

# A Short History of CANADA

Desmond Morton





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## Foreword

A nation, said Ernest Renan, is a people that has done great things together in the past. It is not bound by language or by a common culture but by a shared experience. History is what Canadians have in common.

Canadians believe that their history is short, boring, and irrelevant. They are wrong on all counts. The choices Canadians can make today have been shaped by history. The governors of New France launched arguments that federalists and independentists repeat in present-day Quebec. Early fur traders illustrated economic laws that modern-day resource development unconsciously follows. Canadians trying to understand the problems of political leadership deserve a second look at the arts of Sir John A. Macdonald and Mackenzie King.

In each generation, Canadians have had to learn how to live with each other in this big, rich land. It has never been easy. For those who ignore history, it is doubly difficult. This book has been written to make it a little easier for Canadians to know and understand their country.

It would not have been written without the inspiration and firm prodding of Mel Hurtig. That inspiration has been reinforced—unconsciously and perhaps grudgingly—by generations of students at Erindale College, the Mississauga campus of the University of Toronto. Some of them have been new Canadians, committed to an adopted country, yet puzzled by it and reluctant to take its truths for granted.

Because of them, there will never be a final history of Canada. This is a guidebook to take its readers a certain way. The future is for them to make.

More than most of my books, this one has profited from the patient care and perceptiveness of my editor, Sarah Reid, and of

my wife, Jan. Both deserve whatever claims the book may have to be readable. Where it fails, they could not prevail over stubbornness. David Shaw, as designer, has been all that an author could wish. Clara Stewart has been more than a typist. She and Kathie Hill have reminded me that readers deserve wit and clarity as well as facts.

They want accuracy too, and there I have profited from Erindale colleagues, notably Paul Fox and Eric Sager. They bear no responsibility for any persistent errors. Few institutions have demonstrated more consistently that vague but real virtue called collegiality than Erindale. It is to a college in the new city of Mississauga that this book is dedicated. Erindale sums up for me the past and future of Canada.

PART I

# **Different Histories**



# 1 / New Nation

At midnight on July 1, 1867, church bells rang out from Lunenburg to Sarnia. In Ottawa, militia artillery fired the first round of a hundred-gun salute. Crowds cheered the explosions and waited as the militiamen laboured in the dark with rammers and sponges. At dawn, four million people awoke as citizens of a new Dominion of Canada. Some of them, in New Brunswick and Nova Scotia, might resent their fate, but a two-day weekend (for July 1 fell on a Monday) was too rare a treat to be shunned. Picnics, lacrosse tournaments, cricket matches, and excursions focused the day's excitement. Farm families united around groaning kitchen tables. On Toronto's waterfront, a huge ox would roast all day so that dripping hunks of meat could be distributed to the poor.

Carefully respecting the ban on Sabbath labour, George Brown arrived at the offices of his *Globe* that midnight, determined to do editorial justice to events he had helped to cause. Throughout the morning hours, his pen filled page after page with history, statistics, and hope for the new Dominion. Only at dawn was Brown finished. Solemnly he pledged that "the teeming millions who shall populate the northern part of this continent, from the Atlantic to the Pacific shall, under a wise and just Government, reap the fruit of well-directed enterprise, honest industry and religious principles." By then, the express trains that normally carried the *Globe* to readers across the old province of Canada West had departed without it. Brown's hopes would go largely unread.

In the summer of 1867, they were no more than hopes. Confederation covered only 370,045 square miles (958 416.5 km<sup>2</sup>), a mere tenth of British North America. Three colonies had become four provinces, but the northern edge of the new provinces of Ontario and Quebec ran vaguely along the watershed that drained into the St. Lawrence and the Great Lakes. The

population—3,816,680 by official count—was a tenth as large as that of the bustling, powerful nation to the south. Many Canadians wondered how long they would survive the American boast of a “manifest destiny” to rule the entire continent.

George Brown's Dominion Day mood allowed no dismay. Small as it was, Canada's population was at least as large as America's had been when the Thirteen Colonies won their independence in 1783. Confederation itself was proof that the divisions between a million French Canadians and two and a quarter million Canadians of British origin could be overcome. If there remained differences of race, region, and religion, prosperity would dissolve them. The *Globe's* readers could share the editor's intoxication with statistics, marvelling at every aspect of the young country's potential, from ship-building to the vast deposits of rock oil near Petrolia.

