BOOK REVIEW


Book Review Author:
Deirdre McCorkindale
Queen's University

Canadians are often taught about their country’s multicultural identity and, more importantly, Canada’s purported moral superiority to the United States because of its better treatment of people of colour. This narrative of Canadian morality uses the example of Canada’s role as a safe haven for Black Loyalists, or as a terminus on the Underground Railroad, with Canada being the destination of freedom and equality. These particular stories, and their popularity, place Black people at the centre of the positive national narrative around race, often with little reflection on the anti-Black sentiment in Canada. Graham Reynolds begins to challenge this ideology with his book *Viola Desmond’s Canada: A History of Blacks and Racial Segregation in the Promised Land*.

Reynolds begins by stating in his introduction that while many scholars over the last 50 years have done pioneering work on the history of African Canadians, it is still a relatively marginalized field in Canadian history. Due to this marginalization, Reynolds argues that the nature of the African Canadian experience is not fully understood by most Canadians, who tend to view anti-Black racism as an American phenomenon. The work put forward in Reynolds’ book seeks to provide general audiences with a basic understanding of Black settlement in Canada and some of the anti-Black racism that accompanied such settlement, which included slavery, housing, and job discrimination as well as segregation in order to highlight Canada’s history of discrimination against Black people. The book is separated into two sections. Part One is a narrative history of African Canadians and their experiences with racial segregation. Part Two is a documentary history which discusses and highlights different primary sources such as letters, oral interviews, and photographs related to the history of segregation and anti-Black racism in Canada.

The first half of Reynolds’ work, entitled “Part I: A Narrative History,” provides a short overview of the history of Black settlement and anti-Black racism in Canada. Chapters
One and Two cover subjects such as slavery in New France, Black Loyalist settlement in the Maritime Provinces, the Underground Railroad, and the various forms of segregation and discrimination that occurred from 1880 to 1960 throughout Canada. Reynolds also highlights important legislative acts as well as some of the people and organizations that worked towards ending Canadian segregation. Reynolds’ second chapter ends with the story of Viola Desmond’s historic decision to sit in the section reserved for Whites in the Roseland theatre in New Glasgow, Nova Scotia and her subsequent arrest. The third and final chapter of this section, written by Viola Desmond’s younger sister Wanda Robson, focuses on Robson’s experiences growing up as a Black woman in Nova Scotia, including experiences with discrimination in Nova Scotia and her recollection of her sister’s incident.

The second half of Reynolds’ work, entitled “Part II: A Documentary History,” features primary documents directly related to the history of anti-Black discrimination in Canada. These documents include an inventory of the possessions of Marie Marguerite Rose, a freed slave in New France; a series of documents concerning West Indian immigration to Canada; Ku Klux Klan activity; minstrel shows in Canada; and a profile and interview with Pearleen Oliver and her civil rights activism in Nova Scotia. These documents are primary sources of Canadian Black experiences that are relatively unknown to most Canadians. The inclusion of these documents enhances Reynolds’ discussion of anti-Black racism in the first half of the book by providing evidence related to anti-Black racism to be considered in context with earlier discussions in the text.

Reynolds intermixes legal forms of segregation, such as the Common Schools Act of 1850, with less official forms of segregation such as segregated patterns of settlement in Nova Scotia in the narrative history of the first half of his book. This allows for a more complex discussion of the various forms of discrimination that occurred in Canada. Unsurprisingly—given that it was the location of Viola Desmond’s arrest—Nova Scotia is the most frequently referenced geographical area in this narrative history. As a result, Reynolds’ exploration of the histories of other areas of Black settlement in Canada receive less attention and are thus not as developed.

While French Canada and African slaves are mentioned at the beginning of Chapter One, Black populations in Quebec after slavery receive very little attention. In addition, Reynolds’ discussion of the Underground Railroad provides an overview of some of the key people involved in that movement, such as Levi Coffin, and Josiah Henson, but there is less of a discussion of Black life in Southwestern Ontario, where many fugitive slaves and free people of colour chose to settle. Reynolds does mention some of the settlements, but a more detailed discussion of Black life in those settlements is absent. In this instance, by focusing mostly on
the activities of the Underground Railroad with minimal discussion of Black settlement, Reynolds limits the history of that area in the 19th century to the Underground Railroad. This is a limitation that scholars of Black Canadian history have recognized as a problem because it ties the area so heavily to slavery and to the United States, and allows little room for an analysis of Black life in Canada.

Reynolds’ narrow focus on Black populations in only a small area or province in Canada poses two problems. The first is that it makes the scope of Black settlement appear smaller and more limited than Reynolds’ stated intention. In his second chapter, for example, Reynolds claims that Black Canadians have traditionally not been seen as a significant population in Canadian history. This is a problem, he argues, because by the time of Confederation, Black Canadians were the sixth-largest population and could be found in most regions of the country. He does not then delve into discussions pertaining to those regions outside of the Maritimes, despite this recognition of the necessity to do so. The second problem with Reynolds’ narrow focus is that it isolates the subject of anti-Black racism to a select few areas, at times making an understanding of a broader sense of Canadian segregation and anti-Black racism more difficult to grasp for those new to the subject.

To address all the cases of anti-Black discrimination found in Canada throughout its history in two slim chapters would be impossible, given regional and provincial differences alone. However, a more comprehensive overview of the nature of Canadian racism and more attention to the wide range of Black settlement in Canada would tie all of these populations together through a sense of shared experience, and would allow for a more cohesive discussion of Canadian anti-Black racism. Reynolds’ frequent references to more expansive secondary historical works throughout his narrative chapters is a good way of supplementing areas where he could have been more detailed. However, because of this reliance on more comprehensive texts, coupled with the relatively diluted summarizations of the evidence drawn from these other texts, Reynolds’ own attempt to articulate an overall narrative of Black Canadian history in his first two chapters adds little new to the history of Blacks in Canada. Rather, his narrative chapters provide an accessible overview of the work done on Canadian Black history to date.

The greatest strengths of Viola Desmond’s Canada are found within the chapter by Wanda Robson, the documentary history chapter on Pearleen Oliver, and the transcription of a roundtable from the 2011 Promised Land Project Symposium in the book’s appendix. These sections of the book document Black experiences of segregation. Such accounts are often absent from older historical works, but they are necessary to more clearly understand Canada’s troubled relationship with race. As Reynolds clearly understands, a great deal of the
racism present in Canada, institutional or otherwise, was not necessarily written down plainly and visibly but rather operated through more informal avenues. Accordingly, Reynolds’ inclusion of personal accounts strengthens his work and adds a new dimension to Canadian Black history. Aspects of stories such as Robson’s difficulty finding an apartment in the 1960s, or Oliver’s discussion of hotels and restaurants denying service, are common characteristics of anti-Black racism in general. However, these kinds of experiences were frequent for people of colour but were often left undocumented unless legal action was taken, as with Viola Desmond’s case. Including these personal histories documents this experience and encourages a more nuanced discussion about the nature of race and racism in Canada in all of its experienced aspects, rather than exclusively in documented legal forms.

Without the more familiar “coloured section” sign on the door of a business, or other recognizable signifiers of racism, it can be difficult to articulate and properly record Canada’s history of racism for a general audience unfamiliar with the history of Black settlement in Canada. Viola Desmond’s Canada attempts to remedy this with the narrative chapters providing an overview of Canada’s anti-Black racist past. This, coupled with the primary sources collected in the volume, helps to make it a useful beginner’s resource to the continuing study of race and the history of Blacks in Canada.