

Statues in Time: Canadian Days and Holidays

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Statues in Time: Canadian Days and Holidays

CITIZENS AND GOVERNMENTS USE ANNIVERSARIES AND HOLIDAYS to confirm a connection to a past and to gaze towards a future. These special days embody values that serve as lessons and guides, but they may also serve goals unintended by the promoters and sponsors. In a self-referential twist, *Celebrating Canada*, Raymond B. Blake's and Matthew Hayday's two-volume collection of essays examining the history of remembering in Canada, represents a project linked to the 150th anniversary of Canadian Confederation: these books about commemoration are themselves a product of the commemoration process.¹ Aiming at a publication to coincide with the 150th anniversary of the country's current constitutional framework, the authors presented their papers at an initial workshop at the Canadian Museum of History in Gatineau in 2014.

Holidays and commemorative events, as these volumes illustrate, have often produced a lot of fodder for analysis, but it is hard to predict how much tangible evidence the sesquicentennial will leave behind. For those of us in Ontario, one of the most newsworthy features connected to the anniversary was the tour of a huge, plastic yellow duck to various towns around the Great Lakes. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's statement on the anniversary was a balanced and limited endorsement of the state of the nation, including his reflections on the relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples: "As we mark Canada 150, we also recognize that for many, today is not an occasion for celebration. Indigenous Peoples in this country have faced oppression for centuries."² In 1967, many Canadians chose to celebrate different avenues into what they termed "modernity," but 2017 was a low-key affair. It is worth noting

1 Matthew Hayday and Raymond B. Blake, *Celebrating Canada, Volume 1: Holidays, National Days, and the Crafting of Identities* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016); Raymond B. Blake and Matthew Hayday, eds., *Celebrating Canada, Volume 2: Commemorations, Anniversaries, and National Symbols* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018). I would like to thank the journal's anonymous reviewers for their improvements to this review essay.

2 "Statement by the Prime Minister on Canada Day," 1 July 2017, <https://pm.gc.ca/eng/news/2017/07/01/statement-prime-minister-canada-day>.

that Prime Minister Lester B. Pearson's Dominion Day address on 1 July 1967 also struck a cautionary note: "As the world, to survive the nuclear future, must become a community of peace for all mankind, so must our country be a true homeland for all Canadians as it moves into its second century."³

In 1967 Centennial building projects changed the face of urban Canada, but there will be few lasting legacies of Canada 150. Perhaps a 150th anniversary does not have the same cachet as a centenary or the fairly recent change in the federal government may have made it difficult to plan events (although Robert Cupido notes that the committee to celebrate the 60th anniversary was only incorporated in February of the same year).⁴ Clearly, the community enthusiasm that sparked so much of the energy of the 1967 Centennial was not as apparent in 2017. Whether this reflects apathy or honesty about the project of "Canada" is a subject worthy of debate.

Nonetheless, in scholarly work, a certain number of projects, like this one, will leave their mark. Universities disbursed federal funds that galvanized some collective works, and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council targeted scholarly conferences linked to the anniversary.⁵ It is true that for historians there was nothing on the academic scale of the Canadian Centenary Series, which began with Tryggvi J. Oleson's 1963 study of the early European exploration of what later became Canada and which ultimately came to completion with Morris Zaslow's *The Northward Expansion of Canada, 1914-1967* in 1988.⁶ Perhaps historians today wisely anticipate the long timeframe involved in such projects. Equally likely, historians may shy away from synthesis and globalizing statements about nation even when divided into the regions and discrete time periods reflected in the Canadian Centenary Series.

3 "Ours is a good land, resolve to better it," *Globe and Mail*, 1 July 1967.

4 Robert Cupido, "Competing Pasts, Multiple Identities: The Diamond Jubilee of Confederation and the Politics of Commemoration," II:99.

