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Abstract

The image of the American Thanksgiving is so vivid that it has virtually blocked out any awareness of other thanksgiving traditions in the English-speaking world – in particular, thanksgiving as an official public holiday proclaimed to celebrate an event of particular importance to the state. This article looks at one such thanksgiving, celebrated in Canada in 1927 to mark the sixtieth anniversary of Confederation, and examines what it reveals about the country at that point in its history.

Résumé

L'image de l'Action de Grâce américaine est si vivante que la conscience de toute autre tradition d'Action de Grâce dans le monde anglophone est pratiquement éclipsée – en particulier l'idée de l'Action de Grâce en tant que jour férié officiel proclamé pour célébrer un événement de grande importance pour l'État. Dans cet article, nous nous penchons sur une telle Action de Grâce, célébrée au Canada en 1927 pour commémorer le soixantième anniversaire de la Confédération, et nous étudions ce qu'elle dévoile sur le pays en ce moment particulier de son histoire.

Though Thanksgiving is a national holiday in Canada, a search in the catalogue of Library and Archives Canada in Ottawa for works dealing with the subject turns up very little about Thanksgiving as we know it. The almost total absence of titles dealing with the familiar autumn festival is perhaps not surprising – after all, the Canadian Thanksgiving lacks the mythic dimensions of its American counterpart, and is peripheral rather than central to the Canadian imagination. What may come as a surprise, however, is the large number of titles running along the lines of the following examples. *A form of prayer and thanksgiving to Almighty God: to be used [...] on Thursday the twenty ninth day of November next, being the day appointed by proclamation for a general thanksgiving to God: for vouch safing such signal successes to His Majesty's arms, both by sea and land, particularly by the defeat of the French army in Canada, and the taking of Quebec ... A form of prayer and thanksgiving to Almighty God to be used on Tuesday 21 May 1816, being the day appointed by proclamation for a general thanksgiving to Almighty God for his greatness in putting an end to the war in which we were engaged against France ... A sermon, preached on Wednesday, February 6, 1833, being the day appointed by proclamation for a general thanksgiving to Almighty God for having removed the heavy judgement of the pestilence ... A form of prayer and thanksgiving to be used on Monday 26th February 1838 – being the day appointed by proclamation, for a general thanksgiving to Almighty God, for the signal instance of protection and deliverance experienced in the rebellion which*

has been raised in this province, and the success of His Majesty's Arms within the same, and for the exemption with which we have been since blessed from violence and bloodshed ... A day of general thanksgiving to Almighty God for deliverance from the ravages of the cholera ... A form of thanksgiving and prayer to Almighty God, upon the completion of 50 years of Her Majesty's reign ... Thanksgiving Service in Celebration of the First Anniversary of Social Credit Victory.

The “thanksgivings” in these book titles are all examples of one of the many thanksgivings that have existed side by side over the centuries – in this case, thanksgiving as an official public holiday proclaimed to celebrate a particular event deemed important to the state. This form of thanksgiving has an ancient tradition in Britain, and indeed still exists there, along with its public manifestations, the most recent examples being the service of thanksgiving for Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Mother, held in St Paul’s Cathedral in 2000 to celebrate her one hundredth birthday, and the similar occasion in the same cathedral two years later marking the fiftieth anniversary of the reign of Elizabeth II. As part of its British heritage, the United States, too, once knew this kind of thanksgiving, and the first national thanksgiving, proclaimed by Washington in 1789, was strictly in this tradition of thanksgiving as a manifestation of state policy. But for various reasons – in particular a sense that this type of celebration was a European and not an American custom as well as scruples relating to the separation of church and state – this specific kind of thanksgiving soon disappeared in the United States: the last national proclamation of this sort came in 1815, when James Madison declared a thanksgiving to mark the end of the war with Britain.

In Canada, however, it was quite natural for the British tradition to linger much longer. Beginning in 1799, no fewer than twenty-one thanksgivings were proclaimed in what is now Ontario and Quebec before the creation of Canada in 1867 (Canadian Heritage thanksgiving site). Over half of them marked public events, whether “signal victory over our enemy” (1799 – Napoleon, at the battle of Aboukir), “the end of sanguinary contest in Europe” (1814 – Napoleon again), “the end of war between Great Britain and France” (1816 – yet again Napoleon, post-Waterloo and this time for good), the end of the quarantine of ships at Grosse Isle for cholera (1834), “the termination of the Rebellion” (1838), “the restoration of peace with Russia” (1856 – at the end of the Crimean War), or “the continuation of Peace” (1862, at the height of the Civil War raging next door). And when the first national thanksgiving of the new Dominion of Canada was proclaimed in 1872, it celebrated the “restoration to health of His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales”.

