WHAT IS ACTIVE HISTORY?

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The term Active History was coined through a collaborative brainstorming session, four people enjoying an early morning coffee in a Toronto cafe and thinking of a catchy term for a conference. If my memory is correct, we thought about "applied history," and we thought about history that works for a better future. In the end, the two ideas were combined into our final conference name, "Active History: History for the Future." We elaborated on the name in our Call for Presentations and this statement remains at the core of the today's Active History project:

> *Active History: History for the Future* is a two-day symposium designed to bring together university-based and community-based historians interested in assessing the ways in which historians engage with communities beyond the academy. Given that historians are also inevitably community members, it is important to consider not only the ways in which our work is taken up by the media, the courts, and so on, but also how we engage with and are responsible to communities in our research. How do, and how can, historical investigations of the past transform both historians and communities in the present and for the future?
>
> The organizers define active history variously as history that listens and is responsive; history that will make a tangible difference in people's lives; history that makes an intervention and is transformative to both practitioners and communities. We seek a practice of history that emphasizes collegiality, builds community among active historians and other members of communities, and recognizes the public responsibilities of the historian.[1]

Since that summer 2007 meeting, the concept of Active History has remained collaborative. The conference organisers and now the editorial team at ActiveHistory.ca have helped shape the development of Active History, but we have always tried to remain open to the many perspectives contributed by the conference participants, bloggers and Canadian Historical Association committee members. For this reason, I am very hesitant to try and answer the question "What is Active History?" It is an ongoing project, not a coherent doctrine about how to practice history. The answer to the question, "What is Active History?" expands as our network grows and its definition surely exceeds the statement in the original Call for Presentations, as every new person involved brings a new point of view. Perhaps at its core, Active History is a project that promotes the idea that *history matters* beyond the walls of universities or museums and that it

should play a larger role in our public life; after that, people are free to decide how to be active historians.

One important aspect of the Active History project, highlighted during the presentations at the conferences, is for historians to work with and share authority with the community whose history they study. This is particularly important for academic historians who use oral history to study living history, or who study the more distant past of communities still suffering from historical injustice, including historians of slavery or aboriginal communities. However, this is not an option for all historians and it is not the only approach to Active History.

The Active History project is meant to be inclusive for all historians, including those studying ancient cultures, other countries or political historians focused on the powerful and the elite. In this vein, Active History needs to promote the many ways that history matters beyond these very important engagements with particular marginalised communities. There is not one particular kind of history that matters more than others and I think that all historians, regardless of their fields, can contribute to current issues by asking people to "think with history." The study of any period or field of history trains people to think critically and see the complexity of events or problems facing past societies. John Arnold, for example, argues in his review of John Tosh's book, *Why History Matters,* that pre-modern history can be even more important for applied history than Tosh's more recent focus.[2] Arnold points out that many political ideologies are constructed on a "highly partial reading of history" and a deep look into the historical past is needed to counter these assumptions.

> Take any deep-rooted argument about nature, identity, nationalism and the like. Contemporary political ideology often grounds its authority through either a claim to radical novelty, or an assumption of what is 'natural' or 'traditional'. Only through a long view can these claims be successfully critiqued…. Many influential political theories have based their claims about 'humanity' through a highly partial reading of history, frequently jumping from antiquity to the Enlightenment…. The middle ages has in fact been implicit to *all* arguments about modernity - it is that which is silently invoked by everything which proclaims itself 'modern' and 'western'. But too often the idea of what is 'medieval' owes more to Walter Scott and Hollywood than anything found in pre-modern archives. Medievalists have an important revisionary role here, when and where they are able to find a public voice.[3]

If most types of historical research have the potential to contribute to an applied practice of history, we need to identify some of the many ways historians can engage with today's problems. What can historians do to gain influence in policy debates? How do we build a comparable following as economists have in the public sphere? We cannot simply complain that the media does not care about the historical perspective; instead we need to get involved with issues we care about and

offer a complex understanding of their historical contexts. We cannot do this only from the outside – writing papers or books and hoping people will read them – we also need to engage directly with current issues by joining community group and engaging directly with policy debates.

