

# History Isn't Bunk!

*Educators who skimp on factual historical knowledge damn the disadvantaged.*

By Dan Gardner

The anti-intellectual notion that it's just not important for kids to master basic historical facts is rampant in faculties of education. In the ministries of education, it's practically an article of faith.

The result can be seen in the draft documents that may be setting the elementary history curricula for Ontario's classrooms: page after page discussing skills, social attitudes and "critical thinking" but virtually no mention of what factual history must be covered. Specific people and events usually appear only as suggested topics, as if it makes no difference whether kids study Sir John A. Macdonald, Tecumseh or Shania Twain. All that matters is the process of learning. Facts are trivia.

This couldn't be more wrong. Factual historical knowledge — What major event happened at Winnipeg in 1919? When did women first get the vote? — is vitally important in two ways.

First, factual knowledge is often a good indicator of a person's understanding of serious issues — or lack of same. Knowing that Sir John A. Macdonald was our first prime minister may not be strictly necessary to be a fully-aware and involved citizen.

But if someone doesn't know this very basic fact — and almost half of 18-to-24-year-olds do not, according to a Dominion Institute survey — it's likely they also don't know anything about how Confederation came about, or how that event set the pattern of compromise and negotiation that is central to Canadian politics. Knowing that is necessary to being a fully-aware and involved citizen.

There's another way that historical facts are vital. Every society has a stock of basic knowledge that is assumed to be shared by everyone in that society, and Canada is no exception. A

newspaper article discussing Lucien Bouchard, for example, may mention the BNA Act, the Battle of the Plains of Abraham, the October Crisis," and so on. But the writer isn't likely to explain these terms. He has to assume his readers share this knowledge with him.

This shared information is what allows us to really communicate across society. American educator E.D. Hirsch calls it "cultural capital," and history is a major part of it.

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## 1997 Dominion Institute Canada Day Youth History Survey

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Question	Correct
1. What term is used to describe the severe economic hardships of the 1930s?	64%
2. Who was Canada's first prime minister?	54%
3. Name one group of Canadians who were evacuated from the West Coast during WWII because of their ethnic origin.	43%
4. What year did Confederation occur?	36%
5. Remembrance Day in Canada falls on November 11. November 11 was the last day of which war?	33%
6. Name one of the wars in which Canada was invaded by the United States.	26%
7. What term is commonly used to refer to early French fur traders in Canada?	17%
8. Who was the first Canadian in space?	16%
9. Name a Canadian who received the Nobel Prize for the discovery of insulin.	11%

Any Canadian who has read a British newspaper knows how powerful cultural capital is. The language is the same, but the UK's cultural capital has

enough differences that British newspapers can seem, to Canadian eyes, as if they're written in code. Cultural capital is the key to the code.

Imagine a Canadian who hasn't absorbed her country's cultural capital. She doesn't know who Louis Riel was, or what the Underground Railway did, or why the Battle of Vimy Ridge was important. Trying to read a newspaper article that uses these terms is impossible. Public debates are incomprehensible. Elections are confusing. Jobs that rely heavily on cultural capital — law, journalism, politics, teaching — are off-limits. She's a foreigner in her own country.

This is what happens to students who are not taught fact-based history in the public schools.

More precisely, it's what happens to disadvantaged students. Kids whose parents are educated and spend time with them will pick up cultural capital at home. It's the kids who don't have these advantages who so desperately need the schools to come through for them. It was for this reason that Antonio Gramsci, the Italian Communist, opposed educational theories that belittle facts.

So, the choice is stark. We can either insist that schools expose students to the full range of cultural capital — which in large part means teaching fact-based Canadian history. Or we can snicker at facts, mock historical knowledge as trivia, and damn the disadvantaged.

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*(Answers to sample questions: 1. The Depression; 2. Sir John A. Macdonald; 3. Japanese; 4. 1867; 5. WWI; 6. 1812 or American Revolution; 7. Coureurs des bois; 8. Marc Garneau; 9. Banting or Collin or MacCloud)*