In his day, Brown had flailed at the corruption and waste of the railway builders but now he celebrated their achievements: 2149 miles (3458 km) of track in Quebec and Ontario alone, backed by canals, roads, bridges. The Grand Trunk, with 1277 miles (2055 km) of rail, was the world's largest system. Almost two of those miles rumbled across the St. Lawrence River at Montreal on the world-famous Victoria Bridge, completing a line that ran unbroken from Sarnia to Portland, Maine. And soon there would be more. Confederation was nothing if not a guarantee that new rail lines would snake their way east to Halifax and perhaps west across the fabled Rocky Mountains to the Pacific.

Prosperity would depend on the *Globe's* most faithful readers, the farmers. Across the Dominion, there were more Canadians in farming than in any other occupation. If there was an average farmer of the time, he owned from fifty to one hundred acres, cultivated twenty of them, grew seventy-two bushels of wheat, owned eight cattle and a team of horses. In fact, soil and climate created vast differences. Quebec farmers were poorer, on average, than those in Ontario or the agricultural regions of the Maritimes, but they were recovering from several grim years of depression. Surplus offspring had left for New England mill towns and were sending home the hard-earned sums that would allow the family farm to diversify into dairying. Much of Ontario, soil exhausted and crops ravaged by Hessian fly, was now sliding into its own rural depression.

Social scientists and statisticians barely existed in the 1860s to warn people of national trends. Canadians who gathered for barter or gossip at the local inn or general store knew only of a daughter marrying a man from "the Boston states" or of sons gone homesteading in Kansas. Only the census, every ten years, identified trends: Canadians were leaving the land, and many of them were leaving Canada. Meanwhile, people lived their lives for the most part within the limits of family and community. They looked to politicians not for social or economic programs but for bridges, wharves, and post offices, and sometimes for a personal place on the public payroll.

In spite of localism, broad legislative programs existed. Eger-ton Ryerson had crusaded tirelessly to make the rural communities of Upper Canada establish and tax themselves for their own public schools. Ontario could boast of the results (and grumble at the cost). In Lower Canada, Ryerson's dynamic counterpart, Pierre Chauveau, became the first premier of the new province of Quebec. The struggle for schools was hard; in the lower provinces, it was not yet won. Rural communities saw no need for those "charitable and eleemosynary institutions" the new constitution assigned to the provinces. Rural families made room for their own orphans, elderly, and insane. If the treatment was sometimes harsh and misguided, were the few publicly-run poor houses, orphanages, and asylums any better? Even police forces had no place in a rural Canada. Magistrates had to turn to the militia or recruit special constables if criminals defied the majesty of the law. A frightened rural community could make its own laws, as the Black Donnellys of Lucan, near London, discovered in 1880. When their sense of justice was aroused, rural communities could also defend their own. The Megantic outlaw, Donald Morrison, was hidden from the law for three years in the 1880s when his Eastern Township neighbours found no crime in his alleged arson and accidental manslaughter.

Farming lay at the heart of Canadian society and economics in 1867. Closely linked were the other resource industries of fishing and logging. Indeed, there was little distinction. However harsh or inhospitable the coastline, every fishing family cultivated a few acres of vegetables and hay. Settlers on the edge of the Canadian Shield forced the thin soil to grow hay and oats for the logging camps where they and their sons spent the winters. Wheat, square

timbers, and fish made up most of the \$80 million in exports with which the new Dominion hoped to pay her way in the world.

The future, of course, would be different. It lay not so much with the resource frontier as with the cities that controlled the trade and transportation routes. Once it had been rivers and harbours that made cities, now it was railways that confirmed or denied urban ambitions. The Victoria Bridge confirmed that Montreal would continue as the metropolis of Canada, the first city of 100,000 people. Quebec, with 59,699, would slowly wither as her poor rail connections undermined her claim to be the great port of the St. Lawrence timber trade. Toronto, with 56,092 citizens, would grow because of the river of railway tracks across her waterfront—the Grand Trunk, the Great Western, and her own creation, the Northern, reaching to Collingwood, Lake Huron, and the West. Halifax with 29,582 people and Saint John with 28,805 were the fourth and fifth cities of the Dominion and dominated their own provinces. Their huge merchant fleets allowed Brown to boast of Canada as a great new maritime power. But in the Victorian mansions, where the shipowners displayed their wealth, already there were fears that great ports might become backwaters.

If railways decided the fate of cities, they also created new reasons for urban growth. The costly self-sufficiency of small market towns, producing their own tools, furniture, and boots, ended with the railway. Mass markets justified mass production, costly machinery, and armies of persuasive salesmen. Necessities made locally or in the home could now be supplied year-round with a variety and quality few local tradesmen could hope to match. By 1867, manufacturing employed fifteen per cent of Canadian workers and produced twenty per cent of Canadian wealth. The Massey family's reaper and mower won a prize that year at the Paris Exposition. What could better typify the hopes of Confederation than a Yankee-style pride in home-grown inventiveness? What was more Canadian than delight at foreign recognition? More significant for Canadian development was the process that would carry Daniel Massey's little foundry at Bond Head to the town of Bowmanville and finally, by 1878, to the growing metropolis of Toronto.

