

Did You Know...

That this is Black History Month 1994? We are happy to highlight some little-known facts of historical significance relating to the magnificent achievements of blacks. It is unfortunate that many of these facts remain relatively unknown, especially when we see the negative way in which blacks are continually portrayed in the media. We have highlighted only a few facts here, not because these are the only significant achievements of blacks but because we are severely constrained by space and cost. We urge you to share these facts with others, so that they may learn about positive examples of worthwhile contributions that blacks have made to the development of the modern world.

Did you know that Dr. Charles Drew, the American surgeon who developed the techniques for processing and storing blood plasma for use in blood transfusions, was black? Yet, ironically, he died after he was injured in an automobile accident and was refused treatment in a hospital in Burlington, North Carolina because he was black.

During World War II, Dr. Drew became the director of an American Red Cross program for armed forces, developing techniques for using dried instead of liquid plasma even though he was not allowed to donate blood himself because of his race. His continuing protest led to a change in policy. He resigned after only 3 months following the armed forces' ruling that Caucasian and non-Caucasian blood be stored separately.

Did you know that the history of people of African descent in Canada dates back as early as the arrival of the first explorers? Matthew Da Costa, a black man, came to Nova Scotia in the summer of 1606 as a member of the Poutinacourt-Champlain expedition. The group settled at Port Royal where one of Canada's oldest social clubs - The Order of Good Cheer - was established with Da Costa being one of its charter members.

Da Costa's importance to the expedition was largely due to his linguistic skills. He spoke and understood the languages used by the Mic Mac Indians living in the Atlantic region and acted as the interpreter for Samuel de Champlain, the "father of Canada". It is not known how Da Costa acquired these languages, but his fluency strongly suggests that he must have visited Canada before. He died at Port Royal in 1607 and was buried on the grounds of the little habitation which he had helped construct.

Did you know that the French literary genius Alexandre Dumas (1802-1870) was of African ancestry? Dumas was a prolific writer of novels and plays that dominated French literature throughout the 19th century. His most popular and most reproduced novels were: The Three Musketeers, The Count of Monte Cristo and The Man in the Iron Mask.

Dumas was greatly inspired by his father, Thomas Dumas, whose incredibly heroic exploits

are part of the records of French military archives. Though of noble birth, Thomas Dumas called himself after his mother, a Haitian of African descent. He was a skilful first-class fighter who, in 1786, joined the French army where he rapidly rose to the rank of general. Although he was a fierce fighter in battle, he loved people and hated unnecessary warfare. So, when Napoleon Bonaparte invaded Egypt many questioned his motives but General Dumas was the most vocal in protest. He called for mutiny. In revenge, Napoleon refused to retire General Dumas decorated with full regalia and honours. His pension was cut in half and he was denied back pay that had been uncollected while he was a prisoner at war. He died leaving very little financial security for his wife and two children.

Fortunately, his son, Alexandre, was blessed with a vivid imagination and a memory that forgot nothing. He is credited with over 100 volumes including plays, novels, travel impressions, and even a cookery compendium. But he is most famous for his swash-buckling novels. He is known as Dumas Pere to distinguish him from his son Alexandre Dumas (1824-1895), himself a playwright and novelist, who is known as Dumas Fils. The latter's fame rests mostly on his earliest and most successful play, *Camille*, upon which Verdi's opera *La Traviata* is based. A film version starring Greta Garbo was produced in 1937.

France is indebted to the House of Dumas, a family of men immortally engraved in the history of the world.

Did you know that African Doctors routinely performed Caesarean surgery in cases of complicated deliveries many years before these were done in the West? In 1879, a missionary doctor, Dr. R. W. Felkin, after witnessing a Banyoro surgeon in Uganda perform a Caesarean section, published an extensive report in the Edinburgh Medical Journal. Felkin noted that the dexterity with which the surgical teams worked proved that such operations had been commonly done in these communities for many years.

In fact, medical sciences in Africa were more developed than in any other part of the world before the disruption of its cultures. African doctors developed a small-pox vaccine centuries before Jenner. They developed quarantine systems for contagious diseases. Sophisticated autopsies have been reported among the Banyoro people of Uganda and the Likundu of Central Africa. More recently, in 1979, Nigerian doctors made a major breakthrough in the treatment of cancer in discovering strong anticancer properties in the root bark "*Annona senegalensis*".

