

The United States has tremendous influence on Canadian politics, economics, and culture. One hundred years ago, however, the United States had far less direct impact on Canada. Instead, the greatest influence on Canadian life was England and the British Empire. Many of the symbols of Canadian identity, such as the Canadian flag and the national anthem, were not created until the 1960s; at the turn of the century, Canadians sang God Save the King and flew either the Union Jack (the flag of Britain) or the Red Ensign (a version of the British flag used by the armed forces) over their schools and government buildings. Though the British North America Act of 1867 had given Canada some independence, the young nation was still subject to British policies regarding trade and some international matters.

The Church

Religion was an important part of Canadian life. Considering that most Ontarians were English, it is not surprising that Ontario was primarily Anglican, a branch of Christianity unique to England. Immigrants from Europe brought other denominations of Christianity with them, including Lutheranism and Presbyterianism.

While there were Catholics throughout Canada, the vast majority of Catholic Canadians lived in Quebec. The French-speaking population had maintained its strong connection to the Catholic faith since the British conquest, and often saw the Church as a defining feature of French-Canadian culture. Because the Church was one of the few remnants of the institutions of New France, it had more influence in Quebec than in the rest of Canada. Thus, the bishops of Quebec often saw themselves as the protectors of Catholic Francophones. While the leaders of the Church were well-intentioned, the attempts to retain traditional Quebecois life made change and modernization in the province difficult.

Education

An examination of textbooks from turn of the century Canada reveals a great deal about the culture's views of education. In Ontario, textbooks were published by the Ministry of Education, and had the provincial seal on the cover. They were usually half the size of current textbooks, and had very few images. Subjects included Spelling, Arithmetic, and Health. Particular attention was given to the need for good penmanship and grammar. Health texts focussed on hygiene and public behaviour more than the inner workings of the body.

The content of the texts also reflected the cultural stereotypes and bias of the time. Consider the following quotation from a Health text published in 1925:

The easy-going Southern negro lad prefers a piece of watermelon to the piece of blubber which satisfies the Eskimo lad of the far north. This preference is due partly to a difference in climate and partly to the different kinds of food available."

While the observations about climate and the availability of food may have some merit, the generalizations about African-Americans and the Inuit are stereotypes. Stereotypes are generalizations about a certain group, race, age, etc. Often stereotypes are negative and carry dangerous misconceptions that could affect an individual's judgement. Because these stereotypes are published in a textbook, they reflect more than the personal bias of the text's author. These stereotypes --along with other stereotypes about a number of minority groups in North America, including natives and the French -- were common in early twentieth century Canada.



Gender Issues

Though debate about gender equality still rages in Canada, the status of Canadian women has improved tremendously since the early 1900s. Women living in Canada one hundred years ago were financially dependent on their fathers or husbands. Though some women worked, the work itself was difficult and low-paying. Concepts of womanhood were influenced by nineteenth century ideas, especially the notion that a woman's highest calling was motherhood and household management. All other important facets of society, including medicine, law, and politics, were considered too intellectually demanding for women; in fact, women were not allowed to vote because it was assumed that women would simply vote for whomever their husbands supported.

The ideal woman was the "Angel in the House", a mother who dedicated all her time, energy, and love to her family. Women were often considered morally pure, but this purity was believed to be a direct result of their role as a caring mother and obedient wife. It was widely believed that participation in the cutthroat worlds of business and politics would taint women's moral goodness. These stereotypes regarding the intellectually inferiority and moral superiority of women were used to justify women's exclusion from virtually all aspects of public life.