

No reason for anyone to think Canadian history is boring



Local author Ken Weber had plenty of reasons why Canadian history isn't boring.

By Bill Rea

Caledon author Ken Weber can't figure out why some people consider Canadian history dull.

He attempted to address that issue recently when he spoke to the Caledon East and District Historical Society.

One of the points he made was there was some discussion in the 1860s on what the country would be named, with the likes of Mesopalagia, Albionora and Borealia being in the running before the Fathers of Confederation settled on Canada.

Weber observed that when one considers the history of other countries, there's room for inaccuracy. He cited the example of England's King Richard I, also known as Richard the Lionheart, or Good King Richard. He's got the biggest statue in London's Whitehall.

But Weber pointed out he spent all but about six months of his 10-year rein in France and didn't even speak English. He was also something of a sex maniac, who went after both genders ???an absolute switch-hitter,? he said. He was also a commander in the Crusades, and was responsible for killing some 2,000 Muslim prisoners in one day. That means there's a reason for problems between Muslims and Christians today.

Or there is the adulation history has paid to the Duke of Wellington, who Weber said ?allegedly won the Battle of Waterloo,? and who was so hated by the public when he was Prime Minister that they used to throw garbage at his house. ?The battle could have gone either way,? Weber said, pointing out it was won when Gebhard von Blücher showed up with 60,000 Prussian troops.

There are also stories that another factor in the battle was Napoleon was not able to sit in the saddle because of hemorrhoids. ?The whole course of history changed because of Napoleon's piles,? Weber observed.

So it might be understandable how some would get the wrong idea about Canadian history.

Weber quoted the philosopher Voltaire as referring to Canada as ?a few acres of snow.?

He recalled that in 1985, The New Republic magazine ran a contest for the most boring headline possible. The winning entry was ?Worthwhile Canadian initiative.?

To prove Canadians aren't boring, Weber cited some examples, including the incident in 1996, when Prime Minister Jean Chretien put his hands around the throat of a protester.

He also mentioned an incident in the First World War, when the first sex-education pamphlet showed a prostitute trying to solicit a young soldier; a Canadian. Weber said out of almost 100 countries involved in the conflict, Canada got the honour because Canadians were in the lead when it came to venereal disease rates during the war.

?Canadians are hardly boring,? he declared. ?If anything, quite the opposite.?

Canadians have been behind some inspiring war stories. ?We just don't make a fuss of them,? Weber said.

He cited the Second Battle of Ypres, where the Germans used lethal chlorine gas for the first time. The British and French ran, but the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry didn't. ?It was the Princess Patricia's who stopped them,? Weber remarked.

There were other examples, such as in 1951, when the Chinese got involved in the Korean conflict and almost pushed the allies out. It was the Princess Patricia's who held on to the Kapyong Valley, and arguably saved the war effort.

Referring to individuals in Canadian history, Weber mentioned Emma Edmunds, who served in the union army in the American Civil War, disguised as a man. She became a spy, taking the name Frank Thompson, and was ordered to wear a disguise as a woman.

He also mentioned Thomas Neill Cream, a doctor who practised in Ontario in the 1870s, and then in Chicago and later in England. Weber said the problem with him was women in his circle tended to die. He was finally hanged in 1892, and it was reported his last

words, as he dropped down the gallows, were 'I am Jack The . . .?'

Mae Irwin from Whitby was the first woman ever kissed on screen in 1896 in a most famous Vaudeville performance. Weber said the Southern Baptist Conference and Methodist Clergy Association both condemned the film, which just made people more anxious to see it.

There are a number of 'firsts' that are Canadian that Weber cited, including the first world champion (sculler Ned Hanlan), first commercial oil well, first electronic toll road and the first country to go from colony status to complete independence without firing a shot.

The Edmonton Grads dominated women's basketball, compiling one of the most impressive winning records in any sport between 1915 and 1940. Weber said they folded because they couldn't find anyone to play.

There have been unfortunate moments in Canadian history too. Weber cited sprinter Ben Johnson having his gold medal taken back in the 1988 Olympics, the Empress of Ireland disaster in the Saint Lawrence River in 1914 which claimed the lives of more passengers than the Titanic and the Great Halifax Explosion in 1917, which he said was the loudest man-made noise before the atomic bomb.

Canadians can take some bows for helping with ecology. Weber mentioned Abraham Gesner, who invented kerosene. Prior to that, people used candles or whale oil to light their homes. After that, the number of whales killed went from 735 in 1846 to 35 in 1878. He told the audience of Grace Annie Lockhart, who in 1874 became the first woman in the British Empire to get a university degree. Weber explained that prior to that it was thought the work involved in advanced learning would make a woman infertile. 'She proved them all wrong by having five children,' he said.

Many people believe the Louisiana Purchase was the biggest land acquisition in history. But Weber pointed out Sir John A. Macdonald bought one-third of North America from the Hudson Bay Company for \$16 million.

There were also some scandals in high places. Weber said Sir Wilfrid Laurier and his wife Zoe never had children, but he apparently spent some time with his law partner's wife. Weber said Zoe moved out of Ottawa.

One of the problems with Canadian history is the school text books leave out a lot of good stuff.

Weber said William Lyon Mackenzie King is generally regarded as boring.

'He was a bit of a stud,' he said, adding Mackenzie King had a lot of affairs in his youth, making references in his diary to trips to the Queen and Yonge area of Toronto and how it could cost him a dollar. Weber also said Mackenzie King was one of the first prime ministers to bring in social welfare for those in need. What the history books don't tell is the professional prostitute would be found in certain areas, while the poor women who charged a dollard because they were trying to support their families would be found around Queen and Yonge.

Another problem Weber cites is Canadians are not very good myth makers.

He referred to the 1813 encounter between the USS Chesapeake and HMS Shannon. It only took a couple of minutes for Shannon to get the upper hand. The Chesapeake's Captain, James Lawrence, gained fame for his order 'Don't give up the ship!'

In fact, according to Weber, what Lawrence really said was, 'Blow her up. Sink her. Don't give up the ship!'

Weber concluded his talk with the words of Peter Munk, who said 'Canada is as good as it gets.'

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