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 as a whole, Canada includes peoples and provinces that claim to be 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," this date 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 Nations 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 sometimes 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 Lower Canada and Upper Canada 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.[1] Economic approaches – hunter-gatherer, agricultural, industrial, and digital – 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 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 – Indigenous 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 Indigenous 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 Indigenous 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, Indigenous 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 Indigenous peoples were bested in the exchange with foreigners bearing trinkets, Canada's original inhabitants were savvy traders and knew how to push their advantage to secure the European commodities – guns, knives, pots, blankets, brandy – that facilitated survival in a cold climate. This advantage disappeared under the assault not of weapons, in most cases, but of diseases to which Indigenous 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."[2] Originally a term applied to the offspring resulting from "country marriages" of fur traders and Indigenous women, "Métis" captures the hybridity that increasingly defines Canadian society. During the first 250 years of European settlement, Indigenous 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 Indigenous land claims, and First Nations are a force to be reckoned with on the Canadian political scene.

Although European nations were initially drawn to the eastern seaboard by the abundance of cod, it was the beaver pelt that sustained two empires – French and British – which laid claim to 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.[3] 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 Indigenous, 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 Indigenous 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 remaining

British colonies, meanwhile, enthusiastically cut the imperial apron strings in 1776 and fought a war to establish their independence.

Between the Treaty of Utrecht in 1713 and Confederation in 1867, American and British immigrants, many of them fleeing demons of poverty, oppression, and war, migrated to what is now Canada. 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 Great Britain's 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 Lower and Upper 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."[4] 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 Christian social gospel and dreams of a more egalitarian society prompted farmers, feminists, intellectuals, and wage 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, the Green Party, and the Bloc Québécois.

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 Britain, and the rage for industrial growth in the Western world, three "responsibly governed" eastern colonies – Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and the united Canadas (renamed Quebec and Ontario) – came together in 1867 as the first "dominion" in the British Empire. By 1880, Rupert's Land and the North-Western Territory (the vast region under the suzerainty of the Hudson's Bay Company), 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 initiated 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 northern half of 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 (1869–70 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 draconian measures embodied in the Indian Act and residential schools. In the twentieth century, Indigenous struggles for justice began to gain traction. The 2008 Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement included the creation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, whose goal was work toward a more just and equitable future for Indigenous peoples.

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 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 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 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 image graces Canadian currency. Quebec's refusal to sign the Act, a decision undertaken in the context of two referendums on independence

(1980 and 1995) and failed negotiations to accommodate Quebec's concerns, ensured that constitutional wrangling would remain a central feature of the Canadian political scene.

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 nationwide human rights and social welfare legislation, giving most Canadians a sense of personal empowerment and security that was the envy of the world. In the 1960s Canada opened its doors to immigrants of all cultural backgrounds to provide essential labour in the expanding economy, and in 1971 the country officially embraced a programme of multiculturalism. The Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which was attached to the Constitution Act, 1982, reflects more than a century of struggle around individual and collective rights in a complicated and contested country.

Canada positioned itself in the Cold War as a "middle power," participating actively in the creation of the International Monetary Fund, United Nations, and 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 Britain and the United States on track. In