On the morning of 15 February 1965—a day designated by Her Majesty the Queen of Canada in her proclamation—a crowd of roughly ten thousand Canadians gathered in front of a specially constructed flagpole erected before the Centre Block of the Parliament Buildings on Ottawa’s Parliament Hill. The Canadian Red Ensign flew from the flagpole on this chilly, snow-covered day—but not for long; the crowd was assembled to see the flag’s retirement and the raising of its successor.

That morning, the Montreal Gazette called for understanding the viewpoint of those who will feel a pang in the heart at the coming down of the Red Ensign . . . they feel this regret not simply because it stood for old ties of kith and kin.

For them it has had the broader meanings of the legacy: it was the symbol of freedom, of the rule of law, of the heritage of parliamentary democracy, of the standards of good sense and moderation, of the spirit of courage and service. All these are values not narrow and divisive, but the rich inheritance for the human spirit, the values to be clung to, as long ago proved and always needed.

Inside, some 600 dignitaries gathered for a “simple and solemn” ceremony designed to bury the passions enflamed during the flag debate of the preceding year that ended with Parliament adopting the Maple Leaf Flag to replace the Red Ensign as the flag of Canada. The battle over the new flag pitted two titans of twentieth-century Canadian politics against each other: Lester Pearson, the Liberal prime minister and proponent of a new flag, against John Diefenbaker,
his Conservative predecessor and defender of the old flag. Pearson believed that a new flag was necessary to both combat growing divisions between Anglophones and Francophones and to welcome new immigrants, with ties to neither group, as new citizens. The continued use of the Red Ensign with the Union Flag in the canton—the place of honor—was unacceptable; it was, Pearson once said, time for “Canadian symbols of Canadian nationality.”

Diefenbaker sat silently through the speeches by Governor-General Georges Vanier, an esteemed World War I veteran, and Pearson. Vanier voiced his “hope and pray[er] that Canadians will . . . give an example of fraternal co-existence and that our flag will symbolize to each of us and to the world the unity of purpose and high resolve to which destiny beckons us.” Pearson was “Churchillian” when he told the dignitaries that “if our nation, by God’s grace, endures a thousand years, this day . . . will always be remembered as a milestone in Canada’s national progress.”

After the speeches, the dignitaries went outside to a temporary stage. As servicemen from the Royal Canadian Navy, the Canadian Army, and the Royal Canadian Air Force “stood stiffly at attention under [the] Red Ensign that fluttered gently in a wispy breeze,” the Deputy Registrar General of Canada read the Queen’s proclamation. He read the Queen’s proclamation in both English and French, reciting Parliament’s adoption of the Maple Leaf Flag; declaring that “from and after” this day, that flag would alone signify Canada to itself and to the world; and instructing that her “Loving Subjects and all others whom these Presents may concern are hereby required to take notice and to govern themselves accordingly.”

Shortly before noon, Royal Canadian Mounted Police Sergeant A. B. Goswell lowered the Red Ensign before the silent crowd. The chaplains general of the three armed services offered prayers in English and French. The Red Ensign “was folded carefully” by the servicemen and delivered “for safekeeping to the national archives.” As another trio of servicemen brought out the new flag; RCMP Constable Joseph Secours then raised it to a blast of trumpets, followed by a 21-gun salute and the singing of “O Canada” and “God Save The Queen” by both dignitaries and spectators. The new flag was raised throughout the country, primarily on Government buildings, at the same time; it was raised at the United Nations, at Canada’s legation in London, and at its embassies in Moscow and Washington. In a nice vexillological footnote, Montreal Mayor Jean Drapeau “officiated at a flag-raising ceremony atop City Hall.” There was no flag-raising in Nepean Township, an Ottawa suburb, because the town’s officials “were reported out of town.”
In the *Ottawa Journal* that day, James McCook wrote that, while those favoring a new flag might think less of it, the Red Ensign “was as Canadian as the Quebec Citadel or the Fort Garry gate when glimpsed by travellers beyond these shores.” McCook viewed the Red Ensign as “an undemanding flag, easy to live with”; despite the claims of the “new flag advocates,” however, it was not all-out British despite the Union Jack in the corner. It was a compromise of sorts. It was not thought of as a magnificent emblem of a glorious past, a banner baptized by shot and shell, a message of defiance floating over beleaguered forts or nailed to the mast as the last battleship went down with the captain at the salute.

*But it was ours and around it developed many emotions, loyalties and traditions.* . . . Now it has come to the end of its journey, and the memories flow, to each man his own.

If the Red Ensign was not a “Canadian symbol of [a] Canadian nationality,” then why was it reverently acknowledged on the day of its demise? That is, if the Red Ensign was primarily a flag of an Empire that no longer existed (in fact if not in law), why was its long history both acknowledged and honored on its final day of service? One might think that it was simply political gamesmanship or face-saving rhetoric. I will argue that it was something deeper: a strongly held patriotic memory, fostered through the long observance of Dominion Day, of the Red Ensign as a distinctly Canadian flag.

If most nation-building exercises are undertaken by the state, what makes the examination of Dominion Day as a patriotic memory building exercise more interesting is that, for the most part, Dominion Day was not particularly favored or promoted by the Canadian government and political leaders until late in the twentieth century. The festivities that took place on “parade grounds, sports fields, churches, and other public areas to commemorate the founding of their nation” were held because Canadians wanted to, not because they had to. While scholars acknowledge that Dominion Day “celebrations were expressions of public sentiments about being Canadian and they made a statement about Canadian identity and Canadians’ attachment to their nation,” most scholars often focus on the political and intellectual battles over Canada’s relationship to the United Kingdom. This focus overlooks the very real impact these celebrations had on both the public’s perception of that relationship and the Red Ensign.

