



'National Dreams' Revisited

The creation of myths, or to put it another way, the creation of unity, requires some forgetting.

By: Daniel Francis, 2 July 2012, TheTyee.ca

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[On the fifteenth anniversary of his provocative book [National Dreams](#) about Canada's most powerful historical myths, we asked author Daniel Francis if we could republish on Canada Day his introduction to the book, prefacing it with his current perspective. We are grateful that he agreed.]

In the fall of 2010 I visited Ottawa to attend a conference of historians and history teachers. We were welcomed to the capital by Jason Kenney, minister of citizenship, immigration and multiculturalism in the Conservative government. After making some conventional remarks about how important it is for Canadians to know their own history, Minister Kenney made it clear that his government had a particular view of how that history should be taught. In his opinion, the teaching of Canadian history had taken a wrong turn by emphasizing social history -- i.e. the lives of ordinary people -- instead of concentrating on its proper concern, national politics and military achievement. The former approach tended to over-emphasize minor injustices and inequality, he said, while the latter highlighted nation building and feeling good about ourselves. (I am paraphrasing but this is what he meant.)

Minister Kenney, it turned out, was a combatant in the "history wars," a term given to the debates that took place during the 1990s in several countries, including Canada, about the proper way to teach history. In the view of people like Minister Kenney, history is a unifying force that, if conveyed properly, can reinforce Canadians' faith in our own institutions and belief in our own virtue. Conflict is out; patriotism and national pride is in. The chief proponent of this view was Jack Granatstein, retired history professor, former head of the Canadian War Museum and author of a couple of polemical books attacking the politically-correct multiculturalists and pacifist lefties who, he argued, had "killed" Canadian history by making it about grievance and trivialities. I had thought that by 2010 the history wars were over in Canada, that the two sides had found common ground somewhere in the middle, but apparently no one has told the Harper government which is busily promoting a view of Canadian history that recalls the old-fashioned, boring political and military history I was taught in the 1950s.

Everyone agrees that it is important for a democratic society to be knowledgeable about its own

history. But that assumes that there is "a" history to be knowledgeable about, which there isn't. There are competing versions of history. We know that Confederation took place in 1867, but was it a good thing or a bad thing? Whose interests did it serve? The answers to these questions depend on who is telling the story.

Fifteen years ago, when I published my book *National Dreams: Myth, Memory and Canadian History* (Arsenal Pulp Press), this was the issue I was trying to address. I wanted to investigate some of the prominent myths that Canadians tell themselves about their past. I used the word "myth" in the sense of strongly-held beliefs about, and explanations of, the past. I was interested in things like multiculturalism, the Mountie, the North, the wilderness. Where had these ideas about Canada originated and why did they play such an important part in defining us as a nation?

Clearly, if I was writing the book today I would have to consider some new myths, one of which would be the military myth, or the myth of the Warrior Nation, that the Harper government is trying hard to propagate. When I was writing *National Dreams*, it did not occur to me that the Warrior was one of the images Canadians have of ourselves. Of course Canadian soldiers fought in two world wars and did themselves proud. But they were simply citizens who took up guns in moments of crisis and returned to their normal lives when the crisis was over. In common with my boomer generation, when I thought of Canadian soldiers at all I thought, with some pride, of blue helmets and peacekeeping. The prime minister, however, wants to move the image of the soldier to the centre of the Canadian story. He wishes us to understand that Canadians are warriors now and always have been. The Afghanistan adventure is not some break with the past, and possibly a horrible mistake, but a continuation of our heroic military past, a past which has to be rescued from the neglect and distortions of liberal peaceniks. This is surely what is behind the \$28 million federal government commemoration of the War of 1812 that is going on this summer.

The "mythifying" (or should I say mystifying?) of the past is never complete. National myths are shifting things and require constant recalibration if they are to serve one of their fundamental purposes, which is to invoke the past in support of present policies. And that is the best reason I know to learn about history. Not to unite the country behind a feel-good story of national achievement but to be able to recognize a myth when we are fed one.

'The Story of Canada'

(This is Daniel Francis's original introduction to National Dreams, first published in 1997.)

"... nations are narrations." -- Edward Said

Like so many books, this one began as something completely different. Several years ago I became interested in writing about the Red Scare, the fear of imminent Bolshevik revolution which gripped Canada following World War I. The more I looked into the Scare, the more it became clear to me that each side in the 1919 debate was a prisoner of its own image of the other. Leftists and labour radicals conjured up images of rapacious capitalist oppressors; employers and government authorities responded with outlandish images of Bolshevik revolutionaries, funded by Moscow, rampaging through the streets of Canadian towns and cities in an orgy of free love and mindless violence. I am not exaggerating. Never has political discourse in Canada been so removed from

reality as it was in 1919.

