

CANADA IN THE
GREAT DEPRESSION

TIME LINE

- 1929 – The New York stock market crashes
- 1930 – Conservatives come to power under R.B. Bennett
Canadian Radio League established
- 1931 – Statute of Westminster recognizes Canadian independence from Britain
- 1932 – Formation of the federal relief camps
Imperial Economic Conference in Ottawa
Founding of the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) party
The Workers' Experimental Theatre begins
- 1933 – Canadian Group of Painters (CGP) formed
- 1934 – Birth of the Dionne quintuplets, the world's first surviving quintuplets
Royal Commission on Price Spreads issues its Report
- 1935 – R.B. Bennett's "New Deal" announced
Liberals come to power under Mackenzie King
Social Credit party elected in Alberta under William Aberhart
On-to-Ottawa Trek by unemployed workers; riots break out in Regina
Creation of the Bank of Canada
- 1936 – Founding of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC)
Maurice Duplessis's Union Nationale party elected in Quebec
Dorothea Palmer arrested for distributing birth control literature
- 1937 – General Motors strike in Oshawa
Founding of Trans-Canada Air Lines (forerunner of Air Canada)
Establishment of the Royal Commission on Dominion–Provincial Relations
Establishment of the Governor General awards
- 1938 – Publication of Philippe Panneton's (Ringuet's) novel, *Trente Arpents*, translated into English as *Thirty Acres*
- 1939 – King George VI and Queen Elizabeth tour Canada

The Great Depression dominated the 1930s. The spectacular crash of the New York stock market in October 1929 signalled the crisis. Heavy debt burdens throughout the world created a calamitous economic downturn. Bank failures in both Europe and the United States caused financial instability. International trade declined as nations erected higher and higher tariff walls to protect their own workers and farmers from foreign competition. Worldwide overproduction caused prices of commodities such as wheat, newsprint, and metals — all important Canadian exports — to plummet. Unemployment rose substantially as industries cut back production.

Next to the United States, Canada experienced the western world's most severe decline. Industrial production fell one-third between 1929 and 1932. During that period, Canada's gross national product sank two-fifths, in current dollars. Imports declined in volume about 55 percent, and exports 25 percent. The unemployment rate peaked at 20 percent of the *total* civilian labour force in May 1933.

In an age when modern, state-sponsored social-welfare programs did not exist, self-reliance counted most. But it did not suffice. Thousands of Canadians faced, for the first time, the degradation of going on public relief. Many single unemployed men were forced into relief camps because of the harsh conditions. Farm organizations, trade unions, and co-operatives attempted to protect the interests of their members, but with limited success. Increasingly, people looked to government for answers. Although the Conservatives and the Liberals were voted into office during the Great Depression, in 1930 and in 1935 respectively, many Canadians looked to new third parties, and some even turned to extreme right- and left-wing organizations for solutions. Popular entertainment allowed for an escape from the depressed conditions of everyday life.

THE ADVENT OF THE GREAT DEPRESSION



On October 29, 1929 — “Black Tuesday” — stock markets around the world crashed. The Great Depression that followed lasted a decade and affected the entire western world. The depression hit Canada severely because the national economy had expanded so rapidly and so extensively in the first three decades of the twentieth century. In essence, having risen so high, it had farther to fall. Within Canada, the Prairie West and British Columbia probably suffered most because of the dependence of these regions on primary industries, especially wheat production, and their overexpansion in the previous decades. Furthermore, Canada was heavily dependent on one market, the United States, which was greatly affected by the economic downturn and imposed high tariffs in response. Compounding this economic depression, the Prairie West also suffered from a climatic disaster: ten years of exceptional and persistent drought, extreme summer and winter temperatures, unusual weather patterns, and grasshopper infestations. The topsoil turned to dust and blew away. British Columbia contended with high numbers of transients; Vancouver became known as “the Mecca for the unemployed.”

Nobody wanted Canada's wheat. From 1928 to 1932 prices fell from \$1.29 to 34 cents a bushel for No. 1 Hard, the best wheat on the market. Prices for lesser grades were considerably lower. Also, farmers themselves paid for the cost of shipping the grain to the Lakehead, eroding profit even further. Some western farmers found it cost less to burn their crops than to harvest them.

The wheat pools felt the repercussions. They began in the 1920s advancing (in the fall and winter seasons) a portion of the money expected on next year's crop. This practice was intended to assist farmers in buying seed and getting the wheat crop planted. In the fall and winter of 1928–29, the pools had advanced farmers \$1 a bushel. When wheat prices fell below that price in the fall of 1929 and entered a downward spiral for five consecutive years, the wheat pools went bankrupt.



Dust storm near Lethbridge, Alberta — a familiar sight in Prairie Canada during the “Dirty Thirties.”

Glenbow Archives, Calgary, Canada/NA-1831-1.

Elsewhere, similar dramatic conditions prevailed in the primary resource sector. Thousands of investors lost everything when mining share prices became worthless. Mines closed down for lack of business. The pulp and paper industry, another major resource industry, had a similar fate to that of wheat and mining. The industry had overexpanded in the 1920s as a result of an insatiable American demand for pulp and paper. Its expenses could only be recouped if the market continued at record highs. When the depression hit, the newsprint market collapsed and, along with it, the pulp and paper industry. According to one industry analyst, by 1933 the pulp and paper industry was operating at only half of its capacity. Even then the bottomed-out prices kept production costs barely above bankruptcy.

Money markets followed. Banks and other financial institutions generously approved loans in the 1920s, hoping to capitalize on the boom. Foreign capital entered the country to take advantage of good times. With the advent of the depression, however, financial investors could not retrieve their money or cover their debts. Foreign investment from Canada’s two traditional sources ceased; indeed, Britain and the United States recalled their loans to cover demands at home. Historians Thompson and Seager note that on October 29, “Black Tuesday,” “The *Toronto Star*’s index of sixteen key Canadian stocks fell \$300 000 000 — a million dollars for every minute that markets were open for trading.”¹

Average Canadian investors could not pay loans now recalled by the banks. Nor could they meet their mortgage payments or pay their property taxes. Farmers’ debt levels often exceeded their farms’ value. Interest payments alone often exceeded an average farmer’s annual income. People abandoned their homes and farms, leaving banks with property that no one could afford, and hence had little monetary value.

Companies and factories cut back on wages and employees in an effort to survive. Clerks at Eaton’s and Simpson’s in Toronto, for example, earned only \$10 to \$13 a week, while those in Montreal earned much less. Weekly pay for male workers in the furniture industry averaged \$10, but “boys” of 19 often earned as little as three dollars. In the textile industry, the Royal Commission on Price Spreads, appointed by the Conservative government in 1934, found shocking conditions: a Quebec home worker earning 5 cents an hour; a seamstress paid 9½ cents for sewing a dozen dresses.

Tens of thousands of workers lost their jobs. By 1933, over 20 percent of the entire Canadian labour force — one worker out of every five — remained unemployed. In some regions of the country, the figures rose as high as 35 percent and even 50 percent. Since no social-security system existed, the unemployed, the destitute, and the sick had to rely on the charity of others, private groups, or government relief.

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R.B. BENNETT’S POLICIES

At the outset of the Great Depression, the Liberals were in office. Confident of another victory, party organizers remained apathetic and indifferent throughout the election campaign of 1930. The Liberals believed, as did many other politicians in the western world, that this depression was just another momentary dip in the economy, and therefore saw no need to propose sweeping economic reform during the election campaign. King was also unusually argumentative. In the Parliamentary session just before the election, King was pushed into saying he “would not give a single cent, not a five-cent piece” to any provincial Conservative government,



Eviction in Montreal during the Depression.

National Archives of Canada/C-30811.

a comment that plagued him throughout the election campaign. In contrast, Richard Bedford Bennett, the exuberant Conservative leader, promised that if elected he could, and would, solve the problems of the depression. He won the election.