The fight over a new flag for Canada is traditionally cast by these scholars and observers as one between those refusing to sever Canada’s ties with the
“mother country,” and thus recognizing that Canada was a separate nation, and those who favored a distinctive flag for an independent nation free of any other nation’s symbols. That is, one party was seen as clinging to a flag that represented Britain and the other party as favoring a flag for Canada. The position of the latter is perhaps summed up best by Alistair Fraser, who wrote:

It took Canada nearly a century to gain a national flag. During that time, it did have an official governmental flag that represented Canada as a state, this being the government’s original maritime flag. What Canada lacked was a formal flag that represented Canadians themselves; a flag that individuals could fly to proclaim their Canadianness; a flag of Canada as a nation. For a newly created country to have lacked a national flag for so long seems, by international standards, bizarre and demands some explanation.17

Fraser’s claim that Canada lacked a national flag reflects a legalistic view of flag use: if the flag is not sanctioned by law, then it cannot claim the status of national flag. This was the view of Pearson and the Liberals: Canada had never officially adopted a flag, so it was time to do so. This view is shared by many vexillologists, who also obsess over official specifications of flags and other formal characteristics.18 However, this legalistic view overlooks that “many demonstrations linked to [a] flag [are], in effect, born autonomously outside the sphere of state officialdom, and only later absorbed, regulated, and codified by the latter.”19 Examining Dominion Day’s effect on the creation of patriotic memories of Canadian flags challenges the legalistic view of flag adoption in favor of a vernacular view that national flags may be created, adopted, and sanctioned by those using a flag for that purpose and that such a flag is as much a national flag as any adopted by statute or regulation. While this vernacular adoption usually comes primarily through the use of a flag at war, the Canadian experience suggests that it may also come through conscious use of a conspicuous symbol coupled with appropriate patriotic exercises.

My examination of Dominion Day and the Red Ensign is not a discussion of “otherness,” or how other ethnic groups in Canada viewed the holiday. French-Canadians practically ignored the day, preferring to celebrate 24 June, St. Jean Baptiste Day, as the “Fête nationale.”20 Similarly, Italian-Canadians were indifferent; “their newspapers did not acknowledge” the holiday; “most striking [was] their continued non-observance even in 1967, the centennial of Canada’s Confederation.”21 For example, the Italian-language L’Eco d’Italia of Vancouver made “no mention of celebrations in the city or the nation. There
were no decorations of maple leaves, no statements of Canadian pride, nor any hopes or well-wishes for the future of the country.”

Instead, I focus primarily on its effects on the patriotic memory of Canadians of “British” descent—those whose forebears came to Canada from England, Wales, Scotland, and Ireland. This is the heritage of both Pearson and Diefenbaker and it was, at the time of the flag debate, the common heritage of many of the members in the House of Commons; French-Canadians were second, and other ethnic members a very distant third. This is a reasonable approach echoed by others; for example, Champion examines the flag debate and concludes that it was a British coup by Celto-Hibernians. In examining parliamentary fights over changing the name of Dominion Day, Blake argues that, just as in the flag debate, the fight was not between “British” and “Canadian” but between British-Canadians over two approaches to a Canadian nationalism; those arguing for change were motivated by a desire to defeat Quebec separatism by “manipulat[ing] and manufactur[ing]” a national identity that “minimize[d] Canada’s British heritage in the pursuit of national unity.” What is important here is how these British-Canadians viewed their country and, by extension, themselves. The fight over the new flag, and the competing views of the place of British-Canadians in constructing, fostering, and building a Canadian identity, was precisely a fight amongst themselves because it took place against the deep background of their patriotic memories, formed in part by Dominion Day under the Red Ensign.

The term “patriotic memory” has been used to mean different things in memory studies. It has been used as shorthand for public or collective memories. It also has been used to describe memories constructed by nations and their citizens to deal with the aftermath of war, including occupation, resistance movements, collaborators, and acquiescence in genocide; it may or may not refer to flag use or flag rituals but rather embraces a nation’s collective response to the traumas of war. Guenter uses the term “civil religion” to refer to a nation’s collective memories born of the cumulative effects of flag rituals and flag displays that impart totem-like status to the flag and centers it as a primary venerated object in public life. In Guenter’s unreified, Westian view, a “flag . . . serve[s] as one of a constellation of symbols used to represent [a] country and to invoke nationalism.” Again, these rituals and displays stem primarily from wars and their aftermath; the classic example of a flag-centered civil religion is the United States. In any event, there is little evidence that there is a Canadian civil religion or that Canadian flags have attained totem status thereunder; for that reason, “civil religion” is unhelpful in describing parliamentarians’ view of the Red Ensign.
Here, I use the term “patriotic memory” to refer to a collective memory of a polity held and expressed by individuals who see themselves as a member of that polity; is developed and sustained primarily by vernacular usage without sustained, coordinated, explicit, or active governmental sanction or encouragement; and, while it may be overcome by subsequent, contrary memories, it provides the background assumptions by which those subsequent, contrary memories are either allowed to displace the prior memory or defeat an attempt to substitute that memory. This view of patriotic memory permits an examination of two sides of the same coin: “imperial patriotism” and “dominion nationalism.” As the British dominions became “new statutory nations,” they remained “overwhelmingly British in their social and cultural aspirations but actively constructed and propagated their own independent national identities complementary to, yet ultimately distinct from, the imperial metropolis.”

This view is an evolutionary one; it assumes that an imperial patriotism of primary loyalty to the United Kingdom, grounded in near-universal British citizenship for Canadians and “binding legal, economic, constitutional, and cultural ties to the old mother country,” actually existed as a distinct period. While overt displays of imperial patriotism were common in Canada especially before and during World War I, Carl Berger questioned whether imperial patriotism existed in fact. In his study of the “intellectual contents of Canadian imperialism,” Berger argued quite convincingly that the promoters of imperial unity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were really Canadian nationalists, writing that Canadian imperialism was one variety of Canadian nationalism—a type of awareness of nationality which rested upon a certain understanding of history, the national character, and the national mission.