As I studied this period, I became interested in the divergence between image and actuality, particularly in the disjunction between the squeaky-clean image of the RCMP as a stalwart defender of the law and the reality of the force's role during the Scare, when it was used to spy on Canadians and subvert their rights. The story of the RCMP is one of the great heroic myths of Canadian history. Yet here was the force acting like the secret police in some foreign dictatorship. This led me to begin questioning images and myths in Canadian history generally.

What were some of the major myths I had been taught to believe in? Who originated them, and for what purpose? It turns out many of our cherished myths were invented by government agencies or private corporations for quite specific, usually self-serving, purposes. Canadians as a whole then embraced them because they seemed to express something that we wanted to believe about ourselves. It is this process of myth formation which became my theme. The Red Scare remains, but as a single chapter in a book about a far wider subject, a book about memory, mythology and Canadian history.

A few years ago I wrote a book called *The Imaginary Indian* which described some of the ways non-Native Canadians have imagined Native Indians. Lacking any real knowledge of Native people, non-Natives have felt free to imagine all manner of things about them. Indians were (are) savages; Indians were (are) natural mystics; Indians were (are) militant warriors; Indians were (are) disappearing; Indians were (are) the original environmentalists. I concluded that the Indian was a white-man's fantasy, a screen on which non-Natives projected their anxieties and assumptions about their place in the New World.

National Dreams is a similar exercise. It attempts to locate and describe some of the most persistent images and stories in Canadian history. These are the images and stories that seem to express the fundamental beliefs that Canadians hold about themselves. They are the "core myths" which settle out from the welter of historical detail, like silt at the bottom of a river. With repetition they come to form the mainstream memory of the culture, our national dreams, the master narrative which explains the culture to itself and seems to express its overriding purpose. This is the story of Canada, we say, the story which contains our ideals, which gives out experience continuity and purpose. This is who we are.

A nation is a group of people who share the same illusions about themselves. All nations are "imagined communities," to borrow Benedict Anderson's evocative phrase: "the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion." These images of communion are expressed in the stories we tell about ourselves. Because we lack a common religion, language, or ethnicity, because we are spread out so sparsely across such a huge piece of real estate, Canadians depend on this habit of "consensual hallucination" more than any other people.

We have civic ideology, a framework of ideas and aspirations which expresses itself in allegiance to certain public policies and institutions. The CBC, the social safety net, universal health care, hockey -- these are just some components of our civic ideology. But unlike religion, language, or skin colour, a civic ideology is not something we come by naturally. It has to be continually recreated

and reinforced. This is one function of history, to provide a rationale for the civic ideology. History explains where our institutions and values came from. Out of this shared experience of the past is supposed to emerge a "national identity" which unites all Canadians and makes us unique from, say, the Chinese or the Germans or, particularly, the Americans. How exactly this works remains a bit of a mystery, but most of us are convinced that it does, that there is such a thing a national identity and that it is a good thing to have one.

I have used the word "myth" in referring to the important images, stories, and legends which emerge from Canadian history. I do not mean to suggest by this that they are necessarily fake or misleading. My purpose is not simply to argue with these stories, to prove that they are right or wrong. I do not wish to deconstruct them into oblivion, cast them out like family retainers who have served their purpose, at least not all of them. It is not hard to show that many of our core myths are invalid, that they do not describe history as we now know it to have been. That is one meaning of myth: falsehood, distortion, inaccuracy, lie. It is the meaning implied by Bernard de Voto's famous dictum about American history, that is "began in myth and has developed through three centuries of fairy stories."

But myths are not lies, or at least, not always. Rather they express important truths. They usually do not provide a precise record of events, but that is because they serve other purposes. Myths idealize. They select values and elevate them to the status of legend. In Canadian history that would be the Mounties, to take an example, or the transcontinental railway, or the North. Conversely, myths demonize. They vilify, or at least marginalize, anyone who seems to be frustrating the main cultural project -- Indians, for example, or communists, or Quebec separatists. Myths organize the past into a coherent story, the story of Canada, which simplifies the complex ebb and flow of events and weaves together the disparate threads of experience.

Myths are echoes of the past, resonating in the present.

Memory implies its opposite -- forgetfulness. As a community, we forget as much as we remember, and what we choose to forget tells as much about us as what we choose to remember. For example, it is known, but not often recalled, that the successful, and relatively peaceful, settlement of Canada by European newcomers was possible largely because a vast number of the original inhabitants, the First Nations, were wiped out by terrible plagues against which they had no defence. This holocaust is arguably the most important episode in Canadian history, yet most of us pay it far less attention than Confederation or the Quiet Revolution or the latest referendum in Quebec. Similarly, we recall with pride the legend of the RCMP, and forget the force's long tradition of repression and illegality. Or we describe ourselves as an inclusive cultural mosaic, while forgetting that racism was at the heart of Canadian culture for generations. The creation of myths -- or to put it another way, the creation of unity -- requires some forgetting. In order to live together, we try to get over our differences, put aside our grievances, show a united front. History is as much about forging a liveable consensus as it is about remembering.

