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## The Contributions of Margaret Conrad to Public History in Canada

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### Abstract

The presentation elaborates and assesses the contributions of Margaret Conrad to the field of public history in Canada. Throughout her career, she has been concerned with the relationship of the historical discipline to its diverse publics. By her example, she has shown how scholars from academic history backgrounds can more effectively engage public history, strengthening both the

profession and the credibility of public representations of history.

### Résumé

Cette présentation élabore et évalue les contributions de Margaret Conrad dans le domaine de l'histoire publique du Canada. Tout au long de sa carrière, elle se souciait de la relation entre la discipline historique et ses publics divers. Par son exemple elle a montré comment les érudits avec des antécédents académiques en histoire peuvent engager de façon plus efficace l'histoire publique, renforçant ainsi et la profession et la crédibilité des représentations publiques de l'histoire.

Few historians of Canada have made so many notable contributions across the spectrum of the field of Canadian history, including public history, as has Marg Conrad. While public history represents only one aspect of her career, it is an area in which she has been enormously productive and engaged for many years. It is also an aspect, she has argued, with which all professional historians need to become more engaged, if they wish to stay relevant to Canadian society in the new century. Her example offers many cogent lessons as to how we can make the practice of history more connected to the people whose histories we are trying to understand and represent. This paper briefly elaborates and assesses Marg Conrad's role in public history, but it is only one in a series of papers addressing different aspects of her career as a historian, and should therefore be read in conjunction with its companion pieces by other authors. Another caveat is that Marg Conrad's work in public history is a work in progress as she continues to contribute on a variety of fronts. For this discussion, I use the term "public history" to refer to any historical activities undertaken with a view to reaching, interacting with, teaching, serving, influencing, or reflecting upon the public, however it might be defined. The ground covered in this brief report is also necessarily selective, and cannot address more than a representative sample of the many public history endeavours with which Marg has been associated over several decades.<sup>1</sup> She has long grasped that

public history closely relates to some of the most important questions confronting the historical profession in Canada in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries, including: Who are the many peoples who have lived in Canada, or who comprise its populations today? How can historical practice represent the actual diversity of Canadian history? How will the historical profession more effectively engage its many constituencies? How can Canadians be encouraged to become more involved in the production and reception of their collective and individual histories?

To be effective and sustainable in the long run, public history cannot take a distanced approach appealing to an imagined mainstream. For more than a century after Confederation, numerous cultural and social groups with good reason felt shut out of our national narratives - their histories were simply not considered important by the writers of textbooks.<sup>2</sup> Today, there is an emerging consensus that if history is to represent the actual diversity of the past or to speak meaningfully to the plurality of its constituent groups, it will need to be genuinely inclusive of difference, that is, constitutive of the many groups and identities that make up Canada. To succeed at this task, histories of any type need to stay connected to the public, whether directly or indirectly. Marg Conrad understands that wherever opportunities are presented, historical practice should invite the engagement and participation of members of the public in the process of historical production and interpretation. The past, after all, belongs to the people. Social historians may borrow and utilize records about people in trying to understand how they lived in the past but it is their lives that we are researching or writing about, and they or their descendants are entitled to have a voice in the representation of their diverse histories.

Public history is both an academic discipline and a public practice, and Margaret Conrad is one of the few practitioners whose work has straddled both realms of activity. More importantly, she has sought to bring these disparate strains of public history together, so that they might more fully interact, influence, and enrich one another. In this regard, I have had the good fortune to

work with Marg in various contexts and have been able to watch and learn from her at close range. The first occasion was in the early 1990s during the Review of the National Historic Sites System Plan, Parks Canada's strategic plan for new commemorations. As the member on the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada from Nova Scotia, she convinced the National Historic Sites Directorate that it needed to revise its plan for commemorative priorities to bring it into line with current historiography. Her initiative came at a propitious time and coincided with the emerging recognition of difference within the federal government and the formal designation of equity groups. Concurrently, a survey of the National Commemorative Program showed that major constituencies of the Canadian population, including women, Aboriginal peoples, and members of ethnocultural communities<sup>3</sup> were then greatly under-represented among the persons, places, and events designated as having national historic significance.

