

Chapter 1

One of the Best Countries on Earth

Against Formidable Odds

Why study the history of Canada? For seven consecutive years in the 1990s, the United Nations Human Development Program proclaimed the vast nation that sits atop the North American continent to be the best country on earth, according to an index that includes quality of life, income, and education. By 2005, the UN ranked Canada fourth in the world. Yet in spite of this powerful and compelling evidence of the country's global stature, misconceptions continue to skew our sense of the Canadian past. These suggest that Canadian history is boring, placid, and of little import; that it is devoid of the grand or heroic elements that generally capture the attention of people both inside and outside the nation. Moreover, a persistent and misleading assumption implies that Canada's history, while occasionally distinctive, is essentially a pale reflection of the more intriguing and lively saga of the nation to its immediate south: the United States. The Americans, the idea has it, are the scriptwriters of the most powerful and captivating national story on earth.¹ Their essentially passive neighbors, while occasionally worthy of some note, have essentially trod a national trail that was clearly blazed by others.

Neither point holds merit. The history of the second largest nation on earth is neither sleep inducing nor inconsequential. Its history is



Vancouver, British Columbia, the site of the 2010 Winter Olympics.

Source: Associated Press / Bayne Stanley

unique, despite the fact that it shares patterns with other nations that have been formed by waves of immigrants that transformed a territory originally inhabited by Aboriginal peoples. Readers acquainted with the histories of countries such as Australia, Mexico, Argentina, and India, to name but a few, will certainly recognize much that is familiar. Perhaps most important, Americans will no doubt discover evocative themes as they explore Canada's story. At the same time—and this is the particular challenge of coming to grips with the history of the neighbor of a country that exercises such enormous power in the modern world—Canada's history is not an extension of the American saga.

To many non-Canadian observers, images of and references to the country are often portrayed in a stereotypical fashion. For Americans in the northern states, the country is the source of bothersome, chilly blasts of air in any season. To legions of college students, it is the exporter of decent and relatively affordable beer, a point that is underscored with advertised images of the purity of Canadian beverages, superimposed on a pristine landscape. The land of the rugged Mountie is another popular perception of Canada; strikingly, for a country that fashions itself as one of the most amicable nations on earth, the country uses the elite Royal Canadian Mounted Police as one of its most recognizable symbols. In a world rife with violence, Canada is unique in embracing a symbol of law enforcement as an image of self-portrayal. People around the globe might also think of the country as a hockey devotee's paradise, a place where the fast-paced and rough-and-tumble sport is treated simultaneously with a reverence and fanaticism that is matched only by soccer fans in Latin America and Europe.

It is entertaining to draw out the colorful stereotypes that seem to capture the essence of the country, and certainly Canadians, with genuine self-deprecating humor, are often the first to point out their idiosyncrasies. Yet below the surface of these playful and superficial images, the country is an immensely complex place where in the recent past, voters in Quebec cast ballots in two referendums to decide whether they would retain or fundamentally alter their relationship with the other provinces. The immensely successful 2010 Winter Olympics in Vancouver provided an opportunity for the country to showcase its stature as a global model of well-being and civility; at the same time, numerous critics noted a glaring regional

disparity in the design of publicity and coverage for the event. The paradox of modern Canada is intriguing. Deemed a superior and thus successful model of a modern state by the United Nations, the country simultaneously struggles under a crippling—some would argue fatal—burden of regional, cultural, and ethnic diversity. The bitter irony that one of the planet's most successful nations in the first decade of the twenty-first century grapples with the persistent threat of dismantlement gives us a stark vantage point. While the factors that help to explain this striking contradiction are varied and of course open to debate, collectively they provide a suitable road map for beginning our exploration into Canada's past (see "The Vancouver Winter Olympics and the Press" in the Documents section).

Canadian history should be appreciated by non-Canadians for two essential reasons. As is the case with all other historical studies, it is an important exercise to undergo in order to make sense of the country's present. It also offers, particularly to Americans, some intriguing themes that lend themselves to comparative analysis. At the turn of the last century, Prime Minister Wilfrid Laurier shrewdly observed that "Canada is the most unlikely of regions for nation building." Even after adding another one hundred years, the observation seems particularly insightful. In many ways, the people who put their shoulder to the wheel of national development have beaten some long odds. Canada's history, even after peeling away nationalistic overtones, is fundamentally a tale of survival.

