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Canada Watch

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FIFTY YEARS SINCE THE SYMONS REPORT: DIRECTIONS OF CANADIAN STUDIES

Introduction: Locating and reflecting Thomas H. B. Symons

BY LINDSAY THISTLE, CAROLYN PODRUCHNY, AND RAYMOND B. BLAKE

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Thomas H. B. Symons (1929–2021) was a historian and educator who helped turn Canadian Studies into a recognized area of teaching and research. He was Trent University's founding president, but he also continued to teach. His courses brought history, culture, politics, and communication together to ask larger questions about Canada, an approach that was distinctive at the time, and anticipated the interdisciplinary necessity of Canadian Studies. He helped establish Trent's Canadian Studies program and the *Journal of Canadian Studies*, and he spent much of his career arguing that Canadians need to understand their own country (Trent University, n.d.).

That concern was at the heart of *To Know Ourselves*, the 1975 report of the national Commission on Canadian Studies that he chaired. Volume I looked at Canadian content in university courses, including science, technology, and professional programs. Volume II widened the focus to Canadian Studies abroad, and in community colleges, archives, audiovisual materials, and with private donors. A third and final volume, *Some Questions of Balance*, followed in 1984 and focused on human resources and the changing conditions of higher education. The commission held hearings across the country, received more than 1,000 submissions and nearly 30,000 letters, and consulted hundreds of institutions and organizations. It gave Canadian Studies greater legitimacy and helped encourage new programs, courses, research, and public support in Canada and abroad (Symons, 1975, pp. 3–4; Symons & Page, 1984, pp. vii–viii). The report mattered because it was much more than a discussion among a few academics; it positioned Canadian Studies as a shared intellectual and cultural undertaking.

On June 26, 2026, the Robarts Centre for Canadian Studies at York University held a daylong symposium, "In what ways is the Symons Report still relevant after 50 years? Framing current and future directions in the study of Canada." Participants were invited to reflect on the report through two questions that framed the day's panels. First, what might we keep, change, or toss from the Symons Report when it comes to scholarship and teaching on the study of Canada? Second, what books inspire the study of Canada? After much discussion, the answers led to more questions.

Participants returned repeatedly to the question of whether it is useful—or even possible—to define a single Canadian identity. How can one identity encompass a country shaped by successive waves of immigration, vast and varied geographies, and strong provincial and regional loyalties? What, if anything, unites Canadians: universal health care, a relatively consistent standard of living, the social safety net, the experience of being a middle power overshadowed by an unstable superpower

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CANADA WATCH FALL 2026

Fifty years since the Symons Report: Directions of Canadian Studies

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to the south—or even the weather and high taxes? Other questions focused on the ways in which minorities formerly left out of Canadian Studies were now entering and destabilizing the field in productive and innovative ways. The essays in this issue do not give us one answer to the question of what Canadian Studies should become or what it is. Instead, they return to the Symons Report from different locations and ask what "knowing ourselves" might mean now.

Dimitry Anastakis questions the symposium's central question by asking whether Canadian Studies has succeeded as a project. Weighing the spread of Canadian content in higher education against the decline of dedicated programs at home and abroad, he argues that the Symons Report remains relevant because each generation must ask anew what it means for Canadians to know themselves. Carolyn Podruchny offers a deliberately uneasy answer to the place of Indigenous Studies within Canadian Studies. She argues that Indigenous histories, laws, lands, and sovereignties must be central to any honest study of Canada, but that Indigenous Studies cannot simply be absorbed into a national framework still organized around the settler state. Jane Griffith contends that the Symons Report anticipated today's interdisciplinary environmental scholarship while also carrying nationalist and colonial assumptions about land and water as resources to be studied and used. Her essay asks what reports can make possible—and what they can quietly delay or leave untouched.

Shreyashi Ganguly shifts the vantage point through a desi lens. Rather than asking how South Asian communities fit into Canada, she considers how desi lives, languages, migrations, and cultural practices actively produce Canada. Eyitayo Aloh also starts from lived experience, reflecting on his conversations with Symons and his own path from Nigerian student to teacher of Canada. He argues that environmental, Black, immigrant, and diasporic perspectives need to move from the margins into the conversations and books that shape the field. For Aloh, knowing ourselves is an ongoing journey rather than a finished national story.

To answer the question of what books inspire the study of Canada, Raymond B. Blake returns to George Grant and J. L. Granatstein, two provocative writers whose concerns about historical memory, national identity, and life beside the United States have acquired new urgency. He asks whether we can hold celebration and critique together: confronting colonialism, racism, sexism, and environmental harm without giving up on shared history or civic attachment. Michelle Sraha-Yeboah approaches that problem through *The Book of Emma*, using Black feminist thought to show how mental-health institutions fail when they cannot recognize the afterlives of slavery, intergenerational trauma, and Black ways of knowing. Canadian Studies, she argues, should not simply describe these failures but help unsettle them. Colin M. Coates traces the rise of environmental history and returns to the Symons Report's early recognition of its interdisciplinary promise. Taking R. W. Sandwell's *Powering Up Canada* as a representative work, he shows how histories of climate and energy situate human choices within the material conditions that have shaped Canada.

Finally, Alana Duggan reflects on how Palestine has changed the way she reads Canada. Without collapsing distinct histories, she traces shared questions about land, memory, sovereignty, institutional power, and whose testimony is allowed to count. Her essay leaves us with a demanding but useful proposition: Critical reading should not reassure us of Canada's coherence or innocence. It should change what we can see—and what we understand our responsibilities to be.

For many of the scholars who participated in the symposium, the central paradox was that Canadian Studies programs are slowly disappearing across the country even as scholarship on Canada remains vibrant and innovative. If questions like the ones included here are to be explored, where will that work take place? Fifty years later, the Symons Report has a different resonance with the weakening of the very institutional structures he argued were necessary. The question is no longer how to establish Canadian Studies, but how to sustain it. ■

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"Is the Symons Report still relevant after 50 years?" Questioning the question

BY DIMITRY ANASTAKIS

Dimitry Anastakis is the director of Canadian Studies at the University of Toronto.

When I think about the question, "Is the Symons Report still relevant after 50 years?" the first thing that comes to mind is, "I wonder how Professor Symons would respond?" In the time that I knew him at Trent University, I don't think I referred to him as anything other than Professor Symons. We interacted only sporadically, if incredibly warmly, as he always was with everyone he talked to. But every so often we would have a chat; he regularly hosted visitors, especially students, for tea in his amazing, stately Peterborough residence, Marchbanks, formerly the home of Robertson Davies.

Professor Symons was a Tory, a progressive conservative, a patrician, and something of a pragmatist, too, given his time as a university president. He might have replied with a question of his own, one that is implied in the original query: "A half century on from the report, is Canadian Studies succeeding as a project?"

Success, like relevance, is often a matter of perspective; the answer is probably both yes and no.

TO KNOW OURSELVES

On the one hand, the project has been an undeniable success in many ways. Both volumes of *To Know Ourselves* included chapters that focused on the importance of building Canadian Studies and content into university and college courses and programs, and the central role of the university in shaping our understanding of *all* the people here on the northern half of Turtle Island; in the early 1970s, that was still very much a work in progress, with few courses, disciplinary gaps, and unevenness. How could Canadians know themselves if they did not seek to understand their peoples and places, especially in higher education?

Today, there's no question that this goal was accomplished, with Canadian content found widely across disciplines and courses; Canada is present in the curriculum and programming in universities much more now than when *To Know Ourselves* was published in 1975. In the 2020s, the study of Canada is very much a part of Canadian university and college landscapes in a way that it was not when Professor Symons published his report.