In this context Marg Conrad's strong commitment to diversity was evident throughout, beginning with her advice regarding the specialists in women's history to be invited to participate in a series of national workshops on Women's History as part of the System Plan consultations in 1992-93. In addition to academic specialists from across the country, from her own home region of Atlantic Canada, she proposed that the late Doris Saunders, a vernacular historian from Happy Valley/Goose Bay and the founding editor of the journal *Them Days*, should be invited to participate. Doris had pioneered in the oral history of Labrador, and her journal functioned as its social memory over more than two decades. By participating in these workshops on women's history alongside professional historians, she brought a valuable grass-roots perspective that also underscored the importance of oral history in recovering the past roles and contributions of women to Canada.

The inclusion of vernacular perspective and oral history was all the more remarkable in light of continuing resistance to its inclusion in both scholarly and public commemorative programs in that period. For

example, in a 1985 essay, the noted historian E.J. Hobsbawm described oral history as "a remarkably slippery medium for preserving facts,"<sup>4</sup> expressing a widely shared scepticism regarding its reliability or utility as a source. Against this, keenly aware of the neglect of minorities in mainstream historiography, Marg Conrad made a conscious effort not only to draw on vernacular knowledge as informed by oral history, but also to include minority representation at the table to discuss and debate the issues. Her own sensitivity to oral history was also demonstrated in her project to document the career of Ellen Fairclough, Canada's first female cabinet minister at the federal level (Conrad 1995). These initiatives presaged her own efforts, since assuming her position as Canada Research Chair in Atlantic Canada Studies, to promote oral history through the Portal.

Regarding the new commemorations workshops, Marg's method of chairing these meetings was instructive regarding her approach to public history. Without putting any pressure on participants to speak, she made a point of periodically going around the table to enlist commentary, so that everyone was included in the discussion and no perspectives were neglected. Her approach to group facilitation was an object lesson in participatory process. After a full discussion, however, it was also necessary to organize and integrate these comments into a logical schema that could then usefully guide the future commemoration of women's history within the National Commemorative Program. Towards the end of the meeting, she then applied her well-honed skills of analysis and synthesis to distill a wide-ranging discussion into ten major themes in women's history, including Women and Power, Women and Education, Aboriginal Women, Women and Health, and Women and Spirituality, among others. These became priorities for Parks Canada's thematic research on women's history for the following 10 years, a significant contribution that has expanded the scope of national commemoration to include many aspects of women's history that were previously not recognized.

Subsequently, Marg Conrad returned to lead another national workshop for National

Historic Sites with a mandate to develop a new thematic framework for Canadian history, intended to guide the implementation of the revised System Plan for National Historic Sites, which was released in 2001. This framework elegantly divided Canadian history into five over-arching themes, under which the diversity of the country's history could be subsumed. These included Peopling the Land, Governing Canada, Developing Economies, Building Social and Community Life, and Expressing Intellectual and Cultural Life. Having worked with this framework for nearly a decade, in Parks Canada we have found that it continues to provide an eminently useful and sensible framework for approaching the commemoration of Canada's past (Canada 2000).

During her tenure on the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada, Marg Conrad frequently met with community groups seeking national recognition for persons, places, and events associated with their histories. She patiently explained the process of designation, the criteria and guidelines according to which the Board made its decisions and recommendations, and generally increased the accessibility of this commemorative body which heretofore had been largely out of the public view. Further, she engaged in efforts to spark the serious assessment of the national commemorative program while disseminating the work of the Board to the larger heritage community. She served as co-organizer of the 1994 symposium to mark the seventy-fifth anniversary of the founding of the Board, and enlisted a keynote address by the eminent American scholar Dolores Hayden on a notable project to commemorate the history of ethnocultural and women's minority groups in Los Angeles.

