

The Iceman in Canada's closet

Most Canadians of European descent would never dream of calling themselves aboriginal. They should think again.

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Talk about a skeleton in the closet. Euro-Canadians have a big, big secret.

If recent media debate is any indication, many Canadians are unaware of both their own aboriginal origins in Europe and their status as migrants. In fact, the debate over last summer's Fujian migrants and current arguments about Mi'kmaq fishing rights highlight typical Canadian identity crises: In the first case, we were migrants (let them stay) versus I'm not a migrant, I was born here (ship 'em home); in the second, they were here first (honour treaty rights) versus we're all Canadians now (no special status).

Euro-Canadians may take some comfort from the fact that scientific and historical evidence has settled the debate.

The proof is in the (pre)historic pudding. In 1991, an Alpine glacier in the Tyrolean region of west Austria and northern Italy melted to reveal a body trapped in a glacial pool. The body, dubbed the Iceman, was recovered, carbon-dated and then virtually forgotten by everyone except a few scientists. This skeleton in the closet — actually a 5,300-year-old Neolithic mummy in a refrigerator — is a Stone Age ancestor of European peoples in the area and a direct link to their aboriginal past.

Scientist Olivia Handt, in her 1994 study entitled *Molecular Genetic Analyses of the Tyrolean Iceman*, says tests show "the Iceman's DNA fits with DNA sequences of Europeans. Furthermore, his DNA matches DNA sequences of individuals living in the region." Konrad Spindler, author of *The Man in the Ice*, believes that "the Iceman must be distantly related" to all Europeans.

On the day of his death, the Iceman was wearing an unlined fur robe made of patches of deer, chamois and ibex skin that had been whipstitched together with threads of sinew or plant fibre in a mosaic-like pattern. The garment was complemented by leather shoes stuffed with grass

and a woven grass cape similar to those worn by Tyrolean shepherds as late as the early 1900s.

He had a fur quiver, feathered arrows with flint points, a flint dagger, a bone tool, a deer-antler tool for skinning animals, a wooden bow, sinew waiting to be fashioned into a bowstring, and a birchbark container likely used to carry embers for a fire.

Sounds like an extra from *The Last of the Tyroleans*, except the Tyroleans (like the Mohicans) are alive and well. In fact, says archeobotanist James Holms Dickson, the citizens of Austria disliked the generic Iceman label and nicknamed him Oetzi — a term derived from the mountain range where he was found — to "emphasize his ordinariness and recognize our close affinity."

Unlike the Austrians, few Euro-Canadians seem to feel connected to their aboriginal beginnings. Ingrid Mayrhofer, a 45-year-old Toronto-based artist who emigrated from Austria in 1973, believes this cultural anomie "is fostered by the nation state, which confines people within artificial borders instead of nomadic cultural groups.

"Archeologists have found hunting tools in my village dating back to 700 C.E. [Common Era]," Ms. Mayrhofer says, "and pre-Roman artifacts in salt mines just over the hills from my village. I am definitely indigenous to where I come from, and I feel very connected to that. Europeans are just as tribal as the [aboriginal] people here. Yet Canadians feel so superior."

Pancha Panzo agrees. The 34-year-old teacher emigrated from Angola in 1992 and now works as a front-line worker in a Toronto inner-city health centre.

"When I came here, I thought this was a white country, because that is what [the government] told us," she says. "They think they are the owners of this country. They do not teach the real history — that they are not from here. But they make sure to tell me that I do not belong here."



Pancha Panzo came to Canada from Angola in 1982.

DAVID DORKEN/The Globe and Mail

Ms. Mayrhofer and Ms. Panzo notice that Euro-Canadians apply prefixes to other, more recent, immigrants but rarely describe themselves in terms of ethnic origin. As a consequence, they feel that Europeans are the accepted Canadian norm and that the immigrant label is applied only to people of colour, who are different from the norm. Both Ms. Mayrhofer and Ms. Panzo argue that many Canadians have deracinated themselves, because recent immigrants are ethnic and long-time Canadians are not.

"When people ask me, I say my father is from Prince Edward Island and my mother is from Ontario. I don't say my father is German and my mother is English," says Kevan Jenkins, a 32-year-old Parks Canada archeologist in Ottawa. "I don't have a country of origin. I have provinces."

He feels Canadians have lost touch with a continuous family history. "The lack of an extended family structure in Canada means that many people only know their grandparents," he says. "We move around a lot; we're spread all over the place. I feel like I don't have a culture. We've lost our oral history; we don't know who we are."

