

Reckoning with Place: Region and the Role of the Historian in Troubled Times

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PREAMBLE

May I offer you, as a native-born Islander, a welcome to Prince Edward Island, the first time that the CHA has graced our shores since 1992 and the first time that the ACS has met here since 2009.

I confess that when I was approached by Andrew Nurse to make some remarks at the CHA this year, I nearly said no. After all, I said, what has the likes of me, a slight sage from a small place, to say to the likes of you? What qualification do I have, aside from being old and so, allegedly wise. My mind immediately went back to my first class in graduate school at Queen's in the fall of 1978. I was 20 years old and a long way from home. I left that day with two words I couldn't define banging around in my head: "declension" and "paradigm." "I do not belong here!" I thought.

I was probably right. Just the same, I stuck it out and here we are. But, the question I asked Andrew Nurse remains valid: what wisdom do I have to offer? Only the kind you can buy at any corner store. So, I've decided it is safest for me simply to remind you today of things that you already know. Then we can both feel smart!

I began with that reference to myself as a native-born Islander because, well, I am, but also, because it is the key to what I would like to rehearse with you. I am an historian of place,

and that has furnished me with some insights into the significance of place when it comes to the practice of history. I would like to begin with that.¹

And being an historian of place in a very small place has meant that I have ended up becoming – in scale, at least – a public intellectual. The media ask me from time to time to provide insight into current events by tracking their history, and my school has prevailed on me to help populate their Facebook page with some vignettes from the Island’s past. I also began my career outside of academia, as a public historian, working for a museum and, because it didn’t pay very well, moonlighting as a tour guide. Those experiences fed some pre-existing notions about the place of the historian in the larger society. In the second part of my address, I’d like to talk a little about that because I am convinced that we have a critical – although delicate – role to play.²

Afterwards, I expect, you can put ME in MY place.

Part ONE: PLACE AND THE PRACTICE OF HISTORY

“By discovering your place you discover yourself.”

Margaret Atwood, *Second Words*

Let’s begin with something obvious and newly topical: region as place. It is almost a truism to state that understanding the riddle of Canada requires understanding the riddle of region. Yes, we can conceive of Canada as, in effect, a whole series of nations, each overlaid on the other like those overlay illustrations of the human body in medical texts. And that is useful for some

¹ Passages from the section on place are adapted from a lecture to the Genealogical Association of Nova Scotia in October 2024: “Knowing Your Place: The Importance of Place in the Practice of History.”

² The section on the role of the historian includes a short passage from “The Past Is a Road That Leads to Here,” Afterword, in Margaret MacMillan, *The Lion’s Cub: Canada and the Great War*, Symons Medal Lecture (Charlottetown and Ottawa: Confederation Centre of the Arts and University of Ottawa Press, 2019): 56—62.

purposes, but Canada can also be conceived as a, pardon the term, confederation of regions. As we know and teach, Canadian nationhood requires finding that balance point between what binds those regions together and what drives them apart.

I came of age in the 1970s, back when regional history suddenly become “a thing,” a righteous assertion that region matters – and, by extension, that Atlantic Canada should matter – in the telling of Canadian history, a conviction that Canada wasn’t Ottawa or Ontario, but a Brady-Bunch, blended family of provinces and regions with very different identities and concerns. Some historians even argued at the time that the common ground occupied by Canada’s regions was their sense of alienation from Ottawa. Other historians railed against the loss of any truly “national” history, but in the regions, the applause tended to drown them out

And so, regional history had its moment. Several of them, actually. Region was initially conceived mainly in political and economic terms, but over time it has been re-imagined through different lenses, different ways of seeing and knowing. In recent decades, as is always the way in history, other neglected topics and other reckonings less tied to region have come home to roost. Which is as it should be. Regional history is no longer the cutting edge for getting at what Canada is about. But as both Alberta and, once again, Quebec talk about separation from the Canadian experiment, perhaps it is time to re-visit why region matters. Why place matters.