While serving on the Historic Sites and Monuments Board, Marg Conrad was also invited to sit on the Pier 21 Advisory Board. She and Ruth Goldbloom, the dynamic *tour de force* behind the Pier 21 project, made common cause and worked together to get the site recognized for its role in the history of Canadian immigration. Another related accomplishment followed when the Historic Sites and Monuments Board recognized war

brides, many of whom arrived through Pier 21 following the Second World War, with a plaque at Pier 21.

I also had the opportunity to work with Marg Conrad when serving as Chair of the Advocacy Committee when she was President of the Canadian Historical Association between 2005 and 2007. More recently, I have had occasion to observe her carry out her leadership responsibilities as Chair of the National Capital Commission's Commemorations Committee. Regardless of the venue, her approach to chairing meetings always strikes the right balance between appropriate consultation and deliberation, consensus building, and followed by decisive determinations representative of the consensus and informed by her own clear-sighted understanding of both Canadian history and the issues to which it applies. Watching her in action at these meetings is an educational seminar in itself.

Among other national history and heritage organizations to which she has devoted her time and effort, she has served on such boards and committees as the Minister's Round Table on Parks Canada in 2005; the Board of Directors of Canadian Federation for the Humanities and Social Sciences, 2004-05; the Board of Directors of Canada's National History Society, 2003-06; the Minister's Round Table for the Historical Places Initiative in 2002; the Council of the Historica Foundation, 2000-2003; the Advisory Committee for the National Film Board of Canada's Canadian History Web site, 1999-2001; and the Advisory Board of the National Archives of Canada, 1989-92, among numerous others. Through the Historica Foundation and the Centre for the Study of Canadian Consciousness, she has also contributed to symposia on historical literacy and its assessment in Canada.

Marg Conrad's skills in negotiation, consensus building, and leadership were also important ingredients in her efforts to address numerous public history issues arising during her tenure as President of the Canadian Historical Association between 2005 and 2007. In this period quite a few members of the association and other individuals wrote to the CHA to express their concerns on such

issues as human rights, access to archives, the closure of libraries, and of course, historical controversies such as the CBC production *Prairie Giant*, a docudrama devoted to the career of the late Tommy Douglas, the former premier of Saskatchewan.

As is well known, the last 20 years have witnessed a succession of historical controversies in public history venues in both Canada and the United States. Perhaps the most notorious of these was the controversy over the Enola Gay in an exhibition on the Second World War at the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum in Washington, DC. In that case, the museum restored the B-29 Air Force plane from which United States forces dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima on 5 August 1945. In its exhibition text, the museum summarized the history and development of the Boeing B-29 planes used in bombing raids against Japan, and took the occasion to reassess the war with Japan and the role of the military in that conflict. In response to an outcry by American veterans' groups and others, portions of the exhibition were cancelled and the museum's director resigned. In Canada, a controversy at the Canadian War Museum with some affinities to the Enola Gay affair was prompted by the reaction of various Canadian war veterans to panels devoted to the bombing campaign targeting civilian areas of German cities in the European theatre of the Second World War, as directed by allied forces' Bomber Command. When the Senate of Canada determined to weigh in on the matter, Marg Conrad offered its Veterans Affairs Committee the wise advice that it should not wade into matters of historical interpretation at the museum, although her advice was not heeded. Subsequently, she drew on her experience with this issue when developing more general reflections on the matters of historical controversies at a panel at the 2008 Canadian Historical Association annual conference dealing with the Bomber Command issue. In it, she stressed the importance of dialogue in bringing together opposing players and viewpoints, which in retrospect might have offered opposing sides an opportunity to step back from the

entrenched positions, thereby fostering greater mutual learning (Conrad 2008a).