First- and second-generation immigrants to Canada seem to feel more connected to a familial history than those who arrived one hundred or more years ago in the first waves of immigration from Europe and Great Britain.

Paula Messina, a 32-year-old Italian-Canadian, says: "Both my parents are from small towns [in Italy]. There's no TV there, so they tell stories. I grew up hearing these stories, so when I finally went over there" — she stops momentarily, then shares her

eureka moment — "you know, I've always thought the oral tradition of aboriginal people was fascinating. But I've just realized something. We have one too."

For some Canadians, that history is far away. Their families have been here a long time, and, like Mr. Jenkins, they say Europe just isn't home.

"I feel some sense of connection, but it's distant," says Valerie Gow, whose family left Scotland for Canada in the early 19th century. "The ancient stuff fascinates me. I respect it, but my connection to Scotland is not concrete or tangible like the history I feel in Nova Scotia, and the Scottish heritage there."

Ms. Gow, a 36-year-old career counsellor in Vancouver, works with many newcomers to Canada. Like Ms. Messina, she acknowledges that all Euro-Canadians are migrants. "I say I'm Canadian, but I always include a comment about being of Scottish descent."

For early rural settler families — who speak with pride about the hard work it took to create farms and homesteads — the idea that they should call themselves anything other than Canadian "is very emotional," Mr. Jenkins believes. "It gets to the core of who people are, how they define themselves."

Thirty-four-year-old Toronto antiques dealer Alex Stairs attributes his unhyphenated Canadian identity to the settler-stock melting pot. His family has been in Canada for seven generations on his father's side. "We aren't a 'pure' people," he says. "Settler cultures were mixing back in the 1600s. It would be hard to choose just one, so we choose to be Canadian."

Both Mr. Stairs and Ms. Gow have undertaken genealogical searches. Dineen Baran has also been researching her Ukrainian/Scottish family's past. She has travelled to her family's Manitoba homestead, and feels very Canadian, but she believes the European migration to Canada has been marked by loss.

"We're disconnected to our places of origin, but we're not really connected here," says the 32-year-old draftsman for a Hamilton manufacturing company. "Our ancestry has been watered down. There's very little ethnic history left."

Ms. Mayrhofer and Ms. Panzo agree that Euro-Canadians seem to have forgotten their presettler ethnic history: 1,500-year-old Saxon warrior graves in eastern England; 8,000-year-old mummified bodies found in peat bogs in Ireland, Great Britain, the Netherlands, northern Germany and Denmark; German villages where the Mueller (Miller) family has owned the mill for centuries; the 1,000 stone circles found in Britain; and the Standing Stones of Callanish, built by ancient Celtic peoples in the Scottish Hebrides 5,000 years ago.

History is embodied in people like Adrian Targett. In 1997, scientists bridged 90 centuries and 300 generations to find a modern descendant for Cheddar Man, a 9,000-year-old skeleton found in a cave near Cheddar village in what is now south-western England. Mitochondrial DNA extracted from a skeleton tooth cavity and matched to a cheek swab provided by Mr. Targett confirmed that this average Englishman was a direct descendant on his mother's side of the Stone Age hunter-gatherers who, research shows, were indigenous to the island before the arrival of the Middle Eastern farmers long thought to be the ancestors of modern-day Britons.

Ms. Mayrhofer believes that Euro-Canadians have forgotten their aboriginal past because the European colonial bent started with conquering the primitive within.

"When land becomes a commodity, as it does under colonialism, it changes the nature of a culture and stresses the state over natural conditions. Our aboriginality has been destroyed by the city-building nation state," Ms. Mayrhofer says.

Ms. Panzo feels that renouncing their own aboriginal past has made it easier for Euro-Canadians to assume dominance over other aboriginal peoples, rather than to imagine that they were once the same.

History tells us that most Europeans came to Canada to escape some kind of religious, ethnic or class oppression, sometimes colonial in nature. Yet many of their descendants don't see the irony in writing letters to the editor that decry the "illegal" Fujian migrants and insist that "special rights" for aboriginal people should be suspended. How did we get here? "I think the loss of history has a lot to do with expressing pain, which we don't allow ourselves to do," Ms. Gow says. "It's about cutting off. And it's been passed down."

Suzanne Methot is a Cree writer and editor in Toronto.