CANADA'S HISTORY WARS ARE GOLD FOR POPULARIZERS OF THE PAST

RANDY BOSWELL is a Carleton University journalism professor and a senior writer with Postmedia News. In 2003, he launched a national beat aimed at generating news stories with a historical focus. In 2006, he was shortlisted by Canada's History Society for the Pierre Berton Award for popularizing Canadian history.

ABSTRACT

Debates about how Canadian history should be written and presented to the public offer important opportunities for journalists and other "popularizers" to spread awareness that — regardless of scholarly conflicts or controversy over government policies — the country's past is brimming with compelling stories.

In recent years, the subject of Canadian history has often been discussed in terms of laments, critiques and even *cris du coeur*. We have forgotten it. We have abused it. We have even killed it, as historian Jack Granatstein famously alleged in his 1998 book about the shattering of Canada's life story into jagged shards of memory. The rise of "social history," to him, seemed to elevate the racist, imperialist and thuggish aspects of our national history above the traditional, unifying chronicle of a successful country's political, economic and social progress.

That debate has flared again within the past year on several new battlefronts. The federal Conservative government's robust remembrance of the War of 1812 has received tens of millions of dollars in funding, gained unprecedented public promotion through special coins, stamps and TV ads, and won the high-profile attention of Prime Minister Stephen Harper on numerous occasions.

But the bicentennial has also sparked opposition accusations that the ongoing commemoration of the three-year conflict is more about supporting a "warrior nation" rebranding of our national identity than educating Canadians about a largely forgotten fight for North America.

Meanwhile, the government has also announced — as a flagship project for the 150th anniversary of Confederation in 2017 — the planned transformation of the Canadian Museum of Civilization into the Canadian Museum of History. The initiative has won praise from some of the most prominent historians and history writers in the country — Granatstein and bestselling biographer Charlotte Gray among them — while fuelling fear at the Canadian Historical Association, the Canadian Association of University Teachers and elsewhere that there may be unspoken ideological motives lurking behind the changes.

Questioning the erasure from the museum's rewritten mandate the goal of fostering "critical understanding," the CHA issued a statement in December warning that "critical understanding *should* be a goal" of the revamped Gatineau, Quebec-based institution, "encouraging visitors to consider multiple perspectives, critical analysis, and texts and displays that challenge master narratives, rather than simply venerating national heroes."

The CHA has also warned the government away from a vision of history that "emphasizes dates, events, heroes, and narrative timelines," insisting that "the writing and teaching of Canadian history has moved decisively away from such a one-dimensional perspective on our past, mainly because it leaves out the experience of the great majority of the Canadian population."

Meanwhile, budget cuts and service reductions at Library and Archives Canada and Parks Canada have drawn fire from defenders of historical research, preservation and presentation. Those flashpoints have also fueled suspicion that a federal government keen to honour Canada's history in certain ways is simultaneously strangling key institutions that protect heritage sites and support groundbreaking scholarship.

Heritage Minister James Moore and other government voices have repeatedly rejected such accusations, insisting that national museums and other heritage agencies are merely being struck with the same budget axe as all other federal departments — and in some cases with fewer hits. The governing Conservatives, Moore has essentially insisted, are the biggest champions of Canadian history that Parliament Hill has ever seen — and the long list of momentous anniversaries on their radar, from the bicentennial of Macdonald's birth in 2015 to the upcoming 100th anniversary of the start of the First World War in 2014, are offered as proof of that commitment.

Harper himself is writing a book about the history of professional hockey, something that might impress certain scholars more if they weren't worried that great sporting moments from Canada's past will soon be elbowing out displays about 16th century Basque whalers or Winnipeg General Strike agitators in the future Canadian Museum of History.

In short, Canadian history remains, long after the publication of *Who Killed Canadian History?* 15 years ago, a controversial subject. It's not just the well-known points of contention in the content of the past that keep stirring up trouble — the European subjugation of Aboriginal Peoples; Louis Riel's execution; the bombing of German civilians in the Second World War, and so on. It's also the institutional and scholarly framework in which we learn about such troubling episodes — and all the rest of our great national saga — that continues to generate debate, discussion and dissent.