A caveat is necessary. To talk too glibly about region is to pretend that the similarities within those regions are more defining than their differences. That exercise works best from a distance. From Calgary, all that some people see is “the East”; the Atlantic region doesn’t really exist – except as a source of labour. We are tarred with the same brush as Ontario and Quebec. And for many folks in my region, the West translates as Alberta or maybe even just Fort Mac, which is a disservice to the complexity of the whole western half of Canada.

Because, the closer we look, the more difference we see, the more cracks in the smooth eggshell of “region.” After all, there is no such thing as a Maritimer in the Maritimes. You only become one when you live outside of the region, when shared exile and proximity breed solidarity. Even then, there is a tendency to stereotype, to valorize, or satirize. So, to understand place, perhaps we need to drill down even further. Place has an appeal that begins with the local and, like water, climbs upward through region to the level of nation.

Indeed, I could argue that what many dismiss as localism is a powerful sentiment that has itself been recast in the hothouse climate of politics and social change into a species of nationalism. I won’t do that (although I might mention in passing that there are dozens of nation states around the world that are smaller in both size and numbers than my province. Just sayin’.) Please pardon me if I lean into examples from the region that I know best, and if I begin with my own insecurities about place.

When I went to work in academia after fifteen years in the museum field, colleagues from other parts of the continent frequently asked me what my area of study was. By that they meant to locate me within our discipline by penning me into one of the many fields within history. I never knew exactly how to answer. The best answer that I could come up with – eventually – was that I was an historian of place. And that place was *my* place, my birth province, Prince Edward Island. I often felt slightly apologetic. Even though it ranked as a province, my “place” was admittedly a tiny part of a huge country. Yet, I was also annoyed when the person’s eyes would flicker over my shoulder to see if there was someone else to talk to who was doing something more interesting. Or, at least, someone doing something more important and more relevant than “Canada’s smallest province.” Not everyone was like that, but many were. Place might matter, but it depended on the place.

My reaction to the dismissive strangers, and theirs to me, strikes at one of the paradoxes inherent in the local, especially if the local is a small island. Half of you, half of the time, thinks that your particular place is a world unto itself, the hub of its own universe. The other half suspects that your place doesn't matter at all, that "local" is simply a synonym for "negligible." That your island is, at best, a curious beauty mark on the cold shoulder of the nearest large continent.

Turns out they were wrong. And I was wrong, too. Wrong to be apologetic and wrong to be annoyed. Because I now realize that place *does* matter. And, I contend, it matters in at least three different ways.

First, place should matter on its own merits, especially to the people who belong there and regardless of what outsiders might think. As genealogy has demonstrated, place is a vital component in the formation and maintenance of identity. The local matters to individuals because it provides one of the touchstones for human happiness, that is, a sense of place and, with it, a sense of belonging. It makes history personal, and so, it is often the open door to a deeper engagement with the discipline and all that it offers us.

Second, I believe that place is an invaluable key for unlocking the very largest themes in history. And those, in turn, address the central questions asked by all of the Humanities: why are people the way they are and why do they do the things that they do? The local becomes the laboratory for testing those large ideas, not only by furnishing needful evidence on the ground, but by translating ideas into actualities, turning abstractions into concrete, granular details that resonate as well as substantiate. At a deeper, less tangible level, the gritty reality of those details gives the ring of "authenticity" to history's recreation of the past.

And, finally, place matters because, even as a grasp of the larger context helps explain the local, the local informs and –sometimes – reforms the global storyline. We need to know our place, not to nourish our fragile pride nor to be reminded of our relative inconsequence, but because each place is a telling part of the whole. In what follows, then, I'd like to explore how the global and the local intersect in the way we approach history in order to make the case for *place* in the practice of those allied disciplines.

Place and Identity

Think globally, act locally, Scottish activist and conservationist Patrick Geddes once urged.³ It was a call to activism at the grassroots, community level, but it's also a way of understanding the world.

And ourselves.

