

Winner of Governor General's Award

Skeoch makes some history of his own

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For Alan Skeoch, history has mystery. The veteran Toronto schoolteacher uses unanswered questions about the past to bring its stories to life.

Now, his success has been recognized with the 1999 Governor-General's Award for Excellence in Teaching Canadian History, which he won recently over 116 other nominees from across the country.

Skeoch admits to a feeling of "unworthiness" about the honor, considering the accomplishments of the 12 other finalists.

He won, partly, for his 33-year career at Parkdale Collegiate Institute, where he was department head and taught many disadvantaged and new Canadians.

In addition, he was recognized for longtime work fighting to keep Canadian history in schools, "under terrific pressure from other subjects."

But most particularly, he was honored for how he stepped in, though semi-retired, as a last-minute substitute history teacher at Forest Hill Collegiate for three Grade 10 classes, many of whose students were still learning English.

The students had had four history teachers in six weeks and were in "slight disarray," he said. But he won them over.

"We had just a terrific voyage together for about eight months. . . I think those kids came out of it thinking, "Hey, history is pretty exciting."

At the end of the term he was asked to submit material to Canada's National History Society, which organizes the Governor-General's history awards, and he chose to focus mainly on this experience.

Skeoch believes that stories are at the heart of history. "And in that story there is usually some kind of mystery, something that they can't really answer."

For example, he has never understood why the nation's first prime minister, John A. Macdonald, allowed Metis rebel leader Louis Riel to be executed: "It's been political dynamite for the rest of our existence."

He uses such mysteries to hook his students.

"Once I throw the mystery out, we are as a group. . . on the same human journey," Skeoch said. "We're equals trying to fathom what happened and why."

At 60, a father of two grown boys who lives in Port Credit with wife Marjorie, Skeoch still has the energy and enthusiasm for history he discovered as a working-class kid at Humberside Collegiate.

Continuing as a supply teacher and history consultant, he is co-ordinating the Toronto District School Board's millennium project. He's also an author, having written or co-written 10 history texts.

He has been a CBC Radio history columnist and has written and produced several historical videos, including *No Borders*, about North America's German Mennonites.

He has received the Marshall McLuhan Outstanding Teacher Award for Communication, as well as the Paul Harris Fellow award.

He is also an artist and has turned his hobby of collecting historical implements into a business: He sells props to the film industry.

Skeoch donated the \$500 he received for becoming a finalist for the Governor-General's award to the history society.

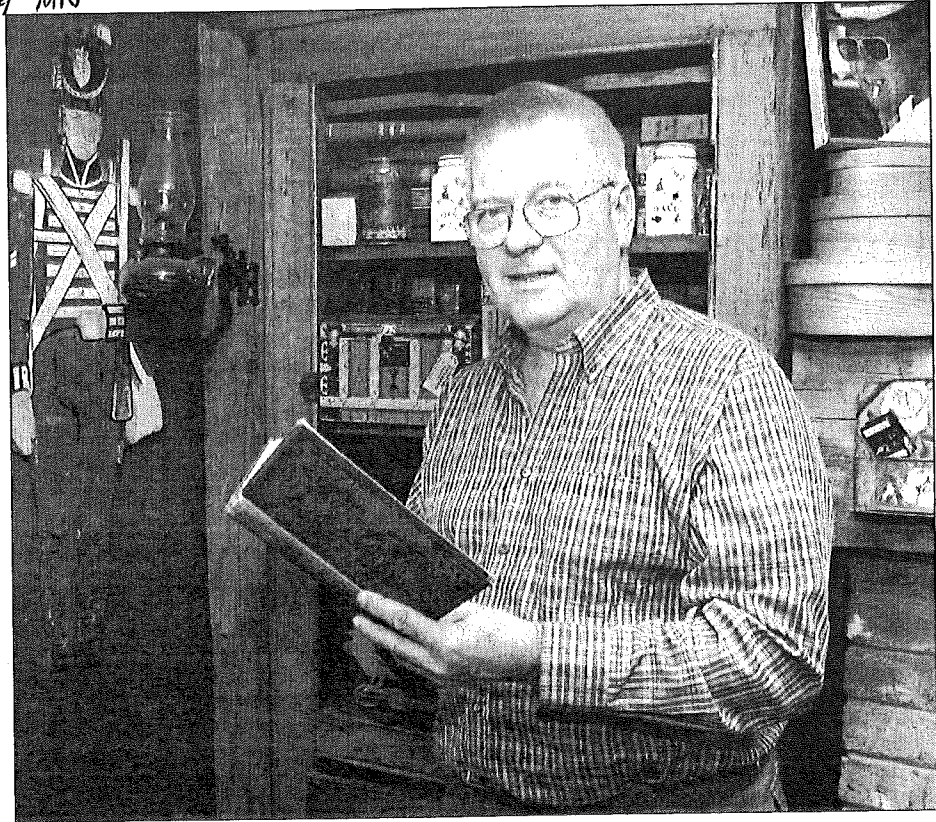
He was presented the award by Governor-General Romeo LeBlanc in Quebec City. The award includes \$5,000 cash. In addition, Bell Canada donated \$5,000 worth of computers to the two schools of his choice: Parkdale and Forest Hill.

There were three other finalists from Greater Toronto: Hens Pierre-Jerome, a French-immersion history teacher at Lawrence Park Collegiate in Toronto; Garfield Newman, at Vaughan Secondary School in Thornhill; and Nick Brune, at Iroquois Ridge High School in Oakville.

The fifth Ontario finalist was Paul Delaney of Victoria Harbour, near Midland.

The other finalists across Canada were: Simon Jeynes of Warburg, Alta.; Laurie Collins, Suzanne Louttit and Phyllis Belliveau of Regina; Paul Bennett and Sylvain Christin of Montreal; Jean MacDonald of Eskasoni, N.S.; and Lloyd Solomon of Souris, P.E.I.

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Staff photo by Fred Loek

Port Credit resident Alan Skeoch received the Governor General's Award for teaching excellence in Canadian history after he came out retirement last year to fill in at Forest Hill Collegiate in Toronto where his work earned him the prestigious award.