Making Canada, Making Canadians

From Open Text BC – Post-Confederation

In the language of 21st century marketers, Canada had a weak “brand” at the start of the post-Confederation era. Was it a British colony or a free nation? The citizens were British subjects … which meant what, exactly, in Quebec? Was Canada a North American nation or an extension of the British Isles and, maybe, Western Europe as a whole? Such issues did not trouble the Americans who had nowhere to look but North America. They cut themselves loose from Europe in the 1780s and built their own continent-wide empire. The word patriot — which derives from the words pays and patris, thus meaning loyalty to the country of one’s father — was looked at askance in Canada because it was associated with American revolutionaries in the 18th century and the Patriotes of Lower Canada who led the 1837 rebellion against imperial authority. As well, for some more imperially-oriented Canadians, being a “nationalist” implied loyalty to the nation-state as a structure rather than to the larger ideals of the empire, the Crown, and so on. The search for a common denominator, a shared bond that was both affectionate and inspiring was underway.

What was Canada in 1867 other than a collection of colonies? They’d fought no great battles together and, in fact, they’d sparred with one another from time to time. Adding on three more colonies by 1873 did nothing to change this. Settling and exploiting the West became something of a common project, although Westerners might argue that their disadvantages under the National Policy ought not be considered a source of national identity or pride. In the 19th
century, the mechanisms for overcoming this alienation, or at least disinterest, were limited. There was no national media (unlike in Britain where *The Times* of London circulated widely) and there was no national education system (again, unlike in Britain); in point of fact, education proved to be one of the most divisive issues in the early days of the two Dominions.

Imperialists jumped on adventures like the Boer War as a means of manufacturing national consciousness, much as English-Canadians had thrown themselves into the 1885 events in the West. While nationalists might call for a Canadian Navy, imperialists believed that a Canadian investment in the Royal Navy made the whole Imperial fleet a symbol of Canada. The persistence of royal imagery in these years suggests that Britain was a stronger source of icons than the Dominion itself. Certainly the monarch appears on Canadian postage stamps and currencies to the exclusion of any other leader until the 20th century. Other more Canadian traditions were, however, making an appearance. When Macdonald proclaimed himself a British subject forever in 1891, his campaign poster — “The Old Flag, The Old Policy, The Old Leader” — had him astride the shoulders of a factory worker and a farmer (both of whom look well pleased), brandishing a variant of the Red Ensign. The “old flag” in this case wasn’t the Union Jack after all, but a colonial model with the Union Jack prominent in the upper corner. The flag was far from “old” and using it in this way was meant to inspire a sense of Canadian tradition.

Artistic representations like this one cannot be underestimated as a source of Canadian identity and part of the process of what historians call “the invention of tradition.” Posters were more easily mass-produced and more colourful than the photographs of the time, and the Post Office served as a distribution system. The Federal Government could issue these images, as could the national political parties. In fact, the Post Office itself, with a presence in almost every community of any size, was an instrument in shaping the Canadian idea.