

## Should we can Canadian history?

Globe writers John Ibbitson and Michael Valpy go head to head on the importance of Canadian heritage, history and mythology

JOHN IBBITSON AND MICHAEL VALPY  
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**John Ibbitson:** *Studying Canada's past is parochial — not to mention divisive. And who really cares about Louis Riel anyway? Bring back the history of Western civilization*

Your province's history curriculum is propaganda designed to brainwash children and stoke ancient resentments, and should be abolished.

A Canadian history curriculum, properly constructed, would focus primarily on the role that our nation has played in the ongoing advance of Western civilization — the most important fact of the human story. Paul Johnson splendidly defended this approach in his introduction to *The Offshore Islanders*, way back in 1972.

"What ideas has Soviet Russia produced?" he wrote. "Or Communist China? Or postwar Japan? Where is the surge of discovery in the Arab world? Or liberated Africa? Or, for that matter, from Latin America, independent now for more than 150 years? It is a thin harvest indeed, distinguished chiefly by infinite variations on the ancient themes of violence, cruelty, suppression of freedom and the destruction of the individual spirit."



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(Ed Schnurr for The Globe and Mail)

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Hope for humankind, Mr. Johnson declared, "lies in the ingenuity and the civilized standards of the West." When other civilizations have matched its political, economic and cultural achievements, "then will be the time to change the axis of our history."

Nothing that has happened since 1972 suggests that the axis needs to be changed.

Since Canada is, uniquely, a union of the English and French cultural and political traditions, a history curriculum based on Mr. Johnson's bracing premise would properly instill in both native-born and immigrant children the roots of Canada's Constitution, laws and customs, and our place in the progress of the world.

But history isn't taught that way any more. Today, all civilizations are viewed as equivalent, and if the West is currently on top, that's only because it excelled in rapacity and greed. This is rot, of course, but it's the sort of rot that fills too many teachers' heads. Since it's no longer possible to teach history properly, better that it not be taught at all.

Mind you, even if I could get the history curriculum reshaped to my satisfaction, I wouldn't, because I do believe in a liberal democratic and multicultural Canada, and the cornerstone of both is respect for the other. I may not agree with my friend Michael Valpy's approach to telling the Canadian story, but he has every right to it. Neither of us, though, has a right to force either of our potentially incompatible philosophies on the young.

One of us could earn that right, if we succeeded in making the teaching of history an election issue. What a fun election that would be, with Conservatives defending Eurocentrism, the Liberals promising a "balanced" approach, the NDP urging that Marx be given a second chance, and the Bloc Québécois constructing a chronology of humiliations. The winner of the "Whose History?" election would get to write the history curriculum, because winners always do.

Sadly, elections are invariably about more mundane things, and without the sanction of the ballot we're back to competing philosophies, none of which have political legitimacy.

Besides, studying Canadian history has arguably done the country more harm than good. Grave injustices were inflicted on Canada's native people, but their relentless obsession with those injustices prevents too many native leaders from getting on with the job of improving things.

Too many Westerners ignore their current blessings, preferring to dwell on Central Canada's historical colonial mentality toward the Prairies.

Too many Quebeckers continue to nurse ancient resentments, as if anyone cared a fig any more about the rebellions of 1837 or the hanging of Louis Riel.

None of the one million people who are arriving here every four years care, nor should they. Their ancestors didn't dishonour any treaties with first nations; they had nothing to do with interning the Japanese during the Second World War.

Most of them are fleeing parts of the world with far too much history; the last thing they need is to be introduced to a fresh litany of grievances.

That isn't to say the past should be obliterated. The better way to teach history would be to embed it in other subjects. A revived and expanded music curriculum, for example, would include studying the history of music. The science curriculum could incorporate the history of science.

And the civics curriculum — which truly does need to be entrenched and made mandatory — should contain within it the evolution of political philosophy from Plato to Mill. (Nothing good happened after Mill.)

Since music, science and political philosophy are all largely Western achievements, we'd get Paul Johnson's history curriculum in through the back door, while the relativists weren't even looking. And wouldn't that be fine?