Place history is one of the essential building blocks of identity. It comes as no revelation to us that urban, industrial society in the Western world has disrupted people's sense of self. Lost in the madding crowd of the big city, feeling anonymous and unnoticed inside their own lives, their families blown like pollen across the continent and their own sense of what constitutes "home" open to conjecture – is it where I was born or where I grew up or where I went to school or where I live now? -- many North Americans in the last half of the twentieth century turned to genealogy to root themselves and rescue their lives from the spectre of Willie Lomanesque obscurity. It gave them a storyline, a place to call their own, and a curious sense of belonging.

As with individuals, so with communities and societies. That powerful 19th-century phenomenon, nationalism, drew heavily on shared history – real and imagined – in order to

³ Patrick Geddes, *Cities in Evolution* (London, 1915). The actual catchphrase has been variously attributed. Where I first encountered it, as an epigraph, in Harry Baglole, ed. *Exploring Island History: A Guide to the Historical Resources of Prince Edward Island* (Belfast, PEI: Ragweed Press, 1977), it was attributed to French-American intellectual René Dubos.

create national identities out of disparate peoples. But we have examples much closer to home. In making his influential argument for Canadian Studies programs at Canadian universities, Tom Symons wrote in 1975, “The most valid and compelling argument for Canadian Studies is the importance of self-knowledge, the need to know and to understand ourselves.”⁴ In a Canada that many observers felt was an artificial construct, Symons knew that any commonly held notion of “Canada” had to be built from the foundation up. And that foundation was history. Or perhaps, “histories.” It was a telling organizational choice by those who launched the Canadian Studies program at the University of PEI that its foundation course was a second-year level survey of Atlantic Canada.

Consider, for example, three of the principal islands in Atlantic Canada. Over the past century and more, Newfoundland has leaned heavily on history to rally a defiant brand of Newfoundland nationalism. It is a storyline that exalts Newfoundland’s resources and people, and finds convenient external scapegoats for its misfortunes: English fishing merchants who plundered its resources without caring to settle it, the British government that refused to recognize the colony that was taking root anyway, and, since 1949, Ottawa, the tie that binds, the hand that gives – and takes away.⁵ That interpretation of the past provides both moral comfort for modern Newfoundlanders and political strategy for its leaders, most notably its former premier, Danny Williams.

Another island culture, Cape Breton, has told a similar story in recent decades. Beset with an all too visible economic decline and crushing unemployment, at the mercy of political power brokers in Ottawa and Halifax and economic power brokers from Away, Cape Breton’s cultural

⁴ T. H.B. Symons, *To Know Ourselves: The Report of the Commission on Canadian Studies* (Ottawa: Association of Universities and Colleges, 1975): 25.

⁵ An explication and critique of that nationalism is the interpretive backbone of Sean T. Cadigan’s, *Newfoundland and Labrador: A History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009).

producers have constructed an historical narrative that pits resilient Cape Bretoners against powerful, callous external actors. “We are an island, a rock in the stream,” sang Kenzie MacNeil in the chorus of Cape Breton’s “unofficial anthem,” titled “The Island.” “We are a people as proud as there’s been.” In the verses, intrepid settlers carve out a peaceable kingdom, but “. . . the foreign-owned companies cause us to fight / For our survival and for our rights.” Among those “rights,” the song’s lyric finishes, is that of agency, “the right to leave or to stay.”⁶ Industrial Cape Breton has always been at the mercy of multinational corporations, and at the political level, it is doubly disadvantaged when it comes to agency. Lacking the gift of jurisdiction, it is beholden to both the provincial government in Halifax and the federal government in Ottawa.

In the same era that Kenzie MacNeil was composing his defiant anthem for Cape Bretoners, two young historian-activists on Prince Edward Island, Harry Baglole and David Weale, were looking askance at the federally driven Comprehensive Development Plan (1969—1984) and its ambitious remaking of Island society and culture in the name of “progress.” And so, when the tourism-hyped centennial of Prince Edward Island’s entry into Confederation in 1873 implied that the Island’s only claim to consequence was the Charlottetown Conference of 1864 and, a decade later, becoming Canada’s smallest, least powerful province, Weale and Baglole launched the Brothers and Sisters of Cornelius Howatt. The BSCH was half satire, half protest. Through clever publicity stunts and trenchant op eds, it questioned the spiritual and cultural costs of the Island’s headlong rush towards the future. Beyond that, its goal was to promote a more prideful, more local, more thoughtful Island identity, not fashioned from how