Marg Conrad has also been in the forefront of using modern technologies to reach public audiences. She has served as producer of several video series devoted to disseminating aspects of Canadian history, beginning with the *History of Atlantic Canada*, a series aired on CTV's University of the Air between 1979 and 1985. In 1984-85 she was the producer of *Perspectives on Canada*, consisting of 30 half-hour programs on contemporary Canadian issues, aired on King's Kable, and distributed through Acadia University's teleconferencing network. In 1988-89 she also served as co-producer of *Targeting Tomorrow*, a video sponsored by the Annapolis Valley Board of Trade, Acadia Institute, and Atlantic Canada Opportunity Agency.

I would be remiss if I did not also mention Marg Conrad's work initiatives to use the digital revolution to promote research and its dissemination. She has discerned in the new digital technologies the potential for history to connect with far larger audiences than traditional print media. In this regard, as co-chair of the Canadian Historical Association's Internet Communications Committee, and then as President, she took the lead in the digitization of the Association's historical booklets and the development of a more interactive website (Conrad 2007, 2). Further, since being appointed Canada Research Chair in Atlantic Studies at the University of New Brunswick, one of her preoccupations has been the establishment and development of the Atlantic Canada Portal, an interactive website devoted to the history of the Atlantic provinces. Through the Portal, she and her colleagues have provided a forum to communicate and connect with students of history beyond the academy (Conrad 2003a; Slumkowski *et al.* 2008). Among other services, the Portal offers a comprehensive bibliography of works published on the Atlantic Region; a virtual archives of primary source materials; a listserv focusing on portal news and events; a research forum for scholarly collaboration; and a searchable web link to other websites addressing Atlantic Canadian history (Atlantic

Canada Portal). She has placed particular emphasis on posting materials to foster collaboration in research (Conrad 2008b). At the University of New Brunswick, Marg has also hosted various conferences on public history. These included an excellent forum in Fredericton in 2003, entitled "Heritage, History, and Historical Consciousness: A Symposium on Public Uses of the Past," which I was fortunate to attend.<sup>5</sup> She has also spoken widely at a range of venues to disseminate the mandate and work of the Atlantic Canadian Portal, including papers at the Canadian Historical Association, the Carleton Centre for the Study of Migrations, and others.

Marg Conrad's interest in the digital revolution has been sparked in part by her passion to make electronic resources widely available to people engaged in the study of Atlantic Canadian history. Her activities are a logical outgrowth of her long-standing concern with the relationship of history, historical consciousness, and public policy in her home region of Atlantic Canada, and also across the country. In the paper "Historical Consciousness, Regional Identity and Public Policy," she explained some of her motivations for moving in this direction. She asked:

What roles have school textbooks, newspapers, radio, television, movies, historic sites, tourist promotion, governments, voluntary organizations, community celebrations, and family gatherings played in creating a sense of identity among groups and individuals in Atlantic Canada today? And what impact do these identities have on the thinking of groups and individuals about what is socially desirable and politically possible? (Conrad 2001)

Marg Conrad thereby identified some of the key questions that will need to be addressed by public history in the Atlantic provinces in the future. These questions will need to be answered if citizens are to be positioned to appreciate the role of history and historical consciousness in the identities and contemporary life of people of the Atlantic region.

A recent major public history project focussing on historical consciousness in

which Marg has played an instrumental role is the Canadians and Their Pasts Project. Featuring a nation-wide survey on the historical consciousness of Canadians, this project seeks to find out what Canadians think about their history, how they acquire knowledge about it, and why they consider particular aspects to be important. Her involvement in this project has been animated by her own intense commitment to bring scholarly research into the arena of public understandings of the past so that this realm of history might benefit from the insights of historiographical reflection and production (Conrad 2007).

One of the most interesting results of the surveys conducted to date was the revelation that Canadians as a whole trust artifacts of the past, such as museum objects or historic sites, more than synthesized or published accounts of the past. These results correspond to the results of similar surveys in other countries, which showed that the mementoes that most engaged the publics were often very personal cultural products, including films, photographs, heirlooms, genealogy, and reunions (Conrad *et al.* 2009). Whether or not the people are justified in such conclusions, these results imply the need for major changes in the ways in which historians practise their discipline, including greater reliance on visual material, use of physical evidence, the research and display of the direct words of witnesses to history, whether in written or oral form, and the representation of different and sometimes conflicting perspectives on history.