I explore the creation of patriotic memories among British-Canadians through the lens of Dominion Day by first examining the literature and other rhetoric prepared for or used in public observances tied to the holiday and the observances themselves. This examination shows that the cultural materials used for Dominion Day utilize a common language, almost from the first observance, of Canada as an independent country, as a “fatherland,” and as a virile heir of the British traditions of fair play and parliamentary democracy under the Red Ensign. Second, the debate on the adoption of a new flag in the House of Commons during the summer of 1964 is examined to determine whether the patriotic memories created by Dominion Day were strong enough to influence the language and verbal imagery used by parliamentarians to argue for or against the adoption of a new flag. This examination shows that the
patriotic memories of Dominion Day were strong on both sides of the debate and operated initially to spare the Red Ensign from forced retirement. This strong effect was sufficiently overcome to permit adoption of the new flag, yet continued to influence later debates on the vernacular use of the Red Ensign and the holiday itself.

The British North America Act united Upper Canada and Lower Canada (Ontario and Quebec, respectively), Nova Scotia, and New Brunswick as “One Dominion under the Name of Canada.” Queen Victoria designated 1 July 1867 as the day of formal union. Part of the larger British holdings in North America before the American Revolution, the future Canadian provinces were controlled first by “arbitrary government” under both French and British rule and then by “representative but irresponsible government,” in which the provincial legislative assemblies had little say in governing because the royal governor and executive council could effectively overrule the assemblies’ decisions. All three were effectively under the power of elite cliques in each province that served in executive posts and controlled nominations to the assemblies. There were some armed uprisings beginning in 1837; Britain, fearing a repeat of 1776 and seeking to forestall French influence in Quebec, moved to institute “responsible government,” a system where the executive officials were directly accountable to the legislature, similar to the system at Westminster.

Upper Canada and Lower Canada were united in 1841, foreshadowing Confederation. Slowly these responsible governments acquired responsibility for trade, defense, and foreign policy; acting to preserve this growth and resolve a serious disagreement between Upper and Lower Canada over the allocation of representation in their own union, the leaders of these provinces sought and won an act of union, to which the other Canadian provinces moved quickly to join. Thus, Canada evolved, it did not revolt; it claimed its ancient rights as Englishmen and transplanted them in a new union in a new land, there to perfect their birthrights.

The birth of the new country was marked with public celebrations and 1 July became known as Dominion Day—the “birthday of Canada.” In hindsight, this is a slight overstatement. The remaining provinces joined Canada as it suited them, beginning with British Columbia in 1871 and ending with Newfoundland in 1949. That Dominion Day was meant to be a Canadian celebration of its nationhood is not unsurprising given the country’s proximity to the United States. “To true Canadians it must be what July 4th is to patriotic Americans, a day of proud rejoicing” because on “this day Canada became a
nation free within itself, and bound to the British Empire by a bond of authority so silken that in a quarter of a century it has not been felt to gall.”

It was organized and observed primarily at the local and regional level until the late 1950s; the exception was the national celebrations organized by the federal government for the Diamond Jubilee of Confederation in 1927. This local and regional orientation is, perhaps, peculiar to British-Canadians. As one Canadian civil servant argued in 1958, “government ceremonies to celebrate a national day were ‘unusual in British countries [and s]ome people regard them as an evidence of national immaturity. . . . Annual government ceremonies are contrary to Canadian and Commonwealth tradition.”

The effect of Canadian patriotic anthologies and their exhortations in support of Dominion Day cannot be overlooked; “the choices made by the early anthologists became building blocks for the development of Canadian literature, just as their conception of nation served to determine the way future generations would envision the country.” Anthologies assisted in the search for a “suitable text for any Dominion Day discourse” by providing a ready reference of material to be used for designing meaningful observances of Dominion Day (and other Canadian holidays), with suggested exercises, short presentations, and a rich trove of patriotic poems and essays for those called upon to speak.

George W. Ross’s *Patriotic Recitations and Arbor Day Exercises* is one influential anthology. Ross was the Ontario minister of education (and later premier); “many teachers felt obliged to buy” the book because of Ross’s position, even though Ross conspicuously disclaimed that it was not a required text. “Ross . . . saw Canada as a nation that could assert its independence and identity within the imperial sphere. *Patriotic Recitations* testifies to the challenges facing anthologists who wanted to embrace the imperial order while asserting Canadian difference.”

In instructing teachers on the importance of observing Dominion Day in the classroom, Ross declared in *Patriotic Recitations* that a “Canadian sentiment we must have, if we are to develop the great forces which make for national life.” If Canada’s history, natural resources, “native energy,” material wealth, and educational achievement “are properly impressed upon the children attending our schools, an impetus will be given to Canadian patriotism.” Ross urged teachers to hold regular thirty-minute lectures before 1 July that examined, among other topics, the country’s settlement, political and military history, its governmental and educational systems, and its vast size and abundant natural
resources. He then provided several pages of notes for these topics, after which he provided prayers, poems, and other “patriotic recitations.”

Part II of *Patriotic Recitations* is titled “Canadian Patriotism,” while Part III, titled “Universal Patriotism,” “is devoted to patriotic verse of the most outspoken kind by a wide assortment of contributors.” The language and tone of many of the selections speak directly of Canada’s status as a separate country with either little or no reference to Britain. For example, in his “Ode to Canada,” Charles G. D. Roberts writes,

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{Here in Canadian hearth, and home, and name;} \\
&\text{This name which yet shall grow} \\
&\text{Till all the nations Know} \\
&\text{Us for a patriot people, heard and land} \\
&\text{Loyal to our native earth,—our own Canadian land!}
\end{align*}
\]

and calls out

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{O strong hearts of the North,} \\
&\text{Let flame your loyalty forth,} \\
&\text{And put the craven and base to an open shame,} \\
&\text{Till earth shall know the Child of Nations by her name!}
\end{align*}
\]

Accepting that Confederation created a nation greater than the sum of the joining provinces or founding peoples, Agnes Maule Machar evokes a dominion nationalism in her “Our Canadian Fatherland,” by her question “what is our young Canadian land?” She calls out each province as a potential and then rejects them all in favor of one country:

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{Can any part—from stand to strand—} \\
&\text{Be a Canadian’s fatherland?} \\
&\text{Nay! for our young Canadian land} \\
&\text{Is greater, grander far, than these.}
\end{align*}
\]

