

## **Great Canadian Question: Heroes & Symbols**

**Title: Canadian Heroes? No Thanks**

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In Canada, “hero” is a four-letter word. The idea of having national heroes who represent and encapsulate our values has never quite caught on. Where the United States makes minor gods of its Founding Fathers, Canadians simply find theirs amusing. Where other countries glorify their war heroes, Canada puts emphasis on its collective peacekeepers. Simply put, Canada has no patience for the idea of a hero.

This does not, as some argue, represent a lack of national character. Instead it highlights some of the most Canadian values of all; a respect for tolerance, community and group action. Our lack of hero-worship is not a drawback but an asset, an expression of esteem for group action and a strong society.

Central to the debate on heroes in Canada is the inherent value, or lack thereof, of heroes. Though it is not unusual for people to decry Canada's lack of heroes, they seem hard-pressed to explain why heroes are such a good thing to begin with. Everyone can agree that it is beneficial when people do good, but what further good is achieved by deifying these people as national icons? The only point of idolizing a hero is to hold them up as an example of what is 'right' and how to do it, but this assumes that the hero themselves was unquestionably right in their actions and intentions.

The problem with heroes is that heroism is a simplistic concept, and we live in a complicated world. The ideal of a hero has a number of key qualities, such as courage, self-sacrifice and great achievement, which are existent but not persistent in the real world. Though a single person might at any time be courageous, self-sacrificing or a great achiever, it is impossible for them to be that way all the time. Real people are more complex; they have flaws and foibles, they are unsure of themselves, they have personal lives and agendas. They are, for much of their lives, unheroic.

Such a condition can be seen with Louis Riel, one of the founders of Manitoba and leader of two armed rebellions. Riel fought for his beliefs and the rights of his people, even going so far as to die for his cause. By all accounts this seems a heroic tale, the righteous individual standing up against a corrupt system. But to consider Riel in such a light is to ignore his religious extremism, his history of mental illness, or the controversial execution of Thomas Scott. Louis Riel is a hero only if we selectively ignore his unheroic traits.

Most instances of heroes have the same problem; they ignore such flaws, building their subjects into unimpeachable paragons of virtue and honour. They come to represent

basic ideas and define their time by being abstracted to the point of becoming unrecognizable. Interpreting the actions of individuals in such simplistic ways is asking for trouble, as it builds an unreasonable emotional connection to the subject. To many Manitobans Riel is not a man to be judged but a hero, unquestionably noble and right. To discuss his flaws or the implications of his actions in polite conversation is taboo; one simply does not speak that way of 'heroes'. But to behave this way is intellectually dishonest, and potentially very dangerous.

Daniel Francis, as quoted by Charlotte Gray, makes the point that heroes are often “sticks used by one part of the community to beat on another”. Indeed, Gray's articles clearly establish that heroes can be more a source of aggravation than admiration. By creating a hero societies create justifications for their past actions; they encourage people to accept their past as unquestionably right rather than confronting the wrongs that occurred. But wrongs committed don't go away, and those wronged tend not to forget. If a society is unwilling to admit that it caused harm to another it makes it difficult for the two to conduct civil relations. Each side sees itself as the victim of unjust attacks, and so they can never quite trust each other. In this manner heroes can be dangerous; they create modern-day problems by obscuring historical truth.

If this is the case then perhaps it is a good thing that Canada has avoided creating heroes, except in the most extraordinary and uncontroversial circumstances. To succeed as a hero in Canada one must avoid interpersonal conflict, the chance of wronging another. This is why Terry Fox makes such a great national hero; not only does he embodied heroic values, but he did so against a disease rather than his fellow citizens. This style of hero worship leads to a limited pantheon of heroes, but also avoids the pitfalls of setting one culture's hero against another. The trade-off in Canada, then, is a lack of national heroes in exchange for increased social cohesion.

Canada's pursuit of cohesion can be seen by concepts and ideals it emphasizes. The national symbols of Canada are not stark individualists but representatives of social order. It is not the towering Paul Bunyan that stands out in the Canadian consciousness but the depersonalized, abstract 'lumberjack'. We revere not old West outlaws like Jesse James or Billy the Kid but the collective order established by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. Even the national symbol, the beaver, is representative of the group activity required to make and maintain a community.

Heroes in Canada, then, tend to be groups rather than people. We place emphasis on collective action rather than the bombastic individual forcing their way through the world. Indeed, overly powerful individuals are regarded with some suspicion in Canada; we instinctively wonder just who they are, and what they did to get where they are today. We are more apt to value the person who has worked within the community rather than the one who works outside it.

Of course, this idea of community action tends to contradict the traditional idea of the hero. Heroes are supposed to make their own way, establish their own rules, be somehow different and 'better' than the average person. Such traits do not lend

themselves to a stable community. Yet many persist in glorifying these ideas; author Peter Newman for one seems to hold this traditional view of heroism, complaining that “we are ruled by a prime minister whose idea of manifest destiny is to get to work on time”. But why would Canadians want anything to do with Manifest Destiny?

It was, after all, a theocratic belief system instituted by a select few that sought to establish the supremacy of one country over others. It combines three ideas- intolerance, elite rule and domination- that are run counter to basic Canadian values. We do not want a Prime Minister that acts decisively, goes their own way, and tries to forge a special destiny for the country; we want a Prime Minister who mediates problems and ensures the country works together.

The origins of this desire lie in the origins of Canada itself. We speak of Canada as a multicultural country as if this were a modern development, when in truth Canada began that way. Confederation was built from a trifecta of English, French and Native communities, each possessing a unique history and unique needs. The only way a country built from such diverse components could work is through compromise, and so compromise became the founding principle of Canada.

How else but through compromise could the country have convinced settlements stretching across the continent to join Confederation? How else but through compromise could the provinces have been able to operate independently while contributing to a greater whole? The needs of prairie farmers are vastly different from those of Newfoundland fishers, and the city of Vancouver is almost entirely different from the city of Montreal, yet these diverse groups are able to work together to build a strong society. The stability of the Confederation depended on this, the ability of different populations to come together to negotiate and operate as part of a larger community. No wonder Canada loves the peacemaker, the compromiser; without them, there would be no Canada at all.

Canada's lack of heroes is not a reflection of cultural weakness but of cultural strength. We get our examples not by censoring the lives of our founders but by observing their ability to put ego aside for the common good. We revere not the individuals that try to define society, but the people and groups who work within it for the common good. Our lack of national heroes represents one of the fundamental strengths of the country, a willingness to look at ourselves honestly as a way of working together and solving problems. There is no shame in our lack of Canadian heroes; Canada neither wants nor needs them.