The merchants and industrialists of the expanding cities were, for the most part, self-made men: once-penniless clerks and arti-

sans who had saved their money, seen their chance, and seized it. Some were Americans; a disproportionate number, perhaps because they were apprenticed so young and in such a hard school, were Scottish immigrants. Few of these hard-bitten achievers (including George Brown), could spare much genuine sympathy for those who had failed in the struggle for wealth. Confederation coincided with an era when skilled workers were losing the struggle for near-equality with their employers and superiority over the unskilled. Ancient crafts, from shoemaking to typography, were being undermined by new technologies. By luck and strong organization, the printers would save themselves; other occupations would disappear or decline in status.

The average worker in Confederation Canada—almost as mythical a being as the average farmer—echoed the rhyme that “a dollar a day is very good pay.” That might be true for labourers; a skilled worker expected twice as much or more for a work week of six days and sixty hours. A mixed blessing of industrialism was that women now found paid work, though at barely half a man’s wage. Children earned far less. An employee, of course, paid for his own holidays—even Dominion Day and Christmas—and took his own risks with old age, sickness, and injuries on the job. The cyclical certainty of hard times was met from a worker’s meagre savings. Those responsible for municipal relief did their best to make sure that any applicant had first considered starvation as a serious alternative.

Urban, industrial workers were a minority. Most Canadians still worked in a wageless, pre-industrial economy, often, like Gaspé fishermen, in debt to their merchant suppliers. Rural-minded Canadians had no sympathy with arguments for shorter hours, higher wages, or labour unions. When workers in Hamilton and Toronto imitated British industrial workers by demanding a nine-hour day, the *Halifax Witness* delivered an editorial sermon most of its readers would instinctively echo:

In this new country, where every man who strives may advance in social power and rank, to teach men subordination to class movements is to deprive them of those noble opportunities for personal advancement which are the peculiar glory and advantage of this continent.

If many Canadians pretended to ignore class differences, their

political, religious, and cultural leaders offered plenty of alternatives. They began with the barriers between the two "founding nations" of French and English. Few, in the first Dominion census, escaped either category: 202,991 Germans were by far the largest exception, but the census-takers found only 125 Jews and 11 "Hindoos." Yet British origins could hide historic and bitter differences. The 846,414 Irish (far the largest of the "British groups") had brought with them, refreshed by an ocean voyage, all the hatreds of Green and Orange. They played them out in frequent midsummer riots in Montreal, Toronto, Saint John, or wherever the fires could be struck.

More than the differences of language and culture, the architects of the new Dominion had tried to accommodate the bitter quarrels of Catholic and Protestant. Few politicians had escaped the temptation or the risks of mixing religion and politics. It was misleading, of course, to claim that Protestants were united (the census distinguished six varieties of Presbyterian and eight of Methodist). Nor were all Canadians united in Christianity (the census also found 1884 "pagans" and 20 atheists, almost all from Ontario).

For Brown's Toronto, for the twenty thousand people of the sweltering little logging town of Ottawa, for Montreal businessmen with renewed visions of a transcontinental empire, Confederation was a triumph. For others, half-devoured by the long struggle with the land, the forest, or the sea, it was a matter of deep indifference. For some, like those who draped the entrance to the Halifax *Chronicle* in black bunting, or those who gathered at Montreal's *Institut Canadien* to hatch schemes to bring down that "sell-out," George-Etienne Cartier, Confederation was already an enemy before it was born.

It was Cartier, the man of action, not words, who had urged, cajoled, and manoeuvred his fellow French Canadians into Confederation. The man who had composed *Avant tout, soyons Canadiens* ("Before All Else, Let's Be Canadians"), who sang it in his rough, raucous voice whenever the company could endure it, was also the man who insisted that Confederation created a "new nation." It was, Cartier insisted, only within a new political nation of British North America that the cultural nation of French Canada could be safe from American conquest or English assimilation.

