British North America: 1815

Dance at the Chateau Saint-Louis, Quebec, 1801 (watercolour)
(National Archives of Canada, C-000040)

Economic conditions

When the United States of America declared independence from the British Empire in the American Revolution of 1776-1783, Britain looked increasingly to its northern colonies for trade. Britain gave special treatment to these loyal colonies over the American or European markets, imposing high duties on imports from 'foreign' countries and providing a favourable market for colonial goods. By the end of the 18th century, Britain was fighting the Napoleonic Wars, and had an increased need of timber for ships and cheap wheat, both of which it found in her North American colonies. With the British trade in wheat, timber and fish, the Maritimes, like Upper and Lower Canada, was undergoing an economic boom. This economic situation was one of the factors encouraging the huge increase in British immigration in the post-1815 decades.

For the 300,000 Europeans who lived in what we now call Canada, the international economy provided employment in fishing and fish preservation, transporting the furs that Aboriginal peoples had traded, working in the woods as lumber jacks, in sawmills, or in the rapidly-growing maritime ship building industry. By 1815, both French Canadian and British farmers in Upper and Lower Canada were producing surpluses of wheat on their newly cleared farm lands, and were selling these to local merchants who, in turn, exported them to international markets. These activities, involving working for wages and/or trading commodities for money were supplemented by what has been called the informal economy, made up of the unpaid day-to-day activities out of which the population created their lives. In the first half of the nineteenth century, most of these activities were directly related to providing shelter, raising food and raising families. For men, these included outside activities like planting and harvesting crops, tending to farm animals and taking care of the farm buildings. It might also include hunting and fishing. For women, activities included planting, harvesting and preserving garden produce for the farm family, the caring for children, the caring for some farm animals like chickens and pigs, weaving and sewing of clothing, and outside farm work as it was required. Children were also involved in this economy, helping with household activities like cooking and farmyard activities like feeding livestock, gathering eggs and milking cows. Older children worked in the fields, scaring away the birds that came to eat seeds and berries, or picking stones from the ground their fathers were tilling.

Barrel-making in Molson's Brewery, early 19th century
(National Archives of Canada, PA-125228; ID #10223)
http://www.canadianheritage.org/reproductions/10223.htm

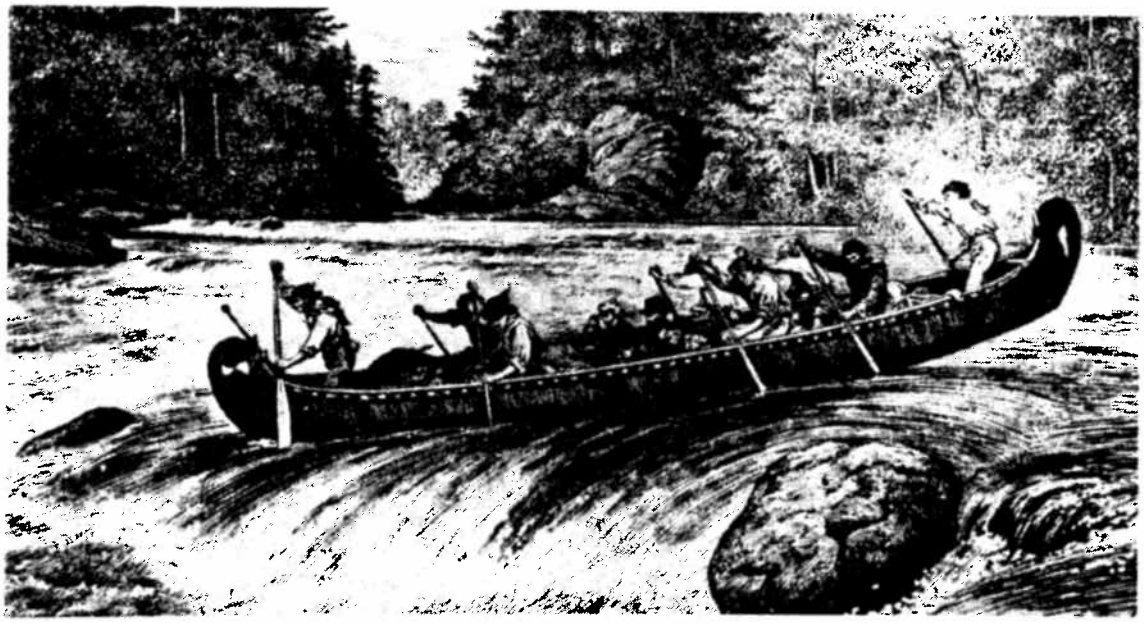
Social conditions

Life was very difficult for recent immigrants. Often the areas they moved into were undeveloped—there were few roads and many of them were extremely difficult to travel on. Fields had to be cleared of trees before crops could be planted. There were few stores of any kind, and people had to rely on their own labour, and on things they had brought from the 'old country' for almost everything they used on a daily basis. There was little government support for anyone who was poor or ill. Things were a little better for people who lived in more settled communities, and who had lived for longer in their community. Most French Canadian families in 1815 had lived in Lower Canada for generations, while many people of British origin were recent immigrants. This pattern would continue through the century, as more British immigrants streamed into the Canadas. The French Canadian population grew rapidly, but from the large families, rather than immigration. Even the settled families of Quebec were far from wealthy, however. Although their communities had been around for longer, the economy was based primarily on agriculture, as it would be in Upper Canada for many years to come.