Machar then asks whether the home countries of the major founding European immigrants are the answer, which she again rejects with a suggestion that they shouldn’t try to divide the country:

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{So let no hostile lands divide} \\
&\text{The field our feet should freely roam;}
\end{align*}
\]
Gael, Norman, Saxon,—side by side,
And Canada our nation’s Home
From sea to sea, from strand to stand,
Spreads our Canadian fatherland.50

This Canadian fatherland, free of foreign loyalties and sectional preference, Machar says exists “where’er our country’s banner spreads / Above Canadian free-born heads”; this freedom—this Canadian freedom—was created not just by British-French wars, but by the hard work by hardy pioneers who sought a new land:

Where’er the story of our land
Enshrines the memory of the band
Of heroes, who, with blood and toil,
Laid, deep in our Canadian soil.51

In Part III’s essay, “Britain’s Overshadowing Power,” Alexander Mackenzie writes of Britain’s “overshadowing power and influence which she has so long possessed in giving shape to the destinies and relations of nations has always been exercised with a view to the amelioration of the condition of mankind” and his hopes that Britain, with Canada’s contributions, will “become the one absorbing and powerful instrumentality in the hands of Providence for the prevention of war, the extension of commerce, and the promotion of the arts of peace.”52 He then writes that,

At the same time let us remember that Canada is our home; that while we think with gratitude of the land of our birth, while our hearts are filled with the warmest patriotism when its history and its heroes are recalled to mind, we should not forget that we have great duties and responsibilities, not of a sectional, but of a national, character to discharge and that we ought to devote ourselves faithfully and honestly to the task of creating and upholding a Canadian spirit, Canadian sentiment, and Canadian enthusiasm; in a word, a spirit of nationality always British, but still Canadian.53

Richard Harcourt writes in his essay “The Future of Canada” that the country’s “destiny under a kind Providence will be just what we will make it. It rests in our own hands.”54 Egerton Ryerson formulates his view that

Canadian loyalty is the perpetuation of that British national life which has constituted the strength and glory of Great Britain since the morning
of the Protestant Reformation, and placed her at the head of the freedom and civilization of mankind. This loyalty maintains the characteristic traditions of the nation—the mysterious links of connection between grandfather and grandson—traditions of strength and glory for a people, and the violations of which are a source of weakness and disorganization. Canadian loyalty . . . is a reverence for, and attachment to, the laws, order, institutions and freedom of the country . . . a firm attachment to that British constitution and those British laws, adopted or enacted by ourselves, which best secure life, liberty and prosperity, and which prompt us to Christian and patriotic deeds by linking us with all that is grand and noble in the traditions of our national history.55

In 1891, Manitoba Lieutenant Governor John C. Schultz arranged for a printed short anthology of Dominion Day essays and poems to be given to the schoolchildren of Winnipeg. Schultz kept pictures of Queen Victoria and the Fathers of Confederation on his home mantle, both “garlanded with maple leaves.”56 The first page bears the image of a single maple leaf above an unsigned poem that begins “Canada! Maple-land!”57 In the essay “Stand by Canada,” F. C. Wade addressed “the future statesman, orators, church dignitaries and men of professional eminence.” He reminded the child reader of the addition of the Northwest Territories, Prince Edward Island, and British Columbia to Canada, concluding that “this completed the formation of our Dominion, and brought under the pleasing shade of the Canadian maple leaf a country” larger than either the United States or the United Kingdom.58

In his essay “A Country to Be Proud Of,” Lord Dufferin, an English nobleman who served as Governor General from 1872–1878, writes

Above all, remember, things are not with you as they were a few short years ago. British North America is no longer a congeries of disconnected Provinces, destitute of any strong bond of sympathy or mutual attachment. You are no longer Colonists or Provincials—you are the owners, the defenders and guardians of half a continent—of a land of unbounded promise and predestinated renown. That thought alone should make men and soldiers of you all. Life would scarcely be worth living, unless it gave us something for whose sake it was worth while to die. Out[side y]our domestic circle there are not many things that come up [to] that standard of value. But one at least you possess—a country you can be proud of; and never should a Canadian forget, no matter what his station in life, what his origin or special environments, that in this broad Dominion he has that, which it is worth while both to live for and to die for.59
Similarly, in his essay “What Canadian Means,” Lord Lorne, an English aristocrat who succeeded Lord Dufferin as Governor General and served until 1883, tells the children that

I believe that you will each and all of you be loyal and true Canadians, that you will devote your energies throughout your lives for the good of your native province, and for the welfare of this wide Dominion, and I feel in speaking to you that I address those whose children will assuredly be the fathers of a mighty nation.60

In the late Victorian era, Dominion Day celebrations rivaled or surpassed those held in honor of the Queen’s birthday and featured explicit imagery of Canadian nationalism, including the Union Flag and the Red Ensign.61 In 1887, Brantford, Ontario, “was decorated with flags, bunting, mottoes, etc.,” with a parade in the morning and horse racing in the afternoon.62 Dawson, Yukon Territory, was bedecked in flags for Dominion Day 1902; the town featured the flags of many other countries, including the United States, and the Red Ensigns appear homemade. (Figures 1 and 2) For 1915’s Dominion Day celebration in Langley, British Columbia, a triumphal arch was built with a huge Red Ensign floating over it.63 Although Dominion Day 1930 was a low-key affair in Montreal, given the swift advent of the Great Depression in Canada, “flags were floating everywhere” and a 21-gun salute was fired at noon in Fletcher’s Field.64

Parades and exercises remained popular staples of the day, with a Red Ensign as a central motif. Halifax, Nova Scotia, marked Dominion Day 1909 with these events and a “mobilization” of the local militia;65 as did Niagara
Falls, Ontario, in 1917. Petrolia, Ontario, featured flags on cars and buildings in 1915 celebrations, which included a large parade; among the flags was an English White Ensign on a car ferrying rather old veterans. (Figure 3) Although Red Ensigns are visible as well, this perhaps lends antecedent evidence for Pearson’s later arguments that the Red Ensign did not signify Canada. In Chapleau, Ontario, the band carried a Red Ensign defaced with the band’s name. (Figure 4) Before the Diamond Jubilee of Confederation in 1927, these parades were as likely to feature the Union Flag as much as the Red Ensign. Since the Union Flag is a part of the Red Ensign, it seems likely, from the later debate, that this vernacular use also influences a patriotic memory of the Union Flag as a Canadian flag.