Historians have something to offer when they get involved with grassroots activism. A close friend of mine, Andrew McCann, followed a different path after we graduated from our undergraduate degrees in history. He became a leading activist for local food and sustainable agriculture in the Kingston area. As I did a MA and began a PhD, he learned to work with a broad section of his community interested in the sustainable food movement. This group included fellow activists, food bank volunteers, politicians, conventional and organic farmers, and local chefs. He found the polarized world of local politics a bit jarring and quickly noticed that both his adversaries and his allies tended to see the challenge of developing a sustainable food system in overly simplistic ways. This contrasted unfavourably with his university experiences, where historians focused on the complexity of the past and worked against reductionist explanations, and he attempted to apply his education to his work in the sustainable food movement. However, he remained critical of many academic historians. His general perception was that while historians brought a complex understanding of the past to the classroom, they often did little more than writing yet more books or articles and rarely engaged with the world around them. In his view, with all the environmental problems facing the world, this approach was a luxury we could no longer afford.

McCann's harsh critique of my chosen career path has moderated over the years. He now acknowledges the need for academic historians, with our lengthy graduate school apprenticeships and our time for research and writing, as essential to developing and maintaining the complex perspective he admires. I would add to this that teaching new generations of undergraduate history students is a valuable contribution and likely the most important an active university-based historian can make. Andrew and I now often talk about ways to build more bridges between the contemplative academics' lofty ivory towers, and the actors in government, NGOs, the private sector, community organisations and engaged public who collectively dominate the public sphere.

My desire to build connections with actors and to be engaged myself, led me to help found Active History. As a result, one of the central questions that I have continued to think about is how to build bridges between universities and those working to solve current problems. As an urban-environmental historian, I tend to focus on environmental issues and how they connect with social concerns. Through my marriage to a city planner working in the sustainability office at a local government, I have been able to observe public policy development and learn about the practical realities and compromises involved with planning for a sustainable future. I hope that through dinner time conversations I contribute a little to

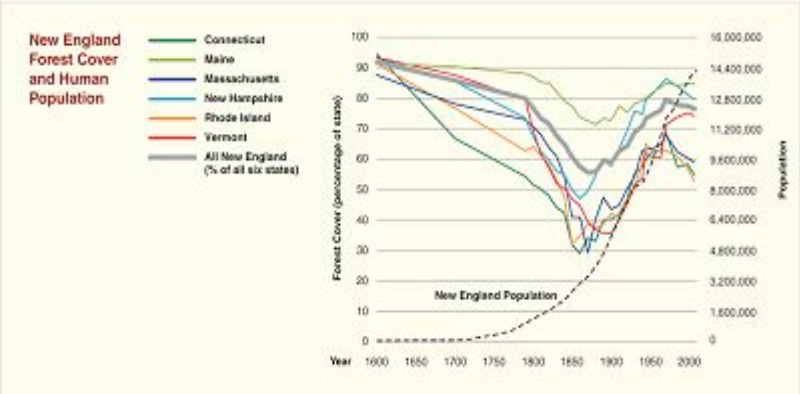
her existing practice of "thinking with history." Beyond proposing a plan that all historians should partner up with civil servants, the challenges of bridging the divide between university history departments and the world beyond them remains very real. We historians do not have the clout held by economists and scientists in the public sphere and it is not altogether clear how to engage with the pressing issues facing the world today.

Some of the most successful examples are historians that left the university after completing their graduate training and found prominent jobs where they could influence policy development. Wayne Roberts, for example, helped lead the Toronto Food Policy Council to international prominence during the past few years; he represents one possible path for Active Historians. With the current academic job market failing to match the ever-growing supply of PhDs, many graduates expect they might be working outside the university in the future. Robert's success as a public intellectual and government employee demonstrates the range of work people can pursue with a PhD in history outside the university. Another example is the occasional contributor to ActiveHistory.ca, Alix Green, who is a history graduate and the Head of Policy in the administration of the University of Hertfordshire. Green explains how she incorporates history into her policy work. She follows two American scholars, Richard Neustadt and Ernest May's analysis of historical thinking in political decision making. Green is particularly interested in Neustadt and May's attention to moments in history when administrations: "did, and did not, conform to 'usual practice' – plunging towards action, depending on fuzzy analogies, paying insufficient attention to the issue's own past, failing to think a second time about key presumptions, adopting stereotyped suppositions about other parties and putting too little effort into seeing choices as part of any historical sequence."[4] Following these scholars, Green suggests there is value in asking coworkers to "tell me a story" instead of "what is the problem," to encourage them to use narratives to put the issue at hand into a historical context, and to avoid the usual pitfalls that come with thinking in the moment.[5]

Roberts and Green are two examples of the value of a historical education for people working in public policy development. I think graduate history programs should see this as a strength, instead of viewing everything aside from a tenure-stream appointment as a failure. Programs could work to better prepare graduate students for this kind of work and provide ways – and bridges – for these historians to remain engaged with academia even as they take up jobs in government, NGOs and the private sector.

