

## Introduction

### *A Cautious Country*

What is this thing called Canada? The second-largest country in the world geographically, it is a loose-jointed construction that seems to lack the cohesion that many other nation-states enjoy. So vast that it is difficult to grasp the whole, some provinces are nations unto themselves. One is at a loss even to establish a founding moment in Canada's past. While 1867 works for the four original provinces in "confederation," it serves less well for other areas of northern North America that were later induced to join the improbable experiment in nation-building.

Many scholars look to the conquest of Quebec by Major General James Wolfe's army in 1759 as a place to start for understanding a country that, in 1969, was proclaimed officially bilingual – French and English. People living in the Atlantic and Western provinces, with their own distinct historical narratives, would no doubt beg to differ on 1759 as the pivotal point, as would Canada's First Peoples and everyone living in Canada's three northern territories. Nevertheless, so prevalent is the province of Quebec in the nation's political landscape that "the rest of Canada" is now understood by its initials – ROC.

The term "Canada" is itself a slippery concept. Apparently a mistaken interpretation of an Iroquoian word for "village," it was applied by the French to their colony on the St. Lawrence River in the early seventeenth century. This space was enlarged and subdivided by the British Parliament into Upper Canada (Ontario) and

Lower Canada (Quebec) in 1791 and put back together in 1840 to form the United Province of Canada. The name was then affixed to the larger polity that took shape “from sea to sea to sea” in the second half of the nineteenth century.

In coming to terms with Canada, most historians have packaged it in several, essentially political, time periods: Pre-Contact to 1500; Natives and Newcomers, 1500–1661; New France, 1661–1763; British North America, 1763–1863; Confederation and Nation Building, 1864–1945; Modern Canada, 1945 to the present. Scholars have tried to move away from this template, but new turning points tend to fall roughly at the same temporal fault lines as the old ones. Gerald Friesen, for example, constructs his impressive narrative, *Citizens and Nation*, around four dominant communication systems – oral-traditional, textual-settler, print-capitalism, and screen-capitalism – but communications are so inextricably linked to economic and political transitions that it is difficult to determine cause and effect.<sup>1</sup> Economic approaches – hunter-gatherer, agricultural, industrial, and postindustrial – reflect similar overarching time frames. Intellectual and scientific innovations (Darwin’s *Origin of Species* or the birth control pill, for example) have yet to drive a survey of Canadian history, but they, too, are part of a larger matrix of changes that accompany economic and political transformations. In this narrative, the chapters follow the conventional chronological framework with slight adjustments to accommodate my particular and, some may well argue, peculiar understanding of Canada’s past.

No historian of Canada can ignore the tremendous geographical challenge of building a nation-state that spans the northern half of the North American continent. Canada’s history is all about space, lots of it, and about weather, both hot and cold, but it is the winter that, until the twentieth century, determined how many people the land could support. Because Canada’s climate and terrain have historically been inhospitable to human habitation, most immigrants – Aboriginal and newcomers alike – passed it by, preferring more salubrious southern climes.

While natural geological features (Appalachians, Great Lakes, Plains, and Pacific coast mountain chains) suggest that political boundaries might work more efficiently running north-south, other

influences have prevailed. The boreal forest, the St. Lawrence–Great Lakes transportation system, and Aboriginal peoples eager to trade furs drew Europeans into the interior of the continent on an east-west axis. For better or for worse, North America was destined to produce three transcontinental nation-states – Mexico, the United States, and Canada – with Aboriginal nations embedded in each of them.

Space and weather have combined to make Canada a difficult place to inhabit and an even harder place to govern, but they have rarely impeded the exploitation of the area's rich natural resources. In the distant past, First Peoples harvested nature's bounty in their seasonal rounds, sometimes hunting species to extinction. Immigrants from Europe and elsewhere were even less likely to be good stewards of the environment. By the end of the twentieth century, it had become clear that there were limits to growth based on resource exploitation, but the habit was hard to break.

Contrary to the view that Natives were bested in the exchange with foreigners bearing trinkets, Canada's indigenous inhabitants were savvy traders and knew how to push their advantage to secure the European commodities – guns, knives, pots, blankets, brandy – that made survival in a cold climate much easier. This advantage disappeared under the assault, not of weapons in most cases, but of diseases to which Aboriginal peoples had little immunity. As microbes spread across the continent, sometimes in advance of European invaders, the population declined precipitously and social cohesion was undermined.

