

Canada in the World

Book Review

By [Tyler Shipley](#)

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“When the European settlers arrived, they needed land to live on. The First Nations peoples agreed to move to different areas to make room for the new settlements.” – Complete Canadian Curriculum (Grade 3), 2017.¹

In 2017, the *Complete Canadian Curriculum* guide for third graders claimed that **“the First Nations peoples moved to areas called reserves, where they could live undisturbed by the hustle and bustle of the settlers.”**² This was a radical and absurd misrepresentation of Canadian history, but it was reflective of a longstanding ideological project to convince Canadians that their country is a well-intentioned contributor to the greater good of the world. In that version of history, Canada has been a haven for refugees, it has been a voice of reason in times of international crisis, it has sought to preserve peace when others wanted war, it has made sacrifices when war was necessary to defeat injustice, and it has helped other nations build prosperous and functional societies like the one Canada built after Indigenous people, presumably, “moved to areas called reserves, where they could live undisturbed by the hustle and bustle of the settlers.”

[Canada in the World](#) offers a sober re-assessment of that story, providing a broad history of Canada’s engagements in the world since Confederation (1867). Unlike many such studies, I will treat the relations between the French, British, and then Canadian settlers and the Indigenous nations they encountered as a foundational element of what Canada became, and I will insist that the legacy and logic of Canadian colonialism runs through the entire history of Canada in the world. Canada’s colonial project was driven by one fundamental material goal – the destruction of Indigenous political economic practices and their displacement by capitalism – and an equally important ideological foundation in the claim that Europeans were racially and culturally advanced and, thus, that their conquest of the Indigenous Peoples represented ‘progress.’ The interplay between this economic compulsion and its ideological framing has remained integral to the story of Canada.

Canada’s Colonial Founding

The structure of this book is designed to highlight the central thesis that Canada’s relationships in the world have consistently followed the patterns set during its colonial founding. Part I provides an overview of the colonial project that created Canada, with emphasis on the period around Canada’s Confederation, a key point in the genocidal effort to eliminate what Canadian officials called “the Indian problem.”³ The creation of Canada took place within the broader dynamics of the emergence of capitalism, the spread of European colonialism and the trans-Atlantic slave trade, which I discuss briefly.

As a new world order was constructed around those dynamics, the foundation for what would become Canada was being established in the minds and in the material conditions of its colonial architects. First, Canada was rooted in the desire to establish a private market in land and labour and create the conditions for capitalist wealth accumulation. Thus, like any settler capitalist state, Canada was designed to destroy the Indigenous inhabitants – by extermination, expulsion, assimilation or whatever other method – and replace their societies with one that would be dominated by a handful of wealthy capitalists and the laws and institutions that support a capitalist society.

Second, it was premised on the notion that white, European society was more advanced, intelligent, rational, and just, and that white settlers were providentially destined to conquer the world. Though this notion took many forms, the various ideas that came to be known as white supremacy were deeply inculcated in the project to create Canada, justifying – in the minds of white settlers – the genocidal practices and policies that were facilitating the theft of land and destruction of Indigenous societies that settler capitalism required. White settlers were possessed by a colonial imagination, a fantasy of their superiority – and of the inferiority of those others they encountered – that permeated nearly every aspect of what became Canadian society. This colonial imagination was manifest in the most overtly genocidal expressions, like John A. MacDonald’s assertions of the superiority of the Aryan races, but it was often also present in the attitudes of settlers who believed themselves to be more progressive and enlightened, like Canadian missionaries or members of the suffragist movement in its early days.

Looking back at the period around Confederation and the conquest of the west, 21st century Canadians are often tempted to assert that, while the racism of the early settlers was terrible, it was a product of the period in which they lived and it is unfair to judge them by the standards of the present. This is a profoundly inadequate assessment. It ignores the fact that those attitudes never went away, even if they were very gradually refashioned and new language used to express them. Though Part I emphasizes the moments around Canada’s creation, it will carry the story of Canadian colonialism forward to the 21st century to illustrate that colonialism never ended but, rather, remained an ongoing and pervasive part of the Canadian story. This reality is tragically evident, for instance, in the appalling rate at which Indigenous women and children are murdered or disappeared in Canada, often with little, if any, investigation. Furthermore, as the rest of the book will illustrate, Canadians’ attitudes toward people outside of its own borders remained steeped in the same attitudes; what was said of people in Afghanistan in the 21st century reflected what had been said about Indigenous people in the 1880s.

