

# DIGGING HISTORY

## Introduction

### Focus

Through the story of Robin Barker James, this *News in Review* module brings together two different topics: teaching Canadian history innovatively, and the role of awards in recognizing and promoting Canadian achievement. Along the way we also look at some basic information on trench warfare in the First World War, the reality of which Barker James so vividly brings alive.

### Further Research

The audio-visual history of Canada in the 20th century is presented in hundreds of files at [www.cbc.ca/archives](http://www.cbc.ca/archives). One powerful First World War topic is the Halifax Explosion.

 Sections marked with this symbol indicate content suitable for younger viewers.

Pity the poor Canadian history teachers. Not only do they teach that driest of subjects—history—but they specialize in the history of one of the least exciting of countries—Canada. This, at least, is what many people believe. On the other hand, if Canadian history is so dull, how do we account for the tremendous success of the CBC's *Canada: A People's History*? And why would millions tune in to a miniseries based on the Halifax Explosion?

In fact, the story of Canada and its peoples is a fascinating one, and history teachers throughout the country and at every level are working creatively to demonstrate this to their students. Robin Barker James, the subject of the video portion of this module, is a fine example of this kind of teacher. He uses role-playing and re-enactments to help students understand the experiences of real people living in a variety of periods in Canadian history, and to make his subject come alive.

Barker James was a finalist for one of Canada's most prestigious teaching awards, the Governor General's Award for Excellence in Teaching Canadian History. Canada's National History

Society created the award to recognize those teachers who are especially successful in involving students in the understanding and appreciation of Canadian history, and to help those successful teachers share their programs and approaches with others. While such an award, in itself, cannot produce great teachers, it does call attention to them and encourage others to emulate their efforts.

The Teaching Canadian History award joins a prestigious group of Governor General's awards and honours that recognize Canadians from many different fields who have made a contribution to Canadian life and culture. Some of these, like the Literary Awards, are given for a single accomplishment at a particular time. Others, like the Order of Canada, are given in recognition of a lifetime's achievements. Some recognize public figures, others those who work quietly behind the scenes. All of them help draw attention to people like Robin Barker James, who work tirelessly to make Canadians better understand themselves and to make Canada a better place to live.

### To Consider

1. Carefully outline your general opinion of Canadian history in terms of its interest and importance.
2. In your opinion, what makes the study of Canadian history interesting?
3. Have you any personal ambition to become a teacher? Explain.

# DIGGING HISTORY

## Video Review

This video review is in three parts. The first part is a pre-view discussion followed by a series of recall questions dealing with the content of the video portion of this month's *News in Review*. The final part consists of questions for class discussion.

### Part I

#### Discussion before Viewing

The video presents an exceptional lesson that one teacher uses to help his students understand the true nature of trench warfare in the First World War. What do you think are the outcomes of a successful lesson? Can you describe any single lessons that you feel were exceptionally memorable?

### Part II

Answer the questions in the space provided.

1. Where does Robin Barker James teach? \_\_\_\_\_
2. Who was General Sam Hughes, the man whom Robin Barker James role-plays for his history class?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
3. Robin Barker James says that he cannot teach the same way he did 15 years ago. Why does he believe this is the case?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
4. What does Robin Barker James believe was "the transforming event of the past century"?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
5. Why was Sam Hughes fired?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
6. Give one example of how Robin Barker James uses his "press conference" to bring out Sam Hughes's character as a racist and a bigot.  
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\_\_\_\_\_
7. How does Robin Barker James know he's "getting through" to his students?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
8. What does Robin Barker James say is the "spirit of the bayonet"?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
9. For what one moment does Robin Barker James say he teaches?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
10. What extra elements does Robin Barker James use at the beginning of the battle to make the experience even more authentic for his students?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

11. After the memorial ceremony, one student speaks out. Why does she say all students should appreciate what Robin Barker James is teaching?
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## Discussion

Use the space between the questions to jot down points for your discussion. Be prepared to share your ideas with your peers.

1. Robin Barker James states that teachers cannot teach the way they did 15 or 20 years ago, that students require more "jolts" today than just a few years ago. Do you agree or disagree? Why?
  
2. Based on your own experiences, would you say that most teachers try to bring the elements that Barker James uses, such as humour and drama, to their teaching?
  
