

Graham Fraser  
Commissioner of Official Languages

***Revealing the Unknown: The Challenge for Canadian Studies  
in the Era of 24-Hour News, Linguistic Duality and Cultural Diversity***

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Check against delivery

I would like to thank you for inviting me to speak at your conference. I was fascinated by your program, and I wish I could attend your sessions. Its provocative theme has inspired me to reflect on the boundaries between what we know, when we know it and what we think we know about Canada.

In 1950, after former prime minister William Lyon Mackenzie King died, my father, who was the Ottawa editor for *Maclean's*, wrote a long and sensitive piece on the man who served longer as prime minister than anyone else.<sup>1</sup>

It was a review of much that was known—his public career, his achievements, his shrewd political style. It also included a number of things that were, I suspect, little known at the time: how King had personally persuaded Nehru that newly-independent India should be part of the Commonwealth by telling him the story of his grandfather William Lyon Mackenzie, who led the Upper Canada rebellion in 1837. King talked of his association with various monarchs—and the pride he had never concealed of his grandfather, who had fled Upper Canada following the rebellion to escape hanging.

The article also told what was virtually unknown: King's thoughtfulness and kindness to those who had suffered loss. "His heart went out to any acquaintance, however slight, who'd suffered any bereavement, however remote or even trivial," my father wrote, adding that when our family lost a dog, he had received a call from the Prime Minister. My father, convinced he had been the victim of a prank, did not mention it to anyone—but finally asked a member of the Prime Minister's staff.

"Oh, that was the PM all right," he was told. "He does that kind of thing all the time."

What he did not mention in that piece was King's spiritualism—because, like virtually everyone else, he had no idea about it. A year later, acting on a tip from a member of King's personal staff, he tracked down the spiritualist mediums whom King had consulted in England and broke the news.<sup>2</sup>

Now, I suspect, those who know anything at all about Canada's 10th prime minister know four things: he finessed a promise to Quebec not to introduce conscription ("conscription if necessary but not necessarily conscription"), he was a shrewd compromiser (F. R. Scott memorably wrote, "He did nothing by halves that could be done by quarters"), he was prime minister for a very long time and he was weird: he talked to his dead mother. As a television host said to introduce

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<sup>1</sup> Blair Fraser, "Mackenzie King as I Knew Him," *Maclean's*, September 1, 1950. In John Fraser and Graham Fraser, eds., *Blair Fraser Reports: Selections 1944-1968*, Toronto, Macmillan of Canada, 1969, pp. 33-42.

<sup>2</sup> See H. Gordon Green and Guy Sylvestre, eds., *A Century of Canadian Literature*, Toronto, Ryerson Press, 1967.

a program about him, “He was an eccentric bachelor who thought he could speak with the dead.”<sup>3</sup>

There are a number of interesting things about the sequence of these insights. My father wrote for a magazine that was published every two weeks. Newspapers did not have political columnists, there was no television, and radio did not have reporters. It was an era when discretion was a virtue. My father learned things—and told things—when King died that he could not have learned—and in some cases would not have reported—when he was alive.

This was an era when statesmen wrote letters and kept diaries—historians found that King wrote about cancelling a cabinet meeting so that he could be with his dog Pat, and detailed his eccentric beliefs in his journal.

Now, that cycle—daily reportage, biweekly analysis and posthumous revelation—has been crunched by 24-hour television news, the Drudge Report, Facebook and YouTube.

At the same time, the notion of private reflection and contemplation has become almost quaint, as the memoir has become the non-fiction vehicle of choice and the blog has become a major instrument for political opinion and analysis.

Personal reflection has become, at once, more intimate, more public—and much more ephemeral. When the archives are opened in 30 years, if contemporary figures have kept diaries—which is unlikely—it is improbable that Library and Archives Canada will have the technology to read what will certainly be long-obsolete computer files. Even now, I cannot read my own notes or original stories that were written on 10- or 15-year-old computers that were cutting edge at the time.

My father was part of a group of post-war Canadian journalists who helped Canada learn about itself.

