

LESSONS FROM BLACK HISTORY

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There is a dual benefit gained with every contribution made to Canada. Firstly, the contribution is made. An inventor, activist, or other exemplary citizen protests a law or creates an artwork that benefits Canadians. Secondly, their story is told. From individual stories Canadian youth learn the importance of critical thinking, the vitality of hope, and the need for pragmatism.

Despite a reality of strict social divisions, black Canadians envisioned a future of equality. Rather than accepting their prescribed social status, figures such as Jackie Robinson is remembered as the first black major league baseball player, and Addie Aylestock as the first African Canadian woman to be ordained a minister, challenged inequality. We remember them, not necessarily because they were the best in their fields, but because they were original. They saw the potential for change in society, and the potential within themselves to be that change. From stories of innovation and leadership teach young Canadians they must think critically about social norms, and as inequalities appear, have the vision to seek solutions.

To educate children purely of the oppression of black people is not only depressing, and thus diminishing the students interest, but it perpetuates the image of black people as the victims of society and therefore as an 'other'. Positive image is essential, not only to the self-respect and identity of black students, but to the broader recognition of the black community. Stories of contributions share a message of hope and solidarity in the face of adversity. For example, the story of Maurice Ruddick. An African Canadian miner, Ruddick was trapped in the collapse of the No. 2 colliery of Cumberland Mines in Springhill Nova Scotia in 1958. Although rescue efforts began immediately, the last seven miners, including Ruddick, were not rescued until the ninth day. As described in the Truro Daily News at the time, Ruddick's "unflagging spirit helped sustain his comrades through their ordeal". A musician, Ruddick is reported to have sung, written songs, and told jokes while trapped. Ruddick's story, among the many stories of triumph and challenge that black Canadians have lived, teach young Canadians faith; despite the dystopia futures that plague our literature and the constant threats of climate change, shootings, and terrorism, our generation is not doomed. If a man trapped 3800 meters below the feet of a society that values him less because of the colour of his skin can maintain the courage to sing for his companions, then there is reason to be faithful in the individuals of our generation to act with bravery and optimism.

To build a better world, optimism must be backed by practical actions, like those of black activists who fought for freedom through education, collaboration, and protest. From these stories, young Canadians learn that no single person or method is enough to change a society, that success is the culmination of the efforts of many lives. The efforts of women such as Mary Ann Shadd, an educator, abolitionist, and the first black female publisher in Canada aided the abolitionist movement. Shadd moved to Canada in 1851, where she opened an integrated school and published pamphlets describing the benefits for Canada of immigration from the south. Through her school and publications, she contributed to her cause through education, but for education to work as a method of change, the educated must act. Harriet Tubman was her own style of abolitionist. Although she fought for the same cause as Shadd, her approach was different. Tubman was a 'conductor' of the Underground Railroad. After escaping slavery herself, she traveled the railways several times to guide fleeing slaves to safety. Tubman and Shadd approached the abolition of slavery in very different ways, but the elemental similarity is that they acted. From their stories, Canadian youth learns the importance of diverse thought and action; that whatever positive contribution an individual brings, it is important.

To imagine the millions of minds and lives lost because of a divided society and, for much of history, brutal racism, is disheartening. The exceptional men and women who rose beyond and created pieces of a better world teach the value of every individual; their unique stories encourage critical thinking, optimism, and action.

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