ON THE TEACHING OF HISTORY IN CANADIAN SCHOOLS

ABSTRACT

Dawn Williams reflects on the importance of making visible all of the richness and complexity of those who contributed, and continue to contribute, to Canadian history. Her recent book of biographies, Who's Who in Black Canada, attempts to fill a gap in the visibility of important contemporary black figures. Our history is far from boring, she asserts.There is no need for Canadians to be enamoured of American history, ours is just as cruel, powerful, fascinating.

In the 1970s when I was in elementary then secondary school, the teaching of Canadian history did not include the past of people who were not white, and only to a limited extent, that of members of the country's native population. Outside of being told about slavery, for which a grade five teacher apologised to me beforehand, hoping, as she said, that I wouldn't find it "too embarrassing," my education about "real" Canadian history would not begin until I entered university. There, through independent readings, I began to find out, piece meal, about the richness and complexity of Canadian history. Perhaps things are different today but I think not: I still hear young Blacks say that they did not learn about Black presence in Canada until they got to university. And I think, well, if they don't know about Blacks being in Canada from at least early in the 1600's, what about their peers who may not be Black and therefore less motivated to find out about "the history of others" in Canada? Surely Blacks must appear as "invisible" in Canadian history to whites and other ethno-racial groups as they do to Blacks.

Yet, Blacks, to name just one group, are sprinkled liberally throughout Canadian history. Many people have not heard of Viola Desmond, a Black businesswoman who, in 1946 was arrested for sitting in the "whites only" section of a local movie theatre in New Glasgow, NS; fewer still have heard of Mathieu da Costa, a Black of Portuguese descent, who, in the early 1600s acted as interpreter between Samuel de Champlain and the MicMacs in Port Royal. Perhaps if I had heard the story of Marie-Josèphe Angélique—the Black slave in Quebec who, in 1734, upon hearing that she was to be sold, whether accidentally or deliberately, set off a fire which led to half of Montreal burning down, for which she was tortured, hanged, and her body burned—I would have found a Black Canadian female resistance fighter (perhaps as controversial as Louis Riel) to emulate instead of immersing myself in Black American literature in search of an identity which would help me see a place for myself in this society.

Canada has always been reluctant to mention the "less glorious" chapters of its past. Only in more recent years have we been hearing more openly about the internment of the Japanese living in Canada, during WWII, or been reminded that the Chinese – whose labour and loss of lives insured that Canadians would be connected "from sea to shining sea" way before the advent of air travel – built the railroad that traverses this great country. But these admissions have not come voluntarily. Rather, they are the results of years of pressure and mobilization by descendants of Japanese- and Chinese-Canadians who wanted to "set the record straight" in honour of their ancestors and for the sense of belonging of future generations.

But why this reluctance to tell the history of those who have contributed to making this country and to those who have made it great? Is it because the information is not known? Highly unlikely, since there is no shortage of books, from early elementary to post-graduate levels, dealing with the various influxes of people, weaving a rich tapestry, forming an attractive patchwork quilt called Canada.

Perhaps it is due in part, like my grade five teacher's embarrassment over slavery, to a misplaced sense of guilt for actions carried out by others and from which their descendants continue to benefit. But why should those in the present assume guilt for matters over which they had no control? Only by choosing to ignore the past or, at worst, to deny it, do we then become complicit in whatever wrongs of omission or commission were enacted by previous generations. Regardless of how controversial or even painful a past may be, we owe it to the memory of those who lived it to remember. If we remember, we grow, we evolve, we insure that their efforts were not in vain.

…Canadian History is Boring

Is Canadian history really boring or is it simply that we do not tell it well? If we were a nation of storytellers, of people who still embraced the richness of the oral tradition and who could add colour to the

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happenings of the past and bring it to life, we would hold our young in thrall, fire their imaginations and stoke their curiosity about who, and how, and why. After all, Canadian history is as rich with rogues and heroes as that of the Americans! We admire their history but think nothing of ours. But what, outside of a Hollywood-type presentation, is so vastly different between American and Canadian history? Each had a large native population which was decimated by the greed and cunning of the newcomer, with both native populations ending up on reserves; they had buffaloes, which were killed for sport, we had beavers, which were killed for their pelts; they held Blacks in slavery, resulting in land cultivation and the accumulation of wealth for the white owners, we held Blacks in slavery for the prestige of showing chattel ownership; they had The Founding Fathers, we had The Fathers of Confederation; they had the Pilgrims, we had, *Les filles du roi*; they had gunslingers and cowboys who settled the Wild, Wild West—in Canada, we had them too; they did not allow women the vote until 1920, in Canada women were eligible to vote from 1916; they had Kennedy, we had Trudeau…characters, events, one as rich as the other, differing only in the telling! This is the stuff of which plays and great fiction are written. We have yet to recognize this in Canada.

