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Canadian Thanksgiving Is Often Oversimplified For Kids — But There's A Lot To Discuss

BY JOSEPH WILSON

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More so than hockey, more so than complaining about the weather, more so even than complaining about useless elections, the national past-time that unites many Canadians is being smug that we're not American.

Our children, for example, are becoming experts at itemizing the so-called "reasons why Canadian Thanksgiving is better than American Thanksgiving".

This includes the fact that our holiday is placed in the calendar at a much more sensible distance from Christmas and the fact that it is a less obvious celebration of colonialism.

American Thanksgiving is to me based on a rosy-eyed interpretation of a meal of harmony between Pilgrims and Native Americans that conveniently leaves out all the disease, warfare and land appropriation that occurred within a few years

(<https://www.britannica.com/event/King-Philips-War>) of that famed dinner. We learn at a young age that Canadian Thanksgiving is intended to be just a meal to celebrate the “bountiful harvest” of the year.

See? It is a little smug.

If you're interested in learning more about Indigenous history, David Robertson shares 48 books by Indigenous writers worth reading.

(<https://www.cbc.ca/books/48-books-by-indigenous-writers-to-read-to-understand-residential-schools-1.6056204>)

Date Confusion

But not so fast.

“What’s Columbus Day?” asks Elizabeth when she sees two holidays listed on our calendar for October 11.

“It’s an American holiday,” I say as if that explains everything.

“Oh, he’s the guy who discovered America?” asks Sonia, our eldest.

“Well, sort of,” I say. “There were already millions of people there, he was just the first European.”

Sonia mimes a sphere with her hands “He wanted to get over here (pointing east) and instead of going that way, he went that way (pointing west) to find a short cut.”

“But North America was in the way” I say. “It was an accident.”

“He doesn’t sound like a very good explorer,” says Elizabeth, our middle child.

I explain that it’s just a coincidence that Thanksgiving and Columbus Day are the same day, and that we celebrate the former and not the latter. But Canadian

Thanksgiving has a problematic history, too. It was declared a national holiday in the mid-19th century as a celebration of white, Protestant rule in Canada — you might say a Northern version of manifest destiny

(<https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/manifest-destiny>). The lobby group was actually called “Canada First.” (<https://www.macleans.ca/opinion/the-odd-complicated-history-of-canadian-thanksgiving/>)

As *Macleans* notes (<https://www.macleans.ca/opinion/the-odd-complicated-history-of-canadian-thanksgiving/>), early Thanksgiving celebrations included “sermons often focused on Canada’s moral superiority to the United States.” So, not much has changed in that regard.

If you're looking to add some Indigenous children's books to your kid's library, here are 10 great options.

(<https://www.cbc.ca/parents/learning/view/10-beautiful-indigenous-childrens-books-to-add-to-your-library>)

This Land Is Their Land

With a week of Truth and Reconciliation

(<https://www.cbc.ca/parents/learning/view/how-to-talk-to-kids-about-national-day-for-truth-and-reconciliation>) activities fresh in their minds, my children are eager to include some First Nations perspectives in Thanksgiving.

According to Brian Rice (<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/indigenous-thanksgiving-history-1.4345348>), member of the Mohawk nation and University of Winnipeg professor, many First Nations include prayers of thanks all year around for the gifts from the natural world, says.

I showed my children the Facebook group “For Our Love of Water,” founded by Whabagoon, Ojibwe Elder, Keeper of Sacred Pipes, who sits with the Loon Clan. This year over our Thanksgiving dinner, our family will give our thanks to the water that has nourished the plants and animals on our table, as well as the sunlight that has helped them grow, and all the humans in the supply chain that worked hard to get food on our table.

We practiced a little at dinner the other night by taking turns saying something we were thankful for.

“I’m thankful for the chicken that gave his life for us to eat,” says Elizabeth.

OK, I thought, we’re starting with the heavy stuff.

“I’m grateful for Madame Sara at school,” says Maria, our youngest. “She’s nice.”

“That’s the spirit,” I say.

“I’m thankful for the broccoli,” says Sonia, “but not the fish.”

OK, you can’t win them all. We tuck in.

So, this Thanksgiving we will try our best not to be too smug, and to direct our thanks towards the natural world and the human stewards of the plants and animals we eat, instead of towards the systems of politics or religion that have so often steered us wrong, not only geographically (Columbus, I’m looking at you) but metaphorically (feel free, over dinner this weekend, to come up with your own example. There are many).

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