Once in power, the new prime minister acted. Bennett introduced a high-tariff policy on manufactured goods as one solution to the depression. But the high tariffs undermined Canada's competitive edge. As a major exporting nation, Canada greatly depended on the export of key staples — wheat, pulp and paper, and minerals — to foreign markets, especially the American market. In 1930, the United States retaliated with the Smoot-Hawley tariff on foreign imports.

Within his first five weeks in office, Bennett introduced the Unemployment Relief Act, which provided \$20 million of assistance to the poor — a considerable sum out of a total federal budget of \$500 million. But Bennett soon discovered that much more was needed. Between 1930 and 1938, Ottawa would provide nearly \$350 million in relief for the jobless and for destitute farmers, while municipal and provincial governments added another \$650 million. Most of the money went to work-incentive programs, for which municipalities were expected to contribute their share.

The federal government underestimated the destitution of the municipal governments. Already heavily in debt, they, and the provincial governments, had overextended themselves in the boom years of the 1920s. Furthermore, their tax base eroded as people could no longer pay local property taxes. Indeed, all levels of government faced mounting deficits on a decreased tax base. Toronto's budget for relief increased twentyfold between 1929 and 1933. By the outbreak of war, Montreal's per capita debt was twice Toronto's. When the province of Quebec, more tight-fisted toward its towns and cities than other provinces, refused to come to Montreal's rescue, the city was forced to declare bankruptcy in 1940.

Municipal, provincial, and federal governments responded by trying to balance their budgets through cutbacks on services. This, in turn, increased unemployment and slowed down



the recovery. Governments had few alternatives, given the magnitude of the debt and their low level of revenue. Also, opportunities to borrow abroad did not exist. All countries faced debt and dealt with it the same way — by trying to balance their budgets.

As the economic crisis continued, Bennett looked to Britain and the other Commonwealth countries for increased trade. In 1932, Canada hosted an Imperial Economic Conference to explore ways to combat the depression. At the conference, Bennett took an aggressive approach. He refused to make concessions to Britain on imports, yet expected the “mother country” to open its markets to Canadian goods. Overall, the conference failed, but Canada did gain a limited preference in the British market for its wheat, lumber, apples, and bacon. In return, Canada raised the preference for British manufactured goods by simply raising the level of the general tariff for all but British goods.

RELIEF



For the first time, thousands of Canadians faced the personal degradation of going on relief — the “pogey,” as it was called. In a society built on a philosophy of self-help, relief was an admission that one could no longer fend for oneself. Many people lost their sense of self-worth. The jobless had no choice but to fall back on charity, both public and private.

Those on relief faced the further humiliation of having to acknowledge their failure publicly. They lined up in a church basement or firehall waiting for relief. When their turn came, they had to proclaim their destitution, and swear that they did not own a car, a radio, or a telephone. Recipients of relief generally had to be in arrears in rent payments and to have received notice of discontinuation of electricity and water service, as well as impending eviction. Then the authorities gave them food vouchers to purchase the minimum necessities at local stores — a further reminder of one’s impoverished condition. In Ontario, these relief vouchers averaged \$8.07 a person for a week in the winter months. In 1933, North York gave families on relief a maximum of \$11.60 a week, although the Toronto Welfare Council estimated that a family of five needed \$28.35 a week to maintain an adequate living standard. In Prince Edward Island, relief vouchers amounted to only \$1.93, and in New Brunswick they averaged a meagre \$1.67.

For relief families, used clothing had to be picked up at a private charity centre. Fuel was often wood cut by people on relief themselves as part of their expected tasks to earn relief money. In the Prairie West — once the “breadbasket of the nation” — food, along with used clothing and fuel, often came in railcar loads from central Canada.

To give those on relief the illusion of working for their relief payments, governments created make-shift jobs known as “boon-doggling.” The town of New Toronto, Ontario, for example, required relief workers to haul large stones to vacant lots, where they were smashed and used for road construction. Winnipeg men on relief sawed wood, pulled weeds along city boulevards, and swept the city streets. Rumours abounded of some municipalities that had “relief men” dig holes one day and fill them in the next, simply to keep them occupied.

To avoid drifters coming into town for assistance, most municipalities had lengthy residence requirements to qualify for relief. Recent immigrants now faced a hostile reception. The Immigrant Act allowed for the deportation of immigrants on relief especially if they happened to belong to socialist organizations. Consequently, some municipalities provided the authorities with lists of immigrants who were receiving government assistance. Between 1930 and 1935, Ottawa returned an unprecedented 30 000 immigrants to Europe.

RELIEF CAMPS

By 1932, the Great Depression had worsened. More than 1.5 million Canadians (15 percent of the nation’s population) depended on relief, and the country seemed ripe for rebellion. Of par-

ticular concern were unemployed single men, many of whom “rode the rods” across Canada in search of work, begged for food and clothing, camped in shantytowns on the outskirts of cities, and lined up at soup kitchens and hostels for food and shelter. General Andrew McNaughton, chief of the Army General Staff, proposed the establishment of relief camps to offer temporary work and prevent dissidence and violence. Beginning in 1932, the federal government established numerous camps across the country, usually in isolated areas distant from major population centres.

During the four-year period that they existed, an estimated 20 000 single, homeless male “volunteers” worked long hours at menial jobs designed simply to keep them busy for a meagre 20 cents a day. Intolerable living conditions in the camps made them ripe for infiltration by communist-led organizations such as the Single Unemployed Workers’ Association, an organization funded by the Communist Party of Canada.

THE ON-TO-OTTAWA TREK

In the spring of 1935, men in British Columbia work camps jumped the trains en route to Ottawa to protest conditions. They picked up other camp men and unemployed workers along the way. About 2000 trekkers reached Regina before the federal government ordered the RCMP to break up the march. The ensuing confrontation, on Dominion Day, 1935, left one plainclothes policeman dead and numerous strikers and police officers injured. The police arrested 120 of the trekkers and convicted eight of them. Only strike leader Arthur Evans and a few others were permitted to continue to Ottawa, where the unsympathetic Prime Minister Bennett denounced them as “red” agitators and dissidents.

Canada’s millionaire prime minister came to represent the callous indifference of the rich to the suffering of the unemployed and destitute, and thus became the butt of numerous jokes. People spoke of “Bennett buggies,” engineless cars pulled by horses because the owners could not afford gas; “Bennett boroughs,” the shantytowns of makeshift “homes” for homeless men; and “Bennett blankets,” the newspapers under which transients slept on park benches. Bennett was ridiculed in a parody of the Lord’s Prayer:



A “Bennett buggy” was a car pulled by a horse, or oxen.

Glenbow Archives/NA-2434-1.



A demonstration of strikers at Market Square on the eve of the Regina Riot on Dominion Day, 1935. During the riot, one plainclothes policeman was killed and numerous strikers and police officers were injured.

Dick and Ada Bird Collection/Saskatchewan Archives Board/R-A27560-1.

Our Father, who art in Ottawa, Bennett be thy name.
Give us this day our bowl of soup and forgive us our
trespasses on the CPR and the CNR as we forgive the
bulls from chasing us. Lead us not into the hands of the
RCMP, nor yet to the relief camp, for thine is the kingdom
the power and glory, until there's an election — Amen.

In fairness to Bennett, beneath his cold exterior existed a warm generosity. Thousands of Canadians wrote personal letters to him expressing their hardships and appealing for help. Very often he sent them money from his own pocket, apparently without any political benefit, since he often insisted on the strictest confidentiality.



Bennett also enacted a number of measures that, over time, strengthened Canada's economy and became permanent structures. He established a central bank, the Bank of Canada, to "promote the economic and financial welfare of the Dominion." His government passed the Natural Products and Marketing Act, which set up a federal marketing board with authority over all "natural products of agriculture and of the forest, sea, lake or river," exported or sold across provincial boundaries. His government also introduced the Canada Grain Board Act, which gave Ottawa control of the marketing of coarse grains, including wheat.