For those who remain in the university there are a lot of challenges involved with remaining 'active' beyond their early years of graduate school. The academic mantra is to publish (peer-reviewed books and articles) or perish. Public engagement and dissemination does not count for much when presented to hiring, tenure or promotion committees, although this is something that hopefully

Figure 1: New England Forest Cover and Human Population[8]

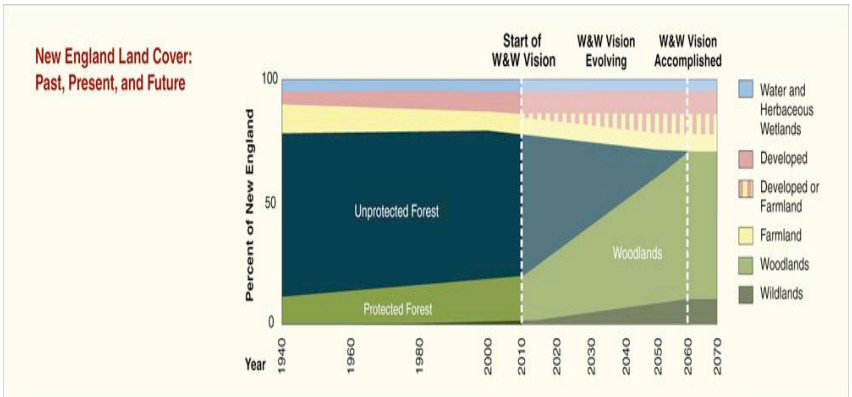


will change as the Social Science and Humanities Research Council increasingly makes public dissemination and engagement major priorities for large funding grants here in Canada. This would be a valuable development, because if historians could be freed up to get more involved in lobbying for a better future, they would have a lot to contribute.

The best example of Active History that I am aware of in recent years is a project in New England that I learned about in 2009. The *Wildland and Woodlands* project is an initiative mixing academics from forestry, ecology, and environmental history, who use their combined expertise to argue for a plan to preserve seventy percent of New England as managed forests and wildlands.[6] Historian Brian Donahue contextualized the forest history of this region, by providing a narrative of massive deforestation and then equally significant recovery in this region during the past four centuries. They propose a new policy based on history and science.

> The *Wildlands and Woodlands* vision calls for a 50-year conservation effort to retain at least 70 percent of New England in forestland, permanently free from development
> -90% of forests would be "Woodlands," conserved by willing landowners and sustainably managed for multiple uses, from recreation to wood products.
> -10% of forests would be "Wildland" reserves, identified by local communities and shaped only by the natural environment.[7]

Despite working with a team largely made up of scientists, David R. Foster, an ecologist and the director of the Harvard Forest, explained at the 2009 ASEH that their historical evidence provides the most compelling argument for adopting a more sustainable plan for the future. Brian Hall's simple graph (see figure 1)
Figure 2: New England Land Cover: Past, Present, and Future[10]



demonstrating the changing forests cover throughout history, provides a powerful rhetorical device when they meet with policy makers and politicians.

Figure 1 demonstrates a dramatic decline in the forest cover between 1600 and the mid-nineteenth century, the remarkable recovery in the following century, as well as the more recent trend towards another steep decline. This encapsulates the problem in a clear, concise, and poignant way. This graph gets people to think with history and it tells the story of the New England forests since the colonists arrived.

Brian Donahue's contributions to the *Wildlands & Woodlands* report are clear in the section on environmental history, near the beginning, that provide context for substantial contributions from ecologist and foresters. The histori cal section rovides some context to explain the dramatic change in forest cover since the colonial period. The growth of farms, villages and cities led to the steep decline in the forests in the south of New England through to the early nineteenth century. This section then references Donahue's research to explain how during the mid-nineteenth century, New England farmers shifted to high value crops on the best land and raised animals using cheap imported grain from the Midwest, leaving marginal pastures to return to forests.[9] In the twentieth-century, global transportation networks saw further improvement, making it more difficult for the New England farmer as he or she sought to compete in national and global food markets. As a result, a large amount of farmland transitioned back to forest. This section continues to provide an overview of the history of forest conservation in New England and demonstrates the long tradition of local stewardship, upon which the *Wildlands & Woodlands* project hopes to build a regional plan. After this historical context, the report discusses the current threats facing the forests and proposes a future with a sustainable balance between urban and suburban spaces, farms, managed forests and protected wildlands.

