

# Who stole Canadian History?

WHEN THE TORONTO FOUR SEASONS HOTEL OPENED IN YORKVILLE IN 1971, the ghosts of the rebels of 1837, who used to ride through the area on their way to Montgomery's tavern, were thought to be displeased with the not-so-subtle scenery change. It was a building that utterly defied local history. The 32 storeys of guest-swaddling concrete in brutally basic skyscraper style didn't endear themselves to local antiquarians either. Plush synthetic Persian rugs, paper-thin hardwood veneers, plate brass and pseudo antique chandeliers do lend a certain aerosol colonial charm to the place, but even so, few can deny it is an unanswerable statement of contemporary corporate convictions.

It was thus a significant venue for the launch of the largest initiative in Canadian History by Lynton "Red" Wilson, chairman of Bell Canada Enterprises. "As citizens, we need to take the initiative and get involved," Wilson told a gathering of history-minded businessmen and reporters at the launch of his new foundation last fall. "And that is why we are asking leaders of the business community to join us in creating Historica." Details on the foundation are still in development, but Wilson says the main plan is for Historica to focus on building Canadian history's presence on the Internet and on TV. With a picture of a computer on every other page of its brochure, Historica wants to build the cyber-venue where educators will find "a truly Canadian community on the Internet...providing multi-layered information on Canadian historical events and placing them in a pan-Canadian, chronological context.... Celebrating the future of our past, Historica is a lasting gift to Canadians."

When Wilson pledged \$500,000 for the foundation, people were impressed. Next, Imasco, Royal Bank, Toronto-Dominion Bank, the Bank of Nova Scotia, McCain, Weston, McClelland & Stewart, CanWest Global, Maritime Broadcasting and a bunch of other memory-minded brands pledged a further \$10 million. Then Charles Bronfman said he would match their money. If the federal government answers their call to match *that* total, Wilson's foundation will have \$50 million. Historica is not the only foundation of its kind. Bronfman has his own foundation, the Charles R. Bronfman Foundation, which funds various history projects. Then there's the Dominion Institute, also dedicated to reviving history. Cleo herself must be impressed. Canadian history is getting its very own millennial dust-off.

In a field where news is archived for at least a decade or two, then retrieved on microfilm, these are strange days. History, it seems, has become an issue for the chauffeur-driven crowd, an urgent cultural concern, just like split-run magazines, cable TV, the NHL and the CBC. That's true south of the border, too: if you take a taxi from New York's La Guardia airport into Manhattan these days, you'll get a glimpse of why his-



Canadian history used to be merely yesterday's news.

It is now today's hot national concern.

Just why are Canada's corporate giants, from Charles Bronfman to "Red" Wilson, pouring money into foundations and projects promoting the subject?

