

Canada & Lord Durham Overview / Historiography

This overview has been compiled by Patrick O'Shaughnessy (@historychappy) and Elliott Watson (@thelibrarian6) using the works below. When quotes are used, they correspond to the relevant colour.

- Niall Ferguson, *Empire*, 2004.
- Piers Brendon, *The Decline and Fall of the British Empire*, 2008.
- Lawrence James, *The Rise and Fall of the British Empire*, 1998.
- Frank McDonough, *The British Empire 1815-1914*, 1994.
- John Darwin, *Unfinished Empire*, 2012

Canada & Lord Durham

"... the Canadian provinces were a constant trouble to govern. The main problem was a bone in the colonial throat which could neither be spat out nor swallowed. The French Canadians, 450,000 strong in 1837, could no more be absorbed into the British Empire than could the South African Boers ... Cut off from France, they were further isolated in Canada by race, religion and language ... They lived in a cultural cocoon, in a state of permanent alienation from their surroundings ... the huge influx of British immigrants strengthened the French sense of identity."

Canada: Influx of defeated (British) Loyalists post American War of Independence.

1837: Lower Canada = French speaking Quebecois revolted.



Upper Canada = Grew five-fold between 1830-1850. 'Pro-American' reformers revolted. "Their main grievance was not unfamiliar: despite being represented in their own House of Assembly, their wishes could be ignored at will by a Legislative Council and Governor solely accountable to London."

Revolts precipitated by "a desire for more democracy, for the sovereign's Governor effectively ruled as well as reigned, at the expense of the elected assembly."

"Most Canadians wanted reform though extremists sought the grail of self-rule ... At any rate, this failed British coup, coming on top of the abortive French revolution, caused serious concern in London ... Certainly Lord Melbourne's government felt that it must act to stop Canada going the way of the United States."

London was worried that America might annex its northern neighbour (War of 1812 saw an American army invade).

"The main cause of the Canadian rebellion was the arbitrary rule of the British Governor and his permanent officials who had persistently ignored the wishes of locally elected councils for greater democracy, and had turned the French settlers of Lower Canada into an oppressed minority. The rebellion was really the culmination of years of discontent with British colonial government in Canada. It was easily put down by British troops."

"In the Canadian rebellions of 1837-8, fear of American influence (and direct intervention) was a major anxiety: it was one of the factors that forced the eventual concession of full internal self-government ('responsible government') in Britain's North American colonies and made it the 'birthright' of white settler colonies elsewhere."

"They (the British) faced in fact two simultaneous rebellions in what were then called 'the Canadas' - today's Quebec and Ontario. The target in both cases was what the rebels regarded as corrupt and over-privileged elites into whose hands the British had largely devolved the colonies' government. In both cases the matter was complicated by questions of race and nationality, and by the looming presence of the United States next door. The eventual outcome, however, was quite 'un-American': not separation but a constitutional formula that squared local autonomy with British connection."

"The rebellion in Upper Canada was briefer and less serious. Here small farmers and artisans resented the power of the 'Family Compact' - a rich oligarchy that formed a court circle surrounding the governor. Fattened by land grants, it was closely allied with the Anglican Church, whose 'clergy reserves' embraced much valuable land, and with bankers and companies. The opposition was led by Dundee-born William Lyon Mackenzie, who arrived in Canada in 1820 Mackenzie found his metier as a campaigning journalist ... exposing graft, corruption and privilege. He became a thorn in the side of the provincial elite and a leading 'reformer' ... What tipped his radical politics over the edge into rebellion was a growing frustration that wider popular backing could not be translated into executive power, since neither the governor nor his tory advisers could be removed by the elected assembly ... In an increasingly feverish atmosphere, he planned an armed demonstration at the end of 1837 to march on the capital York (Toronto) and force a change of regime. It was a fiasco. Mackenzie's advance guard was fired on by a small group of loyalists and quickly retreated ... The British strongly suspected an American hand behind the uprisings (in Upper Canada). The rebellion in Lower Canada (Ontario) was a good deal more serious. In its two phases of violence more than 250 people were killed."