This tradition did not come to an end in the nineteenth century, nor was it confined to the national level. In various forms and in various places it continued well into the twentieth. The last national thanksgiving to honour a monarch came in 1902, marking the coronation of Edward VII. But other thanksgivings continued to be proclaimed. In 1934, for example, there was a Service of Thanksgiving and Prayer on the occasion of the one hundredth anniversary of the incorporation of the city of Toronto, the purpose being “to give public thanks to Almighty God for His blessing bestowed upon our City during the hundred years of its history, to beseech his pardon for our sins and shortcomings, to implore His

guidance for the future” (n.p.). Organized by the Religious Services Committee of the Toronto Centennial, a group that included representatives of the Anglican, Roman Catholic, Baptist and Presbyterian Churches, the United Church of Canada, the Salvation Army and the Jewish community, this impressive ecumenical event featured a massed choir of 2500 members singing pieces by, among others, Wagner, Mendelssohn and Handel (the inevitable Hallelujah Chorus from *The Messiah*). Subsequently, other significant occasions elsewhere were also celebrated with thanksgiving services, though it would seem that this tradition has in all likelihood run its course. The last examples of this type of thanksgiving appear to be the Day of Thanksgiving and Prayer in 1966 marking the centennial of the province of British Columbia, and the almost identical event five years later in commemoration of the centennial of the province’s becoming part of the Dominion of Canada. An age of declining belief perhaps sees no need for such celebrations, and the increasingly multicultural reality of the country would demand a multi-faith event of considerable complexity and inventiveness.

One of the greatest of such public thanksgivings was the National Thanksgiving by the People of Canada, celebrated on July 3, 1927. This event formed part of the celebration of the Diamond Jubilee of Confederation, an occasion that for various reasons Canadians were keen to observe with particular ceremony. The fiftieth anniversary of Confederation had fallen in 1917; because of the Great War, celebrations had been muted. But the war itself had brought a new sense of Canadian nationhood, with Canada playing a significant role in the fighting and subsequently asserting its independent identity for the first time at the Paris Peace Conference. In the 1920s it continued to expand its autonomy: in 1926 Vincent Massey had become the first Canadian minister to the United States; in 1927 the country was elected to a non-permanent seat at the League of Nations, and was on the threshold of opening legations in France and Japan. So there was every reason to celebrate the country’s sixtieth birthday in grand fashion.

A seventy-member Centennial Committee was established that included the Governor General and his wife, the Prime Minister, Cabinet members, Privy Councillors, MPs, Senators, provincial premiers and parliamentary officials as well as representatives of such organizations as the National Council of Women, the Trades and Labour Congress, the Canadian Legion and the Imperial Order Daughters of the Empire. This committee was responsible for devising, suggesting and promoting country-wide celebrations, which were planned to last from Friday, July 1 – the actual anniversary – to Sunday, July 3. The core, however, was the series of celebrations in Ottawa, which on July 1 included the laying of the cornerstone of the Confederation Building by the Governor General, the inauguration of the new Carillon in the Peace Tower, the planting of Confederation maple trees on Parliament Hill, and addresses by the Governor General, the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition and – a folksy touch – descendants of the Fathers of Confederation, interspersed with public singing led by a centenary choir of 10,000 [sic!] schoolchildren. This was followed on Sunday by the National Thanksgiving service.

For many, this National Service of Thanksgiving was regarded as the climax of the celebrations. The National Committee had worked out an Order of Proceedings for the event. This was intended as the model to be used not only in Ottawa, but all across the country: local committees would be set up, and at 2.30

pm in each time zone there would be a public religious ceremony headed by the Lieutenant Governor (in provincial capitals) or mayor or leading person in the community (elsewhere). The Prime Minister, William Lyon Mackenzie King, took particular interest in this event, and had been involved in its preparation as well as in that of the booklet that was produced to be distributed to interested parties across the land.

The form that the ceremony took says much about Canada as it approached its sixtieth birthday. Essentially it was composed of alternating hymns and extracts from the Bible – totally appropriate for what was, after all, a religious event. Interspersed with this were passages extolling “the pioneers and settlers who laid our country’s foundations”, “the Fathers of Confederation”, and “those whose lives have been given in the country’s service” as well as two prayers, the Lord’s Prayer towards the beginning of the service, and close to the end a prayer “for divine guidance in the government of our land”. The whole ceremony ended with what were termed the “national anthems” – “O Canada” and “God Save the King”.

