

PREFACE: HOW WE GOT HERE FROM THERE

When I immigrated to Canada from Britain, I was stunned to discover the wobbly sense of national identity here. I had arrived in 1979, a year when panic about the future had erupted and there was anxious debate about “whither Canada?”. The separatist Parti Québécois was about to hold a referendum on the province’s future relationship with the Rest of Canada (or ROC, as we learned to call it). I recall the passion on both sides of the debate: the fierce speeches by Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau about how it was possible to be a Quebecer and a Canadian; the poignancy of Premier René Lévesque, facing the defeat of his dream of a sovereign Quebec, as he said to his weeping supporters, “À la prochaine.”

Back then, I was confused. I began to wonder if the whole was less than the sum of its parts. My stereotype of Canadians was of sensible, mild-mannered North Americans who still had the same head of state as the people that I had left behind me. In common with most outsiders, when I thought about this country at all, my mind reeled across a colourful kaleidoscope of static images: blue lakes, glistening mountain ranges, green forests, and police in scarlet tunics. The potential of Canada seemed limitless, given its vast geography, its ability to absorb strangers, its resource wealth. How could this stoic, sprawling federation be in danger of collapse? Yet I discovered in my new homeland an almost palpable sense of the country’s fragility.

When I asked my new compatriots what being “a Canadian” meant, their replies were often a stuttering medley of generalizations about what it did *not* mean (Canadian meant not being American, or British, or like res-

idents of other former colonies such as Australia). Often the focus appeared to be on the stresses of the past rather than the potential for the future. I began to understand a remark by one of the few Canadian authors I had heard of, Robertson Davies: “This is not a country you love, it is a country you worry about.”

Since then, as I gradually morphed into a Canadian, there have been regular spasms of national insecurity, prompted by such events as a trade deal with the United States, anguished constitutional negotiations, a second Quebec referendum. Each crisis prompts the same concerns about whether there is enough glue to keep the country together. What do Canadians from coast to coast have in common?

During close to four decades here, I’ve acquired a bookshelf of titles such as *The Search for Identity*, *On Being Canadian*, *What Is a Canadian?*, *The Canadians*, *The Unfinished Canadian*, and *Nationalism without Walls: The Unbearable Lightness of Being Canadian*. I’ve found some hilarious definitions of Canadian identity in them, such as Peter C. Newman’s quip “This is the only country on earth whose citizens dream of being Clark Kent instead of Superman.” But over the years I’ve come to wonder if these books take us in the wrong direction. While presenting insightful analysis alongside self-deprecating witticisms, they feed the insecurity that prompted the question in the first place and encourage an impulse to put others (usually Americans) down in order to build Canadians up. The authors occasionally imply that there might be a clear-cut definition of Canada, which we could discover if we just got over our loser mentality and tried a bit harder.

But this country defies definition. There is no master narrative for Canadian history: there are too many stories to package into a tidy, tightly scripted identity. Yet Canada exerts a sense of endless promise because over the years it has successfully managed so many competing pressures: parallel identities, layers of allegiance, deep-rooted hostilities, overlapping loyalties. This country has reimagined and embellished its self-image in every generation since the proclamation of the British North America Act in 1867, which means that each of those books has had a limited shelf life.

Now I am adding another book to the shelf. I come at the question not

as a political scientist, historian, or journalist, but as a biographer who believes that the ideas and actions of individuals can shape larger social changes, and those changes, in turn, mould national identity. As the sesquicentennial anniversary of the creation of the Dominion of Canada loomed, I decided to write about a handful of individuals who helped shape the way we think about ourselves. Their stories reflect the evolution of Canada over the past 150 years, and the potential for this process to continue into the future.

The conventional milestones in the history of post-Confederation Canada—the building of the Canadian Pacific Railway, fierce battles in two world wars, the Great Depression, political highs and lows—are background to what I’ve written here. And I have made the deliberate choice not to focus on any of Canada’s twenty-three prime ministers: the best of them already have excellent biographers. I’ve also passed over business titans, generals, and (the riskiest decision in a puck-crazed country!) hockey players. I know there are regions I have not covered. Instead, I’ve chosen to tell the story of Canada through portraits of people whose contributions speak to me as a Canadian. Some of them are well-known; others are almost forgotten today. In some cases, their impact was immediate; in others, it took decades for their contribution to be recognized.

Individual lives can be a petri dish for seeing what is going on in the larger society. These particular individuals—all products of their culture and times—helped shape not just the character of the Canada we live in today but also the way we think about ourselves and our future. One way or another, their reflections on being Canadian have become embedded in our collective subconscious. Their lives take a reader deep into the experience of the past. What was it like to exist in eras so different from our own? By bringing some long-dead figures back to life and by approaching from new angles a handful of living Canadians, I am reminded that people didn’t always think the way we do these days.

Modern ideas shouldn’t be retrofitted onto the past. There have been remarkable changes as the baton of narrative perspective has been passed from one generation to the next. Our visual perspective on Canada has

evolved too: as I selected the images in these pages, I have had fun tracing the evolution of the way we see our country.

