

Canadian perspective

by BRIAN LOCKHART

It was September 13, 1759, when General Louis-Joseph Marquis de Montcalm looked out across a battlefield at the Plains of Abraham to find a firing line of regular British soldiers a kilometre wide over an open field.

Commanded by General James Wolfe, the British had successfully scaled the cliffs near Quebec City from the St. Lawrence River, to surprise the French defenders.

The battle that followed was short, it was all over in less than an hour, and ended with the French troops retreating in disarray.

General Wolfe was hit by three musket balls early in the battle and died on the field. Montcalm was also struck by musket fire and mortally wounded, dying the next morning. That British victory over 250 years ago changed the course of history in North America.

In English Canada, the Battle of the Plains of Abraham is noted as an historical event, but there is very little sentiment attached to it.

In French Quebec, however, they have not forgotten.

A plan to commemorate the 250th anniversary including a re-enactment of the battle in 2009 was met with threats of violence if it occurred.

Separatists in particular did not want to see a celebration of an event that resulted in a French defeat.

Regardless of the end result of the battle and the left over sentiment, it is indeed a defining historical event that shaped the country.

One of the forums I visit on regular basis posed the question, 'what are the defining events of Canadian history?'

It was interesting to note the various responses, which did change quite a bit from region to region.

However there was a general consensus among the armchair amateur historians about events which shaped the country and made the greatest impact.

The War of 1812 was considered historic, but in the end, didn't seem to be a defining moment ? but rather a temporary two year blip in the building of a nation. Although the Battle of Lundy's Lane, a brutal battle fought in stifling hot temperatures at Niagara Falls, and at night, did get honourable mention for being one of the largest battles fought Canadian soil.

Confederation, of course made the top of everyone's list. Without the founding fathers coming together and forming the Dominion in 1867, the nation would have been a loosely aligned colony for who knows how many more decades. In an alternate time line, the original four provinces could have tired of waiting and declared their own nation which would have resulted in a continent with quite a few more smaller countries.

The Battle of Vimy Ridge, was the first time the four divisions of the Canadian Expeditionary Force fought together in the First World War. The resulting victory in the battle became a symbol of national achievement and sacrifice as the Canadian forces suffered over 10,000 casualties. Today, the battle is still celebrated and each years students travel to France to visit the memorial and keep the memory alive.

When the new Maple Leaf flag was introduced in 1965, it was not without controversy.

The country never had a flag other than the Red Ensign, which was not an official national flag. Rather it was unofficial but recognizable.

The debate regarding the creation of a new national flag became rather heated. Symbols tend to make some people angry.

In the end the new flag first flew on February 15, 1965, and has become one of the most easily recognizable and respected flags on the planet.

Of all the things former Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau accomplished during his tenure as head of government, the patriation of the Canadian Constitution and with it, the Charter of Rights and Freedoms was arguably his crowning achievement as P.M.

The new constitution replaced the British North America Act and the Statute of Westminster.

While the BNA did work fine, the patriation of the constitution really did mean we had a unique and fully Canadian rule of law. There were several others suggestions for events that shaped the country.

Newfoundland joining Confederation in 1949 and adding 405,000 sq miles to the country is considered a huge deal. The creation of public health care was also in the top mentioned events.

While these events certainly contributed to the nation, I'm sure if you did a poll across the country, you would find at least some differences between western Canada, the eastern provinces, and Quebec, in which events they think are important.

You can't change history, but certain events certainly stand out more than others.