

The Story of Joseph Lewis

Diversity is Alberta's strength.



IN 1799 JOSEPH LEWIS, A HUDSON'S BAY Company employee, arrived in what is now Alberta. He was 27 years old but his life had already been crammed with adventure.

Born in 1772 in Manchester, New Hampshire, at 20 he'd made his way to Montreal, where he joined the North West Company. He was a Nor'wester for four years before he jumped ship—or canoe—and went to work for the HBC. He signed a three-year contract as a “steersman” at a salary of £20 a year. Lewis paddled and portaged his way west for three years, until he arrived here, at the tail end of the 18th century, to help Peter Fidler found Greenwich House, a trading post near Lac La Biche.

One other thing about Joseph Lewis? He was black.

Oh, I know. When you picture voyageurs, you probably don't imagine them as Afro-Canadian. And I don't blame you. After all, our textbooks, our miniseries, our novels, our

Trump wannabes may try to rewrite Alberta's past. But this was never a homogeneous, ethnically “pure” place—that's the nativist nonsense of malignant fantasy.

heritage parks, don't tell the stories of black fur traders in the Canadian West. But they were here nonetheless. They've just been erased from our cultural narratives.

I think it's worth asking why—especially in this age of Wexit, when Trump Lite wannabes and would-be separatists are trying to rewrite Alberta's past, the better to advocate for their wizened vision of our future.

We have forgotten, or neglected to learn, so much of the

real history of this place: of the Indigenous peoples who were here first; of the early fur trade; of the Metis Nation that was born of the blending of European and First Nations cultures. We've forgotten that the NWC and the HBC attracted adventurers from all over, young men of energy and ambition, who could seek fortune and fame here, even if they came from working-class backgrounds back home, wherever home was.

We've forgotten, or never knew, that those early western fur posts were multicultural, multilingual places, where English, French, Michif, Gaelic, Orcadian, German, Norwegian and other tongues mixed and mingled, spoken alongside many Indigenous languages from Cree to Blackfoot to Iroquois.

This territory was never a homogeneous, ethnically “pure” place—that's the nativist nonsense of malignant fantasy. Our diversity has always been our strength, even when we didn't realize, much less celebrate, it.

Records being scarce, we don't know whether Lewis was an escaped slave or a free man looking for a better life. But why should we be surprised that he headed for the western frontier, where he might hope to be judged by his abilities, not his race?

I first learned Lewis's story two years ago when writing a column for the *Edmonton Journal*. I'd been inspired, or rather goaded, by a debate I'd had with a history professor. Fort Edmonton Park, I'd suggested, could do a better job of teaching about diversity. She'd insisted that would be ridiculous because, as she put it, “There were no black people at Fort Edmonton.”

I had no idea if she was right, but her attitude annoyed me so much I determined to find out. With the help of poet and professor Bertrand Bickersteth, who was researching Alberta's lost black history, I determined that Lewis had indeed been at Fort Edmonton—or Edmonton House, as it was then known.

In the summer of 1810 he joined Joseph Howse's expedition across the Rockies to the Columbia River. (By then, his pay had risen to £30 a year.) He was a free man, though slavery in the British Empire wouldn't be abolished for another 30 years.

History records that a few other black men come to Rupert's Land. Stephen Bonga, a fur trader and interpreter who took part in the Bow River expedition in 1822, was the grandson of Michigan slaves. Glasgow Crawford, another black HBC employee, spoke English, French and Iroquois, and worked as a cook and “middleman” at Fort Chipewyan from 1818 to 1821.

But Lewis may have left the most lasting Canadian legacy. He married a local Indigenous woman, whose name we no longer know. They had two daughters and a son, who later moved to join Red River colony to become a part of the Metis Nation.

This column is called “On Second Thought”—an allusion to the fact I'm now a Senator, sitting in what's sometimes called the Chamber of Sober Second Thought. But second thought is useful outside of the Senate too. With Black History Month here again, retelling Lewis's story seems politically urgent.

Don't be fooled by what you read on protest placards and in the dark corners of Twitter. Albertans aren't defined by skin colour or ethnic identity. What makes us Albertan is our shared belief that this is a place of opportunity, freedom and fresh beginnings, a place where courage, skill and hard work are valued, and where people are encouraged, indeed invited, to start life over again. We need to learn about Albertans like Joseph Lewis, not just to understand our history but to navigate our future. Especially as we steer into troubled waters ahead. ■

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My Mother's Story

Canada is defined by refugees.