In the two decades from the mid-1940s to the mid-1960s, *Maclean's* gathered and nurtured journalists as talented, varied and impressive as Pierre Berton, Ralph Allen, June Callwood, Trent Frayne, Peter C. Newman, Christina McCall Newman, Robert Fulford, Peter Gzowski, Harry Bruce, Jack Batten and many others. It sought out, published and supported novelists such as Hugh MacLennan, Morley Callaghan, Fred Bodsworth and Mordecai Richler.

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<sup>3</sup> *The Prime Ministers*, “William Lyon Mackenzie King,” production of the Cable Public Affairs Channel, [www.cpac.ca/PMseries/William\\_Lyon\\_Mackenzie\\_King.pdf](http://www.cpac.ca/PMseries/William_Lyon_Mackenzie_King.pdf).

It also played an important role, throughout that period, in explaining French-speaking Quebec to English-speaking Canada. In a memo to all staff in 1944, the editor of *Maclean's*, Arthur Irwin, wrote:

We accept and support the Canadian idea—which is the development of a nation on the basis of two cultures, two languages and two religions. We defend and have consistently defended the legal and moral right of Quebec to preserve those special institutions and customs which are theirs as a matter, not of sufferance, but of right.<sup>4</sup>

This declaration, made 64 years ago, was quite important, even revolutionary, for this magazine of choice of the English-speaking middle class. It was a vision based on biculturalism, bilingualism, religious tolerance and rights, rather than privileges.

Twenty years later, during the time of the Bilingualism and Biculturalism Commission, this approach was still controversial. In some circles, it still is today.

This vision is what drives me to promote bilingualism as Commissioner of Official Languages. My mandate consists, in part, of protecting Canadians' language rights and promoting linguistic duality.

The position comes with some very useful tools: investigations, audits and the possibility of intervening before the courts. My main job is to encourage and disturb (and I have many ways of doing this), not only for the Canadian political class, but also for the Canadian public, to remind them that English and French are Canadian languages that belong to everyone.

Whether you are a journalist, political scientist, sociologist or historian, you cannot fully understand Canada without looking at its language dynamic. Linguistic duality is an important part of our history, and can be traced through the development of Canadian culture.

My father died 40 years ago this spring—and I do not want to suggest that he lived in a golden age of Canadian nationhood. Those two decades following the war were years of prosperity and growing Canadian self-confidence, but it remained a challenge during this time for Canadians to see themselves reflected in their cultural surroundings. Canadian novels were rare and a minority taste. In the 1940s, Hugh MacLennan had trouble finding a Canadian publisher. As Robert Fulford observed, "He was usually published in the U.S. and he made some appearances on New York best-seller lists, but he often complained that American publishers greeted Canadian characters and settings with apathy. He

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<sup>4</sup> Quoted by Patrick H. Brennan in *Reporting the Nation's Business: Press-Government Relations during the Liberal Years, 1935–1957*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1994, p. 112.

summed up the American attitude as 'Boy meets girl in Winnipeg...and who cares?'"<sup>5</sup>

In her posthumous chapter written for an uncompleted memoir, Christina McCall describes the condescension with which Morley Callaghan was treated by her literature professors at the University of Toronto in the 1950s.<sup>6</sup>

There was little or no Canadian film outside the National Film Board; English-language Canadian theatre did not spread beyond the Canadian Drama Festival, Stratford and touring Broadway shows at the Royal Alexandra Theatre in Toronto; and French-language theatre consisted of one or two struggling theatres in Montréal.

The seeds were planted with the Massey Report, the creation of the Canada Council in the early 1950s and the launch of the CBC and Radio-Canada in 1952—but it would be at least another 15 years before more than a couple of fruits a year would be produced.