What I also take from these fascinating results is that Jean-Francois Lyotard's iconic definition of postmodernism as "incredulity toward metanarratives" not only characterizes much current work in the humanities and social sciences, but also aptly characterizes the public's reception of historical works in the present day (Lyotard 1984).<sup>6</sup> As Lyotard suggested, we are already living in a postmodern world in which Canadians, as well as residents of other countries, have become highly sceptical of the master narratives of history developed over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. To regain the trust and attention of the public,

professional historians increasingly will need to collaborate on a wide variety of cultural and social fronts, and to ground their work as much as possible in interactions with people whose histories they are studying and representing. As Marg Conrad indicated in her 2007 presidential address to the Canadian Historical Association, a sustained engagement with public history is a necessary route to the revitalization of the historical profession (Conrad 2007).

Beyond her numerous papers and lectures in academics settings, Marg has also appeared frequently on radio or television programs to talk about aspects of Canadian history. These have included both regional broadcasts in Atlantic Canada and national venues on CBC, CTV, and other networks. As with her scholarly work, the topics she has addressed in electronic media are wide-ranging and indicative of her expansive interests in Canadian history and society. Just a few examples include interviews or exchanges on Maritime history, War Brides, Women's Unpaid Labour, the place of Newfoundland and Labrador in Confederation, the Coal Industry, the CBC series *Canada: A People's History*, and even cooking, the subject of the excellent book by her and Heather MacDonald, *The Joy of Ginger*, a homage to the traditions of good cooking passed down through the generations by women of the Atlantic provinces (Conrad and MacDonald 1997).<sup>7</sup> These appearances in mass media venues clearly demonstrate her commitment, not only to disseminating history widely, but also to engaging Canadians in an extended conversation about their diverse histories.

I want to comment briefly on some of Marg Conrad's scholarly contributions which cross over into the realm of public history. Margaret Conrad is a historian who has been at the forefront of important and necessary changes in the scholarly study of Canada's past, which both directly and indirectly connect to the professional practice of history and its relationship to its publics. Alvin Finkel's paper in this collection addresses her contributions to textbook writing and I have no intention to cover the same ground, but would simply note that her textbooks have also been

designed to reach a wider audience beyond the academy and in that sense can be considered part of her public history *oeuvre*.

In this regard Conrad and Finkel's *History of the Canadian Peoples*, first published in 1993, was really the first survey textbook of Canadian national history attuned to the diversity of modern Canada (Conrad and Finkel 1993). While other authors have since acknowledged aspects of Canada's plural histories and identity, Conrad and Finkel's national histories continue to be the textbooks that are most plugged into the actual state of the nation, the diversity of its peoples and identities, the diverging paths of its evolution, and the reality of conflicting interpretations of who we were and are as a national collectivity.

I think the resonance of Marg Conrad's work derives significantly from her keeping close tabs on recent historical change in Canada and then endeavouring to apply contemporary understandings to the study of how Canada developed into its present complex character. She has pursued history not as an ivory tower pursuit but rather as a practice that must stay current if it is to continue to be relevant. Many of her published articles have been devoted to examining and contributing to the public's understanding of such key historical matters as feminism, the place of the Atlantic provinces in Confederation, the implications of the region's economic development, and the extension of democracy to marginalized constituencies (Conrad 1992; 1993; 1996; 2003b).

