

## The Call of Passive History

*Thomas Peace - York University*

Since its inception, I have had a somewhat uneasy relationship with Active History. Don't get me wrong, I have been a fairly strong supporter of both the Active History conference and the website that spun out of it. But since Lisa Helps, Victoria Freeman, Jim Clifford and I began planning the conference, Active History: A History for the Future, I've met with a number of people with significant and important concerns about how these projects have been conceived and what we claim to be doing. It's not so much the ideas behind Active History that I have struggled with as much as the name and the belief that Active History marks the beginning of a new type of history or new way of doing history. These are valid concerns and have helped to develop my sense of what Active History is and where it fits in the historiographical cannon.

Just after we started planning the conference a friend of mine approached me and asked me to define Active History. After telling her that Active History is about exploring the ways that historians and communities engage with each other, she asked a much more haunting question: "So if there are Active Historians, who are the passive historians?"

The question startled me, because I had not considered that the name 'Active History' might imply to some that there is some form of passive history. At the time, I – like my friend – could not conceive of a passive type of history. Doesn't all history, both good and bad, require research, thought, and reaction? There may be armchair historians, but these people often have fairly clear political agendas and often fairly loud voices – hardly the traits of a passive historian. I also wouldn't describe any of my colleagues as passive historians, nor can I think of anyone working in a history-related field that fits into this category. But as I spent more time thinking about this question I realized that there is such a thing as passive history – and it relates directly to Active History.

One of the principle challenges facing historians is that the past is accessible to everyone. Unlike other professions and trades, such as law, medicine or pattern-making, which are restricted by knowledge, skill and ability, everybody shapes and creates their own versions of history with varying degrees of professional help. Examples of this abound. Individuals and communities are shaped by personal experience, family history, local and national folklore and myth, and historical research. Although some people – often amateur historians or genealogists – take a more engaged approach to the past, many people learn history passively through television programming, visiting historic sites on summer vacations, or from family story-telling. From these narratives we construct our place in the world and the ways in which we think it can be shaped.

This is passive history. It is a sense of the past that is acquired through minimal effort – though sometimes with the help of professional historians and officially sanctioned historic sites. It informs our decisions, behaviour and worldview. Passive history does not mean that the production of historical interpretation is haphazard or sloppily put together, nor does it discount the deep sense of meaning that many people get from the past. The term refers more to how people receive historical information, rather than how it is produced. Passive history is not intentionally learned, but instead acquired while engaged in other sorts of activities, or it is learned through a framework that conforms to a person's pre-existing understanding of the world. In other words, it is a supportive rather than a transformative way of consuming history. Another way to think about it would be to see passive history as a way of *using* the past rather than *thinking with* the past or thinking historically.

Although I did not realize it at the time my friend asked the question, Active History is a response to this type of passive history. Both Active History: A History for the Future and ActiveHistory.ca, the website that we created once the conference was over, respond to the reality that many people – who value history, or might value history – have neither the time nor energy to learn history in the ways that it is taught in high schools and universities (through the academic monograph and lecture) or even through many public history sites. In a 1998 survey of how Americans engage with the past, Roy Rosenweig and David Thelan found that many of their respondents claimed an interest in learning history, but that most chose to shape their own histories rather than embrace the interpretations of professional historians and history teachers.<sup>1</sup> Most of their respondents focused on personal aspects of the past, particularly centred on the family, rather than on larger or more abstract themes.<sup>2</sup> Rather than being merely passive observers of the past, however, these people actively engaged with the past in ways that helped them shape their present and future.<sup>3</sup> In my mind, Active Historians seek to research and present the past in ways that help people to incorporate a broader context into their more local family and community histories.

What comes across clearly in Rosenweig and Thelan's research is that many people engage with the work of historians sceptically and for some - 5.2% of respondents - academic historians are almost completely without credibility.<sup>4</sup> Without abandoning the rigour that marks historical study, Active History seeks to engage with people and communities on their own terms. In an effort to restore that trust, the ideas behind Active History are centred on respecting the different ways that people have learned about the past, while seeking to also engage with their historical interpretations in a constructive manner. Ultimately, Active Historians are those historians who seek to engage and shape passive history, and similar uses of the past, in ways that help to reflect the high quality work and analy-

sis being produced by amateur and professional historians in the archives.