On the other hand, the project has not "succeeded" in many of the ways that the report recommended. The report called on Ottawa to give higher priority to "external academic and cultural affairs"—a way to push Canada into the world, especially through foreign Canadian Studies programs. The cuts to federal funding since the 1980s that led to the closure of many such programs abroad (and many initiatives at home) represent a great loss of academic and cultural capacity that could have filled a huge role in an era of global rupture and strained multilateralism. So, certainly, there was a failure of political will, though not necessarily a failure of the project as an idea.

Nor has the project been able to adequately maintain the handful of programs specifically dedicated to the project; though that number grew in the 1970s, it has declined since then. Some programs are only a shadow of their former selves, with limited course offerings and a minor presence on their campuses, where they exist at all. Perhaps that "failure" is, in fact, a sign of the spread of Canadian content and ideas throughout the curriculum, but I suspect that Professor Symons would be disappointed in the retreat in stand-alone Canadian Studies programs.

CANADIAN STUDIES AS A PROJECT

Perhaps most importantly, however, Professor Symons might also question the very idea of "a Canadian Studies project," one that has undergone a tremendous change in understanding and purpose. At a previous juncture of self-reflection, in 2000, one of the first full-time scholars of Canadian Studies, Trent's John Wadland, published "Voices in Search of a Conversation: An Unfinished Project" in the *Journal of Canadian Studies*.

Wadland, a close colleague and friend of Professor Symons's, made the case that Canadian Studies had undergone a series of phases: from the 1950s–1960s age of metanarrative and canon; to the 1960s–1990s period of interdisciplinary and critical fragmentation; and perhaps, he wondered, to a third era of "renewed collaboration of the disciplines, and a conversation in the voices, in defence of the relationship that makes them possible" (Wadland, 2000, p. 52). Wadland recognized that, more than a quarter century after publication of the Symons Report, the answer to the questions being asked in Canadian Studies is just as relevant today as it was in 2000, and as it was in 1975.

And, in fact, those questions were not quite ready for answers. That's because Canadians are, by and large, still working away at what it means "to know ourselves." In that way, the Symons Report was a product of its times, in that it had a still expanding notion of what Canada itself meant.

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But the report, and Professor Symons himself, also undoubtedly understood that the very idea of a singular definition of knowing oneself was an impossibility. So, yes, the Symons Report is still relevant, at least in the very real sense that, every so often, a new generation of Canadians ask the same questions, not because there are no answers, but because the very asking of the questions is the point. Canada, and thus Canadian Studies itself, too, remains a work in progress.

Ever it was, and ever it shall be, it seems. ■

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Centring Indigenous histories without absorbing Indigenous Studies

BY CAROLYN PODRUCHNY

Carolyn Podruchny is the director of the Robarts Centre for Canadian Studies and a professor of history at York University. Her research explores relationships forged between Indigenous peoples and French colonists in northern North America.

A QUESTION WITH TWO ANSWERS

Fifty years after the Symons Report (1975), should Canadian Studies integrate Indigenous Studies? My short answer is yes, but not if integration means absorption. Canadian Studies cannot produce an honest account of the country without placing Indigenous peoples, histories, laws, lands, and sovereignties at its centre. Indigenous Studies, however, has its own intellectual traditions, methods, responsibilities, and relationships with communities. It must not become a subsection of a national story that remains organized around the settler state.

I come to this question as a non-Indigenous White settler historian who has spent much of her academic life studying relationships between Indigenous peoples and French colonists. I have often taught Indigenous histories inside courses called Canadian history. That work has convinced me that inclusion is necessary. It has also made me wary of easy claims that a field or institution has been transformed simply because it has added Indigenous content. I remain in a place of discomfort, and I think Canadian Studies should remain there too.

REAL PROGRESS AND ITS LIMITS

There has been meaningful change since 1975. Mount Allison University now describes Canada as a "diverse and complex settler-colonial nation-state" (n.d.). Its Canadian Studies courses address settler–Indigenous relations, and its Centre for Indigenous and Critical Canadian Studies supports both Indigenous Studies and Canadian Studies. At Trent University, the history runs deeper. An Indian-Eskimo Studies Program began in 1969, followed by the Department of Native Studies in 1972. The present Chanie Wenjack School for Indigenous Studies stands within that long institutional history.

These examples show that Indigenous histories are no longer marginal to the study of Canada. In such programs, students encounter treaties, land expropriation, colonialism, resistance to colonialism, Indigenous language renewal, governance and sovereignty, and Indigenous cultural resurgence as central Canadian questions. Canadian Studies is more accurate and more responsible when it recognizes that Indigenous peoples are foundational to the histories of the lands now claimed by Canada.

But institutional proximity does not necessarily mean intellectual transformation. Indigenous Studies exists (and flourishes) alongside Canadian Studies, structured with older national framing. A new course, a cross-listing, or a renamed centre can be important, but these changes can also leave authority in the same hands. If non-Indigenous scholars decide which Indigenous knowledge enters the curriculum, how it will be interpreted, and what purpose it will serve, inclusion can reproduce the hierarchy it promises to correct.

There is another danger. The language of "Indigenous perspectives" can flatten the enormous differences among First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples. There is no single Indigenous history, political tradition, or relationship to Canada. A curriculum that adds one generalized Indigenous unit to a survey course may be less an achievement than a warning sign.

A WARNING FROM PROFESSOR CODY GROAT (KANYEN'KEHAKA / MOHAWK)

Cody Groat's idea brief for the Symons anniversary asks us to look again at the foundations of both fields. He notes that Symons supported Trent's early program and that a planned volume of *To Know Ourselves* was supposed to include a distinct section on Native Studies in post-secondary education. For Groat, this history shows that Indigenous Studies and Canadian Studies were related, but not interchangeable. Their subject matter, methods, and disciplinary purposes differed.

His sharpest challenge is that "a field such as Canadian Studies cannot decolonize itself" (Groat, 2026, p. 2). I take this warning seriously. Canadian Studies developed partly through a nationalist search for a coherent Canada, often in response to the influence of the United States. That search could not easily recognize sovereignties that preceded Canada and continue alongside it. Adding Indigenous histories to the national narrative does not by itself unsettle the narrative's boundaries.

Perhaps Canadian Studies cannot declare itself decolonized. Decolonization is not a credential that a department can award itself after revising a reading list. The field can, however, study the colonial foundations of the country and of its own formation. It can make room for Indigenous scholars and communities to define questions rather than merely answer questions set by others. It can support Indigenous Studies without claiming to contain it. It can also teach students that "Canada" is neither a neutral container nor the only possible frame for understanding the peoples and lands within its borders.

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WHAT WE KEEP AND WHAT WE CHANGE

The Symons Report's call for self-knowledge remains useful if we give up the idea of a single national self. Canada is made through relationships, some cooperative and some coercive, that do not fit one unifying story. Canadian Studies should keep its interdisciplinary curiosity and its openness to different institutional forms. It should continue to move away from treating the nation-state as the natural centre of every question.

In practical terms, that requires two commitments at once. Indigenous histories must shape Canadian Studies throughout its teaching and research, not appear as an optional week at the edge of a course. At the same time, Indigenous Studies requires intellectual and institutional autonomy, Indigenous leadership, sustained resources, and accountable relationships with communities. These commitments may create tension. That tension is productive because it prevents "inclusion" from becoming possession.

