

Nationality: The Experience of Canada

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NATIONALITY : THE EXPERIENCE OF CANADA

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I

It is perhaps a result of the period of the year at which I set out to write this paper that I find myself conceiving of the theme given me in terms like these: *When did the British American colonies become a nation? Be definite, and support your answer with specific facts.*

Searching for the answer, one thinks first of two statutes passed by the British Parliament. One is the British North America Act of 1867, whose centenary we are celebrating this year with well-organized spontaneous joy. The other is the Statute of Westminster of 1931.

Although there is nothing about status in the B.N.A. Act, Lord Monck, the last Governor-in-Chief of British North America and the first Governor General of the Dominion of Canada, clearly felt that Confederation represented a rise in the status of the federated colonies, for he recommended that the occasion be recognized by setting up a special order of chivalry to reward services rendered to or in Canada. We have finally got this, or something like it, in 1967, though it is not to be called by the fine name that Monck suggested — the Order of St. Lawrence. We have not yet got another distinction which Monck advocated: namely, that Canadian Privy Councillors should be styled "Right Honourable." No historian or political scientist should have any difficulty in figuring out why.

The beginnings of nationality, of course, are almost as old as the community called Canada. One can see nationalism stirring in New France in the eighteenth century. And in Upper Canada the War of 1812 did much to prepare the way for the growth of national feeling. Confederation itself was obviously vital to the realization of Canadian nationality. Yet the state organized in 1867 was no more than the outline sketch of a nation. The country was incomplete even physically. Before the blank spaces on the map were filled, old communities had to be absorbed and new ones had to be organized; railways had to be built, immigrants had to be attracted from abroad. But no historian has to be told that more than this was needed. Nations are not made by Acts of Parliament, nor are they composed of steel rails or even census statistics. They have their being in the minds and hearts of men and women; they are compounded of "deep experiences deeply shared." The Statute of Westminster was the legislative interpretation of a great deal that had happened outside any parliament since 1867.

II

Among the deep experiences of the Canadian people one stands out. In many ways the First World War was the most important event in Canadian history. Unparalleled in its own day, it was to have a parallel in the next generation; but the first experience is always the most important. It came on the country without warning; at midsummer of 1914 nobody thought that the Little Town in the sunshine that Stephen Leacock had described two years before was to be plunged into that maelstrom, along with a thousand other Canadian communities great and small. During the next few years this remote and unmilitary society produced a fighting force that beat the Germans — who are not really easy people to beat — on a score of European battlefields. The cost was tragic — in proportion to population, a dozen times as many fatal casualties as the United States suffered in that war. The traumatic effect of those four years was comparable with that of the four years of the Civil War on the country next door. And they left a national legend behind them. The creation of the Canadian Corps was the greatest thing Canada had ever done — perhaps the greatest thing she has done to this day.

An anniversary last spring reminded us of the special national significance of one Canadian battle. To me it brought back an afternoon in September, 1944. Our Army Headquarters in France was moving forward to keep control of its divisions as they pursued the enemy; and a group of officers took advantage of this to see some of the battlefields of the older war. As we drove near Arras we suddenly saw before us, catching the sun high on the distant northern horizon, two great pylons; and we knew we were looking at Vimy Ridge. A quarter of an hour later we were standing before the memorial. I think we all felt a degree of emotion as we read the plain words that tell the story. "The Canadian Corps, on April 9th, 1917, with four divisions in line on a front of four miles attacked and captured this ridge." Men who fought that day recalled fifty years later that it had been a moment of national pride, that as they looked out across the Douai Plain from the conquered Ridge they felt that their country had come of age. If a single milestone is needed to mark progress on the road to national maturity, one might do much worse than nominate that famous Easter Monday.

Seventeen years before, Sir Wilfrid Laurier had made a celebrated speech about the Canadians who fought in South Africa. When the news came, he said, that they had justified Lord Roberts' confidence in them, had charged like veterans and won the admiration of their British comrades, "is there a man whose bosom did not swell with pride — that noblest of all pride, that pride of pure patriotism, the pride of the consciousness of our rising strength, the pride of the consciousness that on that day it had been revealed to the world that a new power had arisen

in the West?"¹ In the context of the battle of Paardeberg, where a single Canadian battalion conducted itself with proper courage and efficiency and had a few dozen casualties, those phrases are merely ludicrous, a queer little exhibit in the museum of Canadian nationalism. In the context of Vimy Ridge they would have made somewhat more sense.

