

When is a "Canadian?"

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An article in a September 2021 edition of the *Winnipeg Free Press* bears witness to the general misunderstanding and misconceptions about Indigenous history in this province. In the article, a Winnipeg high school teacher is quoted as saying: "Talking about Indigenous history shouldn't be -- quote unquote -- 'Indigenous history.' It should be Canadian history." No, it shouldn't, in my humble opinion, because Indigenous people were living hereabouts long, long before the northern half of "Turtle Island" was named "Canada" or any of its inhabitants, "Canadians." Hence, before the earliest European intrusion there could not have been any Canadian history; there could have been only Indigenous history in what is the northern half of North America before the arrival of the first Europeans (Vikings) around 1000 CE.

According to a Government of Canada website (dated 2020-06-08), the name "Canada" likely derives from the Iroquoian word "kanata," which means "village" or "settlement." In 1535, French explorer Jacques Cartier learned from Native informants about the route to "kanata," which probably referred to the village of Stadacona, where Quebec City stands today. Cartier subsequently coined the name "Canada" -- a variation of "Kanata" -- to denote not only Stadacona (the settlement proper) but also the entire area controlled by its chief, Donnacona. So began the era of *bona fide* Canadian history.

By 1547, maps were showing that the country north of the St Lawrence River was designated "Canada," and Cartier referred to the St Lawrence itself as "rivière du Canada." By 1616, although the entire region was now known as "Nouvelle France" ("New France" en anglais), the land along the rivière du Canada and the Golfe du Saint-Laurent (Gulf of St Lawrence) was still called "Canada."

Beginning in the latter half of the 17th Century CE, the ethnonym "Canadien" was used to refer to the French-speaking residents of New France. After the end of the French regime in 1763, employees of the Hudson's Bay Company referred to voyageurs and traders of the Montreal-based North West Company as "Canadians," as shown in HBC fur trade post journals.

So, the inception of the name "Canada," and therefore, arguably, the beginning of Canadian history, only goes back to the time of Cartier. But what about the many thousands of years *before* the arrival of the first Europeans, including the Vikings?¹ At the risk of stating the obvious, Precontact history -- all 11,000 years of it -- was pre-Canada, and pre-Canadian, and hence exclusively Indigenous. Since there was no Canada nor any Canadians in existence before the middle of the 16th Century CE, to imply that the history of northern North America should be conceptualised as Canadian history, as the Winnipeg school teacher has asserted, is erroneous. Her point of view does not take into consideration the eleven or so millennia when only Indigenes, and neither Europeans nor any people who could be called Canadians, lived on Turtle Island.

To be fair, I am confident that the above-mentioned schoolteacher was simply trying to be inclusive and to speak out against isolating and relegating the Indigenous population to the fringes of history as "The Other." However, there is more to the topics of Indigenous and Canadian history than what meets the eye, as I have hopefully shown to good effect in the foregoing paragraphs.

¹ The Vikings discovered the East Coast of North America around 1000 CE.