3. Barker James's recreation of trench warfare works especially well in the rural setting of his farm near Tilsonburg, Ontario. Could a similar recreation take place in an urban setting? Can you think of any Canadian history re-enactments or activities that would work especially well in an urban environment?
  
4. One of the students in the video talks about how much she enjoys the interactive nature of Barker James's classes. Based on your own experiences, would you describe the majority of your learning as interactive? Why or why not?
  
5. What do you think is the most important element in a good lesson?

# DIGGING HISTORY

## *The GGA for Teaching History*

“The GGA annually salutes history teachers in the classrooms of our nation who have inspired and challenged students to explore Canada’s past.” — from the Web site of Canada’s National History Society at [www.historysociety.ca/gga.asp](http://www.historysociety.ca/gga.asp).

Robin Barker James was one of 173 teachers nominated for the 2003 Governor General’s Award for Excellence in Teaching Canadian History. This award is considered one of the most prestigious awards available to a Canadian elementary or secondary school teacher.

The award was established in 1996 by Canada’s National History Society. Its three principal aims are (as stated on its Web site):

- “to recognize excellence in the teaching of Canadian history regardless of the curricula in which it is taught
- to inspire teachers and schools to strive for excellence in Canadian history education
- to promote and facilitate the sharing of best practices and innovative teaching ideas within Canada’s teaching community”

Through 2001, a committee selected 12 finalists annually. Each finalist received \$500 and a trip for two to the awards ceremony, which is held at Rideau Hall (the Governor General’s residence). One teacher was chosen from the group to receive the award, which included a medal and \$5 000.

In 2002 the award was expanded to better reflect the different levels taught by the nominees, and six award recipients are now chosen annually. Each award winner receives a medal and a prize of \$2 500, and each recipient’s school wins \$1 000.

### Criteria

Not only full-time history teachers are eligible for the Award for Excellence. Teachers in almost all subject areas are eligible, “provided that their work

features Canadian content and has an explicitly historical dimension.” The specific criteria established by Canada’s National History Society are as follows:

“Teachers must:

- Demonstrate a commitment to Canadian history in their teaching.
- Demonstrate that their teaching has an impact and that:
  - students gain a better knowledge and understanding of Canada as a whole, so that even a local or a regional study teaches them something about the nature and history of Canadian society in general
  - students understand how Canada’s past connects with its present and future
  - students gain a continuing interest in Canadian history
  - students are required to learn and apply both knowledge and skills in their study
  - students gain an awareness of the nature of history as an intellectual discipline
  - history content is comprehensive and incorporates factual knowledge with broader themes, concepts and ideas and the study of specific events, ideas, movements and peoples
  - students learn to assess historical evidence, to understand the balance between fact and interpretation, to consider questions of bias, accuracy, objectivity
  - students experience a variety of teaching and assessment strategies, resources and materials
  - students are actively involved in the learning of history”



# DIGGING HISTORY

## *The Governor General's Many Awards*

### Further Research

To learn more about the various Canadian honours, including methods for nomination, go to the Governor General's Web site at [www.gg.ca/honours/index\\_e.asp](http://www.gg.ca/honours/index_e.asp).

Every year, the Governor General presents many different awards to deserving Canadians—and, in some cases, to non-Canadians as well. The vice-regal chancellery itself administers some of these. Others are determined by separate organizations. The Governor General's Award for Excellence in Teaching Canadian History is a good example of the latter type; Canada's National History Society determines the recipients.

### Honours

The most prestigious honour presented by the Governor General is the Order of Canada. Twice a year Canadians who have made a significant lifetime contribution to their country are honoured by being made members of the order at one of three levels: member, officer, or companion. Since 1967, more than 4 000 Canadians have received the Order of Canada.

The Meritorious Service Decorations are another important honour bestowed by the Governor General. Unlike the lifetime achievement award of the Order of Canada, these are awarded for excellence in a single achievement or activity or over a specific period. There are two divisions: military and civilian. The military division honours outstanding members of the Canadian Forces. The civilian division recognizes contributions in any field. Each division has two levels, a cross and a medal. The Military Cross was created in 1984; the other three decorations date from 1991.

