

Canadian  
Historical Association



## A WORD FROM THE PRESIDENT

Société historique  
du Canada

### Impact

Universities, colleges, schools, museums, libraries, archives are all facing futures that are more uncertain than we could have imagined. A year of pandemic lockdowns has changed the landscape enormously. Too often, however, solutions are offered in response to immediate events, with little thought to broader implications, or longer trends. We need immediate solutions, goes the argument. This is certainly understandable, although historians have both professional and personal reasons for resisting the allure of the quick fix: we have seen the cost of the knee-jerk response to problems in the past, as well as bearing the brunt, often, of short-sightedness in our workplaces.

At a moment when scientific research seems particularly important – vaccine development being only the most obvious example – and educational and cultural institutions are struggling financially, the place to cut corners has too often been in the Humanities and Social Sciences, where the demonstration of value is complicated.

Those of you who are reading this do not need to be convinced of the value of a degree – or indeed several degrees – in history. But you are a tiny minority, and in your daily lives, you have contact with dozens, hundreds, maybe thousands of people who are not so sure. They need proof. They want to be able to measure the value, as surely ought to be possible for something that has a “value.” So, determinations of value, or impact, or importance, come down to factors that can be measured.

And what, for the historian, can be measured? Publications, and students, and twitter followers and audience sizes; numbers of pages and dollar-figures for grants; contact hours and archival visits and media requests. All interesting numbers, and all no doubt relevant for some sort of calculation, in much the same way that knowing one’s hat size might be interesting and occasionally relevant, but hardly the sort of thing to use as a way of determining impact.

And yet in universities, as elsewhere, impact seems to need to be quantified. It needs to be able to be set out on a spreadsheet, plotting one person’s impact against another, or one department’s impact against another. Other disciplines have a head start on historians in this regard, having agreed that citation frequency, for example, is a good way to measure impact; in history, we haven’t agreed on these ways of measuring our “impact,” and so we find ourselves at something of a loss when asked to provide a number that illustrates impact.

The problem lies in the nature of historical time, and size of historical space. It also lies in the different types of impact. Like a hammer hitting a nail, the impact that is witnessed in some disciplines is direct, immediate and, therefore, more measurable. One particular discovery leads

to the next, and knowledge grows in a roughly linear manner. That's not the case with history, where our understanding grows not in a straight line, but in ripples, like a pebble thrown into the water. The concentric rings of that historical "impact" spread outward in all directions. These historical ideas change not only the way we view the past, but also what happens in the future. And how is that to be measured?

What about by considering who feels the "impact" of historical ideas? Everyone, I would suggest. Not only do historical ideas exert their impact both backward and forward in time, they also work within a vast space, influencing people who had no idea they were absorbing history, using history, and extending that infinite impact even further. These aren't just the students and readers of history, or the public that will once again visit a museum or historic site – the groups that know they are absorbing history – but everyone who lives in a world in which decisions are taken, choices are made, and futures are followed based on what we know about the past. Whether that's about military strategy, or equality, or financial security, or putting food on the table, the decisions *everyone* makes are not just rooted in what we know about the past, but more importantly in what we understand about the past.

Historians, whether they write old-fashioned books that sell 200 copies, or teach classes with 200 students, or open exhibits that attract 200 thousand visitors, all have an impact that is vast, interconnected, and ultimately unknowable.

Measurements are complicated, and the things we value most are immeasurable. Surely the value of history – the multiple, changing, unfinished impacts of our understanding of the past – falls into that category of things that are immeasurable. And perhaps someday we can design a spreadsheet that will illustrate that.

Penny Bryden  
President