For a journalist with the somewhat eccentric goal of making Canadian history a subject of headline-grabbing news, all I can say is: "Bring it on."

When it comes to debates about the way Canadian history is *being* written about or taught — or whether it's even being taught in some provinces — the jousting among historians, educators, think-tanks and politicians proves fruitful from a journalistic point of view no matter what the outcome.

Conflict catches a reporter's attention the way a twitching mouse catches a cat's: we pounce. And then a whole range of possibilities comes into play as experts spar over what stories are worth telling and the public, potentially, gets engaged in the conversation/shouting match.

These debates create openings to remind citizens about — you name it — the Jay's Treaty of 1794, the 1812 Battle of Queenston Heights, Josiah Henson's 1830 escape to Canada via the Underground Railway, the 1914 refusal of the *Komagata Maru*, the 1945 bombing of Dresden, the 1982 patriation of the Constitution.

One of the ideas behind my 10-year-old mission to make news out of history was that Canadians might benefit from periodic reminders in the popular press about events and people and issues from Canadian history that they might have only fleetingly encountered in textbooks years or even decades earlier. But journalism — including the editors who uphold the profession's adherence to certain news values — demands the production of stories with contemporary relevance, with a capacity to attract public interest, with an edgy, new development. And along with such news "triggers" as major research discoveries and reinterpretations, battles over crumbling heritage sites, newly erected tributes to war heroes and the appearance of noteworthy historical objects at archeological sites or on auction blocks, the quarrelling that sometimes takes place among advocates, administrators and chroniclers of history helps justify media coverage. More broadly, such battles are a reminder that so many stories from the country's past are worth struggling to resurrect and to share.

Were there too many triumphant tributes to white guys with muttonchops before the social-history revolution shook things up, adding some texture – and colour – to the canvas? Perhaps.

Has there been too ardent an embrace of historical marginalia ever since, to the detriment of more coherent, chronological, encompassing national narratives? Perhaps.

Reporters don't need to decide. But what they do need — and what, in turn, the reading/watching/ listening/ surfing public needs — is for the principal stakeholders in the Great Canadian History Debate to keep caring deeply about their arguments, to keep presenting fresh stories about the past in support of this viewpoint or that, and to continue fighting to protect heritage, to search for shipwrecks, to shed light on lost tales, to celebrate big milestones, to rewrite the canon or to retell the classics — it's all good.

For history-minded citizens (including history-minded journalists like me) the chief effect of all the attacks and counter-attacks over how we *do* history is a heightened awareness that this country actually *has* a richly layered past, that it matters to the present and future nation, and that it can be at least as interesting and entertaining as reality television.

Contentious claims prompt contentious counterclaims, stoking much livelier exchanges about history than previous generations of Canadians might have enjoyed. And the stuff of those debates — whether we're talking too much about the Chinese Head Tax or too little; whether apologies for the wartime internments of Ukrainians or Italians are warranted or not — at least exposes Canadians to some cobwebbed corners of history that might otherwise have remained overlooked.

It's similar to when the Historica-Dominion Institute decries Canadians' tenuous grasp on basic facts about the country's past — including the name of its first PM (see answer, next paragraph). The institute's main point is that our school systems seem to be failing to teach certain fundamentals of Canadian history, but at least those forgotten facts get a momentary spotlight thanks to the release of the survey results.

More people, it seems safe to say, know more than they used to about the shame of the Acadian Expulsion, of the cold Canadian response in 1939 to the Jewish refugee ship *St. Louis*, of the Residential Schools and Bomber Command. And they know more, as well, about the heroism of Vimy Ridge, of the Franklin Expedition and the Korean War, of Louis Riel, Sir John A. Macdonald and — yes — of Bomber Command.

The valour, the horror, the whole nine yards.

Canadian history is more grown up now, better able to encompass the multiple and sometimes conflicting storylines it inspires. And it has proven, above all, to be full of compelling stories: glorious, tragic, surprising, disturbing, comforting, funny and — to be sure — complex.