So, should we integrate Indigenous Studies into Canadian Studies? Yes, if we mean that no study of Canada is adequate without Indigenous-centred scholarship and a direct reckoning with settler colonialism. No, if we mean folding a distinct field into a Canadian framework and calling the work complete. The better question is whether Canadian Studies is willing to be changed by what Indigenous Studies has been telling it for 50 years. ■

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Environmental Studies: What the Symons Report does say and does not say to us 50 years later

BY JANE GRIFFITH

Jane Griffith is an associate professor in the School of Professional Communication at Toronto Metropolitan University. She is the author of *Words Have a Past: The English Language, Colonialism, and the Newspapers of Indian Boarding School* and is currently completing a second book on the history of public relations and hydroelectricity.

THE JAMES BAY HYDROELECTRIC PROJECT

In the 1978 paperback edition of the Symons Report, which included updates to the 1975 report, the first example used to justify the need for expanding Canadian Studies is the James Bay hydroelectric project in Québec. The report draws the reader in with the James Bay project, and, of all the current events of the 1970s, it is perhaps unsurprising: construction on the hydropower complex began in 1971 as a demonstration of Québec economic sovereignty following the Quiet Revolution. But this project, one of the largest in the world, included no consultation, let alone consent, of the Eeyouch and Inuit peoples whose lands and waters the project would severely alter. This resistance eventually led to the James Bay Northern Quebec Agreement, a modern-day treaty, in 1975.[1]

The James Bay project is, in many ways, an apt place for the Symons Report to begin an examination of Canadian Studies, given the hydro project's intersections of Indigenous rights and resistance, Québec sovereignty, and resource extraction. This was also a time of burgeoning interest in the environment. Pollution Probe, an environmental organization that began at the University of Toronto, was formed in 1969. Greenpeace and the Canadian Nature Federation were both founded in 1971, and the *Arctic Waters Pollution Prevention Act* was passed in 1972. Canadian Maurice Strong led the first United Nations environment program in 1973, and the Ontario-based Coalition for Wilderness formed the same year.[2]

But let's look at the way the example of the James Bay project is framed in the paperback version of the Symons Report:

> We're about to flood an enormous area in the Province of Quebec. We have no idea of what's underneath what we're going to flood. We have no idea of what the consequences will be to the maritime life off the shores of the area we're going to flood. We don't know what the ecological consequences will be. In making plans to flood it, we didn't even think about [Indigenous peoples]. (Symons, 1978, p. 14)

This passage flags important concerns about the James Bay project that were not always discussed contemporaneously, but it also reveals that the intended "we" of the Symons Report often meant non-Indigenous readers. Elsewhere, the report states that "there is a great deal of research in and about the North that needs to be done, much of it of a scientific nature in such fields as geology, biology, and climatology. We can't really make the best use of that part of the country until we do that type of research" (Symons, 1978, p. 14). The report further states that "because of the country's great size and small population, Canadians are among the largest 'real estate owners' in the world" (Symons, 1978, p. 46). Additionally, it states that "despite the fact that Canada has the largest storage of fresh water in the world, there is no school of aquaculture at any university" (Symons, 1978, p. 97).

This is not to cherry-pick but to show that, in places, the report's justification for expanding academic study of the environment is Canada's geography, with subtle nationalism (we are the biggest!) and not-so-subtle colonialism (we need to study the environment so that we can make use of it) threaded throughout.

REPORTS AS GENRE

At Toronto Metropolitan University, I teach a course on report writing for media studies students. We study many historical reports—from the post–Second World War Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences (the Massey commission) to the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline Inquiry in the 1970s, which ended up halting an oil and gas development. We study the Royal Commission on Health Services (the Hall commission) of the 1960s, which led to today's attempts at universal health care in Canada (its two-volume report was released in 1964), as well as the more recent Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2015). In this course, students learn that reports like the ones mentioned here can lead to great change; I also emphasize that other reports may, in fact, aim to *stall* change, to make something *not* happen. Many reports appear to promote change but actually serve as a means of stopping it.

The Symons Report also contains a contradiction in Environmental Studies. The report makes the important point that "the study of environmental issues must embrace many disciplines in the humanities and social sciences" (Symons, 1978,

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p. 57). In this way, the Symons Report anticipates some of the most innovative work happening now in Canada in terms of the environmental humanities, environmental histories, energy humanities, ecocriticism, political ecology, environmental communication, and more. The report also calls for more student opportunities to study environmental issues in Canada through Canadian-focused teaching materials and scholarship, which we may say today has certainly changed. Just look, for example, at the work of the Petrocultures Research Group in Alberta, an international, interdisciplinary research collective founded in 2011 at the University of Alberta in Edmonton to examine the social, cultural, and political implications of oil and energy. Another throughline to today is in the call for more funding for science and technology museums, which is clearly relevant in light of the concerning shutdown of the Ontario Science Centre.

The Symons Report anticipates some of the most innovative work happening now in Canada in terms of the environmental humanities, environmental histories, energy humanities, ecocriticism, political ecology, environmental communication, and more.

ENVIRONMENTAL STUDIES AND NATIONALISM

In addition to its prescience about Environmental Studies, the Symons Report is self-conscious about nationalism. In the paperback version of the report, which would have been more widely read, it states that, in its creation, "there was a healthy skepticism about confusing patriotism with scholarship" (Symons, 1978, p. 14), and that "for some of us, Canadian studies may be seen as the means of inculcating nationalism, propagandizing for the status quo, fostering national unity, or indoctrinating our children. What the Commission is proposing is none of these" (Symons, 1978, p. 17). But in terms of Environmental Studies, there is no space in the Symons Report to study the environment because settler Canadians are ruining the environment. More specific to universities and relevant to today, there is also no space in the report to see universities as complicit in climate change, which many scholars today are drawing attention to, such as the Low-Carbon Research Methods Group.[3]

The Symons Report was also published at the same time as a lesser-known development. The Solandt commission was set up in the early 1970s to investigate a proposal by the Hydro-Electric Power Commission of Ontario (Ontario Hydro) for high-voltage transmission lines, which elicited much concern from the public over environmental issues. The results of the Solandt commission, which largely echoed the public's concerns, led to the 1975 *Environmental Assessment Act*.[4] Interestingly, the commission was named after Omond Solandt, who not only chaired the commission but also served on the advisory board of the Symons Report. In this and other examples, we see direct overlap between the Symons Report and a broader environmental public consciousness in the 1970s. We also largely see an absence in the Symons Report of anti-colonial understandings of Environmental Studies in Canada, which were happening at the time of the report and continue today.[5] ■

NOTES

1. For more on the James Bay Project, see Desbiens (2013), Lameboy et al. (2025), and Sam-Cromarty (2026).
2. See O'Connor (2014).
3. See Hiltner et al. (2024), Low-Carbon Research Methods (n.d.), and Maina et al. (2020).
4. See Swift and Stewart (2004).
5. See, for instance, Luby (2020) and Sims (2015).

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Studying Canada through a desi lens

BY SHREYASHI GANGULY

Shreyashi Ganguly is a PhD candidate in sociology at York University. Her research explores the politics of South Asian identity in Canada through desi diasporic stand-up comedy practices in Toronto.

In his 1975 report, *To Know Ourselves: The Report of the Commission on Canadian Studies*, Thomas H. B. Symons conceived of the study of Canada as a way to acquire self-knowledge about the country. Reading the Symons Report 50 years after its publication, as a PhD student researching the politics of South Asian identity in contemporary Canada, I ask: What can studying Canada through a desi[1] lens tell us about the country today?

