THE RISE OF CITIES IN CANADA BEFORE 1914

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From the 1940s onward, the great majority of Canadians have come to live in cities and smaller urban centres. Yet despite the compelling sweep of this more recent growth, urban communities in Canada took shape much earlier; in fact, their rise began with the very start of permanent European settlement. Even by the First World War over forty percent of the population was urban, while the city, that specially large and powerful urban community, had taken on outlines that are with us still. To trace this long development across a span of some three hundred years requires restricting any brief account of it to certain major aspects or themes. To begin with, we must simplify matters of definition, and merely say at the outset that an urban community, in general, consists of a concentration of people organized at a specific site who carry on various functions or services differentiated from the surrounding countryside, functions which may be economic, political, social or cultural in nature, and usually involve some combination of these factors.

Secondly, we can only deal below with rising urban places in Canada in terms of political functions which they early exercised as government and garrison communities or their advancing economic roles as commercial, transportation, and industrial centres. There is no space to cover the significant social and cultural services they may also have rendered as foci of religious, educational or artistic life, of information, expertise and opinion. But the aim, in any case, is to try to explain how major Canadian centres grew through their basic activities, rather than to analyze their internal life and structure, their social organization, cultural responses or patterns of behaviour.

Finally, the following treatment of several consecutive stages and themes in the rise of Canada's cities down to 1914 obviously involves some overlapping (as well as leaving out much), because the time periods set out for this urban evolution do not sharply start and end: they are simply conveniences for explanation. Nevertheless, they do underline some very influential factors in the development of the communities under consideration, which certainly grew from little outposts or villages to substantial towns or cities—and some of them to the largest, most powerful cities of all with the fullest range of functions, the metropolises: by 1914, the nationally dominant centres of Montreal and Toronto and the more regionally based Winnipeg and Vancouver. But now let us turn to the earliest stage in this transcontinental process of development.

Staple Entrepots and Garrison Centres

Urban communities in early colonial Canada essentially began
as garrison points and warehouse bases, or entrepots, for the trans-atlantic trade in fish and furs. It was largely to command the flow of these prime export staples that France and England established garrisons and governments during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries within the territories of the later Canadian state. The garrison’s function may be left for a moment; as for the staple entrepot, its task was to store and ship the cargoes collected there for export, and to stock and distribute the supplies imported for carrying on the fishery or the fur trade. This entrepot function, however, worked out somewhat differently as between fishing and fur trading.

In the former case, well before 1600 fishing stations (where the catch was dried before shipment) began to spread along the coasts of Newfoundland and the neighbouring mainland. But for long years thereafter the stations were dominated by transient fishermen who crossed the Atlantic each summer to the fishing grounds and returned each fall with cargoes of dried cod. Hence there was no immediate need for a major local base. Moreover, even when a resident fishery did gradually develop to exploit the grounds more fully, the fishing stations often became just little settled “outport” villages, each exporting its catch fairly directly overseas without recourse to some more central place. In short, the dispersed nature of the fishing industry did not readily promote the rise of major entrepots in the Atlantic region.

On the other hand, the fur trade, as it probed inland up the waterways, was focused by the river routes themselves. Traffic flowed down to river bases that commanded access to the interior, and radiated inward from them. This was most evident on the largest Canadian waterway of all, the St. Lawrence. There Quebec emerged after 1600 as the controlling entrepot between the great river and the sea. And further upstream Montreal soon developed as the chief French inland collecting and distributing base, since it was the junction point of three main canoe routes that fanned out into the continent: the Ottawa River to the vast north west, the upper St. Lawrence to the lower Great Lakes and Mississippi waters, and the Richelieu-Lake Champlain route southward to the Atlantic seacoast. It is not surprising, therefore, that Quebec and Montreal became flourishing towns well before there were any comparable English urban centres within the present limits of Canada.

Nevertheless, in the coastal fishing areas a significant entrepot gradually appeared in English Newfoundland: St. John’s. Indeed, in one sense it antedates any other Canadian urban centre, for fishermen from Europe had gathered in its harbour since the early
sixteenth century. Moreover, Water Street, today a chief business thoroughfare in St. John's, was once a fisherman's path along the harbour's edge and has been called the oldest street in North America. Certainly it was early lined with fishermen's shanties, rough wooden storehouses and cod-drying racks or "flakes", though it would take at least two centuries before the jumbled, turbulent shanty world of St. John's really took shape as a coherent urban community with some pattern of permanence in its buildings and its society. Nevertheless, it did have features which brought its ultimate emergence as a major entrepot, gathering fish cargoes and distributing supplies to lesser outports along the shores of Newfoundland.

St. John's had excellent harborage, sheltered behind a line of rocky hills that protected it from the open Atlantic. And it lay on the edge of Newfoundland's eastern Avalon Peninsula, nearest both to Europe and to the rich Grand Banks of the cod fishery. Hence its site was strategic for both trade and defence. This well-located port, approachable only through a cliff-walled water passage, was an obvious place for a garrison to support England's hold over her fishing interests. In the long cycle of Anglo-French imperial struggles from the late seventeenth to the early nineteenth centuries, St. John's thus played a prominent part; repeatedly fought over, and on occasion even captured by the French. It was securely in British hands after 1762, however, while France instead lost her own grip on Newfoundland.

The French wars finally ended in 1815. Largely because of them Britain gradually came to treat Newfoundland as a colony, instead of a giant fishing station for English summer fishermen, in order to strengthen her hold on the fishing regions. St. John's slowly became a centre of administrative and judicial authority as well as a defensive stronghold. And as settlement advanced, so did merchant life on Water Street, the traders handling an ever larger share of the island's commerce. The town did not become the seat of a full-fledged colonial government until 1824. But by then its role was firm as a leading Atlantic fishing entrepot and its population had passed 8,000.

Another prominent Atlantic urban community, Halifax, began as a garrison centre. Britain founded it in 1749 to meet the challenge of Louisbourg, the great stone fortress on Cape Breton Island which France built to sustain her own western Atlantic fisheries and command the St. Lawrence approaches to Canada. The massive citadel and thriving fishing town of Louisbourg fell in 1758 to an expedition from Halifax, now the main British naval base in northern American waters. Though Halifax would long continue in that role, this garrison centre, which was also made
capital of the British colony of Nova Scotia, soon took on commercial activities as well. Its superb and well-protected harbour—where behind a long narrow channel Bedford Basin could contain whole fleets of ships—was as strategically placed for access to North Atlantic trade lanes as it was for naval control. Moreover, the warships and troops that congregated there needed supplies. Halifax merchants emerged as contractors to the garrison, and their warehouses also began to ship goods brought from overseas to the fishing settlements around the eastern Nova Scotian coast.

