WHOSE HISTORY DO WE COMMEMORATE IN PUBLIC SPACES?

DUNCAN McCUE

Award-winning journalist Duncan McCue is host of Kuper Island, an eight-part podcast on residential schools for CBC Podcasts. He's been with CBC News for over two decades. In addition to hosting CBC Radio's Cross Country Checkup, he's been a longstanding correspondent for CBC-TV's flagship news show, The National. McCue was part of a CBC Aboriginal investigation into missing and murdered Indigenous women that won numerous honours, including the Hillman Award for Investigative Journalism. In 2017, he was presented with an Indspire Award for Public Service. McCue teaches journalism at the UBC Graduate School of Journalism and Toronto Metropolitan University. He's the author of a textbook, *Decolonizing Journalism: A Guide to Reporting in Indigenous Communities*. He was awarded a Knight Fellowship at Stanford University in 2011, and a Southam Fellowship at Massey College/University of Toronto in 2020. Before becoming a journalist, McCue studied English at the University of King's College, then Law at UBC. He was called to the bar in British Columbia in 1998. He holds an honourary doctorate from the University of King's College. McCue is Anishinaabe, a member of the Chippewas of Georgina Island First Nation in southern Ontario.

Duncan McCue spoke with Randy Boswell, the guest editor of this edition of Canadian Issues, in July.

Q. What are your thoughts about the contemporary debate happening around statues, place names and other commemorative landmarks in Canada in the wake of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the Black Lives Matter movement, and the ongoing discoveries of unmarked children's graves at former residential school sites across the country?

A. I completely understand the concerns that people have raised. It really raises the essential question of whose history do we commemorate in public spaces in particular. That's the key question: Whose history is it? I cannot divorce myself from the fact that I'm Anishinaabe, and that when I look at the history of the city that I live in right now, Toronto, I don't see evidence of my people's presence here for millennia — since time out of mind. There are, for those who are particularly astute, that one of the main

thoroughfares — Spadina — comes from (Ojibwa) *ishpadinaa*, which is "high hill, or ridge"; we know that Mississauga, Etobicoke, Oshawa — these all come from Anishinaabemowin. But the average resident in the GTA doesn't know that, that those were placenames that were crucial to my people long before settlers arrived. Our history has been erased from the land here in the city. So likewise, with the questions that you then ask about what are the names of the streets, what are the statues that we see? Well, they have for the most part been settlers — whether it's Dundas, or the university that I'm a visiting journalist at, which was named for Egerton Ryerson. Now it's known as Toronto Metropolitan University as a result of this reckoning. On the one hand, Ryerson was being celebrated for his role as an educator. But put yourself in the shoes of an Indigenous student who was coming there and is an intergenerational survivor and learns the role that Egerton Ryerson played in helping design the Residential Schools policy. So, it goes to this question of whose history do we commemorate in public spaces, and it's totally understandable to me that BIPOC folks want there to be better representation.

What about the argument from critics that traditional Canadian history is being erased?

I don't think many people are proposing the erasure of the history. I think what they're objecting to is the commemoration of it, the celebration of it. And who is celebrated in this country — whose narrative is celebrated. I understand that change is difficult. For the most part, people don't spend a lot of time thinking about the street names; they walk past the statues and don't give them much of a notice. But that's because they've become just so ubiquitous in our lives, and we've accepted that narrative. I understand that change is difficult for anybody and that's part of the tension point, when we have heated discussions — battles even — over history.

What role do you see history and historians playing in the quest for reconciliation?

I think historians play a crucial role. You often hear: "No truth, no reconciliation." Truth is an important, critical part of what the TRC hoped would become reconciliation. And the reality is that many Canadians don't know the history of just Residential Schools, for example. Or the history of the contributions of Black Canadians, for example. Or the history of Asians in creating this country, etc., etc. It's been hidden. And in many cases, those histories have been actively hidden for a reason. With regards to Residential Schools, it's because Indigenous people have been dispossessed of our lands and so erasing their history from the lands was an important part of that process. The challenge for historians is that there are many versions of history. In journalism, we always talk about how there's two sides to a story. Well, that's actually simplified. There are many sides to a story... And there are many different versions of history. And so that's the challenge for historians — going through an evidence-based process to try to determine a narrative that has some kind of (comprehensive) basis to it.

