

Report of the Annual Meeting Rapports annuels de la Société historique du Canada

Report of the Annual Meeting

Canadian Cultural Development

J. C. Webster

Volume 6, numéro 1, 1927

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/300050ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/300050ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada

ISSN

0317-0594 (imprimé)

1712-9095 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Webster, J. C. (1927). Canadian Cultural Development. *Report of the Annual Meeting / Rapports annuels de la Société historique du Canada*, 6(1), 74–81.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/300050ar>

All rights reserved © The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada, 1927

Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

érudit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

<https://www.erudit.org/fr/>

CANADIAN CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT

BY J. C. WEBSTER

Throughout the civilized world, there are certain well recognized standards by which the culture of a community may be determined. These are fine architecture, sculpture and painting; an appreciation for good music, dramatic art, and literature; high educational standards, indicated by the influence exerted by institutions of learning on the life, thought and development of the people. Among the tangible and material evidences may be mentioned private and public libraries and art collections, museums, good theatres, concerts, lectures, exhibitions of works of art, development of villages, towns, cities, and parks with some regard for aesthetic appearances.

In making a survey of the Dominion of Canada for such evidences of cultural development, I shall endeavour to avoid both excessive self-laudation and hyper-criticism. In order to be fair, the country should be considered sectionally. By far the largest part of Canada is the newest, viz., the entire territory west of Ontario. Its development, almost entirely within the last sixty years, has necessarily been mainly material. We could scarcely expect any marked evidences of cultural interests, yet, it is with great satisfaction that we note that the latter have not been neglected. Each western province has realized the need of establishing a system of higher education, and various institutions have been started which promise to be important factors in the intellectual life of the different communities.

For the purposes of this paper, the Canada under consideration comprises Ontario, Quebec and the Maritime Provinces. What standard are we to adopt in endeavouring to fix our status among the nations? "What do they know of England who only England know?" and I might also ask in a somewhat different sense, "What do they know of Canada who only Canada know?"

Those whose knowledge of the world is confined to an experience of their own country are surely unfit to express an opinion of their real standing in the comity of nations. Our own estimate of ourselves must be measured against that which is expressed by those who have a much wider range of experience. Canada's standing must, therefore be established by a comparison with the leading civilized communities of the world but to give to it its due rank is a task of some difficulty. One can confidently say, I believe, that it would be higher in the scale than Patagonia, and lower than France, Sweden or Holland.

LITERATURE

Apart from newspapers and a small number of magazines and books, Canada has as yet but a meager well-established literature of her own. How unimportant this is may be estimated by considering the yearly output of Great Britain. If one is familiar with the Literary Supplement of the London *Times*, which appears weekly, with its long lists of new books of travel, history, literature and criticism, science, archæology, philosophy, fiction, etc., it is easy to estimate the amazing productivity of the nation in

this field of endeavour. No matter what disturbances affect the country—great strikes, economic crises or wars, the output continues. Even during the Great World War though there was diminished activity there was no cessation and the thought of the country continued to find expression through the medium of the printing press.

Judged by such a standard, how pitifully small is Canada's literary effort. This is surely an indication that there is but a very small part of the population which has any appreciation for good literature, even of its own writers. That it has scarcely any greater desire for the best of other countries is evidenced by the character of the book-stores throughout the country at large. The standard pabulum demanded by the public are fiction and trashy magazines. The percentage of high-class books carried in stock is small, except in a very few stores in the largest cities. Everywhere, the booksellers tell the same story, viz., "It doesn't pay to carry many of these; they sell so slowly." If there were a widespread love of reading, a real hunger for knowledge and intellectual refreshment, the book-stores would reflect the demand. There would be far more public and private libraries. In this respect Ontario undoubtedly leads the rest of Canada. Indeed, one of the most important educational forces in the country is its Public Library system; I know of no city in the world, in which the wisdom and knowledge of the ages are more intelligently disseminated among the masses, than in Toronto.