The overarching geography of the territory that Canadians inhabit accounts for one of the most dynamic survival themes. Indeed, one of the most enduring quips about the country's landmass is that it has too much geography. The immensely varied environment, with the sweeping Canadian Shield of Precambrian rock, the over one million streams, rivers, ponds, and lakes, the seemingly endless terrain of the prairies and the frozen reaches of the North, the awe-inspiring succession of mountain ranges in the West, all combined to create obstacles to exploration, settlement, transportation, and communication. In addition, the varied and dramatic climate, ranging from the temperate weather of southern Ontario and the lower Pacific coastal region of British Columbia to the ice-choked barrens of the Arctic, has given first Aboriginal peoples, and then European and Asian immigrants, particular challenges. Throughout Canadian history, day-to-day existence in an often harsh environment has consumed the

energies of millions of the country's inhabitants. The geography and environment of the country shaped and continue to dictate the rhythm of life for people as varied as farmers who cope with short growing seasons, engineers who blast into the igneous rock of the Shield to extract marketable minerals, and college students who use tunnels in winter to avoid numbing temperatures and howling winds as they pass from lectures to labs. People the world around have to come to grips with the geography and environment of the region they inhabit; what makes Canada's saga particularly problematic is that its citizens have attempted to master such a large swath of the world's terrain.

Another powerful theme of persistence falls under the category of political struggles between imperial powers as the age of revolution in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries created modern nations. These contests shaped Canada's early history as the French and English engaged in a protracted struggle for mastery of the New World. Canada became an arena for contesting empires; it also was used periodically as a bargaining chip by agenda-driven negotiators in Europe as a means of sorting out the spoils of wars. The French imperial authority fell dramatically to the wayside in the late eighteenth century, and the British North American empire partially unraveled as the American rebellion became a successful revolution. Pursuing a political evolution in the context of the British Empire, Canadians confronted the challenge of juggling the interests of Britain and the United States. As American power surged continentally in the nineteenth century and then internationally in the following century, Canadians negotiated the tricky currents of a sometimes tempestuous relationship between their former imperial master and their neighbor. As the country sought and then achieved sovereignty in a piecemeal fashion, it attempted to ward off the encroachment of what many Canadians considered to be corrosive American economic, social, and cultural influences. Even in the early twenty-first century, magazines and Web sites regularly publish poll results that illuminate their deeply ambivalent feelings about their neighbor. Many Canadians are open to closer contact with Americans, but just as many fear that the ties between the two nations will lead inexorably to Canada's demise as an independent nation. Thus, the politically based survival game, while much altered in definition and scope over the centuries, continues to be a central national consideration.

Survival issues can also be clustered under the category of economic themes. A land that was first sought by Europeans for its seemingly inexhaustible fishing stocks and furs, it soon presented enticing possibilities for lumbering and agricultural development. The concentration on the gathering, extracting, and cultivating of staple resources is one of the most persistent economic dynamics in all of Canadian history. After the initial age of exploration and settlement, it expanded to encompass other raw materials such as minerals, petroleum, and natural gas. The staples approach to understanding Canadian history, while still of value, does not fully explain the complexity of economic themes in Canada's past. The realities of mercantilism, enforced by French and British imperial masters alike, gave way as the British embraced the capitalist model in the nineteenth century. The Western world's grinding passage through the traumatic stages of capital development, with merchants and then industrialists creating transnational economies, meant that Canadians would go through similar phases. By the twentieth century, accelerated by its participation in two global wars, Canada took its place as one of the world's leading economic powers. Even as it entered the postindustrial era late in the century, Canada would be on the cutting edge of technological innovations and changes. Yet with its dramatically skewed trading patterns, first with Britain and then with the United States, Canada would be forever positioned precariously as an extension of a foreign economic giant. Thus, from their entanglements with French mercantilists in the seventeenth century to their current economic intermeshing with the United States and Mexico under the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), Canadians have attempted to retain control over their economic fate.

Finally, the survival idea has played out in the often overlapping arenas of ethnicity, race, religion, and culture. The triangular contest involving Amerindians, French, and British was at root a struggle for survival. As the British imperial forces emerged triumphant in the late eighteenth century, the battleground with the two other groups shifted to the occupation of certain spaces and a sometimes violent resistance to assimilation. The traditional jockeying for power between francophones and anglophones, so much a catalyst for historical forces from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, became over time a less satisfactory model for understanding