



Canadians Then and Now

Do Canadians have any common roots? Not by ancestry, but history has placed us closer together than we might imagine. At a time of celebration, let us look back on those who preceded us. Among them we might perceive the roots of a society. It all began 20,000 years ago...

□ Nineteen eighty-four marks the anniversary of several key events in Canadian history. It has been 450 years since Jacques Cartier planted a cross on the Gaspé Peninsula and claimed for France a kingdom of inconceivable vastness and wealth. Two hundred years ago, New Brunswick and Cape Breton Island (the latter temporarily) became provinces of the old British Empire. Ontario will also mark its bicentennial. Toronto was incorporated as a city 150 years ago, and Trois-Rivières was founded 350 years ago. A number of other Canadian communities will be 100 years old.

Amid the celebrations to which these occasions give rise, Canadians might spare a little thought to the question of who they are and how they arrived together at this juncture. Our population is so varied in its ethnic and religious origins that it may seem impossible that we could have any common roots. But we do have some points of commonality in our national background. Our history has given most of us similar outlooks and characteristics. And when we examine the lives of those who have gone before us, we find that they shared these similarities too.

The basic common denominator among Canadians is that they all owe their presence here to immigration. To stretch a point, even the first human beings ever to set foot on this land moved here from somewhere else. They were the descendants of Asians of Mongoloid stock who crossed the

Bering Strait roughly 20,000 years ago and made their way to a corner of the Yukon Territory which had escaped glaciation in the latest Ice Age. Some stayed in the north and spread eastward to become the Inuit people. Others, misnamed Indians, slowly migrated into the newly-habitable country to the south as the ice cleared.

These southbound migrants went through an experience which emigrants ever since have faced with a mixture of hope and trepidation. They literally built a new life in a new land. In its ponderous, grinding retreat to the north, the huge mass of ice which had covered much of the continent completely rearranged the terrain beneath it, gouging out lakes and rivers, flattening down plains, creating hills and valleys. This fresh environment must have called for considerable changes in the way the people who arrived in it acted. The Indians adapted their methods and customs to the conditions they encountered, inventing new tools and weapons, new forms of shelter and transportation, even new gods.

No one will ever know what forces drove these people onward. They may have been uprooted by natural disasters or wars. Some of them undoubtedly were obliged to move because they had exhausted the local food or fuel supply. Others, we may assume, were responding to the fundamental urge that makes human beings want to find out what is beyond the next bend in the river.

The tribes into which the Indians coalesced broke down into two broad classes. First there were the nomadic fishers and hunters who were forever on the move, pulling up stakes to probe unknown stretches of wilderness, continuing to seek whatever was around the bend. Then there were those who were content to remain in one area as long as it would support them. In the temperate regions, they cleared patches of bush, planted crops on them, and erected villages nearby.

The pattern was the same among the Europeans who eventually came here. The roving adventurers led the way. Jacques Cartier was a professional navigator with many voyages behind him before he was commissioned by King Francis I of France to strike out in search of a short trade route from Europe to Asia. Neither he nor his men had any personal desire to stay in the country they discovered. Having charted the course to it, they considered their work finished; it was left to less restless men and women to colonize New France.

When the colony was finally established, the same two types of character emerged among the New French as among the Indians. There were the adventurous *coureurs de bois* who led a roving life in the bush, and the stolid *habitants* who built homes and cultivated the soil. The latter lived in a small enclave of civilization in boundless wild domain, a situation which the British conquest of New France did little to alter. Apart from a scattering of tiny villages built by pastoral tribes, all the country west of the present western outskirts of Montreal was the preserve of the nomad, whether Indian or white.

The explorer and the settler in a symbiotic relationship

The nomadic tribesmen traded furs with men who were very much like themselves — men who never stayed in one place for very long unless they were forced to by the weather. Trading and military posts could be found here and there, but they were manned by transients who intended to return to their homes if they didn't die first.

