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## “Inclusions and Omissions: Imaginings of Canadian Nation-ness”

Dr Rosie Spooner

*Every.Now.Then: Reframing Nationhood*

Art Gallery of Ontario

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Having grown up in downtown Toronto, but spent most of my adult years in Glasgow, I am looking at *Canada150* with an eye for how the country is presenting itself to those outwith its borders. I find myself interrogating attempts at synopsisizing Canada, which tend to abridge 150 years of history and simultaneously stake a claim to the country’s future. I am especially interested in how current understandings of Canada compare to those that were prevalent during the period when the country was ostensibly in its infancy. As a cultural historian, I see this as an opportune moment to explore the role that visual and material practices play in constructing imaginings and projections of Canadian nationhood, and reflect on how such visions have shifted and evolved. What symbols have been used to encapsulate a sense of nation-ness? Moreover, what experiences and subjectivities are included within national iconographies, and conversely which are those that are left out?

At the time of Confederation, World’s Fairs and International Exhibitions were key sites at which national interests were negotiated and national identities were promoted. Executed on a phenomenal scale, these spectacles were held all over the world, although principally in large European and North American cities like London, Paris, and New York. Presenting art, design, and industrial culture in elaborate and fanciful ways, they routinely enticed spectators in the millions. Canada was a regular contributor to overseas exhibitions, organizing displays that were dominated by natural resources (see figure 1). Somewhat surprisingly, things as inert as grain samples, mineral specimens, and preserved fruit often rivalled cutting-edge machinery and technology, as well as pageants, rides, and amusements, for the public’s attention. This is because raw materials performed an important illustrative role at these events, with the types of objects consistently exhibited by the Canadian government fitting neatly within a larger cultural discourse. As a popular guide to London’s Great Exhibition of 1851 explained to its Victorian readers, “the distance between the raw material and the perfected work is the measure of the conquest of man over the external world.”<sup>i</sup> While at first glance Canada’s exhibits characterized the Dominion’s natural resources and attendant wealth, they also served to insert the country into a global order of progress and civilization, albeit a decidedly Eurocentric one. The Canadian government strove to elevate the country’s position in this hierarchy by stressing its role as a chief supplier of raw materials to Britain and the wider empire. This reveals that mapping, cultivating, and controlling the natural environment were fundamental traits of a nascent national identity. Viewed through this lens, Canada’s exhaustive displays of rocks, grasses, and canned foods – all meticulously labelled to indicate their different properties, uses, and places of origin – take on deeply imaginative qualities. This has echoes of Northrop Frye’s assertion that identity “is primarily a cultural and imaginative question,” and so betrays the influence of creative instinct.<sup>ii</sup>

According to the historian Phillip Buckner, “Canadians entered the twentieth century increasingly self-confident about their nation’s future and determined to play a more important part in world affairs.”<sup>iii</sup> This was evident in the Canadian government’s approach to World’s Fairs and International Exhibitions, whereby these spectacles were used as platforms for dispelling dominant views held overseas, particularly in the so-called imperial “mother country”. Authorities were especially keen to shed Canada’s reputation as a rugged wilderness with a sparse population, a colonial construct rooted in notions of the picturesque that had been molded by European visual and literary depictions (figures 2 and 3). Indeed, renderings of the natural world presented by exploration and travel accounts were

inherently distorted, offering “projections of European ideas, values, and tastes,” rather than reflections of any material and social realities.<sup>iv</sup>

Commentary in exhibition catalogues and the press suggest the government succeeded in its ambition, stimulating a revised understanding of what Canada was like, and changing popular opinions in Britain. As one exhibition guide noted, those “who have generally associated Canada with tobogganing, sleigh bells, and fur overcoats will no doubt be surprised at the immense variety of its fruits ... [which] grow wild and luxuriantly.”<sup>v</sup> Striving to do more than just dislodge existing conceptions of Canada, the government’s displays at nineteenth- and twentieth-century exhibitions were designed to promote an understanding of what made Canada distinct in the hope of attracting British emigrants and investors. Its exhibits aimed to demonstrate that life in the Dominion was not typified by mere subsistence and survival in a constantly cold country, but that it could offer prosperity. It is worth underlining, however, that such desires for increased settlement and investment negated Indigenous interests. Additionally, such enticements were generally reserved for British audiences, and seldom extended to prospective migrants from what were then regarded as less desirable places like southern Europe, the Indian sub-continent, and Southeast Asia.

Whether preserved fruits or processed foodstuffs, extracted minerals or harvested grains, Massey-Harris wheat binders or images of the Canadian Pacific Railway, the objects selected by the Canadian government for public display signified an ability to harness the land and its natural resources. A particularly potent symbol of this narrative appeared at the Glasgow International Exhibition of 1901. The vision of Canada presented here, one constructed chiefly by government agencies, was not just of an expansive resource-rich landscape. Rather, it also portrayed a country that possessed key markers of a nation-state, a message that was a priority to project in light of the fact that Canada had become a federal country less than 35 years earlier. The form chosen to symbolize this nexus of ideas was something called an agricultural trophy – a large structure modelled in the shape of the spire atop the parliamentary library in Ottawa, the still relatively new national capital (figure 4). This installation measured 35 feet high and 65 feet in circumference, and was made entirely out of agricultural produce drawn from across the country such as corn, oats, barley, wheat, rye, and tobacco.

