Brian Brennan

Canadian Journalist and Canadian History Expert

“Brian Brennan is one of the best history writers in Canada, the depth of his research and his easy style of writing set him apart from other authors.” – Canadian historian Hugh Dempsey

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Language Spoken
English

Travel’s From
Calgary, Alberta
Who says Canadian history is boring? Not Brian Brennan. This Irish-born journalist, author, keynote speaker and storyteller has been entertaining readers and listeners with his stories about Western Canada’s chequered past for more than 20 years. At the same time, he has been giving audiences important insights into the way newspapers function in a social environment of constant change.

His voyage of discovery into Western Canada’s past began in 1992 as a staff columnist with the *Calgary Herald*. The *Herald* requested him to write a daily in-memoriam column about everyday individuals who had left an indelible mark. This column, called “Tribute,” soon proved to be one of the most popular features in the paper. Unique for a Canadian daily newspaper, it told readers about ordinary people who had lived extraordinary lives. Brian Brennan was writing about firefighters who had saved lives and rodeo riders who had risked their lives.

While chronicling the lives of individuals who had recently died, Brennan delved into a century of Western Canadian history to produce an array of colourful characters who had often shaped their region for the better but occasionally warranted attention for other reasons. Thus, not only did *Calgary Herald* readers get to find out about such enterprising individuals as Vern “Dryhole” Hunter, the driller who spearheaded Alberta’s biggest oil discovery at Leduc in 1947, but they also got to read about the notorious Pearl Miller, whose brothel provided a welcoming haven for returning Calgary soldiers after the Second World War. As a reporter Brennan had access to the stories of unique individuals we would not otherwise know about. He draws on his extensive research and the knowledge gained from covering such stories to impress and entertain audiences during his presentation.

Brian Brennan wrote the “Tribute” column for seven years. During that time, the scope of the column expanded to cover not only the stories of little-known individuals who had lived privately important lives, but also the stories of prominent Canadians such as Wilf Carter, Will James and Roloff Beny who left Western Canada to make their mark nationally and internationally.

In 2000, Brennan took early retirement from the Herald and published the first of 12 bestselling books about the colourful characters of Western Canada’s past. At the same time, he began to cement his reputation as one of Alberta’s most sought-after history raconteurs by appearing regularly as a guest storyteller on CBC Radio’s weekend program, *Daybreak Alberta*. He won the inaugural Dave Greber Freelance Writers Award for one of his books, *Romancing the Rockies..* Another of his titles, *Scoundrels and Scallywags* topped the regional bestseller charts for more than 20 weeks. Currently he is a respected international online journalist for reporting and news analysis.

Brian Brennan has delivered several keynote addresses at conferences and conventions, tailoring each PowerPoint presentation to meet the specific needs of the host organization. He does not believe in the one-size-fits-all approach. Each group is special, so each presentation is special.
Heroes and Rascals – Unforgettable Characters from Canada’s West

With a wealth of Western Canada’s rich history to draw on, journalist and popular historian Brian Brennan introduces a host of larger-than-life individuals who have inspired, entertained, promoted, exasperated, and scandalized their fellow citizens of Canada’s West down through the years.

Brian Brennan’s entertaining and informative keynote presentation will introduce you to John Brownlee, the Alberta premier toppled by a sex scandal the likes of which the people of his province had never seen before. You will also meet Long Lance, the mixed-blood impostor from North Carolina who successfully masqueraded as a Blackfoot chief and worked as a newspaper reporter in Canada’s West before heading off to Hollywood to become a movie star. And you will meet Brother XII, the mysterious cult leader who set up shop on Vancouver Island and bilked thousands of dollars from unsuspecting Canadian, British and American followers.

On the credit side of the ledger, meet Ernest C. Manning, Alberta’s longest-serving premier, who brought in the oil and gas regulations that made it possible for all citizens of the province to benefit from Alberta’s most valuable natural resource, and left Alberta as the only province in Canada without a provincial sales tax. Or the unconventional journalist Margaret “Ma” Murray, one of the quirkiest voices in the history of Canadian weekly newspapers. Or “Smiling” Jack Gallagher, the “can-do” entrepreneur who spent a lifetime convincing people with money to finance his quest for oil in parts of the world where oil had never been found.

The inspiring life stories in Brennan’s extensive historical collection show that ordinary individuals can achieve greatness through hard work and single-minded determination. The tales of those who have achieved a more dubious honour – infamy – serve as a cautionary reminder that there are many lessons to be learned from the foibles of the past.