Did you know that Amy Jacques Garvey helped sustain the largest mass movement of African peoples in history? The Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), under the leadership of Marcus Garvey, built factories, and businesses, created a steamship company and developed a movement of millions of people of African descent that spanned three continents. In the midst of it all was Amy Jacques Garvey as campaigner, organizer, fundraiser, secretary, publicist, and agitator. Born in Jamaica in 1896, Amy Jacques began work-



ing for the UNIA at its Harlem headquarters in 1918 as a secretary and later became an editor of its widely distributed newspaper, *The Negro World*. The concept of African peoples in control of their own lives, lands and resources was considered so dangerous that the mere possession of this newspaper was treated as a seditious act in parts of French-held Africa and was punishable by death. Amy Jacques married Marcus Garvey in 1922, at a time when he was facing a trial and possible imprisonment for the dubious charge of mail fraud. With her famous words, "Stand on your own two Black feet and fight like hell for your place in the world...", she infused energy into the UNIA, then demoralized because of Garvey's persecution and the collapse of the Black Star Line. Rallying the followers, she became chief agitator for the UNIA, a role that intensified when Garvey was deported in 1927. Determined to secure the movement's place in history, despite the difficulty of finding a willing, unprejudiced publisher, she herself edited and published the two-volume book entitled *The Philosophy & Opinions of Marcus Garvey or Africa for the Africans*. 30 years later, as the modern Civil Rights Movement began to grow, she published her own personal account in *Garvey & Garveyism*. Amy Jacques Garvey died in Jamaica in 1973.

Did you know that Rosemary Brown was the first black woman to sit in Canadian Parliament, having been elected to the British Columbia Legislature in 1972? Born in Kingston, Jamaica, on June 17, 1930, Rosemary migrated to Canada in 1951. She attended McGill University, where she completed her Bachelor of Arts degree in 1955, and the University of British Columbia, where she earned both the Bachelor and the Master of Social Work degrees in 1962 and 1965 respectively.

Rosemary has made history not only as a black, but also a woman in politics. She was re-elected in 1975 in the constituency of Vancouver-Burrard and again in 1983 in the constituency of Burnaby-Edmonds. As a candidate for the NDP's national leadership in 1975, she finished a strong second, a remarkable showing for someone whose candidacy was opposed by every major party figure.

Rosemary has been very active in Canadian life, as a social worker, a politician, an academic and a human rights activist. She has served as provincial Ombudsman and was a founding member of the Status of Women Council in British Columbia. She has worked as a social worker for the Children's Aid Society of Vancouver, Riverview Mental Hospital,

Vancouver Neurological Society and Montreal Children's Hospital. She was a counsellor at Simon Fraser University, a member of the Dalhousie University Institute of Public Affairs and of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. Rosemary was also a founding member and trainer of volunteers for the Vancouver Crisis Centre. In addition, she has participated in many national and international conferences on peace, women's issues and human rights.

Rosemary's impact has been astounding, as reflected by the numerous awards and honours bestowed upon her by a wide variety of local, national and international organizations. She holds an Honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters from Mt. St. Vincent University and, in 1972, was awarded a Human Rights Fellowship by the United Nations. She also received the National Coalition of Canada Award in 1973 and the Black Historical and Cultural Society of BC Award in 1984. In 1987 she was named the YWCA's Woman of Distinction for Humanitarian and Community Activities.

Rosemary is undoubtedly committed to a united Canada in which all people are treated equally. In an address to the Black Women's Congress in 1973, she declared: "I learned that this country, this Canada, is beautiful and strong only because of the people of both sexes and of all races and political persuasion who lived in it and contributed to its culture and its soul and its growth; and that its strength and its beauty which will increase only to the extent that it is able to accept and respect all of its people equally."

Did you know that Colonel The Honourable Lincoln Mac Cauley Alexander, Lieutenant-Governor of Ontario, was the first black man to be elected to the House of Commons? Born in Toronto, Ontario on January 21, 1922 of Jamaican parents, he attended MacMaster University where he earned his BA in 1949. He then pursued Law at the Osgoode Hall Law School which conferred on him the LL.B degree in 1953. Appointed Queen's Counsel in 1965, Colonel the Hon. Lieutenant-Governor continued his law career as a partner in the firm Millar, Alexander, Tokiwa and Isaacs until 1979.

His political career has been phenomenal, reflecting the high regard and respect accorded him both by political leaders as well as the general public. He was first elected to the House of Commons in the general election of June 25, 1968, and was re-elected in 1972, 1974, 1979 and 1980, serving as Minister of Labour from 1979-1980. On the international scene, he has been a member of the Inter-Parliamentary Union, the Common-

The Canadian NATO Parliamentary Association and the Canada-United States Parliamentary Delegation. In 1976 and again in 1978, he served as observed to the United Nations. He was installed as Ontario's Lieutenant-Governor on September 20, 1985. His service to his country began many decades ago, however, as he served as a corporal in the Royal Canadian Air Force during World War II, from 1942 to 1945.