Figure 4. The Chapleau (Ontario) Brass Band near the Canadian Pacific Railway station, possibly in 1909. Source: Chapleau Public Library, Ministry of Natural Resources District Office Fonds.

Parades with flags were still being held in the mid-twentieth century. The 1936 Dominion Day parade in Vancouver featured both Union Flags and Red
Ensigns flying from cars and buildings. Soldiers stationed in the Middle East as part of a United Nations peacekeeping force held a parade for Dominion Day 1958, complete with floats and the Red Ensign. (Figures 5, 6, and 7) Film footage of the parade in Delhi, Ontario, around Dominion Day 1959, shows flags being used in floats and a Red Ensign flying from a school house.

Figures 5, 6, and 7. Dominion Day 1958 in the Middle East. Source: Library and Archives Canada, R112-2985-5-e, R112-2987-9-E, and R112-2988-0-E.
Early on, the parades featured explicit imagery affirming Canada as a separate, independent entity. For example, “on Dominion Day 1892, Miss Jennie McDonald appeared on a beautifully decorated float as ‘Miss Canada,’ the guardian of continuity of the nation,” in the parade held in Petrolia,69 echoing the British “allegorical identification” of country “in female form.”70 Petrolia’s float, in turn, recalls the female allegorical image of Canada on the Dominion Day 1871 cover of the Canadian Illustrated News depicting her “being welcomed by Miss America and a variety of other nations after signing the Treaty of Washington,” (Figure 8) which settled outstanding claims between the U.S., Canada, and Great Britain from the Civil War and a dispute between Canada and the U.S. over the rights of the latter’s fishermen in the former’s waters.71

Figure 8. Canada being welcomed as a nation on the cover of the Canadian Illustrated News of 1 July 1871. Source: Canadian Illustrated News, Vol. iv, No. 1 (1 July 1871): cover.

Since the fiftieth anniversary of Confederation fell during wartime in 1917, the country celebrated its sixtieth anniversary on Dominion Day 1927. In Vancouver, Mayor L. D. Taylor led the Diamond Jubilee parade in a horse-drawn
carriage past buildings bedecked in flags. (Figure 9) Over 6,000 school children took part in a Dominion Day pageant at the exhibition grounds in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan; dressed in white, they held up colored cloths to form the legend “1867 Canada 1927.” (Figure 10) Dominion Day was viewed in 1929 by the students of McGill University’s French summer school as the beginning of a “trio of national holidays,” as the American students observed Fourth of July and the French students observed Bastille Day ten days later. The school’s hall was decorated with maple leaves and flags and students representing each of the provinces gave short speeches to mark the occasion. A series of sketches from the play “The Flowery Presbytery” were performed, “etch[ing] a delicate picture of French-Canadian country life.”72 A few days earlier, members of the Women’s Art Society Soldier’s Fund visited the patients of St. Anne’s Military Hospital bringing ice cream and “small Union Jack[s] as a reminder that the celebration was in honor of Canada’s birthday.”73

Figure 9. Mayor L. D. Taylor in a horse-drawn carriage during the Dominion Day parade in Vancouver in 1927. Source: City of Vancouver Archives, L. D. Taylor family fonds, CVA 1477-39.

Figure 10. Some of the 6,000 schoolchildren in the Dominion Day pageant at the exhibition grounds in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan in 1927. Source: Western Development Museum library, 4-E-5.
Material culture celebrating the Red Ensign and associating it with Dominion Day as a national flag is abundant. A 1907 postcard neatly combines female allegory, the Red Ensign, and the maple leaf in one composition (Figure 11), while another features a rather cherubic boy dressed in military-style clothing (Figure 12). For 1936, the Sunday Magazine of The Vancouver Province features historical articles flanked by a Red Ensign taking up most of the page and under the headline “Canada Comes West.” (Figure 13) The 1941 program for Dominion Day racing in Strathroy, Ontario, features a large Red Ensign on the front. (Figure 14)

While Canadians perhaps disdained American “stump orations” as un-British, “the influence of American patriotic oratory was unmistakable” on the “public addresses” delivered on Dominion Day; speeches were not an uncommon feature of Dominion Day observances and their focus was primarily on Canada’s stature as a nation. On Dominion Day 1904, in Dawson, the Canadian Club sponsored an “afternoon [of] speechmaking, picnicking, and enjoy[ment of]
the outdoor ozone” at which speeches were given by the territory’s commissioner on the “Growth of Canada” and by D. A. McRae, a minor territorial official, on “Canadian Patriotism.”

John Carling, the postmaster general, delivered a speech at a picnic in Strathroy, Ontario, on Dominion Day 1885. In that speech, he paid tribute to the Fathers of Confederation for their foresight to “bring about that great union” and the hardships endured by the province’s early settlers. He then catalogued, at length, the steady and continued growth in the land mass of Canada, its rail network, its agricultural output, imports, and exports, banking
deposits, school expenditures, and student population. “As Canadians,” Carling told his listeners,

we have reason to feel proud of the prosperity and progress that has taken place since [Confederation.] We can bring millions from the Old World and given them a home here. . . . Young men need not leave our country now as they did 25 years ago, for we are advancing as fast as any other nation. And so long as we have a progressive and enterprising people, who are proud of their country, with its civil and religious liberty, we shall continue to go ahead [and] will see greater progress. We have a mixed population here of English, Irish, Scotch, and French, and yet they all seem proud of the advancement of our country.77

