

Exhibiting a Nation: Canada at the British Empire Exhibition, 1924–1925

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The British Empire Exhibition held in 1924 and 1925 presented a chance for Canada to assert a national identity and a prominent place, as a self-governing, “white” dominion, within the British imperial family of nations. Those responsible for the government pavilion consciously sought to understate regional differences and to construct and project a unified, homogeneous image of the nation, despite its vast geographic distances and obvious differences of language and race. While their intentions were to attract investment and improve export markets for Canadian goods, the exhibition commissioners assembled a set of images intended to sum up the idea of Canada. The resulting national representation proved to be contested, fragmented, and sometimes controversial. But for Canadians who visited the exhibit, the pavilion seemed to speak on an emotional level, inspiring national identification and pride.

L’Exposition de l’empire britannique de 1924 et de 1925 a permis au Canada d’affirmer son identité nationale et de se hisser au palmarès des dominions « blancs » du giron de l’Empire britannique. Les responsables du pavillon gouvernemental ont consciemment cherché à minimiser les différences régionales de même qu’à dépeindre le Canada comme un pays homogène en dépit de son immensité géographique et de ses différences évidentes de langue et de race. Bien qu’ils cherchaient à séduire les investisseurs et à trouver des débouchés pour les produits canadiens à l’exportation, les commissaires à l’exposition ont assemblé un panorama d’images visant à résumer l’idée du Canada. Cela a brossé un tableau contesté, fragmenté et parfois controversé du pays. Mais le pavillon semblait faire vibrer la fibre émotive des Canadiens visitant l’exposition, suscitant chez eux un sentiment d’identité et de fierté nationales.

FOR TWO CONSECUTIVE summers, that of 1924 and 1925, Great Britain hosted the British Empire Exhibition. Held in the north London suburb of

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Wembley, this massive undertaking occupied over 220 acres of pavilions, amusements, and water features and drew approximately 25 million visitors over the two seasons that it remained open. While the exhibition was part trade fair and part theme park, the event was ostensibly intended to bring together the nations of the British Empire to celebrate imperial unity and also to increase economic cooperation among the member nations. King George V opened the exhibition on St. George's Day, April 23, 1924, before an assembled crowd of 100,000 people who ignored the fog and drizzle of an English spring to witness the royal processions and hear the speeches.

In his opening remarks, the King described the British Empire as a "family" of nations. This family included the "white" dominions of Australia and Canada; the dependent colonies such as Kenya and Uganda in British East Africa; the protectorates like Palestine and Malta; and India, whose partial self-government under the 1917 Montague-Chelmsford reforms confirmed the sub-continent's ambiguous status as somewhere between dominion and colony.¹ The King spoke warmly of the need for "fraternal cooperation" within this diverse group and stated that he looked forward to a new prosperity and strength of unified purpose for the British Empire after the difficult years of the Great War and its devastating economic aftermath. As further indication of the symbolic unity of the empire, George V sent a telegram to himself, which he received in less than two minutes, the message having travelled the "All Red Route" that encircled the globe.²

Canada, as one of the self-governing "white" dominions, occupied a prominent place within the imperial family and at the Wembley exhibition. In terms of Canada's participation, however, the British Empire Exhibition presented the chance not simply to offer allegiance to Britain and the empire, but to assert Canada's own sense of national identity. For Canadian politicians and intellectuals, that sense of national identity was increasingly tangible by the 1920s, having been strengthened by such factors as Canada's military efforts in World War I, the dominion's representation at the 1919 Paris Peace Conferences, and its separate seats in the assembly of the League of Nations.³

This study of Canada's contribution to the British Empire Exhibition of 1924 and 1925 examines how an emerging Canadian national identity was assembled and communicated to exhibition patrons who visited Wembley. Such a deconstruction involves an analysis of the Canadian pavilion, its contents and displays, as well as an exploration of the motivations of the businessmen, politicians, and civil servants behind the event. Previous studies by Peter H. Hoffenberg, E. A. Heaman, and Stuart Murray have shown that Canada participated in colonial and international exhibitions from the mid-nine-

1 Maritn Pugh, *State and Society: A Social and Political History of Britain, 1870–1997* (London: Arnold, 1994), pp. 239–241.

2 "Glorious Scene in the Stadium", *Daily Telegraph*, April 24, 1924, p. 13.

3 William Roy Smith, "British Imperial Federation", *Political Science Quarterly*, vol. 36 no. 2 (June 1921), pp. 276–277; Margaret MacMillan, *Paris 1919: Six Months that Changed the World* (New York: Random House, 2003), pp. 44–48.

teenth century onwards, as businessmen and politicians used displays of wheat, timber, and minerals to promote trade, to attract investment, and to encourage immigration.⁴ As these works suggest, international exhibitions presented a means of building national prestige at a time when Canada aimed to distinguish itself as a self-governing colony within the British Empire. Canadian politicians increasingly accepted the view that impressive exhibits were of national significance and therefore should be coordinated by government-appointed officials and financed from the public purse. E. M. Heaman effectively illustrates that Canada was well represented at the many international exhibitions of the nineteenth century.⁵ In contrast, the study of Canada's participation in international exhibitions of the twentieth century has been relatively overlooked, with the possible exception of the 1967 World Exhibition in Montreal, otherwise known as Expo 67.⁶ Examining the significance and cultural meaning of Canada's display at the British Empire Exhibition of 1924 and 1925 helps bridge that scholarly gap.