Obviously, many people are excluded or marginalized by the core myths of Canadian history. That is why so many of the myths are under attack at the moment; they do not express a reality of which many Canadians recognize themselves to be a part. This has always been the case. History is contested terrain. Core myths are usually the property of the elites, who use them to reinforce the

status quo and to further their claims to privilege. Again, this does not mean that the myths are false, only that they are partial and constantly at risk of losing their power. In fact, this is exactly what is occurring to most of the core myths which have comforted Canadians for the past few generations. The master narrative has been challenged by counter narratives with their own, very different reading of the past, one which is far less flattering to the elites. The tension between the different versions of Canadian history is also the subject of *National Dreams*.

Learning and unlearning

"Those who don't remember the past are condemned to repeat the eleventh grade." -- James W. Loewen

Like most people, I don't remember much of what I learned about Canadian history in school. There was responsible government, of course, though I still may not be exactly sure how it worked. And Jacques Cartier drinking that stuff made out of tree bark that the Indians gave him to cure scurvy. Drinking was associated with John A. Macdonald as well, though the textbooks hinted pretty strongly that his medicine wasn't tree bark. Because I grew up in British Columbia I also know that Matthew Begbie was "the Hanging Judge," and Amor de Cosmos's real name was Bill Smith, but I get the feeling that this smattering of random facts would not earn me enough marks to pass an exam if I had to write one today.

Nevertheless, the history courses which I don't even remember must have had an impact because, as a result of what they taught me, I grew up with a whole set of misconceptions about the country which I have spent much of my adult life unlearning. For instance, I discovered that the Indians had not disappeared from the real world as they had from the history books; that Quebeckers are not eternally grateful to have been rescued from French rule by the Conquest; that the sun did set on the British Empire; that women have a history too; and that our prime ministers -- a collections of drunks, philanderers and hare-brained spiritualists -- were a lot less statesmanlike (and a lot more interesting) than the cardboard cutouts whose stern faces gazed out at me from the pages of my schoolbook.

Seeking an example of what I mean, I need to look no farther than the pages of *Our Canada*, a history text in wide use during the 1950s and 1960s when I was at school, written by Arthur Dorland, a professor at the University of Western Ontario. Any student paying attention to Professor Dorland's book would have learned the following "facts": that North American Indians were Chinese in origin and most were cannibals (p. 18); that New France was a "despotism" (p. 59); that the Conquest is something "on which both English- and French-speaking Canadians can look back with pride" (p. 105); that Quebec is a backward province whose people "cling tenaciously to the old French-Canadian ways of living" (p. 353); that "the British Commonwealth of Nations is one of the greatest achievements in human organization in all history" (p. 413); that we should never lose our "rugged spirit of independence" by relying on social assistance, which "should never be a substitute for self help, and should offer no encouragement to the shiftless and lazy" (p. 504). Of course, these are not facts at all. Some are theories, others are opinions, some are outright falsehoods, yet not so long ago they were part of our history, part of what all Canadians were expected to know about their country.

Textbooks are a good place to look for the story of Canada. They are the only history books that most people will ever read, and they are among the few places where the story of Canada is written down in black and white. That is why I began my search for the core myths of Canadian history by going back to my own high school history textbook, and to the textbooks used by other generations of students before and since. These books remain fascinating not because they explain what actually happened to us, but because they explain what we think happened to us.

Textbooks are only one source for this book. The core myths of Canadian history are revealed as well in the heroes we create, the art we make, the novels and poems we write, the holidays we celebrate, the symbols we acknowledge, even in the advertising images with which we flood the world. I have been interested in them all. One limit I did set as to confine myself almost completely to the history of English-speaking Canada. It is difficult enough to try to understand my own culture I am not foolhardy enough to attempt to understand another. Quebec is mentioned often in the pages which follow, but always as it is imagined by English Canadians, not as it is imagined by Quebeckers themselves.

No book of this kind can hope to exhaust its subject. My intention is to suggest a way of thinking about Canada so that readers might begin their on process of unlearning history, of re-examining some of the national dreams which preoccupy our waking hours as a nation. 🍃

Daniel Francis, a North Vancouver-based writer, is the author of two dozen books, the latest being *Selling Canada: Three Propaganda Campaigns that Shaped the Nation* (Stanton, Atkins & Dosil).