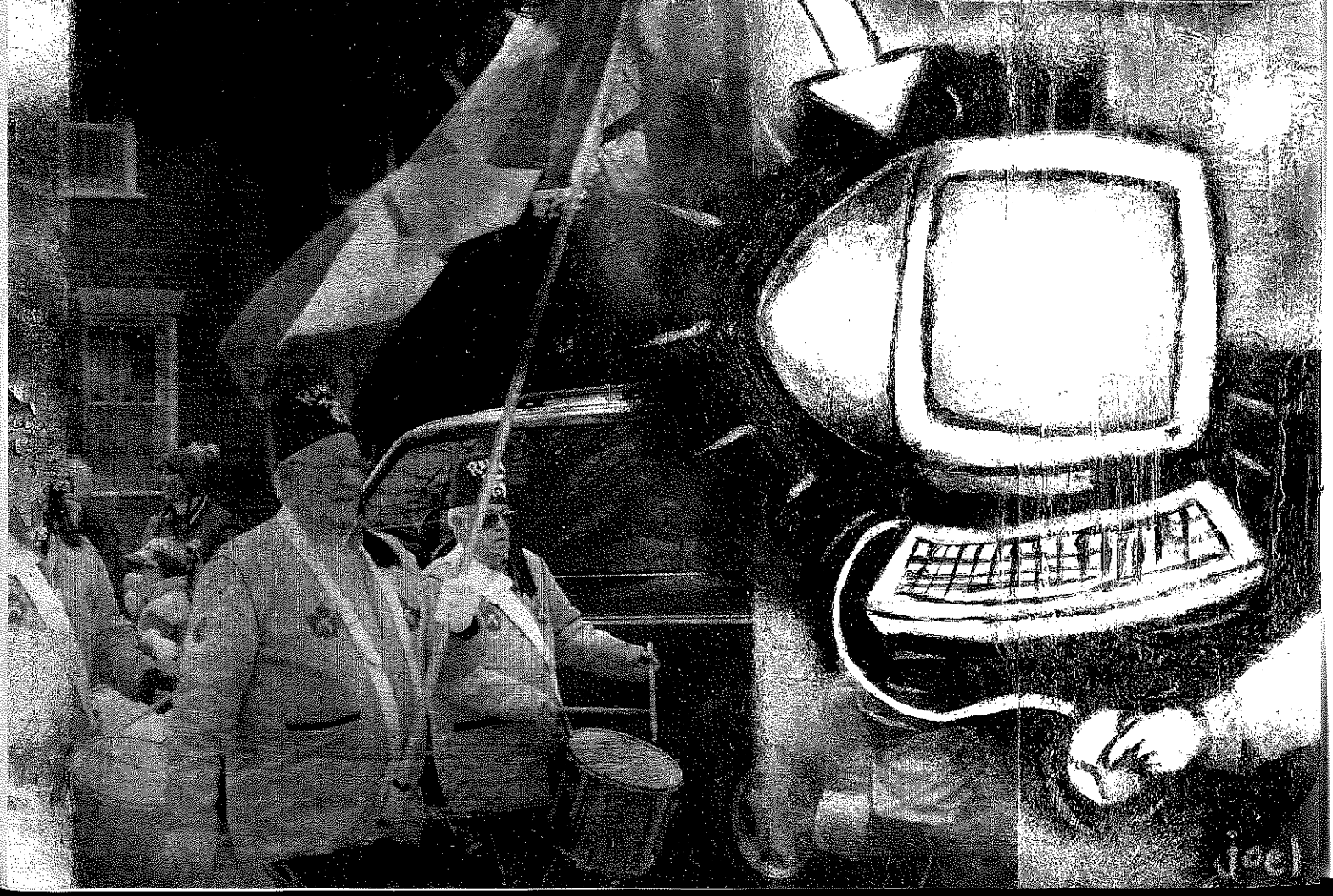
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# PROOF

His Excellency  
Lieutenant G.  
Queen's Pa



tory matters. Towering over a significant chunk of Queens is an enormous golden "H." Below it, an inscription urges commuters to watch History TV. Look up as you pass Columbus Circle, and you'll see a giant neon sign flashing an ad for *Biography TV*. History makes great fodder for low-budget, high-ratings TV, and network executives are making money off it in, well, historical proportions.

For Canada's newfound corporate history buffs, public relations is key: an interest in history is considered a noble pursuit. Giving money to it soothes the conscience. Charles Bronfman's personal foundation has been pumping out Heritage Minutes for years (though cynics would say he's needed a bigger PR boost since his multibillion-dollar family trust slid out of the country, tax free.)

So *Historica* seems to be born of a pretty typical mix: ratings, rewards and redemption. But there's more to it than that. History is about ideology, not just industry. "Education in the history of Canada is essential preparation for responsible citizenship," Red Wilson said at a conference of Canadian historians at McGill University last winter. Wilson says he's "profoundly concerned as a Canadian" about historians' success in "encouraging reasonable loyalty, national pride and citizenship."

Parsing that statement should be relatively easy. When Toronto patricians start talking about loyalty and citizenship, they're usually worried about one of two things: Quebec or the monarchy. In this case, some historians fear it's both. "History is the latest cultural tool favoured by the financial elite to calm their national unity fears," says Dalhousie University historian Michael Cross. "We're back at an argument that began in the 1960s. Back then, the idea of Canadian history was painfully reinvented to overcome the limitations of the approach Bronfman and Wilson now seem to be again promoting. I worry the clock is being turned back."

To understand Cross's concern, you need to remember some history. Up until the 1960s, Canadian history was barely credited as a worthy scholarly field. Underfunded and isolated, scholars such as George Wrong, Frank Underhill, Harold Innis, Arthur Lower and Donald Creighton struggled to develop a national history. Their most abiding success came with the publication of Creighton's 1944 synthesis, *The Dominion of the North*. Creighton's vision of a unified—and unifying—national history promoted Canada as a story of conflict resolved: two nations, fused into a modern power on the world stage.