5 Among other book-length projects that addressed the 150th anniversary of Confederation are the following: Jacqueline Krikorian, Marcel Martel, and Adrian Schubert, eds., *Globalizing Confederation: Canada and the World in 1867* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017); Michael Dawson, Catherine Gidney, and Donald Wright, eds., *Symbols of Canada* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2018); Jacqueline D. Krikorian, David R. Cameron, Marcel Martel, Andrew W. McDougall, and Robert C. Vipond, eds., *Roads to Confederation: The Making of Canada, 1867*, Volume 1 and Volume 2 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017); and Daniel Heidt, ed., *Reconsidering Confederation: Canada's Founding Debates, 1867-1999* (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2018). The last two titles are also published in French.

6 Tryggvi J. Oleson, *Early Voyages and Northern Approaches* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1963); Morris Zaslow, *The Northward Expansion of Canada, 1914-1967* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1988).

Blake and Hayday's two-volume collection of essays reinforces the difficulties of seeing a unified approach to the project of "Canada."

Moreover, we live in a time when we, appropriately, apply critical analysis to the commemorative process and therefore we academics may hesitate to engage in it ourselves too deeply; in contrast, historians like George Wrong and A.G. Doughty were fully involved in the 1927 Diamond Jubilee planning. Today we may recognize more clearly how contingent and arbitrary the designation of specific dates for the purposes of rekindling and enshrining historical memory may be, and we may feel uncomfortable with the messages that these events are intended to convey. In any case, as the essays in this rich collection demonstrate fully, individuals and groups have always brought many different interpretations to bear upon their understanding of the memory process. As the editors state: "The commemoration and memory of past events are complex, messy, multilayered, and elusive, and they tend to evolve over the years."⁷ The same conclusion applies to national holidays. Cupido worded this point slightly differently in relation to the 60th anniversary of Confederation: "The commemorative rites of the Diamond Jubilee remained stubbornly multivocal."⁸

These essays show that national days and anniversaries are like statues, but these commemorations exist in time and not in materiality. People use commemorations for similar reasons as when they erect monuments, and the special days create analogous, though metaphorical, types of public space that different groups and individuals may deploy in varying ways. Some of the national days (Thanksgiving from the 1870s in Ontario, Victoria Day from 1901, Empire Day from 1898, Armistice-Remembrance Day after 1919) were established in the heyday of commemorative statues.⁹ Chris Tait quotes a senator from British Columbia supporting Victoria Day in order to create a tribute "as lasting as bronze or marble."¹⁰ The processes of establishing holidays

7 Raymond B. Blake and Matthew Hayday, "Introduction. Celebrating Canada: Commemorations, Anniversaries, and National Symbols," II:4.

8 Cupido, "Competing Pasts, Multiple Identities," II:134.

9 Among some of the many works that focus on the history of statues in Canada are the following: Alan Gordon, *Making Public Pasts: The Contested Terrain of Montreal's Public Memories, 1891-1930* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2001); Colin M. Coates and Cecilia Morgan, *Heroines and History: Representations of Madeleine de Verchères and Laura Secord* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002); Ronald Rudin, *Founding Fathers: The Celebration of Champlain and Laval in the Streets of Quebec, 1878-1908* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009); and Cecilia Morgan, *Commemorating Canada: History, Heritage, and Memory, 1850s-1990s* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016).

10 Chris Tait, "The Politics of Holiday Making: Legislating Victoria Day as a Perpetual Holiday in Canada, 1897-1901," I:86.

