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Tinkering with Thanksgiving: The Canadian Approach

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As in so many things, when it comes to Thanksgiving, Canadian practice is situated somewhere between Great Britain and the United States. Whereas the British Thanksgiving is a grand, occasional, formal occasion of state, and the American Thanksgiving an intimate annual lovefest of the American family, the Canadian Thanksgiving is both an official state holiday and a social occasion, but one that lacks any deep emotional associations or undertones. This article looks at the genesis of the Canadian Thanksgiving and the considerations that have shaped its particular character.

"Thanksgiving". First appearing in English in 1533 in Tyndale's translation of the Bible, the word initially indicates simply the act of giving thanks to God. Subsequently, the meanings multiply – first a prayer or religious service used to render thanks for Divine benefits and then, in the early seventeenth century, a day officially set apart for public celebration, accompanied by religious services, in acknowledgement of God's favours. But thanksgiving, being dynamic, continues to evolve. On the one hand, it metamorphoses into a major public occasion, the celebration of a unique event of great importance to the state – a military victory, the recovery of the monarch from a life-threatening illness, the end of an epidemic. This is the typical eighteenth-century thanksgiving, both in Britain and its colonies. On the other hand, in the American colonies another tradition takes shape: thanksgiving absorbs the harvest home and turns into a locally focused event celebrating God's bounty. As the nineteenth century advances, the British thanksgiving remains fixed, but in the United States thanksgiving becomes Thanksgiving, an annual national holiday that is also the country's central and most highly distinctive festival, grounded in the myth of the Pilgrim Fathers and celebrating the American family, in both its literal and metaphorical senses.

The nineteenth century also witnessed the emergence of a third Thanksgiving tradition, that in Canada. In the beginning, the influence of the British model predominated.

Between 1799 and the creation of Canada in 1867, twenty-one thanksgivings were proclaimed in what is now Ontario and Quebec – roughly one every three years.[1] Over half marked public events – successive victories over Napoleon, the end of the War of 1812-1814 with the United States, the termination of the rebellion, the "restoration of Peace with Russia" at the end of the Crimean War, the cessation of cholera epidemics and "the end of quarantine of ships at Grosse Isle". Thanksgiving proclamations were clearly instruments of state, serving political ends; this can be seen by comparing those proclaimed in Upper and Lower Canada, which were separate colonies until 1840. In Upper Canada, the only thanksgiving of a political nature was the one proclaimed in 1816 to celebrate the end of the war between Great Britain and France following the demise of Napoleon. In Lower Canada, however, the governing elite seem to have felt a frequent need to remind members of the French-speaking majority of the nature of the colony's proper loyalties. Here there were no fewer than four thanksgivings celebrating the defeat of the French forces (in 1799, twice in 1814, and in 1816), one to mark the end of the War of 1812-1814 (though, rather paradoxically, it was Upper Canada that had been invaded by the Americans during the war, not Lower Canada), and one to commemorate the end of the rebellion of 1837-1838 (admittedly, a more violent event than its Upper Canadian counterpart, but the overwhelming Francophone makeup of the "rebel" side made this a deliberately provocative measure).

Amidst these politically motivated thanksgivings, a minority harked back to the original function of the custom: Thanksgivings "For God's mercies", "To continue God's mercies", and then in 1859 and 1863 "For abundant harvest and continuation of Peace". This last formula is a neat hybrid. "Continuation of Peace" fits in with the tradition of proclaiming thanksgivings to serve political ends, though in these particular cases the threat seems somewhat obscure. Was it the events in Italy in 1859 that Canada was so concerned about? Or was there an uneasy presentiment that year of the disaster about to be unleashed south of the border, and four years later, in 1863, thankfulness British North America had not been dragged into it? On the other hand, thanks for an "abundant harvest" link up with the harvest home tradition, a reminder both of the roots of the American Thanksgiving tradition (a heritage shared by both the United States and Canada) as well as of current reality – Canada at this time was still an overwhelmingly rural society.