"Louis-Joseph Papineau was no backwoods bandit but a wealthy and well-connected lawyer ... By the 1830s he was the leader of the Patriote party in the elected assembly. The Patriotes voiced the growing resentment of the French-Canadian middle class at the disproportionate share of the English-speaking minority in the province's government. Dislike of commercial domination by that same minority, and the nagging belief that migration from Britain was fast-eroding the province's Catholic Francophone character, helped to widen the Patriotes' appeal. The English government, said Papineau, wanted to 'de-nationalise us in order to anglicize us'. The Patriotes aim was to turn their command of the assembly into control of the government. As the struggle went on, Papineau's language suggested that a French-Canadian republic was the ultimate goal.

"The revolt (Lower Canada) had been crushed. But it had been a terrible shock, made worse for the British by danger of war with the United States ... London dispatched some 10,000 troops to keep Canada safe, more than it had sent to Gage in 1775. A political solution was extremely urgent. It came from Lord Durham, but in a roundabout way ... "

"It took six years of political manoeuvring before London accepted that responsible government - a cabinet of ministers who enjoyed the support of the elected majority - was the only workable basis for governing the colony."

Louis-Hippolyte La Fontaine - former Patriote leader who pushed Papineau aside - understood that the constitutional formula allowed French-Canadian culture to survive - "survival required French-Canadians to accept the British connection and to work with the loyal Reform party in Upper Canada to achieve responsible government. La Fontaine reconciled the Patriote party to his plan. His alliance with Upper Canada leaders created at last a stable parliamentary regime. By reconciling British and French, La Fontaine ... was the architect of the modern Canadian state and of responsible government as a workable way of combining local autonomy and the connection with Britain."



Sir Louis-Hippolyte Lafontaine

"The Canadian rebellions did not follow the revolutionary path of the grand settler rebellion to the south. Some of the reasons are easy to spot. There was an obvious difference of scale. In neither Canadian uprising were the rebels able to muster a large enough following to overawe the government's supporters. Neither came near to inflicting the kind of early defeat that the British suffered at Lexington, with its electrifying effect. A tradition of loyalism and the tide of recent migration from Britain smothered the localist republicanism that Mackenzie had favoured ... The ideological convictions that fuelled the American rebellion were less intense or widespread. Nor, despite British fears, did the Canadian rebels enjoy enough American sympathy to make a critical difference: external aid was thus a negligible factor. Indeed, the Americans prevented weapons from crossing the border. The political climate in Britain was also quite different. The radical upsurge that had heartened the American rebels was much less apparent. The unbending assertion of parliamentary supremacy and the demand for a revenue were absent as well. The proconsuls London sent to manage the crisis ... were not of one mind. But they had more room for

manoeuvre, and a good deal more skill than their 'American' predecessors. The result was to allow a much larger space for moderates and reformers to find a compromise formula, breaking the logjam. La Fontaine was able to show that a *non-British* people could use 'British' institutions to preserve their identity - a lesson later eagerly grasped by Indians and Africans. Rebellion may have made the United States; by a subtler route, it also made Canada.



John Lambton, the Earl of Durham; "a high living hangover from the Regency era, who was sent to Canada to head off this fresh colonial revolt."

"... he managed to be at once a political democrat and a social autocrat. He advocated egalitarian reform while treating all humanity as his inferiors ... If Durham was vain, overbearing and brutal, he was also shrewd, charming and high-minded. He took an enormous entourage to Quebec, rashly including a couple of notorious reprobates ..."

" ... he (Durham) attained remarkable popularity in both provinces of Canada. Moreover his Report became 'the Magna Charta of Dominion'."

"Durham's stint as Governor-General was a fiasco. He only lasted six months, ruining himself through a characteristic combination of liberality and autocracy."

Amnesty was granted to the rebel rank and file, but Durham banished the rebel ringleaders to Bermuda. "Melbourne refused to endorse this just but illegal act and Durham at once resigned."

"Despite appearances, however, Durham was no lightweight. He had been one of the authors of the 1832 Reform Act, hence his nickname 'Radical Jack'. He also had the wit to be well advised."



Durham's two advisors were:

- Charles Buller (private secretary).
- Edward Gibbon Wakefield (Durham's principal advisor).