…Teaching History Today:

Now, more than ever, it is imperative that Canadian history as it is taught in the classrooms reflect the history of those *in* the classroom, and situate them within the Canadian mosaic. According to Statistics Canada's 2002 Ethnic Diversity Study, "People of non-European descent accounted for 13% of the population aged 15 and over, or 2.9 million…(non-Europeans [originate from] Asia, Africa, Central and South America, the Caribbean, Australia and Oceania.)." Canada is proud to proclaim that it is home to one of the most multi-ethnic populations in the world, yet studies show that these various groups are being left to live on the fringes; foreign-trained professionals have difficulty being accredited here and their previous experiences are not considered relevant. What are the implications for the children of these more recent immigrants? Will they see Canada as "home," as a country that has adopted and embraced them and to which they want to contribute? Or, will they disengage, feeling that since their parents were not valued, their own efforts too will be wasted? This is a situation that Canada can ill afford: with the country's declining birth rate and rapidly aging baby-boomers, Canada needs a well-trained, highly productive and *tax-paying* population to maintain the social structure to which we have become accustomed and for which we are the envy of the rest of the world. To do this, the various peoples who inhabit this land need to feel they belong, they need to feel welcome, they need to have their experiences and their origins recognized, they need to see themselves reflected in course material and in those who teach this course material.

…My Story

When I embarked upon the writing of *Who's Who in Black Canada*, it was out of concern for the lack of visibility (*not* lack of presence) of Blacks in contemporary Canadian society as leaders, as achievers, and as role models. Having seen them in government, business, medical and academic settings, I knew they existed. My concern was that if I – a fairly well-educated and well-travelled individual about to enter my fourth decade – could find few examples of Blacks who were successful being portrayed in the media and public forums, it would be even more difficult and more disheartening for those in their first or second decade of existence. Recognising this omission and its possible detrimental effect on the self-esteem of young people – especially since Black presence in Canada has been documented since at least the 1600's – I felt it incumbent upon me to provide an educational reference which could be used by teachers, students, and those providing career counselling to help situate Blacks within contemporary Canadian society. Such a reference would be helpful to young Blacks looking for "identity" and role models; it would also serve to educate other students who are not Black. And ultimately, I would provide those in the teaching profession with examples of successful Blacks who could be identified as guest speakers, serve as research topics, or just offer additional reference points to complement the teaching of history or science or literature, or other courses in the classroom.

As it often happens with such undertakings, it was the initiator who was first impacted by this research. Indeed, my intuition and initial sense of justification were confirmed. Of the 700+ people identified and profiled in this book, many have fascinating stories and set inspirational examples. These include: neurosurgeon Dr. Renn Holness who was the first in Canada to carry out fetal transplants to treat Parkinson's disease; Dr. Olufemi Olatunbosun who has pioneered medical techniques in obstetrics and gynaecology; Dr. Daurene Lewis who, in 1984, became the first Black in Nova Scotia and the first Black woman in North America to become mayor of a city (Annapolis Royal); Charmaine Hooper, captain of Canada's women's soccer team; Mr. Justice Julius Isaac, the first Black to be appointed to the Federal Court of Canada; Lloyd Richards, director of the ground-breaking, *A Raisin in the Sun* who in 1959 became only the second Black ever to direct a play on Broadway; Prof. Chris Ross, in 1992, became the first Black Dean of a business school (John Molson, Concordia U.); award-winning writers, Émile Ollivier, George Elliott Clarke, and Lillian Allen; soil specialists Dr. Constantine Campbell and Dr. Valin Marshall; Willie O'Ree who in 1958 became the first Black to play in the NHL…And the list goes on to include journalists, engineers, ophthalmologists, business leaders, designers, judges, academics, elected government representatives, and many more.

Those who use a book like *Who's Who in Black Canada* recognize that history does not always need to be taught chronologically, from the past forward; that by beginning in the present one can inspire learners to *want* to look back and learn more. It is that motivation, that inspiration which needs to be captured and harnessed to encourage young people to ask *how* and *why*. There is a lot of rich material available and many wonderful stories to be told about how Canada was *and is* being made. If we can use our imagination as educators and as citizens to motivate young people, they will feel inspired to take their place in society and contribute fully, knowing that they too can achieve and succeed and that history will remember them.