Even before the Statute of Westminster in 1931, it was common, at least on Dominion Day, for Englishmen to refer to Canada as an independent country. In his 1929 toast to the Dominion during observances held in London, the Marquis of Reading, a noted Liberal politician, judge, and former Viceroy of India,
referred to Canada’s position today as a free and independent state, but nevertheless a part of the Empire, owing common allegiance to the King. . . ‘Canada has throbbed with the feeling of a national consciousness and ha[s] taken her position undisputed among the nations[, Lord Reading said, adding that] she continues to assume her rightful place along with the other Dominions, sharing the common burden and responsibility that belong to united by free and independent nations.’78

Canadians raised the Red Ensign abroad on Dominion Day to mark significant moments. The Red Ensign was hoisted over Rogers Harbor, Wrangell Island, Alaska, on Dominion Day 1914 by Templeman and Maurer during the Canadian Arctic Exploration. (Figure 15) In 1929, Dominion Day was observed at the Canadian Legation in Tokyo in a “carefully orchestrated” display of “dominion autonomy,” as the participants—mostly legation officials and Canadian expatriates—raised the Red Ensign and sang “O Canada” and “God Save the King.”79 The newsreel heralded the ceremony, with its flag-raising, as “the first time the Canadian National emblem is raised up on Asiatic soil.”80 The Red Ensign was also raised over the First Canadian Army Headquarters for the first time since the D-Day invasion on Dominion Day 1944. (Figure 16)

Figure 15. Templeman and Maurer hoisting the Red Ensign during their Dominion Day celebration on Wrangell Island, Alaska, on 1 July 1914. Source: Library and Archives Canada, PA-074079.

Figure 16. Canadian Army soldiers marching past the unfurled Canadian flag at First Canadian Army Headquarters, Normandy, France, as the flag flew for the first time on French soil. Source: Ken Bell, Library and Archives Canada, PA-137915.
“But It Was Ours”: The Canadian Flag Debate

From the first use of the female allegory of Miss Canada, vernacular imagery, rhetoric, and usage was oriented towards Canada as its own country. Its ties to Great Britain were ties of birth, not shackles of control, and were maintained because Canadians wanted to maintain this tie. This was reaffirmed by the Mother Country’s representatives, in similar language, over a period of fifty years. While proponents of a new flag saw imperial patriotism in its design, the repeated vernacular use of the flag on the birthday of a “free and independent nation” willingly cooperating with its parent supported a strong dominion nationalism viewed the child as greater than the parent. This patriotic memory of the flag as a symbol of a “Canadian fatherland” of free-born citizens that “are the owners, the defenders and guardians of half a continent” was the constant background to the debate over a new flag.

The debate on the flag proceeded, from the beginning, as a discussion by British Canadians, among British Canadians, primarily for British Canadians about the “Canadian” flag. The resolution offered by Pearson’s government to replace the Red Ensign with the “Pearson Pennant” authorized [the Government] to take such steps as may be necessary to establish officially as the flag of Canada a flag embodying the emblem proclaimed by His Majesty King George V on November 21, 1921—three maple leaves conjoined on one stem—in the colours red and white then designated for Canada, the red leaves occupying a field of white between sections of blue on the edges of the flag.81

Pearson declared that this design would “give us all a common flag; a Canadian flag which, while bringing us together by rising above the landmarks and milestones of the past, will say proudly to the world and to the future: ‘I stand for Canada.’”82 Yet the language of the resolution itself belies this statement. The design’s rationale is based entirely on English heraldic practice as declared by a British sovereign.

Even after the Pearson Pennant was politically dead, English heraldic design and practice continued to dominate the search for a new Canadian flag. It is undisputed that Dr. George F. G. Stanley, Dean of Arts and Chair of the Department of History at the Royal Military College of Canada is the designer of the Maple Leaf flag, which is based on the College’s flag.83 (Figure 17) Sometime in Spring 1964, Matheson visited Stanley at the college’s campus in Kingston, Ontario. Stanley had already proposed the design of red-white-red pales with a single maple leaf in his 23 March 1964 memorandum to Matheson outlining his “observations” on Canadian symbols and colors.84 (Figure 18)
As Matheson later wrote,

I particularly recall standing beside George Stanley and looking up at the Royal Military College flag flapping furiously from the Mackenzie Building. . . . This flag had three vertical pales, red-white-red, with the college crest (a mailed fist holding three maple leaves) on the white center pale. We had just emerged from the college mess and Dr. Stanley
 remarked “There, John, is your flag.” Interpreting him literally I remarked that Canadians would not accept a mailed fist symbol. He said, “No, I mean with a red maple leaf in the place of the College Crest.” It was an interesting proposal that I kept very much to myself, but pondered it from time to time.85

Much of the debate in Parliament was—as many legislative debates are—dull and repetitive.86 After the initial speeches by Pearson and Diefenbaker set the markers, most members simply repeated the points made by the leaders, with additional references to anecdotal evidence such as constituent letters and newspaper readers’ polls. Throughout, however, were the markers of the patriotic memory of dominion nationalism created by Dominion Day and endowed on the Red Ensign.

When the debate began, Pearson told the House of Commons that he believed “that a national flag of the [proposed design] will be exclusively Cana-
dian, will bring us closer together; [and] give us a greater feeling of national unity.” He acknowledged, too, that “there are others who are as patriotic and as
Canadian as I am or can ever hope to be, who disagree honestly and deeply.”87 Pearson argued that the country did not have “a distinctive flag which cannot be mistaken for or confused with the emblem of any other country but Canada,” which to him was the fundamental test of national identity.88 Pearson went on to state that “some hon[orable] members will say: Have we not such a flag? I do not think so. . . . The red ensign has served Canada honourably and well since it was designated for such service by order-in-council.”89

Pearson’s statement is internally contradictory: if the Red Ensign was not a national flag, how could it have served as a national flag “honourably and well”? Coupled with his earlier characterization of his opponents as being “as patriotic and as Canadian as I am or can every hope to be,” it is a remarkable testament to a specific patriotic memory of the Red Ensign as a Canadian flag identified with liberal tradition that was created by Dominion Day—a memory so strong that it affected the foremost proponent of a new flag himself.