The tradition of political thanksgivings lingered on in Canada: the first thanksgiving following the creation of Canada in 1867, proclaimed in 1872, was "for restoration to health of H.R.H. the Prince of Wales". Nor was this the last such occasion: in 1887 a thanksgiving was proclaimed for "the 50th anniversary of Her Majesty's accession to the Throne", another one followed a decade later to mark "the Diamond Jubilee of H.M. Queen Victoria", and a final patriotic outburst came in 1902, when King Edward VIII's coronation led Canada to proclaim "a day of General Thanksgiving and rejoicing". The dates on which these thanksgivings were celebrated were of course predetermined by the events they were marking, as was the case with virtually all the thanksgivings so far referred to; as such, they might occur – and did in fact occur – at all times throughout the year. This was also true of the general thanksgivings for "God's mercies", which over the years were proclaimed in the months of January, February, August, October and December, seemingly for no particular reason on any given occasion.

This was not the case, however, with thanksgivings linked to the tradition of harvest home celebrations, which proved to be the decisive element in the development of the Canadian thanksgiving: by definition these had to come sometime in the fall. The first such Thanksgiving was proclaimed in 1879; this proved to be the first of an uninterrupted series of annual thanksgivings that has continued down until the present time. And the formula used that year – "For blessings of an abundant harvest" – had a remarkably long life: it continued unchanged year after year (with one exception) until 1920. Canada at the time was

predominantly rural, and the thanksgiving festival was seized upon as a means of binding city and country, of reminding Canadians of their rural roots. In addition, in the latter half of the nineteenth century, there was a concerted effort on the part of the Protestant clergy, particularly in Ontario, to stress the religious nature of the festival and to link it with its British roots (Stevens 1999). In the era of robust nationalism following the creation of Canada, Thanksgiving was regarded as one of the instruments for encouraging the particular "Canadianness" favoured by this constituency – a Canadianness that stressed the country's Anglo-Saxon "racial" origins and its British, Protestant heritage. Oddly enough, however, in the process American myths were taken up and reworked: the common American trope of a new Jerusalem and a country created in the image of the Biblical land of Canaan was reinterpreted, in the light of American slavery and the US Civil War, as applying to Canada. Even the myth of the Pilgrim Fathers and the first American Thanksgiving was pressed into service: it was stressed that the Pilgrims were in fact Englishmen, introducing the English custom of giving thanks into the New World; in no way should they be considered "Americans".

This wish to have it both ways reflects the powerful influence the American Thanksgiving was already exerting on its northern neighbour. This can also be seen in the date chosen for the festival: after a rocky start – in 1879 on Thursday 6 November, in 1880 on Wednesday 3 November and in 1881 on Thursday 20 October – the Canadian Thanksgiving settled down to a Thursday in November. In the absence of any Canadian Thanksgiving tradition, the choice of a Thursday only confirms the force of the American model. However, the particular Thursday chosen was seldom the same as in the United States – the last in the month – the reason presumably being that, as Canada was a northern country, an earlier date was more appropriate. But, especially in the countryside, it was still essentially "a farmer's holiday, held when the field work was done and winter work had not yet fully begun" (Drury 1966: 24), its religious nature underscored by attendance at special church services.

It did not take long, however, for the Canadian Thanksgiving to start shedding its religious overtones and rural associations. Once it became an annual event, people could "make secular plans for the holiday, which in turn enabled business and community groups to stage regular activities that had little to do with the church" (Stevens 1999). Railways started selling "Thanksgiving tickets" at cut rates, department stores like Eaton's and Simpson's introduced inexpensive "Thanksgiving goods". "By the late 1880s, the most significant Thanksgiving event in Ontario was the Canadian military's annual 'Sham Battle'" (Stevens 1999). Tens of thousands of spectators would watch up to six different regiments in Toronto's High Park or the Don River Valley, as they used blank ammunition in a mock battle for control of Toronto. Given that the military was still under British command until the early twentieth century, this also helped strengthen Canadians' bonds to the "mother country"; as an added bonus, the occasion also reinforced anti-American sentiment, recalling as it did the perfidious American attack on Toronto – then York – in the War of 1812-1814.