Contemplating the national results of the First World War, one is forced to make two reservations. The first is minor. It consists in the fact that the army that did such great things was only a little over fifty per cent Canadian — if you define a Canadian as a person born in Canada. This is hardly serious; people born abroad have never had much difficulty in establishing Canadian status, in their own minds or even in other people's, and probably a majority of the worthies who have claims to be considered Canadian national heroes were not natives of British North America. Much more serious is the fact that in this national army of 1914-18 French Canada was so badly under-represented. It is true that French-Canadian soldiers fought magnificently — one remembers the 22nd Battalion, as it then was, coming out of the Hindenburg Line battle in August 1918 with all its officers dead or wounded (the acting Commanding Officer, Major Vanier, had lost a leg); and it is true, I think, that, as usual, "French" and "English" got on better together in the forces than they do anywhere else. The facts remain that French Canadians were a much smaller minority in the wartime army than they were in the country's population, and that the conscription issue had created a calamitous discord between them and the rest of the country. It is one of the great tragedies of Canadian history that this tremendous experience, the most powerful nation-building force ever brought to bear upon English-speaking Canada, was actually divisive in its effects upon the relations between English and French.

No one can foretell today the ultimate result of the new crisis between the two cultures that has been developing since Maurice Duplessis died. But it too obviously has very tragic aspects. The saddest, I think, consists in the fact that English-speaking Canada, and in particular the province of Ontario, have been more friendly to French-Canadian aspirations since the Second World War than at any previous period. There has never been a time when the basic assumption implicit in the British North America Act — the idea of a single political community based upon the mutual tolerance and friendly cooperation of two cultures — was so fully and freely accepted by English Canadians, or when there was more general and genuine goodwill among them towards the French part of the country. It is a blow to the simple-minded WASP, full of kindly feeling and Centennial gaiety, when some French-Canadian extremist strikes aside his proffered hand and tells him that he, and those centralizers in

¹ House of Commons, 13 March 1900. Misquoted in O. D. Skelton's *Life and Letters of Sir Wilfrid Laurier*, II, 108.

Ottawa, are just purveyors of phony unity. One thing is painfully clear. If complete national unity is essential to genuine nationality, then I cannot provide today the date when Canada became a nation. I can only refer you to some reliable astrologer. The South African Boers finally won the Battle of Paardeberg in 1960. There are obviously at least a few people in Quebec who are hoping that Montcalm will win the Battle of the Plains of Abraham by 1970, or at any rate by 1980. All I can say, myself, is that I continue, optimistically, to rely on what Alfred Lord Tennyson called the common sense of most. And I continue, optimistically, to think that there are still large reserves of common sense in both English and French Canada.

III

The First World War's effects upon Canadian national spirit had, in their turn, results in terms of national status which there is no need to dwell upon. Second Ypres, Vimy, Passchendaele and Amiens led to the Imperial War Cabinet, to Dominion representation at the Peace Conference and in the League of Nations, to the Balfour Declaration of 1926, and to the Statute of Westminster. If the war left Canada still disunited, it left her stronger; and it made her "an international person," which she had not been before. But there were still many question marks. Whatever the mass of Canadians thought — and they were mainly devoted to trying to get rich quick before 1929, and trying to get enough to eat afterwards — some people, particularly intellectuals, were disturbed and uncertain about the country's future. I offer a case in point.