When it comes to reconciliation, do you think it's possible to reconcile/weave together Indigenous and non-Indigenous historical narratives about the people and places in what became contemporary Canada?

I think we have to. To quote the Supreme Court of Canada decision in Delgamuukw — which is a critical aboriginal title case — there was a very simple line, but a profound one, at the end of that decision: "We're all here to stay." So if you accept that notion, settlers aren't getting back on the boats and leaving, and I don't think there are many Indigenous people that asking for that either. But I think we have to try to figure out, historians have to try to figure out how to weave together the narratives. Speaking from an Indigenous perspective, when contact happened, from the perspective of many of my ancestors, they say that weaving being possible. They certainly saw coexistence being possible. What they didn't expect was to have the Indigenous narrative erased. When you talk about having to intertwine historical narratives between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in this country, I do think it's possible. But what needs to happen is that the balance needs to be restored. That's what my ancestors anticipated when they came up with the wampum belt — which was two canoes going on the same river — or the treaties, which were a sacred and reciprocal relationship. The balance has tilted to one side — the settler side, and particularly the British/Eurocentric vision of the world. What people are asking of historians is to try to restore the balance between Indigenous and non-Indigenous viewpoints on the world.

Who would you say is responsible for repairing the relationship, and for the historical injustices committed against Indigenous people? For example, does blame today lie to a greater degree with descendants of settler-colonists of the past who disrupted and displaced Indigenous communities, sometimes violently? Are Black Canadians responsible for pursuing the project of reconciliation? Are displaced Jews from Europe after the Second World War? These are questions, in a sense, that revolve around definitions of a "settler".

I'm not going to weigh in on the definition of settler because I think that by itself is a complex question. But I will say that I think all Canadians have a role. It's not just white men that need to make reparations in this country. I often use the treaty example because I am a treaty Indian. There are a large group of Indigenous people who are not; they have unceded land in this country and they haven't signed treaties. But my analogy is this: We're all treaty people. If you want to understand the history of this country, you need to understand the treaty obligations. And the obligations aren't just for Indigenous folks. They are for all Canadians. So if you are an immigrant to this country, you have a responsibility as a treaty partner to learn the history and acknowledge the role of Indigenous people in this country. It doesn't matter what colour you are, or whether your ancestors were part of displacing Indigenous people or whether you just got off the plane at Pearson yesterday and are hoping to become a citizen.

How do you think contemporary Indigenous Peoples feel about Canada, and about their future within this nation-state? Is that even the right way to frame the future?

I think on this there is a lot of difference of opinion amongst Indigenous Peoples. We're not homogenous by any stretch of the imagination, either culturally and certainly not politically. If you talk to a Mohawk from Akwesasne, then they may have very different feelings about their place in Canada — or whether they're even Canadian. There are

many Haudenosaunee people who do not consider themselves Canadian. On the other hand, there are plenty of Indigenous people who fought in the war on behalf of Canada, who proudly wear Team Canada uniforms to compete in the Olympics on our behalf. I think the vast majority of First Nations people don't see themselves as separating from the country, but they do see themselves as having rights to self-determination.

You've pioneered protocols for "Reporting In Indigenous Communities" through the RIIC website and spoken often about how media coverage frequently reflects journalists' poor grasp of Indigenous history in Canada. In the years since the Truth and Reconciliation Commission specifically identified what the news media and journalism schools should do to help remedy these failings, do you see signs of progress?