⁶ Kenzie MacNeil, “The Island,” 1977.

others saw us, but generated internally and based on a deeper understanding of Island history.⁷ Their co-authored book *The Island and Confederation: The End of an Era* (1973) posited an emergent Island nationalism, buoyant and confident, in the mid-nineteenth century that was throttled by the colony's entry into Confederation.⁸ (Although developed independently, the argument can be seen as a lineal descendant of the Golden Age-ism of the 1920s Maritime Rights movement.)⁹ The unapologetic downplaying of flag-waving "Canadianism" in favour of "small Islandism" was temporary, but the passionate plea for the importance of place, crafted with the tools of history, had an enduring impact and helped nourish a grassroots heritage movement in the province.

Micro Places and Macro Questions

The history of place, then, has undeniable value for the inhabitants of that place. But the local's importance goes well beyond anchoring identity. In historical terms, it is where theory meets practice. Just as environmental historians ground-truth a place footstep by footstep, measuring maps, archival images, and written accounts against what they see on the landscape, so the details gathered from actual experience in a place provide the hard evidence to prove or disprove ambitious hypotheses. The local thus becomes the proving ground for the global. As geographer Graeme Wynn has perceptively noted, islands, those most well-defined of places, are particularly popular as case studies. Scholars with no personal stake in a place may nevertheless rely on it as their laboratory to see how their theories or methodologies play out.¹⁰

⁷ All of this is discussed in, among other places, Edward MacDonald, *If You're Stronghearted: Prince Edward Island in the Twentieth Century* (Charlottetown: PEI Museum & Heritage Foundation, 2000), 302—49, especially, 318—19. Many of their op eds were published in David Weale and Harry Baglole, *Cornelius Howatt, Superstar!* (Summerside: Williams & Crue, 1974).

⁸ David Weale and Harry Baglole, *Confederation: The End of an Era* (Summerside: Williams & Crue, 1973).

⁹ E.R. Forbes, *The Maritime Rights Movement: A Study in Regionalism* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1979).

¹⁰ Graeme Wynn, "Museums, Laboratories, Showcases: Prince Edward Island and Other Islands in Environmental History," in *Time and a Place: An Environmental History of Prince Edward Island*, ed. by Edward MacDonald,

One of the best examples of this in our region is A.H. Clark's classic *Three Centuries and the Island*.¹¹ When I was in graduate school, I was puzzled to find Clark's book available only on reserve in the Douglas Library. I hadn't thought many people at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario, had much interest in the history and geography of Prince Edward Island. Turns out, they didn't. But Clark's work was so notable for its approach and general arguments about how ethnicity affects patterns of settlement that it was assigned reading for the geography program.

Of course, place provides far more than the setting for case studies. And its value is not always realized through a top-down perspective. Academic history too often resembles a fly-over from a drone. From that vantage, it sees the landscape as a whole but misses essential details that define and explain it. For that, a much closer view is required, and our region provides numerous examples of how micro histories end up revising macro storylines.

Genealogists, for example, will invest hundreds of hours of research to uncover a single tantalizing fact about their ancestors. Historians – with so many demands on their time and an eye to publication during their own lifetime – are seldom willing to invest so much for so little return. Yet even pebbles will fill a well if we have enough of them. It was the meticulous work of scores of genealogists that helped historians recreate the history of the Acadian Deportations, Le Grand Dérangement, as a lived experience, tracing the odysseys of individual families out of, and back into, the region. On Prince Edward Island, for instance, conventional wisdom maintained for decades that the Island's modern Acadians were the descendants of a handful of families in Malpeque who fled into the woods to escape deportation in the fall of 1758, emerging again when it was safe. Thanks to family history, we now know that many Island Acadians – as

Joshua MacFadyen, and Irené Novaczek (Charlottetown and Montreal: Island Studies Press and McGill-Queen's University Press, 2016): 36—56.