Again, Hall's second graph (figure 2) encourages the viewer to think his-

torically, by noticing the growing trend of development replacing forest and then presenting alternative versions of the future. I know historians, with good reason, are wary of using history to predict the future. However, I think we can more safely demonstrate historical trends and provide a range of possibilities for the future to help provide context for policy debates. It is also worthwhile noting that Donahue is a well-respected historian - his book *The Great Meadow* won the 2005 George Perkins March Prize for the best book in environmental history. He presents a good example of a historian's ability to research and write academic history, while working to influence the present and the future.

My background in British social and environmental history provides a number of examples of engaged historians including E.P. Thompson and the British Marxist historians, the History Workshop movement, the role of David Rosner and Gerald Markowitz as expert witnesses in court cases against the lead and chemical industries, and HistoryandPolicy.org.[11] In fact, it was reading books by these 'active' historians that inspired me to think about the ways I could connect my research and training as a historian with my politics.

I am now a lot more involved with the Canadian historical community, and I know there is a long tradition of engaged history here in Canada, including scholars such as Craig Heron and Joy Parr who are published in this special issue. As a result, I no longer see Active History as something new, but instead as a new network to connect and support the efforts of engaged historians around Canada and beyond. The internet provides a new tool for Active Historians and I hope ActiveHistory.ca provides a portal to build community among historians, to share success stories and to reach out to the wider public. I believe it remains vitally important for our new generation of historians to bring new energy to active traditions established by social and feminist historians. We also need to build more bridges between university history departments that the wider public. This is essential, because Anna Davin and Sally Alexander's words remain just as true today as they were in 1976, "history is too important to be left just to professional historians."[12]

NOTES

1 "Call for Presentations: Active History: History for the Future," *Active History Conference Website*, January 30, 2008, http://activehistory.wordpress.com/2008/01/30/cfp/.

2 John Tosh, *Why History Matters* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

3 John Arnold, "Why history matters - and why medieval history also matters," May 2008, http://www.historyandpolicy.org/papers/policy-paper-81.html.

4 "'Tell me the story' – Thinking with History, Policy, and the Goldberg Rule," *ActiveHistory.ca*, May 18, 2010, http://activehistory.ca/2010/05/tell-me-the-story-thinking-with-history-policy-and-the-goldberg-rule/.

5 Ibid.

6 "Wildlands & Woodlands," n.d., http://www.wildlandsandwoodlands.org/.

7 Ibid.

8 David Foster et al., *Wildlands and Woodlands A Vision for the New England Landscape.* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 5.

9 Foster et al., *Wildlands and Woodlands A Vision for the New England Landscape.*, 7; Brian Donahue, *Reclaiming the Commons: Community Farms and Forests in a New England Town* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999); Brian Donahue, "Another Look from Sanderson's Farm: A Perspective on New England Environmental History and Conservation," *Environmental History* 12, 1 (January 1, 2007): 9 -35.

10 Foster et al., *Wildlands and Woodlands A Vision for the New England Landscape.*, 6.

11 Harvey J. Kaye, *The British Marxist Historians* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1995); Gerald Markowitz and David Rosner, *Deceit and Denial: The Deadly Politics of Industrial Pollution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); *The Raphael Samuel History Centre*, n.d., http://www.raphael-samuel.org.uk/; Barbara Taylor, "History Workshop Journal," *Making History: the Changing Face of the Profession in Britain*, n.d., http://www.history.ac.uk/makinghistory/resources/articles/HWJ.html; Alastair Reid and Simon Szreter, "History & Policy," *Making History: the Changing Face of the Profession in Britain*, n.d., http://www.history.ac.uk/makinghistory/resources/articles/history_and_policy.html; *History & Policy: Connecting Historians, Policymakers and the Media*, n.d., http://www.historyandpolicy.org/index.html.

12 Sally Alexander and Anna Davin, "Feminist History," *History Workshop*, 1 (Spring 1976): 6.