Not surprisingly, this tidy vision proved serviceable for only a brief period. There's a film archived somewhere deep in the bowels of the CBC that was telecast in 1972 as *The Craft of History*. In it, the new social historian Ramsay Cook interviews Arthur Lower, Donald Creighton and Michel Brunet, a Quebec historian with a strong nationalist orientation. The film is a relic of the days before History TV, of a time when historians were allowed to appear on TV as themselves, rather than as the disembodied sources of heavily edited ideas voiced by actors as cover script for video sequences.

The producers were bold in their own quaint way (remember, this is before the CBC went commercial). They had Cook interview Lower in his boat out in Lake Ontario. It was one of those small, quiet, epochal events. One of the great proponents of the old history was out on a lake with one of the new historians, and the whole thing was being recorded by the (now old) new media. It was show biz, but Lower

stuck to his script: The history of the French-Canadian identity starts with the Conquest. Confederation and Conquest are of the "first importance" in our history. When Cook pressed Lower about Canadians' "colonial mentality," Lower switched on the motor and changed the topic. "I think we're uncomfortably close to the shore there, Ramsay," he said. "No danger of going on the rocks."

But the Creighton-and-Lower vision grew stale. With a flood of new money for Canadian universities in the 1960s, and a popular surge of interest in Centennial themes in 1967, Canadian history was blossoming. And it wasn't the same old Canadian history. According to University of Toronto historian Carl Berger, the number of historians in Canada expanded sixfold through the 1970s. The new historians successfully focused on social themes: women, labour, the environment, minorities, immigrants and aboriginal people—narratives that had gone mostly untouched by older historians. While promoting a more diverse

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understanding of Canada's past, they began downgrading some of their predecessors' ideas. Unifying notions such as the two founding nations, the concept of a classless society, the country where slavery never existed and where the wars were fought in noble ways for noble causes began to crumble. Confederation was no longer the cure for Conquest and colonialism.

The new social historians measured their success not only in academic terms. They've been astonishingly effective in conveying their results to film, TV and literature. The CBC—which is currently producing a 30-hour "people's history"—has been especially receptive to a broadened, diversified history encompassing the issues that, in truth, divide as well as unite.

People anxious about national unity were bound to take offence. It was the precarious result of the October 30, 1995, Quebec referendum on separation that finally triggered decisive counteraction. But the backlash didn't come from within Canadian history departments. It came from the financial community. Quite a few powerful businessmen must have woken up on the morning after the referendum thinking Canadian history looked less like a big snowy map sprinkled with obscure dates and places and much more like a blood-stained spreadsheet. Before long, heavyweights such as Imasco, Consumers Gas, Al-

liance Communications, RBC-Dominion Securities, *History TV* and the right-wing Donner Foundation were backing a new lobby organization dedicated to redirecting history. They called it the Dominion Institute. If you think the name sounds like a throwback to the monarchy, you're on the right track.

The Dominion Institute spent most of its start-up capital in 1997 on a series of Angus Reid polls that purported to demonstrate that Canadians don't know their history. Once that chasm of need was created, the results were turned over to Jack Granatstein, a retired York University historian. Granatstein is a Dominion Institute director—along with Mike Harris's adviser, Allister Campbell, and Conrad Black's closest business associate, Peter White. Granatstein used the Dominion polls as the basis for a 1998 book titled *Who Killed Canadian History?*, which argues that the post-Creighton generation of Canadian historians shirked its cultural responsibilities by shifting "to victimization and blame-seeking on the fringes." The message was businesslike: "We pay vast sums for education," complained Canada's favourite gradgrind, "and we are simply not getting the returns we should."

This bottom-line theme went down well with the corporations behind the Dominion Institute, which regularly calls for a national history curriculum focused on the wars, the prime ministers, the constitution and the economy. Why teach all the divisive stuff, Granatstein asks, and why promote multicultural examinations of our past? "The aim of every Canadian and of all levels of government should be to welcome immigrants and turn them into Canadian citizens as quickly as possible," Granatstein wrote. "Not one cent of federal, provincial, or municipal government money should be devoted to fostering retention of their cultures."