¹¹ Andrew Hill Clark, *Three Centuries and the Island: A Historical Geography of Settlement and Agriculture in Prince Edward Island, Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1959).

much as a third of the population in 1758 -- fled the Deportation and/or slowly, painfully made their way back into the region in the decades that followed.¹²

To cite another example, for generations we conceived of Loyalists as white, Anglo-American colonists, comparatively well to do, generally Episcopalians, ideologically conservative, and emotionally tied to Great Britain. No doubt many of them were. But we now know that there were Black Loyalists, Indigenous Loyalists, Loyalists defined by circumstance not ideology and calculation not emotion; that some Loyalists – such as Capt. John MacDonald of St. John’s Island and his brother Donald -- were not even living in the Thirteen Colonies, but had simply volunteered to serve the British Crown. How do we know this? In part through local history and the painstaking work of genealogists.¹³

All of this is by now well known. The local as the specific that validates or revises the general is so well accepted a notion as to be almost a truism. How else do we prove anything? But I would argue that the local has an additional value. Local detail does not just convince as evidence; it convinces by adding colour, nuance, drama, complexity, immediacy, humanity to any account. And it is not too much of a stretch to say that those stories and those details are invested in the concrete setting supplied by place.

To dismiss a devotion to such details as merely “local colour” is to ignore the depth of their contribution to history. Not only do they richly cloth the dull flesh of history, not only do they make it more memorable, but they help give history its necessary ring of authenticity.

¹² To cite just two examples for Prince Edward Island, see Georges Arsenault, “The Saga of Alexis Doiron,” *The Island Magazine*, no. 39 (Spring/Summer 1996): 10—17; and Jean-Paul Arsenault, “The Odyssey of Joseph ‘Chaculot’ Gaudet and Marie-Blanche Bourg,” *The Island Magazine*, no. 54 (Fall/Winter 2003): 11—15. For the macro numbers, see Earle Lockerby, “Deportation of the Acadians from Ile Saint-Jean,” *The Island Magazine*, no. 46 (Fall/Winter 1999): 17—28.

¹³ For Prince Edward Island, see, for example, Orlo Jones and Doris Haslam, eds. *An Island Refuge: Loyalists and Disbanded Troops on the Island of St. John* (Charlottetown: The Abegweit Branch of the United Empire Loyalists Association of Canada, 1983), which fed into J.M. Bumsted, *Understanding the Loyalists* (Sackville, NB: Mount Allison University, 1986).

“Place” makes abstract, universal themes specific – hence concrete – and hence, more resonant, comprehensible, and impactful. It makes history more *real*. It is history written from the inside out, rather than the outside in. The small speaks to the bigger world. The local can do that for the larger history.

Context and Local History

Lest we get lost in the weeds, it is best to remember that the story reads both ways: from the particular to the general, but at the same time, from the general to the particular. What happens locally is always affected by what is happening in the wider world. In fact, to switch metaphors, the working of history is less a domino effect than a series of ricochets. Ideas, influences, actions, decisions, conditions reverberate back and forth from the global to the local, from the abstract to the specific. And so, the local can only truly be understood if it is seen within its wider context. For those of us wedded to place, it is a needful reminder. Place history is often hobbled by an over-emphasis on individual dynamics or a flimsy grasp of the larger picture. Island historians are similarly afflicted. We have been roundly criticized in the past for our stubborn insularity, for writing our history as if it existed in a sort of vacuum, that what happened on the Island was unique to it and was uninflected by outside forces except in the most obvious of ways.¹⁴ Well, aside from the defense that each place, island or not, *is* unique, there was some justice in that accusation.

The person who made it, Canadian historian Jack Bumsted, was especially skilled in couching his own fascination with Island history within its larger context. To name a few examples, Bumsted understood Lord Selkirk’s transplantation of Skye tenants to Belfast, PEI, in 1803 as formative prelude to more famous, less successful colonizing ventures in other parts of

¹⁴ See, for example, J.M. Bumsted, “The Only Island There Is,” in *The Garden Transformed: Prince Edward Island, 1945–1980*, ed. by Verner Smitheram, David Milne, and Satadal Dasgupta (Charlottetown: Ragweed Press, 1982).

