



Canada and its History

History, it is said, is a great teacher. What does Canadian history have to say to the people it has shaped? For one thing, that we have never been without dissension. And for another, that we have always managed to find the way ahead . . .

□ The story is told of a high school student who querulously asks his teacher why he should be forced to learn history. "Do you know what happens to a man who loses his memory?" the teacher asks in return.

One thing that happens, presumably, is that the man also loses his identity. This may explain why Canadians, in their seeming indifference to their own history, have been restlessly searching for a distinctive national identity for many years.

The identity has been there all along, of course, as any Canadian in another country soon discovers. And so has a national history as remarkable in its own way as any in the world.

But like our national character, our history is full of subtleties, complexities and contradictions. It defies simple interpretation. It is hard to digest.

This is one of the reasons why Canadians — particularly English-speaking Canadians — have long been in the habit of importing history from other countries for popular consumption. When the British Empire was at its zenith, the main source was Great Britain, as witness the prevalence across the country of Marlborough, Wellington and Nelson streets.

Since the British connection with Canada has loosened, Canadians have turned to the mass media of the United States for their popular history and heroes. No less a personage than the president of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, A. W. Johnson, recently complained:

"The plain truth is that our kids know more about the Alamo than they know about Batoche or Chrysler's Farm. They know more about Davey Crockett than Louis Riel." As if to emphasize Johnson's point, *Maclean's* magazine felt obliged to print a footnote to the quotation: "Riel's headquarters were at Batoche, Saskatchewan; British troops defeated a U.S. force at Chrysler's Farm in Upper Canada during the War of 1812."

Why this ignorance? Partly, it seems, because Canada lacks a national mythology. We are short of the epic poems, folk-songs and historical novels that immortalize a nation's Francis Drakes, Robert Bruces and Paul Reveres. Only among French-speaking Canadians are historical heroes generally recognized: Dollard, Madeleine de Verchères, Champlain, La Vérendrye. Among their English-speaking compatriots there is a curious lack of appreciation of such giants of the wilderness as Samuel Hearne, Alexander Mackenzie, Simon Fraser and David Thompson, who accomplished adventurous feats of exploration second to none.

It is perhaps more serious that — up to the latest generation, at least — Canadians should know more about Abraham Lincoln than about his great contemporary, Sir John A. Macdonald.

Macdonald did as much for his country as Lincoln did for his. Or more — in American terms he might be called Abraham Lincoln and George Washington rolled into one. Not only did he hold a political union together, he played the leading part

in creating a new nation. Yet this man of magnificent vision and purpose seems to be remembered by his countrymen mainly as a merry buffoon, an inveterate boozier and shamelessly tricky politician. His immense accomplishments are taken for granted in Canada today.

A comparison of the careers of the two North American leaders in the 1860s makes an interesting study of the differences in the Canadian and American political traditions. The chief preoccupation of both statesmen was to preserve an imperilled union — in Macdonald's case the united Province of Canada, consisting of the present-day Quebec and Ontario. But while the United States tore itself asunder in a bloody civil war, Canada fused itself into a greatly expanded federal state.

Lincoln would be assassinated in the aftermath of the Civil War; Macdonald would live to realize his dream of a Canadian Confederation stretching from coast to coast, and would actually cross this fledgling nation on the great railway he had struggled so hard to have constructed. He died peacefully in office at the age of 73.

If Canadians do not remember Macdonald as well as they should, it is because he was a typically Canadian compromiser. The results of compromise are seldom spectacular. There was little sound and fury in our first Prime Minister's career.

The road to Confederation was paved with compromise

If there is one consistent theme running through the Canadian story, it is compromise. At least two of the most critical junctures in our history came as a result of key individuals submerging their own perceived best interests in a greater cause.

In 1841 Louis Hippolyte Lafontaine, leader of the French-Canadian reform movement, joined Robert Baldwin to form the government of the new united Province of Canada. Lafontaine had strong reasons to abhor this union, which deprived Quebec of its traditional political autonomy. It was well within his political power to demolish it. By forming his alliance with Baldwin, Lafontaine placed himself above language, religious and regional factiousness.

Twenty-two years later, with the union threatening to fly apart, it was the turn of an Ontario Orangeman to put his ideals ahead of his prejudices. For many years George Brown, founder of the *Toronto Globe* and leader of the "Clear Grits", had been an implacable opponent of French-speaking and Roman Catholic influence in Canadian colonial affairs. He despised John A. Macdonald, who was his opposite in practically every personal and political characteristic. Yet the dour, hitherto inflexible Brown found the moral courage to join in a coalition with Macdonald and George-Etienne Cartier to save the union.

Moreover, Brown had the foresight to begin working with his former political foes towards a general federation of all the scattered British North American colonies. He bowed to the need to bring two distinct lingualistic groups together in the formation of a new and different nation. Well might he say, as if in wonderment at his own acts, "Where, sir, in the pages of history shall we find a parallel to this?"

As the distinguished Canadian historian W. L. Morton once pointed out, the events leading to the Confederation represented a defeat for "the politics of ascendancy". As long as one racial group demanded ascendancy over the other (usually, but not always, the English over the French) the old Canadian union would not hold. The resolutions framed at the Quebec Conference of 1864 affirmed the partnership of French- and English-Canadians in the embryonic nation, and the pact eventually sealed in 1867 enshrined the political principles the two language groups had in common. According to Morton:

The union of British North America was proposed, not to achieve sought-after privileges and liberties, but to preserve an inheritance of freedom long enjoyed and a tradition of life valued beyond any promise of prophet or demagogue. Confederation was to preserve by union the constitutional heritage of Canadians from the Magna Carta of the barons to the responsible government of Baldwin and Lafontaine, and, no less, the French and Catholic culture of St. Louis and Laval.