The fur traders were the last ones to want people to settle down and develop the country. When, in the early 1800s, the Earl of Selkirk tried to found a colony of Scottish immigrants on the Red River,

the traders of the North West Company did their best to kill it in the bud. Ironically, the company's explorers, ever searching for new sources of pelts, drew the maps of western and northern Canada which pioneer settlers would later follow. The 200th anniversary of the founding of that grand organization will be commemorated at its former western headquarters, Old Fort William, Ont., this July.

It is fitting that this and the other special events taking place this year should honour both the explorers and the settlers. Without both types of people, this country would never have grown into what it is. A symbiotic relationship prevailed between the two. The work of the explorers made later settlement possible, but they could not have functioned without the work of the existing settlers. The fur traders depended upon their base in Quebec for the provisions they needed for their expeditions. In the eastern colonies, the seamen who sailed away to trade with the West Indies were sustained by the men and women who caught fish, raised gardens and built ships "down home."

The celebrations this year will also throw light on a special kind of immigrant who has contributed much over the years to our common heritage. This is the refugee who did not choose voluntarily to come here, but who made the best of it when he did.

The bicentennials of New Brunswick and Ontario will concentrate on the leading examples of this type, the United Empire Loyalists. These were people who had the courage of their convictions to the extent of risking their lives. They brought that same iron determination to the task of building a new homeland for themselves.

The story of the Loyalists has been widely misunderstood, partly because their own Canadian descendants retroactively endowed them with a social prominence and political beliefs which most of them did not possess in the first place. The Canadian habit of subscribing to the popular American version of history in imported books, movies and television programs has done nothing to clarify the picture of what these people were really like.

The myth of the Loyalists as seen through Canadian eyes is that they were a lot of upper-class

snobs who thought they owned the country and lorded it over later immigrants, as some of their offspring indeed attempted to do. Through American eyes, they are generally perceived as a small faction of pseudo-aristocratic "Tories" who refused to grasp the torch of liberty because they were too busy trying to hold on to the privileges and power they enjoyed.

Tar and feathers for the loyal point of view

Neither perception accords with the facts. First of all, the Loyalists could hardly be described as a small faction. One of the fathers of the American revolution, John Adams, wrote that as much as one-third of the population of the 13 Colonies was opposed to independence when it was declared in 1776. The Loyalists were certainly not all privileged land-owners or officers of the Crown; there were probably as many of these on the revolutionary side, including George Washington.

The usual impression of the American War of Independence is that it was fought out between the English redcoats and Hessian mercenaries of King George III on one side and tough American frontiersmen wielding squirrel rifles on the other. In fact, it was largely a civil war between Americans who wanted to break away from the British Empire and Americans who did not.

Like all civil wars, it was an especially bitter conflict. Loyalist soldiers captured by their ex-compatriots were hanged as traitors to the revolutionary cause, and civilians in Revolutionist territory who expressed loyal sentiments were cruelly abused. At best, their property was confiscated and they were prohibited from practising their trades or professions. At worst, they were hounded by mobs who burned their houses, threw them in jail, tarred and feathered them and subjected them to other painful indignities.

After the decisive defeat of the British forces at Yorktown in 1781, scores of thousands of Loyalists clustered in British-held areas to await the results of the peace negotiations that would determine their future. When the terms of the Treaty of Paris became known two years later, they were shocked and hurt. It seemed to them

that the Mother Country had sold out their interests. Although the U.S. government promised to facilitate their return to their homes, many who tried to reclaim confiscated property were as roughly handled as ever by vindictive former neighbours. So, with the Crown's assurance that they would be assisted in resettling on new land, at least 60,000 of them (estimates range to 100,000) left their homes behind for good.

Loyalists with the means to do so went to England, Bermuda and the settled parts of the West Indies. The poorer ones — some 45,000 of them — took up offers of land grants in the British colonies to the North. They either sailed in convoys from Britain's last outpost, the port of New York, or trekked overland to the rivers and lakes that formed the new international boundary. The ships from New York landed in Halifax and Montreal. The land-bound refugees crossed into what was then Western Quebec, later to be joined by several thousand who moved up the St. Lawrence River from Montreal.