British America as Selkirk worked out his grand vision for healing the Highlands of Scotland.¹⁵ Employing Scottish sources, Bumsted was also able to trace the Scottish Catholic Church's behind-the-scenes involvement in John MacDonald's watershed settlement of Catholic Scots in Tracadie, PEI, in 1772, and placed it squarely within the slow-motion implosion of the Clan system in Highland Scotland.¹⁶ In other publications, he explained the evidently inexplicable decision to establish leasehold land tenure on Prince Edward Island – the infamous “Land Question” – not as a lapse in judgement, but in terms of long-term settlement patterns in British America. And even as he gleefully pilloried the self-interested corruption and venality of colonial officials, he portrayed them within the moral strictures (or lack of them) of the contemporary public service.¹⁷

Taken as a whole, Bumsted's work has made a tremendous contribution to Island history. His impact within the province might have been even greater, but when he made some minor mistakes in genealogical framing (and sardonically shattered a few cherished myths), local audiences decided that his work was . . . unreliable. There's another lesson there, perhaps.

Following Bumsted's example, I will cite two specific instances where a deeper understanding of the broader context has refined what Islanders thought they knew about their local history. Back in the early 1970s, when a grassroots heritage movement was sweeping the province, many Islanders of Scots descent simply assumed their ancestors had been victims of the Highland Clearances, summarily evicted from their crofts in favour of large-scale sheep farming (as the waggish liked to put it, “run out of Scotland for sheep stealing”). However, close

¹⁵ J.M. Bumsted, “Settlement by Chance: Lord Selkirk and Prince Edward Island,” *Canadian Historical Review* 59, no. 2 (June 1978): 170—88.

¹⁶ J.M. Bumsted, “Highland Emigration to the Island of St. John and the Scottish Catholic Church, 1769—1774,” *Dalhousie Review* 58 (Fall, 1978): 511—27.

¹⁷ In, for example, J.M. Bumsted, *Land, Settlement and Politics on Eighteenth-Century Prince Edward Island* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1987).

comparison of the Island immigration experience with the history of the Clearances reveals that very few Highland emigrants to the province were actually cleared off their properties, at least not until the early 1840s. Some might have been coercively moved around within their clan chief's estates and many probably feared being cleared, but most had considerably more agency about whether and when they emigrated.¹⁸

Similarly, many Irish Islanders in the same era would have told you that their ancestors were refugees from the Great Famine that devastated Ireland between 1845 and 1852, killing over a million people and driving another million to emigrate. It was a reasonable extrapolation – except that it was inaccurate. When author Brendan O'Grady collated the stories of individual families and paired them with the chronology of the Great Famine, it became apparent that most Irish immigrants to Prince Edward Island arrived before the Famine began and so, escaped much of its long, dark, traumatic shadow.¹⁹ Ireland in the 1830s and early 1840s was a deeply unhappy place, a place for leaving, but it was not a charnel house and that has implications for the subsequent history of Irish immigrants in the province.

The Sum of Its Parts

It would be hubristic for a historian of place to insist that place is the most important element in the writing of history. But it is impossible to deny its relevance or its importance. It explains, it enriches, it empowers. It even consoles. We live in dangerous times. Experience and conventional wisdom suggest that, although we live a long way from most of them, global

¹⁸ See, for example, J.M. Bumsted, *The People's Clearance: Highland Emigration to British North America, 1770–1815* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1982); and Michael Kennedy, “*Is leis an tighearna an talamh agus an lan* (the earth and all that it contains belongs to God): The Scottish Gaelic Settlement History of Prince Edward Island,” Ph.D. diss., University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, Scotland, 1995.

