

Why We Honour Queen Victoria

Tomorrow is the 195th birthday of Her Imperial Britannic Majesty Victoria, Queen and Empress, which we celebrated with the holiday last Monday. All my youth, with the fireworks displays, it was one of my favourite holidays.

I recall with particular pleasure when the metal rod from which my father was launching May 24 rockets slipped and the already lighted rocket took off almost horizontally and went through a neighbour's window, buzzed about the walls emitting small flames and erupted spectacularly over about 10 blazing seconds. After another ten seconds, as my father expressed the hope there had been no one in the room, an ancient gray head festooned with curlers and still sizzling sparks appeared, shaky but purposeful and emitting an unholy rage. She shook her fists, screamed a few epithets, and receded, like a geriatric cuckoo-clock bird, slamming the window and pulling closed the curtains, as we were all splitting our sides with un hoped for holiday mirth.

My father, a literate man with a formidable deadpan sense of humour, replied, for our benefit, with the famous line from John Greenleaf Whittier's poem about Barbara Frietchie, who defied General Stonewall Jackson by waving the Union flag and shouting: "Shoot if you must this old gray head, but not" – and here my father improvised, "your neighbour's children," continuing, from Whittier, a bit late: "Who touches a hair on yon gray head dies like a dog." All in all, it was the most riveting fireworks display I have witnessed.

In so far as there is a point to any of this, it is that we all happily observed Queen Victoria's birthday without a thought of why we were doing it. Of course she was a long-serving queen of England and affiliated jurisdictions, including Canada, but not one person in a hundred then, nor, I suspect, one Canadian in 10,000 now, could say why anyone in

this country should observe that queen's birthday. In fact, it is the least we can do. When still in her twenties, Victoria, in her first of over six decades as queen, dissented from what Stephen Leacock described (in the case of colonial secretary Lord Stanley) as the "magnificent stupidity" of trying to retain the government of Canada in the hands of colonial governors with no system of popular approval. She took matters into her own hands and insisted on the appointment as governor of Canada of the enlightened former governor of Jamaica, Lord Elgin, in 1847, with a clear mandate to bring in what was called "responsible government": autonomy in domestic matters for ministers responsible to an elected legislature of what was then called the United Province of Canada, effectively Quebec and Ontario together.

There followed a gradual recognition that unless they were united, the provinces north of the United States would have no ability to resist the magnetic power of that country even in peaceful conditions, much less if the U.S resorted to force after its sanguinary Civil War. The Americans emerged in 1865 from that war forcibly united at a cost of 750,000 dead (in a population smaller than Canada's is now), with the greatest army and most talented generals in the world and unencumbered by any affection for Britain or Canada, as Britain had almost overtly favoured the Confederacy in the late war.

The leaders of the drive for responsible government in Canada, Robert Baldwin and Louis-Hippolyte LaFontaine, had recognized that to become a successful and independent country, Canada would have to be governed by the English and French-speaking populations jointly and that a majority would be required from both communities on very important questions; the country would not function if the English simply imposed their majority on the French. This message was carried forward by their successors, John A. Macdonald and George-Etienne Cartier; these men, with George Brown and others and with the encouragement of Queen Victoria, directly (when they visited

her in the mid-1860s) and through her governor-general, Viscount Monck, negotiated Confederation.

Canada became and remains the only trans-continental, officially bicultural, parliamentary confederation in the history of the world. Despite considerable skepticism in the British Parliament and in the United States, that Confederation has endured and generally prospered these 148 years. Of the world's countries with a population as large as Canada's, only the United Kingdom and the United States have been governed by the same political institutions for a longer time. At the time of Confederation in 1867, France and Russia and the central European congeries of nationalities grouped around Austria and Hungary were all empires, Germany and Italy were fragmented in various kingdoms and principalities, and Japan was an under-developed hermit kingdom.

Victoria saw clearly that Canada had the potential to be an important country, and that the French-Canadians could not be treated as a conquered people (which they never were – the British army defeated the French army at Quebec and Montreal but no one has ever conquered any significant part of Canada). She and her enlightened consort, Prince Albert, were in a minority in the British establishment that did not favour a Confederate victory in the U.S. Civil War, and realized that Britain could not, even tacitly, favour slavery and secessionism.

Queen Victoria took a great and helpful interest in Canada throughout her reign, which began at the time of the Gilbert and Sullivan rebellions of Mackenzie and Papineau in 1837. She sent the Prince of Wales (later King Edward VII) to Canada on a visit in 1860, during which he opened the Victoria Bridge in Montreal, then the longest bridge in the world, and laid the corner-stone for the Parliament buildings in Ottawa. She sent her son-in-law, the Marquess of Lorne, to serve as governor-general of Canada from 1878 to 1883, and always treated Macdonald and Sir Wilfrid Laurier with great respect when they

came to England. They served her as prime minister of the Dominion or co-premier of the United Province for a total of 43 years.

When Macdonald won the 1891 election on an anti-annexationist platform, Victoria sent him congratulations via Governor-General Lord Stanley (son of the sluggish colonial secretary from 45 years before); when Macdonald died later that year, she had Sir Casimir Gzowski (ancestor of the popular broadcaster) lay a wreath of roses from her on his coffin. Macdonald's preferred successor, Sir John Thompson, died while on a three-day visit to Windsor Castle in 1894. She arranged, unprecedentedly, a Roman Catholic state funeral for him in London and had a Royal Navy cruiser painted black for the return of Thompson's casket to Halifax.

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