This is an oblique way of saying that the Fathers of Confederation rejected the republican principles

of the United States in favour of a constitutional monarchy. Canadians of both founding races had been resisting annexation by the United States ever since the American Revolutionary War. When it came to forming their own federation, the leaders of the British North American colonies made it clear that they wanted to build a different society from the one across the border. They were North Americans, yes; Americans, no.

It is popularly assumed today that Canada at the time of Confederation had no choice but to remain part of the British Empire. Actually there is considerable evidence to suggest that the political leadership of Great Britain, then going through an anti-colonialist phase, did not much care whether Canada was absorbed by the American republic or not. According to Macdonald's biographer, Donald Creighton, it was mainly up to the Canadians. He wrote that the first Prime Minister believed Canadian nationhood must move towards two objectives:

Canada must, in the first place, maintain a separate political existence on the North American continent; and in the second, she must achieve autonomy inside the British Empire-Commonwealth. Obviously the first national objective was the more basic and also the more difficult to achieve, for the North American continent was dominated by the United States and, of the two imperialisms, American and British, the former was by far the more dangerous.

The building of a nation with a heritage all its own

The history of Canada since Confederation has seen fitful advances towards these objectives. While steadily achieving more and more independence from the British Crown, Canadians developed and maintained a way of life that was North American, but distinct from that of their neighbours to the south. Canadians insisted on doing things their own way through their own institutions, mostly British institutions adapted to North American conditions. They took what they deemed

best from the American system — municipal government and public education, for example — and arrived at a system that was neither British nor American. They built Canada into a nation with a heritage all its own.

If the Canadian character is often defined in negative terms — in terms of what Canadians are not — it is largely because of the sheer size and power of the United States and the pervasiveness of American culture. In their attempts to remain separate from the United States, culturally as much as politically, Canadians have left themselves open to the accusation of being petulantly anti-American. Actually, their rejection of American ways has been more a matter of recognizing flaws in the American society and resolving not to let them develop here.

The settlement of the Canadian West offers a case in point. During the first five years of the new Dominion, the vast reaches of the Canadian prairies from the Red River to the Rocky Mountains were populated almost exclusively by a few thousand Indians and Métis. Practically the only other human inhabitants of the Canadian plains were whisky traders and wolf hunters from the "wild west" of the United States.

The plains Indians were mercilessly exploited by the American traders. In May, 1873, a party of them, along with some "wolfers", massacred 20 or more Indian men, women and children in the Cypress Hills, near the present boundary between Alberta and Saskatchewan. Slaughters of this kind were not uncommon across the American border, where the saying, "the only good Indian is a dead Indian", was put into practice with bullets. In Canada, by contrast, the shocking incident prompted Macdonald to hasten the formation and dispatch westward of the North-West Mounted Police.

In an astonishingly short time, this intrepid band of 600 red-coated men had expelled the

whisky traders, won the confidence and friendship of the natives, and established a regime of strict law and order. Through the diligent efforts of two of its top officers, the Cypress Hills murderers were tracked down in Fort Benton, Montana, where an American court rudely refused to extradite them for trial. When one of the party, arrested on Canadian soil, was brought to trial in Winnipeg, he was acquitted for lack of evidence. But the message of the police action was clear to all concerned: that this was a land of peace and justice where the law would be administered impartially, and where it was meant to be obeyed.

The drama of men fighting nature, and not each other

In the Canadian West, by common consent, public order came before the oft-abused individual liberty which was the touchstone of American democracy. The early Mounted Police symbolized the differences in the society on either side of the 49th Parallel. To the south, lawmen and judges were elected, and they frequently indulged in graft and other kinds of lawlessness. To the north, the lawmen were members of an incorruptible uniformed constabulary, subject to strict military discipline, who never drew their fire-arms until reason and force of will had failed.

The rarity of violence on Canada's western frontier might lead to the conclusion that its history is dull. Certainly it seems to pale in comparison to the American Old West, so exhaustively celebrated in song and story. This is natural enough; an orderly, law-abiding society does not inspire many movies or paperback books.

There is drama in Canadian history — and not only in that of Western Canada — but it is more the drama of men fighting nature than of men fighting one another. True, there was violence, and plenty of it, during the earlier years of settlement. But there has been relatively little strife on Canadian soil since the War of 1812, perhaps for the very reason that nature in one of the world's

biggest, coldest and most rugged countries presents such a formidable challenge. Struggling against the elements, wresting a living from an inhospitable land, Canada's pioneers had little time or energy to spare for hatred. Traditional animosities from the old countries of Europe were buried in an atmosphere of common hardship.

Three steps backward for every one forward — and yet . . .

The historian A. M. R. Lower has written that Canadians must seek their collective soul in the land, for Canada has none of the social common denominators which normally unite a nation. Certainly the land, in all its vastness and harshness, has left its imprint on the way Canadians traditionally have behaved.

From its earliest days, Canada has been a place where people have countered adversity by sharing things in the common interest. This inborn generosity — along with the vastness of our spaces — has made it possible to offer a home here to millions of people from all over the world.

Like history in general, the history of Canada seems like a matter of taking three steps backward for every one forward. Canada has never been without difficulty and dissension. Yet, in the long run, Canadians have always managed to find the way ahead.

In recent years there has been a long-overdue public awakening to Canadian history as a spate of popular books on historical subjects has been published, often being adapted for film and/or television. They are worthy of study, as is our history as a whole.

It tells a story of divergent political interests restlessly moving, not without a struggle, towards common ground; and of diverse people somehow finding a way to live together peacefully in spite of the differences among them. If Canadian history has a lesson to teach, it is that great things can come of gradualism, conciliation, tolerance and moderation. In this new time of trial for Canada, Canadians should know their own history for their own good.