

# **DEADLY DANCING: FAILURE-PROOF FIELD TRIPS**

Mel Greif, Ontario

## **INTENDED GRADE/SUBJECT AREA**

Senior History, Drama, Language Arts

## **INSTRUCTIONAL OUTCOMES**

Students will:

- observe with a purpose
- research diligently and with a specific focus
- be encouraged to look at other historical fiction
- learn powers of description
- use vocabulary that is in modern usage
- role-play
- understand the values and mores of the past
- adapt to the expressions and vocabulary of the past as well
- comprehend the actions of persons in the past. What motivates people in general and what were the forces in play in previous eras?
- learn the names of our historical figures and appreciate the times in which they lived.

## **BACKGROUND**

How often have you watched your best field study location—and an opportunity for stimulating observation, learning and the creation of useful student product that can be evaluated—fail to live up to its promise?

There are many things that can go wrong during a field study. The students may not be motivated. The student profile might be less than academic and there may be many students who have a natural rejection of yet another “field trip.” In spite of your best preparation, the docents or professional guides may not deliver on the required information and detail that make the particular focus of your assignment “do-able.”

How can you ensure that the day at the gallery, historic home or important national historic site is useful, academic and just plain old fun? The trick, of course, is to harness the students’ natural creativity and desire to be outlandish. The following demonstrates an approach that has worked for the author and his colleagues in many settings for over a decade.

The nature of this particular approach to field study is best suited for senior students but may be adapted, with some sensitivity, to suit younger students. However, we should not underestimate the desire for gore and the previous entertainment experience of our students. Additionally, please note that this history department does many other types of field study assignments. They are more traditional and are very specific and directed in the nature of the outcome.

## ACTIVITY

Significant marks are given for accuracy and reference to the era under study. The hook is that it is their story and they are in control of the process of creating it. The least that can happen is that the very grateful tour guides will compliment you on the diligence and attentive nature of your students. They will even invite you back and really mean it!

## SETTING

Almost any place can be a setting for the plot of an historical fiction murder mystery. The Grange, Fort York, Spadina House and the William Mackenzie Home and Printing Shop are all Toronto Landmarks. Every locality has such places. We have even used battle sites of the War of 1812. Students are given the task of writing a murder mystery using one or two of these sites and the people who lived there. They are to include details and descriptions of the places. They must set the scene by way of introduction. They must use language/vocabulary and dialogue suitable to the times. The plot must include elements of political and social history.

For variety and for plagiarism control, the assignment also demands that certain plot devices be included. You would not want to be reading last year's stories. Experience has shown that the docents at the Grange get very excited about the prospect of sharing information with students who are highly motivated to write about murder and mayhem, love and betrayal with action and plot complexity as part of their class assignment. They enjoy reading the student submissions, the best of which are always sent to them.

The new curriculum requires that students be given opportunities for independent research and creative thinking and writing. We are told that we should connect with other disciplines. This approach links to the arts, drama and literary studies and to the school library and research centre. My experience is that all students hand in this assignment.

The stories and plays are very interesting. Some verge on the outlandish. You need to set limits on sexuality and the use of colloquial language. Students will use this opportunity to test your prudishness. The most significant problem is to make sure that the students do not go on forever. You will have to set length limits.

## About the Educator

Mel Greif's school is steeped in history. He engages his students in field trips, Confederation debates, simulations, an 1812 picnic and murder-mysteries based on local historic sites. Students undertake independent historical research projects that enrich the class and school. The absence of female role models in history classrooms instigated the study of women in Canadian history. Now a corridor is devoted to Canadian women role models. Students work as archivists and as history mentors/ tutors in the school library.

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## SAMPLE ONE

Colonial Canada And Its Society  
Fort York, The Family Compact And The Rest  
A Murder Mystery

### “Deadly Dancing”

The period 1830-1860 saw the transformation of colonial York into the early industrial capital of Toronto. A society controlled by elites was under siege by reformers. Fort York was the bastion of the forces of order. It had defended the town against the Americans during the War of 1812 and continued to be a stronghold of imperial order. The gentlefolk of the town were often invited to the fort for its celebrations as were the officers invited to the homes of the elite.

Write a murder mystery using the fort as a setting. Your plot should use a cross-section of characters using appropriate-sounding or real names from the time. The plot should be plausible and historically based. The vocabulary and objects should be appropriate to the time. Dialogue, if used, must be accurate to the time and place. Your plot must include dancing. In fact the murder should involve dancing. Your story should demonstrate much detail from the Fort. Marks will be awarded for the above criteria.

The essay must be prefaced by an academic cover page. There are source books that are available such as Lownsbrough’s *The Privileged Few*. There are several booklets on the Fort itself. Make many notes during the tour to assist with your creative writing.

There are two marks assigned to this assignment for one grand total.

Creativity and plot — 10

Historical content and accuracy — 15

Total mark — 25



CHRISTMAS BALL IN BACHELORS' HALL.

Courtesy of *The Beaver* Collection

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## SAMPLE TWO

### Colonial Canada And Its Society

#### Fort York, Toronto, The Family Compact And The Rest

#### A Murder Mystery

##### “Deathly Encounters”

The period 1830-1860 saw the transformation of colonial York into the early industrial capital of Toronto. A society controlled by elites was under siege by reformers. Fort York was the bastion of the forces of order. It had defended the town against the Americans during the War of 1812 and continued to be a stronghold of imperial order. The gentlefolk of the town were often invited to the fort for its celebrations as were the officers invited to the homes of the elite. The room settings and artifacts in the Canadiana section of the Royal Ontario Museum assist in setting the scene.

Write a murder mystery using the fort and various room settings as displayed at the museum as a setting. Your plot should use a cross-section of characters using appropriate-sounding or real names from the time. The plot should be plausible and be historically based. The vocabulary and objects should be appropriate to the time.

Dialogue, if used, must be accurate to the time and place. Your plot must include a duel and perhaps dancing. The murder weapon must be a rope. Your story should demonstrate much detail from the fort and the museum. There ought to be some floor plans or freehand sketches of the scene and/or objects central to the plot. Marks will be awarded for the above criteria.

The essay must be prefaced by an academic cover page. There are source books that are available such as Lownsbrough's *The Privileged Few*. There are several booklets on the Fort itself. Make many notes during the tours to assist with your creative writing.

Be at the fort before 8.45am. The tour starts at 9.00am. Do not be late; we will be hard to find once the tour begins.

The museum section starts at 1.00. Be on time as we start promptly. The tour cost at Fort York is \$4.00. The Museum admission is \$5.00. The total is \$9.00. Pay in class.

Creativity and plot — 10

Historical content and accuracy — 15

total marks — 25