In 1934, Bennett also appointed the Royal Commission on Price Spreads to investigate the buying practices of major department stores and the labour conditions in certain industries. Out of that commission came legislation to institute unemployment insurance and to regulate wages and working hours. Unfortunately both bills were struck down by the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council as unconstitutional. In 1940, however, the federal government succeeded in implementing an unemployment insurance plan after the British North America Act had been amended to allow for Ottawa's intervention into this traditional field of provincial jurisdiction.

BENNETT'S "NEW DEAL"

As the election of 1935 approached, Bennett decided to imitate the example of the popular American president, Franklin D. Roosevelt. In a radio address, he announced his "New Deal," a

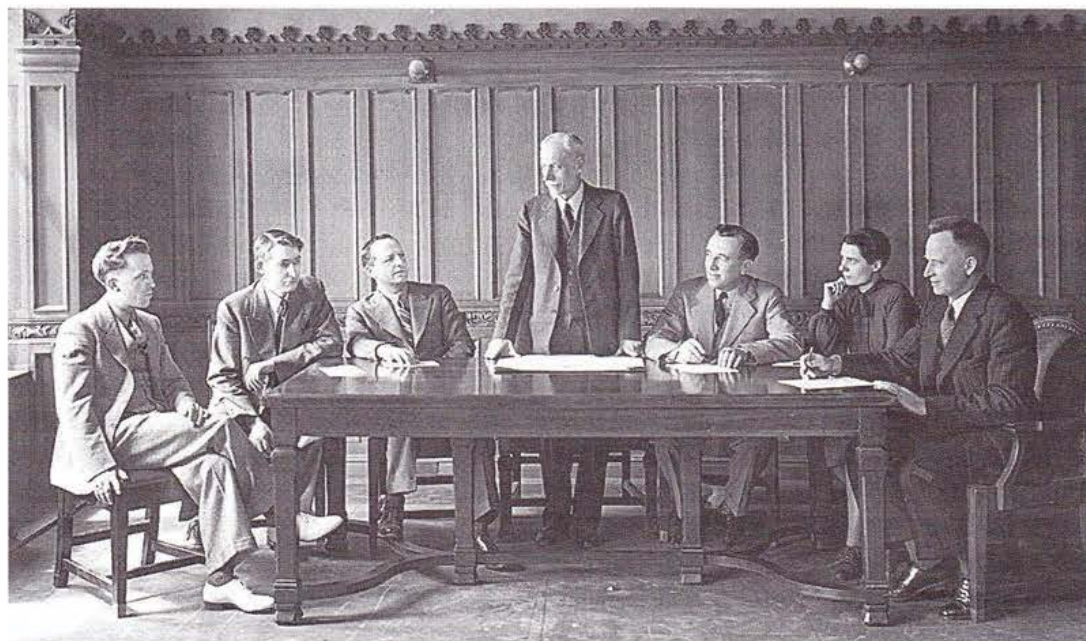
program of reform that his party would introduce if the Conservatives were re-elected. It came as a complete surprise, even to his own cabinet members, who had not been consulted about the reform package. It included health and unemployment insurance, a maximum work week, financial assistance to farmers to enable them to stay on their farms, and the creation of the Economic Council of Canada to advise the government. (After the election, the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council ruled that many aspects of Bennett's "New Deal" were unconstitutional because they infringed on provincial jurisdiction.)

Many Canadians were sceptical of Bennett's "sudden conversion to reform," especially since virtually none of the legislation was prepared going into the election. The voting public expressed its scepticism and its criticism of the Conservatives in the election of 1935. It returned Mackenzie King's Liberal party to power with a majority government but with a lower percentage of votes than in 1930 when he lost. Political analysts argue that the Liberal victory was more a rejection of Bennett than an endorsement of King. Indeed, in the popular vote, more than 25 percent of Canadians rejected both of the mainline parties to vote for one of the new parties that entered the election.

THIRD PARTIES

Two of those new parties began on the Prairies. The Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) had its beginnings at a national convention in Calgary in August 1932. The CCF drew together dissident groups from a broad spectrum of Canadian society, including farmers, labourers, socialists, academics, and disenchanted Liberals. At the convention the party chose Labour MP J.S. Woodsworth as their leader.

From the beginning, the CCF distanced itself from the two mainline parties by having a clear socialist program to deal with the Great Depression. Woodsworth asked the League for



The federal CCF caucus meets with its secretary J.S. Woodsworth, who is standing in the centre. On the extreme left sits Tommy Douglas, later Premier of Saskatchewan, and the first leader when the CCF changed its name to the New Democratic Party.

National Archives of Canada/PA 167544.

Social Reconstruction (LSR), an organization of left-wing intellectuals who were mostly, although not exclusively, from universities to draft a manifesto for the new party. University of Toronto historian Frank H. Underhill and McGill University law professor Frank Scott did so. Adopted at the party's second annual convention in Regina in 1933, the "Regina Manifesto" set out a ten-point program for the CCF to follow in its effort to "eradicate capitalism" and create a co-operative commonwealth in Canada. The CCF favoured government control of the economy through the nationalization of the means of production, distribution, and exchange. It also worked for a more equitable distribution of wealth, the creation of a welfare state, and the pursuit of international peace through the League of Nations.

The CCF entered its first federal election in 1935 in high hopes of becoming a major party. Those expectations were dashed when it won only seven seats, all from the West, although the party did win 8.8 percent of the popular vote. Two of those elected — M.J. Coldwell and T.C. "Tommy" Douglas — later became national party leaders. Although weak in representation, the party did come to acquire the reputation of being "the conscience of the House of Commons." Provincially, the CCF did better. The party became the official opposition in British Columbia in 1933, in Saskatchewan in 1934, and in Ontario in 1943; but its real breakthrough came in the midst of World War II, when in 1944 Tommy Douglas led the party to victory in Saskatchewan.

SOCIAL CREDIT



In Alberta, a party quite different from the CCF, the Social Credit party, also began in the midst of the depression. Major C.H. Douglas, a Scottish engineer, first enunciated Social Credit theory in the 1910s. Douglas was concerned about the waste and underutilization of resources in the capitalist system. He did not blame the system, which he admired, but rather the financial institutions that hoarded money, thus preventing consumers from buying the abundant goods that the capitalist system produced. Douglas's solution was for governments to inject more money into the economy and give it to the people to spend. He used his "A plus B Theorem" to explain his reasoning. "A" represented the wages, salaries, and dividends paid to individuals, while "B" represented all other costs involved in making an item, such as raw materials and bank charges. Together, the two costs would give the "just price" of an item. The problem was, Social Credit theorists argued, that individuals only got the "A" portion. To make up the difference—the "B" portion—a Social Credit government would provide a "national dividend" to every individual to enable him or her to purchase essential goods. To people without sufficient money to buy even the necessities of life, the theory was appealing.

Douglas's theories awaited a popular leader; Alberta provided one, the charismatic William "Bible Bill" Aberhart. Born in Ontario, the son of a dairy farmer, Aberhart came west in 1910. The Ontario teacher became principal of a new high school in Calgary. At the same time, he served as a lay preacher in a local Baptist church. In 1925, the radio station CFCN invited him to give Sunday sermons on their "Voice of the Prairie" program. This opportunity enabled him to reach an estimated 350 000 people with his religious message. With financial contributions from listeners, he built the Prophetic Bible Institute in Calgary, which he later used to distribute Social Credit material.


Aberhart "converted" to Social Credit in the summer of 1932 after the suicide of one of his best students as a result of the depression. Thereafter, he introduced Social Credit economic theory into his weekly sermons. Initially, he hoped one of the established political parties would adopt Social Credit. When they failed to do so, he began his own party on the eve of the 1935 provincial election. He promised each citizen a \$25-a-month "basic dividend" to purchase necessities. Helping the party to gain popularity was a sex scandal involving Premier John Brownlee, which destroyed his career.