As Margaret Atwood put it, "Canada is an unknown territory for the people who live in it [...] to know ourselves, we must know our own literature."<sup>7</sup> Michel Tremblay expresses the same feeling from another angle: "L'écriture est une lettre que je m'écris à moi-même pour m'expliquer le monde."<sup>8</sup>

The flowering of those fruit trees over the last four or five decades has created a new Canadian landscape. Indeed, the best of Canadian scholars have not only helped shape that landscape, they have risen above the artificial limitations of academic disciplines. Among English-speaking scholars, I am thinking of Marshall McLuhan, who was much more than just a professor of literature, but a prophetic analyst of communications, and Charles Taylor, who has been not just a professor of political science and philosophy, but a philosopher himself. Among French-speaking scholars, Pierre Dansereau virtually invented the field of ecology, and Gérard Bergeron was not only an internationally renowned political scientist, but a shrewd observer of contemporary political life. However, large parts of our landscape remain unknown.

On the positive side, multiculturalism—once an almost derisive bureaucratic term referring to federal government subsidy programs—now provides Canadians with an insight into groups that were previously distant, foreign and unfamiliar.

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<sup>5</sup> Robert Fulford, "The international success of Canadian literature," *National Post*, June 6, 2001.

<sup>6</sup> Stephen Clarkson, ed., *My Life as a Dame: The Personal and the Political in the Writings of Christina McCall*, Toronto, House of Anansi Press, 2008, pp. 23–24.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted by Justin Edwards and Douglas Iveson in *Downtown Canada: Writing Canadian Cities*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2004, p. 4.

<sup>8</sup> *Entre les mains de Michel Tremblay*, a documentary by Adrian Wills.

Mordecai Richler may not have done much to improve relations between Francophones and Anglophones—but he opened the doors and the windows of the Montréal Jewish community. Nicco Ricci made the Italian immigrant experience a Canadian cultural experience—just as M.G. Vassanji revealed to Canadians what the Ugandan Asians had experienced, Rohinton Mistry and David Davidar made India a part of Canadian understanding and Austin Clarke gave a Canadian reality to the Caribbean.

But unfortunately, in the eyes of many English-speaking Canadians, French remains a foreign language. The language barrier remains intact. In the discussion on cultural diversity, there is little recognition or understanding of the fact that French-speaking Canada, inside and outside Quebec, is becoming as culturally and racially diverse as is English-speaking Canada.

Indeed, I have a sense of growing disengagement by English-speaking Canada from French-speaking Canada. There is somewhat less enthusiasm for the spirit of accommodation and the excitement for provocative alliances that characterized the time of Baldwin and Lafontaine, or Macdonald and Cartier.

And yet, plays by Michel Tremblay and Michel Marc Bouchard have been translated, as have novels by Yves Beauchemin, Nicole Brossard, Jacques Poulin, François Gravel, Daniel Poliquin and Gaétan Soucy. But their impact remains limited.

The box-office success of the bilingual film *Bon Cop, Bad Cop* shows that Canadians are at least able to get a good laugh out of the country's linguistic situation. But Denys Arcand's Academy Award-winning film *Les invasions barbares* did better at the box office in Australia than it did in English Canada. And *Les trois petits cochons*, the film that did better at the box office last year than any other Canadian film, earning it the Golden Reel Award at last March's Genie Awards, has never been shown in English Canada.

That disengagement is equally evident in two areas where there ought to be the most mutual interest and understanding: the legal profession and the academic community.

Thirty years ago, the late Jules Deschênes, Chief Justice of the Superior Court of Quebec, warned of what he called "legal separatism."<sup>9</sup>

"Québec has shown the willingness and the ability to contribute to the building of [...] a national scheme of federal law, but the legal community of the rest of Canada has, by and large, closed itself off and away by simply ignoring the Québec contribution," he said. "There now exists an actual separation in legal

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<sup>9</sup> "On legal separatism in Canada," address at a dinner in honour of the Ontario judges, Toronto, January 9, 1978. Republished in Jules Deschênes, *The Sword and the Scales*, foreword by the Right Honourable Bora Laskin, Toronto, Butterworths, 1979, pp. 31–42.

Canada, but it has been worked upon Québec from without, not by Québec from within."<sup>10</sup>

He noted the academic legal work that had been carried out in Quebec in the fields of commercial law, criminal law and administrative law and that had gone unnoticed in the rest of Canada—and went on to discuss the absence of citation of Quebec decisions.