They formed a microcosm of Canadian society today

The people caught up in this exodus formed a microcosm of the present "English" Canadian population. Besides English-Americans, they were mainly of Scottish, Irish, French, German and Dutch descent. Among them were several hundred black ex-soldiers who had been released from slavery by the war, and about 1,000 Iroquois Indians who had fought as allies of the British. This last group, headed by Chief Joseph Brant, took up land in and around Brantford (named after the Chief) and Cornwall, Ont., which also became the home of many white refugees. Both these cities are observing their bicentennials this year.

In terms of social class, the majority was not much different from the majority of Canadians today: tradesmen, farmers, labourers, shopkeepers and discharged soldiers, with a sprinkling of doctors, lawyers, teachers and clergymen. Their ranks encompassed Anglicans, Roman Catholics, Methodists, Wesleyans, Baptists, Congregationalists, Mennonites, Quakers and pagans. They spoke a variety of languages, not the least French, since a community of *Canadien* farmers crossed the Detroit River to resettle near Windsor, Ont.

The Loyalists were what modern social scientists would call a heterogeneous and pluralistic group. As such, they represented the foundation of "English" Canada's diverse cultural structure. To add to their variety, they came from many different parts of the former 13 Colonies. There were eastern fishermen and western grain-farmers then as now, only the grain-farmers did not live as far west.

Along with their babies and belongings, the Loyalists brought with them the traditional gradualist Canadian approach to public affairs. They abhorred revolutionary extremes. Some indeed were the elitist hide-bound Tories of the Loyalist myth, but most were "Whiggish by persuasion," according to the historian W.L. Morton. This means that they were not averse to political reform, but they believed that it could be accomplished without violence or the severing of historical connections.

This does not mean that they were at all backward in asserting their rights. The 14,000 who landed in the Saint John River Valley, then part of Nova Scotia, had no sooner finished pitching their tents than they began demanding to run their own local affairs. The result was the creation in 1784 of the Province of New Brunswick. Cape Breton was made a separate province as well, retaining this status until 1810.

Meanwhile, the Loyalists in Western Quebec began agitating for a change from Quebec's French system of land tenure and civil law to the British system they had known in their last places of residence. This led to the Constitutional Act of 1791, which established Upper Canada (later Ontario) as a province with its own elected assembly and land and civil laws. The same Act confirmed that the traditional French legal usages would prevail in Lower Canada (Quebec), which gained its own assembly as well.

So great was the part the Loyalists played in the founding of Ontario that the province has decided to base its official bicentennial on their arrival in 1784, despite the fact that it did not become a separate jurisdiction until seven years later. The rationale for this is that the Loyalists really founded the Ontario society.

Like every group of immigrants before and since, they had their share of adventurers among them.

Many lit out immediately to explore the timber and mineral resources of the great forests at their backs. From their bases in the Maritime provinces, Loyalist sailors pursued the shipping trade around the world. A few generations later, men of Loyalist stock were in the vanguard of the opening of the Canadian West.

In the meantime, they went in for further pioneering closer to home. Among the places they settled was the new Upper Canadian capital of York, the former and future Toronto, which has now officially been a city for 150 years.

The timeless themes of life in this country still go on

As Canada's most populous single place, Toronto makes an interesting study in the timeless themes of Canadian life — exploration, settlement, immigration. Its present eminence as a financial and industrial hub is largely owed to its role in the past as the leading settlement on a vast frontier. It was from Toronto that the explorers looking for mineral resources over much of Canada were financed and supplied.

On drilling rigs and in mining camps in the Canadian North, the symbiosis between the explorer and the settler still exists, even though the explorer now may be a university-trained geologist and the settler a pin-striped banker. The explorer, in fact, may be on another frontier entirely, working with a microscope in a laboratory, seeking discoveries of a scientific nature. But, in modern dress, the basic rhythms of Canadian life still go on today.

And the immigrants still come, some of them voluntarily and some not, to add to Canada's cultural and material riches in their determination to build a new life in a new country. For all we know, they come with the same hopes and dreams and fears as those first people who stood on the edge of Asia and then started striding over the ice towards the outline of an unknown continent countless eons ago. Now as then, there will be adventurers and pioneers among them. And as they come, our roots will be nourished and renewed.