The case is that of Loring Cheney Christie, who was born at Amherst, Nova Scotia, in 1885 and when he died in 1941 was Canadian Minister to Washington.² After graduating from Acadia, he had a brilliant career at the Harvard Law School and a few years in the United States Department of Justice; he then joined the new Canadian Department of External Affairs, and shortly became the confidential assistant of Sir Robert Borden. He was with Borden at the Imperial War Cabinet and Imperial War Conference and the Paris Peace Conference; he was at Arthur Meighen's elbow during the famous confrontation over the Anglo-Japanese Alliance in London in 1921, and with Borden again later that year at the Washington Conference. The nature of Christie's influence on Borden, and indeed the extent of Borden's influence on imperial policies, both need investigation; but Borden was certainly a figure of some importance at both London and Paris, and there seems fairly good reason to believe that Christie had a good deal to do with shaping the line of policy with which

² Christie's career to 1935 is sketched in a *curriculum vitae* initialled by himself, Sir Robert Borden Papers, vol. 264, folio 148147, Public Archives of Canada. See the discussion of Christie in James Eayrs, *In Defence of Canada: From the Great War to the Great Depression* (Toronto, n.d.), 23.

Borden's name is connected — the idea of a common Empire foreign policy arrived at after close and careful consultation between the United Kingdom and the Dominions.

After the change of government in 1921 Christie found himself little consulted by the new Prime Minister, Mackenzie King, and in 1923 he left the Department of External Affairs and moved to England. King asserted long afterwards — in his diary in September 1939 — that he had offered Christie the post of Under-Secretary of State for External Affairs, to which O. D. Skelton was subsequently appointed; and Christie himself set down that King counselled him against precipitate resignation. But it is well established that at this time Christie felt the utmost hatred and contempt for King, and he clearly had no intention of going on working for him. In England he went into business in the City and became a member of the editorial board of the *Round Table*, to which he himself contributed. As late as December 1924 he was writing to Arthur Meighen that he could not see how Canada's individuality could be "preserved in any shape at all except through the British Empire."³ The following year, however, something happened that permanently altered his whole thinking on the future of the Canadian nation and its relation to the Commonwealth. It may seem a little strange today, but the immediate trigger of the change was the procedure followed in negotiating the Locarno Treaties. The British Government kept the Dominions informed of progress, but it did not invite them to be represented at Locarno, and the Treaty of Mutual Guarantee that was signed there contained a provision that they would not be bound by the document unless they specifically adhered to it. This procedure was quite in accordance with the King-Skelton theories, and Canada made no official objection to it; but to Christie it represented a repudiation by the British Government of the "project of co-operative unified diplomacy"⁴ advanced, under the influence of men like Borden and Smuts, in 1917-21. It is likely, I think, that Locarno was as much the occasion as the cause of Christie's change of heart and mind. There are indications in his correspondence that he had become disillusioned with British attitudes on Commonwealth and international affairs. Perhaps the moral of the affair is that overseas people devoted to the Commonwealth idea should not go to live in England. At any rate, the change is not in doubt. Christie developed his new views in a series of letters and papers, and in the process resigned

³ Christie to Meighen, 18 December 1924, Meighen Papers, Series III, Public Archives of Canada. I owe this reference to Mr. R. S. Bothwell. Christie's feelings towards King are made very clear in a letter to Borden, 15 March 1926, Borden Papers, vol. 264, folios 148306-7. Elsewhere (*ibid.*, folio 148398) he reports with obvious glee another man's remark about King: "*He is such a pompous ass that an orang-outang that would flatter him could choose its own reward.*"

⁴ Christie to Philip Kerr, 15 March 1926, Borden Papers, vol. 264, folios 148293-305.

from the *Round Table*.⁵ By mid-1926 he had a programme of his own for Canada. The first item in it was "Canada a sovereign state." Though he did not develop this, the implication seems to be that there would be some kind of formal act of separation. The next step would be to develop a treaty relationship with Britain, in which it appears the vital point would be protection of the right of free decision on questions of peace and war; this matter haunted Christie, as it haunted many other people, from this time forward. Christie thought that on this basis it might be possible to form some kind of Britannic League. His other points were continued membership in the League of Nations, unless it became too preoccupied with Europe; an application to join the Pan-American Union; and "A special treaty with the United States providing for consultation on North American affairs."⁶

By 1927, Loring Christie was back in Canada. After a period in private employment he returned to the Department of External Affairs in 1935; and until the outbreak of war he functioned as the loyal and active supporter of King and Skelton, who had consciously and systematically destroyed the edifice of Commonwealth diplomatic solidarity which Christie had helped Borden and others to raise. He took a particular interest in frustrating the efforts of the people in the Department of National Defence who were trying to make some preparation for the war which was fast approaching. General Crerar said of Christie in 1936, "He is, I consider, a 'Super-isolationist', and I am not at all happy about the effect his advice may have on his Department."⁷