Leaving the eastern coast, we come to the early fur trade entrepots of Quebec and Montreal. The former definitely began in 1608 as a staple warehouse. It lay at a point where narrows in the St. Lawrence beneath the towering mass of Cape Diamond enabled it to command traffic up the river with the interior. Moreover, deep tidal waters, river bank coves and the mouth of the tributary stream, the St. Charles, provided safe anchorage here for ships from France inbound with trade goods and outbound with furs collected at Quebec. From the start it served as the seat of French governing authority as well, while its log walls and small contingent of soldiers also expressed a military function. Still, in the initial years there were no settlers, only fur traders, to govern; and not until the 1630s did Quebec really start to be effectively fortified as a garrison point, and to rule over colonists once farming settlement commenced to spread along the river banks. Nor did its essential fur entrepot role then cease.

In the later seventeenth century, the flow of French settlers increased to the St. Lawrence, and Quebec’s commercial activities enlarged somewhat as it came to be a market centre for the local agrarian population. Furthermore, the mounting imperial conflict with the British enhanced its garrison function. Quebec became, in fact, a walled fortress-capital, the key to France’s hold on settled Canada and to the ever-extending fur trade of the interior. By the early 1750s it was a substantial town of some 7,500: seat of the great officers of state, home of the highest Catholic clergy and chief educational institutions, centre of ship-building and artisans’ services, and the main port of New France where West Indian as well as French imports entered and farm products as well as furs went out. Nevertheless, though the fur frontiers now had moved far westward from Quebec, it still rested on the fur trade. It remained at root a staple entrepot when Britain captured it in 1759, and France ceded Canada in 1763.

Throughout the whole French period Montreal stood out still more plainly as a fur trade base. Initially founded in 1642 as a mission centre to the inland tribes, its advanced position near the
country of the powerful Iroquois confederacy also made it a place of defence when wars erupted between the French and Iroquois. But Montreal's very ease of access from interior trails and rivers also rendered it an ideal location for the commerce in furs. By the 1670s, when for a time peace had returned, it was the site of annual fur fairs, rip-roaring frontier gatherings to which Indians journeyed with canoe-loads of pelts to exchange for goods shipped up to merchants stationed there. Above Montreal, rapids in the St. Lawrence barred the further passage of ships westward. Indeed, even in the river below, toward Quebec, shallows and dangerous currents made navigation risky for the sailing vessels of the age. But smaller ships and bateaux could ascend this far. Hence from the start Montreal was marked out as the head of navigation on the St. Lawrence, the final trans-shipment point from oceanic to inland transport.

As fur commerce grew, so did Montreal. As the 1750s opened, it was a flourishing town of about 3,500, by now surrounded by farming settlement and removed from the pressing danger of Indian attack. The fur frontiers lay so far beyond, reaching into the valley of the Saskatchewan, that Indian canoes no longer brought pelts to trade in Montreal. Instead the exchange was made at distant western posts, and French-Canadian voyageurs, the skilled labour of the fur trade, maintained canoe routes westward from the Montreal base. There they gathered before and after the flow of summer traffic. There as well were the solidly built houses of the inland fur merchants, their clerks, storekeepers and craftsmen. Although Montreal also became a local market serving a fertile farming neighbourhood and the home of influential religious orders, the stamp of the fur entrepot continued strongly upon it.

Its garrison role was quickly revived in the decisive Franco-British contest for America. Montreal served as anchor and supply base for a chain of forts defending the French mid-continental empire, embryonic towns extending in the 1750s from Fort Frontenac (later Kingston) and Niagara to Detroit and the forks of the Ohio. But British attacks broke up the chain, and in 1760 the last French forces in Canada surrendered at Montreal itself. Actually, that place, set as it was on an open river bank, was not a strong defensive site against European-style cannon and soldiery. In spite of the town's high strategic importance, it was never a prime fortress. Montreal's future, like its past, lay with trade and transport.

The coming of British rule soon made that apparent, as English-speaking merchants settled in Montreal in order to enter the far-flung St. Lawrence fur trade. Their business skills and their
connections with British markets and supply houses gave them advantages over French-speaking merchants whose own trading ties with France had now been broken. Under English direction, but with experienced French-Canadian western traders and voyageurs as vital adjuncts, the fur trade out of Montreal rose to unprecedented heights, especially evidenced in the North West Company which took shape there in the 1780s. By the early nineteenth century hard-driving Nor'Westers had extended the town's fur commerce to the Arctic and Pacific. And the leading Montreal fur magnates raised fine stone mansions and lived in lordly fashion, as befitted the masters of a huge commercial empire.

That empire, however, faced the challenge of a rival fur trade system. The Hudson's Bay Company, founded by England in 1670, could reach from posts on the great Bay deep into Montreal's western trading areas, and it had the advantage of a shorter route between transatlantic markets and the heart of the continent. It thus had posed a problem for the St. Lawrence traders during the French era, but it was only in the early nineteenth century that a newly aggressive Hudson's Bay Company engaged with the North West Company in an all-out trade war that brought bloodshed and heavy costs to both. As a result, in 1821, the Nor'Westers amalgamated with the older company, which had the better access to distant fur resources. In 1821, the western fur commerce thus passed from Montreal. Yet though that town now lost its role a staple fur entrepot, it rapidly adjusted; for by this time other economic activities had sufficiently developed there to offset the loss of the fur trade.

Quebec, meanwhile, had grown somewhat more slowly. Its population in 1821 was 15,000 compared to Montreal's nearly 20,000. It had remained the seat of government under British rule, after 1791, as capital of the largely French-speaking province of Lower Canada. It was still the main St. Lawrence port of entry, and from about 1810 the rise of lumbering along the St. Lawrence-Ottawa river system made it the main entrepot for a valuable new staple export, square timber, which went from Quebec to Britain in ever-increasing quantities. Furthermore, the city maintained its role as an imperial fortress under British sway. It resisted American attack in 1775 and thereby held Canada. It was the main military base for Britain during the inland War of 1812 with the United States. Afterwards, its fortifications were strengthened still more massively, and Quebec's garrison function continued to play a large part in its existence.