At first sight this ceremony seems unremarkable, but on closer consideration one is struck by at least two of its features. The first is how focused it is on government. In an introduction to the booklet, the National Committee perhaps reveals more than it realizes. After a description of the ceremony that will be taking place on Parliament Hill, “immediately in front of the entrance to the Houses of Parliament”, it goes on:

At the Capitals of the several Provinces it is proposed that gatherings similar in character take place immediately in front of their respective Legislative Buildings, the Lieutenant Governors to be responsible for the order of proceedings.

In Canada the municipal system lies at the very basis of its parliamentary institutions. It is therefore proposed that in cities, towns and villages other than capitals the National Thanksgiving proceedings should be accorded a relationship to the Municipality similar to that given it at the several Capitals. No settlement or hamlet in the Dominion is too small or too remote to participate officially in the National Thanksgiving. (2)

And this omnipresence of government crops up throughout the ceremony. The text of the Lord’s Prayer is established as that used “at the opening of each day’s proceedings in the Parliament of Canada by the Speaker of the Commons and the Speaker of the Senate” (5). In the eulogy to the Fathers of Confederation the participants are reminded that

The values and interest of history are derived *chiefly* from the lives and *services* of the men [sic] whom it commemorates. Without these the progress of the nation would be little worth recording. Upon this day of National Thanksgiving it is fitting to recall the eminent *services* of the Fathers of Confederation... To follow in their footsteps in devoted *service* to our country is the highest tribute we can pay to their memory (6; my italics).

Even more to the point is the “Prayer for Divine Guidance in the Government of our Land”. Again, this is a prayer that had been read every day in the House of Commons since its adoption in 1877, one that calls on Most Gracious God to ensure that all things may be “so ordered and settled” by the endeavours of all legislative and municipal bodies in the discharge of their public duties, that “peace and happiness, truth, and justice, religion and piety” may be established in the Dominion (9). Granted that this ceremony is by nature a national and hence a public occasion, nevertheless what it all adds up to is something slightly peculiar, and very Canadian: a service of prayer and thanks to God not for individual well-being, and not – except as an end-product – for social well-being, but rather for the bureaucratic tools that make both possible, that is, properly enlightened legislatures and legislators. One is strongly reminded of the central importance accorded in the BNA Act to the concept of “peace, order and good government”. The belief seems to be that good civil servants and politicians make good citizens, rather than the other way round.

A second feature that strikes the observer today is the overwhelmingly Protestant character of the event. The opening hymn is the Old Hundredth – “Praise God from whom all blessings flow.” This widely-known religious song, with a distinguished pedigree going back to its first appearance in the Genevan Psalter in 1551, is a kind of touchstone of the presence of Calvinism. One sees here, perhaps, the fine hand of the Prime Minister himself – Mackenzie King was, after all, a deep-dyed Presbyterian – and behind this, the central role played by the Presbyterian Church and the Scots in general in Canadian history and culture. The other hymns, too, reflect the country’s major Protestant traditions, as embodied in the Methodist and Anglican churches. There seems no doubt that “Canada”, in the eyes of the creators of the National Thanksgiving, was by definition “WASP”.

This, of course, was to pass over two absolutely central aspects of contemporary Canada – the Roman Catholic Church, and the French fact. Though the two were often equated, they were by no means identical; indeed on some issues – for example the use of French in Ontario schools – the French and English-speaking Catholic hierarchies were bitterly opposed. Even so, the two constituencies did represent a formidable demographic reality. Nevertheless, it seems that in their planning the creators of the National Thanksgiving paid little heed to the one million or so English-speaking Canadians at the time who were Roman Catholics (to say nothing of the Orthodox Christians, Jews and members of other religious denominations), let alone overwhelmingly Catholic Quebec. Problems arose, however, when the National Thanksgiving Order of Proceedings was found to be unacceptable for Roman Catholic usage.

Changes were therefore made, and a peculiarly Canadian compromise emerged. Any concerns Anglophone Catholics might have had were ignored: the English-language service of National Thanksgiving as it took place remained the monument to WASP Canada described above. (Not that the hymns were anti-Catholic: it is simply that their exclusive presence blandly ignored and even denied the existence of any English-speaking Catholic community.) But Catholic, Francophone Canada could not be overlooked. So a version of the National Thanksgiving was prepared that would be as much a reflection of French-Canadian culture as the original was of English-Canadian culture. In the end, the transformation was simple and indeed elegant. The basic structure of the

ceremony remained the same, as did most of the Biblical texts and the two prayers, the Lord's Prayer and the "prière pour implorer l'assistance divine dans le gouvernement du pays". The various homages were virtually identical – "aux pionniers", "aux Pères de la Confédération" and "à ceux qui ont sacrifié leur vie pour le pays", and the ceremony ended, like its English counterpart, with the "airs nationaux", "O Canada" and "Dieu protège le roi!" What chiefly disappeared were the hymns, replaced by an additional prayer and a Biblical adaptation, poems and a prose passage. Clearly hymns were not the central feature in French Catholic life and culture that they were in English-speaking Canada. Even more clearly, the texts that were introduced conveyed a very different message.