Even in the 1880s, there was no global consensus that white supremacist values were correct. While most wealthy white people more or less accepted its basic premises, the overwhelming majority of the world was not white and did not consent to the theft of their land, the destruction of their societies, and the denigration of their cultures by Europeans. Colonialism was always met with resistance. Even within European societies and settler colonies, there gradually emerged in the 19th century a current of anti-colonial politics. Though these individuals often failed to completely transcend the white supremacy of the society they emanated from, they increasingly built connections with colonized people in struggles to overthrow the capitalist, colonial world order. The left, as this resistance came to be known, was always present in both the colonized and settler communities, and put the lie to any notion that ‘everyone’ believed in the ideas of white supremacy.

Canada Looks Outward

Part I, then, lays the groundwork for the argument at the heart of this book, which is that those key components of Canada's founding - settler capitalism and the colonial imagination - remained central to Canada's engagements in the world henceforth. In Part II, I return to the period around Confederation and track the parallel dynamics of Canada's looking outward to the rest of the world, illustrating the ways in which the very same Canadians who were consolidating colonialism in Canada were projecting it elsewhere. Sam Steele, celebrated police officer who helped conquer Indigenous people and supervised the virtual slave labour of Chinese workers on the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR), would later travel to South Africa to administer concentration camps holding mostly-black South Africans on behalf of the British Empire. Cornelius Van Horne, capitalist tycoon who was the president of the CPR, was quickly off to Cuba where he brought his "clearer northern brain" to monopolize the island and extract profits. By the 1930s, the Canadian military would be supporting a massacre of thousands of Indigenous farmers - "communist Indians," Prime Minister R.B. Bennett called them - in El Salvador, in order to protect the profits of the Canadian company which monopolized electricity provision in the country.

This section of the book then locates Canada within the period of global tumult that developed in the early 20th century and exploded between 1914-1945 with two world wars and an economic catastrophe. The class dynamics of Canadian society - muted somewhat by the early stages of colonial conquest - became much clearer in this period as working-class Canadians, often immigrants, were sacrificed on behalf of the British Empire and the global supremacy of the Anglo-American powers. Central to this section is a re-assessment of Canada's place in a world gripped by left-wing revolution and fascist reaction; most notably, Part II critically examines Canada's relationship to the far-right movements that rose around the world in the 1920s and 1930s to illustrate that Canada often did more to foster their emergence than to stop them. Although Canada's participation in the Second World War was mythologized as selfless and heroic, the defeat of Nazi Germany would have been much easier had Canada not spent so long supporting Hitler, refusing to accept Jewish refugees, and abandoning countries like Spain and Portugal to fascist domination.

Explaining Canada's behaviour in this period is difficult unless one remains clear about its founding principles. Canada's commitment was to a capitalist world, and thus it shared with the fascist powers a deep-rooted desire to crush the movements of the left that had risen up dramatically in the early 20th century in opposition to the poverty and immiseration of capitalism. In particular, Canada sought the destruction of the Soviet Union and, when Canada's own invasion failed to defeat the Russian Revolution, it hoped to wield fascism abroad as a hammer against communism. Furthermore, like the fascist powers, the Canadian ruling classes nurtured an abiding belief in hierarchy, in the idea that the world was divided into categories of people who, based on their race, gender, class, or religion, were more or less fit to rule over others. Hitler, after all, admired Canada's genocidal policies toward Indigenous Peoples, just as the Canadian Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King admired "the constructive work" Hitler's Germany was doing in having "met the Communist menace at the time she did, and in the way she did," which was, of course, by mass murder.⁴ King and Hitler also, notably, agreed "that in a large percentage of the [Jewish] race there are tendencies and trends which are dangerous indeed."⁵ Ideologically, then, the Canadian government was not so distant from the fascists, even while many individual Canadians abhorred them.

Middle Power and Cold War

The world looked very different after the Second World War, and Part III grapples with Canada's emergence as a so-called "Middle Power" during the Cold War. This was the era when peacekeeping became part of Canadian identity, when an image was built of a Canada that was a neutral and well-intentioned arbiter in international affairs. The reality was much different: as the people of Africa, Asia, and Latin America fought for their freedom from European colonial or neocolonial authority, Canada consistently sided with the colonial powers and undermined those struggles for freedom. Canadian magazines declared that India "was not a nation," Canadian officials urged Britain not to relinquish control of its colonial possessions to politically "immature" Africans, and Canadian weapons were donated to France to oppose the Vietnamese fight for independence. Across the globe, Canada insisted that colonized people were not capable of self-governance, and mobilized racist stereotypes of Congolese cannibals, Papuan people "living in trees," and South Asian leaders wearing diapers.

