# 1867-1896: THE NEW CANADIAN REALITY

By Sean Mills

under the direction of Brian Young, McGill University

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Political</th>
<th>1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>British North America Act</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The BNA Act in Ontario, Quebec, and New Brunswick</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nova Scotia and Confederation</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>British Columbia and Prince Edward Island</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Economic</th>
<th>3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Red River Rebellion</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Pacific Scandal and National Policy</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The National Policy and the Maritimes</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industrial Work</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ideological</th>
<th>6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Canada First Movement</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roman Catholic Church</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberalism in Quebec</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suggestions for Further Reading</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

McCord Museum of Canadian History
1867-1896

Political

British North America Act

With an act of British Parliament, the Dominion of Canada was born on 1 July 1867. It contained approximately four million people, living in four provinces – Ontario, Quebec, New Brunswick, and Nova Scotia. Unlike the United States to the south, the new country maintained British social and political institutions and, fearing excessive democracy, was founded on the principles of “Peace, Order, and good Government.” Fuelled by the hopes and dreams of its citizens, the Dominion struggled to demonstrate that a North American alternative to the United States was possible. In its early years, however, voting rights remained largely limited to male property holders, excluding all women and much of the working class. Native populations, moreover, excluded from the negotiations leading to the BNA Act, became wards of the federal government.

The BNA Act in Ontario, Quebec, and New Brunswick

In Quebec, Cartier sold Confederation as a means for Quebec to achieve independent political control over culture and education. The rhetoric of provincial rights, however, was belied by the subordinate role that the BNA Act actually allotted to the provinces. Cartier and his Bleus were, contrary to how they presented Confederation, strong supporters of political centralism. While Quebeckers backed Confederation reluctantly, New Brunswick unenthusiastically looked forward to the economic possibilities that the union would bring. Popular enthusiasm for the project was most deeply felt in Ontario,
where both of the major political parties had supported the idea. Dreaming of railways and western expansion, Torontonians gathered at Queen’s Park on 1 July to witness, as George Brown described it, “the most magnificent display of fireworks ever exhibited in Canada.” From the beginning, Ontario played a dominant role in Confederation. The Kingstonian John A. Macdonald became the first Prime Minister, and he appointed Ontarians to five of the thirteen cabinet posts. Ottawa, moreover, was firmly established as the permanent capital.

Nova Scotia and Confederation

Nova Scotians, however, rejected both the acquiescence of Quebec and New Brunswick and the jubilation of Ontario and strongly rejected Confederation. Charles Tupper, Nova Scotia’s premier, believed that Confederation would be best for Nova Scotia in the long run, but, as the results of the 1867 elections in Nova Scotia clearly demonstrated, the majority of his population did not agree. After Britain refused to allow Nova Scotia out of the union, the repeal movement’s Joseph Howe, in exchange for increased provincial subsidies, accepted a seat in Macdonald’s cabinet.

British Columbia and Prince Edward Island

In the November 1867 federal election, the first in the country’s history, Macdonald and his supporters easily won a majority, with 108 seats in the newly established House of Commons. In the 1870s, both British Columbia (1871) and Prince Edward Island (1873) joined the new dominion. After the gold rush waned, British Columbia was left with a large public debt and, in a meeting in Ottawa, Cartier promised to give the province subsidies for sixty thousand people despite the
fact that its non-Native population was only twenty-eight thousand. When Cartier promised to link the westernmost province to the East with a transcontinental railway, moreover, the delegates could not refuse. Prince Edward Island, for its part, became a province in 1873 when it accepted Ottawa’s offer to assume its $3 million debt and to buy out its absentee proprietors.

**Economic**

Following Confederation, events in the West were extremely important. Worried that the United States would seek control of the entire continent in accordance with the doctrine of “manifest destiny,” Macdonald moved quickly to consolidate Canada’s claim over the western territories. Cartier and William MacDougall, as representatives of Canada, sailed for London in 1868 and purchased Rupert’s Land\(^1\) at the cost of $1.5 million. Having had their land transferred without being consulted, and seeing settlement surveyors appear on their land, people living in the new territories were not as exuberant as Cartier and Macdonald about Ottawa’s attempts to control the West.

