2020 OHS AGM Keynote Address Transcript
Dr. Tim Cook
"Public, Popular, and Academic History in Canada"

Michel Beaulieu: So, without further ado, I'd like to introduce the keynote address for the hundred and thirty second annual general meeting of the Ontario Historical Society.

Dr. Tim Cook is the acting director of research at the Canadian War Museum and the author of 12 books including two published this past year: an edited collection with J. L. Granatstein entitled *Canada 1919: A Nation Shaped by War*, which came out last week, and a major appraisal of memory and commemoration, *The Fight for History: 75 Years of Forgetting, Remembering, and Remaking Canada's Second World War*, which will be published this upcoming September.

He is a director for Canada's History Society, a recipient of the Governor General's Award for Popular Media, and a member of both the Royal Society of Canada and the Order of Canada. It's with great pleasure that I introduce you all to Tim Cook who will talk today on public, popular, and academic history in Canada. So welcome Tim.

Tim Cook: Thanks very much, Michel, and thank all of you who are with us still.

It's a great honour to be here. I typically lecture standing up and moving around the room, so I'm sitting still and trying to remain framed here. But it is a great pleasure to be with you today.

As you've heard, I'm a public historian and I've spent about 25 years in government, first at the National Archives of Canada and then and now still at the Canadian War Museum. I'm also an academic historian. I have the history PhD, the secret club with our handshake to get us in and out.

And I suppose I am a popular historian. Now that phrase "popular" was a label that took some time for me to accept. Why? Well, among professional academics "popular" tended to mean a lesser form of historian. Less serious, less cutting-edge, a recycler of old information in a jazzed-up way as opposed to creating new knowledge.

When I received the Pierre Berton Award in 2014 that Michel just mentioned, the Governor General's History Award for Popular Media, I again bristled a little, not wanting my work to be defined as being popular, even though I think it is. My wife Sarah upon hearing me mumbling about the label pointed out that surely it was better than being an unpopular historian, and she was right. She also opened up one of my books and pointed to the thousand or so footnotes and asked if perhaps one could be creating new knowledge and be popular at the same time. I think one can and I like to define myself as a public historian.

Academic, public, popular: these things can work together. In fact, they should work together, mapping upon one another to enrich and share our history. Now in Canada we have a system, just as it is around the world, where most young people are trained in the historical profession in universities. At the undergraduate level, those in history are taught about the discipline. They're instructed to read critically and to write analytically. They encounter concepts like historiography and how theoretical approaches help to frame interpretation.

And yet, even at the Masters and the PhD, most of these students will not become professors. Most, I think, will be teachers, accountants, lawyers, countless other professions. However, many will enter the public history realm of archives, museums, galleries, historical sites, historical journalism, or the many fields that offer jobs to history graduates, both those with an historical background and those in public history, that realm that reaches and tells our stories to the broader public, all of those people, I think, will be more deeply grounded in the country's past and with knowledge and tools to better understand the present.

I'll go so far as to say that they will be more engaged citizens. Historically minded, I think, are better suited to contributing to how our country moves forward into an uncertain future, and always with no roadmap to guide us other than the one that has come before us.

Perhaps most importantly, I have always thought that the great strength of historians and the historically minded is in seeing connections that others do not. Especially those who are untethered, who live with little grounding in the past.

So who wouldn't want to be a historian? Well, apparently a lot of young people today. History as a field of study in the university is in sharp decline. With every professor I've talked to in Canada, the United States and Britain, enrollments have dropped significantly over the past decade. In quantifiable numbers, sometimes the enrollments have been cut in half. Other times, like at York, with one of the country's largest departments, by almost two-thirds over the last decade.

Now some have pegged this to the 2008 financial collapse and the fear that emanated from that primarily that universities had better stop fooling around in the liberal arts and better start getting young people prepared for jobs. No doubt, the staggering debt loads forced other students to such conclusions. The periodic but steady barrage by some journalists that a history or an arts degree is only training smart young people to be fast-food workers or Uber drivers certainly does not help.

Fewer seem to pay much attention to the equally periodic but steady commentary by those in the business world who say that they often prefer students from the arts for their ability to write and communicate, and they can be taught the other aspects of the job, be it finance or being a public servant.

Now I don't teach anymore – I taught for many years at Carleton – but I have sent at least two MA students who studied history to Bay Street. And during the hiring process, that is exactly

what I was told, that they can be taught how to do those jobs, and I won't pretend to know what you do on Bay Street, but that the history background was crucial.

In this digital, connected world with its unceasing demands of the immediate, in which the time for quiet reflection is rapidly evaporating, where the slow is eschewed and where young people are barraged by hundreds of tweets and alerts every day, the training of historians is not an insignificant shield. It's also a sword with which to cut through the noise to find clarity.

