



**THE ENGINEERING INSTITUTE OF CANADA**

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**L'Institut canadien des ingénieurs**

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# **ENGINEERING HISTORY PAPER #1 "Documenting the History of Engineering in Canada"**

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There are no definitive written histories of engineering in Canada, although there is a surprising amount of miscellaneous related material in this field. There are also a number of books covering engineering generally or specific subjects within the context of engineering and its disciplines. Until quite recently, there was also a dearth of consolidated institutional material related to the profession, except in so far as it was covered in articles and news items in the professional institute, society and association magazines. These magazines have also been a major source of (usually brief) biographical material, augmented by a very limited number of books. Universities and companies have also been slow to produce books describing the historical development of their engineering activities.

Generally speaking, academic historians have been reluctant to discuss or describe engineering developments that have influenced the political, economic and social factors that are their principal concerns. The lack of source material that meets the professional requirements of academic researchers is, of course, one of the principal disincentives to such discussions and descriptions. Academics also appear to be skeptical of the contributions of enthusiastic 'amateurs' to history of any kind, since these contributions do not necessarily meet their professional criteria. On the other hand, it is often the enthusiastic 'amateurs' who have the necessary technical backgrounds to explain the essence of the engineering in the same way that economists can help guide historians through the complexities of developments in their field.

Attempts to introduce the history of engineering as a discrete subject - especially to non-engineering students - have been less than successful and the recent reductions in research funding within the academic sector have further weakened this situation. But while the separation of the history of engineering from the other aspects of history can be useful, the integration of it with these aspects will be by far the more important development in the future. In other words, both avenues need to be pursued and both professional and 'amateur' contributions will be needed.

As a result of the situation just described, the public's awareness of engineering and its influence on the development of Canada and on the lives of its citizens leaves a gap yet to be properly filled. Add to this the general lack of interest of engineers as a group of professionals in the activities of their colleagues in years past and the situation becomes more complex still. Nevertheless, in recent years there has been a welcome increase in the interest some engineers have taken in the history of their field, and more articles and papers on the subject have been published.

Some of the recent initiatives have originated with the Engineering Institute of Canada and its Member Societies and with a number of the provincial Professional Associations. The Institute has sponsored a number of History Committees in past years, its most recent being the establishment of a Standing Committee for History & Archives in June 1999. The principal thrust of this Committee's work will be to promote awareness of the history of engineering in Canada, and it will do so in a number of ways including the encouragement of research and publication and the commemoration of Canadian engineering achievements.

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