Canada's indigenous peoples have contributed greatly to the development of Canada, so much so that John Ralston Saul concludes that “we are a Métis civilization.”<sup>2</sup> Originally a term applied to the offspring resulting from “country marriages” of fur traders and Aboriginal women, “Métis” captures the hybridity that increasingly defines Canadian society. During the first 250 years of European settlement, Aboriginal peoples dominated much of the Canadian landscape, and as settler populations continue to drift toward cities, it can be argued that they still do. Nearly 40 percent of Canadian territory is currently subject to Aboriginal land claims, and First Peoples are a force to be reckoned with on the Canadian political scene.

Although European nations were initially drawn to the eastern seaboard by the lowly cod, it was the beaver pelt that sustained two empires – French and British – that claimed much of the area now called Canada. Fishers and fur traders were mostly male sojourners, eager to return to their warmer homelands with “new-world” treasures. As one eighteenth-century observer noted with respect to Newfoundland, “Soe longe as there comes noe women,” settler societies were unlikely to take root.<sup>3</sup> But women did come because the labour essential to human survival was deeply gendered and performed primarily in family economies before the Industrial Revolution transformed production processes. In colonial societies, women were responsible for preparing food; sewing warm clothing; caring for the young, the ill, and the elderly; and, in the case of communities dependent on the fisheries, managing the shore-based drying of the catch.

Canada as we know it today is the product of European and North American imperial rivalries and of the world wars that punctuated the long eighteenth century from 1689 to 1815. As such, Canada is heir to the Enlightenment and to the political currents that informed the Glorious, American, and French revolutions. Wars and negotiations in this period set the framework for continuing and often troubled relationships among the Aboriginal, French, and British populations of northern North America. Despite periodic efforts to transcend past transgressions, eighteenth-century treaties and parliamentary proclamations are still relevant to Aboriginal struggles for justice, and the legacy of the French regime remains deeply rooted, especially in Quebec and the Maritime provinces. Significantly, the colonies that emerged as “British” North America after the American Revolution consisted mostly of territory initially claimed by France. The thirteen original British colonies, meanwhile, enthusiastically cut the imperial apron strings.

Between the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713 and Confederation in 1867, British and American immigrants, many of them fleeing demons of poverty, oppression, and war, migrated to British North America. They brought with them modern capitalism, squabbling Christianities, a vigorous civil society, and hierarchical conventions relating to class, gender, and race. By the mid-nineteenth century, when railways made a transcontinental nation more than an impractical

dream, settler societies from Newfoundland to Vancouver Island had much in common, including their governing institutions and political parties that drew heavily on the British parliamentary system.

Political leaders in the colonies, ever mindful of the freedoms experienced by the citizens of the United States, pioneered an evolutionary approach to self-government within the British Empire. After rebellions in Upper and Lower Canada (1837–38) and shabby political manoeuvrings everywhere, British North Americans achieved a limited parliamentary democracy, described as “responsible government” to distinguish it from the notion of full independence and from republican variants in France and the United States. Indeed, cautious colonials developed a whole new vocabulary to describe their ambiguous political condition, speaking of “autonomy” not “independence,” adopting “dominion” instead of “kingdom” as their nation’s status, and emphasizing “evolution” rather than “revolution” in their approach to reform.

The rebellions and responsible government set in motion what the historian Ian McKay describes as “the project of liberal rule.”<sup>4</sup> In Canada, as elsewhere, the tenets of liberalism – individual initiative, democratic accountability, civil liberties, rule of law, property rights, separation of church and state, and a market-driven economy – have been hotly contested, but they served as the lodestar for many reformers and for the leaders of the Liberal and Conservative parties that have dominated the national political scene. In the twentieth century the social gospel and dreams of a more egalitarian society prompted farmers, feminists, intellectuals, and labourers to nurture a healthy strain of social democracy, still largely liberal in its essence, which is currently expressed most clearly by the New Democratic Party.

Confederation was a major step in the consolidation of the nation-state and a key factor in pushing the liberal objective of capitalist development. Undertaken in the context of a civil war in the United States, pressure from financial interests in Great Britain, and the rage for industrial growth in the Western world, three “responsibly governed” eastern colonies – Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and the united Canadas (Quebec and Ontario) – came together in 1867 as the first “dominion” in the British Empire. By 1880, Rupert’s

Cambridge University Press  
978-0-521-76193-2 -A Concise History of Canada  
Margaret Conrad  
Excerpt  
[More information](#)

---

Land (the vast territorial domain claimed by the Hudson's Bay Company), the Northwest, and the Arctic, along with the colonies of British Columbia and Prince Edward Island, had been brought under the jurisdiction of Ottawa. The last holdout, Newfoundland and Labrador, joined Confederation in 1949.