These were all manifestations of the same colonial imagination that Canada had applied to its own conquered peoples, so it should come as no surprise that white supremacy mobilized at home would be similarly mobilized abroad. But Canada's undermining of the freedom struggles of colonized people was not simply ideological; by the Cold War period, Canadian capital had expanded into the world, from banking to mining to manufacturing, and the movements struggling against colonialism could not always be trusted to protect Canadian investments. Thus, part of Canada's Cold War calculation was always to support those movements that were most amenable to maintaining a global capitalist system in a world where the existence of the Soviet Union made communism or socialism a viable option.

Canada thus became an important player in the Cold War, working closely with the United States to undermine those movements in the decolonizing world that posed a threat to the capitalist order and seeking to support those which would maintain neocolonial relations with the west. Canada opposed Indonesian freedom when it was oriented to the left, but supported it when it was ruled by a dictatorship that murdered millions of communists and welcomed foreign capital. Canada resisted the idea of Congolese independence when it was led by the charismatic left-leaning Patrice Lumumba, but quickly assisted an independent Congo taken over by right-wing forces which had assassinated Lumumba. Canada built close relations with the government of Chile and gave millions of dollars in foreign aid until Chileans elected the socialist Salvador Allende. Aid and relations were then suspended until a *coup d'état* by the notorious butcher Augusto Pinochet - supported by Canada - turned Chile into a violent, capitalist laboratory.

It was all geared toward the larger goal of winning the Cold War, definitively conquering the socialist bloc that was centred around the Soviet Union which, for all its flaws and problems, remained a key source of support for popular movements around the world. Canada had, from its inception, been driven by the permanent need to expand the frontiers of capitalism, and that project got a boost in the late 1980s, when the Soviet Union collapsed and Canada found itself part of an Anglo-American alliance that effectively ruled the world. Part IV of this book assesses what Canada did with this new power. It may have seemed, to some Canadians, that whatever violence was necessary to defeat the Soviet 'Evil Empire' was worth it, even if it was unsavoury. For those who accepted that logic, the 1990s likely came as a shock, as Canada involved itself in global affairs that had disastrous consequences but did not have the Cold War as an excuse.

Endless Wars and Climate Catastrophe

Part IV begins by addressing the 1990s, from the catastrophic dismantling of the economies of Russia and Eastern Europe, to the wanton violence of the Persian Gulf War, to the torture and murder of Somali youth, to the chaotic and confusing war in Yugoslavia and, perhaps most notably, the deeply tragic and misunderstood crisis in Rwanda. In sum, it was a terrible victory lap for the capitalist world and, especially, for Canada. In 2001, when decades of US interference in the Middle East produced a predictable retaliation in the form of the terrorist attacks against New York and Washington, a new era in world politics was declared under the banner of the War on Terror. Devastating and calamitous invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq quickly expanded to Libya, Syria, Mali and elsewhere, and the world veered ever closer to the dystopian fantasies that permeated western pop culture. The 21st century has offered endless war, climate catastrophe, capitalist crises, and the rise of fascism, and Canada has consistently been found exacerbating all of these problems.

Canada has become one of the world's largest exporters of weapons. Canada is one of the world's worst polluters. Canada has routinely intervened in other countries' affairs - Haiti, Honduras, Colombia, Venezuela - to neutralize popular movements trying to reform or replace the capitalist structures causing the crisis. And Canada has cozied up to a new wave of fascists - in Brazil, Ukraine, Poland, Saudi Arabia, Israel and arguably the United States itself - who seem possessed by a pathological death drive that leaves children in concentration camps in Texas, an entire people imprisoned by an apartheid wall in Israel, and the Amazon rainforest in flames. If the world is in crisis, Canada is a co-author, and through it all the logic has remained the same.

