

“The Call to Radical Inclusion”

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One of the perks of becoming a Canadian citizen last spring has been the gift of the Cultural Access Pass, which provides free entrance, for a year, to museums and parks across the country.

My year is quickly running out, and I haven't used the pass as much as I could or should have.

But it did make it easier for me to justify making three trips earlier this month to the Canadian Museum of History in Gatineau.

I recall, shortly after moving to Canada in 2007, hearing Adrienne Clarkson, as the former G-G, say to a group of new citizens that to make one's home here, one must also take on the history that comes with this place, the good and the bad, and everything in-between.

To be adopted into this country means to take on responsibility for its past, its present, and its future.

I have endeavoured to do that to the best of my ability for many years now, and in many ways. And it is something I'm committed to continuing to do.

Which is why I made three trips to the museum in the span of six days earlier this month—and, I think, read every last speck of printed material in the place. While the official museum guide says that you can move through the exhibits in three or four hours, I took something closer to twenty hours, and still felt I ran out of time.

I had been to this museum a few times over the years,
or more precisely, to its predecessor, the Museum of Civilization.

I hadn't been there, though, since it was totally transformed,
following a new mandate from the last Conservative government
directing it to focus on telling the story of Canadian history.

At the time this mandate was given in 2012,
there were deep concerns about how this history would be told—
fears that the party in power
would paint history with their particular brush.

In the end, those concerns were not justified.

The curators have done a magnificent job
of telling the powerful, complicated, and compelling story of Canada
in a way that honours our triumphs,
while also holding up our contradictions and our collective sins.

It's clear that the curators,
rather than trying to tweak the existing exhibits,
rightly decided to blow things up
and start over from scratch.

That decision made a meaningful difference.

The result is an integrated collection that
lifts up minority and dissenting voices,
and that doesn't simply relegate the experiences of women
to the occasional out-of-the-way displays meant to show
how much women seemingly loved
doing household chores in the 18th century.

It's all there now, in all of its complicated glory:
the story of who we have been,
the story of who we are,
and the story of who we are still trying to become.

There are, of course,
the requisite sections about the French and the English.

But there are also exhibits that speak to the particulars
of the many waves of immigrants who have made Canada home since,
from the Black Nova Scotians who created Africville
to the Chinese who built the railroads
and the Ukrainians who settled the Prairies.

As was the case with the earlier incarnation of the museum,
the ground floor is devoted to the culture
of the First Nations, Métis, and Inuit.

But what I now find most striking
is that their story no longer ends on the first floor,
and at the point where the story of Canada begins to be told.

Instead, the story of the Indigenous Peoples in Canada
is now woven into the story of this country at every turn,
from the first contact with Europeans,
the early impact of colonization
and the bloody battles for land,
to Confederation,
complete with John A. Macdonald's racist rhetoric,
and on to the Numbered Treaties,
Louis Riel, the Residential Schools,
and the stand-offs at Oka and Ipperwash.

As hard as it was, as times, to take in all of this history—
history which I have, in fact, been studying for many years—
there was something profoundly moving
about seeing this messy, painful,
and yet at times still beautiful and powerful story
being told in something closer to the fullness of its truth
than is usually the case.

And in our national history museum, no less.

That is why I ultimately left after my three visits
with an unexpected feeling of hope,
for it feels that the transformation of the museum's exhibits
are a tangible if small step on our long and halting path towards reconciliation.

In the words of Black American writer, James Baldwin,

“Not everything that is faced can be changed.
But nothing can be changed until it is faced.”

The story a country tells about itself in a formal way
is an important barometer of how it understands itself.

I deeply believe that understanding is slowly changing.

In the thirteen years I have lived here, I have felt it.
And I hope you have, too.

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As you might imagine,
all of this has been on my mind in recent weeks
as I have followed the confrontation
over the construction of the gas pipeline
through the traditional lands of the Wet’suwet’en Nation.

It’s been hard to not draw a line between
what I saw in the museum and what we are seeing now.

As I have watched troubling video
of RCMP interventions in Wet’suwet’en territory,
I’ve thought back to seeing in the museum
the striking red serge jacket worn
by one of the first officers of the North-West Mounted Police,
the predecessor of the RCMP established by Macdonald
to secure land and enforce order on the Prairies,
often at the cost of the life and liberty of the
Indigenous Peoples of that time and place.

But I also draw a line to other artifacts,
other objects on display in the museum.

I keep thinking back to the modern reproduction
of the Dish-With-One-Spoon wampum belt,
the original of which, I believe, is at the ROM.

This wampum belt, made from white welk shells
with a ring of purple quahog shells,

is akin to a treaty and points to a law in use among Indigenous Peoples in this region going back almost a thousand years.

It was formalized at the Great Peace of Montreal in 1701, when the Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee agreed that they, symbolically (and sometimes literally), ate from the same dish.

In this, they pledged to respect the hunting and other natural resources of the region, and promised always to leave enough for each other.

On the wampum belt itself, the one dish is depicted in the ring of purple shells.

It is suggested by some Indigenous Peoples that those of us who are settlers on this land are now part of this agreement, this treaty, this covenant with our neighbours, and, ultimately, this pact with the earth.

Given our history, there is radical hospitality in that view.

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In his book *A Fair Country*, John Ralston Saul brings together his life as a public intellectual and his experience of being married to Adrienne Clarkson, during her term as Governor General, to reflect, as he has for years and across several not-so-easy-to-read books, about the state of things in Canada.