This audacious attempt at nation-building by fewer than 4 million people was informed by the transcontinental model of the United States, blessed by the British government, and predicated on a communications network to tie the whole together. In his national policy, Canada's first prime minister, Scottish-born Sir John A. Macdonald, emphasized a transcontinental railway, agricultural settlement in the west, and tariffs high enough to cradle an industrial sector in the St. Lawrence–Great Lakes heartland, dominated by the emerging metropolises of Montreal and Toronto. By 1914 three rail lines spanned the continent and a new flood of immigrants from Europe, the United States, and elsewhere had expanded Canada's vast forest and mining frontiers, settled the "last best west," and contributed to the growth of the nation's industrial cities.

Under Louis Riel's leadership, Métis and First Nations on the Prairies twice (1870 and 1885) mounted unsuccessful resistance to the invading Canadians. The Métis were marginalized in the wake of the 1885 uprising, while First Nations, in the developing west and elsewhere, were controlled by the Indian Act and residential schools.

The challenge of surviving as a child of one superpower and the sibling of another is the key to understanding Canada as we know it today. At the time of Confederation, political leaders were deeply conscious of the role that Great Britain played in providing markets, military protection, and a countervailing force against the "manifest destiny" of the United States to dominate the whole North American continent. Imperial sentiment and self-interest determined that in the twentieth century Canadians would fight two bloody world wars on Britain's side, helping the embattled mother country to hold on until the prodigal sibling finally joined the Allied cause.

In keeping with their cautious approach to political change, Canadians were slow to assert their independence from Great Britain. Canada was a signatory to the Treaty of Versailles (1919)

in its own right, and the Statute of Westminster (1931) confirmed the autonomy of dominions in the British Commonwealth of Nations. Following the Second World War, which greatly enhanced national confidence and productive capacity, the Canadian government began issuing its own passports, and in 1965 the government finally adopted, but not without noisy controversy, a distinctive flag sporting a red maple leaf. As improbable as it seems in retrospect, full autonomy remained elusive until 1982, when, by the Constitution Act, Canadians were able to amend their constitution without resorting to the British Parliament. Nevertheless, the British monarch is still officially the Canadian head of state, and Queen Elizabeth's head graces Canadian currency.

Despite foot dragging on constitutional matters, Canadians managed to reinvent themselves in the three decades following the Second World War. Emerging as a great industrial nation with one of the highest standards of living in the world, Canada embraced policies worthy of its newfound status. The federal government triumphed over defenders of provincial rights to implement a series of nationwide social programs, giving most Canadians a sense of personal security that was the envy of the world. In the 1960s Canada opened its door to immigrants of all cultural backgrounds to provide essential labour in the expanding economy, and in 1971 the country officially embraced a program of multiculturalism. The Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which was attached to the Constitution Act, reflects more than a century of struggle around individual and collective rights in a complicated country.

Canada positioned itself in the Cold War as a "middle power," participating actively in the creation of the United Nations and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization and emphasizing peaceful negotiation as an alternative to military approaches to conflict. First and foremost helpful fixers in the dangerous competition between capitalism and communism, Canadian diplomats in the postwar years had their hands full keeping Great Britain and the United States on track. In 1957 External Affairs Minister Lester Pearson won the Nobel Peace Prize for proposing a peaceful solution to the Suez crisis. Thereafter, "peacekeeping" became the brand of the Canadian military until the "war on terror" in the twenty-first century exploded this elaborate fiction.

Cambridge University Press  
978-0-521-76193-2 -A Concise History of Canada  
Margaret Conrad  
Excerpt  
[More information](#)

