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## *Canada: A Very Short Introduction*

**Donald Wright**

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In recent years, “history” has taken on a new urgency, becoming an object of panicked concern to increasing numbers of people. A statue is taken down, an institution or a street is renamed, the story of a building or an estate is rewritten to include less savoury moments in the lives of its past owners, and the cry goes up that this is an unacceptable, ideologically motivated attempt to “rewrite history.” This is to miss the point. Any serious attempt to look at the past necessarily entails “rewriting” history in some way, and any historian who fails to do so is not worth their salt. This is because history, and the writing of history, is not about the past. On the contrary, it is very much about the present and indeed the future – an attempt to look at the past in a way that has relevance to us and our society today and that, hopefully, will in turn serve as a guide as we move ahead. Just as Heraclitus claimed a person could not step twice into the same river, it’s impossible to step twice into the same history.

“History” is not a fixed or even a steadily expanding set of facts, but rather a way of interpreting facts, of seeing new patterns in them, of reordering their relative importance as well as of bringing into the foreground facts that were out there in the background somewhere, but largely ignored or even suppressed. Canadian history provides a particularly vivid example of how this plays out in practice. When I was a schoolkid in Ottawa in the 1950s, “Canadian history” was a subset of “British history,” beginning with the “discovery” of Canada by John Cabot in 1497, then passing through a brief, heroic but ultimately doomed French phase, and finally emerging after 1763 as an increasingly successful and ultimately independent offspring of its British model – a model quietly confirmed in the portrait of the reigning monarch hanging at the front of every classroom, and our singing “God Save the King” (or, after 1952, the Queen) to start off the school day. This particular avatar of “Canadian history” gave way in the 1960s in the face of the Quiet Revolution: almost overnight it was all about two “founding nations,” about bilingualism and biculturalism. Soon, however, a third version of “Canadian history” elbowed its way to the fore. It turned



out that “Canadian history” was about the long path to multiculturalism, to a country in which, in the words of then Prime Minister Pierre Elliott Trudeau, “the very essence of Canadian identity” was “cultural pluralism” (68). This model held sway for some time, but beginning in the 1990s, the potpourri of “Canadian history” saw an additional ingredient added to the mix – the Aboriginal peoples. Up until then the First Nations, the Inuit, and the Métis had been utterly marginal to the national story – totally absent, or invisible, or relegated to the role of troublemakers; now they became central to “Canadian history” as one of the country’s three “founding peoples.” So, four successive versions of the story of Canada in approximately seventy years, or roughly one per generation, each partly but not completely enfolding its predecessor. As a result of all this, writing a history of Canada these days has become a very tricky business.

This challenge was taken up by Donald Wright in his *Canada: A Very Short Introduction*, a task made even more daunting owing to the compact format of the Oxford University Press VSI series and its target audience, the legendary “general educated reader.” In an interview with the Champlain Society, Wright admitted that he found writing it “very, very difficult.” Happily, he has succeeded brilliantly. The book is a little miracle, taking the reader smoothly through the course of Canadian history from the beginning – not Cabot and 1497, but seasonal hunters high in what is now the Yukon 24,000 years ago – down to 2020 and Syrian refugees, five years after arriving in Canada, preparing for their citizenship exam. What are the elements that make this such an attractive work?

First, Wright has pared away the details of the historical narrative to the bone, retaining only information that is absolutely necessary for an understanding of how and why events occurred. The century and a half of conflict between Britain and France in North America in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, for example, is dealt with in a paragraph. Names that are irreplaceable markers in standard histories of Canada are either absent – Wolfe and Montcalm – or have only a fleeting presence: Wilfrid Laurier, John Diefenbaker. What carries the narrative is not Great Men, but rather issues and events and movements over time and how they have affected ordinary people.

In order to give form to what would otherwise be an unwieldy mass, Wright has devised a cunning framework. Bracketed by its Introduction and Conclusion, the book does indeed proceed in a loosely chronological fashion, but this movement is structured around six themes that also serve as titles of the book’s six chapters – Beginnings, Disposessions, Nationalisms, Rights, Borders, Norths. The plural form for all of these is striking. This reflects Wright’s central insight (which he attributes to the great Canadian historian Ramsay Cook) – that Canadian history is plural, not singular, that there are multiple histories of Canada, each distinctive but also open-



ended and capacious and interconnected with the others. And he employs the term “history” in a broad sense – besides the histories of, for example, Francophone Canada or the Inuit, there are histories of labour, of women’s rights, of northern Canada, and so on. Canada is a purely, perhaps uniquely, fragmented polity.

