

Historica Canada Education Portal

Bob Edwards

Overview

This lesson is based on viewing the Bob Edwards biography from [The Canadians](#) series. Edwards was an outspoken newspaperman at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Aims

Studying the life and career of Edwards will provide students with the opportunity to explore a variety of historical and contemporary themes including: political commentary, corporate responsibility, prohibition, and the "Wild West."

Background

Bob Edwards was a man of paradox who made his mark exposing hypocrisy. His humorous, combative stance on almost any issue, and a number of non-issues, made him a favourite newspaperman across the West and eventually across Canada.

Never up for sale and never easy to predict, he generally sympathized with the worker, the dispossessed, and the disempowered. Among his

targets were the Chamber of Commerce and the CPR, including their solicitor R.B. Bennett, a future Prime Minister of Canada.

While he attacked hypocrisy and social irresponsibility, he reserved the right to maintain paradoxes in his own life. His supportive stance on prohibition contradicted his personal drinking habits, and his condemnation of politicians didn't prevent him from running for election in 1921. Nevertheless, Bob Edwards poured his wit and spirit into his paper's commentaries, and remained committed to his ideals throughout.

Activities

Time Allowance: 1 - 4 hours

Procedures:

1. In pairs, have students find the definition of 'paradox' and list some of Edwards's paradoxes. Next, have them individually come up with some of their own personal paradoxes. Have them share with the class. Students should think about and write down how they deal with these paradoxes. Do they ignore, accept, work around, or work to change them? What would Edwards do in this situation? Have students either write letters to themselves giving advice on the paradox, or have them write letters from Edwards that offer advice on dealing with the paradox.

2. Have students individually brainstorm their perception of the Wild West. Do they imagine the Canadian and American frontiers similarly? Have them recall with a partner what the movie said and compare this to their own perceptions. Then have them work in pairs to research the Canadian frontier to find out what it was like. Have them start with topics

like: when it was 'opened' and when it was 'closed,' what the law was like and who enforced it, what people did for a living, relations between First Nations and Euro-Canadians. In pairs, have them draw pictures on poster paper that portray the Canadian West in the late nineteenth century with notes explaining the scene.

3. In small groups (3-4 students), have students read the editorial pages of several newspapers, both local and national, paying attention to the editorial cartoons. The goal is to help students understand Edwards's chosen role, and the similar (if toned-down) role played by editorial comments today. This activity entails some media literacy and current events knowledge, as the teacher helps students understand the comments being made. Students can do one of two topics. After their evaluation of various editorials (including Edwards'), students can write an argument on what is good critiquing, what goes too far, and what doesn't go far enough. Consider physical appearances of editorial cartoon characters, personal insults, exaggerated truths, etc., and whether they are useful or harmful. Alternatively, or perhaps following the previous exercise, students pick a current event or one relevant to the unit under study, and create their own editorial comment or cartoon. Perhaps pick hot topics in the school environment to really cause a stir (student government elections/appointments, dress code rules, no-skateboarding rules, etc). Post them in the class, publish them in the school newspaper, or mail them to the local paper.

4. Have students investigate corporate responsibility. Edwards often criticised the CPR. Is such criticism still warranted today? Are there corporations in your school? (Who provides vending machines or cafeteria food?) Do local businesses support school teams or help in fundraisers? What makes a "good" corporation? (Huge profits, safety for employees, helping the community, environmental consideration)

Conduct a Think-Pair-Share on what makes a good business. As a class, vote on what the most important criteria are. As a class, create a list of local businesses and local branches of larger corporations, particularly those connected with the school. Assign a pair of students to each business and research it (interviews, company policies, mission statements, etc). Each pair of students should prepare an evaluation of their company's business practices. Evaluate each business based on the class's criteria and award good businesses with certificates that outline exactly why they are good businesses.

5. Organize a class debate on Prohibition that follows proper parliamentary process. Assign roles to each student (Prime Minister, Speaker, a couple of important Cabinet Ministers, backbenchers to research before the debate and heckle during, etc). Insert a couple of breaks as though the debate were to take several days to allow consultation within parties and new angles of attack. Ensure that inappropriate comments require an apology at the beginning of the next session, just like in Parliament. Students should research Prohibition in Canada to see what the issues were in order to make sure their arguments are historically valid. At the end of the debate, students write a reflection paper on prohibition today. Consider some of the following: Are the issues the same? Would it work today? Is it more or less necessary now than in the early twentieth century?

6. As a class, list some of the topics that Edwards advocated (old age pensions, minimum wage laws, hospitalization, schoolbooks with Canadian content, abolition of the Senate, prohibition). Divide into enough groups to investigate each of the topics and research the history of these reforms. Have they happened? Who wanted/wants them and why? Prepare a report on the history of the topic. As a post-script, create a letter from Edwards from beyond the grave. What would Edwards think

about how the issue has unfolded over the century? Include some witty critiques if possible to make it more authentic.

Resources

[The Canadians: Bob Edwards](#)

[Bob Edwards - The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

McEwan, Grant, *Eye opener Bob: the story of Bob Edwards*. Edmonton: Institute of Applied Art, 1957.

Edwards, Robert Chambers, *The wit & wisdom of Bob Edwards*. Edmonton: Hurtig, 1976.

Edwards, Bob, *The best of Bob Edwards*. Edmonton: Hurtig, 1975.

