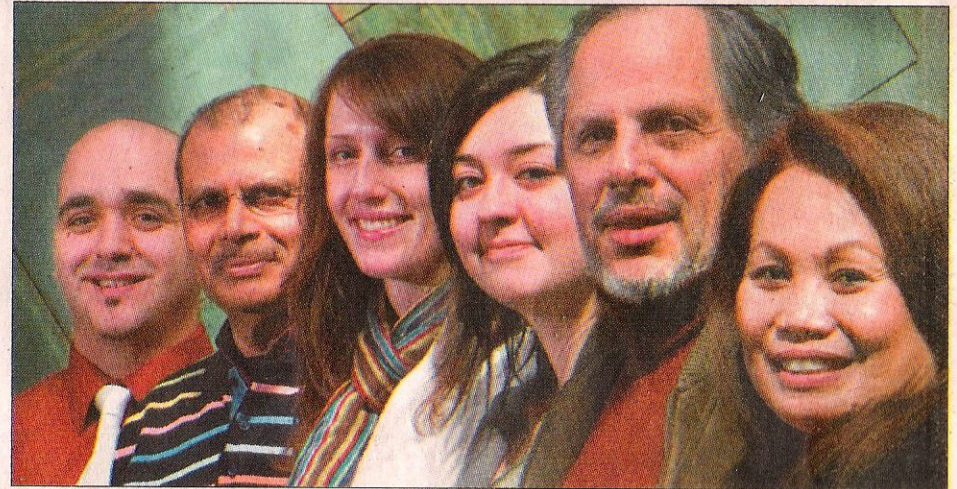


Yours, mine and ours

When does it become 'our' history? For six first-generation Canadians on a quest to understand Vimy Ridge, the gulf between present and past narrows



WAYNE CUDDINGTON, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN

Ali Abbas, Nityanand Varma, Kristina Roic, Gloria Ivankovic, Gustavo Rodriguez-Zuleta and Julie Espinosa have been given a crash-course on the First World War.

BY CHARLOTTE GRAY

The transition was gradual, and fascinating to watch.

At the start of the Vimy project, the Canadian newcomers told the rest of us about their own journeys to Canada, and what they had left behind.

Gustavo, 58, described how Colombia's experience of colonization was different than Canada's: "We were conquered, by soldiers. It was so different here: you came and settled this country." Gloria, 17, said she couldn't imagine a war museum in Bosnia, where she was born: "We have nothing to

celebrate — and besides, it would be things from our own homes on display."

At our first meeting, it was "we" and "them" in every sense. "We", the academics, knew the facts while "they" were exploring a landmark of Canada's past. "We", the experts, spoke for Canadian history while "they", the newcomers, were identified by their own national backgrounds. These first-generation Canadians listened respectfully to explanations of what happened on Vimy Ridge in April 1917, and why the battle looms large in Canadian history.

See **OURS** on PAGE B3

INSIDE, HISTORY ON THE HILL: SIX FIRST-GENERATION CANADIANS TOUR PARLIAMENT AS PART OF THEIR QUEST TO DETERMINE WHETHER THE BATTLE OF VIMY RIDGE DESERVES THE ICONIC STATUS IT HOLDS IN CANADIAN HISTORY. PAGES B2 AND B3



WAYNE CUDDINGTON, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN

Meryn Stuart, director of nursing history research at the University of Ottawa, suspects politics may have played a role in the Battle of Vimy Ridge being so well memorialized by Canadians.

Ours: A sense of belonging

Continued from PAGE B1

All were aware that they had been chosen because they were, as they say in Newfoundland, "Come From Aways."

When they asked questions, Canadian history was "your history." This was especially true for Nityanand Varma, 69, who was well-versed in the history of his native country, India. He pointed out that several thousand Indian troops had also fought in the First World War, with brutal casualties. "You weren't the only colony that contributed soldiers."

But then the categories began to break down. For one thing, the experts couldn't always agree on the story. Tim Cook, from the War Museum, suggested

History provides newcomers with the context in which to understand current politics.

that the hard-won Canadian victory at Vimy marked the start of a sense of Canadian nationality.

Jean Morin, from the Department of National Defence's Directorate of History, shook his head emphatically. No, he argued, Vimy was the end — the last gasp — of Canada's automatic identification with British interests.

Similarly, as we stood in front of the Nurses' Memorial in Parliament's Centre Block, the experts disagreed on the role played by Prime Minister Mackenzie King. House of Commons curator David Monaghan suggested that King himself had sketched the design for the monument. "I don't think so," said Meryn Stuart, from the University of Ottawa. Then she chuckled as she told us, "But you see, historians often cannot even agree on the facts, let alone the interpretations!"

As we started talking about what kind of history Canadians want, the newcomers' language shifted. Gustavo raised the issue of heroes. "I came to Canada Day here on the Hill, and everybody was so proud of this country. But why don't we have any heroes here — except perhaps Terry Fox?"

I looked around. Did anybody else catch it? The way Gustavo had said "we," identifying himself as a Canadian?

Ali Abbas spoke about the centuries-old religious divisions that colour life in Lebanon, which he left when he was six. "They cannot get beyond the past in Lebanon."

I glanced around again. Did anybody else notice he talked about "they"?

If the *Citizen's* Vimy project demonstrated one thing to me, it was the link between history and citizenship — the sense of belonging to a country. There are many reasons to study our history: It is a deep mine of intriguing stories; it explains the patterns of development; it reveals the values on which our federation is built. But why should any first-generation Canadian care about ancient Canadian battles, especially if they have come from countries where history is the source of carnage and bloodshed?

The answer, I discovered, is that history provides newcomers with the context to understand current politics. History offers them symbols of their new nationality that they can embrace.

For the first-generation Canadians with whom I explored Vimy, the bare battlefield facts were of only passing interest. But the ensuing debate pushed us all to talk about what those facts meant.

We explored the dramatic difference in 1917 attitudes to conscription between Quebec and the rest of Canada. By this point, all of us sitting in the Speaker's splendid dining room were talking in the first person plural. "We" was everybody there — not just the homegrown experts.

The appetite to learn more about Canadian history was almost tangible. Julie Espinosa, who had only been a citizen for two weeks, confided that after our first get-together she had asked her employer to explain Canada's role in the First World War. "He brought out his son's history books!" she said.

Even as the group broke up, the newcomers were asking questions. Gloria and I walked back along the House of Commons corridor past the portraits of former prime ministers. She had studied Pierre Trudeau in Grade 10 Canadian history, but wished she knew enough to recognize some of the others. When she caught sight of Brian Mulroney, she laughed. "It's sad, you know. For my generation, he's just Ben's dad."

Charlotte Gray is the bestselling author of numerous books, including *The Museum Called Canada*.