The new Canadian nation was not the outcome of a long

struggle for liberation or even of the effort, so common in nineteenth-century Europe, to revive a half-buried language and culture. The Dominion had no common language or agreed-upon symbols. Even the beaver, "a most respectable animal," as Sir William Dawson of McGill University acknowledged, was "a type of unvarying instincts and old-world traditions. He does not improve and becomes extinct rather than change his ways." Canadians certainly shared a climate—harsh, interminable winters that might, if one believed the dangerous new doctrines of Charles Darwin, breed out the feeble and the weak-willed. Winters were more popular with the wealthy than with workers who faced routine wage cuts and layoffs when the cold months approached. Canada's image as "Our Lady of the Snows" would repel the investment and immigration which so preoccupied the Fathers of Confederation.

July 1, 1867, was a time of hope and fresh beginnings. In fact, Confederation had not broken with the past. Unlike the American revolutionaries, who deliberately concealed their borrowings from colonial tradition, the Fathers of Confederation built deliberately, pragmatically, and cautiously from their own historical experience. They and their critics carried their memories intact across the narrow divide of the first Dominion Day. The history of Canada as a single transcontinental nation begins from that day.

The histories of Canada had begun long before.

## 2 / Cartier's Quebec

For George-Etienne Cartier or any other *Canadien*, Canada's history began not in 1867 but in 1534, when another Cartier had made his landfall on the Gaspé shore of the Baie des Chaleurs. By erecting a cross and claiming the continent for His Most Christian Majesty, Francis I, Jacques Cartier had ~~posted the French bid for North America.~~

The bid ignored the claims of Indians or Inuit, established for thousands of years since their ancestors had crossed the Alaska land-bridge from Asia. Even Europeans had staked an earlier claim; Vikings, driven west from Iceland to the coast of Labrador, Newfoundland, and perhaps even New England, had recorded their discoveries in Norse sagas. Basque and Breton fishermen had come regularly, returning under strict oaths of secrecy about the origins of their rich catches. In 1497, when the boastful John Cabot came back to Bristol to report schools of codfish so dense "they sometimes stayed his shippes," he merely broke a trade secret.

Cartier had come for a different form of wealth. He had been enticed by vague Indian claims of a wealthy "Kingdom of the Saguenay" and by the great river that he hoped would lead past the rapids of Lachine to a western ocean. When the gold he brought home on his third voyage proved to be iron pyrites, the St. Mâlo seaman was discredited. Anyway, France was too deep in the wars between Catholic and Huguenot to care about distant lands. Seventy years would pass before the French came again. This time, Samuel de Champlain would make them stay.

No nation could ask for a nobler founder than Champlain. Navigator, soldier, visionary, a Protestant turned Catholic by conviction, a man of Renaissance curiosity and eternal fortitude, Champlain created New France. A few bleak winters spent on the



Bay of Fundy persuaded him to try elsewhere. Fate then took him back to Cartier's great river, the "Father of Waters." Where Cape Diamond rears up to narrow the St. Lawrence River, Champlain and a few men built their *habitation* in the autumn of 1608.

Champlain's business, financed by court favourites and Rouen merchants, was the fur trade. In its name, he made alliances with Algonquin Indians; fought their dreaded enemies, the Iroquois; journeyed to the Huron country that is now central Ontario; and sent young Frenchmen to learn Indian languages and lifestyles as the first *coureurs de bois*.

Champlain has been condemned for provoking the Iroquois, but his intervention only speeded up the inevitable. Enemies and climate had driven the Iroquois south of the Great Lakes. Their longhouse culture of cornfields and tribal alliances gave them a strength and a stability no other northern Indians possessed. On the other hand, they lacked rich sources of good furs or the swift canoes to carry them to the new European trading posts. Anyone who has tried skinning a rabbit with a stone knife or boiling water in a clay pot will not wonder why Indians were soon desperate for the steel knives and copper kettles the Europeans traded for their furs. Lacking furs and canoes, the Iroquois used their military power to become the middlemen between the stolid Dutch traders at Albany and the Huron and Algonquin suppliers. If these tribes went to the French, they would be punished or even destroyed by the Iroquois.

For almost a century, war with the Iroquois was a recurrent, tragic fact of life for the struggling French settlement. The war made every settler a soldier and a potential victim of death by torture or brutal captivity. One result was a legend of an embattled people, defended by heroes such as Adam Dollard of the Long Sault and such heroines as Madeleine de Verchères. Only divine inspiration could have spared the few hundred colonists or the frail outpost of Montreal, established in 1642 by Paul de Chomedy, Sieur de Maisonneuve. In the legend of *Canadien* survival, there was little room for sympathy with the Indians, caught between powerful European rivals and struggling with their own ingenuity and courage to defend their interests.

To Champlain and to others, New France meant more than furs or war. The fur trade was a vital commercial foundation for a greater purpose: the conversion of the Indian people. As part of