November, however, is not a time of year when Canadians can expect to spend much time out of doors in a pleasant fashion; soon it was proposed to shift the date of the festival. So in 1899 Thanksgiving was moved forward, to a Thursday in mid-October, a time when much of Canada often enjoys Indian Summer. This marked the first major departure from "tradition" (though of course the "tradition" in question was in fact a hodge-podge cobbled together from a genuine harvest home heritage and an imaginative American mélange of fact and fiction); it also marked the beginning of efforts to tinker with the holiday, tailoring it to meet specific needs. A second change was soon to follow: in 1908 Parliament shifted the holiday to a Monday, largely because of representations from trade and commercial

institutions, among them the Commercial Travellers' Association of Canada (*Hansard* 1921 IV: 3773), which wanted Thanksgiving Day to be celebrated on a Monday "in order to give three days in which tradesmen and others could enjoy that holiday" (*Hansard*, 1931 I: 1063). In the eyes of a later Premier of Ontario, E.C. Drury, this marked the definitive point at which

> "Thanksgiving Day, the farmers' own holiday, [was] stolen by the towns, put forward [...] for better weather [...] [It] is kept on a Monday so that townsfolk can get another long weekend at their summer cottages. They go rushing out over the highways, on Friday afternoon and Saturday morning, and rush back again on Monday evening, and in Ontario usually kill fifteen or twenty and seriously injure as many more, 'butchered to make a Canadian holiday', and it is safe to say that not one in ten of them knows what to be thankful for, or Who to. Farmers have their Thanksgiving dinner on Sunday, and work on Monday" (Drury 1966: 27).

For the next decade or so, Thanksgiving day drifted around the October calendar, being proclaimed each year on a different Monday, as early as October 8 and as late as October 31. (The latter date was particularly unhappy: irksome to Catholics, since it fell on the Feast of All Saints, a day on which they were expected to fast, it also irritated Anglo Canada, since it coincided with Halloween.) In the meantime, World War I intervened, and by the time it ended, many Canadians felt that the horrific sacrifices made by men and women of the country's armed forces should be honoured by the creation of a special holiday. In the words of the original resolution introduced in Parliament in April 1919, "November 11 of each year should be set aside as a day of national thanksgiving, to be a perpetual memorial to the signing of the armistice, ending the great world war" (quoted in *Hansard*, 1921, IV: 3773). The Thanksgiving Day Act thus proposed sank as the result of considerable political jockeying, but the idea was kept alive, and in 1921 it became a reality in the Armistice Day Act. This piece of legislation created Armistice Day as a legal holiday, to be celebrated on the Monday in the week during which 11 November occurred; rather surprisingly, it also provided for the celebration of Thanksgiving on Armistice Day. In other words, Thanksgiving and Armistice Day, though considered to have separate identities, were amalgamated into a single holiday.

In the debates in Parliament when this bill was being considered, many speakers paid homage to the sacrifices of Canadian soldiers and asserted the need to honour their memory. However, it was never made clear exactly why this should entail the incorporation of Thanksgiving into Armistice Day. It could be argued, of course, that there was a certain "deep logic" in yoking the two holidays together: both were indeed occasions for giving thanks, and in a sense they represented in a new form the ancient double Thanksgiving tradition of state occasion and secular festival. However, the real reason was probably more pragmatic – a feeling that two separate holidays at more or less the same time of year was excessive (a feeling echoed at a later date by a Member of Parliament who stated forthrightly that "we have in Canada far too many public holidays"; *Hansard* 1931, I: 1065). There was even some questioning as to whether or not this return of Thanksgiving to November was not a mistake. As one MP pointed out, with the new system "This year the second Monday falls on the 14th, and that is considered too late in parts of the Dominion of Canada to hold Thanksgiving Day" (*Hansard* 1921, IV: 3775). A comment by another MP reveals the extent to which Thanksgiving had completely lost any of its original religious overtones. "I would say the earlier the date, the better. Most sportsmen in Ontario are off hunting the first couple of weeks in November, and they want a holiday when the weather is good. Also for a holiday during which there can be any movement of troops, the earlier the date the better; so much so, that

for years in view of the fall manoeuvres in Ontario, Thanksgiving was shifted on to the middle of October" (*Hansard* 1921, IV: 3776).