In 1996, Governor General Romeo LeBlanc decided that he wanted a new award to honour volunteers who worked behind the scenes with no

expectation of reward. This led to the foundation of the Governor General's Caring Canadian Award. This award goes to Canadians who have been active for several years, and have usually received no previous national or provincial recognition. The award consists of a certificate and a lapel pin.

Since the Queen created the Decorations for Bravery in 1972, over 2 000 Canadians have received an award at one of three levels—the Cross of Valour, the Star of Courage, or the Medal of Bravery. All have been recognized because they risked their lives to help others.

Since 1873, the Governor General has presented Academic Medals to promote excellence in education. The medals are awarded at four levels: Bronze at the secondary school level, Collegiate Bronze at the post-secondary diploma level, Silver at the university undergraduate level, and Gold at the graduate level. They are awarded to the student graduating with the highest average.

### Awards

The Governor General also presents several other achievement awards in various fields to Canadians and, in some areas, to citizens of other countries who have made contributions to Canadian culture. Three of these are the most recognized.

The Governor General's Literary Awards were first conferred in 1937. The Canada Council for the Arts assumed funding and adjudicating responsibilities in 1959, and added French-language categories to what were exclusively English-language awards.

The awards are given to works in

both official languages in the following categories: fiction, poetry, drama, non-fiction, translation, children's literature – text, and children's literature – illustration. Each winner receives \$15 000 and a specially bound copy of their book. Each finalist receives \$1 000, \$3 000 goes to the publisher of the winning title to assist in its promotion.

Three distinguished jurors make the selection for each category. In 2003, there were 1470 submissions from publishers. The largest category was English non-fiction, with 217 entries.

The Governor General's Performing Arts Awards were created in 1992 to honour recipients who made a lifetime contribution to Canada's cultural life. Six recipients are chosen from all areas of the performing arts: theatre, dance, classical music and opera, popular music, film, and broadcasting. Each winner receives \$15 000 and a medalion.

The awards are administered by the Governor General's Performing Arts

Awards Foundation. Its membership consists of CBC/Radio Canada, the National Arts Centre, the Canada Council for the Arts, and the Canadian Conference of the Arts.

The Governor General's Awards in Visual and Media Arts were created in 1999. Like the Literary Awards, they are administered by the Canada Council for the Arts. Six prizes are given annually for distinguished career achievement, and one more is awarded for "distinguished contributions to the visual and media arts through voluntarism, philanthropy, board governance, or community outreach activities." Each winner receives \$15 000, plus an artwork created by one of the previous year's winners.

There are several categories in which an artist may be nominated: painting and drawing; photography and printmaking; architecture; fine crafts; sculpture, including installation and other three-dimensional work; film; video; and audio and new media.

## Discussion

1. How important is it that the Government of Canada, through honours and awards, recognize the achievements of Canadians?
2. The Governor General's Literary Awards always receive the most extensive news coverage of any of the awards presented by the Governor General. Why do you think this is the case?
3. Who might you be willing to nominate for the Caring Canadian award?
4. What kinds of awards are presented at your school? Which awards do you consider most important? Why?

# DIGGING HISTORY

## Trench Warfare

### Further Research

The Canadian Museum of Civilization and the Canadian War Museum provide an exciting interactive experience on trench warfare called *Over the Top* on the Internet at [www.civilization.ca/cwm/overtop/otopinte.html](http://www.civilization.ca/cwm/overtop/otopinte.html). Much of the information in this section is based on material at two other Web sites, those of [FirstWorldWar.com](http://FirstWorldWar.com) at [www.firstworldwar.com/features/trenchlife.htm](http://www.firstworldwar.com/features/trenchlife.htm) and Industry Canada's Canadian Veterans Recollect at [collections.ic.gc.ca/audio/lifetren.htm](http://collections.ic.gc.ca/audio/lifetren.htm).

### Definition

*Front* in war refers to the battle front where two opposing armies meet. In the First World War the front was heavily marked by lines of barbed wire, shell craters, mud, and dead bodies. It was almost impossible to cross, so it was usually called No Man's Land.

The realities of trench warfare during the First World War were even more frightening than those experienced by Robin Barker James's students in his recreation of a battle on the Western Front.

No one-day experience can convey the full horror of being part of the Allied forces bogged down in Belgium and France from 1914 through 1918.