Unfortunately, this tradition has continued in other areas of academic work in Canada.

In the December 2007 issue of the *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, François Rocher of the University of Ottawa presents an analysis of the degree to which English-speaking scholars in Canada take into account the work of French-speaking scholars.<sup>11</sup> His premise, or as he puts it, his expectation, "which seems legitimate," is the following:

To fully understand the social and political Canadian reality implies a deep awareness of its complexity. It also implies that the researcher will take into consideration the works related to the object of research without systematically ignoring a significant proportion of scholarly work, particularly emanating from a different linguistic universe.

He then relates this assumption about research to the country as a whole:

If Canada, as a political community (and a national community, as is used widely in the vocabulary of English Canada) is composed of two global societies [...], scholarly production related to it must reflect this reality if it wishes to be inclusive and comprehensive.

He concludes his normative expectation by writing the following: "Knowledge of the French language, at least the capacity to read it, constitutes a prerequisite for a complete and serious analysis of Canada."

This statement, Rocher acknowledges, "will be very controversial for some, self-evident for others."

As far as I am concerned, it is self-evident.

To summarize Rocher's research, he concluded that there is a very small number of references to works produced in the French-speaking universe by English-speaking scholars writing about Canada—only about five per cent.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>11</sup> "The End of the 'Two Solitudes'? The Presence (or Absence) of the Work of French-speaking Scholars in Canadian Politics," *Canadian Journal of Political Science / Revue canadienne de science politique*, 40, 4 (December 2007), pp. 833–857.

This is particularly unfortunate now, as Quebec seems, for the time being at least, to be wrestling with the fact that, for the foreseeable future, it will be part of Canada.

In a recent column, *Le Devoir's* Michel David described a "crisis of faith" in the Parti Québécois.

Based on an unbiased interpretation of the latest surveys, he concluded that sovereignty might be part of Quebecers' personal history, but that it was dropping off the radar screen. Less than one-third (31 percent) of Quebecers still believe that the province will become independent one day. Even among Parti Québécois members, 40 percent have thrown in the towel.<sup>12</sup>

But with a drop in the belief that sovereignty will happen, there has been a return of anxiety about the language issue in Quebec.

The release of the Statistics Canada 2006 census numbers provoked a number of intense, but very different, debates in Canada.

In the French-language majority media, the debate was about the fact that, despite the increase in the number of Francophones, the percentage of mother-tongue Francophones had dropped below 80 per cent for the first time since 1931.

This sparked a number of headlines to the effect that French was in retreat. "Le français en recul" was the line running across the bottom of the screen of RDI. But, as Alain Dubuc pointed out, it is not quite so simple.

He wrote that the only thing that could be interpreted as a sign of retreat is the drop in the proportion of people whose mother tongue is French on Montreal Island, now under 50 per cent, as a result of increased immigration and the exodus of Francophones to the suburbs. There are fewer Francophones. That is a fact. But is French in retreat? That is a different story.<sup>13</sup>

But that was not the only narrative about the census. In the English-speaking majority media, the census was about diversity. In the English-speaking minority media in Quebec, it was about the first net increase in the Anglophone community's population in decades. In the French-language minority press outside Quebec, it was about the net loss of 5,000 French speakers to Quebec. Four media environments, four different narratives.

But the present is not the only terrain of conflicting narratives. There is the past.

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<sup>12</sup> Michel David, "Crise de foi," *Le Devoir*, April 26, 2008, p. B3.

<sup>13</sup> Alan Dubuc, "Le recul et le péril," *La Presse*, April 30, 2008.

Margaret Macmillan, the brilliant historian whose skills have been recognized with the impact that her international best-seller *Paris 1919* has had, observed recently that history can have a positive impact on public understanding: "Examining the past honestly, whether that is painful for some people or not, is the only way for societies to become mature and to build bridges to others,"<sup>14</sup> she wrote.

A good example can be found in André Pratte's collection of essays.

