

# CANADA'S CULTURAL MOSAIC

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Canada is often called a "cultural mosaic." Our nation was born from relationships between European pioneers and Aboriginal peoples who, over the years, learned to accept each other, and ultimately celebrate each other's customs and traditions. Canada's diversity consists of contrasting colours that manage to complement each other and to create one beautiful picture. Sometimes, the blue tiles attempt to devalue the orange tiles, but without both colours, our mosaic would not be complete. Every culture, religion, and ethnicity contributes to Canada's diverse identity. Specifically, Canada's black community has played a significant role in defining our culture.

100 Years ago, Canada was in the midst of a massive armed conflict: World War I. Thousands of brave Canadians participated in the war effort, and many fought and died for our country. Along the Canadian troops was an instrumental group of black men: the No. 2 Construction Battalion. Despite initial rules against black men joining a "white man's war," this all-black battalion eventually formed in 1916, allowing black Canadians to contribute to the war effort. Members of the battalion played an important role behind the lines, building bridges and roads and diffusing land mines in order to advance the Allied soldiers and halt the enemy. The immense contributions of these brave men, although not initially recognized, proved to be crucial to the Allies' victory.

Black Canadians' war contributions did not begin with the Great War. Over 100 years earlier, the Coloured Corps helped defeat the American soldiers in the War of 1812. Richard Pierpoint, the military commander who led the Coloured Corps to victory, was born in Senegal and sold as a slave to a British officer in America. His contributions to the British side of the American Revolution won him freedom and land in Niagara region, where he continuously fought for black rights. He petitioned to create a black community and, in 1812, black involvement in the war. Pierpoint became the leader of the Coloured Corps, an all-black regiment that fought courageously in numerous battles, including Queenston Heights, the siege of Fort George, and the battle of Lundy's Lane. The Coloured Corps also built Fort Mississauga, located near the mouth of the Niagara River.

The War of 1812 was vital to Canada's path to becoming a nation. If it had not been for the brave soldiers defending our land from American invasion, Canada would not exist. Similarly, Canada's contribution to victory in WWI established Canada as a nation. Without black Canadian contributions to these two wars, Canada would not be the country it is today.

Canada's more recent defining moments have come from cultural events. For example, Canadians were brought together in the 1990s when Donovan Bailey of Oakville became the fastest man on earth. Bailey represented Canada as a 100-metre sprinter and a member of the four-by-100-metre relay team. He set an Olympic and world record in the 1996 Olympics, completing the 100-metre dash in 9.84 seconds. Despite claims that his speed was inferior to that of 200-metre specialist Michael Johnson, Bailey defeated Johnson in a 150-metre showdown in 1997. Bailey's success rectified Canada's disappointment and humiliation after former track hero, Ben Johnson, tested positive for illegal substances in 1998. The victory restored Canadians' sense of national pride, especially in our athletes.

Many Canadians also take pride in our talented musicians, some of whom have impacted millions all over the world. In 2009, one song took the world by storm. K'Naan's "Waving Flag," based on the singer's childhood experiences, became an anthem for change. Young or old, black or white, rich or poor, nobody could escape its captivating lyrics, "patiently wait for that faithful day/it's not far away..." The song brought attention to issues of poverty, especially in the third world. After the tragic earthquake in Haiti in January 2010, 53 Canadian artists came together to rerecord K'Naan's hit, raising over \$1 million for recovery efforts. I remember my school holding a pyjama-day fundraiser to support the cause. The work of one black Toronto musician brought Canada together to make a difference on a global scale and help those in need: a tremendous achievement for not only black Canadians, but every member of our diverse nation.

Black Canadians have made significant contributions to our country's diverse heritage and identity. Like every subculture in Canada, the black community has played an important role in the makeup of our cultural mosaic, and without these heroes, our country would not be the masterpiece it is today.

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