Behind the cascading crises of the 21st century is the endless desire for capitalist profits, of which Canada is in pursuit, especially in the environmentally destructive extractive industries. And in every struggle over Canadian access to some resource in some place, there have been people saying no, but being ignored or overruled. The same colonial imagination that led Canadians to assert their right to conquer Canada and write its laws drove Canadians to insert themselves into Honduras and re-write Honduran laws. The same certainty that Canada knew best was inherent in its transparent efforts to overthrow the Venezuelan government in favour of a pro-western oligarch, even if the vast majority of Venezuelans had not and would not choose it. The same assumption of Canadian superiority led Canadian soldiers to claim that Afghans were "two thousand years behind" and needed the Canadian occupation to help develop the country and its industries.

When people oppose Canadian intervention - as they often have - they are chastised as immature, irrational, hysterical, and backwards. When Indigenous Guatemalans opposed a Canadian mine, the Canadian ambassador told them that they needed "to face the reality of a global society."⁶ If they were not insulted, they were attacked; after a Colombian opponent of a Canadian hydro dam travelled to Canada to denounce the project, he returned to Colombia to be murdered without a word from the Canadian government or media. Even back in Canada, when an Indigenous protestor interrupted Prime Minister Justin Trudeau at a fundraiser dinner to raise the issue of people dying from poisoned water at Grassy Narrows First Nation, Trudeau sarcastically mocked the protestor while he was escorted out.

It is these continuities in Canada's engagements in the world that this book seeks to highlight. Canada's behaviour in more than 150 years of colonial relations with Indigenous Peoples is a terrible story in itself, but is given another dimension when understood to be a consistent expression of what Canada is in the world. Canadian settlers' pervasive and ongoing practice of sexual violence against Indigenous women was reflected in the same

behaviours by Canadian soldiers in Korea. The mixture of violence and manipulation that Canada used to seize land from Indigenous communities was replicated by Canadian capitalists in Honduras in the 21st century. Perhaps most telling of all, in nearly every setting the Canadian military found itself – Somalia, Yugoslavia, Afghanistan – soldiers consistently ended up calling that place “Indian Country.”

This book offers a broad history of Canada in the world, but it is not exhaustive. Such a task would be impossible to write and overwhelming to read. Instead, I have made decisions about what to emphasize, what to note briefly, and what to leave out. Those choices, naturally, betray my own interests in writing a book like this. Where many traditional Canadian historians spend much time dissecting the various personalities at the highest level of Canadian politics, my focus tends to be on the broader dynamics of historical change. This is because I seek to understand *why* things happen, and I do not believe this question can be answered merely by examining the decisions of a few typically wealthy men who claim to speak on behalf of an entire nation. That those people in positions of power have an effect is undeniably true and, as such, the various prime ministers are a big part of this story. But the flow of history runs much deeper than these individuals; this book suggests that Canada, regardless of its prime minister, has always been driven by a material compulsion toward the accumulation of capital and an ideological commitment to colonialism and white supremacy.

Indeed, many studies of Canadian foreign policy begin from an unsubstantiated assumption that Canadian policy is generally well-intentioned and seeks to strike a balance between the well-being of Canadians and the greater interests of the international community. Such an approach ignores the fact that Canada, like the rest of the world, is divided into many classes of people with very different interests; what is good for some may be bad for others. I understand history as being shaped by conflict between and within a variety of social classes and communities. The Canadian state, in this framework, acts as an institution that seeks to manage class conflict to the ultimate benefit of the Canadian capitalist class. As such, the phases and episodes in Canada’s foreign engagements are reflective of the evolving needs of the ruling classes. This book not only recounts various pieces of Canadian history but, in addition, contextualizes them within the framework of the Canadian colonial capitalist project.

Naturally, individual people in Canada often took on those goals and ideologies that emanated from the state, especially those whose interests most closely aligned with those of the Canadian ruling class, but many others found themselves on the opposite side for a variety of reasons. Gabriel Dumont, Mewa Singh, Alice Chown, Arthur Roy, Freda Coodin, Red Walsh, Norman Bethune, Edgar Harris, Kanao Inouye, James Endicott, Herbert Norman, Claire Culhane, Rocky Jones, Lee Maracle, Jean Claude Parrot, Suzanne Dudziak; they all found themselves on the wrong side of Canada, at some point and for some reason, but their stories are just as significant as the Prime Ministers.’ They represent the cracks in the edifice of Canada; those who were excluded from it, who were broken by it, or who extricated themselves from it and came to oppose it. In some of their lives – a soldier who refused to fight against the Bolsheviks, a nurse in Vietnam who exposed Canadian complicity in that conflict, or a nun who travelled to the Honduran border to block the passage of Canadian-supported paramilitaries – there were hints at something different that could have been, or that could yet be, in place of the Canada that is.