In the Maritime Provinces, private libraries, worthy the name, are very few in number; and, as regards public libraries, the people are poorly supplied, a recent statement of the American Library Association revealing that 82.5 of the population are without such service, a record which is only exceeded by Saskatchewan and the Northwest Territories. The chief sources of supply of such literature as is read by the people are Great Britain and the United States (in Quebec, France). As regards the relative importance of these two nations it is to be said that the very small minority who read high-class books depend upon British authorship, whereas the great majority who read mostly light literature, in the shape of weekly and monthly magazines, are supplied from the United States. The lighter British magazines are not current in Canada, and the better ones are found only in libraries, clubs and a small percentage of homes. British newspapers are not read at all by the mass of our people, whereas American papers are distributed to a considerable extent throughout Canada. It is thus quite evident that the dominant literature influencing our citizens is American.

DRAMATIC ART

Dramatic art of native origin does not exist in Canada. The majority of the theatres provide chiefly vaudeville or trashy plays. Outside of Montreal, Toronto and one or two other cities very few first-class companies give performances. Public taste is everywhere satisfied by the movies. British attractions are rarely offered, the great majority being American in origin. The latest extension of wireless broadcasting and the rapid increase of radio-receiving instruments in Canadian homes implies a wider dissemination of American thought through lectures, speeches, sermons and concerts, as well as of the happenings of daily life from the Atlantic to the Pacific. When in addition to these influences, we add the daily intercourse, the ever-increasing financial and business relationships, is it any wonder that, while Canadian in name, our people (excepting the French of Quebec) tend more and more to become American in thought and habits.

MUSIC IN CANADA

Fletcher of Saltoun in the seventeenth century stated that if he could make the songs of a country, he did not care who made its laws. Certainly in old Scotland, the national and folk songs have played a great part in preserving the national spirit. For a long period music was one of the pleasures of home life among rich and poor, and it chiefly took the form of singing. This was the case throughout Canada as late as thirty or forty years ago, but in the English-speaking part of the country this form of home culture has largely disappeared, though it still retains a place in the French-Canadian homes of the province of Quebec.

In this connection I should like to pay tribute to the splendid work of Mr. Barbeau and others in collecting the enormous numbers of folk songs which have been the heritage of French Quebec, a collection as extensive as can now be found in use in any nation of Europe. The English population of Canada lags far behind in this respect. The great majority of our children are no longer educated to play and sing, music being provided in the form of "canned cacophany," as gramophone records have been termed by an American humorist. Coincident with this deterioration in the homes has been the change in our schools. Men and women beyond middle life can recall the relaxation and pleasure afforded by the singing of national and other melodies at certain periods during school hours. Such a practice was of value in impressing youthful minds with patriotic feelings, and, as well, in exercising a cultural influence. In many European countries, particularly the Scandinavian and Teutonic, great importance is given to musical instruction in the public schools, with the result that the patriotism of the people is strengthened and a love of music inculcated, which lasts throughout life.

Outside a very few of the larger cities good musical performances, either by individuals or orchestras, are rare. The Maritime Provinces are particularly barren in this respect. It is, however, gratifying to note that in a few quarters musical culture is not wanting. Indeed, the city in which we are now meeting holds a high place in musical instruction and taste. The magnificent (singing) choir which it has developed gives it an enviable position among the leading cities of the world.

PAINTING, SCULPTURE AND ARCHITECTURE

Canada cannot be said to have developed any marked originality in the field of architecture. Throughout the country generally it is of a very commonplace type, particularly noticeable throughout the Maritime Provinces. Quebec, however, holds a distinctive place for, as has been made evident by two large illustrated volumes issued by the Province, there are many old country houses and churches with architectural features of great charm and dignity. These belong mainly to the old regime. Modern structures for the most part are not above the level found elsewhere in Canada.

In painting and sculpture we cannot claim to have taken a prominent place. While we have produced a number of artists and sculptors of high merit, very few have achieved world wide recognition. The mass of our people have little appreciation for art. There is very little demand for paintings, etchings, engravings or sculpture. There are very few public collections of any importance, and a small percentage of private houses in which good works of art are to be found. The Maritime Provinces are particularly arid in this respect. As might be expected, the best collections are in Montreal and Toronto. The two leading Art Schools are in these cities and their influence is continually increasing. One of the

most notable collections is that of the Museum of Archaeology of Toronto, one of the world's great treasure houses of Oriental Art. Indeed, in certain features of ancient Chinese art, it holds a unique place. Too great praise cannot be given to those whose foresight and courage have provided Canada with one of the most remarkable Art collections in existence. The National Gallery of Ottawa is a creation of the Federal Government, due to the inspiration of a few private citizens. While it has a number of good pictures it does not yet rank very high. There is no great enthusiasm among our "practical" legislators to provide large sums of money in the purchase of important works of art, and, as private gifts have been few, it is to be feared that the importance of the Gallery will not be rapidly enhanced. The travelling exhibitions organized by the directorate have been useful and should be more frequently repeated, especially in the outlying portions of the Dominion, such as the Maritime Provinces.