Brennan was short-listed for the 2003 Grant MacEwan Author’s Award, nominated for the Irish Times Literature Prize in 2001, and has received two Western Magazine Awards and the national Hollobon Award for journalism. He was the first winner of the Dave Greber Freelance Writers Award, presented in 2004.
Newspaper Journalism in a Changing Digital Landscape

After more than 30 years as a staff writer, columnist and editor at various Canadian newspapers, Brian Brennan is uniquely qualified to tell audiences how newspaper journalism functions today. He compares today’s reporters, who come equipped with tablets, laptops and smartphones, to those who worked in newspapers before the rise of digital technology. He also looks at how online publishers such as Buzzfeed, Google and the Huffington Post have taken readers and advertising business away from legacy media such as The Globe and Mail, New York Times and Toronto Star.

Technological developments have made it possible to do journalism faster, but has that improved journalistic quality? Is social media changing the way stories are being reported? Brennan answers these questions from the perspective of a veteran reporter who still closely monitors the industry.

Brian Brennan shows how a steady decline in print advertising has forced newspapers to trim newsroom budgets and adopt a digital-first policy that has already seen the elimination of the print versions of some newspapers, and will inevitably lead to more closures.

In the past, the daily news meetings of newspaper editors focussed on deciding what would make the front page in the print edition the following day. Today, this print-centric focus is changing. Editors now discuss ways to create an attractive, comprehensive digital report across all the non-print platforms (web, tablet and smartphone) and how best to reach an audience that increasingly is getting its news from non-print sources.

How can small businesses, corporations, municipalities, government agencies and other stakeholders benefit from the technological changes that are happening in the newspaper industry? Brennan offers solutions and tips for the public relations industry and other professional communicators.

A centrepiece of Brennan’s presentation is an insider account of the defamation case launched by famed television journalist Arthur Kent against Canada’s largest newspaper publisher. This case hinged not only on the veracity of the originally printed newspaper column but also on the fact that continued publication of the article on the corporate owner’s websites constituted an aggravating factor. The $200,000 compensatory damages award to Kent was unprecedented in Alberta legal history.

Newspaper Journalism in a Changing Digital Landscape shows how the newspaper business is preparing for a future for which there is yet no specific blueprint. Brian Brennan offers an insider’s view of today’s changing journalistic landscape for those who need to communicate effectively with the public. He examines the cultural shifts inside and outside the newspaper industry while revisiting past trends and exploring the future.
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Scoundrels and Scallywags

Alberta has a long-standing reputation for attracting and producing characters with scant respect for the law and even less for public opinion. In his latest collection of short biographies, Brian Brennan, Dave Greber Award winner for freelance writing, looks at the flamboyant, eccentric, and downright bizzare people who established this provincial tradition.

Rogues and Rebels

Rogues and Rebels introduces us to dozens of larger-than-life Westerners—some infamous, some obscure—who dared to be different. Brian Brennan chronicles the mavericks, iconoclasts, and adventurers who threw away the rulebook, thumbed their noses at convention, and let their detractors howl. They never retracted, never explained, never apologized, and they got things done. Discover the unforgettable characters who made the West what it is today. You know some by name: Jack Webster, Nellie McClung, and Tommy Douglas. Others are less well-known: the inventor of the Bloody Caesar; those who assumed fake identities to further their ambitions; the mysterious cult leader Brother XII, and more.
Testimonials

“Brian’s author talk at the 2012 Alberta Library Conference was fantastic. He was funny and engaging and many times had the audience laughing out loud. His presentation was informative and entertaining and he connected with the audience along the way. Definitely the best kind of speaker!”

Sarah, Meilleur, Conference Organizer

I always enjoy hearing Brian speak. He knows his history, but, more importantly, he knows how to engage his audience with well-told stories, impeccable timing, and all-round showmanship—including use of period costume, piano-playing, and song. I have no hesitation in recommending him as a speaker.

Harry M. Sanders, Historian Laureate, Calgary 2012

Thank you for speaking at the annual banquet of The Historical Society of Alberta. Our members very much enjoyed your presentation, and your ability to tell the stories of Albertans. We appreciate your special effort to reacquaint us with A.C. Rutherford and R.G. Reid, two of our Society’s important forefathers. Your contribution helped to make the evening truly a special one.

Marianne Fedori, Past President

On behalf of Scouts Canada, Northern Lights Council, I would like to thank you for taking time out of your day to speak at our 11th Annual Ernest E. Poole Leadership Breakfast. As a result of the presentation by you, the June 30th event was very successful indeed.

Again, on behalf of the youth and leaders of Northern Lights Council, thank you for being such an important part of the 11th annual Leadership Breakfast.

D.J. Gough, Council Executive Director

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