Halifax, too, remained a major garrison and naval base through the American Revolutionary and French Napoleonic Wars,
prospering markedly in the years of high wartime demand for supplies and services to the forces, and also building up an important trade with the West Indies sugar islands within the British Empire. By 1817 its population stood at 11,000. But other influences were also now acting strongly on Halifax as on the other urban centres of British North America—largely because of the spread of settlement in the colonies which was ushering in a whole new stage of urban growth.

**Eastern Settlement and Commercial Towns**

After the Napoleonic Wars ended in 1815, British immigrants came in increasing numbers to British North America. This transatlantic wave of settlement brought about a million people before subsiding in the 1850s, although it was not the only influx to affect the colonies. The Loyalist migration northward after the American Revolution had much increased Nova Scotia's population and led to the foundation of the provinces of New Brunswick in 1784 and Upper Canada, later Ontario, in 1791. Then, from the 1790s to the War of 1812, considerable numbers of American pioneers had pushed out farm frontiers in Upper Canada and the Eastern Townships of Lower Canada. Yet the much larger, longer, British migration had far wider impact, touching all the eastern British American colonies.

Newfoundland had already been receiving English and Irish immigrants, the latter especially in and around St. John's. Scots had entered Nova Scotia since the 1770s; Scots and Irish occupied lands in Prince Edward Island. Irish immigrants also gathered in the lumbering areas of New Brunswick and on the Ottawa after 1820. And English, Scots and Irish filled up the extensive farmlands of Upper Canada onward to the fifties. Still further, many immigrants collected in the towns; the Irish became a large component of an otherwise French-speaking labour force in Montreal and Quebec, while Anglo-Scots dominated their business circles. And Toronto, Upper Canada's biggest centre by the mid-century, was at that time chiefly populated by British-born citizens, largely English and Irish. One inevitable consequence of this whole influx was heightened ethnic strains and politico-religious rivalries, notably between Catholic Irish (strongly clustered in Montreal and Halifax) and Protestant Ulstermen (still more powerful in Toronto). But the far larger consequence was much more rapid social and economic development, which particularly affected the towns themselves.

The advance of settlement entailed the growth of commercial functions for urban places in the colonies. More people in the surrounding countryside created more needs for supply and service
centres; more exploitation of resources brought more products to market at the towns. Through immigration they also directly received labour, capital and skills to utilize: their population and potentialities went up in keeping with colonial settlement as a whole. New urban communities appeared to serve emerging districts, while older ones grew larger. At the same time, existing garrison points or fur trade posts often focused the development of areas around them, offering available market places and facilities about which rural occupation could proceed. The growth of town and country accordingly went on by interaction. Their relations have always been reciprocal in kind, if seldom without friction.

In any event, the rise of internal, local markets was highly significant for towns. Hitherto the garrison centre or staple entrepot had had a fairly narrow economic basis. The former's prime functions were of course military and political. Until it could attract other kinds of activities that would do more than serve a non-producing body of soldiers or the needs of government officials, its development was bound to stay restricted. The staple entrepot carried on a long-range, but rather simple, undiversified kind of commerce. Its interests were kept subordinate to those of trans-atlantic markets and distant metropolitan merchants who reaped the largest rewards from its trade. Unless business men in the colonial urban centres could take on a more varied set of operations, their towns were likely to remain slow-growing and greatly dominated by outside metropolitan forces.

The spread of local commerce altered the picture. Naturally, it did not happen overnight, but it was already well under way in some areas. In the former St. Lawrence colony of New France, for instance, it had gone on with expanding rural occupation since the later seventeenth century, thus widening the operations of Quebec and Montreal; and it had also continued at Halifax from at least the late eighteenth century. But garrison and entrepot functions had remained dominant in these places. It was not until settlement swept across eastern British North America in the earlier nineteenth century that broader-based and faster-growing commercial towns became a prominent feature of Canadian urban life.

Toronto provides a case in point. For a time a minor post and warehouse in the eighteenth-century French fur trade, it was re-established and renamed York in 1793 as capital and military base of the new province of Upper Canada. In fur trade days, Toronto had been the entry to a main trail northward from Lake Ontario that cut across the neck of the Ontario peninsula to the upper Great Lakes. Its site could still command this strategic passage to the northern Lakes. Moreover, its broad harbour
enabled a British fleet based there to make Lake Ontario a barrier against American attack, whereas Niagara at the one end and Kingston at the other, where the St. Lawrence opened, lay just across the border from an unfriendly United States. And so York essentially was founded as a garrison town.

For all this, the place was briefly captured in American naval raids during the War of 1812. Actually York’s site was none too defensible if “sea” power failed, for, like Montreal, it lay on a low open shore, and it, too, proved better-placed for trade and transport than for a military role. As a garrison and governing centre, however, the town did attract some early farm settlement in its vicinity to supply its soldiers and officials. Also, the roughly cleared main roads, like Yonge Street northward, that were cut out through the forests from the capital gave it some advantages in access to the inland areas. Yet until the post-war British migration flowed into Upper Canada, York remained little more than a capital village, chiefly distinguished by the aristocratic dignity and political power of its close-knit governing circle, the Family Compact. It was much smaller than Kingston, which thrived as a trans-shipment point between lake and river transport on the St. Lawrence route to the sea, and which in the War of 1812 had become the real military stronghold in the colony, the site of naval dockyards and growing fortifications.

In the 1820s, however, York began a rapid advance as settlers spread out across Upper Canada. Whereas Kingston, well to the east of the province, had a relatively limited, rugged back-country or hinterland, York, at the centre, had much better contact with broad, fast-settling farm districts. Besides, it had the roads, rough as they were, to get at the rising local markets of its own hinterland. Furthermore, the opening of the American Erie Canal from the lower Great Lakes to New York in 1825 gave the town an alternative waterway outward. It could import goods for its hinterland and send out produce either by the Kingston-Montreal river route or by lake and Erie Canal—and so escaped being dominated either by one or the other. Population growth amply demonstrated the ascent of this new commercial town: from 1200 inhabitants in 1820 to 9200 in 1834, when it was incorporated as the City of Toronto.