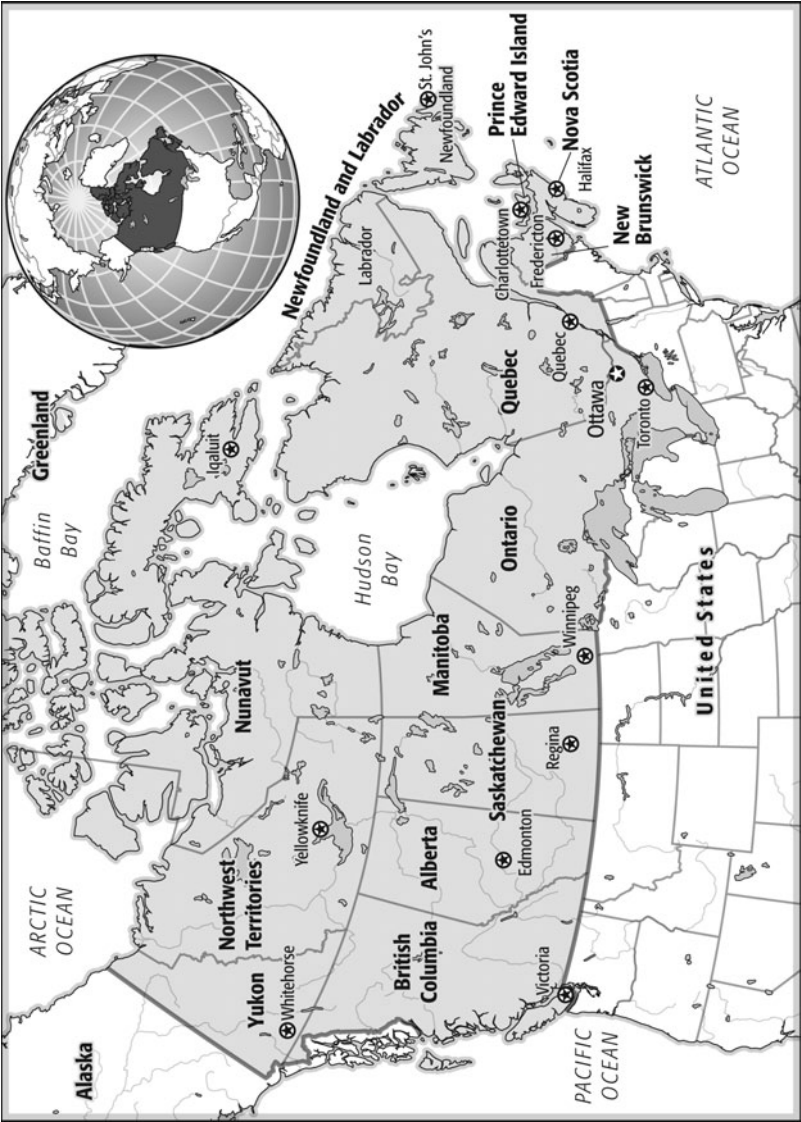
---

Skeptics had long pointed out that, in most foreign policy initiatives, Canada served as handmaiden to the United States. Indeed, the new Romans had become so prevalent in Canadian development that Harold Innis, Canada's foremost political economist, proclaimed in 1948 that "Canada moved from colony to nation to colony."<sup>5</sup> Efforts to define a Canada that was more than a weak echo of the United States became a major goal of successive governments following the Second World War, but globalizing tendencies, defined largely in American terms, continued unabated. In 1988 the old national policy of protectionism, called into question by prevailing neoliberal orthodoxies, was swept away with the adoption of a comprehensive free-trade agreement with the United States. International developments that followed in the wake of the 9/11 attacks by Muslim extremists on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon further tightened the continental embrace. With unbridled greed, terrorist threats, the all-encompassing Internet, and climate change dominating the global scene in the twenty-first century, Canada's political leaders continued to pursue a cautious approach to public policy. Perhaps Margaret Atwood was right when she asserted in 1972 that "hanging on, staying alive," is the best ordinary citizens can do,<sup>6</sup> but many Canadians feel that we could, and should, do more.

Deep-rooted tensions – between Aboriginal and settler, nation and province, centre and periphery, French and English, Roman Catholic and Protestant, rich and poor, white and black, men and women – frustrate all efforts to present Canada's history as a story of triumphal progress. There are injustices in the nation's past so mean-spirited that they are difficult to believe. At the same time, it must be conceded that Canada is one of the most successful nations on earth, a country where people from all over the world have found opportunities for community and individual fulfillment. In any concise history of Canada, it is important to pay attention to the complexity that characterizes this rich and ever-evolving nation, which now seems to be experiencing yet another transformation in the way it represents itself in the world.



Cambridge University Press  
978-0-521-76193-2 -A Concise History of Canada  
Margaret Conrad  
Excerpt  
[More information](#)



Map I.1. Canadian provinces and territories in the twenty-first century

# I

---

## Since Time Immemorial

Collective understandings of who we are and how we got here help to anchor us as human beings to the planet. What is remarkable is the diversity of thinking on these matters and how difficult it is to reconcile different points of view. The Canadian geographer Cole Harris argues that the single most important insight to guide us in our encounters with the “lifeworlds” of the distant past is recognizing the existence of localized fields of knowledge that enabled those who possessed them to live in particular places.<sup>1</sup> For the most part, these fields of knowledge have been lost or greatly altered as Europeans introduced their institutions and values on a global scale, but surviving evidence allows us to imagine how these long-ago societies operated and why their localized fields of knowledge remain relevant today.

### THE ANCIENT HISTORY OF NORTHERN NORTH AMERICA

Aboriginal peoples maintain that their ancestors have inhabited the Americas since time immemorial, and they are correct in this assumption. While we can pinpoint, sometimes to the very day, the arrival of many of the first Europeans, the appearance of the first humans in the Americas, as everywhere, is shrouded in the mists of time.

In recent years, some archaeologists have argued, but not without being challenged, that human occupation of the Americas dates back thirty thousand, even fifty thousand, years and that people