When war was initially declared, few expected that the conflict would continue as long or move as slowly as it did. But when the Germans dug into their positions after their failure to defeat France at the Marne River, it meant that trench warfare would become the norm for the next four years.

The trenches reached across Belgium and France for over 950 kilometres. In some locations, enemy trenches were separated by less than 100 metres, with a "No Man's Land" in between. The trenches themselves were at least two metres deep; often they began as shell holes that were joined together by ditches dug by the soldiers.

The trenches were dug in a zigzag pattern, with firing lines connected so that the full line never faced enemy fire. Behind the front lines was a second line of support trenches; behind those was a third line of reserve trenches. These were joined by communication trenches and a telephone system. Barbed wire was strung to protect the trenches from enemy attack. The system was designed to help move troops and supplies to the front as efficiently as possible.

Soldiers were subject to what is called a duty cycle. They would spend a period of time in the front line, then in support lines, followed by the reserve

lines and, finally, a period of rest (usually short). The amount of time in each area could vary widely from soldier to soldier.

### Life in the Trenches

Conditions in the trenches were truly appalling. Heavy rain and snow meant they were often filled with mud and water—water that was sometimes up to the soldiers' knees. Troops used boards as pathways to maintain their footing in these conditions, and they were always in need of repair.

The trenches were infested with vermin. Lice were a common problem, breeding in the filthy clothes that men were rarely able to change. Lice caused a disease called Trench Fever, the symptoms of which were severe pain and a high fever, requiring a 12-week recovery period away from the trenches. These lice were accompanied by the nits that lived in the soldiers' hair.

Frogs, slugs and beetles were everywhere. Worst of all, however, were the millions of rats that gorged on human remains on the battlefield. Each rat could produce as many as 900 offspring per year, and they were everywhere in the trenches, spreading infection and contaminating food.

New arrivals to the trenches were always aware of the vile smells that more seasoned veterans learned to ignore. These included the smell of rotting corpses in shallow graves, inadequate latrines, unwashed bodies, chemicals used to fight infection, cordite, and the last vestiges of poison gas from attacks.

Death was everywhere around the men in the trenches. It has been estimated that one-third of military deaths in the First World War were in the trenches of the Western Front. Disease was always a threat, and responsible for a large percentage of deaths. In the more active sectors shellfire was constant. Especially during the daylight, snipers picked off those who were foolish enough to raise their heads above the parapet (it is said that curious newcomers to the front were the most common sniper victims).

A day in the trenches followed a strict routine. One hour before dawn the men were ordered to “stand to”: to go on guard with fixed bayonets against dawn raids (which were not unusual). This was followed by rifle cleaning, breakfast, and inspection. Chores were then assigned, such as maintenance of sandbags and wooden pathways, pumping out water, or latrine duty.

Movement in and around the trenches was heavily restricted until nightfall, when the front lines really came alive.

Soldiers were once again ordered to “stand to” at sunset. Once it was dark, the task of supply and maintenance of the front lines was attended to. Food and water would be brought up from the rear. Relief forces would also work their way up to the front—a trip that took several hours of weaving through the lines of trenches. Some soldiers would be assigned sentry duty, which was usually for no more than a two-hour stretch, to prevent them from falling asleep. Falling asleep on sentry duty meant the firing squad.

It was also at night that patrols went out into No Man’s Land to spy on enemy forces and, in some cases, to go on trench raids. Trench raids, in which small groups would cut an enemy’s barbed wire and attack a particular part of the trench system, were a common occurrence between major attacks across an entire front. Canadian soldiers became famous for their willingness to participate in trench raids, and for the successes they had during them.

## **To Consider**

1. What is your general impression of the First World War?
2. If you could speak to a Canadian veteran of the First World War, what would you say?
3. How important it for young Canadians to learn about past events such as the First World War? Explain fully.

# DIGGING HISTORY

## *Making History Interesting*

### Crossfire

Which of the following quotes do you most support? Why? "Canada's history is as dull as ditchwater and her politics is full of it." — Maurice Dutton 1935 in *Canadian Historical Review* OR "We don't need to make our history interesting. It *is* interesting." — Governor-General Vincent Massey, 1958

Teaching Canadian history is not an easy job. Presented as a series of events and facts, history can be very dry. One secret of successful history teaching is to totally involve students in an experience that is an honest representation of what it would have been like to be alive in a previous era, or to have taken part in a significant event. A second secret is to show students how historians learn about the past through a variety of tools—from artifacts to literature, art to archives.