And yet still the numbers of history students drop at universities. This is all the more perplexing when history still seems to be of significant interest outside of the academy. In fact, it seems to be on an upward surge. History is all around us in the public sphere. It is in our films, in our novels, in the digital world, in our streaming services, everything from the annual blockbuster to *Outlander* to Netflix's counterfactual *The Plot Against America*, to dozens of other shows.

History is also constantly in the news and informs our politics. If one is to take the long view, as history trains us to do, if Quebec sovereignty and the interpretation of charter rights were the defining questions across Canada from the 1960s to the end of the century, this generation's three defining questions, I think, are the environment, diversity and inclusion, and of course reconciliation.

Of course, any serious discussion about the environment links the past to the present, while addressing diversity, inclusion, and reconciliation is steeped in history and has forced Canadians to think critically of our country, the winners and losers, the treatment of others, questions of education, culture, heroes, and even genocide.

There are no easy answers to any of these pressing societal issues, but being historically minded offers some additional insight and grounding to pressing questions around us, both in Canada and around the world.

Just as history swirls around us, we have also attempted to stake it down. Monuments are one way to do this, and we have built or are building new national monuments. One to mark the Holocaust in Ottawa, unveiled in September 2017. More recently, a decision for a new Afghanistan memorial to be unveiled sometime around 2023. And also, the forthcoming memorial to the victims of communism.

This building of monuments, an inherent act of history making that is grounded in the present, forcing us to reflect on the past and creating key anchors of understanding for future generations, is very much part of the society we live in today. And these structures reveal that public history is often contested history.

So too is the recent movement to remove, deface, or tear down monuments of the past that offend us in the present. I don't have time to explore this subject in its full detail required, but there are opponents and supporters who almost always turn to history as a justification or a

defense. Is it hooliganism or heroic action? Are they well thought out actions to festering historical wounds or impulsive mayhem defined by anger and anguish?

Are these wretched monuments that must fall because they keep faith with lost causes, or is it legitimate to keep hurtful monuments to remember people in the past who are different than us today? In countries around the world, one sees all of these questions motivating action. And yet, all are deeply entwined with history and its depiction in public spaces.

Public history continues to be reflected and refracted through many prisms in Canadian society: in our books, graphic novels, social media products and podcasts, and even a continued interest in scrapbooking. We have seen a return to victory gardens in this pandemic and the repurposing of Second World War posters with positive COVID-19 messages.

From public spaces to private spheres, our houses and dwellings are often filled with history heirlooms and family artifacts that connect us to the past. So too does the study of our family's history. Genealogical research is thriving. There are robust sites like Ancestry and even DNA testing to know more about our deep origins. We turn to our photo albums and we remember the stories of our elders, and we continually engage with those who came before and passed on before we were born. In our historical engagement with our own families, we find connections. We unearth stories we did not know, and sometimes, yes, we encounter hard truths.

The retiring boomers are driving some of this renewed interest, but it is not just them. Archives across the country, the national, provincial and local level, are all making their collections available for easier access and profound exploration into our shared history for people of all ages.

Museums are important sites of education, and attesting to the strength of history in our society, there are several new national museums. In recent years, we have had the Human Rights Museum in Winnipeg and the elevation of Pier 21 in Halifax to a national museum status as the Canadian Museum of Immigration. The Canadian Museum of History opened in 2017 a reconceptualized Canada Hall which is visited by the better part of a million people each year.

In all of these museums, the presented history is not uncritical and it is not sanitized. Most museums are no longer cabinets of curiosity or temples to knowledge. But often they are spaces of disputed history, of questioning as much as answering, of protest and activism or at least providing the knowledge to carry forward such ideas and action.

Most of the staff in these museums have thought deeply about how to share stories of our collective past, including whose history is included and whose history is left out, which groups have a voice and which are silenced, and how the history is interpreted and presented. And they are being visited. The Canadian Museum of History draws 1.2 million visitors a year, the War Museum about 550,000, the ROM about 1.3 million, to name some of the biggest in Ontario and Quebec.

And there are the historic sites like Upper Canada Village and the many forts: Henry, York, Wellington. There are the house museums, the heritage buildings, the railway sites, the cemeteries, the historic barns, the lighthouses, and the list goes on. All drew significant visitors before COVID and they will again.

These cultural sites and places of living history are intricately tied to tourism, and profitably so for the local communities in which they are situated. In 2017 there were 8.1 million trips to historic sites across Canada, 8.1 million. That same year, in 2017, there were 19,000 employees in 2,700 museums across the country. And, not to drown you in statistics, and another study in 2019, it found that visits to galleries, libraries, archives, and museums contributed some 8.6 billion, yes billion, to Canada's economic and social prosperity.

