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Balancing the Local and the Global: The American Civil War in Western Canadian Classrooms

Frank Towers

University of Calgary

Before arriving at the University of Calgary in the western Canadian province of Alberta in 2004, I taught Civil War history in the United States and in Turkey. My earlier experience cautions me against making too much of the national educational setting at the expense of issues that transcend a particular country. The local and national context that students bring to the classroom influences teaching and educates the instructor as much as the students. At the same time, teaching in Canada has made me more aware of how deeply some Civil War narratives have been embedded in global culture and how the war serves popular understanding of modernity.

Teaching the history of the Civil War outside the United States requires that instructors balance global themes with connections to the local world of their students. This claim should seem like a reasonable proposition about teaching American history internationally. It runs up against a popular emphasis, however, on adapting course content to the particular culture(s) of students, an emphasis that is itself a reaction against an older tradition of nationalist teaching that marked the beginnings of international U.S. history instruction. Early in the twentieth century, most international instruction in U.S. history occurred under the auspices of American religious and government agencies geared toward “spreading American political and cultural values.” After World War II, “cultural exchange” replaced cultural conversion as the guiding principle for teaching American history abroad. Factors influencing this change included an understanding of cultural difference as something to be respected rather than erased; an anticolonial theme in U.S. Cold War rhetoric aimed at countering suspicion of U.S. world hegemony; and scholarship that emphasized conflict and inequalities of power rather than consensus and contentment. Meanwhile, the growth of American studies internationally increased U.S. history offerings at non-American universities and employment opportunities for teachers unaffiliated with missionaries and Washington, D.C.[1]

Today, making U.S. history engaging for non-American students presents a greater challenge to teachers than does overthrowing the jingoism of an earlier time. To combat students’ perception of American history as irrelevant to their own experience, teachers working outside the United States advise that colleagues first recognize the cultural context that students bring to the classroom and then look for connections between the local setting and issues in the American past.[2]

In western Canada, this approach offers some thought-provoking parallels between the American Civil War and Canadian history. Foremost among them is the question of regional separatism. The Bloc Québécois, a self-described “sovereigntist” party that advocates “the full development of the Quebec nation,” is currently the third largest party in the Canadian parliament. To accommodate Quebec sovereigntists, in 1982 the federal parliament passed the “notwithstanding clause,” which, reminiscent of South Carolina’s nullification doctrine, allows a provincial veto on federal legislation.[3]

I teach in Alberta, not Quebec. That context matters as well. Calgary is the home base of the federal parliament’s current Conservative minority government. Prime Minister Stephen Harper has an economics degree from the University of Calgary, and some of his advisers are affiliated with the university (full disclosure: I am not one of them). Quebec separatists get little sympathy from students raised in the Anglophone West, which is ironic given the self-perception of some western Canadians as an aggrieved minority oppressed by the powerful central province of Ontario and the federal political establishment in Ottawa.[4] This grievance—and a political economy of commodity exports—are common threads between nineteenth-century southern fire-eaters and contemporary Albertans. Instead of cotton, tobacco, and sugar, Albertans sell oil, natural gas, and wheat. In both cases riches have accrued through free-trade policies in a world economy hungry for raw materials. Albertans can connect the politics of oil to the Confederacy’s hope

that its cotton embargo would bring diplomatic recognition from cotton-hungry Britain and France. And then there is slavery. Canada's status as the ultimate destination of runaway slaves and Great Britain's as an antislavery world power in the mid-1800s are points of national pride.^[5] This perspective feeds into a larger interest in the United States as a negative reference point for Canadian self-definition and makes Canadians more receptive than some U.S. students to considering northern nonslaveholders' complicity in slavery.

While these comparisons to the United States can generate discussion, students' familiarity with American mass culture sometimes makes the past seem more transparent than it really is. The proximity of Canada to the United States and the interdependence of the two economies—each is the other's largest trading partner—immerse Canadian students in American cultural as well as material exports. Shared media, language, and markets can lead Canadian students to assume greater knowledge of the U.S. past than they actually possess. U.S. history teachers in Canada share the task that an Americanist teaching in France described as “countering the cultural myths generated by consumerism and images from American films and television series.”^[6] The pitfalls of assumed knowledge manifested themselves in a class discussion of the long-term implications of African American military service for the Confederacy, a theme of Bruce Levine's *Confederate Emancipation*, which I had assigned.^[7] The students were largely unaware of political controversies over displaying the Confederate flag or of connections between states' rights rhetoric and twentieth-century segregation, and therefore had little feel for the present-day significance of neo-Confederate historiography. It took an American transfer student to make the connection between representations of slavery's past and the politics of the present.

Yet while the contemporary political implications of the Civil War are not always obvious in the Canadian classroom, the vestiges of Lost Cause and neo-abolitionist narratives are still there. Canadian students, like so many consumers of Civil War history, are interested in what that era says about modernity as embodied by the contemporary United States. Modern nationalism often celebrates a folk traditionalism to counterbalance progress toward a universal bourgeois norm.^[8] For Americans, the Old South has occasionally served that role. In treating the Confederacy as both a carrier of tradition and roadblock to progress, students pick and choose from Confederate Lost Cause and neo-abolitionist historiography. They recognize the evils of slavery but mourn the passing of agrarian life and are critical of the rise of industrial, urban society, which they regard as the legacy of Union victory.

To teach against the grain of this popular story means engaging students with economic historians' work on the value of slaves to the U.S. economy and slavery's compatibility with industrial capitalism; and intellectual historians' scholarship on the cosmopolitan, modernist outlook of secessionists and the defensive nationalism of northern Unionists. It also means considering the agrarian, rather than the industrial, roots of free-soil politics in the North, investigating Confederate industrialization, and exploring the moral conduct of the war. All of these themes disrupt the narrative of the Civil War as a noble blood sacrifice in which 600,000 lives and rural innocence were given up so that equal rights and industrial progress could come to pass. That impression of the Civil War pervades American culture as much as it does global culture, and most new scholarship that takes on this received wisdom has yet to appear on course syllabi in the United States or outside of it.^[9]

In challenging this conventional wisdom, teaching the American Civil War in Canada is more similar to teaching it in the United States than it is different. Students live simultaneously in the globalizing contemporary world and in their own local and national cultures. Making connections between narratives pertinent to the 1860s in the United States and the students' national past teaches a great deal, just as understanding the implications of the Civil War era helps answer broader questions of how the world of today emerged out of the nineteenth century.

^[1]Frank Towers is an associate professor of history at the University of Calgary. The author thanks Paul Quigley for organizing the round table that generated this essay. Paul also provided valuable comments on earlier drafts, as did Scott Casper, Tim Roberts, Jewel Spangler, and the JAH staff.

Readers may contact Towers at ftowers@ucalgary.ca.

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[5] Karolyn Smardz Frost, *I've Got a Home in Glory Land: A Lost Tale of the Underground Railroad* (New York, 2007); James Tagg, "'And, We Burned Down the White House, Too': American History, Canadian Undergraduates, and Nationalism," *History Teacher*, 37 (May 2004), 309–34.

[6] Marie Bolton, "Poor Relation or Honorable Peer? Reflections on American History in French Universities," *History Teacher*, 36 (Aug. 2003), 443–64, esp. 456.

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