MY MOTHER WAS A REFUGEE, and Canada was her refuge.

My mother died this August, a few days before her 81st birthday. And as I sat down to write her eulogy, I kept thinking about the confluence of events that brought her to Alberta, and about Alberta's legacy as a home for people fleeing war and terror.

My mum was born in late August of 1939, just days before the declaration of war. She took her first breaths in a Mennonite colony in what was then the USSR but is now Ukraine. She was the product of a so-called mixed marriage: Her father was Mennonite, her mother Lutheran. Ukraine was convulsed by famine, and the Mennonite communities were victims too of Stalin's iron fist.

In a time of crisis and chaos, there's a temptation to pull up the drawbridge. But we need to find a way to resume admitting refugees and immigrants.

But things got exponentially worse when the Nazis invaded in 1942, leaving German-speaking Soviet citizens caught in a vise between two evil dictators.

Any illusions, or delusions, that ethnic Germans may have had that Hitler's forces would liberate them from Stalin's tyranny were grotesquely mistaken. The Mennonites were pacifists. That didn't stop my grandfather, a gentle, bookish man, from being

forced to serve in the German army. He was among the millions who died on the Eastern Front. My redoubtable grandmother, a widow with three small children, somehow made the trek from Ukraine, through Czechoslovakia, to Germany. When the war finally ended, they had made it into the American sector of occupation. They were wildly lucky. Under the terms of the Yalta agreements, all Soviet citizens were supposed to be repatriated to the USSR. Thousands of ethnic Germans were deemed traitors and sent back to internal exile—or worse. My mother escaped that fate. Some of my grandfather's Mennonite relatives, who'd moved to Manitoba and Saskatchewan before the war, saw the names of my grandmother, my mother and my aunts on a list of "displaced persons" and sponsored them to come to Canada.

My mother and her family arrived in Montreal in June of 1948 aboard a ship called the *Tabinta* and travelled west by train. My grandmother ended up in Barrhead, about 120 km northwest of Edmonton, where she worked as a housekeeper and washerwoman while the family lived in a converted chicken coop.

There were no ESL classes at the Barrhead school. No settlement services for new immigrants. And 1948 can't have been an easy time to be a German-speaking refugee. But some kind teachers at that little public school took care to ensure that my nine-year-old mother learned to speak elegant English and to read and write it fluently.

When I was growing up, our house was full of books, including the classics: Tolstoy, Flaubert, Henry James. When I was young I assumed those books must belong to my dad. He, after all, was the one with a university education. My mum had only finished high school. But that was my own internalized sexism and snobbery. Those books all belonged to my mother, a ferocious autodidact, who had gotten her own education via public libraries and public radio. The CBC was her university. She listened to Peter Gzowski and Alberto Manguel and Margaret Visser and Shelagh Rogers and Eleanor Wachtel and read the books they recommended. That's why our house was filled with CanLit: Robertson Davies, Margaret Lawrence, Margaret Atwood, Mordecai Richler, Carol Shields. Small wonder I became a reader—and a writer.

My mother's story is exceptional in some ways—but in other ways it parallels the experiences of thousands of Albertans, whether they arrived here from Eastern Europe, like my mum, or from Chile or Vietnam or Eritrea or South Sudan or Myanmar or Syria. As a community we have been defined and redefined by the waves of refugees who have found new hope and new homes here. That's a lesson we need to remember as we remake refugee and immigration policy in a time of global pandemic and hardening borders. In a time of crisis and chaos, there's a natural temptation to pull up the drawbridge. But we need to find a way to resume admitting refugees and immigrants to Canada, a system that protects us all without abandoning those who sorely need refuge.

My mother's story holds another lesson too. If we want refugee stories to be success stories, we need the publicly funded programs and the public infrastructure that allow people to learn English (or French), to get a post-secondary education, to start their own businesses, to find rewarding employment, to find their way in a different place and a different culture. We need to remove barriers, to confront prejudices, to give people who have come here, victims, perhaps, of trauma, the best chance to begin again.

I have lost my mother. But I will never forget her legacy. I hope I never fail to honour it. ■

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Finding Fortitude

Canada's most powerful memorial.