"Durham, Buller and Wakefield spent just six months in Canada before returning to England and presenting their report."

Given the impact of the Report on the future governments of the white settler colonies: "... the Durham Report has a good claim to be the book that saved the Empire. For what it did was to acknowledge that the American colonists had been right. They had, after all, been entitled to demand that those who governed the white colonies should be accountable to representative assemblies of the colonists, and not simply to the agents of a distant royal authority. What Durham called for was exactly what an earlier generation of British ministers had denied the American colonies (responsible self-government)."

"Although the government hastened to implement Durham's principal

recommendation - that Upper and Lower Canada be united in order to dilute French influence in the former - responsible self-government was not introduced until 1848, and then only in Nova Scotia. It was not until 1856 that most of the Canadian colonies had been granted it."

"The Durham Report squarely placed the blame on the British administration which was termed 'irresponsible government'. Durham recommended uniting Upper and Lower Canada to form a single province with a truly representative system of government. The idea was for Britain to retain overall control but to allow a locally elected government to decide domestic policy. The Durham Report was a 'revolutionary' document in that it became the blueprint for the introduction of self-government to most of the other colonies of settlement. Canada led the way. Upper and Lower Canada were united in 1840. A National Federal Assembly was created for the whole of Canada, and the individual provinces were given control over their affairs. By 1867 Canada was a fully functioning self-governing colony with a democratic voting system and its own domestic policy ... The Canadian rebellion was the catalyst for the change. Yet it was British government which masterminded it and extended it."

"... In 1839, the year before he died, the earl restored his reputation by publishing the Report that bears his name. It provided an incisive analysis of Canada's difficulties together with proposals for resolving them which were so universal in their application that the Durham Report became a handbook of white colonial development under the Union Jack. Britain's settlers felt a natural pride in being part of the world's most powerful, civilised and glorious empire. But they felt an understandable aversion to the tutelage of Westminster, who denied them a proper say in their own affairs. Canadians contrasted their state with that of Americans, who had become masters of their own destiny."

"Durham's solutions ... were not especially original but, taken together, they were an ingenious attempt to combine colonial autonomy with imperial unity. In order to dilute the French, he recommended the merging of Upper and Lower Canada ... he aimed to preserve the transatlantic connection with a 'veritable union of hearts'. This would be achieved by trusting Canadians to rule themselves, leaving London in control of external affairs, constitutional matters and public land administration. Durham believed that Canada would thus remain an intensely patriotic element within the British Empire."

"... Durham's 'healing policy' ... was partially implemented during the 1840s, helped to foster Canadian loyalty. It strengthened the colonial tie by easing the imperial yoke. It is true that the fusion of Upper and Lower Canada (1840) did not so much dispel French animus as compel French acquiescence, but unification and responsible government, introduced gradually and with

difficulty, created an Anglo-French community of interest."

1820-1908; "Between these two dates the internal government of the white colonies had been transformed. The process had started in 1839 with the publication of a report by Lord Durham of an investigation he had conducted in Canada after small-scale disturbance there two years before. The Whig peer's recommendations for local self-determination were the basis for a policy which his party implemented between 1847 and 1867. The Canadian provinces, the Australian states, New Zealand and Cape Colony were each given constitutions that provided them with elected governments with powers to make laws and distribute land ... Local autonomy led the way to voluntary creation of nation states; in 1867 Canada became a confederation, Australia a federation in 1901 and South Africa in 1910 ...

1860s: Shift in power - Governors in white colonies were from now onwards largely decorative; power was now vested in colonists elected representatives.

1858 - Canadian garrison cost GBP 261,000. By 1871, the 'Redcoats' had left all white settler-colonies, bar the Cape. The colonists had to raise and fund their own militias.

"'Responsible government', then, was a way of reconciling the practice of empire with the principle of liberty. What the Durham Report meant was that the aspirations of Canadians, Australians, New Zealanders and South Africans - which were to be little different from the aspirations of the Americans in the 1770s - could be and would be answered without the need for wars of independence. From now on, whatever the colonists wanted, they pretty much got."

"... it is hard not to feel, when one reads the Durham Report, that its subtext is one of regret" (that the same hadn't been extended to America).