

# Canadians eager to know their past, says popular historian

Gray also champions Sir John A. for The Greatest Canadian

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Sir John A. Macdonald — who sometimes governed this nation while suffering from a hangover — couldn't have asked for a better advocate than author Charlotte Gray in CBC's nationwide referendum on *The Greatest Canadian*.

But Gray, the writer of popular histories and the author of the lavishly illustrated and highly readable *The Museum Called Canada: 25 Rooms of Wonder* (Random House, 710 pp., \$65), knows she's in tough with her choice. She made her pitch to the country on Oct. 27, just two days after Bret (The Hitman) Hart eloquently argued his case for Don Cherry. So far, Don's in third place, beating Sir John A., who's in sixth place behind the likes of Tommy Douglas at No. 1, Terry Fox at No. 2, Pierre Trudeau at No. 4 and Wayne Gretzky at No. 5.

Gray has one more plea to make at a final, live debate at 8 p.m. on Nov. 28 and, she says, she's up for the job.

"He's my man," she says of Canada's first prime minister. "And it's been great fun."

Fittingly, the interview takes place in the Confederation Lounge of the Hotel Macdonald. The Fathers of Confederation stare down from their massive portrait that hangs in the room.

Other Canadians in the running for Greatest Of Us All include environmentalist David Suzuki; Dr. Frederick Banting, the discoverer of insulin; Lester Pearson, former prime minister and Nobel Peace Prize winner; and Alexander Graham Bell, who invented the telephone. Viewers can vote either via the Internet at [www.cbc.ca/greatest](http://www.cbc.ca/greatest), over the telephone by calling the toll-free 1-866-303-VOTE (8683) or by text messaging to CBC10 (22210).

"I think people who are snotty about *The Greatest Canadian* vote are missing the point completely," says Gray, who's on a book tour interview promoting *The Museum Called Canada*.

"I was in a cab going downtown from the Calgary airport and the driver was a young man from India who was listening to CBC FM.

"I asked him if he was a fan of CBC, and before we hit the outskirts of the city he was discussing his feelings about Alexander Graham Bell versus Pierre Elliott Trudeau. I thought it was great."

And Don Cherry?

"Having Don Cherry there is good because people say, 'Surely there's more to Canada than Don Cherry,'" says Gray.

The interest in the vote, she says, is another indication that Canadians desperately want to learn more about their country's past and its heroes.

"There is a real hunger in this country



JOHN LUCAS, THE JOURNAL

What better place for author Charlotte Gray to talk about Sir John A. Macdonald's greatness than in the Confederation Lounge of the Hotel Macdonald?

for Canadian history," the British expatriate says. "I've lucked out because I write what I love, and there's this immense appetite to find out where we've come from."

Her previous books include the *Flint and Feather: The Life and Times of E. Pauline Johnson*, *Tekhionwake* and *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Lives of Susanna Moodie and Catharine Parr Traill*.

Her museum book takes readers from Canada's two-billion-year-old fossil record to a spectacular view of the country's North Atlantic coast shot from the Skylab space station as it orbited the Earth.

"One of the things that we wanted to make clear in the book was that this is a very old landscape," she says. "It didn't come into being with Confederation."

*The Museum Called Canada* is a beautifully designed book with a faux wood-grain cover and square-edged binding that gives it the appearance of a box of wonders. Designed by Sara Angel, who might be one of the best book designers in the country, the illustrations cover the gamut of our nation's history. Included, of course, are some of the moments in our collective past where horrors, many of them directed at First Nations people, occurred.

"This book has the design quality of a fashion magazine," a proud Gray says, "and it was the kind of team effort in which writers rarely get to take part."

While she admits to a bad memory for dates, "I am quite good I think at the broad strokes of history over the last 200 years or so.

"But I really didn't know much before then — there were dinosaurs and then Brits and Portuguese came here to fish — but that was about it."

Approaching history through artifacts as she does here is a much different way of telling the story of a country.

"It's certainly a reversal of the traditional academic approach to history," Gray says, "which always seems to go from the general to the particular."

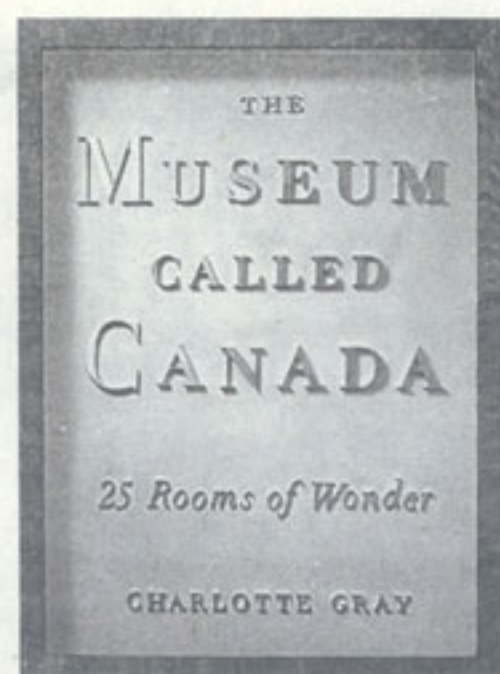
The artifacts, whether it's the half-skull of Jesuit martyr Jean de Brebeuf or an Eaton's Beauty Doll from the '20s, give readers what Gray calls "specific hand-holds" on their past.

To her, the most moving artifact is a satchel carried by a Vietnamese boat person. It's battered and beaten but oddly hopeful, too.

"I think it's incredibly moving," Gray says. "More than 20,000 Vietnamese people arrived here and were embraced by this nation. The satchel is such a wonderful symbol of immigrants who brought so little to this country and yet brought so much."

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*The Greatest Canadian* airs Wednesday nights at 8 on CBC. Tonight, Paul Gross pleads the case for Lester B. Pearson.



SUPPLIED

Charlotte Gray's book  
*The Museum Called Canada:  
25 Rooms of Wonder*