For many conversant with the term "South Asian" in everyday encounters, "desi" might appear as an unfamiliar term. A Hindi word that is etymologically connected to the word "desh," meaning "one's country," desi signifies the South Asian community as a transnational entity, formed through trajectories of movement and places of settlement globally (Kim, 2012). It captures the heterogeneity of the lived realities of all those who are grouped under the census category of "South Asians" (Ashutosh, 2008). A desi consciousness is an assertion of ethnic pride, cultural affiliation, and a basis of solidarity to resist imposed identities (Kim, 2012). Studying Canada through a desi lens—and not a South Asian lens—is thus an intentional epistemological decision that helps me explore what the pluralities of desi lived realities, migration histories, and linguistic modes of operation say about shifts and changes to the very idea of Canada today.

WHAT DOES THE STUDY OF CANADA THROUGH A DESI LENS ENTAIL?

I conceive of the study of Canada through a desi lens as a way to understand desi lived experiences, not merely as subjects of inquiry, but as a mode of knowledge production about the country. Instead of examining how desis fit into the established national framework of Canada, this approach recognizes how the community is actively producing the idea of Canada.

A desi lens offers the potential to further highlight the fact that belonging within the confines of the nation-state has been historically produced through racialization. It probes whether knowledge about Canada adequately captures how racialized subjects experience the country. By centring desi voices and histories, it can highlight the limits of multiculturalism and reveal how belonging is a continuous negotiation for the community. This is particularly pertinent in the present moment, marked by growing anti–South Asian discourse in the country (Van Dyk, 2025). Thus, studying Canada through a desi lens can show how belonging is relationally—and hierarchically—produced.

Given its transnational dimensions, a desi lens also has the potential to move beyond the study of Canada as a self-contained nation-state and facilitate an understanding of it as a transnational formation that is situated within, and is actively shaping, global flows of people, media, capital, ideas, and technologies (Appadurai, 1990). It emphasizes the need to explore how Canada is produced dynamically through transnational mobilities and global cultural practices.

Methodologically, then, a desi study of Canada can be best accomplished by adopting an anti-racist, decolonial framework that is informed by an idea of multiculturalism that dismantles racial differences rather than simply manages them. More importantly, a desi study of Canada needs to be grounded in an ethics of care that recognizes shared vulnerabilities among the many people who constitute Canada. This leads me to consider the implications of a desi lens to study the Symons Report.

READING THE SYMONS REPORT THROUGH A DESI LENS

In his report, Symons emphasized the need for Canadians to know the "us" to effectively shape the society they inhabit. Incidentally, this idea of an "us" has undergone several paradigm shifts since its publication. Reading the Symons Report through a desi lens today offers new capabilities to understand who constitutes the "us" and how diasporic and racialized Canadians are positioned within this "us." It also allows us to understand how the "us" is produced through transnational mobilities, multiple political and cultural attachments, and differential regimes of power.

One way to envision a desi interpretation of the report is through language. While Symons understood Canada's English and French language traditions as foundational to the study of the country, a desi lens provides scope to think about what Hindi and Punjabi or other South Asian languages can tell us about the people who inhabit Canada and how they understand their positionality within it. Employing a desi perspective in studying the Symons Report therefore involves asking what the imagination of Canada looks like when viewed through the lens of desi cultural-linguistic practices.

A desi reading of the Symons Report recognizes that South Asian histories are crucial to Canadian self-knowledge. In doing so, it opens an expansive global discussion that puts Canadian Studies in conversation with South Asian Studies and Diaspora Studies, thereby helping break academic silos.

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CONCLUSION

As a desi-identifying researcher myself, I see immense theoretical potential in using desi as a lens to study Canada and read the Symons Report. However, I am cognizant that employing a desi lens must account for its heterogeneity, which makes a cohesive desi reading difficult to arrive at. Rather, the value in using a desi lens lies in its ability to highlight the processes through which heterogeneous subjects negotiate affiliation and difference. Thus, a desi reading of Canada must avoid essentializing the diversity of the desi experience. Nonetheless, this approach can be a significant avenue to understand how Canadian Studies can better capture the transformations in Canadian society today. Studying Canada through a desi lens, therefore, harbours the potential to reimagine how Canada can produce knowledge about itself. ■

NOTE

1. I choose to not italicize the term "desi" as a deliberate refusal to reproduce hierarchies of knowledge through visual forms of othering.

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Reading to know ourselves: A personal reflection

BY EYITAYO ALOH

Eyitayo Aloh is an assistant professor in the School for the Study of Canada at Trent University. His research focuses on Black/African Canadian Studies and culture.

One of the perks (others will say privileges) of being a graduate student at Trent University was the rare opportunity to interact with and have extended conversations with Thomas H. B. Symons. On numerous occasions, he would walk into a student-led seminar with his stroller and sit in on the conversations. He never interrupted and only made his sagacious comments at the end. In one of our conversations, we discussed his report, which serves as the foundation for studying Canada as an academic pursuit. One of the stories he told me, upon learning that I was a Nigerian, was about visiting a university in Nigeria as part of his recruitment drive for Trent University and sharing what he had to do to sell Canada and Canadian Studies as a viable and important academic pursuit. He emphasized that while the goal of the project was to "know ourselves," it always had the vision of expanding that knowledge of "self" to include others who will in future days become a part of the Canadian fabric. This is often my default answer whenever anyone asks, "What is Canadian Studies?"

The 50th anniversary of the report gave me an opportunity to reflect on my conversations with Thomas Symons and the place of the study of Canada in the broader academic sphere. I have often seen myself as a product of that vision: an African immigrant who came to Canada to study Canada and now holds an academic position teaching Canada and all that it offers the world. Yet something always seems to be missing. The kinds of international scholarship that brought me to Canada are drying up, and recently, as a response to immigration concerns, international student admissions have been cut, impacting many who had an interest in studying Canada and not just studying in Canada. This prompts the questions: What has been missing from the study of Canada, and where do we go from here? These inquiries formed the bedrock of a symposium I was lucky enough to attend in June 2026. It was held at the Robarts Centre for Canadian Studies, to mark the 50th anniversary of the Symons Report and to consider how the report remains relevant today.

WHAT'S MISSING? LOOKING BACK THROUGH A CONTEMPORARY LENS

Engaging the study of Canada through a 50-year-old report can indeed be a tricky venture. However, for the session that I chaired, the panellists were tasked with doing just that through an examination of books that have shaped the study of Canada, with consideration of what's missing. I consider this a very useful endeavour. The new frontier of Canadian Studies seems to be its relationship with new citizens who call Canada home but still have affiliation to their home countries. Indeed, the previous issue of this journal had articles that showcased the perspectives of scholars from Poland and India (Formanowicz & Krishnan, 2026) as well as two separate articles on diaspora and diasporic literature (Pérez-Castelo & Ayari, 2026; Attrux & Rathakrishna, 2026). Yet the question remains: Which texts and books address these concerns at an academic level and form a canon that not only teaches but also signposts the field's direction? In building on the reflections of the panellists included in this issue, I would like to revisit two themes explored during the symposium.