and erecting statues usually stem from the same concerns, and they often attempt to fix the same perceived problems related to the dangers of losing a connection to an idealized past. When groups make the considerable effort to erect a statue, they invest a good deal of time and money in the endeavour. They claim that their work will etch in stone or cast in metal the accepted meaning of the historic figure, rendering complete and unalterable that individual's life and significance. They do this in vain, of course, as they cannot control how the passage of time will affect interpretations, nor even how people will use the public space created by a statue. And when changes occurred, they could be painful for some people. As Stuart Ward writes in relation to the efforts in the 1960s to change some of the symbols from the past, such as the name "Dominion Day" and the Canadian Red Ensign: "The spectre haunting all of these reactions was erasure – a foreboding sense that the people were being corralled into a debilitating collective amnesia."¹¹ The proponents of the commemoration and national days likewise feared erasure. Establishing new national holidays, commemorating key moments of the past, and creating new symbols attempted to address such concerns. Despite anxiety about change, new cultural forms create novel opportunities for people to insert themselves into the public space – something that often becomes different than what the proponents intended. National holidays and anniversaries, therefore, are types of public space created in time and are subject to changing interpretations.

Like statues, many of these acts of commemoration and memorialization depended on the work of small numbers of individuals. Clementina Fessenden Trenholme played a key role in popularizing "Empire Day," and she enlisted Ontario's Minister of Education George W. Ross in the effort.¹² Nina Cohen galvanized her local community and her Liberal Party connections to find funding for the Cape Breton Miners' Museum.¹³ Frank MacKinnon shows up in two chapters: as author of the address that Boy Scouts read at the graves of the Fathers of Confederation across the country on 1 July 1967 and as a key supporter for the building of a cultural centre in Prince Edward Island.¹⁴ In

11 Stuart Ward, "The Redundant 'Dominion': Refitting the National Fabric at Empire's End," 1:336.

12 Brittney Anne Bos and Allison Marie Ward, "Love the Empire, Love Yourself? Empire Day, Immigration, and the Role of Britishness in Anglo-Canadian Identity, 1920-1955," 1:149-70.

13 Meaghan Elizabeth Beaton, "A 'Labor of Love in a Community Spirit': The Cape Breton Miners' Museum and the Remaking of Historical Consciousness," 11:207-36.

14 James Trepanier, "'Fit for Citizenship': Scouting the Centennial Celebrations of 1967," 11:290-312; Matthew McRae, "New Nationalism in the Cradle of Confederation: Prince Edward Island's Centennial Decade," 11:339-75.

other cases, the public's engagement with or dismissal of anniversaries diverted attention away from the official plans.

The first volume of this collection of essays approaches the limited number of provincial and national civic holidays, including some non-statutory days of remembrance, from a range of perspectives. Rather than letting one single chapter define for the reader how the meaning of specific national days evolved, the volume shows that Dominion Day and Empire Day looked different in Québec than in Hamilton, Ontario, or British Columbia. By the 1920s, the *Fête de Dollard* had supplanted any earlier French Canadian interest in Empire Day.¹⁵ Two chapters look at experiences beyond Canada, such as the muted, fairly uncomprehending acknowledgement of Dominion Day in the United Kingdom, and the national holidays in Australia, New Zealand, and Rhodesia that paralleled Dominion Day in Canada.¹⁶

The second volume focuses largely on anniversaries, such as the Loyalist Centennial celebrations and the *Conventions nationales acadiennes*, which operated in parallel but separate ways in New Brunswick in the 1880s. Their main overlap involved similar narratives of displacement and exile – although that shared sentiment of loss did not lead to an awareness of the commonality of their experiences.¹⁷ Most of the essays in the second volume concentrate on commemorations of the anniversary of Confederation, with two essays on 1927 and seven contributions on projects that drew inspiration and funding from the spirit of the 1967 Centennial.

The title of this two-volume collection is “Celebrating Canada.” A well-chosen gerund, “celebrating” connotes the practice of “honouring with ceremonies.” In more contemporary usage, it tends to imply a positive feeling, a rejoicing; but in older usage, it referred less emotively to the act of public performance. This older usage probably better reflects the range of contributions in this collection. Not all members of the polity joined enthusiastically in the praise of their country or region or ethnic group on specific dates through the year or on particular anniversaries. Instead, for some who felt excluded from the festivity, they could openly contest the meaning

15 Joel Belliveau and Marcel Martel, “‘One Flag, One Throne, One Empire?’ Espousing and Replacing Empire Day in French Canada, 1899-1952,” I:125-48.