Granatstein proposed action. He called for "clear, measurable standards" for teaching history: "Courses must be grounded solidly in chronology, and must treat both the political and the social history of the nation," he wrote. He recommended that the federal government intervene (as, of course, it already does) with cash for television and radio history programs, and the establishment of a Centre for Canadian History located "near, but not at, a major university."

Then, less than two years later, along came *Historica*. Not surprisingly, Red Wilson says he consulted extensively with Granatstein concerning the plan for the rich new foundation. There will be foundation money for staid stuff like Canada's National History Society and *The Dictionary of Canadian Biography* (as editor of the dictionary, Ramsey Cook, one of the stars of that 1972 CBC documentary, will be getting a little help from *Historica*). But the first priority will be the Internet. The *Historica* board (which brings together tobacco, energy, banking, telephone, tv and publishing executives with former politicians Frank McKenna and Peter Lougheed, three Bronfman representatives, several corporate lawyers and former Chief Justice of Canada Antonio Lamer, all in the absence of a single historian or teacher) met for the first time in early February and voted to back five Web-based projects, more *Heritage Minutes* and a tv series, produced in partnership with History Television. *Historica* also plans to back several grassroots projects directly aimed at school kids and teachers.

The e-and-tv emphasis here comes as no surprise: Wilson and the others behind *Historica* own a good chunk of our airwaves and cyberspace. Business development is always better when it's tax-deductible.

This is not the first time Canadian business has tackled history. In the 1950s, businessmen took education very seriously. An Industrial Foundation on Education, set up by the president of the A.V. Roe Company in 1956, promoted education in all fields, including history. But in those days business wanted a more complex and cosmopolitan history. An editorial in the Bank of Montreal's "Monthly Letter" of August 1960 reveals this concern. "It is a fatal mistake," wrote the Bank's editors, "to believe that democratic education consists of teaching children some of the facts about our government and making them learn the provisions of the British North America Act." Now, the banks seem to want this approach back.

It's of course important that business leaders take an interest in education. But the notion that the financial elite can step in to direct scholarship and schoolteachers to serve national unity (or any other political concern) is so obviously dubious as to seem self-satirical. Scholars and patrons with the Maple Leaf in their eyes should do some quick background reading. Historical approaches designed for specific utilitarian purposes such as national unity or citizen loyalty (or the monarchy, for that matter) seldom age well. Herodotus may be celebrated as the fourth century BC father of history, but much of his work long ago fell into partisan disrepute. Edmund Burke's attack on revolutionary French democracy soured in the same way. More recently, historiography scripted to serve both sides of the Cold War has been junked.

"They're not going to be able to leverage history into a force for national unity," says Michael Cross, "no matter how many millions they say they'll spend." Teachers need to make independent curriculum decisions based on independent scholarship and input from students and parents, says Cross. Besides, scholars and educators are fiercely territorial. They're not about to let a telephone executive, a beverage billionaire, a business lobby group or even Jack Granatstein dictate new terms.

"History must be defended against attempts to abuse it in the cause of change. We should constantly be on our guard against theories which either dismiss the past or give it a drastically new interpretation." When Donald Creighton said these words in a speech at Trent University in November 1965, he had the new social historians' radicalism in his sights. "Such theories are likely to abound in an age of doubt and uncertainty about the future," Creighton continued, "and most of them, whether consciously or unconsciously, have been developed to serve the radical program of the moment." One wonders what Creighton would think of Granatstein's project now, were he alive. Might he display the same distaste?

"An understanding of the historical context of any society is the only way to make sense of the motivations that drive behaviour, including the behaviour of business counterparts and customers," says Wilson in the *Historica* brochure. Utilitarian thinking from a utility boss is fine. But he's not talking telecom strategy. Among other things, he's talking about the rebels of 1837. You can just imagine what they're thinking: *first* they build the Four Seasons, now *this*.

The new social historians taught us that we are more than the sum of our wars, our prime ministers, our constitution, our economy, our unity and our disunity. Canada has always been a complicated country. Paradox is our strongest cultural condition. In the words of Donald Creighton, "A nation that repudiates or distorts its past runs a grave danger of forfeiting its future." ■