Canada, the land, has always held a place in the scholarship shaping the discipline. Yet most books still tend to lean toward the study of the wilderness and how residents deal with the terrain. It was fascinating to listen as such environmental concerns were brought into conversation with contemporary discourse. A book on climate change and climate action may not be what one needs to read to study Canada, yet it is an important aspect of our survival as a nation-state. How can we know ourselves if we end up killing ourselves? The environment and climate must be a part of our study, and it is important not just to have books that show this, but to have books that do so in accessible language for the benefit of Canadians. This was an important lesson I learnt, and while it may not be a missing aspect of studying Canada, it surely represents a missing element in contemporary discourse. It is also refreshing to see scholars and books that cover aspects of Canada's national identity.

And talking about identity, the importance of diasporic identity and the role of diasporic Canadian citizens also came up as missing from the texts on Canada. Again, "missing" needs to be contextualized, as texts on the subject exist, but they rarely make it into mainstream conversations about Canada. As a Black scholar, it was humbling and energizing to hear about texts that focus on the Black experience of Canadians, and to know that more are on the way to funding from organizations such as SSHRC (the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council) and the Arts Council of Ontario. Texts like this are supposed to put the diasporic identity in direct conversation with the Symons Report. Such a conversation will affirm the relevance of the Symons Report in

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contemporary times, rather than making it an archival reference.

WHERE ARE WE GOING? A QUESTION OF JOURNEY AND NOT DESTINATION?

As the panel turned to audience questions, one remark also gave me an opportunity to reflect further on issues raised about missing texts: What books would the panellists recommend as representing the true Canadian story? The question was both personal and national. I took it as a pragmatic reflection point for the panellists and me, as chair, to look back and see what text I would choose in representing me as an immigrant Canadian. The weight of the question was also felt by the panellists, as half asked for a few more moments to ponder, and it was not until the end of the session that a final answer was given. My takeaway from that moment is that the direction of Canadian Studies is not a one-answer-fits-all. There are still areas to explore, ones that we must think about to be able to energize the field of Canadian Studies. It may be about the environment, Canada's relationship with its Indigenous communities, its diasporic citizens, and the commitments of these subjects to the Canadian project. The focus really is about the journey and the process of finding ourselves and knowing ourselves. As the panel demonstrated, the Symons Report remains a relevant document in Canadian Studies, and as the frontiers of inquiry continue to expand, so too will the quest for knowledge about Canadians and the books that contribute to it. ■

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Canadianists read … Books inspiring the study of Canada

BY RAYMOND B. BLAKE

Raymond B. Blake is a professor of history at the University of Regina and a fellow of the Royal Society of Canada. A specialist in Canadian political history, nationalism, citizenship, and federalism, he has written or edited more than 20 books.

At the Robarts Centre Symposium on the Symons Report, we were asked to present books that have inspired our thinking and teaching on Canada. I began by noting that the fundamental lesson from Professor Symons is that no single group holds a monopoly on knowledge about Canada. The pursuit of national self-understanding must be as broad-based as possible.

I chose two books: George Grant, *Lament for a Nation: The Defeat of Canadian Nationalism*, and J. L. Granatstein, *Who Killed Canadian History?* If Grant's book had been relegated to the dustbin because of the increasing acceptance of continental integration, Granatstein's, despite selling 20,000 copies, was there for advocating a return to what academics described as an outdated, nationalist history of cheerleading while unfairly dismissing modern social, cultural, and marginalized histories. Around 2019, I quietly dropped both as students had grown impatient with them.

Then, in the 2023 academic year, I brought both back. The reason was straightforward. I had just completed a book on prime ministers and national identity and was worried about the rapid decline in the number of Canadians who felt pride and attachment to the nation. For decades, pollsters found that more than 80 percent of Canadians described themselves as "very or somewhat proud" to be Canadian. That figure had dipped slightly by 2015, but in the decade following, it plummeted, dropping to slightly above 50 percent by 2024. Over the same period, those "not very" or "not at all" proud to be Canadian rose from 4 percent to 12 percent. This was before Donald Trump's tariff threats began reshaping the national mood.

TWO COMPETING STORIES

For much of the 20 century, Canada's normative historical narrative was one of different peoples coming together to overcome shared obstacles. It was a story of achievement, even triumph. It had serious blind spots: colonialism, racism, and sexism were largely absent from the frame. By the second decade of this century, those omissions had become the story itself. The perniciousness of colonialism, the persistence of racism and sexism, environmental degradation, and the exploitation of marginalized communities moved from the footnotes to the foreground.

Both narratives contain truth but are incomplete on their own. A history that only celebrates leaves citizens unprepared for honest reckoning; a history that only condemns leaves them without anything worth defending. Both narratives are needed to fully understand Canada and give students the information they need to move forward in creating a better nation.

Neither book requires agreement to be valuable. They are polemical and deliberately provocative, which makes them ideal for developing critical thinking. Each argues about threats to the nation, and the goal is not to endorse their arguments but to engage with them; they force us to think about national identity, historical memory, and what type of nation we want. That is what makes them excellent texts for critical thinking in our universities. One does not have to agree with them to benefit from engaging with their arguments.

GRANATSTEIN: HISTORY AS CULTURAL CAPITAL

Granatstein's central argument is that historical knowledge is fundamental "cultural capital." Without a working grasp of key events, figures, and knowledge of the past, citizens struggle to fully understand daily news, critically evaluate politics, and participate in civic discourse. Ignorance of Canadian history, he contends, weakens democracy and citizenship, a claim worth examining carefully.

He also levels a pointed critique at the education system, arguing that schools have progressively dismantled the shared historical framework that once gave Canadians a common frame of reference. Reading the book encourages students to question what is prioritized in their own schooling.

When I taught the book in my seminar earlier this year, the response surprised me. A few years ago, students had found little value in it; this time, something had shifted. Several students (both male and female, admittedly, mostly White) described school experiences in which they felt personally blamed for historical injustices they had no part in. They spoke of being expected to assume individual responsibility for how various identity groups had been treated in the past. Some said they had come to feel that expressing pride in Canada was tantamount to devaluing anyone who was not White or heterosexual.

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These are not trivial complaints, nor are they straightforward ones. They are exactly the kind of tensions a good seminar should explore. Granatstein doesn't resolve them, but he names them, and that is where the conversation can begin. His broader question remains: Can a country hold together without citizens who share some common historical memory? This is very much a question that many students are wrestling with personally. It is not merely an academic question. It is a political one.

GRANT: THE LAMENT THAT KEEPS ASKING

George Grant wrote *Lament for a Nation* in the immediate aftermath of John Diefenbaker's fall from power and the Bomarc missile crisis of 1963. His thesis was stark: Canada as a distinct, sovereign nation was finished and would be absorbed inevitably into the American continental empire. No serious student of Canadian politics, nationalism, or culture can ignore Grant. It is a work of political philosophy as much as political commentary. It shaped generations of thinkers across the ideological spectrum, and it forces students to think about what Canada was and what it has become.

In seminar, three questions anchored our discussions of Grant:

What makes Canada distinct? Grant argued that Canada risked losing its unique political and cultural character through deepening integration with the United States. His challenge to Canadians was pointed: Is a nation merely an economy, or does it embody particular traditions, values, and ways of life? In an era of globalization, streaming media, and continental trade, the question feels no less urgent.

Can small nations govern themselves? Grant was not promoting nationalism in any simple or chauvinistic sense. He was asking something more unsettling: whether small nations can preserve meaningful self-government in the permanent shadow of a larger power. That question has outlasted the Cold War context in which he posed it and is very much with Canadians today.