Thanks to the growth of villages and hamlets in nearby districts, each with their own local markets to serve, Toronto further emerged as a wholesale centre, another mark of the developed commercial town. Its merchants not only carried on retail trade with their own locality, but also specialized in providing goods for
the retail trade and local markets of smaller places in the city's hinterland. This process was advancing in Toronto from the 1830s as dry goods, hardware, grocery, and other substantial wholesale houses appeared there. Their well-to-do masters grew economically powerful. They found a rising business elite, which soon wrestled political and social leadership in the city away from the old officialdom of Family Compact days.

By 1851, accordingly, Toronto had become a sizable commercial centre with over 30,000 inhabitants and a vigorous municipal life dominated by business interests. It functioned chiefly as the focus of a large, diversified trade with the markets of its flourishing hinterland. It was certainly not a simple staple entrepot, nor had it been one, except in its earliest days as a minor fur outpost. Its garrison function was no longer important. After 1841 Toronto was not even the capital in the Union of the Canadas, formed that year. It was soon to be a capital again, but plainly the loss of the seat of government had not interfered with its continuing commercial growth. With its superior access to the interior, especially northward up Yonge Street, and its enterprising, increasingly specialized business community, Upper Canada's first city was on its way to becoming the metropolis of a well-populated Ontario region.

Toronto is but one example of the commercial towns that were now arising from the Maritime colonies to Upper Canada, but especially in the latter. There, too, they were notably gaining incorporated, elected municipal authorities to maintain order and provide internal services for their growing populations. They might vary widely in size and character, from coastal port to inland country town, but all were dealing with expanding local markets and commerce, whatever other operations they also carried on. Halifax, for instance, still a capital and an imperial garrison base, particularly developed in the earlier nineteenth century as a major shipping centre, bringing in West Indian rum and sugar and British manufactures, distributing goods around the coasts and collecting cargoes of fish, lumber and farm produce for shipment overseas. Its affluent West Indies merchants and its Halifax Banking Company (1825) and Bank of Nova Scotia (1832) indicated the mounting wealth of the community, which was incorporated as a city in 1841.

One important new kind of staple entrepot *cum* commercial town also emerged in the period, however: the lumber centre, based on the increasing amount of timber which flowed down Atlantic rivers and the St. Lawrence as staple exports to the British market. Most noteworthy in the Maritimes was the rise of Saint John as a
timber port, controlling access to some of New Brunswick’s greatest forest resources up the long Saint John River. Wooden shipbuilding quite naturally concentrated at this city (which was given that status on its first settlement by Loyalists in 1784). By the mid-nineteenth century large Saint John-built sailing vessels were known on the oceans of the world. Thanks to its shipyards, its prime lumber exports, and the local commerce that grew with settlement along the river, New Brunswick’s chief seaport far outstripped Fredericton, the little provincial capital further up-river. By 1851, in fact, Saint John was larger than Halifax, their respective populations standing at 22,700 and 20,700.

On the St. Lawrence, Quebec became an even bigger lumber port. Incorporated as a city in 1832, by 1851 its population had grown to 42,000. Bulky lumber ships came to its deep-water anchorages to load the giant square-hewed timbers that were rafted down the river; their roomy holds gave cheap passage to the immigrants they brought back from Britain. Ship-building also developed on a large scale at Quebec, requiring many skilled artisans, while numerous other workers were employed in its timber coves to serve the waiting vessels. Its powerful timber merchants began to tap the forest resources of the Saguenay to meet the insatiable demand for the wood staple. But above all they looked to the Ottawa River as their source of supply.

Here on British America’s furthest-reaching forest frontier, an inland lumber centre arose at Bytown, later Ottawa, where rapids offered water power for sawmills and tributary streams brought down more timber. Bytown actually began in 1826 as a base for building the Rideau Canal between the Ottawa and Lake Ontario at Kingston, but lumbering was already well established in the vicinity and the completion of the canal in 1832 essentially gave it another outward path for forest products. Thriving on the continued expansion of the lumber frontier along the upper Ottawa, its sawmills and its local commerce with the lumber camps, Bytown by 1854 had become the City of Ottawa, with a population of some 8,000.

Yet the greatest growth in this whole period of urban commercial development was made by Montreal, first incorporated as a city in 1832. It benefited mainly from the trade via the St. Lawrence with the expanding settlements of the Great Lakes region, both Canadian and American. For the waterway it dominated was the natural transport route to these valuable markets, carrying in manufactures and tropical goods, taking out grain, flour and other
primary products. Montreal thus built up a major wholesale forwarding business, which shipped in stocks required by inland merchants and similarly brought out the commodities they had collected for sale abroad. Forwarders might run large river shipping lines, including steam tugs and steamboats after power-driven vessels began to spread in river navigation following the War of 1812. Wholesaling in Montreal, moreover, developed readily out of the earlier operations of the big fur trade supply houses. Their business heritage was also expressed in the powerful Bank of Montreal, founded in 1817. In view of this control of rising inland local commerce, it was small wonder that the St. Lawrence transport centre quickly recovered from its loss of the fur trade in 1821.

Montreal’s new commercial empire, based on agriculture and settlement rather than furs and wilderness, brought the growth which made it British America’s richest, largest city, with a population of 57,000 by 1851. Still, its empire faced threats. The Erie Canal of 1825, draining trade southward to New York, was a grave challenge. In response, Montreal’s merchant class sought canals of their own to overcome the series of rapids in the upper St. Lawrence that impeded river transport and increased its costs. But French-English quarrels in Lower Canada frustrated the building of the St. Lawrence canals, although the Rideau Canal after 1832 provided a somewhat inadequate back route from Montreal to Lake Ontario via the Ottawa. Not until the Union of the Canadas of 1841 had brought a new chance, and new funds, were the St. Lawrence canals finally completed in 1848. By then the Americans had established duty-free use of their own routes between the seaboard and inland Canada, while Britain’s adoption of free trade between 1846 and 1849 removed imperial preferential duties that had fostered transport by the St. Lawrence as a way into the British market. Consequently, in the late forties, Montreal was in the doldrums and its merchants despairing. Yet this condition really owed more to a coincident world economic depression than to the loss of imperial tariff privileges, since the city’s fortunes rapidly recovered with the revival of world trade from 1850 onward. It still held a large share of an increasingly prosperous inland market. Furthermore, Montreal now was looking eagerly to railway-building to consolidate its continued commercial lead in Canada.

