

COUNTRY'S PORTRAIT NEEDS A GALLERY

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CHARLOTTE GRAY

Portraits bring our history alive in a way the written word seldom can. When I visualize paintings of Sir John A. Macdonald, Canada's first prime minister, I see the glimmer of sadness behind his wicked grin. When I look at photographs of women's rights advocate Nellie McClung, I see the maternal warmth of her gaze.

I learned the power of portraits young. I was born in northern England, where we were taught that the 17th-century English Civil War was a Good Thing. Thanks to Oliver Cromwell, its hero, the monarchy was throttled back, Parliament asserted its supremacy, and the first whiff of real democracy spread across the land. Who could quarrel with that?

Then, when I was 11 years old, I found myself in front of a portrait of

Oliver Cromwell, in Warwick Castle. I stared at a guy with a piercing stare, arrogant expression and cruel mouth. The tour guide asked me what I thought of this man, and, dutiful little Northerner that I was, I said, "Well, I suppose you have to be tough to win a war."

She looked at me with horror — I should have known that anybody who worked in a castle was a royalist. "He beheaded the king!" she snapped. "He tore England apart!"

The experience was a revelation. I had glimpsed the personality of the Great Protector (as he was known). I could see that there are many versions of the same story.

Now we're having a debate about the Portrait Gallery of Canada. First announced in 2001, the gallery remains unbuilt and is long overdue. Most countries established national portrait galleries years ago, and their extensive collections give visitors a vivid sense of both long-ago and recent history. They also reveal which class of individuals a nation chooses to give special attention to.

If you go to the newly reopened Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C., you see the 42

presidents paraded in front of you — film footage of Franklin D. Roosevelt, Oliphant cartoons of Richard Nixon. London's National Portrait Gallery highlights great writers like the Brontë sisters, and self-portraits by Sir Joshua Reynolds and David Hockney. The Scottish National Portrait Gallery displays philosophers and engineers.

Canada has a wonderful collection of portraits currently stored in the Gatineau vaults of Library and Archives Canada. This collection is intriguing because it is so Canadian. Yes, there are lots of celebs there (Mackenzie King, Margaret Atwood), but there are also images of anonymous people who did the back-breaking work of exploring, settling and fighting for Canada — Iroquois chiefs, Hudson Bay Company voyageurs, First World War soldiers, Saskatchewan farm women in the 1930s.

We Canadians are uncomfortable about our history. There is no master narrative, because there are so many tensions — East versus West, English versus French, First Nations versus settlers. Provincial museums do a great job of regional history, but it is often hard for us to see the bigger picture.

Yet the portraits hidden in the Gatineau vaults do tell a national story, because they reveal the collective effort that built the most successful federation in the world. If on public display, they would allow us to engage with people who shaped this country as individuals, rather than as figure-

heads from a particular province, party or group. And we would finally enjoy some real treasures — for example, an 1819 portrait of a young girl called Desmasduit, the last survivor of the Beothuk people of Newfoundland.

The current debate about a Canadian Portrait Gallery is very Canadian, since it is conducted within the framework of regional tensions and grudges. Which city should house it? Thanks to a private real-estate deal, Calgary appears to be the current front-runner. There is no reason why the new Encana building in Calgary shouldn't have a satellite portrait gallery in its public space, just as England's Tate Gallery, housed on London's Embankment, has Tate North, a satellite gallery, in Liverpool.

But if our nation's Portrait Gallery is to give us a glimpse of the individuals who together built this country, it makes sense to put it in our national capital. Ottawa is not only the city visited by thousands of schoolchildren and tourists each year, eager to understand how a country as huge and farflung as Canada works. It is also the place where Canadians from every region still assemble today, to hammer out the consensus that continues to make Canada more than a collection of provinces.

CHARLOTTE GRAY is the author of six best-selling books of history and biography, and the winner of the Pierre Berton Award for popularizing Canadian history. She is an adjunct research professor in history at Carleton University.