In the 1935 provincial election Social Credit swept Alberta, winning 56 of the 63 seats. Once in power, the new premier and his party could not implement their election promises. The federal government challenged the constitutional legality of a province issuing its own currency. The party also lacked parliamentary expertise, since the majority of its candidates were political neophytes. Only after the outbreak of war, and especially after the discovery of oil in 1947, did the party become well established under Aberhart's protégé, Ernest Manning, who took over after Aberhart's death in 1943.

THE RECONSTRUCTION PARTY

H.H. Stevens, a B.C. member of the Bennett government and head of the Select Committee and then of the Royal Commission on Price Spreads, resigned from the cabinet in October 1934 to begin his own party, the Reconstruction party. He promised "to re-establish Canada's industrial, economic and social life for the benefit of the great majority." In the 1935 election, the Reconstruction party won over 8 percent of the popular vote but elected only one candidate, Stevens. The party reduced Conservative support in various constituencies across the country.

COMMUNISTS AND FASCISTS

 Extreme left- and right-wing political movements, such as the Communist Party and fascist groups, grew during the interwar years. The Communist Party of Canada, founded in 1921 in Guelph, Ontario, thrived in the economic-crisis conditions of the depression, especially among immigrants threatened with deportation. It modelled itself after the Soviet Communist Party. Government repression of the party occurred frequently in the decade by invoking section 98 of the Criminal Code, which made it illegal to advocate "governmental, industrial or economic change within Canada by the use of force, violence or physical injury to persons or property, or by threats of such injury" even if the accused did nothing to bring about such changes. In one crackdown in August 1931, party leader Tim Buck and seven others were arrested. As a result of an attempt on Buck's life in Kingston Penitentiary a year later, the "Toronto Eight," as they became known, emerged as the embattled underdogs. They won sympathy from a number of Canadians who believed in the democratic right of left-wing dissident groups to express their views, even if they disagreed with the party's ideology.

Most Canadians who wanted radical change during the depression preferred the peaceful, democratic approach of the CCF to the violent, revolutionary change advocated by the communists. On the eve of World War II, the Communist Party supposedly had 16 000 members. But when the Soviet Union signed a non-aggression pact with Adolf Hitler that summer, many members quit the party in protest. In June 1940, the Canadian government declared the Communist Party illegal.

Fascists proved less numerous than communists in Canada. The Deutscher Bund Canada, founded in 1934 and led by German Canadians, never had more than 2000 members, while the Canadian Nationalist Party, founded by right-wing militants, and the allied Swastika clubs, added a few thousand more. The Swastika clubs tried to stop Jews from visiting Kew and Balmy Beaches in east Toronto. At McGill University in Montreal, officials conspired to turn away Jewish applicants. In Quebec, Adrien Arcand patterned his National Social



An anti-Semitic poster at Sainte-Agathe, a resort area in the Laurentians north of Montreal, 1939.

National Archives of Canada/PA-107943.
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Montreal.

Christian party along Nazi lines. He claimed to represent the last stand of Roman Catholicism against communists and other “atheist” groups. While Arcand remained a marginal and eccentric character, anti-Semitism found support among nationalist movements in the province, such as the Jeune-Canada and the Ligue d’Action nationale.

Not surprisingly, thousands of persecuted Jews fleeing Nazi Germany found Canada’s doors firmly closed. A leading member of the immigration department summarized their viewpoint toward Jewish immigrants, “none was too many.” Only a few Canadian leaders, such as Cairine Wilson, Canada’s first woman senator and chairperson of the Canadian National Committee on Refugees, denounced Nazi atrocities and urged a liberalization of Canadian immigration regulations. Immigration in total reached an all-time low in the 1930s: only 149 000 immigrants were allowed in during the entire decade, and only 5000 of them were Jews.

PROVINCIAL POLITICS AND THE ECONOMIC CRISIS

The depression led to political change in the provinces. In most provinces, voters ousted incumbents, although usually in exchange for governments by well-established, as opposed to new, parties.

NEWFOUNDLAND AND THE MARITIMES

Various problems beset Newfoundland in the 1930s, at the time a British dominion; the most important was the falling price of fish as a result of the depression. In 1932, Sir Richard Squires, the Liberal premier, narrowly escaped being lynched by a mob infuriated by disclosures of scandal, as well as by the government’s tough relief policies when almost half of the island’s labour force was out of work. Indeed, the British navy had to be called in to assist local police in controlling rioters. A new government, the United Newfoundland party, took power after the election of 1932. It obtained further bank loans by arguing that the money was needed to ward off “grave threats of insurrection.” A royal commission reviewed the economic crisis and recommended the dissolution of the legislature; Newfoundland reverted to the status of a British colony, and London was obliged to pay off the colony’s debts.

Canadians in the Maritime provinces elected Liberal governments in the 1930s and kept them in office until the 1950s. In Nova Scotia, Angus L. Macdonald, a former law professor, became premier in 1933. Practising an activist style of government, “Angus L.” implemented old age pensions and began paving provincial roads. He also appointed a royal commission to investigate Nova Scotia’s position in Confederation. Norman Macleod Rogers, who taught political science at Queen’s University, drafted the province’s submission. It argued for additional compensation for Canada’s poorer provinces, since their disadvantageous position resulted from their role in Confederation.

In both New Brunswick and Prince Edward Island, the Liberals came to power on promises of economic and social reform. In New Brunswick, Allison Dysart’s government introduced old age pensions, created public works projects, and pressured timber companies into activating their leases or else losing them. In Prince Edward Island, Thane Campbell’s government had the distinction of being the first to win every seat in a provincial election. In office, Campbell established a permanent civil service and supported co-operative organizations and marketing boards as its response to the depression.

All three provinces lacked the revenues to complete the promised reforms. New Brunswick, for example, borrowed heavily to finance its massive public works program. Inevitably, other priorities suffered. Education and health services declined to barely half the national average by the end of the 1930s, and illiteracy and infant mortality rates in the province were the highest in the country.

QUEBEC

In Quebec, the new Union Nationale party, under the leadership of Maurice Duplessis, the Conservative leader, allied his party with a dissident left-wing group within the Liberal party called Action libérale nationale, headed by Paul Gouin, son of former Quebec Liberal premier Lomer Gouin, and it became thus the Union Nationale. This “unholy alliance” lasted only long enough to defeat in 1936 the long-standing Liberal government, in power since 1897. Thereafter, the right-wing Duplessis purged his government of the Gouin faction.

Duplessis attacked a number of dissident groups in the province, including socialists, communists, and trade unionists. In 1937 he introduced the “Padlock Law,” which made it illegal for any group to use a house or hall “to propagate communism or bolshevism” or to publish or distribute literature “tending to propagate communism.” As the bill did not define “communist,” it gave the premier a weapon with which to attack any left-wing organization he wished. Duplessis used the law to lock premises suspected of being used for communist activities, to ban publications, and, on a couple of occasions, to arrest dissidents. He attacked union leaders, denouncing them as “dangerous agitators,” when unions refused to comply with Quebec’s labour laws.

ONTARIO

Next door in Ontario, in 1934, voters ousted the Conservatives, who had been in office since 1923. They elected the Liberals under their flamboyant leader, “Mitch” Hepburn, whose oratorical skills and quick wit served him well on the political hustings. At one country rally, Hepburn gave his speech from the only available stage, a manure spreader. He remarked that it was the first time he had given an address on a “Conservative platform.”

Although initially seen as a reformer, Hepburn soon proved to be reactionary. He sided with industrialists against labourers in a bitter sixteen-day strike against General Motors in Oshawa in 1937. He denounced the United Auto Workers union as “communist inspired,” and sent in a government-supported police force, dubbed “Hepburn’s Hussars” or “sons of Mitches” to break up the strike. Two of his cabinet ministers, Arthur Roebuck and David Croll, resigned in disgust. Croll proclaimed his “place was marching with the workers rather than riding with General Motors.”