**Red River Rebellion**

The Métis of the Red River settlement offered the most forceful resistance and, under the leadership of Louis Riel, they succeeded in establishing a provisional government in the colony. Demanding that Manitoba become a province like the others, Riel took his protest to

---

\(^1\) Rupert’s Land designated the territory granted to the Hudson’s Bay Company in 1670. Covering what has now come to be western and northwestern Canada, Rupert’s Land was defined by the drainage basin of the Hudson Bay.
the extreme, court-martialling and executing Thomas Scott, an Ontario Orangeman, in March of 1870. While news of Scott’s murder infuriated Protestants in Ontario, Catholics in Quebec began looking on Riel as a defender of both French-Canadian and Catholic rights. Creating the province of Manitoba (1870) in response to the rebels’ demands, the federal government, however, refused to grant amnesty for Scott’s murder, and Riel fled to the United States. Fourteen years later, in 1885, the Métis would invite him back to Canada to lead their revolt. Again declaring a provisional government, Riel and his followers took up arms against the federal government to defend their demands. Captured and tried for treason, Riel was convicted and executed, an event that once again polarized French and English public opinion.

The Pacific Scandal and National Policy

As the Riel rebellions clearly demonstrated, governing Canada, with its size, diverse populations, and multitude of interests, was a complicated task. In the aftermath of Macdonald’s second election campaign, his administration was brought down by the Pacific railway scandal.² It was a Liberal, Alexander Mackenzie, who formed a government in Macdonald’s place. Although Mackenzie made important reforms, Macdonald’s promise of a “National Policy” that would attract immigrants, introduce tariffs to protect Canadian interests, and initiate railway construction, ensured his return to power in the 1878 election.

² The Canadian Pacific Scandal tarnished Macdonald’s reputation in the aftermath of the second federal election. Needing more money to help finance his electoral campaign, Macdonald turned to Sir Hugh Allan for help. In return, Allen was granted the charter to build the railway to the Pacific. When a raid on the office of Allen’s solicitor unveiled a bag of evidence incriminating Macdonald, and after the evidence was delivered to the Opposition, Macdonald’s government collapsed.
Beginning in 1879, Macdonald raised tariffs by 15 percent and continued to raise them throughout the 1880s. Manufacturing in Ontario and Quebec expanded and railway construction was stimulated. Under the leadership of George Stephen and Donald Smith and financed by American and British investors, the new Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR), receiving government financing, a monopoly, and land grants, pledged to build the railway to the Pacific Ocean. Although a combination of Canadian and immigrant workers were to provide the labour, much of the most dangerous and least desirable work was left to Chinese migrants. After years of construction, the CPR was finally completed in 1885.

The National Policy and the Maritimes

While the National Policy initially spurred economic growth in the Atlantic region, its long-term effects promoted increased industrialization in Ontario and Quebec, while leaving the eastern provinces in their wake. During the recession of the 1890s, factories closed and manufacturing in the Maritimes started to decline in relation to central Canada. Already by the turn of the century, half of the gross value of Canadian manufacturing was concentrated in Ontario, with another third located in Quebec (Conrad and Finkel 77).