16 Mike Benbough-Jackson, “Dominion Day in Britain, 1900-1917,” I:220-43; Ward, “Redundant ‘Dominion,’” I:335-55.

17 Denis Bourque, Bonnie Huskins, Greg Marquis, and Chantal Richard, “National Symbols and Commemorations: Analyzing the Loyalist Centennial and the *Conventions nationales acadiennes* in New Brunswick in the 1880s,” II:26-51.

or develop a rival ceremony. Of course, those who did not choose to engage at all with the intended purpose of the moment may have quietly stayed at home, headed to a cottage, or simply slept in late; this passive approach to the performance of nationhood largely escapes scholarly analysis. What does produce sources are the originators, proponents, and protestors of the events, and the essays in this collection are clearest on those who organized for and against the celebrations.

Not surprisingly, Benedict Anderson's "imagined communities" and Eric Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger's "invention of tradition" loom large throughout the volume.¹⁸ Anderson famously discussed the development of what he called "creole nationalism" in European overseas colonies. Most of the scholars here are not looking at the development of a Canadian creole nationalism (or multiple forms of it) in opposition to the mother country, but rather the abstract idea that Canadians living in Revelstoke, British Columbia, and Windsor, Nova Scotia, and Drummondville, Québec may potentially share some commonalities – if only because they have the same day off work and at some points they might even watch the same nationally televised celebration.

Despite the best efforts of some of the proponents of these national days and commemorations, a united sovereign and national vision does not emerge from these notable days. Instead, one of the themes that emerges from many of the essays is the emphasis on subnational and sub-state identities. For many decades, Canadians celebrated the fact that the country had *not* achieved full independence from the United Kingdom. Victoria Day, and even more, Empire Day, a Canadian idea that spread to other settler dominions, showed a reverence for the connection to a distant mother country. Even French Canadians initially expressed some limited acceptance of the concept of Empire Day, but Anglophone hostility to French-language education rights and the Conscription Crisis in the First World War soon changed that. Acadians, with their national holiday on 15 August and, in the late 20th century, Québécois, with the Fête nationale (replacing Saint-Jean-Baptiste Day), celebrated their own sub-state identities.¹⁹ Earlier, in 19th-century Montreal, the complex mix of French Catholics, Irish Catholics, Scots, English, and Germans had all taken to

18 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 2nd ed. (London: Verso, 1991); Eric Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983).

19 Marc-André Gagnon, "'Adieu le mouton, salut les Québécois!' The Lévesque Government and Saint-Jean-Baptiste Day / Fête Nationale Celebrations, 1976-1984," 1:356-79; Michael Poplyansky, "The Rootedness of Acadian Neo-nationalism: The Changing Meaning of le 15 août, 1968-1982," 1:380-404.

the streets in what were usually well-managed parades celebrating their ethnic ties.²⁰

Overall, the essays point to the instability of the concept of Canada. Was it a key member of the British Empire and, later, the Commonwealth? The changing social contexts that accompanied urbanization and large-scale immigration in the late 19th and early 20th century are reflected in the first volume. Many of the national days were, in different ways, celebrations of Britishness, developed during a time of massive non-British immigration. The national days were, therefore, pedagogy in what it meant to be a British Canadian. As the 20th century progressed, there was a stronger desire to see Canada as a unified independent nation – sometimes even recognizing that two principal linguistic groups inhabited it. And increasingly through the 20th century, efforts emphasized Canada's distinctiveness from the United States. The concept of Canada, nonetheless, functioned as an operationalizing definition that allowed municipalities to take advantage of new funding opportunities to build a local museum or library or redesign a town square, or groups like the Boy Scouts to attempt to address the decline in participation among older boys.²¹ In this pragmatic significance of nation, Canada is likely not much different from other countries.

