OUR HOME AND NATIVE WHAT?



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Every Canada Day, a new survey reveals Canadians' abysmal lack of knowledge of our own history. A few years ago, one such poll found that only half of those questioned knew the name of Canada's first prime minister, and far less than half (37 per cent) knew even the first line of Canada's national anthem. If surveys can be trusted, what do these results mean? Are we really that uninformed and disinterested in our own past? And what about all those American school children who can recite the names of Presidents from George Washington to George Bush, and proudly sing every word of "The Star-Spangled Banner"? One thing is for sure, Canadians are proud to be Canadian, so what's the problem?

The overwhelming success of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's "*Canada: A People's History*", as well as the more recent search for "The Greatest Canadian" are proof that our citizens are hungry for substance. But despite the significant work of organizations like Historica and the Dominion Institute, short of banning all American television, movies, and print media, Canadian children who rely on these sources for information will undoubtedly know more about American history (and the American perspective) than Canadian history.

In a June 2003 National Post article, Thomas Axworthy provided a good example of the problem of American culture. Axworthy points out that after seeing the World War II epic *Saving Private Ryan,* one would not know that, in reality, Canada's Third Division moved further inland on June 6, 1944, than either the British or American armies. Dominion Institute founder Rudyard Griffiths suggests that no matter how much funding we delegate to Canadian culture, we will never be able to compete with the all-pervasive American culture. In Griffith's words, "the classroom is one of the last zones of Canadian sovereignty".

This brings me to the second reason why teaching Canadian history is so challenging. The second largest land mass on the planet with a mere 30 million residents, Canada is fortunate to have an astonishingly diverse geography, which naturally leads to differing economies and cultures all within one massive country. We are also fortunate to enjoy one of the most de-centralized democracies in the world, which enables our provincial and territorial governments to focus on regional interests. But our size and governance also present enormous challenges.

Although most Canadian students are taught about the main developments and events in Canadian history, in the absence of national curricula and standards, little Canadian history is taught in the early grades and is an elective in high school in most provinces. While students are exposed to a smattering of topics from Aboriginal history to Confederation, rarely is there a sense of chronology.

In *How to be a Canadian Even if you Already are One,* Will and Ian Ferguson begin sarcastically: "Canadian history is incredibly boring." They proceed to describe a fascinating and dramatic story that would rival any Hollywood blockbuster. Why should we learn about our history? For so many good reasons, including the fact that without context, we are doomed to repeat mistakes and make ill-informed decisions about our present and our future. The best reason, however, is because our history is, quite simply, captivating. How we can best teach it is a difficult question given our influential neighbour and our impressive geography. The necessity of finding answers is of the utmost national importance, because, as Thomas Axworthy writes, "history is to citizenship as mathematics is to science – the essential prerequisite." Our great country of Canada deserves nothing less.