BRITISH COLUMBIA

In British Columbia, another flamboyant and self-assured provincial Liberal leader, T.D. “Duff” Pattullo, became premier in the midst of the depression. Pattullo had won and lost fortunes in a business career in the Yukon and northern British Columbia before entering politics. He won the election of 1933 on the promise of “work and wages” for every provincial resident. His program became known as the “little New Deal,” which promised a provincial health-insurance plan, reduced taxes on lower incomes, public works, unemployment insurance, and an economic council with labour representation to study the problem of unemployment. He also believed in injecting money into the economy by spending on major public works projects, such as the bridge that bears his name and the Alaska Highway. In the words of historian Robin Fisher, his biographer, “The first Pattullo administration offered the most vigorous political response to the depression of any government in Canada.”² But as in Alberta’s case, the government of British Columbia lacked the tax base to make these changes. Pattullo looked to the federal government for loans to help his government fight the “war on poverty.” When the Conservative, and then Liberal, administrations in Ottawa refused funding requests, Pattullo



May Day Parade in Toronto, May 1, 1934.

City of Toronto Archives, Fonds 1266, Globe and Mail Collection, Item 33196.

failed to follow through on many policies. Nevertheless, he managed to get re-elected in 1937, giving his government the distinction of being the only government in Canada to be re-elected during the depression. It remained in power until 1941, when it was replaced by a Liberal–Conservative coalition party.

LABOUR IN THE GREAT DEPRESSION

Workers became more militant in the desperate conditions of the Great Depression. “Red” trade unions grew, and some affiliated with the Communist Party of Canada. For example, the Workers’ Unity League (WUL) was born out of a directive from Moscow that communist-led unions should separate from “reformist” unions, like the All-Canadian Congress of Labour (ACCL), and prepare for the coming world

revolution. After signing up workers in mines and shops, the WUL declared strikes to obtain union recognition and better wages and working conditions. At its peak in 1932, the WUL had an estimated 40 000 members. It claimed leadership of most of the strikes across the country in the early 1930s. The WUL also organized the unemployed by establishing workers’ councils in various cities and by circulating a petition, eventually signed by 300 000 people, calling for a national non-contributory unemployment-insurance scheme.

Violent confrontation often occurred between police and strikers or between strikebreakers and strikers. The worst was in Estevan, Saskatchewan, in 1931, when 600 coal-mine workers walked out of the mines. The owners denounced the strike as “Communist-led,” thus ensuring the support of the politicians and the RCMP. The police opened fire during a strikers’ parade, killing three unarmed strikers.

THE CIO IN CANADA

In 1935 a new union, the American-based Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), emerged in Canada to “organize the unorganized.” The Canadian CIO’s greatest success occurred in 1937, when the CIO-inspired United Auto Workers led the strike at the General Motors factory in Oshawa, Ontario. Hepburn intervened to break the strike because he feared a CIO victory would encourage unionization and strikes elsewhere in the province. The CIO also organized Montreal’s female garment workers, as well as coal miners in Nova Scotia.

Despite some successes and much publicity, however, the CIO made little headway elsewhere in Canada in the 1930s. Strong opposition came from business and the craft-dominated Trades and Labor Congress (TLC), which in 1939 expelled the CIO affiliates. The CIO then merged with the weaker All-Canadian Congress of Labour in 1940 to form the Canadian Congress of Labour (CCL).

WOMEN IN THE 1930s

In the 1930s, women’s wages fell dramatically and working conditions deteriorated. Initially, the depression benefited women who wanted to work because they could be hired at half a man’s wages. Soon came the backlash. Women were attacked for taking jobs away from unemployed

men who had wives and families to support. CCF member Agnes Macphail pointed out that the economic system, not women, was to blame for unemployment. She added that many women needed to work if they and their families were to survive.

Women faced difficulties getting relief even if they were eligible for it. In addition, many municipalities opposed giving relief to women. Authorities reasoned that single unemployed women posed no threat to society, as did single unemployed men. Furthermore, they assumed that these women would be cared for by their families. As well, authorities feared that relief to women would contribute to the breakdown of the family. A few single women turned to prostitution as a desperate alternative to dire poverty. Some married women assumed the dual responsibilities of “breadwinner” and sole head of the family, as their husbands left home in search of work or simply deserted their families. Destitute single mothers in Ontario could apply for the Ontario Mothers’ Allowance, implemented in 1920, but the amount was meagre, and the recipients became, in essence, wards of the State.

Emphasis was placed on women being wives and mothers as their appropriate roles. Over 90 percent of women eventually married. Once married, they were expected to give up their jobs and take up domestic duties. Marriages seldom ended in divorce. Wife abuse increased, especially during the depression. The police were of little assistance; they usually told victims of abuse simply to make the best of matters and to find comfort in their children.

Family size declined in the 1930s. Infant mortality still remained high by today’s standards, due to several factors. Babies born in the winter months had to survive the poor heating in even the best-built residences. Infants also faced a wide range of the “childhood diseases” — measles, mumps, scarlet fever, and whooping cough — illnesses that proved deadly then but are now held in check through public-health programs and by antibiotics.

Birth control was seldom an option women could consider, although by 1937 birth-control clinics existed in Toronto, Hamilton, and Windsor. Also available was A.H. Tyrer’s popular book, *Sex, Marriage and Birth Control* (1936). The popular belief of the day was expressed by Dr. Helen McMurchy, director of the Dominion Division of Child Welfare, who described birth control among those of British background as “race suicide.” French-Canadian nationalists used the same argument in Quebec. Still, the idea of eugenics — the selective breeding of the fittest and the compulsory sterilization of those considered inferior — gained popularity in the 1930s. Heading the movement was A.R. Kaufman, a wealthy manufacturer, who believed that the “inferior” working class was producing over half of the nation’s children. Among them were the “irresponsible, criminal and mentally deficient” who were the source of “most of our social liabilities.” His solution was to distribute birth-control information and devices and even to perform surgical operations to restrict or prevent reproduction among certain groups.

A few doctors provided birth-control information and devices, but they did so at the risk of losing their medical licence. Dr. Elizabeth Bagshaw, for example, operated a birth-control clinic for working-class women in Hamilton, Ontario. Dorothea Palmer was arrested in a French-Canadian suburb of Ottawa for distributing contraceptive information. At her trial, where both Tyrer and Kaufman lent support, the judge acquitted her because he believed she had acted “for the public good.” The poor, he stated, “are a burden to the taxpayer. They crowd the Juvenile Court. They glut the competitive labour market.” For some women, self-induced miscarriages seemed to be the only alternative to unwanted children or children they simply could not afford.

Support for birth control tended often to come from socialist groups. Some women socialists believed that the capitalist system encouraged large families so as to have a cheap source of labour for its factories and cannon fodder for its armies. In 1924, British Columbia socialists founded the Canadian Birth Control League to educate working-class women. In 1929, the Saskatchewan section of the United Farmers of Canada recommended the establishment of birth-control clinics staffed by trained doctors.

THE NATIVE PEOPLES IN THE 1930s

During the 1930s, First Nations and Métis communities faced numerous challenges. As Plains Cree historian Stan Cuthand writes of western Canada in the interwar years: “Conditions on Indian reserves in practically every area—social services, health, education, and living facilities—had deteriorated in the years since the signing of the treaties.”³ The Indian Act’s tight regulations remained in full force. But a ray of hope emerged in this decade: political organization. British Columbia had led the way with the formation of the Allied Tribes of British Columbia in 1915, replaced by the more powerful Native Brotherhood of British Columbia in 1931. Fred Loft’s League of Indians of Canada, founded after World War I, briefly became the first pan-Indian political organization extending across Canada in the early 1920s. It contributed to the formation of the Indian Association of Alberta in 1929 that also publicized Aboriginal claims.