In this collection, Canadian history begins around the 1840s – as is true of much of current historiography, that often chooses not to reach back into the more distant past – and its development ramps up after Confederation in 1867. However, annual commemorations occurred before the 1840s. In an article that appeared after the first of these volumes was published, Joseph Hardwick takes the analysis of Thanksgiving ceremonies back to the late 18th century.²² Analogous annual commemorations occurred even before the period Hardwick discusses. The establishment of annual *Te Deum* masses in Québec City in 1712 to commemorate the defeats of Sir William Phipps in 1690 and Sir Hovenden Walker in 1711 were comparable expressions of the “national” days covered in these volumes. The record of shifting the date of the *Te Deum* mass in 1724 to coincide with the Feast of the Immaculate Conception on 8 December in order to avoid the busy time before the annual departure of ships to France, and the

20 Gillian I. Leitch, "Claiming the Streets: Negotiating National Identities in Montreal's Parades, 1840-1880," 1:29-53.

21 Christopher Los, "Federal Funding, Local Priorities: Urban Planning and Ontario's Municipal Centennial Projects," II:237-58; Trepanier, "Fit for Citizenship."

22 Joseph Hardwick, "Fasts, Thanksgivings, and Senses of Community in Nineteenth-Century Canada and the British Empire," *Canadian Historical Review* 98, no. 4 (December 2017): 675-703.

subsequent move back to late October in 1728, reflects the malleability we see with such national days as Thanksgiving and Remembrance Day.²³

Even more striking for a collection that otherwise cast its net widely is the absence of analysis of Indigenous celebrations. Many of the contributions are sensitive to the general exclusion of Indigenous peoples from the national narratives portrayed in the special days, as well as the ways that Indigenous groups sometimes used public performances to assert their cultural identities. In her otherwise celebratory account of the great successes of the 1967 Centennial, Helen Davies is careful to point out the counter-narratives that Indigenous people developed in that key year.²⁴ In a number of other celebrations, state and civic actors attempted to integrate Indigenous representations into the events. But it would have been interesting to see analyses of annual Treaty Day ceremonies that function in a similar way to some of these other events.

As Michel-Rolph Trouillot argues in his discussion of the new national commemorations in the late 19th century, such as Bastille Day in France, the events “taught the new masses who they were, in part by telling them who they were not.”²⁵ Implicitly, the national celebrations told (most) Canadians that they were not Indigenous, that if they were not of British descent they should act as if they were, and, increasingly through the 20th century, that they were not American.

But were those messages enough to ascribe scholarly meaning to holidays and celebrations? Clifford Geertz’s classic article “Deep Play: Notes on a Balinese Cockfight” might have provided some insights into the stories that the participants were telling themselves, if the authors had been able to attempt some participant observation.²⁶ Ward, who noticed the plethora of national flags festooning Ottawa on his first visit to the city, refers to his own experiences of Canada Day celebrations. For historians, such a methodology cannot apply for the distant commemorations, of course, but expanding the sources consulted could potentially provide some other clues. What about the outsiders on the edge of the crowd, for instance, the marginalized whose

23 Délibération du Conseil, 17 octobre 1712, TP1, S28, P9214; 14 octobre 1724, TP1, S28, P16091; 17 septembre 1728, TP1, S28, P16714, Bibliothèque et Archives nationales du Québec, Montréal.

24 Helen Davies, “Canada’s Centennial Experience,” II:174-206.

25 Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 124.

26 Clifford Geertz, “Deep Play: Notes on a Balinese Cockfight,” in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 412-53. Cupido refers to Geertz in his essay.

views do not tend to be reflected in the planning and interpretations of specific events?