In one of his essays, he looked at some myths that have prevailed in French-Canadian history regarding the French regime, the conquest, the Second World War, conscription, the constitutional debates and the Canadian economy. He fights against what he calls "the victim view of our history."<sup>15</sup>

As Canadian studies scholars, what are the challenges and opportunities you face? And what are your responsibilities?

The first thing, I would suggest, is to recognize how important a role foreign scholars studying Canada have played in the past.

In a series of disciplines, it has been non-Canadian observers who have seen what Canadians themselves are unable to grasp: that this country has a complexity that is every bit as deserving of academic study as any other.

In many ways, the original historical narrative in English of the creation of what became Canada was Francis Parkman's magnificent, romantic 19th century account of the French regime, the conflict with First Nations peoples, and what we call the Seven Years' War and what the Americans call the French and Indian War.

In the 20th century, Mason Wade, a biographer of Parkman, wrote the first comprehensive one-volume history of French Canada in English—and opened the eyes of a whole generation of English-speaking Canadians to French Canada.

At the same time, Canadian sociology was virtually created by foreign visitors.

In the field of political science, a French scholar laid the groundwork for looking at Canadian political institutions. André Siegfried wrote *The Race Question in Canada* after observing the Canadian election of 1904.

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<sup>14</sup> Margaret Macmillan, *The Uses and Abuses of History*, Toronto, Viking Canada, 2008, p. 150.

<sup>15</sup> André Pratte, "Faire table rase: Voir notre passé autrement pour mieux bâtir notre avenir," *Reconquérir le Canada: Un nouveau projet pour la nation québécoise*, André Pratte, ed., Montréal, Les Éditions voix parallèles, 2007, p. 243.

Three decades later, his lectures in Paris convinced André Laurendeau that separatism was not the solution for French Canada—a view that Laurendeau never lost.

In English Canada, some of the most important groundbreaking work was carried out by Seymour Martin Lipset: first in his study of the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (or CCF) in Saskatchewan and then, near the end of his career, in his comparative work *Continental Divide: The Values and Institutions of the United States and Canada*.

In 1939, Horace Miner published *St. Denis: A French-Canadian Parish*, a study of a rural Quebec community. Four years later, Everett C. Hughes wrote the classic *French Canada in Transition*, which examined "Cantonville," his name for Drummondville, and described the impact of industrialization on a small Quebec town. He discovered to his surprise that academics at McGill were convinced that he was wasting his time: French would die out.

Miner and Hughes were both from the Chicago School, which had an enormous impact on a generation of Quebec social scientists—men such as Jean-Charles Falardeau and Guy Rocher.

Two decades later, John Porter had a similar impact—not only on English-Canadian social scientists but on the general public—with his 1965 book *The Vertical Mosaic: An Analysis of Social Class and Power in Canada*. Until then, many Canadians were slow to acknowledge the importance of class in Canadian life.

More recently, some of the most illuminating studies of the changes in Montréal and the state of the English minority in Quebec have been carried out by outsiders: Marc Levine, an American economic and urban historian, wrote *The Reconquest of Montreal: Language Policy and Social Change in a Bilingual City* in 1990, and, 10 years later, Martha Radice, a British anthropologist, wrote *Feeling Comfortable? The Urban Experience of Anglo-Montrealers*.

What do all these works have in common? To begin with, academic rigor. Their authors did not lower their standards when they focused their attention on Canada.

All of these studies demonstrate a clear-eyed perspective, unfettered by the limitations imposed by unacknowledged local prejudices. Their authors all had respect for those they were studying, and did not assume that Canadian reality fit the same frameworks that had been developed in other countries. The authors developed a sense of the social forces and connections that have shaped or are affecting the Canada that Canadians are slow to recognize or acknowledge.

They recognized that Canada was not simply an English-speaking country, but a country with two linguistic majorities.

And, in some cases, they extended their view beyond the narrow limitations of their disciplines.

I would recommend these examples to you, and point out how much work remains to be done in the study of Canada: major figures whose biographies have not been written, novels that have not been studied, films and television dramas that have not been analyzed, and political and social phenomena and institutions that have not been examined.

I wish you all the best for your conference, and for your continuing, important work in Canadian studies.

Thank you.