*(John Ibbitson is a columnist and correspondent in The Globe and Mail's Washington bureau).*

**Michael Valpy:** *Sex in canoes — as well as other facts and myths about Canada's past — defines who we are. Dropping Canadian history from the classroom is the ultimate dodge*

We don't want to kill off the teaching of Canadian history. Or dilute it. We want to be smarter and more diligent about it, more devious than we have been in the past about making it serve the integrity of the nation.

Because anything else is a cop-out that gives up on Canada.

Because those of us who live here together now, and who will be joining us in the future, are entitled to stories about our common experience, derived past and present from our institutions, laws, customs, behaviours and relationships to each other and to our land.

Because the country itself is entitled to a history of what has transpired within its borders.

The preponderance of thought among today's academically prissy (historians and educators alike) is that national history is ruled out by our limited identities — Albertan here, Québécois there, black, Asian, aboriginal, women, urban, rural, rich, poor and so forth. There's an attitude, moreover, that Canadian historiography is an immutably flawed project, forever fleeing one ideological captor only to be imprisoned by the next.

Thus, pan-Canada history is offered to us as a desiccated husk — relativist and sucked dry of juice, like Christmas, lest it cause any offence. And the events of our past are deemed irrelevant to hundreds of thousands of immigrants turning up each year who are encouraged to think Canadian history begins with their arrival and who care, in John Ibbitson's words, not a fig why the 1837 rebellions occurred or that Louis Riel got hanged.

However, there is this matter of what holds us together. Because without a sense of the common experience and the common project called Canada, we won't do things together — fix medicare, support public schools, for that matter go to Afghanistan.

"It is through history," McGill University historian Desmond Morton says, "[that] we learn to recognize and weigh the different interests, beliefs, experiences and circumstances that guide human beings inside and outside their own societies."

It is a shared past that makes English- and French-speaking Canadians resemble each other more than they resemble other North Americans and provides us with shared values and attitudes.

There have always been two ways of talking about the past. They are complementary, interwoven, and both are essential to the formation of social cohesion and national culture.

The first is the account of historians who explore and interpret events of the past. The second is meaning-endowed narrative, or mythology: what we believe about ourselves extrapolated from events of the past and historians' accounts — regardless of whether our beliefs are correct.

To illustrate, I listened to a woman at this week's Anglican synod explain how the boundaries of her Saskatchewan diocese were determined by canoe routes and thought of Pierre Berton's aphorism that a Canadian is someone who knows how to have sex in a canoe.

Historic account and derived mythology — with both narratives elevating the canoe to iconic significance in terms of how Canadians think about themselves and their past on both sides of the language divide (Pierre Trudeau's writing on the canoe approaches scripture) and from every generation and ethnic origin.

There are other examples: the mythologies that nothing about the country is simple, that French-English relations are our central and unique theme, that we're a nation of historic losers, that collectively we make liberal choices and embrace a pluralistic society — increasingly a dodgy assumption — and that just about everybody has come here to get rich... All beliefs that shape how we think about ourselves and act together.

And if our historians and teachers — and journalists — are not bent on rooting out what is common to us all from the past, it is because they're lazy or regionally bitchy and parochial or sunk in blinkered ideology.

Fortunately we have historians who still see the whole country.

Prof. Morton calls his book *A Short History of Canada* "a user's manual to help the current residents to take advantage of the country with the least damage to themselves and their fellow citizens."

McMaster University's Vivian Nelles, in *A Little History of Canada*, tells the country's story through the metaphor of a masked Haida dancer, where the mask changes as the country changes through the years, but the dancer remains always the same.

The University of Manitoba's Gerald Friesen's eloquent *Citizens and Nation: An Essay on History, Communication, and Canada* tells the stories of ordinary Canadians responding to events around them.

How should we tackle the history of Canada? Carefully and cautiously, Prof. Morton says; finding room for all the participants, loud-mouthed and silenced alike, winners and losers. "In the end, we shall rediscover that history is adult entertainment."

*(Michael Valpy is a writer with The Globe and Mail. )*

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