

Films shine light on 'forgotten' elements of Canada's Black History

From a former slave who became a ranching titan in Canada's prairies to students at a Montreal university fighting against racism, Canada has a rich history of Black pioneers and trailblazers who sometimes get lost amid their more prominent counterparts.

But, as we approach February's Black History Month, the Aurora Public Library (APL) is hoping to shine a light on homegrown heroes through a series of virtual film screenings held in association with the National Film Board of Canada.

On Sunday, February 6, the APL will screen *John Ware Reclaimed*, 'an examination of the mythology surrounding John Ware, the Black cowboy who settled in Alberta before the turn of the 20th century.' The series continues on February 20 with *Ninth Floor*, 'the story of the most dramatic and violent racial conflict in modern Canadian history when a group of students at Sir George Williams University accused their professor of racism, triggering an explosive student uprising.'

'There is so much that has been written about Black history from an American perspective, but the history of Black people in Canada is typically untold, mis-told, mythologized or covered up,' says Reccia Mandelcorn, Manager of Community Collaboration for the APL. 'Certainly, when I was in school, I did not learn very much about Black history. Most of what I learned has been in recent years. I think in order to understand where we are and where we want to go, we need to acknowledge and learn about our history.'

The films look at two very different elements of Canada's Black History.

John Ware Reclaimed examines the Black diaspora in Canada's prairies that dates back to the 1800s, and profiles the pioneering Ware, whose life as a successful rancher has often been interpreted through a White lens.

'Nobody even knows if that was his name, if it was the name of the last owner or a previous owner? nobody even knows exactly which part of the States he came from and research is still trying to figure this out,' explains Ms. Mandelcorn. 'What we do know about him is limited to a single book called *John Ware's Cow Country* and it was written by Grant McEwan in 1960. From the film, you find that Grant was well-meaning, but he was a White man and has been criticized in the Black community for what is now understood to be racist stereotypes of Black masculinity that was in his book.'

'Filmmaker Cheryl Foggo, who is also a playwright, set out to reclaim not just John Ware's story from mostly biased history books, but really to tell the story of the rich history of Black Canadians on the Prairies. Cheryl humanized an important but often unknown figure in Canadian history. When I first saw this story last year, it kind of enlarged my vision of the people who built this country. It wasn't only John Ware; it was his wife, his children, his community? there was a richness in life and most people don't know that, but they will when they see these films!'

As much as *John Ware Reclaimed* celebrates a Canadian pioneer, *Ninth Floor* looks at a 1969 student protest that too has been forgotten in many quarters, having taken place at Montreal's Sir George Williams University, which has since been renamed Concordia.

'It began when six Black students complained they were not being marked equally as fellow White students were for work of the same quality,' says Ms. Mandelcorn. 'This was in biology class. Initially when the original charges were laid, there wasn't a protest; there was a trust that due process would occur within the university administration. Ten months later, that didn't happen and the students staged a peaceful sit-in that lasted almost two weeks. The administration then dismissed the charges of racism and the protest escalated into a rampage that resulted in riot police occupying the occupied ninth floor of the computer building.'

'There was a million dollars' worth of damage, computers were thrown out the window, computer cards shredded like snowflakes, it was incredible. There was the arrest of 97 students. In this film, the filmmaker looks back on these events that not only spoke of Black history in Canada, current Black history, but really how the events shaped the student activist movement.'

Some of the participants went on to become key leaders in their communities, including a Prime Minister of Dominica (Rosie Douglas), and the first Black person appointed to the Canadian senate (Anne Cools).

“We want to celebrate all the good things we have in life, we want to celebrate our education system, we want to celebrate our freedoms, our accomplishments, but we really have to look back on the people who sacrificed in order to give us these celebrations,” says Ms. Mandelcorn. “Knowing our history and acknowledging our history is part of what allows us to celebrate what we have now and to work towards making an even better future.

“People themselves are telling their stories. They're looking at their history and now the rest of us have the opportunity to learn from them and it is empowering. That is what I hope people will take away [from these screenings]: some insights into Canadian history.”

To register for the screenings, visit aurorapl.ca.

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