Fittingly, the agricultural trophy was designed by an employee of the Department of Agriculture’s Experimental Farms unit named W.H. Hay, whose evocative description points to its function as a rhetorical tool that conveyed a distinct ideology:

[T]he grain was massed and arranged in gothic arches and in circles, and when completed the structure had the appearance of an immense temple of cereals. Coats of arms of the provinces were placed over each of the main arches, and some fine specimens of mounted ‘prairie chickens’ were distributed among the sheaves of grain. ... Good views were shown of settlers’ homes, giving the appearance of the farm when first located, and again a few years later under improved conditions. ... The agricultural trophy elicited the admiration of visitors on every hand for its colossal character.<sup>vi</sup>

Hay’s work was evidently intended to be an allegory for a cohesive national unit. Weaving together a singular vision of Canada – both metaphorically and materially – it exhibited a considered sense of nation-ness that superseded regional ties, and supplanted social and cultural plurality. Stitching over any fissures and fractures, it had no loose ends. This three-dimensional portrait of Canada from the turn of the last century revealed a settler-colonial society, an image of the nation that omitted the presence of many, and in particular negated the sovereignty of Indigenous peoples.

Reflecting on past moments when Canada sought to showcase itself to a wider world offers occasion to trace the lineage of ideas that remain central to imaginings of *Canadian-ness*; but which often overlook histories of conflict and contestation, particularly over issues of land and place, and

attendant questions over who has access to these spaces and who belongs within them. Indeed, as Edward Said explains, “there is in all nationally defined cultures ... an aspiration to sovereignty, to sway, and to dominance.”<sup>vii</sup> This is a timely reminder. The passage of the first British North America Act in 1867 brought together three existing colonies, the Province of Canada (now Ontario and Québec), New Brunswick, and Nova Scotia, to create a new state called the Dominion of Canada. Although ostensibly self-governing, it would take another 115 years and 20 additional UK parliamentary acts for all legislative and constitutional powers to be transferred to Canadian authorities. Perhaps of greater consequence, the physical shape and social composition of Canada changed dramatically over these years. Colonialist policies, for example, caused increased settlement at the expense of First Nations societies that inhabited, used, and acted as guardians of land that was purposefully territorialized by the nation-state and affiliated institutions. This silencing would seem to have found a parallel at World’s Fairs and International Exhibitions, since Canada’s displays overlooked this aspect of the country’s burgeoning national story, focusing instead on the narrative that it was ripe with promise.

*Canada150* is a celebration of a nation on a national scale. Over the course of this year, well-rehearsed stories we tell each other as Canadians will be performed anew in the hope of shoring up a shared sense of belonging and nationhood. Viewing these gestures with scepticism and taking a critical approach, however, is crucial if reverting to historic constructions of national identity that bolster settler-colonial ambitions is to be avoided. Exhibitions like *Every.Now.Then: Reframing Nationhood* offer opportunities to examine how national iconographies have come into being, and judiciously reflect on the ways they are continually re-hashed, re-formulated, and re-built. This in turn allows us to further understand contemporary resonances that such myths of collective identity often obfuscate, and yet do not render wholly invisible.

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## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> John Tallis and Jacob George Strutt, *History and Description of the Crystal Palace, and the Exhibition of the World’s Industry in 1851; Illustrated by Beautiful Steel Engravings from Original Drawings and Daguerreotypes by Beard, Mayall, Etc.* (London: John Tallis & Co., 1852), 14.

<sup>ii</sup> Northrop Frye, *Bush Garden: Essays on the Canadian Imagination* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971), i.

<sup>iii</sup> Phillip Buckner, “The Creation of the Dominion of Canada, 1860-1901,” in *Canada and the British Empire*, ed. Phillip Buckner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 67.

<sup>iv</sup> Brian S. Osborne, “The Iconography of Nationhood in Canadian Art,” in *The Iconography of Landscape: Essays on the Symbolic Representation, Design and Use of Past Environments*, ed. Denis Cosgrove and Stephen Daniels (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 163. See also Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (ed.), *Lighting the Eighth Fire: The Liberation, Resurgence and Protection of Indigenous Nations* (Winnipeg: Arbeiter Ring Publishing, 2008), and Suzanne Zeller, *Inventing*

*Canada: Early Victorian Science and the Idea of a Transcontinental Nation* (Montréal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009).

<sup>v</sup> *Glasgow International Exhibition, 1901: Official Guide* (Glasgow: Charles P. Watson, 1901), 30-31.

<sup>vi</sup> W.H. Hay, as quoted in William Saunders, "Appendix to the Report of the Minister of Agriculture: Experimental Farms Reports for 1901," *Sessional Paper* No. 16 (Ottawa, 1902), 78-79. Records of the Semiarid Prairie Agricultural Research Centre, Swift Current, SK.

<sup>vii</sup> Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage Books, 1994), 15.