History matters. History's value can be quantified. It stimulates economies and it creates jobs. Now this isn't the primary reason why history should be studied, in my opinion. I think these historical sites enrich our local communities. But to quantify the cost and the value of history is one way to show how it resonates with Canadians in our provinces, in our communities, in our homes, and in our hearts.

I want to return in my final minutes here to that conundrum of dropping enrollments at university. There is a resurgence of history around us in the broad realm of public history. It seems that universities should lean into public history. Of course, it has already begun to happen. At a basic level, most history department websites have sections on what jobs history grads can get. This is a useful practical guide to combat some of that ill-informed thinking that the arts will only lead to a job at McDonald's.

I also see a smattering of courses in digital history in a slow but growing number of public history programs. For one in a public history position, I would suggest that the instruction and the practical uses of history might include the study of places and spaces of history making, of the digital and the real, of matters and controversies related to archives, museums, historical tourism, and paid consulting, and how all of these historical issues and events play out in society and the workforce.

All of this and more, I think, is important and are important foundations, when combined with other academic studies and of course historical research and work, for the future public historians.

As a final thought, what attracts many young people to history is the story of the past. They encounter these stories through their grandparents and parents, in schools, museums, and as noted above, in many parts of everyday culture. The story is, I think, what keeps many older people also interested in history, when they are not forced to study but instead read and visit and surf the net for pleasure.

Both the elderly and youth and all those in between are drawn to those stories that move us to pride, to frustration, to tears, and often to action. Within the public history environment, the

story is key, even if many voices are presented and public history sites, plaques, and museums are increasingly shaped by concepts of historical thinking and of questioning the past.

I have always thought that history must be taught, presented, and written with passion. But nor should we lose sight of the impact of the story and narrative, of people’s struggles and triumphs, of the extraordinary in the mundane, and firing the imagination and enticing young students to make those choices to study history in the university.

So I will end with a modest plea to the academics and the public historians. For the academics, to think more about how academic history can be presented to resonate in a public history environment. And for the public historians, to continue to work with the academics to form profitable relationships and partnerships and to feed back into the academy, from where everyone in the profession comes.

Together we can surely make history popular again in the universities. It already is outside of them. The past, I am certain, has a future. Thank you, merci.

Michel Beaulieu: Thank you very much, Tim, for a very engaging and very interesting presentation. So just want to remind everyone, please do use the Q&A function or the chat function if you do have any questions.

I do have one already that has come in and you'd mentioned it in your presentation, digital but also in terms of physical in place. And the question is, could you comment on not only digital but the role and need for physical historical sites.

Tim Cook: For the sites? Yes. Well, I think my talk was largely about the sites, the physical sites. I think the digital is crucial and has become more so. I wouldn't want to say that the crisis we're living through has any silver lining, but it has forced archives and museums and historic sites to think about the digital, to lean into that.

And yet I think the tangible is absolutely crucial. The places we visit, the artifacts we hold, the photographs that we can grasp in our hands and study, that is the stuff of history. The material culture and the visual culture I don't think can be replaced with the digital. I think the digital can complement. And yet nonetheless to be standing in a place of history and a site of memory, to hold those artifacts, to be engaged with your body and your mind, and I think with your heart as well, is absolutely crucial to the public history story.

Michel Beaulieu: Okay, thank you. Next question is, when did history enrollment start to drop off and is it recent?

Tim Cook: As far as I can tell, and I'm not an academic anymore, I think, although I taught in universities until about 2011, but the drop off seems to have been pegged by many historians at around 2008. And that's the same in Britain and in Canada and the United States, that I know

of. And of course that was the financial meltdown. And from that point forward there was a significant drop and it was steady to the present.

Now, the positive element here is that we who I think are trained to take the long view may see this as just a blip – 12, 13 years is a blip in our historical cycle – and it may be coming back up and I've talked to a few academics who've said that the numbers are starting to climb. So this is encouraging.

I think it also coincides with some of the things I mentioned in the talk, the digital world we live in and all the other elements there. But I do think that we have to fight, that we have to fight for our history. History is hard. I think it would be fair to say that most of the people listening to me here are probably advanced in age. When I speak to people across the country, I am very strong, I say, with the demographics of people over 65. I go to high schools as well to speak, but history can be a tougher sell for young people.

In all cases, we know that it takes champions. It takes champions like this society and the people who volunteer here. It takes champions across the province and across the country. We have to fight for our history. We have to tell our stories. We have to make it important to governments, who have multiple reasons not to spend money on history and culture. And we need to show why it's important, and I think many of us know quite intrinsically why it's important, but we must work at it and get those stories out.