The uneasy coexistence of Thanksgiving and Armistice Day foreshadowed by this debate was to last only ten years; by 1931 it had become clear that the two commemorative occasions differed so fundamentally in their natures that it would be best to separate them. Among those most vociferous for a divorce were veterans and their organizations, who felt that the dignity of the day was demeaned by being associated with the festive nature of Thanksgiving: they did not want Armistice Day to "degenerate into an ordinary public holiday", and feared that its identity was "in grave danger of being lost by reason of the extent to which [it] has been and is being confused with Thanksgiving Day in the minds of the people of Canada" (*Hansard* 1931, I: 1064). With a minimum of debate, the two holidays were split. Armistice Day was renamed Remembrance Day, and fixed for November 11. In the case of Thanksgiving, there was a resumption of the old practice by which it was formally declared by annual proclamation of the Governor in Council. With its reemergence in 1931 it also gained a new and all-inclusive raison d'être: "For general thanksgiving to Almighty God for the blessings with which the people of Canada have been favoured". That year the day chosen for celebration was the second Monday of October, and this stuck: from that time Thanksgiving Day in Canada has been fixed, with the single exception of 1935, when a general election was declared on the second Monday of October, which fell on the 14 October that year, thus forcing the holiday back to October 24, a Thursday. General displeasure with a holiday that did not result in a long weekend meant that the experiment was never repeated. Finally, in 1957, a proclamation was issued fixing Thanksgiving permanently on the second Monday of October, thus doing away with the need for annual proclamations.

From this brief history it is clear that the Canadian Thanksgiving lacks any kind of aura of majesty or mystery. Though for a brief period in the second half of the 1800s there was an attempt to capture it for particular ideological purposes, for most of the time it has been regarded quite pragmatically as a pleasant and convenient fall holiday, one that can be shifted about at will to meet changing circumstances and particular needs. Some Canadians feel uncomfortable with this, and in recent years there have been efforts to invent a new, more exciting Canadian Thanksgiving with a more distinguished pedigree. *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, for example, in its article on "Thanksgiving Day", claims a North American first for Canada: the ceremony of thanks held by Martin Frobisher in 1578 on Kodlunarn Island in the eastern Arctic (Vol. 4: 2136). This, however, was no thanksgiving festival in our sense, but rather an act of desperate gratitude by men who felt extremely lucky to have made it through the ice, currents and terrible winds that had sunk one of their ships, led the crew of another to mutiny and almost prevented them from reaching the island. Other books speak of Champlain's Order of Good Cheer at Port-Royal as having been the occasion of the first Canadian Thanksgiving dinner, refer to Cartier's kneeling in thanks on the shores of the St Lawrence as a clear precursor of the tradition, and even try to rope in the Vikings, speculating that "it is possible" that back around 1000 "they might have given thanks in their own way to their own gods for bringing them safely to beautiful, fertile 'Vinland'" (Garner 1986: 9). And in an age of multiculturalism, it is no surprise to learn that there is no doubt that "North America's first inhabitants, the Inuit and Indian peoples had their thanksgivings centuries before the first European set foot on these shores" (Garner 1986: 9).

But this is pushing the term too far. "Giving thanks" is not the same as Thanksgiving. The word has accumulated too many culture-specific associations since it first appeared almost five hundred years ago. In Canada, however, these associations have been modest, pragmatic and above all lacking in any mythic overtones. This is true today, and seems to have been true since the emergence of the modern holiday in the nineteenth century. It is enough to go to the website of Library and Archives Canada and the Early Canadiana Online

project of the Canadian Institute for Historical Microreproductions, an impressive collection of nineteenth century Canadian fiction. The texts here were produced around the time when, in the United States, writers like Harriet Beecher Stowe and John Greenleaf Whittier and even Emily Dickinson herself were embellishing the Thanksgiving theme in their work. A search through the hundreds of Canadian novels from that period in the Early Canadian Online project, however, draws a virtual blank: it is as though Thanksgiving did not exist. There is just one brief reference to the holiday, contained in a single sentence in a novel from 1897 by Maud Petitt, entitled *Beth Woodburn*. Beth, the title character, is a student at the University of Toronto who comes from a small town in the Ontario countryside. At one point in the story, Thanksgiving Day appears on the horizon, but it is quickly dispatched: "Beth did not go home at Thanksgiving that year, and she almost regretted it the evening before" (97). She *almost* regretted it – presumably, on second thought, she realized how unimportant it was for her to go home on the occasion. No American writer would dare brush off this holiday so coolly and so brusquely: where Thanksgiving is concerned, this passage must be regarded as setting the absolute standard for minimalism.

Endnote

[1] Basic information about the Canadian Thanksgiving proclamations can be found on the Government of Canada Canadian Heritage website at <http://www.pch.gc.ca/progs/cpsc-ccsp/jfa-ha/graces_e.cfm>.

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