¹⁹ Brendan O'Grady, *Exiles and Islanders: The Irish Settlers of Prince Edward Island* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004). O'Grady owed much to the genealogists who compiled and published a complete catalogue of aggregate passenger lists for vessels arriving on Prince Edward Island with immigrants in multiple issues of *The Island Magazine* (notably, numbers 16, 17, 18, 26, and 27). These complemented the nominal lists published in the Magazine in numbers 1, 2, 3, 29, and 39, respectively.

tensions, trends, and conflicts darken our everyday lives and feed a gnawing sense of anxiety. History of place, whether of region or local history, is not intended as an escape from those turmoils. Nor is it normally a recipe for resolving them. But like the mythical Antaeus, we draw strength from the ground on which we stand. Place is the foundation from which we encounter the larger world. And it feeds into history's higher purpose: understanding. Understanding who we are. How we got here. Why things are the way they are. Those are the essential tools for navigating the troubled waters of the present time. And, as it slips into history, of the next.

Part TWO: The Historian's Place in Troubled Times

I am now going to venture with some trepidation onto some thin ice: some reflections on the historian's "place," if you will, in the place I probably know least about, the Present.

"I'm history," people say.

"I'm finished," they mean. "Done. Dismissed. Past."

In recent times, that seems to be a common attitude towards History. In our society it has become what it is in our schools, an elective. And very often, it is not elected. History – the study of the past – has been relegated to an irrelevance in a world consumed by the Present. As one public figure termed it not so long ago, History is a luxury, alright as a hobby for those who don't need to make their way in the world.

But as we all know, the past is a road – a road of cause and effect -- that leads inexorably to the present. And if we are going to understand how we got *here*, we need to find that road and travel it. To use it to find our way in the world. Put another way, history is a key to understanding. Understanding is the beginning of wisdom. And wisdom should be the guide for action.

History, then, should be our *teacher*. But when people are not blithely ignoring History, too many of them have made it their *servant*, using it, not for understanding, but to rationalize – to justify – positions that they have already been taken. History is always a dialogue between past and present, but when it is too rooted in the present, the past is sharpened into a weapon. Because we all face a dilemma. It is the duty of every citizen to be an *advocate* for the things that they believe in. But it is the duty of the historian to be a *witness*, to provide the testimony that explains the now. One tells people what they should do; the other explains how the problem or issue emerged in the first place.

Going back to the 1970s again, there was a grassroots heritage movement on Prince Edward Island in those days. There was so much change so quickly that many thoughtful Islanders – and some not very thoughtful but equally opinionated ones – were afraid that in the rush to the future, the baby was being thrown out with the bathwater. The preservation of heritage became more than a hobby. For some it was a crusade. Now, that heritage movement itself might be divided (somewhat simplistically) into two kinds of people: archivists and activists. Personality helped decide what side of the divide heritage supporters found themselves. Archivists devoted themselves to excavating the past and telling its stories. Activists fought to make sure that the past was preserved: physically, visually, and in print. They campaigned. They crusaded. They preached. They protested. The activists often became frustrated with the archivists. There was a war to be won, they complained, and their needful allies were at the archives instead of in the trenches. Of course, there was a need for both, and both had something of value to teach the other.

So, how do we reconcile those two duties? After all, both have their place and we live both identities at the same time, not week about. Spoiler alert: I don't have a magic formula for

navigating those waters. As with nearly everything else, the answer I think lies upon a spectrum, a spectrum that, like history, is contingent. I will only say that the cost of unbridled advocacy is often the trust of those out there listening and reading. Trust that the evidence we give is reliable. Trust that our version of the past is an honest one.

Of course, I'm being unrealistic if I pretend that historians can ever be completely impartial witnesses. We all know – now more than ever -- that bias is inevitable, that the historian cannot truly be objective. But within the limits of that bias, we need to be trustworthy witnesses to the past. We can be both advocates and historians, but it's hard to be both at the same time. Advocacy is too easily dismissed as partisanship, and perception of partisanship is fatal to our credibility as historians. We live in an age where “expertise” is already distrusted, where “evidence” and “opinion” are equated and discounted accordingly, where dialogue has dwindled into diatribe. Where conflicting opinions are cast as conspiracy. Advocates court disagreement the way that sailors crave a wind. But for historians (and to switch metaphors) trust in our expertise is our currency. We must spend it wisely for once spent, our credibility cannot be replenished. But if we do preserve our credibility, then our witness can itself stand as advocacy.