Active History has been practiced for a long time and is perhaps best manifest through politically engaged historians (of which there is no shortage). Labour, Gender and Oral History have perhaps seen some of the strongest manifestations of an Active History approach. We think of the work of Mary Beard and Charles Beard, or more recently E.P. Thompson, Natalie Zemon Davies, and Howard Zinn. In Canada the work of Craig Heron, Jennifer S.H. Brown and Joy Parr, among many others, have shaped a more active approach to studying the past. Active History was alive and well long before we used the label to encapsulate these ideas.

It is no coincidence that Active History has emerged in Canada at the height of these scholars' careers. Rather than being something new, Active History marks the parallel development of a number of historiographical trends. It is one representation of the coming together of similar ideas that have been discussed for decades in many and diverse sub-disciplines of history. Active History, as a concept, seeks to provide a forum, context and platform through which university-based and non-university-based historians, archaeologists and genealogists, among many others, can discuss the ways in which their research, methodologies and ways of communicating their results intersect.

Active History: A History for the Future and ActiveHistory.ca are just two small projects that are part of this wider trend. In Canada there have been many recent developments that have pursued similar goals. Concordia's 'Sharing Authority' conference in 2008 brought together scholars from around the world to discuss collaboration between communities and researchers doing oral history projects. The Canadians and their Pasts project – which shares many similarities with Rosenweig and Thelan's work – is less focused on the way that historians engage with the public, than on the historical consciousness of the public and the more passive ways that people engage with the past. Most recently the program from the 2010 annual meeting of the Canadian Historical Association, which focused on storytelling, reveals the wealth and diversity of historians working on topics which could be labelled as Active History and panels focused on similar themes.

Jocelyn Létourneau's *A History for the Future: Rewriting Memory and Identity in Québec* and John Tosh's *Why History Matters* have encapsulated this growing interest in carrying out this type of history. Both books probe the way that history helps to situate us in the present and plan for the future. Létourneau's work explores the way that the past has been interpreted in Quebec, suggesting that much of the historiography on Québec has been shaped by visions for the province's future. He argues that instead of limiting this future, historians should seek to be bearers of hope, who "through their work of writing the past as history... must strive to open the future as wide as possible."<sup>5</sup> Tosh makes a similar argument in a much less theoretical, and much more concrete, manner. His book

argues that an engaged citizenry requires a critical understanding of the past. The book stresses that a critical citizenship shares many similarities with historical inquiry: "Identifying what is distinctive about the present, enlarging our awareness of the possibilities inherent in the present, and situating the present in the processes which link it with the past and the future."<sup>6</sup> For both historians, the central point is that the role of history is to serve the present while looking towards the future.

These books both address the problem and challenge of passive history. Tosh well summarized common critiques of the heritage industry which focus on the way that many people (passively) learn history at popular heritage sites: "Many of our most popular heritage sites encourage a view of the past which is superficial, nostalgic and conformist; they are not so much a means of education as an adjunct to tourism."<sup>7</sup> Engaging with the past in this way assimilates the past to the present eroding the difference brought about by the passage of time.<sup>8</sup> This is often how historians envision passive (and often very bad) history. The point spinning out of this, though, is not that heritage sites are more for tourism than education. Instead, it is the realization that experience and place are two important ways that people engage with the past.<sup>9</sup> Too often historians fail to capitalize on this way of relating to the past; we miss opportunities to challenge the public to engage with the past.

I do not know of an historian whose practice serves as a better example of how to seize these opportunities than Joy Parr. From her early work in *The Gender of Breadwinners: Women, Men and Change in Two Industrial Towns 1880-1950* where she both researched and worked in the industries and communities she studied to her more recent work with the Walkerton Inquiry on tainted water, she has taken a unique path which has navigated between respect for the people and communities which she studies and historical rigour. The Megaprojects New Media project, which she led with Jon van der Veen and Jessica van Horssen, serves as a model of engaged public history. The project's website presents the stories of six different megaprojects in Canadian history and the way that they were experienced by the people living around them. It engages people by drawing on different ways of understanding and learning the stories of these communities. The story of Asbestos, QC is told through a graphic novel narrated by the mine, whereas the story of the Bruce Nuclear Power Plant is told through oral interviews, and the story of Iroquois, QC through a street tour.