Lincoln Alexander is or has been a member of more organizations than it is possible to name on a single page. Suffice it to say that his committed participation and inspiring leadership have been valued throughout the length and breadth of Ontario, in every conceivable area of human activity and by both genders and all races, ages, religions, cultures and ethnic groups. Numerous awards and honours have been bestowed upon him.

Always a man of integrity and sound judgement, Lincoln Alexander said, in his maiden speech to the House of Commons in Ottawa on September 20, 1968: "... I am the first Black man elected to the House of Commons. This results from the fact that Hamiltonians (believe) that men should be judged not by their skin, nor by the way they fight, love or sin, nor by the gods they serve or vintage they drink, but by the quality of thoughts they think... The Black man also desires a place in the main stream of life..."

Despite holding a public office that makes extraordinary demands on his time, Colonel The Honourable Lincoln Alexander remains a dedicated family man. He spends as much time as possible with his wife Hamiltonian Yvonne Phyllis (nee Harrison), whom he married on September 10, 1948, his only son, Keith, and daughter-in-law, Joyce, and his two granddaughters, Erika and Marissa. He also still finds time to enjoy his hobbies of music and gardening.

Did you know that Oscar Peterson, the internationally renowned pianist, was born in Montreal in 1925? Oscar began studying the trumpet and the piano at age 5 but soon gave up the trumpet and began concentrating on the piano. He attended the Montreal Conservatory of Music, then became a student of Paul deMarkey, the classical pianist. While still in his teens, Oscar won first prize on the Ken Soble Amateur Show and was consequently given his own weekly radio show over the CBC network. He began making concert appearances throughout Canada as a member of the Johnny Holmes orchestra and soon RCA Victor signed him up for his first recording. In 1947, at the age of 22, Oscar formed his own trio and after numerous successful concert performances across Canada and spotlights on several Canadian radio programs, he took his show to the USA. There, in 1949, he appeared at New York's Carnegie Hall as the surprise guest of Jazz at the Philharmonic. It was an evening when, without having rehearsed, he was invited from among the audience to perform and, as the story is told, he gave a "show-stopper", stealing the show from stars like Ella Fitzgerald.

This was the beginning of Oscar's international exposure. He earned awards, honours and universal acclaim. Among his honours were: Best Jazz Pianist of the Year, Down Beat Awards 1952, the first

of 12 such awards; The Musicians' Musician; Toronto's Civic Medal, 1971; The Edison Award of Europe for the Best Jazz LP of the year; The Achievement Award of the Lakeshore Lions Club of Toronto, 1966; The Award of Appreciation from the B'Nai B'rith Eastern Regional Council of Montreal, 1969; The Gold Rose Award given at the Montreal Jazz performance, 1969; The Golden Disc Award from Japan; honoree of Metronome Magazine on several occasions; 5-time nominee by the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences for the best album of the year. Oscar was appointed to the Order of Canada on June 23, 1972.

He appeared on television shows hosted by such big names as Danny Kaye, Johnny Carson, and Frank Sinatra, and his life was the subject of television programs by the CBC. In addition, the CTV network used to present a weekly half-hour show called "Oscar Presents" which was very well received across Canada. With the other members of his trio, Oscar established and headed the Advanced School of Contemporary Music in Toronto. Students from all over the world attended the school which was often favourably reviewed in music journals and attracted many visitors, several of whom were themselves stars in the music world. However, the school constantly conflicted with the trio's concert careers and since it was being operated without any grants or other assistance and was not generating much money despite its fame and good reputation, it had to be sacrificed for the good of the trio's careers.

In spite of his international renown, Oscar continued to make Canada his home. On behalf of the Canadian government, he performed at the Cultural Centre of Paris, for the US State Department and throughout the Soviet Union. He was also the luncheon guest of the former US President, the late Lyndon B. Johnson. In 1966 he composed "Canadian Suite" which he dedicated to Canada with love.

Why observe Black History Month? This is a month devoted to acknowledging the contributions of people of African descent to the development of the modern world. Unfortunately, the role of African descendants in humankind's development is often neglected in history books and it seems only fitting that we should spend some time, albeit a single month of the year, to redress this neglect.

The idea of setting aside a special time to acknowledge the achievements of African descendants originated with Carter G. Woodson, an African-American historian, who introduced "Negro History Week" in the USA in 1926. It was observed in February because this is the month in which two great persons in American history were born. Both of these men made significant contributions to the quest for a truly equal society. They were President Abraham Lincoln and Frederick Douglas, an ex-slave and leader in the abolition movement. Over the years, the observance of Negro History Week evolved into Black History Month as we know it today.