Now that doesn't mean that our obligation to advocacy can't or shouldn't dictate what historical topics we choose to testify about. And what a simple, yet powerful, decision that is! Admittedly, the public historian doesn't always get to set the agenda. And not just because our employer (if we work in the public history field) may want to censor the message. The audience also has a say in setting the table. Current issues dictate what the public and the media want to know about and predispose our potential audience to listen. Or not. But inevitably, most of us do

get approached for comment or explanation: by the media, by heritage groups, by service clubs looking for somebody willing to give a talk at seven in the morning.

When the audience finds us, or we it, how do we keep it? No one, apparently, has the attention span to read or listen for long nowadays unless there is something very compelling about the messaging. Complex arguments get reduced out “there” to elevator pitches. And yet, our job as historians and teachers is to “trouble” easy answers. To complicate issues, not bludgeon them into submission. Nor is it our duty to turn students into cynics. Rather, we want to sharpen their critical faculties. To help them learn how to learn. How to swim in the tsunami of information washing over them in the wider world outside the classroom.

That leads us to another piece of the historian’s puzzle. I began in this profession with the conviction that for history to do its job, it had to communicate to a larger audience than our tenure and promotion committee or even the small circle of our peers. That part of the profession is fundamental, of course. It is the testing ground for our ideas and our competence. But if ordinary people are excluded from our audience, then our impact will scarcely ripple across the college quad. One answer, I suggest, is to reach out to that larger public when we have the opportunity in a language that they can embrace.

That can happen in the ways that we present our work to that conjectural larger audience. After all, there is a lot of competition out there. Much of it less qualified but often more persuasive. That does not mean dumbing difficult things down or over-simplifying but, after all, the triumph of good writing is not to dazzle – or befuddle -- people with your brilliance but to render things that may be difficult both comprehensible and compelling.

Before I go further, a confession. When I was very small, I fell in love with words. I fell in love with their power. Fell in love with their subtlety. With their ability to inspire emotions in readers. I have been accused – rightly, I fear – of caring more about *how* something is said than for *what* is said. Put another way, I have sometimes been accused of preferring *style* to *substance*. In answer, I would say that you cannot disconnect the two, just as you cannot disconnect in a song the music from the lyrics. I grew up with professors who seemed to feel that “popular” history was a synonym for “bad” history, that if history was made interesting, it must be somehow suspect. I never thought that was true, and I don’t think we can afford that sort of academic snobbery any more. In a review of one of my books, the writer mentioned that in places it made him laugh. I took it as a compliment. I hope it was.

We often forget – and pardon me, those of you who have heard me repeat this mantra over and over again like a scolding mother -- that the most important part of the word of “history” remains “story.” If we forget that, we lose our audience and if we lose our audience, then history becomes merely a closed circuit of academics talking to one another. Story is the spoonful of sugar that helps the medicine go down. After all, narrative is the structure that we impose on the chaos of human events cascading around us every moment to make some sort of sense of the world. Yes, it is to some extent artificial. To some extent selective. But in building a broader audience, it is effective. And we should all aspire to reach that wider audience.

But I don’t mean to argue that the sugar is more important than the medicine. Our goal is not just to entertain. And if we have to choose, and sometimes the nature of our topic – and our essential style as writers -- requires it, substance is more important than style. But . . . there are worse things for a historian than to be a teller of stories.

Conclusion

But as I said in the beginning, I'm just telling you things that you already know. Things that you already do. Some of you have been witnesses to the past – quite literally—in legal cases that continue to make a difference in our nations. Many of you are already bloggers and texters and tweeters and podcast makers and all those other things that I can't keep abreast of. Some of you are already regular resources for the media. Already reach out to the larger community seeking that potent mixture of education and entertainment. Helping them tell their own stories. You fill me with admiration.

Because you know how much place matters in how we encounter our past. And you know that we have a legitimate place in this troubled world we find ourselves in. We are the memory keepers. We are the tellers. We use the past to make sense of the present. And what, in the end, can be more important than that?