HISTORICAL INSTRUCTION.

In my extensive journeyings throughout Eastern Canada in recent years nothing has made a deeper impression on me than the lack of interest in the historic basis of our national development. In the Maritimes the ignorance of our people is appalling. I believe that this is mainly due to the lack of stimulating instruction in the common schools, though the colleges must also share the blame. Not only is there no purposeful effort to instil into the minds of the young a love of country, based upon its traditions and the facts of its historic development, but the ordinary routine history courses are given with such lack of enthusiasm that they are generally regarded by children as dreary drudgery, from which they would gladly escape. In the Province of Nova Scotia, where the educational authorities, some years ago, made history a non-compulsory subject, the children have responded by generally taking advantage of the freedom offered them.

As compared with our neighbour to the South we are low in the scale as regards historical knowledge and appreciation. In the United States the most potent influences in creating a national spirit are historical instruction in schools, the appeal to sentiment by memorial celebrations, and the nation-wide respect paid to all who have contributed to the establishment of the country's liberties, or assisted in promoting and safeguarding its interests. In Canada these means are generally neglected. The dominant ideals are related to material prosperity or sport. National holidays are merely rest or sport days and are not characterized by demonstrations calculated to foster patriotic feelings, nor are they utilized to focus the attention of the people on their historic past, to instil into them a lively appreciation of the growth of our Empire, or to stir them with pride in the great achievements of our ancestors in every sphere of human activity. Unless our youth are brought up to feel a passionate attachment to the land of their birth, to glory in the struggles and accomplishments of the past, there can be no hope of building up a strong nation. If our land be considered only from the material standpoint, it is only natural that young men and women should unhesitatingly migrate to a country where they believe the opportunities to be greater and the prizes richer.

As history is taught in the schools it is to most pupils a dreary mass of dates and disconnected facts. Only an occasional teacher makes an appeal to the imagination and imparts knowledge with such enthusiasm as to send a thrill through youthful minds. Our ordinary text-books are partly to blame for they are as a rule written by uninspired and unimaginative

writers. They are mostly boiled-down editions of larger works meant for adult readers. The great majority of common school children are to become ordinary citizens. For them an elaborate constitutional, economic or sociologic presentation is useless. Outline sketches of the main course of our history with special reference to the most prominent personages and events are sufficient for the great majority of boys and girls. As far as possible reproductions of good paintings and engravings should be used. These are now obtainable in England and France at very moderate cost. In these countries such accessories have been employed for years and have been of the greatest value in stimulating and impressing the minds of the young. Only a very small percentage of Canadian schools use wall-illustrations, for there is no source of supply in our country. There is a splendid opportunity to undertake pioneer work in providing these valuable teaching adjuncts for all the provinces. From the mass of material in the Public Archives and other collections all periods of Canadian history could be represented pictorially. Lantern slides could also be most effectively used.

For some years the educational branch of the Department of the Interior has been making slides to illustrate the manufacturing, agricultural and other economic developments of our country, as well as its scenic attractions. Short descriptions of the slides are printed and these are loaned to lecturers in all parts of Canada, free of cost. There is no reason why the same course should not be pursued in the teaching of history. If members of this Society will furnish outline lectures the slides will be made from material in the Public Archives, free of charge.

EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS.

To attempt a survey of the various systems of common school education in Canada in order to estimate their efficiency and value in the life of the country is a task which would require a long period of patient investigation, and, as generalizations not founded on accurate data would be quite valueless, I shall limit my remarks to that part of the country of which I have intimate knowledge. Last year, in an address to the National Council of Education in Montreal, I considered conditions in the Maritime Provinces, referring freely to the comprehensive survey made by the Carnegie Foundation in 1922, of which a full report has been published. This independent corporation, whose aim is to point out defects and to suggest methods of improvement, severely criticised the common school system in the three provinces, both the primary and secondary divisions being found (with few exceptions) generally unsatisfactory.