The "Prière de Saint-Thomas", with which the ceremony opens, is innocuous, but it does give a hint of what is to come. God is thanked for "des lumières que vous avez répandues sur notre pays depuis soixante ans". But in the next sentence, the worshippers ask God to ensure that they will act for the glory of His name, and "le bonheur de notre bien aimée patrie" (3). The shift is subtle: the neutral "pays" has become the much more charged "patrie". And the new, substituted texts that follow reveal that this was not a question of happenstance. The poem paying homage to the pioneers is a red-hot celebration of the French presence in North America by Louis Fréchette, "Notre histoire" from *La Légende d'un peuple*, where it is quite clear who "notre" is or are. Another poem, Octave Crémazie's "Appel à l'union national", had originally been written in 1856 for the "fête nationale", 24 June – that is, the feast day of John the Baptist, patron saint of Québec. And Etienne Lamy's "Hommage au Canada" is deeply Catholic, deeply reactionary – "Canada" is said to have been "séparé de la France avant que la France se séparât de son passé" (8) – and was originally written as part of a defence of the French language in conjunction with the struggle against Regulation 17, the 1912 Ontario law that banned French as a language of instruction in the province's schools. Finally, there is a passage from Pierre-Joseph-Olivier Chauveau's "Aux braves de 1760" – a salute to those who fought in the last battle of the French against the English in North America before the Conquest. Here, though, the exclusive Canadian nationalism (we are too early for the nationalism to be Québécois) is muted, since Chauveau is in fact paying homage to all who fell in the battle – "tous, Anglais et Français, grenadiers, montagnards, miliciens, et sauvages" (9).

It is clear, then, that these two versions of what is being presented as a common ceremony reflect radically different versions of Canada and the significance of the "national" in the National Thanksgiving. Those who are unfamiliar with Canada might find this baffling; those with a deeper knowledge of the country will see it as nothing unusual – indeed, it is the same double vision contained in the two versions of the national anthem "O Canada", where the English text affirms Canadians' determination to "stand on guard" for the "True North, strong and free", while its French counterpart celebrates a heroic past and expresses an equal determination to stand on guard for its particular identity, "nos foyers et nos droits" – implicitly, in the face of threats from the Anglo majority. Like the national anthem, the National Thanksgiving embodied this same bland juxtaposition of two sharply divided points of view, two radically different concepts of the "nation".

This continual and continuing insistence that two very different and distinct cultures do in fact share some larger set of values that makes them both "Canadian" is at the core of the Canadian experiment over the past two centuries. It is neatly summed up in the illustration chosen for the cover of the National Thanksgiving booklet. Though it is not easy to identify all the figures, many are obvious and others can be guessed at. But what is certain is the intent of the illustrator: to present a neatly balanced visual image symbolizing Canada's French and English past and present. In the foreground stand two lines of male figures, split into groups on left and right. Beginning with the figures in the front row and starting from the left, we have Cartier, Champlain, Montcalm, a figure hard to identify, and George-Etienne Cartier. On the right, from right to left, there are Wolfe, Brock, another shadowy figure, Lord Elgin and Sir John A. Macdonald. In other words, a selection of leading figures in Canadian history and public life in the pre-Confederation period, French on the left, English on the right. The men in the back row are less identifiable, but from those who are, the scheme is clear: a reversal of the front row, with Anglo-Canadians on the left – among them Thomas D'Arcy McGee, Alexander Mackenzie and Sir Charles Tupper – and their Franco-Canadian colleagues on the right – Laurier most prominently, Taché, Langevin and others. These "Eminent Canadians" are grouped in front of the new Centre Block, freshly rebuilt after its destruction by fire in 1916, the Peace Tower providing the focal point of the illustration. Framing the scene on the left there is the Union Jack and British coat of arms, on the right the old royal French flag and the fleur-de-lis arms. The imagery is clear, almost naive. The Parliament buildings serve as a symbol of rebirth, of the strength of Canadian democracy in the present, just as the flags and coats of arms enclosing the scene remind the viewer of the country's shared historical roots. This double heritage is reflected in the gallery of worthies in the foreground, invoking as they do a sense of the tranquil harmony of Canada's two "founding peoples" (or "races", in contemporary terminology). Taken as a whole, the illustration is an ideal and idealized emblem of the country, offering more than ample justification for the heartfelt celebration of a National Thanksgiving.

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at this time an uncommonly plentiful harvest. London: Thomas Baskett, c.1759.

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