

How solid is the case against Cornwallis?

By PAUL W. BENNETT

Removing the name of Halifax's founder, Edward Cornwallis, from the masthead of a South End junior high school has set a dangerous precedent.

The appointed Mi'kmaq Trustee, Kirk Arsenault, has succeeded in convincing the elected Halifax School Board to remove Cornwallis' name. No one spoke against the move and a jubilant Arsenault now claims that "anything that's named after Edward Cornwallis needs to be changed."

The HRSB's unanimous decision has not only opened the door to renaming other public monuments and streets, but implicitly endorsed Mi'kmaq author Daniel N. Paul's 25-year crusade to vilify Cornwallis and the so-called "European ruling classes" for "their efforts to destroy the Amerindians."

Renaming the school is not a trifling matter. Cornwallis was the British military officer credited with founding Halifax in 1749 with some 2,576 white settlers. He commanded the British forces in the midst of a period of frontier warfare where the British, French and Mi'kmaq repeatedly killed combatants, including women, children and babies. A downtown street, local park, and famous statue also bear his name.

The case against Cornwallis hangs on the fact that he issued a 1749 proclamation putting a bounty on the scalps of Mi'kmaq men, women, and children. What is problematic, however, is whether such an action, undertaken in a state of brutal frontier warfare, was that unusual and, indeed, whether 18th century military commanders should be judged by modern standards.

Much of the Mi'kmaq claim is presented in Paul's 1993 book *We Were Not the Savages*. While Paul is often described as an historian, his work is mostly popular storytelling, since it's a fascinating mix of history, folklore, and personal testimony.

Paul's book contends that the British and specifically Cornwallis were guilty of waging "genocide" against the Mi'kmaq people in Acadia and what is now Nova Scotia. In his tale, the Mi'kmaq welcomed Cornwallis with "hospitality," only to be later treated with "insincerity and contempt" by the European intruders.

In his tale, the British scalp proclamation is labelled an act of "genocide" and Cornwallis's actions compared with Adolf Hitler's "extermination of most of Europe's Jews." He was, in

Paul's words, "well endowed with a heartless cruelty" and akin to the "English barbarians" who slaughtered the Scots in the 1746 Battle of Culloden.

Such charges certainly arouse the passions and draw much-needed attention to the larger historical context.

Settling and defending Halifax was part of a European 18th century "conquest" of the Americas, but Cornwallis's actions were not appreciably different from those of his counterparts in Massachusetts Bay Colony and Pennsylvania, or Andrew Jackson of Tennessee. All offered "scalp bounties" and committed atrocities in times of colonial frontier warfare.

Paul's analysis of Cornwallis is incredibly one-sided and enjoys little support among North American historians. Professor J. Murray Beck's Dictionary of Canadian Biography (DCB) appraisal of Cornwallis lauds him for his choice of the Citadel Hill site, organizing the first government, and setting up a courts system modelled after Virginia.

The governor, according to Beck, "initially established friendly relations with the Micmacs," but the relationship dissolved after they aligned with Jean-Louis Le Loutre, a French missionary Cornwallis described bluntly as "a good for nothing Scoundrel as ever lived."

Amidst the barbarity of frontier warfare, Daniel Paul has no difficulty identifying the heroes and villains. Chief of the Mi'kmaq tribe of Shubenacadie, Jean-Baptiste Cope, associated with Le Loutre, is described as a "humanitarian."

That description is disputed by Micheline D. Johnson, historian at Université de Sherbrooke, Quebec. She bases her claim on French colonial papers describing Cope as "a drunkard and a bad lot" and "a bad Micmac whose conduct has always been uncertain and suspect by both nations."

Paul's indictment is largely based upon research that is now rather dated. *We are Not the Savages* is an important book, but it should now be interpreted in the light of the rise of the North American Indian movement. It's a Canadian version of Dee Brown's best seller *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* and, as such, served a valuable purpose in raising public consciousness about Mi'kmaq history, identity, and culture.

Basing public policy on Daniel Paul's writings can only lead to further historical injustices. John E. Grenier's 2008 book *The Far Reaches of Empire: War in Nova Scotia, 1710-1760*, offers a much sounder historical analysis. In it, Cornwallis is depicted as a British colonial official who used "brutal but effective measures" to "wrest control of Nova Scotia from French and Indian enemies who were no less ruthless."

It may be too late to rescind the ill-advised Halifax board decision to "kill" the Cornwallis name. Perhaps the school council will come to the rescue by suggesting a new face-saving alternative. "Founder's Junior High School" sounds right to me.

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