A similar investigation in the other provinces of the Dominion would be of the greatest value. Indeed, judging from many letters which I have received and from newspaper editorials, I have some suspicion that many of the faults which exist in the extreme East may also be found in other sections of the country.

In speaking of higher education I am on surer ground, because the data relating thereto are, comparatively speaking, readily ascertainable. At the time of Confederation, the colleges of Canada were mostly small and unpretentious, devoting their attention chiefly to the old-fashioned arts curriculum. Students were not numerous and were subject to careful supervision, the ablest being encouraged to enter the professions, with the result that many attained to positions of eminence both in Canada and the United States. For many years these institutions carried

on their work without much change. It was only after the great advances in all branches of scientific knowledge, emanating from the schools of Europe, were forced on the attention of educationalists, that any marked development took place. The demand for scientific instruction called for the increase of teaching staffs and the equipment of laboratories. Many of the colleges were unable to meet the new conditions though attempting or pretending to do so; yet they exhibited an unwarranted haste in advancing their status from that of the old simple modest college to the more grandiose dignity of university, thus announcing to the world that they were expanding in conformity with the requirements of the new era. Skeleton faculties were established, in which a few professors gave instruction in many subjects. Thus, I can recall my own college experience of studying botany, chemistry, geology and physics under a single teacher. For a time he lectured as well on a branch of theology, but, fortunately, this subject was not part of my curriculum. It is thus evident that instruction could not have been thorough or adequate. Practical and laboratory facilities were most meagre, because of the lack of funds. Teaching in most cases consisted in daily quizzing of students from a text-book in which a number of pages had been assigned for consideration on the previous day—just the lesson-method of the common schools. Canada did not stand alone in these respects. The great majority of Colleges in the United States were in the same position. The institutions of both countries were infinitely inferior to the universities of the old world.

The modern era of advancement in higher education in North America dates from the establishment of Johns Hopkins University in 1876. This institution, consecrated to the advancement of knowledge as well as to the highest standard of instruction, has been an inspiration and stimulus to all the universities of America, and has given an immense impetus both to scholarship and research in all fields of inquiry, and the supreme influence which brought about these remarkable developments was undoubtedly of German origin. Canada was slow in responding to the new *zeit-geist* but in course of time changes began to take place, though very unequally in different sections. The most marked transformations have been found in Toronto and Montreal, where comparatively small institutions have grown into huge universities worthy of inclusion among the leading schools of learning in the world.

In the Maritime Provinces, with less than a million people possessing five universities and six colleges of lower grade, some with university powers, described by the Carnegie Foundation as being generally weak, poorly equipped and insufficiently endowed, the strongest efforts have been made to bring about confederation and consolidation of resources, following the example set in Toronto, whose noble university is the outcome of such an act of wisdom. As yet, however, no such beneficent result has been attained, mainly owing to sectional and denominational prejudices and self-satisfied contentment with the very imperfect existing conditions. Dalhousie, the only institution in the provinces which the Foundation consider worthy of the name of university, has been foremost in her endeavour to bring about amalgamation, and has been warmly seconded by King's, but the remaining institutions have remained aloof.

One of the chief indictments to be brought against the colleges and universities of Canada is that they have failed to make provision for post-graduate instruction and for the advancement of knowledge by means of research. It is only within very recent years that we have in a very limited measure followed the American example of encouraging

graduates of ability to prosecute further studies for higher degrees, not that the advanced diplomas are themselves of value, but that the higher standard of scholarship required to obtain them benefits the recipients and better qualifies them for carrying on their life work.

Many a youth in his college career develops aspirations for more advanced knowledge. Where no facilities exist for satisfying his ambition after graduation, his yearnings are likely to be quenched, but if he be very determined he will require to go far afield, even into other countries to carry out his purpose. Graduate schools offer the opportunity to continue studies, which otherwise might be dropped forever. Such work can only be carried on extensively by large universities with abundant resources and a large teaching staff. On this account we must expect but a slow development in Canada, where the facilities existing in most of our universities are so limited. At present a large percentage of Canadians who desire to pursue post-graduate studies go to the United States, where many find permanent positions. Thus, there is a steady drain of intellectual workers away from Canada, many of whom are of exceptional ability. This is a far more serious loss to the country than the exodus of day labourers.