Like those of European origin, many Aboriginal peoples in British North America participated in the international economy of the fur trade, and the informal economies of daily life. They differed from either ordinary settlers or British investors in the British North American economy, because their traditional ways of life were being removed by the increasing settlement on their traditional lands in the eastern regions of British North America. With the decline in the fur trade east of Manitoba, their economic importance as trappers and traders also declined. After 300 years of European contact, their land-based economy and culture had been transformed by the trading relations with the Europeans and by new spiritual relations brought by missionaries. The diseases that Europeans brought with them, particularly smallpox and measles had, by 1815, greatly reduced Aboriginal populations—there were fewer than 50,000 Aboriginal peoples east of the present day Manitoba/Ontario border. For the Beothuk of Newfoundland, the combination of events had proved deadly and Shanadithit, the last of the Beothuk, died in 1829.

Shanawdithit, the last-known Beothuk in Newfoundland, was captured in 1823 at the point of starvation
(National Archives of Canada. C-38862; ID #10036)
http://www.canadianheritage.org/reproductions/10036.htm

In the area west of the present day Manitoba/Ontario border, the situation for Aboriginal peoples was unchanged in many ways. As many as 150,000 Aboriginal peoples lived this region. The vast Rupert's Land and North Western Territory were seen by non-Natives as area where natural resources such as furs could be obtained for the benefit of British and colonial merchants. And like Newfousndland, where most settlement was disallowed for fear that settlement interfered with the rich fishing industry, European settlement in the north west was discouraged because it would interfere with the trapping of fur bearing animals. Most Aboriginal peoples would not have come into direct contact with Europeans, even if they had traded furs for European guns, horses, kettles and knives, and their traditional ways of life continued.



Frances Hopkins, A North West canoe on the Mattawa River
(Ontario Archives, S18096; ID #20071)
http://www.canadianheritage.org/reproductions/20071.htm

Political conditions

In the early 19th century, there was no single independent nation known as Canada. Rather the separate colonies of Nova Scotia, Cape Breton, Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick, Lower Canada and Upper Canada remained in British hands. From the perspective of the British ruling classes, the colonies in British North America provided a place to invest in land and trade in the area's abundant natural resources. British people bought up huge tracts of land at cheap prices and, as part of the deal, were expected to encourage settlers to populate the colonies. By the early 19th century, these settlers were still scarce. The abundant resources of the North American colonies, however, were successfully used to increase the wealth of the mother country.

In the eastern colonies, the 1763 Royal Charter required that American settlers who had taken up land obtain the legal title of Aboriginal lands before settling on it. This legal exchange of property did little to protect conditions for Aboriginal peoples. After the War of 1812, the British government lost interest in Aboriginal populations, whose long-standing military support was no longer needed to protect against French or American troops.

The western region had not been divided into settled colonies under British rule, but was instead a series of Aboriginal lands under the authority (from a European point of view) of a group of British merchants. The Hudson's Bay Company or The Bay as we know it today had been granted a Royal Charter on May 2, 1670 to trade furs. This company had received title from the British crown to the entire drainage basin to Hudson's Bay—about 40% of modern Canada. After the fall of Quebec, the North West Company—a group of Montreal-based traders—had also established fur trading routes south of Hudson's Bay region, and by 1815 both companies were competing fiercely for trade. The North West Company of traders had encouraged the settlement of a few French Canadian and British traders as "wintering partners"—men who would go and live near the Aboriginal groups who trapped and traded the furs. Aboriginal women were vital to the fur trade, teaching traders the skills needed to survive in north and at the same time cementing trade alliances with family ties. By 1815, a distinct population of mixed race families, the Metis, had grown up in present-day Manitoba. By that date Native peoples and Metis were, in an important sense, still in control of the fur trade through their skills as trappers and traders, and Aboriginal populations continued to dominate the entire north western part of the continent. Beyond the mountains, European, American and Russian traders had arrived by sea in the late eighteenth century to trade the valuable sea otter pelts. Alexander Mackenzie had reached the north west Pacific coast from the east by land in 1893, and in 1808 Simon Fraser reached the mouth of the river that bears his name. By 1815, an overland trade from Canada in a variety of furs was getting underway, and fur trade posts were springing up across the continent.