OTTAWA IS A CITY OF MEMORIALS, as befits a national capital. But the most poignant and powerful one isn't in Ottawa proper. It's the Afghanistan Memorial Hall, a 30-minute drive from Parliament Hill, at the National Defence Headquarters (Carling).

Tucked into the centre of the sprawling Carling Campus, the memorial pavilion is a striking building: low-slung, sharp-edged. Its front walls are slabs of highly polished black marble, buffed to such a shine that they reflect the sky above. On them are engraved the words "We will remember them/Nous nous souviendrons d'eux." Step inside and the pavilion is filled with light. Floor-to-ceiling windows look out onto a forest wilderness, white in winter, lush green when summer finally comes.

May those who served in Afghanistan be examples as we set about the everyday heroism of life in the pandemic.

The hall is a tribute to the Canadians who died in Afghanistan: 158 military personnel and seven civilians. It also recognizes and commemorates the US service men and women who died while under Canadian command.

The centre of the memorial is a large rough rock. A boulder. Taliban fighters used this rock as a roadblock, to force a Canadian military vehicle off the road. The

tactic was successful. Fatally so. And so the Canadian soldiers decided that this particular boulder would never be used to kill another Canadian. They lugged it to their base in Kandahar. It became the start of a makeshift memorial. A haunting cenotaph the soldiers built for themselves. For their own.

Made from Afghan white marble, the cenotaph displays the names and photos, the birth dates and birthplaces, and the death dates and death places of the fallen.

Walking through the hall on my first visit there, last June, took my breath away. I remembered so many of those names and faces from my days writing for the *Edmonton Journal*.

The first Canadians who died: Sgt. Marc Léger, Cpl. Ainsworth Dyer, Pte. Richard Green and Pte. Nathan Smith. All four were members of the Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry, based in Edmonton. They were killed by Americans, not Afghans, in a "friendly fire" incident on April 17, 2002. I covered their massive public memorial service at the Oilers' arena. Thousands turned out that bright April day, shocked by the horror of such pointless accidental loss. But their deaths were only the first of many that the Princess Pat's would suffer.

Over the years the news stories continued. But the big public memorials stopped. The losses of Canadians in Afghanistan slowly became, if not routine, then something that no longer surprised us.

But in Kandahar this grassroots memorial kept growing.

As I walked along, I saw the memorial plaque for Cpt. Nichola Goddard, the young Calgary woman and officer in the Royal Canadian Horse Artillery who died on May 17, 2006. I saw the plaque for Michelle Lang, the *Calgary Herald* reporter killed while on assignment in Kandahar in 2009. So many Alberta names and faces. A powerful reminder of how deeply this war, so many miles away, touched and scarred our province.

The memorial is black and white and grey. As black and white as we thought the issues were in the wake of 9/11. As grey as they seemed when Canada left Afghanistan in 2011.

The memorial hasn't been without controversy. Some people complain that it isn't more public, more accessible, more central. Because it's on a military base, it can only be visited by appointment, though families of the dead can visit 24/7. But I understand the military's desire to keep this luminous, numinous space protected, to ensure it's not going to be vandalized by graffiti nor used as a backdrop for tourist selfies. I think it's appropriate too that this memorial rests right in the heart of National Defence Headquarters—an omnipresent reminder of the human cost of war.

I've been thinking a lot of late about memorials, and how we remember the dead. Small wonder. I'm writing this column on March 22, 2020. Alberta is on edge about COVID-19. As I type, the death toll in Canada is rising. Magazine production deadlines being what they are, you will read this column two months after I file it. Who knows what our body count will be by then? After 9/11 shook our world to its foundations, we sent young Canadian men and women off to war to fight in our name. To protect us. In 2020 a new certainty-shattering crisis came home, and no army could defend us.

When the COVID-19 crisis abates, we'll need to pick up our lives, mourn the lost and screw up our courage to confront the economic and social challenges left in the virus's wake. We'll all need the fortitude and *esprit de corps* we demanded of those who served us in Kabul and Kandahar. As beautiful as the Afghanistan Memorial Hall is, perhaps the best legacy for those we remember there is to let them be our examples and guides as we set about the hard, everyday heroism of life in the shadow of pandemic. ■

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