The Coming of the Railway

Though there had been a few short lines constructed earlier, the booming 1850s brought the railway age to Canada, with profound effects on urban development. Hitherto, all major, bulky traffic had used waterways, so that urban places were chiefly
oriented to routes by sea, lake or river. Land transport—having
great distances to deal with, only ox or horse-power, and usually
poor roads, often impassable during thaw and freeze-up—had
largely remained localized and limited. The railway, however, now
opened broad inland areas to all-season, heavy traffic and linked
them with an urban network of much larger scope. Substantial
urban places henceforth could emerge away from main-line water
transport, although the chief centres to benefit tended to be strategic
points of trans-shipment where land and water routes met. At the
same time, some places that had been based on water traffic turned
out to be less well situated when the new pattern of rail lines took
shape. Towns thus went both up and down in this transportation
revolution. But large and small, they saw iron rails as their path
to power and wealth; therefore, urban communities were at the heart
of the railway promotion and construction movement that swept
British North America in the fifties.

Montreal-based interests completed the St. Lawrence and
Atlantic in 1852, to reach Portland, Maine, and gain access to an
ice-free Atlantic port, thereby overcoming the winter closing of
their river route. Other Montreal rail projects thrust towards
Ottawa and westward, or southward to connect with American
railroads to Boston and New York. Altogether, they brought to
the fore a new enterprising group of urban business men, the railway
promoters and contractors, who found their necessary associates
in land speculators and railway politicians, merchant investors
and bankers. The same elements grew strongly in Upper Canada.
In Hamilton, already a thriving commercial town, they pushed the
building of the Great Western, which was opened in 1854 from
Niagara, via Hamilton, to Windsor opposite Detroit. Toronto
entrepreneurs constructed a line northward across the old Toronto
passage that reached Lake Huron waters and the way to the great
North-West in 1855. And other railroads were run from the upper
St. Lawrence to Ottawa’s lumber regions to carry down sawn wood
for fast-growing American markets across the river boundary.

In the first feverish Canadian rail boom, many of the optim-
istic projects promoted in towns and cities indeed collapsed, or
were partly built at extravagant costs and only completed years
later. In the Maritimes too, the grand plan of an Intercolonial
Railway from Halifax to Quebec was much discussed and at times
negotiated between the provinces. But it was not to be effected
until after Confederation of the colonies took place in 1867—in
part, as a means of building the Intercolonial itself. In the mean-
time, tracks across Nova Scotia linked Halifax with Truro and
Windsor on the Bay of Fundy, while Saint John obtained a line to
the Atlantic shore of New Brunswick at Shediac.

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But the largest project of all did go forward in the then-Canadian union, the Grand Trunk Railway, a huge, privately owned but government-backed company. Between 1852 and 1858 it completed a through rail system from Rimouski on the St. Lawrence below Quebec, to Montreal and Toronto, and on to Sarnia at the southwestern tip of the province of Canada. A railway triumph, it was also a financial disaster, chartered at highly inflated costs and built in times of soaring prices. Some of the sharpest urban promoters and contractors made fortunes, but many investing towns were left with heavy municipal debts. Yet the consequences of the Grand Trunk went much further, certainly for the towns themselves. Some of the places along its east-west path, existing water ports, found traffic by-passing them by rail to go to larger centres. Kingston was one of these. Some, with Berlin (later Kitchener) in the heart of the western Ontario peninsula, gained greatly by their new land transport artery—as did Hamilton, London and Windsor on the Great Western. But the chief gainers were the already well-established major cities, Montreal and Toronto.

Montreal had its main water line west reinforced by Grand Trunk tracks: year-round access to the interior as well as to the sea in winter via Portland. Furthermore, the deepening of the river channel below Montreal (pushed hard by its business leaders) and the arrival of large ocean steamships at its docks in the 1850s meant that the city much enhanced its role as head of navigation on the St. Lawrence. Still further, the completion of the Victoria Bridge across the river at Montreal in 1860 brought lines from south and east right into the heart of the city. Fed by the rails that bore traffic to its port, distributing goods along the tracks far inland, Montreal after 1867 advanced to be Canada’s first national railway metropolis, commanding the through east-west land transport system—a function that would grow even greater once the Canadian Pacific had opened the West to it in the 1880s.

Toronto did nearly as well. A line to Hamilton in 1855 linked it to the Great Western, and effectively opened the south-west of the province to the larger city. Then the Grand Trunk gave Toronto an iron highway eastward and an alternative route across the west; it already had the Northern to the upper lakes, bringing lumber exports from the northern forests. Railways often had a focusing effect, tending to concentrate activities and population at main centres that had the better facilities and greater prospects of development. So it was with Toronto. It became the hub of a railway network controlling the commerce of more and more Ontario territory, both by east-west and north-south transport, and whether finally directed to Montreal or New York. Expanding Toronto still did not overtake Montreal in Canada and in some
respects remained subordinate to the eastern city's broader business power. But it was consolidating its grip as an Ontario metropolis in its own right, with its own powerful financial as well as transport services, displayed in banking institutions like the Bank of Toronto (1855) and Bank of Commerce (1867), its insurance and investment companies, and its stock exchange. By Confederation in 1867, Toronto was unshakably dominant in the new province of Ontario, and the city was looking eagerly to still wider national markets in the North-West beyond the Lakes, which Toronto's railway, business and political leaders had sought strenuously to have brought into the new federal union.

Confederation, of course, confirmed Quebec as the capital of a largely French-speaking province once again, and Ottawa as the federal seat of government, therefore destining it to be far more than a lumber town. Moreover, it brought the Intercolonial, finally completed in 1876. Halifax at last was joined by rail with the St. Lawrence, as was Saint John, since its line to Shediac crossed the Intercolonial at a point where the railway centre of Moncton developed. But though the two chief Maritime ports would ultimately benefit as winter Atlantic outlets for the main Canadian transport system (thereby replacing Portland), the greater effect of the rail link between central Canada and the Atlantic seemed to be that the Maritime region was increasingly tied into the commercial hinterland of Montreal and Toronto businesses. Agents and firms based in these metropolises came to dominate much of the Maritimes' trading life, at the expense of Halifax or Saint John merchants. The rate of growth in the two Atlantic centres slowed relative to central Canadian places.