Within each of his chapters, Wright focuses roughly on a particular period, but in his treatment of its particular theme he feels free to go back in time and then move forward to examine the repercussions of decisions long in the future. This results in a certain temporal overlap as one reads, a brilliant device for breaking the monotonous “then ... and then... and then” rhythm of most histories. “Dispossessions,” for example, begins with the emergence of the Métis in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, moves through the events at the Red River in 1869–70 and the Northwest Rebellion in 1885, and describes the Métis’ subsequent fate. A smooth transition is then made to the Indian Act of 1876 and its consequences down to the White Paper of 1969, followed by the slow but increasingly successful struggle by the First Nations to regain their rights and their dignity. The chapter thus treats a series of dispossessions – of land (reserves, the Métis’ farms), of traditional self-government (replaced by imposed band councils), of customs both religious (the Sun Dance) and social (the potlatch), of family and language (residential schools), of band status (First Nations women who married non-Natives), of economic, social, health and sexual security. The chapter on “Nationalisms” traces the histories of Canada’s current nations – not one, not two, not three, but four entities: Québec, English Canada, the First Nations and, surprisingly, Newfoundland. (Few people are aware that Quebec is not alone in seeing its primary identity as local, with “Canadian” as a secondary identity; Newfoundland, too, shares this perspective.) In the course of the chapter Wright deals with the role of war in shaping these nations’ identities; the unfolding of the Quiet Revolution and the Other Quiet Revolution (Anglophone Canada’s shift from an identification of Canada as British to one premised on a Canada that is bilingual and multicultural); multiculturalism; the First Nations and their struggle to find a place in the sun; and the Constitutional wrangles (the 1982 patriation of the Constitution, Meech Lake, Charlottetown) that pitted all four nations against one other. In a similar fashion, the other chapters in the book display exemplary skill and fluidity in the way they move out from a particular period to range over extensive periods of time and relate events to the chosen theme.

I mentioned above that the book is thin on Great Men. Instead, Wright peppers his chapters with brief vignettes of “ordinary” women and men whose lives or actions in some way embody the theme under discussion. Many, though not all, are from the First Nations; they include women’s rights activists, judges, artists, trade unionists, pioneers in the gay and lesbian movement, members of linguistic minorities. These individuals reinforce the author’s thesis on the country’s plurality, and provide vivid



examples of how our understanding of “Canada” and “Canadian” has expanded over time.

One outstanding feature of the book has still to be mentioned: Wright can write. The narrative moves at a brisk clip, never getting bogged down in details or lost in byways, carried along by an elegant, supple style. Wright is a master of the pithy insight: relating the missionary efforts in New France, he remarks “If the Holy Gospel was an agent of empire, the real shock troops were foreign pathogens” (36). He cuts incisively to the root of complicated issues: “What are English Canadians and Quebecers really talking about when they talk about the *hijab*, the *niqab*, and the *burka*? Of course, it’s not one thing, it’s several: gender, religion, difference, identity, tradition, modernity, and belonging. Ultimately, however, they are talking about the nation” (85). His ever-present wit is at times dry – “Like a theological debate, the tariff debate in late 19<sup>th</sup>-century Canada was lengthy, arcane, and emotional” (94) – and at others sarcastic: “The Battle of the Plains of Abraham lasted just a few minutes, but the Battle of the Battle of the Plains of Abraham, fought by historians, journalists and politicians, has lasted over 250 years” (41). He can be blunt: “Of course nothing can change the fact that the United States is an imperial power and that Canada is a middle power dependent on American power” (108). And he has an uncanny ability to make the reader look at events through other eyes, particularly Indigenous eyes: “What if [the Jesuit missionary Jean de Brébeuf’s] death isn’t read as a martyr’s death but instead as an Indigenous death? What if he was tortured and killed not as Brébeuf but as Echon, his Wendat name, as an enemy of the Haudenosaunee, not as a defender of the Catholic faith?” (38) In those two sentences he blows away almost four hundred years of historical “truth,” E.J. Pratt’s iconic epic poem *Brebeuf and His Brethren*, and Brébeuf’s canonization by the Catholic Church in 1930.

Wright’s introduction to Canada is an endless series of surprising historical insights and satisfying literary pleasures. It also answers a very practical need. No matter what their discipline, very few university students anywhere, and especially here in Central Europe, start out with even a basic familiarity with Canadian history, culture or society. And, at least to my mind, up to now there has been no book that would provide them, in a brief, engaging form, with the information they require to dip their toes into Canadian Studies. This is no longer the case. In an ideal world, every student in an Introduction to Canada course would be presented with a copy of *Canada: A Very Short Introduction*. In the real world, all I can do is urge educators to recommend this book to their students – a bargain at about 9 euros – and to order multiple copies of it for their libraries. Interest in Canadian Studies, and the quality of student work, will be sure to rise dramatically.