Robin Barker James's lesson on trench warfare during the First World War is an attempt to re-create some of the terrible conditions faced by the average Canadian soldier on a daily basis. A variety of experiences—a march to the battlefield, mock combat, and a funeral—are designed to bring home the horror of war that cannot be fully described by the words in a textbook.

The re-creation of past events is a technique that works well in other areas as well. A popular event for teachers of courses in Western civilization is the medieval fair, in which students design and staff booths that duplicate the kinds of foods, wares, and services that would

have been available at such an event during the Middle Ages.

To help students learn how archaeologists and historians learn about the past, many history teachers really do dig history. They bury a series of carefully chosen artifacts on school property and train their students in the correct method of performing an archaeological dig. Having given students hints on the location of the artifacts, teachers send them out to unearth them. Analysis of each item is also part of the lesson; students are asked what each item might tell us about the culture from which it came.

Oral history, in which individuals are asked to record their memories of events during their lifetimes, has become an increasingly popular field. It is also an area of history where teachers and students can work together to create an oral history of their community based on the memories of long-time residents. These activities can have important results, including the preservation of much knowledge that might otherwise be lost. Some schools archive the material; others present it to the public in published form.

### Your Turn

At one time or another, all students believe they have the perfect method for making learning more interesting. This is your opportunity to create a new way of presenting some aspect of the Canadian history curriculum.

Simply choose a period, event, or concept from Canadian history, and describe how you would present it to a class in a way that would interest the students. Your topics might include life in New France, the impact of the Great Depression, or the intrigues of the Confederation debate. Your unit should not only teach the facts of the event you have selected, but should ensure that student involvement results in a real understanding of what life was like for those who lived in the period or took part in the event. Your method might include any-

thing from a re-enactment to an interactive game. You should also consider a fair method for evaluating student understanding and progress. Use the organizer to outline your lesson plan. Note: Teachers go through this process every day as they prepare to present material to their students.

## **My History Lesson**

<b>Lesson Title</b>
<b>Description of period, event or concept to be studied</b>
<b>Method (Carefully note how you would go about setting up and running the lesson.)</b>
<b>What students would learn and experience:</b>
<b>Evaluation Scheme</b>

## DIGGING HISTORY

### *Designing an Award*

#### Quote

"To be allowed to teach children should be the sign of the final approval of society."  
— Brock Chisholm, 1945

Not every teacher is going to win the Governor General's Award for Excellence in Teaching Canadian History. Almost all students, however, have at least one teacher whom they feel deserves an award of excellence—a teacher who has made a real difference in their lives and the way they learn. Like Robin Barker James's history teachers, that one teacher may even influence a student's ultimate career choice.

Here is your opportunity to honour a special teacher by designing an award of your own, and presenting it to him or her. What the award looks like is completely up to you: it could be a trophy or artwork. A hand-lettered or computer-produced certificate always works well.

The award must have a specific set of criteria that are met by the activities of the recipient (see the section "The GGA for Teaching History" on page 49 for an example of how to set up these criteria). These criteria should be a list of those things you find most important in a teacher and in your own learning.

The award should include a brief description of the winner, a citation that makes it clear why he or she is a deserving recipient. For example, when Margaret Atwood was made a Companion of the Order of Canada by the Governor General, her Honour included the following description: "A poet, novelist and critic, she has long been a major cultural force in Canada and is now considered one of the country's most prominent and internationally known literary figures. In addition to her writing, she has long been heavily involved in the feminist and writing communities as well as in Amnesty International, PEN International, and in environmental protection organizations."

When you have completed your award, be sure to present it to your favourite teacher. Every teacher is delighted when a student shows her or his appreciation. Don't forget to sign and date it.

Use the worksheet on the next page to organize your work.

## Favourite Teacher Award Worksheet

**Title of the award:**

**Format of the award (You may wish to include a rough design of the certificate, trophy, etc.):**

**Text that will appear on the award itself:**

**Criteria for the award:**

**Recipient of this year's award:**

**Description of the recipient:**