Actually, larger forces were at work. The very spread of railways and settlement westward across North America had brought the reorientation of basic traffic routes, making access to the continental interior much more significant for urban places than positions on old coastal waterways. The Maritime centres were out on a limb. Furthermore, the decline in the demand for wooden ships in the 1870s, as iron and steel steamships took over on the seas, cut into their great strength in shipping and ship-building. Finally, a long era of deflation in the western world and of slow economic growth in much of Canada (which lasted with only a few breaks from the early 1870s to the mid-nineties), especially retarded advances in eastern places that had few new lands or resources to develop. Hence, after a prosperous mid-century spurt, Halifax only increased to 38,000 in 1891 from 30,000 in 1871, and Saint John actually declined, from 41,000 to 39,000. St. John's in Newfoundland was still mainly a fishing and
sealing entrepot, though the chief one in the island. Incorporated in 1888, it went through a disastrous fire in 1892, which left 11,000 people temporarily homeless.

In central Canada, the railway-building fifties had witnessed a rapid rate of urban growth and the rise to city status of towns like Hamilton and London. When the boom collapsed, the pace slowed in the sixties, but several good trade years, some revival of rail construction, and the solid markets of a new well-developed countryside revived urban prosperity later in the decade. Towns henceforth expanded less through immigration from abroad than by the movement of new job-seekers away from filled-up farmlands. This rural-urban shift was quite discernible by the census of 1871. It was closely connected with rising manufacturing activities in the towns and the result was that the larger central Canadian cities continued to increase in size considerably, despite the era of relative stagnation from the seventies to the nineties. The building of the Canadian Pacific Railway across the North-West in the eighties also brought a temporary boom: both through its expenditures and the expectations it roused in places like Montreal, the effective eastern terminus, and Toronto, which linked its own rail system to the line within a year of its completion in 1885. The former city had grown to 219,000 by 1891, the latter to 181,000. They had substantial business cores with paved streets and busy horse-drawn traffic, the telephone, gas and carbon-arc lights, and the first electric street cars.

Out in the West in the years since mid-century, urban life was just beginning, but would be no less influenced by railways in the lands brought into Canada by Confederation. On Vancouver Island, Victoria had been founded by the Hudson's Bay Company in 1843 as its chief Pacific coastal base, and in 1849 the little fort-entrepot became capital of the new Company-controlled colony of Vancouver Island. Victoria also acquired a stronger garrison connection when in the fifties the adjoining harbour of Esquimalt began to emerge as a British naval station to watch over North Pacific shipping lanes. But despite strategic location and rich farm and timber lands, this fur company and governing centre grew very slowly until gold was discovered on the Fraser River in the nearby, empty mainland. Miners flocked north from California in 1858, entering by sea via Victoria and obtaining supplies there. New finds further inland in the Cariboo district brought an even larger rush and Victoria boomed with it. By 1864 it was a commercial town of some 4,000, with solid brick stores and warehouses, while on the mainland New Westminster had appeared near the mouth of the Fraser as capital of a hastily-erected mainland colony of British Columbia.
The decline of the gold fields brought hard times to Victoria, and the joining of the island province to British Columbia in 1866 to reduce government costs. But new hopes were raised, once British Columbia had entered Confederation in 1871, by the promise of a Canadian Pacific railway from the East. It was thought in Victoria that the line would cross the narrows at the north end of Vancouver Island and come down to the island port, thus making it a veritable San Francisco of the North as terminus of a transcontinental railway—the key to the coast and the distant Orient. These hopes were dashed, however, when a more southerly route through the mountains subsequently was chosen for the railway, to end at Burrard Inlet on the mainland near the mouth of the Fraser. Nevertheless, Victoria remained capital of its province, and developed fishing, logging and coastal shipping interests. In the 1880s it also gained an island railway as a consolation prize, the Esquimalt and Nanaimo, though this could never match its loss of the C.P.R. By 1891 Victoria was growing sedately as a garden-loving community of nearly 17,000, already becoming a recreation centre, thanks to the mildest climate in Canada.

Meanwhile, in the western plains another significant urban community had emerged—Winnipeg, its destiny still more obviously shaped by railways. This too had started as a fur trade base, the Hudson’s Bay Company’s Fort Garry, situated at the junction of the Red and Assiniboine Rivers and commanding the main fur routes to the north and west beyond. Near here the small Selkirk farming settlement, largely Scottish, had been established since 1812. At Fort Garry, also, the Company’s Council of Assiniboine met to govern the surrounding territory. And in the 1850s the opening of an ox-cart trail to the United States and the markets of St. Paul had improved access, bringing American and Canadian merchants or settlers to the Red River; in the next decade, the rough-built little wooden village of Winnipeg took shape outside the stone walls of Fort Garry. The Red River rising of 1869-70, on the North-West’s troubled entry into Canada, then brought a Canadian military expedition overland from the East, and some of the troops remained to settle. They soon were followed by an influx of Ontario farm pioneers into the lands about Winnipeg, now capital of the young province of Manitoba. In 1873 it was incorporated as a city and by 1881 its population had reached nearly 8,000.

But transportation problems restricted Winnipeg’s further advance. Overland tracks by Red River carts, and canoes and York boats on western waterways, might have served the fur trade adequately, but they could not handle heavy transport; even the steamboat had only limited value on prairie rivers, shallow in summer, torrential in spring, and full of shifting sand bars. Of
course the railway was the answer, opening the empty plains to widespread settlement, enabling bulky products like grain to go to distant markets and bringing in men and materials to exploit the deep prairie soils. Winnipeg stood to benefit particularly from the railway, as the prime gathering point and supply centre at the eastern gateway to the plains. By 1878 it indeed had a rail connection southward to St. Paul, but its first big boom occurred with the approach of the C.P.R. in the early eighties. Frantic waves of land and business speculation surged through Winnipeg. Their collapse in 1883 hit the city hard. But by 1886 it at last had through rail connection with the East and onward to the Pacific. In 1891 its population stood at 25,000. Though world recession then slowed its growth anew, it had the railway which would soon be used to the full, when a fresh tide of settlement began to flood into the West.