One particularly fascinating example from this collection is Lianbi Zhu's and Timothy Baycroft's chapter on "Chinese Humiliation Day," an event that developed in response to Dominion Day. To protest their exclusion from the polity and the country's racist exclusionary policies, Chinese Canadians held their own ceremonies to encourage solidarity. In the Vancouver case, this effort involved some enforcement from officials of the Chinese-Canadian community to ensure that everyone participated in the Exclusion Day events and thus acknowledged the denial of their political rights. Nonetheless, it seems some Chinese Canadians participated in both the Humiliation Day and the Dominion Day events.²⁷ This collection makes it clear that many groups adapted the festivities to fit their own priorities.

Like any historical analysis, the essays reflect the advantages and limitations of their sources. How can we discover the meaning of the special days? It is fairly straightforward to see what the proposers intended, as they needed to explain their goals in order to convince others to participate and mobilize the funds and labour necessary to arrange the events. It is much more difficult to understand how people lived and interpreted the special days. Many of these analyses rely on newspaper accounts, delving deeply into local newspapers in their attempt to find out what was happening on the ground. There are still limitations in such accounts, of course, but the perspective is fairly close to the action. Forrest D. Pass even located the subscription book that detailed how much money individuals contributed to the rival Dominion Day and 4th of July celebrations in the Cariboo region in British Columbia around 1880, most individuals contributing more to the 1st of July festivities than the Independence Day ones.²⁸ However, none of the essays employed police or court records to discover how those who contravened the stated goals of the celebrations may have accounted for their actions, perhaps through drunken brawling or other criminalized actions. Granted, this would be laborious and difficult analysis, but it might have done more to capture those on the periphery of the celebrations.

27 Lianbi Zhu and Timothy Baycroft, "A Chinese Counterpart to Dominion Day: Chinese Humiliation Day in Interwar Canada, 1924-1930," 1:244-73.

28 Forrest D. Pass, "Dominion Day and the Rites of Regionalism in British Columbia, 1867-1937," 1:191-219.

While many chapters highlight opposition to the central messages of the holidays or anniversaries, some of the essays suggest that the events fulfilled their broader purpose. Robert J. Talbot contends, for instance, that the emphasis on bilingualism for the Diamond Jubilee in 1927 attempted to banish bad memories of the deep divides of the previous decade when the country was embroiled in fights over conscription and Regulation 17 in Ontario (which limited access to French-language schooling in Ontario). A small, but significant, gesture of a special issue of bilingual stamps for the occasion heralded a new policy thereafter, and Ontario would repeal Regulation 17 in 1927; bilingual paper money would follow within a decade.²⁹ But other celebrations failed to capture the imagination of Canadians: the hundredth anniversary of peace with the United States did not muster much support in the months leading up to the outbreak of the Great War, and the Flag Day that Jean Chrétien's Liberal government attempted to promote in the aftermath of the second Québec referendum has not acquired much of a following.³⁰ Empire Day eventually faded away.

This collection of 28 research essays and four overview chapters provides a fittingly ironic reflection on the process of commemoration and public memory; at the same time, these books form part of the same process. When we look back on the 150th anniversary of Canadian Confederation, these published scholarly accounts may count among its key legacies. There certainly were not many new museums, town squares, or spruced up graves of the Fathers of Confederation to point to in 2017, and nothing nearing the scale of Expo 67. Rather, this collection of essays may lead us to a conclusion along the lines of one of Canada's most widely shared narrative threads today as reflected in Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's Canada Day message from 2017: "As has been the case for centuries, we are strong not in spite of our differences, but because of them."³¹

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29 Robert J. Talbot, "Bilingualism and Biculturalism at the Diamond Jubilee of Confederation, 1927," II:145-73.

30 Brandon Dimmel, "Children of a Common Mother: The Rise and Fall of the Anglo-American Peace Centenary," II:71-96; Richard Nimijean and L. Pauline Rankin, "Marketing the Maple Leaf: The Curious Case of National Flag of Canada Day," I:405-36.

31 "Statement by the Prime Minister on Canada Day," 1 July 2017.

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