LIBERAL POLICIES

Once back in power after the federal election of 1935, Mackenzie King’s Liberals continued some of the Conservatives’ policies to cope with the depression and added some of their own. The Liberals, for instance, supported the Bank of Canada as an essential stabilizing force in a time of financial crisis. After the government purchased a majority of the bank’s stock, King made its governor responsible to Parliament for monetary policy. But the Liberals altered the Conservatives’ high tariff policy. Charles Dunning, the finance minister and former premier of Saskatchewan, negotiated low tariff agreements with both Britain and the United States.

THE PRAIRIE FARM REHABILITATION PROGRAM

King continued the Conservatives’ policy of aid to the drought-stricken farmers of western Canada. The Liberals even extended assistance by implementing the Prairie Farm Rehabilitation Act (PFRA), which provided money to experiment with new farming methods, especially in the dry-belt area of the Palliser Triangle. The experimental farms in the region applied the latest scientific knowledge to attempt to get the soil to regain its productivity. Two innovations followed: first, the Noble plough, invented by Charles Noble of Nobleford, Alberta, which cut the roots of weeds without turning over the topsoil to expose it to sun and wind; second, “trash farming”—instead of ploughing and harrowing their fields to make them look neat and clean, farmers were encouraged to leave the dead plants and grain stubble on the field to prevent wind erosion. The PFRA’s program also provided money to build dugouts for spring runoff water for cattle, helped reseed vacant and pasture land, and, in the case of destitute farm families in the Palliser Triangle area, assisted relocation to better farming areas to the north.

THE CBC AND TCA

The Liberals created two innovative national institutions and introduced two important social-security measures in the 1930s. In 1936, they reorganized the Canadian Radio Broadcasting Commission, founded in 1932 to control radio under federal government jurisdiction, into the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC). According to Graham Spry, whose Canadian Radio League had fought for such an institution, the choice was between “the State or the United States.” The government mandated the CBC to regulate private broadcasting and to develop its own network across the country with Canadian content in both official languages. Political scientist Jack McLeod sees the creation of the CBC as “the 20th-century parallel to Macdonald’s railway.”⁴ In 1937, the Liberals established Trans-Canada Air Lines (TCA), the

forerunner of Air Canada, as a Crown corporation. Two other federal initiatives proved successful: the Municipal Improvements Assistance Act, which authorized \$30 million in federal loans at 2 percent interest for special municipal public-works projects, and the National Housing Act (NHA), which made federally backed mortgages easier to obtain. The NHA provided \$30 million worth of mortgages for low-income tenants.

The King government also addressed the relief question. It established the National Employment Commission to re-examine and restructure the administration of direct relief. In 1867, relief had been a very minor matter, assigned in the BNA Act to the provinces and municipalities. The commission made two important recommendations: first, that the federal government take over unemployment payments because this was too big and expensive an undertaking for municipal or provincial governments; and second, that the government adopt a policy of deficit financing to provide additional relief and stimulate economic growth. King hesitated in acquiring federal responsibility for unemployment and relief, responsibilities that would increase the federal debt load. He also resisted the Keynesian monetary policy of deficit financing, which went against his traditional liberal policies of *laissez-faire* and a balanced budget.

THE ROYAL COMMISSION ON DOMINION–PROVINCIAL RELATIONS

Before moving on either issue, King created the Royal Commission on Dominion–Provincial Relations to explore all aspects of relations between these two levels of government in light of the current economic crisis. Heralded by the federal government as the most important royal commission in Canadian history, the Rowell–Sirois Commission, as it became known after its head commissioners, N.W. Rowell of Ontario and Joseph Sirois of Quebec, recommended a stronger federal-government economic presence. The decision to launch the commission ran into strong provincial opposition from both Hepburn in Ontario and Duplessis in Quebec. Its report did not appear until 1940; Parliament had just a year earlier imposed the War Measures Act, which gave the government licence to impose many aspects of the report's centralist agenda without consulting the provinces, at least for the duration of the war.

RELIGION

Many Canadians turned to religion for solace and direction in the depression. The trend was to move away from radical religion, with its emphasis on social reform, to a more conservative faith, with its emphasis on personal salvation and the importance of tradition. Nevertheless, a few radical groups gained some support during the depression. Some socially minded Protestants looked to the Fellowship for a Christian Social Order, founded by members of the United Church, for answers to the economic crisis. Fellowship members insisted that realizing the kingdom of God meant replacing a bankrupt capitalist system with socialism. Critics of the group complained that too many of its members were more committed to the teachings of Karl Marx than those of Jesus Christ.

Student activists turned to the Student Christian Movement (SCM), an organization begun in 1920 by the YWCA and YMCA. The SCM provided study groups on most Canadian university campuses in the 1930s to discuss social issues and advocate social change. For young girls, the Canadian Girls in Training (CGIT), an organization founded by the YWCA and the Protestant churches in 1917 to train young girls to improve both their lives and those of others, reached its peak of popularity during the depression, when it had an estimated 40 000 members.

Conservative and fundamentalist groups flourished in the decade. Church leaders promised that if people could not find salvation in this world, they could still hope in the afterlife. Disciples of the British Oxford Movement (a predecessor of Moral Rearmament) toured Canada,

Where Historians Disagree

Protestantism and Reform in the 1930s

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Protestant churches increasingly advocated and worked for social reform. Essentially, historians have debated whether this move to reform strengthened or weakened the Protestant faith. The decade of the 1930s has been important in this debate, because all churches were called upon to take a more active social role by helping individuals and families who were suffering during the depression.

An earlier generation of religious historians saw a split among the Protestant churches, between conservative and fundamentalist ones that emphasized personal salvation, and liberal and radical ones that stressed social salvation. They also noted a correlation between religious beliefs and political affiliation, at least in regard to new political reform movements and parties on the Prairies in the 1930s. W.E. Mann argued that the greatest support for Social Credit came from the fundamentalist churches and religious sects and cults.¹ Historians David Elliott and Iris Miller disagreed. They argue that the mainline Protestant churches, including those adhering to a liberal theology, most strongly supported Aberhart and his Social Credit movement.² Analysts of the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF) have noted an equally strong religious affiliation. Political scientist Walter Young noted that the party's leadership came largely from the left-wing Methodist church and its offspring, the United Church of Canada.³ Historian Kenneth McNaught emphasized the importance of Methodism in the life of J.S. Woodsworth, the founding leader of the CCF.⁴

More recently, religious historians have examined the social gospel movement in the Protestant churches in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Richard Allen argued that industrialization and urbanization created new social problems that required the attention of the Protestant churches.⁵ The resulting reform impulse inaugurated an era of revivalism that kept Protestantism alive and active well into the twentieth century. In the 1930s, the Fellowship for a Christian Social Order (FCSO), a socialist group consisting largely of ministers and sons of the manse, brought religion to the CCF.

Historian Ramsay Cook disagreed with Allen. He argued that the social gospel movement undermined the Protestant faith by getting churches involved in social issues that were more secular than sacred. As a result, religion went into a decline that has led to the modern secular society.⁶ David Marshall argued that during the Great Depression many clergy appealed for an evangelical revivalism to cope with the social dislocation. But their appeal went unheeded, because "years of accommodating religion with modernism and diluting the supernatural elements of Christianity"⁷ left religion a spent force in the 1930s.