Why controversy is the point. One of the best reasons to teach a book like *Lament for a Nation* or *Who Killed Canadian History?* is that it provokes disagreement. A good education is not about assigning texts everyone already agrees with. It is about engaging serious arguments and learning to evaluate them honestly and critically. Few Canadian books have framed such questions about identity and nationalism as powerfully or as influentially as Grant's and Granatstein's.

CONCLUSION

Grant and Granatstein are important in the study of Canada because they force us to engage in debates on a variety of issues. They are lamenting the same loss from different directions. Grant feared that technology, large corporations, and economic integration would flatten Canada's distinctiveness into a generic North American culture. Granatstein feared that Canadians were forgetting the historical knowledge necessary to sustain a national identity. One worried about the erosion of what Canada was, and the other about the erosion of Canadians' ability to know what it was. In different ways, they are concerned with what binds Canadians together and what happens when those bonds weaken. And they force students to confront major questions.

For students of Canadian Studies, these books remain indispensable. Together, they form an essential pairing. They are short but serious. They challenge readers to think critically about identity, citizenship, memory, and nationhood. Accessible and deeply provocative, they continue to ask one of the most important questions in Canadian public life: What is Canada, and does it still matter?

When I would mention, especially at academic conferences of Canadian scholars, that my students read Granatstein and Grant and also Harold Innis and Donald Creighton, I knew some thought I was hopelessly trapped in an earlier time, even if I made it clear that my students also read the new books and articles from Canada's historians and political scientists. Yet, in 2026, when many among us rediscovered Grant and became excited about the resurgence of Canadian nationalism (should we even dare say Canadian patriotism?) in many of its forms, I am happy that my students have long been reading and engaging in discussions about identity and the struggles of a nation like Canada, living next door to a cultural and economic giant. I like to think, too, that Professor Symons would agree with my choice of books. ■

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A promising prognosis: Decolonized mental health care and Canadian Studies*

BY MICHELLE SRAHA-YEBOAH

Dr. Michelle Sraha-Yeboah is a post-doctoral fellow in the Faculty of Health Sciences at the University of Ottawa. She is the co-principal investigator on the Public Health Agency of Canada-funded study "Advancing African, Caribbean and Black (ACB) Perinatal Mental Healthcare: Assessment, Advocacy and Action."

The field of Canadian Studies has an abiding interest in self-interrogating its disciplinary foundations and strategic priorities, and this tendency reflects broader national tensions over what, and who, counts in Canadian history. Indeed, whose histories are folded into the national narratives of the nation? Whose are excluded? What concerns are central to the state and whose concerns are allowed to stand for the interests of the state? The primordial question of place, belonging, and knowing preoccupies the field of Canadian Studies and, coincidentally, beckons my entry. The novel I selected is *The Book of Emma* (2006) by Marie-Célie Agnant, a Haitian-born, Montreal-based writer who brings these considerations sharply into focus through a powerful tackling of madness and mental well-being. I understand this novel as an important springboard for research investigating mental health-care service delivery for Black Canadians in the African diaspora, and for thinking through the field of Canadian Studies more broadly.

THE BOOK OF EMMA

The Book of Emma begins with the protagonist, Emma Bratte, confined to a psychiatric hospital in Montreal for allegedly committing the murder of her three-year-old daughter, Lola. An interpreter named Flore is assigned to Emma to help translate her Haitian-Creole testimony and to assist the leading psychologist, Dr. Ian MacLeod, in determining her fitness to stand trial. Emma recounts a provocative narrative of both her troubled childhood and her ancestors' struggles against slavery. Her story transcends time and space, as she recounts a cultural memory, passed down from seven generations of women in her family, of colonial occupation, the slave trade, and its enduring ramifications. The novel concludes with Emma's suicide, which she refers to as her return to the "route of the big boats," in a poignant reference to the Middle Passage (Agnant, 2006, p. 201). In the novel, Emma is unable to receive appropriate care within a westernized psychiatric hospital. Confined to room 122, Emma faces a mental health-care system that actively participates in the erasure of Black suffering.

Dr. MacLeod is unable to grasp the intergenerational trauma impacting Emma's well-being, and thus renders her as incomprehensible: "'This is all I've been able to observe,' he murmured, waving the pages in the air. 'It's only about blueness: the blue of the sky, the blue of the sea, the blue of Black people's skin, and about the madness which is supposed to have come over in the holds of the slave ships'" (Agnant, 2001, p. 10). Dr. MacLeod's inability to understand the trauma of the transatlantic slave trade, and his apolitical mental health-care service provision, fall short in the face of Emma's embodied history of trauma. Christina Sharpe's "wake work" serves as a useful theoretical framework to understand Emma's insistence on making intelligible the violence visited on Black communities (Sharpe, 2016). "Wake work" refers to "a mode of inhibiting *and* rupturing" the afterlife of slavery (2016, p. 11). Despite the variations of wake work, such as Black annotation and redaction, at its core, it demands processing and unpacking the conditions that produce anti-Blackness, and insisting on Black peoples' survival and resistance in the wake of slavery.

WAKE WORK: BLACK ANNOTATIONS

In the novel, Emma practises Black annotation in two primary ways. First, she draws on her own epistemological frames of reference, oral stories from her female forebears, to render intelligible an intergenerational archive of slavery that is obscured by institutional screening tools. Emma's act of annotation helps her grapple with her illness and chart her own treatment plan: a path toward self-determination and freedom. Second, Emma performs this practice linguistically by refusing to converse in "standard" Québécois French with the medical health-care professionals in her ward. Instead, she relies exclusively on her mother tongue, Haitian-Creole, to violently rupture the semantic field that has been used against her to misrepresent and misdiagnose her.

Yet Emma's approach to authoring and authenticating her suffering is at odds with psychiatric institutionalized ways of knowing and interpreting Black life, and she is deemed incorrigible. Agnant represents traditional biomedical approaches to mental health care as profoundly limited in their ability to address historical wounds, which bleed and fester into present-day injustices. By narrating the patterns of violence that Emma experiences, structured by slavery and its attendant neo-colonial forces, psychiatric care, policing, and the criminal justice system, Agnant offers her readers compelling

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The Book of Emma demonstrates the ethical impetus to reframe mental health care to serve as a site of emancipatory praxis, collective well-being, and freedom-making practices to achieve transformative decolonized mental health-care service delivery.

insights about living in the "afterlife of slavery" (Hartman, 2007, p. 6).

The novel illustrates that working and thinking through a more historically attuned and culturally responsive mental health care for Black communities requires stronger consideration of the broader historical, political, and sociocultural conditions that interweave to influence Black life. The novel also affirms, through its portrayal of Emma's relationship with Flore, the need for community-rooted, holistic interventions that honour testimony, advocacy, and social justice in the pursuit of wellness and as a foundational cornerstone of a healing praxis. This clinical oversight prevents Emma from recovering under the supervision of Dr. MacLeod and exacerbates her existing feelings of alienation, which only serves to retraumatize her.

HEALING AGENTS

The Book of Emma demonstrates the ethical impetus to reframe mental health care to serve as a site of emancipatory praxis, collective well-being, and freedom-making practices to achieve transformative decolonized mental health-care service delivery. Agnant's work is in conversation with many Black feminist creative writers who have challenged the limitations of a Western episteme of mental health care (Wilentz, 2000). Her ruminations on "wellness" and "illness" in the context of imperialism, White supremacy, and the encumbering legacies of the transatlantic slave trade afford her considerable analytical power to create new discourses on healing that acknowledge historical traumas and articulate new measures of survival in the wake of slavery.