The most compelling argument Saul makes is that Canada is a Métis nation—a country with not two great founding cultures, but three.

He says that Canada is not primarily a “European” nation, created in the image of France and Great Britain, but Métis, in the sense that our values, ideas, and institutions have been and are still being shaped by the encounter

between Canada's early immigrants and Indigenous Peoples.

In his own words, he says,
“The underlying currents of this country,
are more indigenous than imported....”

Our “central inspiration... is aboriginal...
How we imagine ourselves, how we govern, how we live together,
how we treat one another when we are not being stupid
is [all] deeply aboriginal.”

Canada has been guided by what he sees as central aboriginal ideas:
“egalitarianism, a proper balance between individual and group,
and a penchant for negotiation over violence.”

He says that our resistance to recognising Canada's Métis identity,
our failure to come to terms with this
as Canada's true founding story,
leaves us confused and not really sure of who we are—
and deprives Canada of the self-confidence it needs
to be the progressive power in the world
that it could and should be.

He worries that “Canada is in trouble [today]
because it has [come] untethered from its aboriginal moorings.”

I think it's fair to ask: “Is all of this true?”
Is Canada truly a Métis nation?

It's fair to ask if this alternative read of history is really real.

Does this country's relatively easy embrace of multiculturalism
stem from generations of indigenous influence—
from the aboriginal idea of an ever-expanding,
but inclusive circle that welcomes in the other?

Does the indigenous pillar of this country's history
explain the Canadian habit of finding the third way, a middle path,
of speaking with a voice of conciliation
and working toward consensus?

I don't know.
I don't have all the answers,
and I'm not completely convinced Saul does either.

There are some who have accused him of writing revisionist history,
of attempting to create a new foundational myth for Canada.

Some of that may well be true.

But, I'm increasingly convinced
that that is not necessarily a bad thing.

There is power in the stories we tell.

There is power in which stories we tell.

And, there is power in how we chose to tell the stories that we have.

Saul is right. Canada's story doesn't make sense
when told only in French or English or both.
And it doesn't make sense
in the many imported tongues that make us who we are today.

A vital part of understanding the true fabric of this country
involves appreciating how the characteristic "ways of being"
within Indigenous culture have been woven
into the lives of all of us living here.

Whether Saul's claims are completely, historically true or not,
now seem a bit beside the point.

What seems more important is recognising the potential,
the promise, the possibility that exists
in making this beautiful version of the story true,
of coming—again or at last—
to honour our indigenous foundations
alongside those imported by we who are settlers.

The history of Canada is still being written.

We still have the opportunity to recognise the many ways

Indigenous Peoples have given shape to this country,
and are giving shape to it still.

And, we have the chance,
in this current unfolding moment across Canada,
to ask what kind of country we want to be.

In this moment, like many of you, no doubt, I am worried.

I am worried about what's at stake,
and what could be ruined if we don't get this right this time.

I'm worried about the well-being of the Wet'suwet'en people,
even as I worry about those impacted by the rail blockades,
and especially those who've been laid off from their jobs.

I'm worried about fraying nerves and depleted patience,
and the damage that could be caused by self-appointed vigilantes.

I worry about national unity
and how we balance current needs in the face of climate change.

And, yet, I am still feeling hope in this terribly fraught moment.

This moment that is an invitation to not only tell,
but to live into a different story.

This moment that is an opportunity to actually gain
some meaningful ground on the road to reconciliation.

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A few days ago, I was watching a short film about the pipeline conflict.

One scene stays with me in such a powerful way.

Representatives from the pipeline company pay a visit
to the gate erected by the Wet'suwet'en on the access road
to signal their intent to proceed with construction.

As the group approaches, one Wet'suwet'en woman

repeatedly shouts that they are defending the land and water,
not only for themselves but for everyone,
including the children of these people from Coastal GasLink.

Now, these visitors knew enough about Indigenous customs
to understand that they should bring gifts, such as tobacco,
to offer to the Wet'suwet'en.

The thing is they came bearing a 24-pack of bottled water
and two packages of off-the-shelf tobacco in plastic wrapping.

It looked like they had simply stopped by 7-11 on their way
and snagged a case of Aquafina and two boxes of cheap cigars.

The Wet'suwet'en women refused their, um, thoughtful generosity.

And then signalled that the visitors needed to leave—
and to take their gifts with them.

But the image that stays with me
is of the case of bottled water, sitting there in the snow,
while the river of fresh water runs just a few metres away.

In that single, sad snapshot for me
was a glimpse into what all of this is really about:
about protecting the one dish that we all now share,
for better or for worse.

Our destinies are now shared, as they have always been.

The question, as always, is whether we know that.

In words from an aboriginal activists group in Queensland:

“If you have come here to help me
you are wasting your time,
but if you have come because your liberation
is bound up with mine,
then let us work together.”

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I do understand that little, if anything, is simple
about this fraught moment we are in.

A moment centuries in the making,
and a moment with consequences
that could last just as long or longer.

The deep desire of my heart this day
is that we will make the most of this moment
to move towards reconciliation and right relationship,
towards sustainability and hope.

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I had thought I would be giving a sermon this morning
about radical inclusion within our congregation.

In some ways, I think I actually have.

For there are elements of story,
of which stories are told,
and which voices are included,
of seeing that our well-being is bound up with each other's,
and that the only way forward is together
which are at the heart of what it means to practice radical inclusion—
to make space for the other,
for human difference,
all knowing that the grand bargain is
that if we can learn to make room for everyone,
it means there will be a place for each of us to call home.

May it be so.