*Western Settlement and Industrial Cities*

In the later 1890s a new era of prosperous world trade opened, which for Canada lasted with few serious downturns until just before the First World War. It was another age of heavy immigration. A million more people entered from Britain, about 750,000 from the United States, nearly 500,000 from continental Europe. Many of the newcomers concentrated in the major cities, which for the first time developed sizeable non-English-speaking immigrant communities and districts, such as The Ward in Toronto or Winnipeg’s North End. Many worked in new northern mining and pulp-milling towns, in lumber camps or on railway gangs, as construction again went forward. But above all, they filled in the West: both the wheat and ranching country of the plains and the lumbering, mining and farming areas of the Pacific slopes. Again towns grew rapidly with this spread of settlement. While in the East the existing urban pattern became much larger and more complex, the distinctive feature in the West was that a whole set of major urban places developed within this relatively short period.

Winnipeg rose as a regional metropolis, the chief prairie railway and wholesaling centre, its population increasing from 25,000 in 1891 to 136,000 by 1911. Here great rail yards marshalled wheat cargoes from across the West and funnelled them down to the grain ports of Port Arthur and Fort William at the head of Lake Superior. Indeed, transport needs seemed so great that two new transcontinentals began building after 1905, the Canadian Northern and the Grand Trunk Pacific (a subsidiary of the eastern Grand Trunk), which brought more rail facilities and workers’ payrolls to Winnipeg, the basic western railway hub. Its wealthy wholesalers, serving the markets of smaller places westward to

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Regina and beyond, headed the city's elite. Its Grain Exchange dominated the sale of the wheat crops, and its lawyers, land companies and banks, although branches of big eastern firms, controlled investment and finance across the plains. By 1914, the muddy frontier town of Winnipeg had disappeared, as skyscrapers rose in its central business district and tree-lined residential streets extended; as street-cars, publicly-owned electric light and the automobile brought modern urban amenities; and as teeming immigrant quarters, slum housing, and public health and welfare needs raised hard social issues, to show that the city had entered the urban big league in every respect.

In some degree Regina developed as a smaller Winnipeg, with its own wheat-raising hinterland to serve. The child of the railway, it grew up on the open prairie without water communications, when the Canadian Pacific went through its site in 1882, and it thrived as farmers occupied the rich Regina Plain. It also became capital of the North-West Territories and after 1905 of the province of Saskatchewan. Moreover, Regina was the headquarters of the North-West Mounted Police, whose posts were dotted across the plains almost as little garrison communities. Indeed, the N.W.M.P. base and barracks gave Regina some flavour of the military function of earlier eastern garrison centres.

In the foothills ranching country, Calgary had been founded in 1875 as a police post on the Bow River, at which traders gathered to carry on commerce with early Alberta settlements by trails to north and south. The arrival of the C.P.R. in 1883 confirmed its trading position, though not until the full thrust of settlement reached its area after 1900 did rapid growth begin. Calgary shipped out cattle by rail, took up meat packing, and dealt with farm towns as irrigation spread agriculture in dry southern Alberta. It also acquired large coal mines in its varied hinterland—which extended into the mountains of south-eastern British Columbia when the C.P.R.'s new Crow's Nest Pass route gave access to that area. Finally, the opening of the Turner Valley oilfield by 1914 presaged Calgary's future as an oil capital. In any event, its population had grown to an amazing extent between 1891 and 1914, from 3,800 to over 50,000.

Well to the north, Edmonton had earlier been a prominent fort and entrepot on the fur trade route along the North Saskatchewan. When, however, the fur trade departed and farm settlement began, it found itself far removed from the new transport line across the plains, the Canadian Pacific. In 1892 a branch line was extended from Calgary to the older Albertan centre, yet this still left the latter commercially subject to its southern rival.
Besides, the railway did not enter Edmonton, but ended on the south bank across the river. Thus hampered, Edmonton grew more slowly than Calgary after the twentieth century opened, although its civic leaders won a victory in 1906 when it was chosen capital of the newly-erected province of Alberta. Then came the Canadian Northern and Grand Trunk Pacific, both building westward by a northern route through Edmonton. It hence gained two transcontinentals, while the C.P.R. now was impelled to bridge the river and enter it directly. With ample rail facilities, expanding farm districts to service and the way open to northern resources, the city leaped into a land and building boom. Skyscrapers went up, civic boundaries spread out—in fact, street cars at times careened across empty prairies that had been hopefully designated as building lots. When the war began, Edmonton had passed Calgary in size and had some 72,000 inhabitants.

But Vancouver on the West Coast displayed the most striking growth of all. Its site was laid out in 1870 as Granville, one of the little sawmill settlements appearing around Burrard Inlet to exploit the huge coastal forests. The settlement of Granville was incorporated as Vancouver in 1886, as the C.P.R. approached. Apart from the natural beauty supplied by flanking mountain peaks, Vancouver's location was ideal. It lay on one of the largest, deep, sheltered harbours on the coast and, while no major rivers flowed into the Inlet, the rails would connect it with the lower Fraser Valley, and from there through the mountains to the East. The line arrived in 1887, by which time a buoyant little boom town had mushroomed in anticipation. Despite a great fire, Vancouver did not falter, but re-emerged with solid brick and stone buildings at its business core. Its expectations mounted when the Canadian Pacific launched direct shipping to the Orient and sent tea and silk cargoes east by special trains. But again depressed world trade conditions in the nineties intervened to check development. The Klondike gold rush stirred Vancouver anew in 1898-9, as it looked to become the chief supply port for the miners in the Yukon. Once more the rush ebbed, with little real return to the hopeful seaport. By now, however, world recovery and vigorous western settlement were under way, and this key Pacific outlet benefited increasingly.

Vancouver gained trade along the railway, as the interior valleys and uplands of southern British Columbia were occupied. It tapped prairie markets by rail, sending in lumber, canned salmon and other produce, carrying out grain to export via the Pacific. This prairie export was to rise, particularly after the opening of the Panama Canal in 1914 put European markets within effective reach of the port of Vancouver, but even before it had a growing
hinterland on the plains. And on the coast its trading dominance increased, not only as a major centre of lumber-shipping and salmon-canning, but also as the chief distributing point for goods brought overland by the railway it commanded. Thus Vancouver’s sea-borne commerce passed Victoria’s around the turn of the century, while nearby New Westminster remained but a river port, lacking the position of a mainland rail terminus. Vancouver multiplied from some 13,000 in 1891 to around 155,000 in 1914, when Victoria only stood at about 35,000. More railways entered: the Canadian Northern from the east, the Great Northern up from the American border, and the advancing Kettle Valley line by 1914 promising Vancouver direct access to the expanding mining towns of southeastern British Columbia. Full of over-confident land developers and loudly vocal “boosters”, the city was none the less emerging as a major new regional metropolis.

