

Have you flunked history?

By HOWARD KAMAN

The Collins Dictionary of Canadian History 1867 to the Present
by David Bercuson and J.L. Granatstein (Collins)

More than 75 per cent of Canadians flunked history.

This verdict was the result of a brief Gallup poll conducted last summer which asked six Canadian history questions. Forty per cent of those polled knew the name of Canada's first prime minister. Half that many knew which PM served the longest term.

Thirty-two per cent of those polled got every answer wrong.

These conclusions exemplify why the publication of *The Collins Dictionary of Canadian History* is such a timely event. The new book — a joint project between David Bercuson of the University of Calgary and York History Professor J.L. Granatstein — is a 270-page compendium of facts and figures alphabetically organized. Its compact size and easy-to-read style make it a valuable reference for any student.

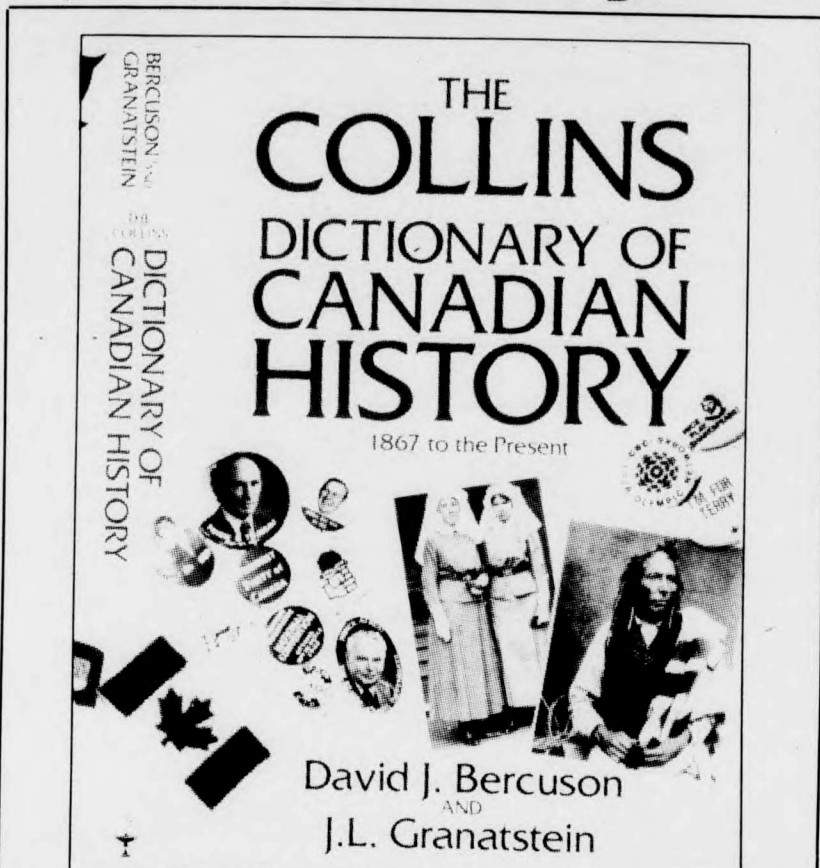
"There is no doubt that Canadians don't know enough about their country," says Granatstein. He hopes to provide a reference volume that will be useful to all Canadians without being cumbersome.

"It is stripped down," he admits, "but we think it provides most of the basic stuff that anybody working on the last 120 years of Canadian history would need to know."

The *Dictionary* is not in the same class as Mel Hurtig's recent *Canadian Encyclopedia*, but it wasn't meant to be. While the *Encyclopedia* is a full-blooded four-volume set with every conceivable entry, the *Dictionary* is a small, convenient reference — good for fast facts, and quick information.

The book is lively reading. While both historians express their strong opinions in places, their leanings enhance the book rather than detract. This is a dictionary that is enjoyable to read.

And while readers may bicker that some entries receive too much space, and others too little, Granatstein is quick to point out, "it's a *historical* dictionary, and so there's a tendency



QUICK QUESTION: Can you name Canada's longest serving Prime Minister?

to favour the dead over the living, for one thing, and to favour those who have had historical impact."

This statement can be juxtaposed against the fact that the longest entry in the book belongs to a living person, Pierre Elliot Trudeau.

"I thought he was very current and very relevant," says Granatstein. "He was the kind of entry where people would be looking for a little more space."

While the book leans toward long-dead historical figures — like Mackenzie King, Timothy Eaton, and Alexander Graham Bell — it also provides sufficient current information on the likes of Trudeau and Brian Mulroney, as well as brief biographies of other living Canadians who have made an impact on our lives in one way or another.

It is interesting to note the influx of Canadian reference books on the market. In addition to the *Dictionary*, there is the aforementioned four-volume *Canadian Encyclopedia*

and book such as the *Oxford Book of Canadian Political Anecdotes*, edited by Jack McLeod.

Why the sudden flow of Canadian reference materials? Perhaps because Canadians are realizing their uniqueness as a people distinct from our southern neighbours, the United States.

Granatstein explained that "Canadians have been taught to believe that this country hasn't got any history. There's a tendency to say, 'Well, it's Canadian, so it's not important.' A great deal of the responsibility for that rests on the people who teach Canadian history, primarily in the public schools and the high schools, where it's been mangled for years."

Granatstein and Bercuson have attempted to untwist some of the mess that they believe the system has caused, and make the proper knowledge accessible and useful to those who want it. With this dictionary, they have done their job admirably.

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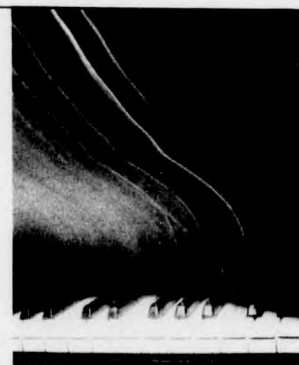
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