This is reinforced by Pearson’s statements relating to the United Kingdom and the Union Flag. As an olive branch to those favoring retention of the Red Ensign, Pearson proposed that Parliament adopt the Union Flag as a second flag “to be flown as a symbol of Canadian membership in the Commonwealth of Nations and our allegiance to the Crown.”90 He argued that a new flag, unlike the Red Ensign, did not affect Canada’s birthright, noting that while “our formal links with the United Kingdom had changed” in the twentieth century, “our ties of friendship and, for many Canadians, of kinship, have not
weakened. They are as strong as ever.”91 In specifically referring to the presence of the Union Flag on the Red Ensign, and echoing its earlier use in Dominion Day celebrations, he claims that the Union Flag was a Canadian flag as well:

I proudly acknowledge what the [Union Flag] stand[s] for in justice, freedom, and human rights. I pay my tribute to the British people whom this flag symbolizes and from whom we have inherited so much—a people whose courage and service to mankind has not been excelled by any other people in history. . . . All this is part of our tradition, too. . . . We support it because the stand it takes is Canadian and because it marks another stage in the growth of Canada.92

Pearson argued that the House was “being asked particularly to give to the hearts and minds of our children a feeling of national identity, national pride, national loyalty. We are asked to provide for them a symbol of our independent strength and of the bright promise of a future for them.”93 Again, this statement contradicts his earlier statements; if there was no feeling of “national identity, national pride, national loyalty,” then how could Pearson proclaim that he and his opponents were both “as patriotic and as Canadian as [they were] or [could] ever hope to be”? In making this statement, Pearson words recall those of Lord Lorne that “loyal and true Canadians . . . will devote your energies throughout your lives . . . for the welfare of this wide Dominion.”94 It also is in line with Harcourt’s view that the country’s “destiny under a kind Providence will be just what we will make it. It rests in our own hands.”95

Diefenbaker would have none of it. He attacked the Pearson Pennant as a “flag that had not reference to Canada’s heritage and our past, to the contribution made by the French and by the British to the building of our nation.”96 He recalled the words of Sir John Macdonald (himself associated with the Red Ensign) in 1865 that a confederated Canada would build “a great nationality commanding the respect of the world, able to hold our own against all opponents and to defend those institutions we prize.”97 (Figure 19)

The fact that the Red Ensign had never been “legally adopted” did not matter to Diefenbaker. “A flag is not something which can be ordered by parliament. A flag must be something to evoke the motions of the heart, a rallying point for the finer sentiments of the peoples joined together in a nation.”98 To him, the Red Ensign was now the embodiment of the “tremendous contributions under British rule such as parliament, the rule of law, and freedom.”99 He countered with his view of dominion nationalism:
There is in all our hearts deep and abiding Canadianism. Canadians think of themselves as Canadians and as nothing else. I do. My people come from two races but I think of myself as Canadian; and always, from my earliest days in this House, I advocated a Canadianism unhyphenated while fully recognizing the constitutional rights under our constitution and the British North America Act.100

This passage Mackenzie’s phraseology from “Overshadowing Power” describing “a spirit of nationality always British, but still Canadian.”101 It also recalls Ryerson’s view that “Canadian loyalty is the perpetuation of” an ever-perfecting British tradition of “freedom and civilization of mankind” and which “maintains the characteristic traditions of the nation—the mysterious links of connection between grandfather and grandson,” that are “a firm attachment to that British constitution and those British laws, adopted or enacted by ourselves, which best secure life, liberty and prosperity” and without which a nation founders.102
For Diefenbaker, the Red Ensign maintained this link to recall the rights of Canadians as free peoples, a theme reinforced by decades of celebration of the country’s “birthday” under that flag. Its legal status was immaterial; it reflected back to Canadians a Canadianism grounded in a long-standing Canadian loyalty.

In the end, rounds of committee hearings eventually produced Stanley’s design squarely rooted in English heraldic tradition. In expressing their views of Canadianism—of dominion nationalism—Pearson and Diefenbaker reflected the patriotic memory of the Red Ensign as a Canadian flag—a flag that stood for a new fatherland, free of interference from mother countries, and committed only to the course chosen by its people—but still yet commemorates and renews the mysterious constitutional links with the Mother Country with her birthright of responsible government brought forward on a long-ago birthday.

The patriotic memory of Dominion Day and the Red Ensign—both form and content—continue to influence Canadian identity and Canadian vexillology. “Even now, more than a quarter-century after the official change [from Dominion Day to Canada Day] passed through Parliament in 1982, many still cling to the original name.”103 (Figure 20)
The Maple Leaf flag is perhaps more prevalent in Québec than the Red Ensign, but the fleurdelisé continues to claim the hearts and minds of that province. The provincial government “uses the fleurdelisé to . . . emphasize Québec’s ‘nationality,’ in ways that differ from usage in most other Canadian provinces.” Provincial law and regulation accord the fleurdelisé the place of honor “in all cases” and views the Canadian flag primarily as a flag identifying the source of services provided by the federal government; this is justified by adopting the view that, “for us [in Québec], the presence of a flag should not be interpreted as a sign of belonging to or identification with a sovereign country.”

Ontario and Manitoba continue to fly, as their provincial flags, a Red Ensign with the appropriate provincial coat of arms on the fly. These flags were adopted after, and in direct opposition to, the new flag. Since the adoption of the Maple Leaf flag and the provincial Red Ensigns, there has not been a serious effort to change the provincial flags to reflect a more “Canadian” identity.

The Red Ensign’s form continues in other flags in Canada. (Figures 21, 22, and 23, next page) Here, the individual bears his personal coat of arms in the canton, occupying about the same space as the Union Flag does on the Red Ensign. Similarly, the individual’s personal badge occupies roughly the same space as the Canadian arms did. These designs are most likely requested by the individual or entity seeking a grant from the Canadian Heraldic Authority; the Authority’s first preference is for a banner of arms for municipalities, and it also encourages the use of Canadian pale for municipal and corporate grants, although there are exceptions. What is material is that the design reflects that the patriotic memory of the Red Ensign resonates with both grantor and grantee; each sees in the design a Canadian form, and likely one that is a traditional form. From the United States, one could view this flag as being similar in form to the Stars and Stripes, but likely will not without the additional form of the stripes.