Another example of her efforts to stay connected to the concerns of Canadians is her treatment of the history of sexuality. The sexual revolution is mostly recent history, and the human rights struggles of sexual minorities even more recent. Before the publication of *History of the Canadian Peoples*, Canada's national historians were very reluctant to address these issues. Part of the problem was that, until the last 10-15 years, there was a very slender historiography dealing with sexuality in Canadian history, and in many respects the coverage is still very slender. Conventional wisdom might have dictated that authors of textbooks hold back until an extensive body of literature had

appeared. To her credit, Marg did not hold back and she cast her net beyond the paucity of historical accounts to include the literature of sociology, popular journals and ephemera in order to find and tell a story that other practitioners either did not see or were not prepared to address (Conrad and Finkel 1993, II, 517-20; 2003, 405-07; 330-32; and 490-92). Conrad and Finkel's work continues to set a worthy example for textbooks to deal as openly and fully as possible with such sensitive topics.

A further example of the relevance of Marg Conrad's historical work is the substantial treatment of the development of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms in *History of the Canadian Peoples*. The book's extensive treatment of the patriation of the Canadian constitution and the inauguration of the Charter provides important contexts for students of history to understand the meaning and importance of the changes brought about by this epoch-defining event of the late twentieth century in Canada (Conrad and Finkel 1993, II, 585-86). Once again, Marg Conrad demonstrated that historical writing that is well grounded in its understanding of contemporary life can play a significant role in positioning students and readers to better understand where Canadian society has come from and where we are headed.

Underlying much of Marg Conrad's work in public history is her desire to make history relevant to the concerns, issues and challenges of Canadians in the present. She has approached our history as an ever-evolving process of engaging Canadians in working cooperatively to better understand ourselves. She is also aware of the fact that, to be relevant in the twenty-first century, historical practice will inevitably need to become more connected to the public, often through the technologies and techniques of the digital revolution, and particularly the resources of the Internet. In her 2007 presidential address to the Canadian Historical Association she elaborated many of these concerns. She observed that professional historians had spent nearly a century "building barriers to ward off those who might challenge academic approaches to the past. In the twenty-first century, our urgent

task must be to build bridges" (Conrad 2007, 30). Margaret Conrad's career in public history bears eloquent witness to her own focus on building bridges, which she continues to construct in partnership with historians inside and outside the academy, and with the general public. Canadian history is richer for it.

### Endnotes

1. For a detailed summary of Margaret Conrad's varied activities in public history, readers are referred to her *curriculum vitae* posted on her professional pages on the University of New Brunswick website, at: [http://v8nu74s71s31g374r7ssn017uloss3c1vr3s.unbf.ca/~mconrad/conrad\\_cv.htm](http://v8nu74s71s31g374r7ssn017uloss3c1vr3s.unbf.ca/~mconrad/conrad_cv.htm).
2. See the discussion in Lyle Dick, "A Growing Necessity for Canada: W.L. Morton's Centenary Series and the Forms of National History," *Canadian Historical Review* 82. 2 (June 2001): 223-52.
3. "Ethnocultural Communities" was the term used by Parks Canada and the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada to refer to those cultural groups whose histories were not yet adequately represented among the national designations. The term was not meant to imply that well-established cultural groups were not ethnocultural communities, but rather that, as their histories were much better represented in the National Commemorative Program, they were not given priority in the manner of under-represented groups.
4. Quoted in Anna Green and Kathleen Troup, *The Houses of History: A Critical Reader in Twentieth-Century History and Theory*. Manchester, U.K.: Manchester University Press, 1999, p. 230.
5. [http://atlanticportal.hil.unb.ca/eprint/view/conf/Heritage,\\_History,\\_and\\_Historical\\_Consciousness:\\_A\\_Symposium\\_on\\_Public\\_Uses\\_of\\_the\\_Past.html](http://atlanticportal.hil.unb.ca/eprint/view/conf/Heritage,_History,_and_Historical_Consciousness:_A_Symposium_on_Public_Uses_of_the_Past.html)
6. For a different perspective on the meaning of postmodernism, see also David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* Oxford, U.K: Basil Blackwell, 1989.
7. See also: [http://v8nu74s71s31g374r7ssn017uloss3c1](http://v8nu74s71s31g374r7ssn017uloss3c1vr3s.unbf.ca/~mconrad/conrad_cv.htm)

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