On the eve of war Christie was still struggling with the problems of Canadian nationality as he had been in 1926. The Balfour Declaration and the Statute of Westminster had meant nothing to him; his reaction to the former had been that an imperial conference had improperly taken it on itself to amend the constitution of Canada.⁸ In 1938 he wrote, "Canada remains a dependency and not a fully responsible community." His fundamental concern was apparently the fact that Canada might be committed to war by decisions taken elsewhere. Still pursuing true

⁵ *Ibid.* This volume of the Borden Papers contains a number of letters by Christie bearing on this question. See particularly Christie to Borden, 25 February 1926, folios 148278-83. Carroll Quigley, "The Round Table Groups in Canada," *Canadian Historical Review*, September 1962, does not refer to Christie's resignation and gives the impression that he remained a member of the Round Table movement until much later.

⁶ "Responsible Government in Canada. The Last Stage" (draft, 15 June 1926), Christie Papers, Department of External Affairs, Ottawa.

⁷ Col. H. D. G. Crerar to Lt.-Col. M. A. Pope, 11 April 1936, Directorate of History, Department of National Defence. The nature of Christie's influence will be documented to some extent in my forthcoming official volume on Canadian military policies, 1939-45. In the air training discussions of 1938, for instance, we find Christie writing a paper for Skelton, Skelton passing it to King, and phrases from it turning up in a speech by King in the House of Commons.

⁸ "Notes on the Imperial Conference, 1926," Christie Papers, Department of External Affairs.

sovereign status for his country, he remarked that attaining it is "not a thing that has been or can be done by ordinary political processes."⁹ Twelve years before he had written to Borden, "we must face it that we are a special case and go ahead alone to whatever limit is necessary to our future."¹⁰ I think it is evident that what Christie was searching for was political finality, and that — although he never stated it in these terms — his essential conclusion was that it could be found only where the Americans had found it far back in 1776: in a declaration of independence. And it is worth mentioning that the last sentence of the letter just quoted reads, "One clings to old symbols, but more and more I become conscious that I am also a Canadian rooted in the soil of North America."

IV

Loring Christie was certainly not a representative Canadian — there were not very many of those in the pre-war Department of External Affairs — and it would probably be fair to say that he was unstable as well as brilliant; but his rather remarkable voyage of opinion throws some light on our problem. That such a man holding such positions could pass through such an odyssey surely reflects the fact that in his day the country to which he felt so deep a devotion was very immature politically and very insecure psychologically.

On the question of peace and war he was of course right in feeling that the essential decision would be made outside of Canada. Mackenzie King, for all his talk about Parliament deciding, had always known what would have to be done, though he never admitted it publicly. He told the Imperial Conference of 1923, *à propos* of American influence on Canada, that that influence would have to be taken into account in "lesser issues"; but "If a great and clear call of duty comes, Canada will respond, whether or not the United States responds, as she did in 1914."¹¹ It was sixteen years before the clear call came; but King's diary indicates that when the Canadian Cabinet faced the question on 24 August 1939 there was really no difference of opinion as to the essential decision. The real question was timing — how and when the government's attitude was to be made known. Nevertheless, the simple statement that Canada automatically followed Britain needs some qualification. Evidence for this is found in the fact that King was of the opinion that if a decision for war had had to be made at the time of

⁹ "The Canadian Dilemma" (private), December 1938, *ibid.*

¹⁰ Christie to Borden, 25 February 1926, above, note 5. At this point Christie was writing with particular reference to the differences between Canada's position and the other Dominions'.

¹¹ "Imperial Conference, 1923. Stenographic Notes of the Fourth Meeting... October 8, 1923..." King Papers, vol. 82, folios C62628-29, Public Archives of Canada.

Munich, there would have been resignations from his Cabinet.¹² Events during the intervening months solidified public and political opinion and put powerful contemporary logic behind a decision that almost everyone knew had to be made for other reasons.