Still, this book is an examination of the Canada that is: how it has fit into the world, what role it has played, how it has shaped and been shaped by the dynamics around it. There is

much covered here that is not typically included in foreign policy studies, ranging from the dynamics of class and race in Canada, the relationship between early waves of Canadian feminism and the Great War, and shifting attitudes toward immigration and who was included as 'white' and/or 'Canadian.' There are also forays into global and regional politics that may, on occasion, seem not to be directly related to Canada. One of the weaknesses of many of the existing studies of Canada's engagements in the world is that the narrow focus on Canada means that the broader context in which Canada is engaging can be obscured. In fact, the Canadian government has often relied upon simplistic and de-contextualized narratives of its activities in order to cloak them in an air of harmless, good intentions. To truly understand the role Canada plays in various historical moments, it is imperative that we properly understand those moments.

For instance, the story that emerged from the crisis in Rwanda in 1994 was that a Canadian general tried to stop a genocide from taking place, but was thwarted by United Nations bureaucrats who refused to give him the resources he needed to prevent Rwandan Hutus from engaging in a vicious and coordinated spree of ethnic violence against Tutsis. That narrative is inaccurate, but explaining its inaccuracies requires some deeper understanding of the history of Great Lakes Africa. Thus, Chapter 10 diverges for several pages into that history, out of which the reader should emerge with a much fuller understanding of how Canada's interference in Rwanda may have directly contributed to the tragedies that engulfed that country, even before 1994, and which ended with a pro-western dictatorship that perfectly suited Canada's interests.

There are many such explorations of regional and global history, into which I insert Canada's place, and in crafting these historical accounts I am deeply indebted to the work of other scholars. Outside of several years of fieldwork in Honduras, and the occasional personal anecdote, the knowledge that I marshal for this book is drawn from secondary sources, hundreds of them, each one containing many years of work and thinking by someone else. Although I have tried to use these sources faithfully, even when I am criticizing them, it needs be said that in a book as broad in scope as this, there are likely moments where the nuance and texture of my sources gets lost. I can only implore the interested reader to follow up on the sources that I have drawn from to get the deeper picture that, on occasion, I have had to sacrifice for relevance and brevity.

There is a fundamental question at the heart of this book: what is Canada? What is at the core of the thing – the state, the society, the culture – that was built on the place that is now called Canada and which was once under the jurisdiction of hundreds of Indigenous nations? No single answer will ever be fully satisfactory, but my intention is to cast some light on this problem by looking at how Canada has engaged in the world. What did Canada say? What did it do? Who did it support? Who did it oppose? What was Canada's contribution to the events that shaped people's lives over the past century and a half, and what role has it played in building the world our children will inherit? The answers to these questions will not be comforting to anyone who is committed to the idea of a nice, kind Canada trying to help people. But given the state of the 21st century world, I make no apologies if this book is jarring. The problems that Canada has helped create are so great that some view them as an existential threat to humanity itself. Even less dire interpretations of the coming calamities suggest that we must, as a species, change course urgently. A necessary first step, for people located in Canada, is an honest and unflinching look in the mirror.

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Notes

1. Quoted in Philip Lee-Shanok, "[GTA book publisher accused of whitewashing Indigenous history](#)," *CBC News*, October 3, 2017.
2. Quoted in Philip Lee-Shanok, "GTA book publisher accused of whitewashing Indigenous history," *CBC News*, October 3, 2017.
3. Duncan Campbell Scott, quoted in J.R. Miller, *Skyscrapers Hide the Heavens: A History of Indian-White Relations in Canada*, 3rd edition, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2000, p. 281-282.
4. William Lyon Mackenzie King, *The Mackenzie King Diaries, 1893-1947*, June 29, 1937, Microfiche Collection, University of Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1980.
5. William Lyon Mackenzie King, quoted in Gerald Tulchinsky, "Goldwin Smith: Victorian Canadian Antisemite," in Alan Davies, ed., *Antisemitism in Canada: History and Interpretation*, Waterloo, Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1992, p. 84.
6. James Lambert, quoted in Todd Gordon and Jeffery R. Webber, [Blood of Extraction: Canadian Imperialism in Latin America](#), Halifax, Fernwood, 2016, p. 95-96.

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