In speaking of the highest functions of a university Huxley has stated:—

“In an Ideal university, a man should be able to obtain instruction in all forms of knowledge, and discipline in the use of all methods by which knowledge is obtained. In such a University, the force of living example should fire the student with a noble ambition to emulate the learning of learned men, and to follow in the footsteps of the explorers of new fields of knowledge.”

Again:—

“The future of the world lies in the hands of those who are able to carry the interpretation of nature a step further than their predecessors. . . . *The highest function of a University is to seek out these men, cherish them, and give their ability to serve their kind full play.*”

This standard has been recognized for generations in the principal countries of the old world, but it has been chiefly in Germany that the spirit of Research has dominated and been the chief glory of her Universities. Huxley's remarkable tribute, written many years ago, is just as true today:—

“The German universities have become the most intensely cultivated and the most productive intellectual corporations the world has ever seen.”

Is it any wonder that during many years young men, burning with a desire to advance knowledge, should have striven to work under the inspiration and guidance of German masters? Where could a Canadian find such opportunity, such stimulus or such encouragement at home?

In the great majority of Canadian universities, research has found no place. The professoriate have been chosen for the instruction of raw boys and girls whose chief aim has been to pass examinations and obtain degrees. Even if teachers might have the desire and the ability to carry on investigations, they have been hampered by the system which ties them down to class-room instruction. Yet, in recent years some notable original work has been carried on by individuals, and the indication is that our leading institutions will in future give that attention to research which has been so lacking in the past. To bring this about, professors must be secured, who possess the necessary qualifications, and who are freed from the obligation of conducting continuous routine instruction; moreover they must be supplied with resources sufficient for the carrying on of their work.

Finally, in endeavouring to explain the relative backwardness of Canada in the various forms of cultural expression which I have been considering, I would assign two conditions as chiefly responsible. Though Canada has a history of three hundred years, its problems of material development have been so great as to engross the attention of the entire population. In the French regime, life was not only difficult but very uncertain. There was a succession of wars with the English and the Iroquois, and the inhabitants lived in constant dread of raids by the savages.

Until the opening of the West, farms had to be made out of forest land. When, for example, some seventy thousand Loyalists settled in Canada, bringing with them only the clothes which they wore, they were faced with the necessity of hard and unremitting labour for many years in order merely to live. Under these conditions it is not surprising that they had little time to indulge in the refinements of civilization. Later, as the country grew, the problems of developing commerce and of improving transportation facilities by land and water engrossed the active minds of the people. Wealth, but slowly accumulated and throughout most of our history there has been no leisured class to represent the cultural side of life. It is only since Confederation that we have in a small degree gradually approached to the conditions existing in the European countries, and it is within this very period that our present attainments have been consummated.

The second influence which has greatly retarded our intellectual growth is the long period of Colonial tutelage, from which we are just now emerging. What chance was there for any independent expression of Canadian thought, in any form, during the French period, when the will of the King in Paris was the factor which decided the character of Canadian life in every detail? There was no opportunity for art and literature to flourish under the zealous supervision of Royal officials at Quebec, and the church exercised a potent supervision over the rudimentary educational system which existed.

Under British domination, the Canadian provinces accepted the role which destiny had conferred upon them, of being distant appendages of the Mother Country, whose interest was not in developing and strengthening them, but in keeping them as a market for her manufactured goods and as a strategic foothold on the North American Continent.

The Colonial Office sent out governors and exercised much influence in provincial affairs. The various fights for responsible government were not inspired by dislike of British domination but by the hatred of the tyranny and injustice so often practised by governing councils in the provinces. Apart from these incidents the people meekly accepted their lot. Their laws were supervised in England. The goods which they consumed were made there. Their literature came from overseas and their protection came from the British Army and Navy. It was only after Confederation that a new spirit began to animate our people. Faint at first, it has continued to grow in strength until at last it has brought to an end our colonial status.

We are now a free self-governing state with the consciousness and pride of nationhood in our hearts and minds. Our destiny is henceforth in our own control for weal or woe. Our great achievements in the last sixty years have been mainly in the material sphere. Let us now cherish the ambition to achieve an equally notable record in the development of science, literature, education and the fine arts, so that when the Centenary of Confederation is celebrated we shall take high rank among the leading nations of the earth.