It is clear now that Christie's struggle to find some institutional solution for the Canadian dilemma — he often speaks of a constitutional convention or conference to make fundamental decisions — was and is irrelevant to the facts of the modern world. It is true that Canada followed Britain into the war in 1939; but it is arguable that the United Kingdom itself was not altogether a free agent, but was driven by forces which it could not control. As for the situation today, it is evident that whereas before 1939 the decisions that would dictate Canadian action in a world crisis were made in Downing Street, now they are made in the White House — or possibly the Pentagon. Great Britain has lost the control of her own destiny which she once possessed. Canada has lost it without ever really having had it. We never got that treaty with the United States that Christie wanted; all we have had is a press release written by Franklin D. Roosevelt at Ogdensburg. But even if we had had the treaty, or even if we had not had the press release, it would have made very little difference. We are in the grip of world events, and in a major crisis we would have to go all the way with L. B. J. — that deathless phrase from the Antipodes — or with any other person whom the Americans may select to lead them, be he genius or be he oaf.

All this might lead one to conclude that in Canada today nationalism and nationality are obsolete: that they are luxuries which none but the super-powers can afford. But I would not myself go quite so far. We can have independence, within limits. We have contrived, with the help of fortuitous circumstances, to avoid marching any Canadians into that bottomless pit in Vietnam. When the Queen comes to Canada this summer, Mr. Pearson may if he chooses report to her in words like those of Walpole: "Madam, there are fifty thousand men slain this year in South-East Asia, and not one Canadian." That is something. And if the Americans get really mad at us about this, it will help us with our problems of internal unity. They have kindly done this sort of thing for us before. (What a pity the Fenian Brotherhood was allowed to die out!)

The fact is, we are probably no worse off than we were, say, forty years ago — except in so far as all mankind is worse off, thanks to the beneficent activities of the scientists. Provided nobody starts a nuclear war and blows up the world, we may be able to survive, and even to assert ourselves if we set bounds to our aspirations.

¹² He told me this in 1946; but he also recorded it in his diary in September 1939.

It would not be hard to prove that a characteristic national manifestation among English-speaking Canadians in this century has been a desire to see their country play an active part on the international stage. An early example was our small participation in the South African War — which I am sure was a function of Canadian nationalism rather than a reversion to colonial dependence. The most recent is the popularity of what is known as Peacekeeping. As a community, we have I think a strong anxiety to be important. We measure ourselves against the two great English-speaking powers, Great Britain and the United States; in our own minds we compete with them; and when, inevitably, we fall short, we feel frustrated. The most characteristic expression of our aspirations was voiced, curiously enough, in its most famous form by a French-Canadian Prime Minister: "The nineteenth century was the century of the United States, the twentieth century will be the century of Canada." But in due course it became evident that the twentieth century was to be the century of the United States far more than the nineteenth had ever been; and every good Canadian has felt cheated ever since.

Mackenzie King — who seems to me, I am sorry to say, the most Canadian of our Prime Ministers — was never more Canadian than when, in 1939, he sat listening to a broadcast by the First Lord of the Admiralty and wishing that he could speak like that. And it was characteristic of Canadians that they, and particularly the Canadian forces, unconsciously compared King with Churchill and Roosevelt to King's great disadvantage, and felt a certain contempt for him accordingly; yet they went on voting for him, because Churchill and Roosevelt were not running for office in Canada, and, after all, who else was there?

The Canadian frustrations of our time, so far as they relate to Canada's position in the world — and most of them do — boil down to a simple question of power. Twenty million Canadians are simply not a community large enough to support the aspirations we have often nursed. Perhaps, for the sake of our own mental health, we should abandon our habit of trying to make like Great Britain or the United States, or both at once, and admit that after all we are relatively small fry. We should stop complaining that there is no Canadian news in the New York and London papers except on the rare occasions when our international, political and sexual activities all happen to get mixed up together in public. We should give up the idea that we can influence the imperial policies of a nation a dozen times as big as we are by marching on the United States Consulate in Toronto, or by "bombarding" Canadian M.Ps. with indignant letters. In short, we should act our age and our size. We should cultivate our gardens, in which there are a few weeds.

It will be observed that I am myself indulging in a typically Canadian occupation — namely, handing out free advice. But I have no expectation whatever that anyone will take it.