My choices include three idea-driven political leaders, an artist, a writer, an Oji-Cree elder, a lawyer. Other writers would undoubtedly approach our history from a different point of view and put together a very different list. But that's one of the remarkable aspects of Canada today, isn't it? Our country owes its success not to some imagined tribal singularity but to the fact that, although its thirty-five million citizens do not look, speak, or pray alike, we have learned to share this land and for the most part live in neighbourly sympathy. As we embark on the next 150 years, it helps to recall Canada's extraordinary resilience during constant turbulent change, and to recognize subconscious as well as conscious change. The historian Desmond Morton once observed that Canadians "have spent too much time remembering conflicts, crises, and failures. They forgot the great, quiet continuity of life in a vast and generous land."



Canada's history stretches way, way back: there have been people living in the northern half of North America for millennia, surviving and thriving and building communities. And there have been people calling themselves Canadians (or, more accurately, *Canadiens* and *Canadiennes*) since the French settled New France in the seventeenth century and adopted the Algonquin word "Canada" for the region that is now Quebec.

But when we talk of "Canada" today, we are usually referring to the country created in 1867 by the British North America Act. The act embodied a deal that had emerged three years earlier after twenty-three polite men in top hats met in Prince Edward Island. The Charlottetown meeting—a week of chat and compromise—led to Confederation, the founding event of the "Dominion of Canada."

Canada slipped quietly into the world. The cliché about the mild-mannered Canadian is rooted in the Dominion's birth. The 1864 Charlottetown Conference seemed little more than a sketchy real estate deal: the highlight of the conference was a ball at Prince Edward Island's Govern-

ment House. Confederation was a defensive strategy then, not an epic dream of nationhood. A bunch of impoverished, underpopulated, raw-boned, and rough-mannered British colonies came together not for a group hug but because their leaders foresaw unpleasant alternatives. British politicians wanted to shrug off their North American colonies while American politicians gazed north with naked greed.

When the British North America Act was finally passed in 1867, Canadians had their constitution only because, 3,300 kilometres away, the British Parliament and monarch had approved it. The deal nearly crumbled before the ink was dry. Only four of today's ten provinces belonged to the newly created federation (and one of those four immediately tried to walk away from it). International borders in the Far North and the West remained fluid. The act virtually ignored the country's Indigenous inhabitants. The project proceeded so slowly that it took thirty-eight years after Confederation for the other six mainland provinces to join—and Newfoundland (later called Newfoundland and Labrador) waited another half century. Today, Indigenous peoples are still challenging governments and their fellow citizens to recognize their rights.

To most immigrants, Canada's origins seem spectacularly tame. Elsewhere, civil war and carnage usually accompanied the birth of new countries or regimes. I was raised on the blood-spattered history of Britain and gulped down stories of murdered queens and military victories. French schoolchildren absorb the lessons of the guillotine in the construction of "la gloire de la République." Youngsters in China hear about the brutally demanding Long March while Japanese students hear stories of fierce shoguns and kamikaze pilots. The history of the United States recalls corpses on the Gettysburg battlefield alongside the bold promise of the Declaration of Independence.

Such chest-thumping rhetoric and bloody birth pangs cement a sense of national purpose. But in the new Dominion of 1867, the only national institution to unite the scattered colonies was the distant government. There would be no coast-to-coast adoption of a "Canadian identity" for decades. Not even a new flag until a century later. Founded on a political

compact, Canadian nationhood inched forward. Yet the deal stuck: Canada remains united and the Canadian sensibility has grown sturdier, even as the population has become more diverse. Nonetheless, the idea that the country might fall apart remains one of our few binding national myths.



Defining the Canadian identity is a race without a finish line, because as the country evolves, so does our collective sense of self. Perhaps only a poet can capture the momentum: a poet like Shane Koyczan, the spoken-word artist who rocked the audience at the opening ceremony of the 2010 Vancouver Olympics with his poem “We Are More.” You can still catch the whole performance on YouTube, as the bearded, Yellowknife-born poet appeared on the Vancouver stage, surrounded by thousands of people from all over the world.

“Define Canada,” he began, in a voice that was both conversational and mesmerizing. In simple language, he listed some of our country’s clichés. Hockey, fishing lines, good manners, maple syrup, tree planting, whale-watching . . .

*But we are more
than genteel or civilized
we are an idea in the process
of being realized
we are young
we are cultures strung together
then woven into a tapestry
and the design
is what makes us more
than the sum total of our history . . .*

By the time Koyczan reached the final line, the Vancouver crowd was roaring in ecstasy. He had drawn his listeners into a shared sense of national well-being that Canadians rarely feel, let alone express. He had reminded us

that this is still a land of promise. I was shocked and moved by the collective enthusiasm—an enthusiasm that the Fathers of Confederation could never have imagined, as they looked around the table in Charlottetown.

The pace of change during the intervening years has been startling. In 1867 this country was dirt poor and scrambling to survive. Yet its potential, as many of those Fathers of Confederation recognized, was immense. Now, 150 years later, Canadians live in one of the most prosperous and peaceable countries in the world. As we approach Canada's sesquicentennial birthday, here are some of the people whose ideas, over time, have helped this country achieve some of the promise it continues to offer.

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