Yet however much Vancouver and other western cities had grown, they still essentially remained commercial and transport centres. They might display increasing financial functions, mainly in Vancouver and Winnipeg. They might sustain some manufacturing for local markets, along with Vancouver’s export lumber plants or Winnipeg’s big flour mills. But basically they did not become major industrial cities. Large-scale manufacturing and heavy industry chiefly developed in eastern urban centres, rapidly enlarging there even as the West was filling up. The two of course were interconnected. Western settlement stimulated eastern industrial output with new demands for agricultural machinery, textiles, clothing, household goods and much more. Moreover, from 1879 the National Policy of trade protection had put a tariff wall around Canada, behind which Canadian factories could supply a continent-wide market along the railway lines. And whatever the long-term effects of the National Policy, it assuredly invited industrial expansion in established eastern towns, and shaped a powerful manufacturing element with a sharp vested interest in the protective tariff.

The beginnings of manufacturing in the East ran far back. In New France, skilled artisans had gathered in Quebec, as they subsequently did at Halifax or York, to fill specialized needs for an affluent governing class or to carry on ship-construction, house-building, metal-working and the like. In the rising commercial towns of eastern settlement, water-driven sawmills, grist mills and woollen mills next became a common feature. Even by the 1840s some of these were taking to steam power and hiring numbers of workers. Significant factory concentrations appeared in the Niagara Peninsula, around Toronto, or at Montreal on the Lachine Canal, and there were also the great shipyards of Quebec and Saint John,
and Ottawa's growing complex of lumber industries. Then mid-century railway construction led to massive rolling mills for rails at Toronto and Montreal, and car or engine works at Hamilton and elsewhere. In fact, railway needs promoted the new steam and steel technology, and the effective start of heavy industry.

Nevertheless, apart from a few sizeable exceptions, most industrial units remained fairly small in Canada before the 1880s. They were mainly local factories or workshops concerned with processing the primary materials or produce of their regions, like breweries, tanneries, furniture works and so on. But then larger, more complicated plants began emerging in major eastern centres, especially in Montreal, Toronto and Hamilton. The focusing effects of railways had much to do with it, leading industries to concentrate at places with the best transport and supply facilities, where labour would collect and the advantages of large-scale production could best be secured. The expansion of the national market and the encouragements of the National Policy were no less influential. Despite the times of trade recession, growth went on quite steadily in these industrializing cities across the eighties and nineties. On the other hand, Quebec and Saint John suffered from the virtual disappearance of their old wooden-ship industry. The former, at least, became a centre of shoe, clothing and wooden-ware factories, for the regrettable reason that such operations largely relied on cheap labour, which was supplied by rural French Canadians moving to the city from impoverished farming areas.

The early twentieth century brought even greater industrial advance with the return of economic prosperity, as western markets soared, as American branch plants were established in Canada to get behind the tariff barrier, and as hydro-electric power, the exploitation of mineral wealth, and a swelling international demand for newsprint greatly expanded industrial activities. Western demands for agricultural machinery built up a basic factory industry, displayed in Toronto's big Massey-Harris plant, or at Brantford and elsewhere in Ontario. Hamilton built blast furnaces and became a heavy steel-making town, as did Sydney, Nova Scotia, where Newfoundland iron and Cape Breton coal were brought together. Montreal, still heart of the national traffic system, remained the largest manufacturing centre, having a range of major industries from steel shipbuilding and machinery works to textile and food-processing factories. Toronto came next, with a prosperous variety of high-wage, high-skill industries of nation-wide scope, including publishing. Between 1891 and 1911 the two cities' populations mounted respectively from 219,000 to 490,000 and from 181,000 to 382,000. Plainly, manufacturing growth was

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primarily responsible for this expansion, as densely populated working-class districts arose beyond their business and manufacturing cores. And in these and other industrial cities a widespread labour movement had now developed, to match union organization and numbers against the wealth and power of the big employing companies.

Industrial urban activity, so evident across central Canada and aided there by the rising availability of cheap hydro-electric energy, was less apparent in the Atlantic regions. New towns did emerge in Newfoundland, where the completion of the trans-island railway by the early twentieth century opened up interior forest and mineral resources. But the island’s people stayed overwhelmingly dependent on fishing and, though St. John’s prospered in the boom, it remained quite narrowly based. On the mainland, Halifax and Saint John had local branch factories, sugar refineries and some ship-building, but they suffered from their remoteness from the main areas of continental growth. Still they became winter outlets for western grain traffic and Halifax, with 46,000 inhabitants by 1911, remained Canada’s key Atlantic naval base—a fact to be confirmed anew in the War of 1914-18. Saint John grew still more slowly, to 42,000 by 1911, though pulp mills there to some degree revived the city’s past links with New Brunswick’s forest industry.

Pulp and paper-making for the American or overseas newsprint market now spread widely across the northern forest frontiers of Canada. Pulp towns sprang up from the Saguenay to Lake Superior. No less significant, substantial mining towns emerged, veritable industrial centres in the wilderness, but company-dominated from the outside, just as the early fur-staple bases had been. Sudbury became a world centre of nickel production, soon in great demand for armaments in the First World War. Sault Ste. Marie rose as a steel town on the Northern Ontario resource frontier and, in the British Columbian interior mountains, Trail and other base metal centres acquired large, concentrated, mining and smelting operations.

Before 1900, the electrically-lit city and electric-powered street transport had arrived all across Canada. Chains of banks, department stores and mail-order houses, steel rails and telephone wires, tied the country to its cities from coast to coast and above all to the national metropolises of Montreal and Toronto. Tall office buildings, pounding factories, complex road, water and sewage systems, many-sided municipal governments, and powerful educational and religious institutions, were all hallmarks of abundant urban life. So were the concentrated social ills of blighted
housing, over-crowding, crime, and alcohol. By 1914, the automobile was in widespread use in cities and beginning to re-shape them as the railway had done earlier. Aside from this, most of the basic urban patterns still found in Canada were well established by that date. Thus, in the first long age of the rise of Canadian cities down to the First World War, modern urban society had taken form: with all the possibilities and problems, the rewards and costs—both material and psychological—which so deeply challenge us today.
Suggested Readings