This approach, which draws on the conceptual and methodological tools of Black feminist traditions, allows Agnant to point to the shortcomings of mental health care for African diasporic peoples and, by extension, to highlight some of the very stakes of Canadian Studies. Just as decolonized mental health care must be invested in foregrounding histories of the transatlantic slave trade, critiquing the influence of political economies on creating pathogenic social conditions, centring a larger pool of scholar-activists and their accompanying epistemologies, and actively engaging in social justice interventions (Sraha-Yeboah, 2022), so too must the field of Canadian Studies aim to contend with these central preoccupations, ultimately strengthening the critical efficacy of the field.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

A Canadian Studies approach that is attentive to the ways questions of place, belonging, and knowing can be extended to include (1) active efforts to make intelligible Black suffering and uncover colonial processes within institutional contexts that produce conditions of anti-Blackness; (2) recognition of Black Canadians' longstanding and foundational presence in Canada and their constitutive contributions to building civil society; (3) a sustained commitment and receptiveness to Black feminist epistemologies and lived experiences as a theoretical and empirical knowledge base to advance Canadian social and institutional policy; and (4) imagining new liberatory possibilities to promote freedom from systemic and institutional matrices of oppression. While these measures are only a starting point, building on the work of racialized scholars in the field, they can be usefully developed to critically refine the trajectory of the field's future directions.

The Book of Emma depicts a mental health-care system that refuses to grapple with the weight of history and develop a justice-centred and freedom-oriented treatment plan for our titular protagonist. In turn, there is no way forward for Emma Bratte, whose experiences remain incomprehensible within a care system unwilling to confront the conditions producing her suffering. The novel's indictment extends beyond the Canadian mental health-care system and exposes Canada's institutional inclinations to abstain from accountability and to attempt redress without justice. I argue that this routine, documented failing is precisely where Canadian Studies must intervene. The discipline's purpose is not merely to be descriptive, but transformative. As such, Canadian Studies must not end at documenting the conditions of Canada and Canadian society as we know it; it must also unsettle Canada's suppressed histories, enforced silences, and calculated exclusions. If Canada is to adamantly declare "a true north strong and free," I believe that Canadian Studies must hold the nation accountable to that promise. In fact, I believe it is Canadianists' scholarly imperative and civic responsibility to do so. ■

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NOTE

* This article was first presented as a talk prepared for the Robarts Centre for Canadian Studies and the Canadian Studies Network/Réseau d'études canadiennes symposium on the Symons Report, June 2026. It was developed in response to an invitation to present a book that has inspired one's thinking, teaching, and/or research on Canada. The response has been adapted for publication.

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Canadianists read … environmental history

BY COLIN M. COATES

Colin M. Coates is a professor in the Canadian Studies program at Glendon College and was director of the Robarts Centre for Canadian Studies from 2011 to 2015.

When the afternoon panellists discussed how we should approach our comments on the current state of Canadian Studies, 50 years after the publication of the Symons Report, we agreed to pattern our talks on the CBC radio program "Canada Reads." From there, we diverged somewhat in our interpretation of the task. In fact, I found it hard to choose one book that captures the evolution of Canadian Studies since 1975. Instead, I opted to discuss the development of a new field, environmental history, although I will later propose one representative Canadian title.

I describe this field as "new," but the Symons Report devoted a substantial section to environmental issues. Undoubtedly, this reflected public worries about the environment at the time, after a decade of increased concern about the dangers of chemical pesticides in the wake of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) and in the context of the mid-1970s oil embargo. Symons stated, perhaps somewhat optimistically, "Canadian environmental studies are also beginning to receive attention in the curriculum of such disciplines as history, philosophy and sociology" (Symons, 1975, p. 80).

Many scholars locate the origins of environmental history as a subfield within the historical profession, and therefore the broader realm of Canadian Studies, in the decade that followed. The American Society of Environmental History was established in 1977, and some of the now-classic works in the area appeared in the 1980s. Alfred Crosby's *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900–1900* was published in 1986. Its central argument, about the creation of environmental "neo-Europes" in temperate zones, applied as much to southern Canada as it did to the United States, Argentina, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa. However, Crosby's references to the northern half of North America are sparse. William Cronon's *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England*, published in 1983, dealt with the northeastern English colonies and conflicts between Indigenous and settler environmental practices. He also relied on evidence from Atlantic Canada. These were not works in the field of Canadian Studies, but they held much promise for new perspectives on Canadian history.

It is true that one can find important works that touch on environmental history in Canada further back in time, before the formal establishment of the subfield. Harold Innis's classic study, *The Fur Trade in Canada* (1930), a foundational text in Canadian Studies, considered the political and economic implications of the hunt for beavers. Likewise, generations of historical geographers, like Andrew Hill Clark, Serge Courville, R. Colebrook Harris, and Graeme Wynn, focused closely on the human occupation of space and the ecological implications of their activities.

As a more dedicated subfield of Canadian History, environmental history took shape in the first decade of this century. It received a tremendous boost with the development of NiCHE, the Network in Canadian History & Environment/ Nouvelle initiative canadienne en histoire de l'environnement, a SSHRC-funded knowledge clusters grant, headed up by Alan MacEachern of Western University. This project started in 2004, and it continues today under new leadership, sustained by the enthusiasm of a wide variety of scholars inside and outside the university sector. Many articles and books have been published since 2004 in the field, and I will emphasize a few key insights that environmental history brings to Canadian History and Canadian Studies more broadly.

One fundamental contribution is a reminder of the historical nature of the climate in this part of the world. Today, we should not need any reminder about the impact of climate change on human activity, but it is helpful to place these developments in a longer perspective. The little ice age, spanning much of the 17th century, was an important context that complicated and slowed the early French and English colonization efforts in the St. Lawrence Valley and peninsular Nova Scotia.[1] Some of the lowest average temperatures in the last 2,000 years occurred just as Samuel de Champlain attempted to establish settlements at Port Royal in Acadia and near present-day Québec City. Decades later, Louis XIV's brief focus on encouraging French settlement in the St. Lawrence Valley likewise occurred against a backdrop of historically cold temperatures. Climate history provides a broad framework for understanding human choices in this part of the world. And climate change today is one of the central issues with which all Canadians will have to contend.

As a second example, environmental history encourages us to situate human decisions within the material conditions that they encounter. One way to do this is to focus on energy as a theme in Canadian history. I think that R. W. Sandwell's edited collection, *Powering Up Canada: A History of Power, Fuel, and Energy from 1600*, captures much of the complexity of the

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settler-colonial occupation of this land. Chapters in the book focus on the role of pemmican in providing the food energy fur traders required, as they canoed the rivers that linked the supply of pelts with the merchants. Other chapters show the importance of horses, which consumed plants that humans generally cannot stomach, in providing motor energy on farms and in cities well into the early 20th century. The book is structured around the shift from organic to mineral energy.

The collection reminds us that Canada differed in chronology from so many other countries with which it is often compared. For instance, firewood supplied about half of Canadian energy as late as 1901, and remained a substantial contributor for over five decades, still at 11 percent in 1951. This fact has deep implications, I think, for how Canadians engaged with the natural world around them, in comparison to other countries that transitioned to coal and oil earlier. Equally important is the total amount of energy consumed in Canada, which dramatically took off after the 1960s. In 1941, Canadians used around 2,000 petajoules, but this number increased to around 3,200 petajoules in 1961, to more than 11,000 petajoules in 2001. Of course, the human population in Canada increased a good deal over this time (while the horse population declined dramatically), but the figures indicate the degree to which Canadians consumed vastly increased amounts of energy. Environmental history approaches remind us that many Canadians interacted with the natural world in substantially different ways in the second half of the 20th century. The social, political, and environmental implications of postwar choices should undergird the way we understand Canadian history.

