

Historica Canada Education Portal

Grey Owl

Overview

This lesson is based on viewing the Grey Owl biography from [The Canadians](#) series. It explores the life and work of this infamous conservationist, who convinced the world that he was of Aboriginal descent.

Aims

With role-playing and debates, students will focus on the controversy surrounding Grey Owl and decide whether they think he should be regarded as an important conservationist, or as an imposter and fraud.

Background

Grey Owl was the most famous Aboriginal of his day. The Canadian Government gave him a job promoting conservation in the national parks. He made speaking tours of Great Britain and had a private audience with the King of England and the Royal Family in 1937. Princess Elizabeth was enthralled, but the Royal entourage was horrified when Grey Owl put his hand on the King of England's shoulder and said: "Good luck to you brother."

Everyone believed his story that he was born of an Apache mother and a Scottish fur trader father and that he grew up in the wilderness and had known little of civilization. In fact, a few months after his Royal Command performance, the King and his family - and the rest of the world - were staggered to discover that Grey Owl was in fact an Englishman named Archie Belaney. He had grown up in the British seaside town of Hastings, had five wives, a major drinking problem, and had conned the world into believing one of the biggest hoaxes of the century.

But did Grey Owl have a message that was worth the hoax? Or was he just using a fantasy life to cover up a miserable childhood and a massive inferiority complex?

Activities

Time Allowance: 1 - 2 hours

Procedures:

1. Create a timeline to illustrate the key events in Archie Belaney's life, from his birth in 1888 to his death in 1938. Include ten key events or developments. Direct your students to select three events that they think are turning points and have them explain their decisions. Compare the events students have selected and encourage them to discuss why they may have selected different events. Emphasize that there is more than one answer, but that all answers need to be supported with facts and well constructed arguments.

2. Create a balance sheet to illustrate the positive contributions versus

the negative aspects of Archie Belaney/Grey Owl's life. Use this balance sheet for an informal debate or round table discussion on the life of Grey Owl.

3. Make a list of Archie Belaney's lies and deceptions. Make a list of his positive characteristics, special abilities, and best ideas. This list can build on the balance sheet made in the previous activity, or stand alone.

4. Trace the career of Archie Belaney/Grey Owl on a map. Tie in events from your timeline.

5. Try a formally structured debate with this resolution: Despite the fact that he was an imposter, Archie Belaney deserves to be recognized as a great Canadian for his work as a champion of the environment and conservation.

6. Conduct an informal debate on the topic of whether this person should be remembered as Grey Owl, the author and conservationist, or Archie Belaney, the imposter and liar.

7. Conduct a mock news conference with Archie Belaney returning from the dead and appearing as a special guest at the conference.

The roles to be played:

- Grey Owl/Archie
- 3 advisors to Grey Owl: a lawyer, a media advisor/agent, a publisher/promoter (These roles can help Grey Owl prepare to answer questions)
- Anahareo
- Dawn, daughter born to Grey Owl and Anahareo, given up for adoption

to the Winters family.

You could also include some famous people who were fooled by Archie, including William Lyon MacKenzie King, John Diefenbaker, King George VI, Karsh (the famous photographer), Queen Elizabeth (a young princess at the time), and Vincent Massey.

The rest of the class could be representatives from various media outlets, including newspapers, television, and radio. Encourage them to identify the newspaper or TV network they work for and what province of Canada or country they are from. Be sure to have some British media present.

Allow time for the students to do some more research or at least review their notes from the video in order to prepare good penetrating questions and for those playing Grey Owl and other characters to prepare to answer these questions.

Resources

[Grey Owl Worksheet](#)

[Grey Owl - The Canadian Encyclopedia \(Macleans\)](#)

[Archibald Belaney, Grey Owl - The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

[Grey Owl's Great Deception - The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

Anahaareo, *My Life with Grey Owl*. 1940.

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