the long 1960s and accordingly benefits from the trend to adapt methods from other disciplines. Third, most Canadians are immigrants or the heirs of settlers, which means that part of the fabric of Canadian history is knowing where people came from and what they brought with them. Given the variety of Canadian backgrounds, Canadian history must address many different cultural heritages and how they mingle with, are altered by, and enhance the Canadian social landscape.

Finally, the CHA/SHC has a mandate to represent all historians in Canada. This mandate has meant conscious efforts to draw in historians who are not Canadian specialists, whether in the form of comparative sessions at the annual meetings, inclusion of promising papers in the *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association*, and by electing presidents whose specializations are not Canadian. I have found being on Council, and attending the annual meetings, stimulating and inspiring. I hope to be able to attend more sessions and join the new media history group in the future. I hope that I will see you at these sessions.

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### Endnotes:

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- 2 Brian D. Palmer, *Canada's 1960s. The Ironies of Identity in a Rebellious Era* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009)
- 3 Table 2 University enrolments by field of study and gender, University Enrolment, The Daily, Statistics Canada, July 14<sup>th</sup>, 2010. <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/daily-quotidien/100714/dq100714a-eng.htm>, and Table 2, Percentage of women and rate of change in the percentage of women and total number of faculty by principal subject taught by year, in Michael Ornstein, P. Stewart and J. Drakich, "The Status of Women Faculty in Canadian Universities," *Education Quarterly Review*, 1998.
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- 6 *History from below. Studies in popular protest and popular ideology*. Ed. Frederick Krantz. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, c1988).
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- 8 Sylvia Paletschek, "Opening up Narrow Boundaries: Memory Culture, Historiography and Excluded Histories from a Gendered Perspective," in *Gendering Historiography. Beyond National Canons*, ed. Angelika Epple, Angelika Schaser (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 2009), p. 168.
- 9 Judith M. Bennett, *History Matters. Patriarchy and the Challenge of Feminism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006) pp. 68 and 129.
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- 11 Laura Lee Downs, *Writing Gender History* (London: Hodder Arnold, 2004).
- 12 Jean M. Lutes, *Front-page girls: Women journalists in American culture and fiction, 1880-1930* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006).
- 13 Jean Boydston, "Gender as a Question of Historical Analysis," *Gender and History*, 20, 3 (November 2008), but see also Joan Wallach Scott, 'Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis', *American Historical Review* 91 (1986), and "Gender: Still a Useful Category of Analysis?" *Diogenes*, 57, 1 (2010).
- 14 Chandra Talpede Mohanty "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," *Feminist Review*, 30 (1988), pp. 61–88.
- 15 *Conflicted Memories. Europeanizing Contemporary Histories*, edited by Konrad H. Jarausch and Thomas Lindenberger in collaboration with Annelie Ramsbrock (New York/Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2007).
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- 18 John Lutz, *Makuk, A New History of Aboriginal-White Relations* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2008)