The anti-secularists replied, led by historian Michael Gauvreau. He maintained that the Methodist and Presbyterian churches survived the onslaught of secularism in the late nineteenth century through a reformulation of their tradition of evangelicalism to fit the changing times and emerged with a "persistence and vitality" that served them well in the twentieth century. Far from being a spent force, as the secularists argued,

Protestantism was alive and well in the twentieth century, and it played a meaningful role in dealing with social concerns in the 1930s. If Protestantism did decline, it was after the Great Depression, Gauvreau argued.⁸

Entering the debate, historian Neil Semple pointed out that to the Methodists everything was sacred because “everything belonged to God,” and therefore secularism posed no threat. Furthermore, he suggested looking at the sacred–secular issue not as a linear progression but as something that

came and went, somewhat like “waves.” One such “wave” occurred in the 1930s, when even social gospellers “underwent a traumatic crisis of faith and sought a spiritual revival for themselves and for the entire church.”⁹

The debate is certain to continue as religious historians seek to understand the role of religion in the reform impulse of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries and the impact of that symbiotic relationship on the Protestant faith.

¹ W.E. Mann, *Sect, Cult and Church in Alberta* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1955).

² David Elliott and Iris Miller, *“Bible Bill”: A Biography of William Aberhart* (Edmonton: Reidmore Books, 1987).

³ Walter Young, *The Anatomy of a Party: The National CCF* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1969).

⁴ Kenneth McNaught, *A Prophet in Politics: A Biography of J.S. Woodsworth* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1959).

⁵ Richard Allen, *The Social Passion: Religion and Social Reform in Canada, 1914–1928* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971).

⁶ Ramsay Cook, *The Regenerators: Social Criticism in Late Victorian English Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985).

⁷ David B. Marshall, *Secularizing the Faith: Canadian Protestant Clergy and the Crisis of Belief, 1850–1940* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), p. 254.

⁸ Michael Gauvreau, *The Evangelical Century: College and Creed in English Canada from the Great Revival to the Great Depression* (Montreal/Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991).

⁹ Neil Semple, *The Lord's Domain: The History of Methodism* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1996), p. 448.



A Canadian Girls in Training (CGIT) meeting, probably in Toronto, around 1920. The Young Women's Christian Association and the major Protestant denominations established the organization in 1915 to promote the Christian education of girls aged 12 to 17.

Canadian Girls in Training Collection/National Archives of Canada/PA-125872.

delivering a message of “revelation, not revolution” to overflow audiences, which on one occasion included R.B. Bennett and his entire cabinet, at Bennett’s request.

In Quebec, many in the Roman Catholic church saw the depression as evidence of divine punishment for the sins of humankind — sins that included communism, materialism, urbanization, and even capitalism. They supported a back-to-the-land movement as the best means to combat both unemployment and “moral decrepitude.”

THE ANTIGONISH MOVEMENT

Still others, particularly those in the Maritimes, looked to co-operatives as the answer. In 1931, Pope Pius XI issued his encyclical *Quadragesimo anno*, in which he attacked the competitive nature of capitalism as heartless and cruel, and advocated co-operation instead. His appeal found a receptive audience in the co-operative movement in eastern Canada.

Beginning in the late 1920s and throughout the 1930s, Moses Coady, director of the extension department at St. Francis Xavier University in Antigonish, Nova Scotia, and Jimmy Tompkins, a fellow priest, worked to improve the lives of poor farmers, miners, fishers, and their families. A representative of this young co-operative movement would visit a community and, using local contacts, call a public meeting. A study group would follow to assess the community’s economic strengths and weaknesses. After the group’s meetings concluded, one or more co-operatives would form to remedy the identifiable weaknesses. The co-operatives might be credit unions, or perhaps co-operatives for selling fish or farm produce. When accused of being too left wing, Father Coady replied: “I’m not a leftist; I’m where the righteous ought to be.”

CULTURE IN THE 1930S

During the 1930s, popular culture flourished. New forms of entertainment — radio, for instance — allowed a greater choice of escapes from the realities of the depression. Owners of radio sets in English-speaking Canada listened to the comedy show *Amos ‘n Andy*, the most popular program of the decade. *Hockey Night in Canada*, with Foster Hewitt, was also a regular favourite. Such recording artists as Willie Eckstein, Percy Faith, and Guy Lombardo and his Royal Canadians got their start on Canadian radio, although by 1940 both Percy Faith and Guy Lombardo had left Canada for larger dance floors in the United States. Lombardo’s famous “Auld Lang Syne” had its origins in the Scottish communities of Ontario where he played, but it became synonymous with the American New Year’s Eve celebration. Don Messer began playing his “old time” fiddle music on radio in the 1930s, and formed “The Islanders” for CFLY radio in Charlottetown, PEI in 1939. French Canadians enjoyed the immensely successful serials written specifically for radio, such as “Le Curé de Village” and “La Pension Velder.” Radio variety shows were equally popular programs in Quebec. The songs of “La Bolduc,” Mary Travers-Bolduc, enjoyed enormous popularity.

Mass magazines, both Canadian and American, featured stories of wealth and glamour, while films from Hollywood portrayed romance and fantasy. Walt Disney’s *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* became a box-office hit. The birth of the Dionne quintuplets near Callander, Ontario, in May 1934, attracted worldwide attention and brought over 3 million people to see a glimpse of them at a special hospital set up to care for them under the auspices of the Ontario government — a government that quickly appreciated the profit to be made from this “tourist attraction.” Even this real-life event was a form of escape for the many who came.

SPORTS

Sports became another form of popular entertainment and a distraction during the depression. In winter, hockey dominated. Hockey stars became household names among sports-minded families: the Toronto Maple Leafs' famous "Kid Line" of Charlie Conacher, Joe Primeau, and Busher Jackson; the legendary Eddie Shore of the Boston Bruins, known for his speed and scoring flair; Francis "King" Clancy of the Toronto Maple Leafs, who once played every position on the ice in a single game; and Howie Morenz of the Montreal Canadiens, with his speed and flashy stickhandling, who was easily the greatest hockey superstar of the 1930s. Shortly after Morenz's tragic death on January 28, 1937, as a result of injuries received in a game, thousands of Montrealers filed past his bier, placed at centre ice in the Montreal Forum.

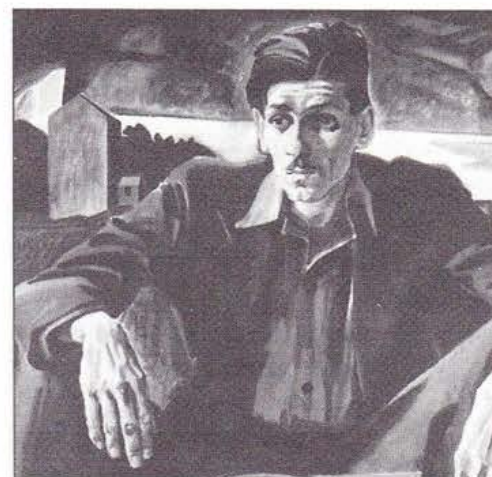
In summer, baseball continued to be Canada's most popular sport. Every community had a local team, and the larger towns and cities enjoyed franchises in minor professional leagues. As well, Canadians followed American big-league baseball as though it were their own "national" sport and cheered the successes of the legendary Babe Ruth. Canadian baseball fans gathered in front of the newspaper offices to watch the World Series as it was recorded on a scale-modelled baseball diamond, while an announcer described the game as it came in over the wire service.

VISUAL ART

In 1933, the Canadian Group of Painters (CGP) formed as an expansion of the Group of Seven. It held its first exhibition that year in Atlantic City, New Jersey. During the 1930s, the group focussed its activities in three cities — Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver. It formed a loose-knit association that provided moral support for artists who were affiliated with it. Younger members included A.J. Casson, Yvonne McKague Housser, Edwin Holgate, Gordon Webber, Isabel McLaughlin, Carl Schaefer, Charles Comfort, Paraskeva Clark, and J.W.G. (Jock) Macdonald. The older members, Arthur Lismer and A.Y. Jackson, the key figures of this new group, linked it directly to the earlier Group of Seven. Art education became an important goal of the CGP. As educational supervisor of the Art Gallery of Toronto, Lismer established the most successful children's art program in North America in the mid-1930s.