In a 2001 study of flag grants by the Authority thorough 1998, the number of ensign-style flags (29) slightly outnumbered those flags using the Canadian pale of the Maple Leaf flag (24). Vachon suggests that the number of ensign-style flags should have been higher given that “Canadianised or otherwise differenced ensigns were widely flown” for most of Canada’s history and notes that the Canadian pale “quickly grew in popularity.” Vachon’s study notes that flags were a part of only one-third of the Authority’s grants during the study period, and of those, about one-third were for municipalities; he calls for the Authority’s heralds to “be more forward in attempting to
Figure 21. The flag granted by the Canadian Heraldic Authority to Walter William Roy Bradford in 2001. Source: Canadian Heraldic Authority.

Figure 22. The flag granted by the Canadian Heraldic Authority to Peter William Noonan in 2014. Source: Canadian Heraldic Authority.

Figure 23. The flag granted by the Canadian Heraldic Authority to the Village of Bath, Ontario, in 1997. Source: Canadian Heraldic Authority.
convince grantees of the importance of including a flag duly described and depicted in the letters patent.”111 Most individual grantees are likely more than familiar with heraldry—hence, their desire for a grant—and would know that a grant of a banner of arms is, strictly speaking, unnecessary.112 Thus, the low number of flag grants suggests, then, that the slight preference of ensign-style over Canadian pales reflects the deeper patriotic memory of the Red Ensign as a Canadian flag.

Perhaps most significantly, in 2007, the Canadian Heraldic Authority entered the Red Ensign into the Public Register of Arms, Flags and Badges of Canada at the request of the minister for “Multiculturalism and Canadian Identity.”113 “It was a flag flown and used in Canada by Canadians as a sign of their nationality for quite a period of time,” Chief Herald Robert Watt told reporters, and said that “adding the Canadian Red Ensign to the public register does not alter the status of the Maple Leaf as Canada’s national flag, but simply confers recognition on an important historic symbol.”114 Coming forty years after its retirement, the heralds’ action illustrates the patriotic memories created, fostered, and sustained by the Red Ensign over a century of Dominion Days.

“It is not an act of Parliament but time and the cumulative pride, honor and sacrifice paid by many hearts, that makes a flag cherished in the land.”115 Dominion Day played a critical role in making the Red Ensign the flag of Canada for almost 100 years. A wealth of nationalistic literature was placed at the disposal of politicians, ministers, and teachers to provide the texts for Dominion Day observances that provided several versions of a Canadianism tied to a new land free from old entanglements. Parades, triumphal arches, and material culture, with their use of flags and female patriotic allegories, emphasized Canada as an independent nation on equal footing with other nations, yet enjoying “mysterious links” to its constitutional forebear. British-Canadians created the Red Ensign as their flag and they could create a new one for themselves and all other Canadians. But they could not replace the Red Ensign, because “it was ours and . . . and the memories flow, to each man his own.”116

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End Notes


2. Ibid.


9. Ibid; Matheson, *Canada’s Flag*, 240–43.


11. Ibid.


15. Ibid. (emphasis added).


17. Ibid., 30.


22. Ibid.

23. Diefenbaker wrote that he was descended from “dispossessed Scottish Highlanders and discontented Palatine Germans” (Smith, “Diefenbaker, John George”). He was “fiercely proud of his Scottish heritage” and “gave emotional speeches about how the Selkirk settlers overcame daunting challenges while helping to open the Canadian west” (McGoogan, *How the Scots Invented Canada*, 299). On a 1968 trip to the Scottish Highlands, he unveiled a plaque commemorating the Selkirk settlers, which included his great-grandfather (ibid.). Identifying him as a British-Canadian in this essay is consistent with Diefenbaker’s public actions.
29. Llewellyn, “Dominion Nationalism or Imperial Patriotism,” 53.
30. Ibid., 51–53.
32. British North America Act, 1867, §3.
33. Queen’s Proclamation 1867.
42. Ibid., 113–114.
44. Ibid.
45. Ibid., 8–26 and 43–311.
48. Ibid., 98.
49. Ibid.
50. Ibid.
51. Ibid.
52. Ibid., 182.
53. Ibid. (emphasis added).
54. Ibid., 179.
55. Ibid., 177.
58. Ibid., 8.
59. Ibid., 11.
60. Ibid., 12.
76. “Hon. Mr. Carling: His Dominion Day Speech at Strathroy,” *Toronto Mail*, 2 July 1884.
77. Ibid.

81. Matheson, *Canada’s Flag*, 78.

82. Pearson, “‘Canadian Flag.’” 4326.

83. George F. G. Stanley to J. R. Matheson, 23 March 1964, Library and Archives Canada, Alan Beddow Papers; Matheson, *Canada’s Flag*, 120 and 122–126.

84. Stanley to Matheson, 23 March 1964.

85. Matheson, *Canada’s Flag*, 122.

86. Ibid., 93–94.

87. Pearson, “‘Canadian Flag.’” 4319 (emphasis added).

88. Ibid., 4320.

89. Ibid.

90. Matheson, *Canada’s Flag*, 78.

91. Pearson, “‘Canadian Flag.’” 4320.

92. Ibid., 4323.

93. Ibid., 4325.


96. Diefenbaker, “‘Canadian Flag.’” 4326–4327.

97. Ibid., 4327.

98. Ibid., 4331.

99. Ibid., 4329.

100. Ibid., 4331.


102. Ibid., 177 (emphasis added).

103. Hayday, “‘Variety Show as National Identity,’” 171.


105. Ibid., 50–51.

106. Matheson, *Canada’s Flag*, 231.

107. Vachon, “Flags Granted by the Canadian Heraldic Authority,” 40.

110. Ibid., 48.
111. Ibid., 39–40 and 56.
112. Boutell and Brooke-Little, Boutell’s Heraldry, 251.

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British North America Act, 1867, 30 and 31 Vict, c 3.


