

# CANADIANS AND THEIR PASTS

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**Community Partners:** Association of Heritage Industries, Newfoundland & Labrador, St. John's; Musée acadien, Université de Moncton; Musée de la civilisation, Quebec City; Association for Canadian Studies, Montreal; Canadian Museums Association, Ottawa; Historica, Toronto; Canada West Foundation, Calgary; The Kamloops-Thompson Regional Historica Fair Committee and Thompson Rivers University's Centre for the Study of Multiple Literacies, Kamloops; Union of British Columbia Indian Chiefs, Vancouver.

## SUMMARY OF PROPOSED RESEARCH

Support for "public" history in Canada is one of the most remarkable features of the past decade. It is manifested in such capital-intensive projects as CBC's *Canada: A People's History*, the *History Channel*, and *Historia*; the founding of Canada's National History Society, the Dominion Institute, and *Historica*; and federal support for a new Canadian War Museum and Portrait Gallery. Polling data suggests that ordinary Canadians embrace these initiatives, visit museums, historic sites, and commemorative celebrations in growing numbers, and are themselves engaged in family and community history projects.

While Canadians are polled on a regular basis about their knowledge and consumption of history, they are less likely to be asked to reflect on the presence of their past in their lives. We may know that 250,000 children annually are engaged in *Historica Fairs*, that Aboriginal treaties have relevance to current political realities, and that heritage industries are a major staple of Canada's burgeoning tourist sector, but we are less certain about the focus of people's engagement with the past, popular perceptions of the trustworthiness of historical sources, how people reconcile conflicting narratives about past events, and the ways that people use the past to construct their individual and collective identities. This project is designed to explore these questions.

The centrepiece of this project is a nation-wide survey, modeled on those conducted in the United States and Australia, that will explore the presence of the past in everyday life. The survey will provide national data that will allow Canadians to enter an important international debate about uses of the past and give those involved in delivering history in Canadian schools and universities, museums and historic sites, on television and the Internet a benchmark against which to measure their activities. The time lapse since the American study and improvements made upon it by the Australians enable us to address some of the design flaws identified in the earlier surveys and to add a Canadian element to the debate. In particular, we will take into account linguistic and regional identities as well as age, class, ethnic, and gender differences in approaches to the past. One of the major goals of the project is to develop processes to bridge the troubling gap between what is now distinguished as "history" and "heritage." Through surveys, focus groups, conferences, symposia, workshops, media events, websites, and publications, we will generate a nation-wide dialogue around Canadian uses of the past and forge networks among school teachers, curators of museums and historic sites, film makers, genealogists, and academic historians that will serve the interests of history practitioners and policy-makers engaged in researching and communicating Canada's past.