Here's where I can be quite positive, because I do see there is progress being made. That's in part a reflection of the length of time that I've been in the industry. I am almost 25 years a reporter now, and when I broke into the industry there were very few Indigenous journalists. And I remember a time when we had to fight tooth and nail just to get any Indigenous content on the air at all. To use Residential Schools as an example, we would pitch Residential School stories and the reaction would be: "Well, we had a Residential School story last year, do we really need this one? What's new about Residential Schools?" I can trot out many examples of that. So, is there progress? Yes — demonstrably, evidence-based. In the past decade, we're seeing Journalists for Human Rights, for example, tracking the media reportage of Indigenous issues in Ontario, and slowly but surely we are seeing an increase in the quantity of content. And it seems that the quality of content is also improving. Not enough — we're still underrepresented in the mainstream media. But it's improving. There are efforts to create fellowships for young Indigenous journalists. There is an award for reconciliation journalism. I think all of these things are positive steps. But it's two steps forward, one step back in many ways. I can also point to atrocious headlines that have appeared in my own media outlet that are full of stereotypes and tropes, and we wish that those journalists knew better. But unfortunately, they don't. And we still see that equity in the newsrooms at CBC and elsewhere is still far below where it needs to be for Indigenous journalists and Indigenous news managers.

Even professional historians are at odds over complex, contentious questions like whether Indigenous nations in Canada have faced genocide, cultural genocide or neither. Journalists, typically working under time and space constraints, are often tasked with contextualizing news events and issues with deep historical roots. How can they improve what they're doing?

The short answer is that I feel for journalists. I've been there — in fact, I'm there today. I'm on deadline. And I know what it's like to be on deadline trying to become an expert on a topic and report it to the rest of the country — and the rest of the world now in an internet age — and to be factual and to get it right. I know how tough that is. I have a great deal of sympathy because we're called upon every day to become experts in a wide variety of topics. And we're good at it. We've got processes in place to try to check our biases, to try to do our best to make sure what we report is factual and balanced.

But that said, we all have unconscious biases. But this is a topic — Indigenous Peoples in this country — which is so essential that we have to be teaching it to journalists, just like we teach white-balancing [for TV camera colour calibration] and how to write a lead. Because the damage they can do if they don't do it properly is grave, and we've seen it over and over again. So that's a long way of saying I don't expect every journalist to become a wise sage of Indigenous culture and history and politics. But I do think that every journalist should be at least introduced to the basics of Indigenous history in this country so that they have some knowledge because every journalist in this country is going to interact with Indigenous people at some point in their career — and they can do damage if they get it wrong.

I think that cultural competency is a skill that can be taught to journalists. But it's not just a one-off, either — like take a one-hour workshop and good, we're done. It's a learning journey that newsrooms need to offer to their reporters and journalism schools need to offer to their students and then give them an opportunity to learn that skill and refresh that skill a couple of years later.

Your Kuper Island podcast series encompasses history and journalism on a very front-of-mind issue for many Canadians in a popular storytelling format. Can you discuss some of the challenges mentioned above in the context of this ambitious project?

One is the obvious one, about the history of Residential Schools being obscured and, in some cases, hidden. We've had a Truth and Reconciliation Commission in this country, and one might argue that that history is now freely available to anyone who wants to know it. But the truth of the matter is that the primary documents who want to dig deeper are still very hard to access. The National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation is the keeper of those documents and they are overburdened with requests and under-resourced. So if you actually want to dig in to the primary documents to try to get answers to what happened at over 100 schools in this country, it is very difficult. And in some cases, because the Catholic Church in particular has still not handed over documents, it's impossible. That's thing one. Thing two is something I talk about in the podcast, which is that when you're trying to have an evidence-based dive into the history of Residential Schools, there are two sources of material. There are the official records that were kept by church and government officials who, frankly, had motive to either ignore or hide some of the things that were happening at the schools. And then we have the memories of survivors, who were children when these things were happening to them. They were traumatized. And we know what the brain does when it experiences trauma. So those memories are also potentially fraught. That's another challenge in terms of historians delving into history. The third thing is just the challenge of a podcast. History is often seen as being dry and boring. How do you engage a wide swath of the public in something that's very important in an engaging manner that gets them to learn a history that they may not have learned in their history class. And that's a challenge of narrative and all kinds of other things.