Concurrently with the Group of Seven's ascendancy in English-speaking Canada, French-Canadian painters showed a similar fascination with the land. Marc-Aurèle Fortin became a major landscape painter, but his inspiration came from visits to Chicago, Boston, and New York, and later to southern France and northern Italy, where he was especially influenced by the style of the Spanish painter Sorolla y Bastida. His pastoral canvases of the village of Sainte-Rose and of scenes along the north shore of Montreal Island are noted for their subdued colours. After 1935, he began painting in more vibrant, luminous colours. Art critic J. Russell Harper notes: "Fortin accomplished in Quebec what the Group of Seven had accomplished in Ontario: he painted the Quebec landscape as a symbol of the way in which he knew and felt it.... [But] he had one feature which is never found in the work of the Ontario artists: a religious overtone."⁵

Religious subjects also appeared in the early paintings of Jean-Paul Lemieux in the 1930s. He chose colourful Fête-Dieu processions in



Young Canadian (1932), by Charles Comfort. A portrait of fellow-artist Carl Schaefer, whose disillusioned eyes and empty, hanging hands symbolized the Great Depression.

Hart House, Permanent Collection, University of Toronto.

Quebec streets and other religious events as subjects for his paintings. They too, like Fortin's, were noted for their quiet nostalgia and gentle lyricism. The period also marked the death of a giant from an earlier era, Marc-Aurèle de Foy Suzor-Côte, in 1937. His obituary in the *Montreal Star* recognized him as "French Canada's greatest painter, and one of her greatest sculptors. His large canvases breathe the very atmosphere and colour of the woods of his beloved Quebec."

NOVELS

In the 1930s, Morley Callaghan's three novels — *Such Is My Beloved* (1934), *They Shall Inherit the Earth* (1935), and *More Joy in Heaven* (1937) — stood out as good examples of realistic novels, a reaction to the sentimental and romantic literature of an earlier generation. Irene Baird's *Waste Heritage* (1939) dealt with labour unrest and unemployment in Vancouver during the depression. The most outstanding French-Canadian novel in the 1930s was Ringuet's (Philippe Panneton's) *Trente Arpents*, translated into English as *Thirty Acres*, a realistic novel that graphically depicted the transition from rural to urban life in Quebec. It broke with literary tradition in Quebec in describing the French-Canadian farmer as a tragic, rather than heroic, figure. The novel follows the fall of its central character, Euchariste Moisan, from initial prosperity on his farm to a broken man in a New England factory town.

THEATRE

During the 1930s in Quebec, several of the best-known French-Canadian playwrights, such as Gratien Gélinas, learned their trade by writing scripts for radio productions, especially for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC). But criticism arose once again concerning the propriety of the theatre. When a Parisian company performed the popular but risqué operetta *Phi-Phi* at Montreal's St.-Denis theatre, a judge declared it indecent, closed it down, and levied \$15 fines on each of the actors, their agents, and even the orchestra leader.

Although the Roman Catholic church opposed public theatre for entertainment purposes, the clergy did support amateur theatre for educational purposes. Father Émile Legault founded in 1937 a troupe of young actors at Montreal's Collège de Saint-Laurent that from 1938 to 1952 set the pace for a theatrical renaissance in Quebec. With his encouragement, the group moved from an early emphasis on religious theatre to a concentration on classical and contemporary plays. Félix Leclerc, the famous Quebec singer, songwriter, playwright, and actor, acted with the *Compagnons de St. Laurent* in the early 1940s.

In English Canada, professional theatre languished in the depressed atmosphere of the 1930s. Most theatre groups, which were barely able to hold on during the good times, folded in the depression. Amateur theatre groups took their place. Governor General Lord Bessborough, a theatre enthusiast, assisted amateur theatre by founding in 1932 the Dominion Drama Festival, an annual competition that included amateur societies at the local, regional, and national levels. The best provincial productions went on to national finals, held each year in a different major city. The first competition was held in Ottawa in April 1933, and included 168 participants. During its nearly 40-year existence, the festival inaugurated the careers of a significant number of later-professional actors and actresses.

While professional theatre languished during the 1930s, working-class political theatre emerged. Especially popular was the agitprop troupe (agitprop is a combination of the words "agitation" and "propaganda") theatre used by communist sympathizers to advance class struggle. The conditions of the depression provided both the actors, in the form of unemployed workers and student agitators, and a sympathetic and enthusiastic audience for such theatre.

The Workers' Experimental Theatre became the first agitprop troupe in Canada, and it held its first performance on May 6, 1932, at the Ukrainian Labour Temple. This was followed in the summer of 1933 by three tours through southern Ontario. But their greatest success occurred in December 1933 when the group staged *Eight Men Speak*, a mock trial drama of the arrest two years earlier in 1931 and attempted assassination at the Kingston Penitentiary of Tim Buck, leader of the Communist Party. Many of the actors themselves risked arrest (and in some cases deportation) for taking part in the play, while theatre owners were threatened with having their licences revoked should they permit the play to be staged in their theatre. In the end, only one performance of the entire play was performed to a packed audience of 1500 at the Standard Theatre on Spadina Avenue in Toronto.

The depression affected all aspects of Canadian society. Out of desperation, people turned to the government for financial assistance. Governments, in turn, reluctantly accepted new economic and social responsibilities. New political parties appeared, each one offering its own solution to the depression. Women and labourers made only marginal gains. Many turned to religion for guidance. Popular culture flourished as people sought an escape from the harsh reality around them.

NOTES

1. John Herd Thompson with Allen Seager, *Canada, 1922–1939: Decades of Discord* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1985), p. 194.
2. Robin Fisher and David J. Mitchell, "Patterns of Provincial Politics Since 1916," in Hugh J.M. Johnston, ed., *The Pacific Province: A History of British Columbia* (Vancouver: Douglas & McIntyre, 1996), p. 259.
3. Stan Cuthand, "The Native Peoples of the Prairie Provinces in the 1920s and 1930s," in Ian A.L. Getty and Donald B. Smith, eds., *One Century Later: Western Canadian Reserve Indians Since Treaty 7* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1978), p. 41.
4. Jack McLeod, "Taking a leaf from Sir John's good book," *The Globe and Mail*, January 11, 1997, Section D, p. 5.
5. J. Russell Harper, *Painting in Canada: A History*, 2nd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), p. 296.

LINKING TO THE PAST

Key Economic Events: The Great Depression

http://canadianeconomy.gc.ca/english/economy/1929_39depression.html

A brief account of the effects of the depression, from the Government of Canada site.

Richard B. Bennett

<http://www.nlc-bnc.ca/primeministers/h4-3275-e.html>

Facts about and a brief biography of Richard B. Bennett, as well as excerpts from his speeches.

The Great Depression

http://www.canadianencyclopedia.com/index.cfm?PgNum=TCE&TCE_Version=A&ArticleId=A0003425&MenuClosed=0

An article tracing the economic, political, and social aspects of the depression years. Follow the links on this page to learn more.

The Bank of Canada Act

<http://laws.justice.gc.ca/en/B-2>

The full text of the Bank of Canada Act, which established the Bank of Canada in 1935.

Alberta's Social Credit Party

<http://www.freenet.edmonton.ab.ca/socred/history.html>

A history of the Social Credit party in Alberta.

75 Years of Struggle: History of the Communist Party of Canada

<http://www.comunist-party.ca/archive/index.html>

All illustrated history of the Communist Party of Canada, from its formation in 1921 to the present.

RELATED READINGS

R. Douglas Francis and Donald B. Smith, eds., *Readings in Canadian History: Post-Confederation*, 6th ed. (Toronto: Nelson Thomson Learning, 2002), contains two articles relevant to this chapter: Nelson Wiseman, "The Pattern of Prairie Politics," pp. 283–299; and James Struthers, "Canadian Unemployment Policy in the 1930s," pp. 309–319.

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