Sandwell's collection is only one of many contributions in environmental history that encourage us to comprehend the complexity of individual and collective decisions in a new light. As we think about what Canadianists might read in 2026, I encourage us to draw inspiration from the section of the Symons Report that recognized the potential of interdisciplinary environmental studies as early as 1975. ■

NOTE

1. Sam White deals with the climate context of early European colonization in North America in *A Cold Welcome: The Little Ice Age and Europe's Encounter with North America* (2017).

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Palestine changed how I read Canada

BY ALANA DUGGAN

Alana Duggan is a PhD candidate in art history and visual culture at York University. Her dissertation traces the emergence of the Canadian art world through the 19th-century Montreal photography studio of William Notman. Her research approaches the art world as a settler-colonial and pedagogical formation.

I read Canada differently since October 7, 2023. The ongoing genocide perpetrated by Israel on the Palestinians in Gaza and the accelerated destruction of their lands, homes, institutions, and cultural memory have profoundly disturbed how I think, read, and write.[1] For three years, we have watched live-streamed war crimes and crimes against humanity continue with impunity. Despite the declaration of a ceasefire, the siege and killing continue alongside ongoing restrictions on movement and access to vital resources.[2]

Beyond the devastating scale of these atrocities, what we are witnessing in Palestine has made the workings of settler colonialism visible: not only spectacular violence, but cruel and cumulative actions, multiple and often mundane mechanisms of dispossession, and restriction, erasure, and control. This multiplicity matters. It can obscure the scale of the violence and the structures that sustain it.

Many of the questions that Palestine raises—about land, memory, sovereignty, visibility, institutional responsibility, and national narratives—resonate both with questions that Indigenous peoples have long raised about Canada and with ongoing struggles against dispossession, violations of sovereignty, and other enduring structures of settler colonialism. Nevertheless, the histories of Palestine and Canada are distinct, and I do not want their proximity here to flatten those differences or minimize the violence of the ongoing genocide.

The past three years have also sharpened my attention to Canadian cultural, academic, media, and political institutions. Palestine has become a stress test for these institutions, revealing how selectively protections associated with academic freedom, political expression, and public protest are applied; whose testimony and expertise are granted authority; how institutions struggle, or refuse, to reconcile their professed ethical commitments with their actions; and how these pressures shape what can be said, taught, exhibited, published, protested or even made visible.

None of this has made reading easier. It has made it more necessary.

LEARNING HOW TO READ CANADA

At the symposium marking 50 years since the Symons Report, I participated in a panel called "Canadianists Read." We were asked to discuss books that might inspire the critical study of Canada. I chose to talk about how I read, and about the thinkers who have taught me to read, think, and write differently.

My own research examines the formation of the Canadian art world in 19th-century Montreal, but the questions that interest me rarely remain neatly within art history. Questions about visual art lead into colonialism, racial capitalism, and White supremacy; archives into labour and governance; museums into ethics, nationhood, and political belonging.

In the panel, I discussed Ariella Aïsha Azoulay's *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (2019), which gave me a language for collaborative, critical reading through her concept of "unlearning with companions." Azoulay asks us to question what has been normalized while remaining open to relations and histories that imperial ways of knowing have obscured. Audra Simpson's *Mohawk Interruptus* (2014) taught me to question the apparent coherence of settler archives and narratives, and whether what appears anomalous within them might instead reveal the limits of their own political categories. Dionne Brand's *Salvage: Readings from the Wreck* (2024) reveals reading itself as inherited and situated. Her recurring invocation of "a reader like me" reminds us that no universal reader stands outside history.

Together, these writers have encouraged me to approach scholarship—reading, thinking, writing—less as an accumulation of knowledge than as a practice of relation, collaboration, learning, and unlearning. Attentive reading does not necessarily produce greater certainty. Sometimes, it should make us less certain about what we think we know.

WHAT I DID NOT SAY

The past three years have made me more attentive to asymmetry: to the distance between universal principles and their uneven application; between institutional rhetoric and institutional practice; between whose testimony is presumed credible and whose requires endless verification; between whose political expression is protected and whose becomes threatening; between whose sovereignty is treated as unassailable and whose remains conditional.

These questions follow me back into Canadian history.

When I encounter 19th-century rhetoric about civilization, improvement, refinement, progress, and good government in my archival research, I read it differently now. I am more attentive to the work that such language performs: how apparently benevolent ideals can coexist with dispossession and inequality; how institutions produce coherence

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by determining what counts as legitimate knowledge, culture, and political belonging; and how numerous seemingly minor exclusions can accumulate into durable structures of power.

The movement works in the other direction, too. Studying Canada's settler-colonial past has made me more suspicious of comforting national narratives in the present—particularly in this "elbows-up" moment, when Canada has newly reasserted its self-image as a tolerant, humanitarian, peacekeeping nation committed to human rights and a "rules-based international order." Those contradictions are particularly visible in Canada's political and material support for Israel (Boudjikanian, 2026). The question is not simply whether these principles are admirable. It is what becomes visible when we examine how consistently, and for whom, they are applied.

READING CANADA WITHOUT REASSURANCE

Fifty years after the Symons Report, perhaps the challenge for Canadian Studies is no longer simply to persuade Canadians that Canada is worthy of study. It is to ask what critical study demands of us when what we discover unsettles the nation we thought we knew.

For me, Palestine has made that question impossible to keep at a comfortable historical distance. It has reinforced something that Indigenous and Black thinkers have long insisted upon: colonialism is not safely contained in the past, and the stories nations tell about themselves are part of how relations of power are reproduced in the present.

Our reading, research, thinking, and writing cannot be entirely separated from ongoing political struggles because those struggles are themselves contests over land, visibility, memory, history, and relation. What is said now—and what is silenced, destroyed, undocumented, or refused—will shape the archives through which future historians try to understand this moment.

Now is not the time for comforting national narratives. Critical Canadian Studies should make it possible to read Canada without requiring Canada to remain coherent or innocent. It should keep the past open as a living relation to the present (Azoulay et al., 2023) and ask what responsibilities emerge when we do.

I read Canada differently now. I think that is precisely what critical reading should make possible. ■

NOTES

1. The term "genocide" is used here in accordance with determinations by the International Association of Genocide Scholars, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, B'Tselem, and the Lemkin Institute for Genocide Prevention, as well as findings of the UN Independent International Commission of Inquiry (2025).
2. For ongoing documentation of the killings, displacement, restrictions, and destruction in Palestine, see reporting by local journalists such as Hani M. Abuishaiba, Hind Khoudary, and Bisan Owda, alongside testimony of emergency doctors such as Ali Tahrawi. Palestinian journalists continue to report and bear witness under the conditions they document, and more than 270 media workers have been killed since October 7, 2023 (United Nations, 2026).

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In what ways is the Symons Report still relevant after 50 years?

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1:15 PM: ***Canadianists Read*:** Books inspiring the study of Canada	Raymond Blake, URegina Colin Coates, YorkU Alana Duggan, YorkU Michelle Sraha-Yeboah, UOttawa Chair: Heather Nicol, Trent

Lunch will be served along with the book launch of William Jenkins' 2025 edited collection titled *Canada and the Great Irish Famine: Studying the Impacts of Ireland's Great Famine Immigration to Canada* (McGill-Queen's University Press).

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