And I think that this also includes professors in the universities who need to work harder to make their courses relevant, to make their stories resonate, and to fire up, as I said in my talk, fire the imagination of young people so that they too can know and be guided by the importance of understanding our shared history.

Michel Beaulieu: The next question, and you did touch upon this as well in your presentation, but to what role do current issues have related to what could be termed historical amnesia.

Tim Cook: I think we live in a digital world. We live in a world now, I think, with young people who are going into universities who were born in a digital world. This adds new complexity. As I touched on and talked in the paper, the immediate, the constant barrage of our news cycles, 24 hours, and of social media, and everything that is out there to crowd out our history, to crowd out our shared past.

And I believe that it takes work. It takes work to read a history book. It takes work to read a historical novel. It takes work to do that genealogical research, and to go out there to save your local cemetery, and to restore a barn, and to go through all of that.

And I do think that, yes, that we're living in a very different time period. And that may be contributing as well to why it's more difficult to get students, younger people, into studying history. And yet, as I pointed out in my talk, public history is all around us. It informs our discussions, our politics, our culture. It informs our monuments. It is everywhere.

And I think that those who have no concept of the past and have no grounding and remain untethered are far more likely to be carried away by whatever currents are pushing us in our rapid day-to-day lives.

Michel Beaulieu: Okay, we've got a few more questions that have come in. I think you've spurred some discussion here on the some of those last comments.

So the first one is, is there any movement, in light of the ongoing travel restrictions, for national museums collaborating with local and regional museums to get to continue them to further their mission throughout the country?

Tim Cook: That I don't know. I think what we are seeing in this unprecedented period is a greater cooperation between museums and archives to get material out there. And I think of museums really leaning into the digital products. But of course this has been going on for many years.

I think that there are fruitful relationships. I'm a part of Canada's History Society. One of the things that society tries to do is to connect community historical sites and museums across the country. And you can go to the Canada's History Society webpage there.

I think that we just saw an announcement two days ago from the federal government that money would be put aside for both national museums in a Phase One, and then Phase Two local and community museums. And so you may want to look that up. And it looks like that there will be some support to ensure that our shared history does not wither away in this very desperate time that we are living through.

Michel Beaulieu: Thank you. Next question is, historians in the United States often appear in mainstream media, propelled by current politics in that country. That's not often the case in Canada. Is there much hope that can be changed?

Tim Cook: Yeah, that's an interesting question. And I have thought about that because when I have been in Britain and France and the United States, you find historians in the media. They're on television. They are asked to comment on key issues of the day. And of course they bring a, I think, a powerful and unique perspective, often connecting the chaos of the present with some better sense of the past.

It does not happen in Canada and it's difficult to say why that is. It wasn't always that way. If we think of Underhill and Creighton and Lauer, some of the historians from two generations ago, they were public commentators. They were asked for their opinions.

And even a generation ago, and I think probably still to this day, and in the realm of national history, in political history, key figures like Granatstein and Morton and Bercuson and English and Bothwell were all part of that mainstream discussion.

But it's not even across the board and it tends to be political and military and national historians. And I think as we move forward to this day, it becomes harder and harder for historians to have a voice in the media. This is something that I do, as some of you may know, around anniversaries, Remembrance Day, Vimy Day, VE Day, VJ Day. And I think it's an interesting and important aspect for the historian.

I see it as part of my job as a public historian to talk and to share these ideas with a broad public. When else are you going to be able to speak to 800,000 people which, I gather, was the reach of my Remembrance Day discussion last year. So that's an incredible opportunity.

At the same time, it comes with some frustration. As I am talking and rambling on here, I would have been cut off by a producer speaking in my ear a long time ago to get to the point. And so, it isn't that you must speak in sound bites, but you must speak with clarity and, I think, find a way – and this is not an easy task – to share the complexities of the past in a very short and crisp way.

Having said that, I think it's important that historians do that because we bring something important to these discussions.

Michel Beaulieu: Thanks, Tim. It is an interesting point. As you were talking, I was sort of thinking about individuals like Eugene Forsey, and the role they had behind the scenes with government and being sort of on the Rolodex – or the speed dial wouldn't have existed then – but the ministerial discussions, the corridors of power, for their historians behind the scenes where this is slightly changed in the last number of decades.

So that's it for the questions that have come in. So on behalf of all of us who have been attending and listening to what has been a fascinating presentation, as well as questions, thank you on behalf of the Ontario Historical Society for taking your time out of your Saturday and being our keynote for our one hundred and thirty second Annual General Meeting.

Tim Cook: Thank you so much.