Parr's work, particularly *The Gender of Breadwinners* and her recently published *Sensing Changes: Technologies, Environments, and the Everyday, 1953-2003* weaves together the disparate loose ends of passive and active history. By focusing on how people make sense of the world, and particularly how these experiences are embodied, her work resonates with the early Annaliste idea of the 'dirty hands' approach to history whereby historical insight is gained through both research and

direct experience in the field.<sup>10</sup> At the heart of her research lie the people with whom she is working, forcing her to engage with their ideas about the past and their -and her- place in the world.

I experienced some of the ideas that Parr has put into words and practice while living in L'Arche. L'Arche communities are places where people with varying gifts and abilities build relationships with each other by living together in community. At the heart of L'Arche are men and women with intellectual disabilities, known as core members because of their central role in the community. One of the activities common to many L'Arche communities is the tradition of building life-story books. These books tell the story of core members' lives through photographs, letters, and news clippings of events that are important to that person. Many core members have difficulty expressing their desires verbally and need some assistance constructing their life-story books. An assistant, or a friend, will usually help construct the book with them. These people will actively listen, ask questions, and make suggestions to help the core member shape the vision for their book, as well as help to collect content that will be meaningful for the core member. Even though this material is often not textual, through the images and mementos broader themes become apparent. A life-story book almost always weaves the larger stories of the community and society into the person's personal narrative. In linking personal stories to their broader context, the relationship between the core member and the people involved in these projects is important. It involves trust, open communication, and a willingness to be vulnerable with each other.

This is the heart of Active History and what ultimately drew me into this project. It is the idea that historians need to connect with the people on whom, for whom, and with whom they are working, engage with their vision of the past and provide the tools, resources and information for which an even greater and deeper understanding of history can be developed. This is a two-way process through which both the historian and the people in the community being studied have something to give and something to gain. It is not without risk, either. Pressures of time, particularly when trying to complete a dissertation, distance, other commitments, and thoughtless words all shape the dynamics of these relationships. But rarely, if ever, is Active History – or Active historians – perfect. Rather, Active History is an ideal. It is a process and experience through which historians place themselves in a place of vulnerability, seeking to engage with the people whose history they research and write, learning from them and asking forgiveness when they make mistakes, providing a deeper sense of the past and its context.

It is in this sense that Active History is a type of political action more than a single political stance, statement or perspective. Active History confronts and challenges passive history, which in Canada has ignored some of the darker – but important, and often central – aspects of the past in favour of a more nation-

alist and conformist narrative. In responding to, and engaging with, passive history, Active History seeks to better contextualize and situate the way that the past is envisioned. Like some of the historians I listed above, it is about embodying and employing the principals that governed many of the historiographical shifts of the 1960s and 1970s in our research, writing and dissemination. Again, rather than re-inventing the wheel, Active History is an attempt to reinforce these ideas in an effort to promote a deeper public understanding of, and engagement with, the past.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelan, *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 177-178.

<sup>2</sup> Rosenzweig and Thelan, 21. The exception to this is when personal experience and the experience of larger groups coincide – this is often linked to racism and other forms of discrimination. See 22 and chap. 6.

<sup>3</sup> Rosenzweig and Thelan, chap. 3.

<sup>4</sup> Rosenzweig and Thelan, 91. Percentages can sometimes be deceiving. If Canadians share similar attributes to the Americans in this study. There are around 1.7 million people who are relatively sceptical of the work that we do.

<sup>5</sup> Jocelyn Létourneau, *A History for the Future: Rewriting Memory and Identity in Quebec*, (Montreal-Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004), 27.

<sup>6</sup> John Tosh, *Why History Matters*, (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2008), 7.

<sup>7</sup> Tosh, 11.

<sup>8</sup> Tosh, 11-12.

<sup>9</sup> Rosenzweig and Thelan, chap. 4.

<sup>10</sup> Paul R. Spickard, Kevin M. Cragg and James V. Spickard used this term to encapsulate the research and writing of Marc Bloch in their historiographical survey, *World History by the world's historians*, (Toronto: McGraw-Hill, 1998), 504.