Industrial Work

At the time of Confederation, the majority of Canadians lived in a rural environment and made their living by either farming or exploiting natural resources; the family was usually the basic work unit. By the 1880s, wage labour outside the home and in an urban setting was becoming increasingly common. Industrial work could be demeaning,
dangerous, and underpaid; and women and children working in the industrial economy were typically paid half the wages of men. For seasonal workers and the unemployed, the cold Canadian winters had a punishing effect. Working-class taverns, like the famous Joe Beef’s tavern of Montreal, provided casual workers with entertainment and an affordable place to stay; as a result, taverns like Joe Beef’s became centres of a nascent working-class culture. As industrialism progressed, moreover, workers became increasingly conscious of their collective interests. Moving beyond the confines of early craft unions, for example, the Knights of Labor arrived in Canada in the 1880s and attempted to organize both male and female workers of all skill levels and ethnic backgrounds. The culture of the working class was also influenced to a large degree by reform movements, such as the Salvation Army. Attracting a large number of working-class women, the Salvation Army militated against the “immorality” of the lower classes, attempted to “rescue” those who had “fallen,” and provided spiritual guidance to those most affected by industrialization.

**Ideological**

**Canada First Movement**

In the period following Confederation, both Ontario and Quebec’s ideological foundations continued to develop. Ontario began forming an indigenous literary and cultural tradition. Susanna Moodie and Catherine Parr Traill, for example, wrote extensively of their
experiences living in the North American wilderness.\textsuperscript{3} Also, a small but influential group of wealthy Ontarians formed the Canada First movement in the 1870s. Believing in the need to create a “national spirit” based on Canada’s alliance with Great Britain, the group hoped to build a Protestant nation. Canadians, they argued in the \textit{Canadian Monthly and National Review}, were descendants of northern races who were well adapted to living in the country’s northern environment. Clearly disregarding any need to appeal to French-Canadian identity, the Canada First movement was also resolutely elitist, disdaining both the working classes and Native populations. Canada Firsters did not monopolize public opinion, however, as both defenders of strong ties with Great Britain and advocates for closer relations with the United States emerged. While imperialist sentiment was growing, Goldwin Smith, in his \textit{Canada and the Canadian Question} (1891), maintained that the United States should annex Canada. He argued that there could be no question that a “union of Canada with the American Commonwealth, like that which Scotland entered with England, would in itself be attended with great advantages.”

\textbf{Roman Catholic Church}

In Quebec, the period saw a marked increase in the power of the Roman Catholic Church. Uniting European ultramontanism with Quebec nationalism, Quebec’s clerical élite consolidated their influence. One of Quebec’s most persistent and fervent ultramontanists, believing that the pope in Rome should be society’s

\textsuperscript{3} See Moodie’s \textit{Roughing it in the Bush} (1852) and Traill’s \textit{Backwoods of Canada} (1836).
ultimate authority, was Ignace Bourget, bishop of Montreal from 1840 to 1876. Bourget, along with his colleague Louis-François Laflèche, bishop of Trois-Rivières (1870-1898), worked to implement a conservative Catholic doctrine. The church both built institutions and minimized the power of the state in education.

**Liberalism in Quebec**

Despite the efforts of conservative clerics, liberalism was present in Quebec society. One of the most important challenges to ultramontanism arose in a controversy surrounding the *Institut canadien*. A Montreal club with about two thousand members, from the mid-1840s to the mid-1870s, it provided a fully stocked library and a place where men gathered to discuss liberal ideas. The influence of the institute can be seen in members such as Wilfrid Laurier, who was prominent in forming the *Rouges* and, later, the Liberal Party. Debating liberal ideals of progress and women’s rights, members read widely, ignoring clerical sanctions. The conflict between the institute and the church came to a head when one of the institute’s members, Joseph Guibord, died. Bourget refused to allow him to be buried in consecrated ground, and Guibord’s family appealed to England’s Privy Council, which ruled that it was his civil right to be buried as a Catholic. Unable to accept that the courts had overruled the papal authority, Bourget deconsecrated the cemetery plot in which Guibord was buried. As the Guibord affair demonstrates, the social influence of the church was not able to stop the forces of modernization and liberalization that were sweeping the western world in the second half of the nineteenth century. In 1896, to the church’s dismay, a French-Canadian Liberal and former member of the institute was elected...
Prime Minister; Laurier would launch Canada into a new stage of its development.
Suggestions for Further Reading


