

History is more than just what happened

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It is May, 1783. George Washington, victorious general, founder of a nation, has come to a farmhouse outside New York City. With full military honours, Washington greets Sir Guy Carleton, the British commander who must consign British America to history.

For Carleton, it is a moment of humiliation. British forces are still strong in New York and other redoubts but the British government has decided to cut its losses. It is Carleton who must tidy up affairs and sail away - effectively abandoning Loyalist Americans.

Sitting across the table from Washington, Carleton is determined to salvage a few scraps of dignity. He informs Washington that, in contravention of signed treaties, several shiploads of Loyalists "of all colours" have left New York for Nova Scotia.

All colours? Washington is furious. The negroes taking shelter with the British are escaped slaves. Stolen goods. He himself has suffered such losses, as have most of the American leaders who would one day be known as the Founding Fathers. This property must be returned.

Carleton replies that the escaped slaves took up service with the British during the conflict in exchange for a promise of freedom. He will keep that promise. The honour of the Crown demands it.

Angry words are exchanged. The two sides dig in. "There was nothing more to be done," writes British historian Simon Schama in *Rough Crossings*. "Washington pulled out his watch, 'and observing it was dinner time, offered Wines and Bitters.'"

Ultimately, Sir Guy did keep the British promise. And more. Of the 3,000 blacks in New York given the precious certificates which allowed them to embark on British ships for Canada, more than 800 admitted they hadn't actually served the British. They were simply escaped slaves who wanted freedom. And Sir Guy Carleton, ignoring the instructions of his government and the wrath of Washington, gave it to them.

It's a beautiful story. But whose is it?

Is it American history? Or British? Or is it our own Canadian history?

Thanks to another dismal Dominion Institute poll, the release of Paul Gross's film *Passchendaele*, and the publication of two important new examinations of Canadian history - John Ralston Saul's *A Fair Country* and Andrew Cohen's biography of Lester B. Pearson - we are in another of our periodic bouts of concern for memory.

By now, the complaints are familiar: Canadians know so little Canadian history; the schools aren't doing enough; we must tell our stories.

All of which is true. We need more books like Cohen's insightful and accessible life of Pearson. We need more reconsiderations like Saul's claim -startling and fresh, if not convincing - that "we are a people of aboriginal inspiration."

And we desperately need more Canadian stories told in film, the medium that dominates popular culture.

I was in France for the celebrations marking the 80th anniversary of the end of the First World War. I spoke with the ancient survivors, their eyes red-rimmed and watery. I saw the endless rows of names chiselled into the Vimy memorial. For struggling to restore that titanic conflict to Canadian imagination, Paul Gross deserves the gratitude of a nation and a vanished generation.

So, yes, we must tell our stories. But what stories are those?

What is Canadian history?

The naive tend to think history is a treasure chest just waiting to be dug up. Inside, there are gleaming facts and stories. The hard part is the digging.

History, in this view, is simply a record of what happened. As the great 19th-century German historian Leopold von Ranke put it, history is *wie es eigentlich gewesen*. How it actually was.

In reality, history is far more difficult than this because facts and stories - the gold in the treasure chest - are merely its raw material. After they are unearthed, their meaning must be gleaned. It is this act of interpretation that is the telling of history.

There are, of course, better and worse interpretations. An interpretation that is in accord with the broadest possible array of facts is a good interpretation; one that overlooks or contradicts available evidence is not. But there is no final, correct, interpretation, which is why complaints that someone is "re-writing history" are silly. History is always being re-written. That's what history is.

Gross's interpretation of Canada's Great War history is decidedly modern. War, militarism, and bigotry are condemned in *Passchendaele*. The villain of the piece is not a German but a bald, fat, pompous, conniving British officer who struts about spouting imperialist nonsense until he finally goes to the front line, reveals himself to be a coward, and dies a miserable death. (I suspect German propagandists might have thought Gross laid it on a little thick.)

The hero, a Canadian soldier played by Gross, is everything the Brit is not. Honest. Plain-talkin'. Brave in battle. He has no use for politics, doesn't care how the war started, and is loyal only to his comrades in the trenches.

The sharp division Gross draws between Canadian and Brit - with the British Empire shoved over to their side of the line, thank you very much - is also thoroughly modern. Canadians today see this country as a sovereign nation with no special link to Britain. The British Empire is, at most, an embarrassing reminder of the time when we were colonial subordinates; for many, it is a costume drama set in India.

This neat division between "Canadian" and "British" is something Gross shares with John Ralston Saul, and many others.

But interpreting early-20th century history through this prism is a serious mistake. The overwhelming majority of Canadians of the time saw "Canadian" and "British" as overlapping identities, just as Canada was a country and a proud part of the British empire. That we don't share this perception today is irrelevant. That is how "it actually was."

Now, let's go back to that farmhouse outside New York City. Is the history happening inside American, British or Canadian? The simple answer is "yes." It's all these things. (It's also African history because many of the slaves struggling for their freedom had been brought to the Americas in bondage and some, after spending some time in Nova Scotia, would return.)

We think these categories are mutually exclusive because we have lines drawn on our maps and minds. But the participants would not have recognized our lines and when we impose them on the past, we produce bad history.

We also shrink Canadian history. Instead of a grand, complex, interwoven saga spanning much of the globe - a history that includes Sir Guy Carleton telling George Washington to stuff it - it becomes the story of a patch of ground and the people who lived on it.

It becomes, in a word, parochial.

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