The Wembley exhibition already holds an important place in the history of Canadian art and national identity, particularly with regard to the Group of Seven. At Wembley in 1924 the seven painters attracted the attention of British art critics for their bold interpretations of the Canadian landscape, then on display in the exhibition's Palace of Arts. Several of the artists, including A. Y. Jackson, Arthur Lismer, and Lawren Harris, stated their views about the need for a truly Canadian form of artistic expression, one that distinguished Canada as a North American nation whose character, mood, and spirit were distinct from those of Europe and Great Britain. Given the objections of several painters from the Royal Academy of Canadian Art regarding the alleged bias of the selection process in favour of the modernist school, the Group of Seven's critical acclaim at Wembley was all the more significant, especially as the Tate Gallery purchased one of Jackson's paintings for its permanent collection.⁷ While the success of the Group of Seven bolstered their artistic reputations at home, it helped establish the idea at the international level that their paintings embodied "the buoyant, eager, defiant spirit of the nation".⁸ Journalist F. B. Housser described the Group's critical success at Wembley

4 E. A. Heaman, *The Inglorious Arts of Peace: Exhibitions in Canadian Society during the Nineteenth Century* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), pp. 6–8, 182–184, 192–194; Peter H. Hoffenberg, *An Empire on Display: English, Indian, and Australian Exhibition from the Crystal Palace to the Great War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), pp. 123, 142–143, 188; Stuart Murray, "Canadian Participation and National Representation at the 1851 London Great Exhibition and the 1855 Paris *Exposition Universelle*", *Histoire sociale/ Social History*, vol. 32, no. 63 (May 1999), pp. 1–22.

5 Heaman, *The Inglorious Arts of Peace*, pp. 141–142.

6 Alexandra Mosquin, "Advertising Canada Abroad: Canada on Display at International Exhibition, 1920–1940" (PhD dissertation, York University, 2003); L. B. Kuffert, *A Great Duty: Canadian Responses to Modern Life and Mass Culture, 1939–1967* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003), chap. 6.

7 Ann Davis, "The Wembley Controversy in Canadian Art", *Canadian Historical Review*, vol. 56, no. 1 (March 1973), pp. 68–71.

8 Newton MacTavish, *The Fine Arts in Canada* (1925; Toronto: MacMillan, reprint 1973), p. 159.

in his 1926 history of the Group of Seven, concluding that the painters' professional triumph was also an indication that Canada had found a "complete racial expression of herself through art".⁹ Subsequent studies of Canadian art and culture have questioned the accuracy of Housser's narrative and have even challenged the perception that the Group represented a "national" school of art, identifying instead a central Canadian regionalism that was anglophone, white, and male, with a cultural authority legitimated by public institutions like the National Gallery in Ottawa and the patronage of its director, Eric Brown. Notwithstanding these discussions over whether the Group comprised Canada's most eminent painters, or what circumstances made them thus, the Wembley show remains a definitive event in the history of Canadian art and the expression of an emerging cultural nationalism.¹⁰ At the time, however, this "defiant spirit of the nation" was lost to the majority of visitors to the Palace of Arts; many exhibition-goers ignored the colonial paintings and instead queued for hours to glimpse the most popular display, the Queen's Doll House, a miniature, fully furnished model of Buckingham Palace designed by British architect Sir Edwin Lutyens.¹¹

Canada's contribution to the Palace of Arts represents but one component of its Wembley display, which also included a Canadian government building, flanked by two smaller pavilions sponsored by the Canadian National and the Canadian Pacific Railways. Like the displays in the Palace of Arts, the Canadian pavilion at the British Empire Exhibition, and public responses to the displays, suggest the emergence of a Canadian national identity. But here was no straightforward identification with the rugged wilderness. The image of Canada, as presented in the government pavilion, was contested, fragmented, and sometimes controversial. Although those responsible for the government pavilion desired to create a unified presentation and consciously sought to understate regional differences, the resulting displays showed a country that was the granary of the empire, but also the future workshop of the world; a land of untamed wilderness, and one of sophisticated modern cities. The exhibit and the response of Canadians who saw it reveal a people who were loyal to their British heritage, but at the same time proud to be Canadian, who were anxious to claim a prominent place in the British Empire while pressing

9 Quoted in Ramsay Cook, *Canada, Quebec and the Uses of Nationalism* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1986), pp. 132–133.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 132; see also Dennis Reid, *A Concise History of Canadian Painting* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 155; Jeanne L. Pattison, *The Group of Seven and Tom Thomson* (Kleinburg, ON: McMichael Canadian Collection, 1979), pp. 18–20. For a more critical discussion of the Group's impact on national cultural identities, see Daniel Francis, *National Dreams: Myth, Memory, and Canadian History* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 1997), pp. 138–142; Lynda Jessup, "Prospectors, Bushwackers, Painters: Antimodernism and the Group of Seven", *International Journal of Canadian Studies*, vol. 17 (Spring 1998), pp. 193–214; Leslie Dawn, *National Visions, National Blindness: Canadian Art and Identities in the 1920s* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2006).

11 E. M. Forster, "The Bad Fairies", *The Nation and Athenaeum*, August 2, 1924, pp. 562–563. Forster's article describes his trip to the Palace of Arts to see the famed Doll's House.

for economic and diplomatic independence. In addition to using dioramas and displays to project an image of the nation, the organizers relied upon the exhibition of Canadians themselves, in this case, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. Aboriginal Canadians were not represented in the Canadian pavilion; the most visible nod to the First Nations was a butter sculpture of Edward, Prince of Wales, in the “dress of a Red Indian”.¹² In light of such contradictions, how did exhibition organizers and visitors understand this contested national image, and what does this reveal about an emerging Canadian identity during the 1920s? Rather than attempting to measure the economic impact of the British Empire Exhibition on Canadian trade, I explore the meaning of Canada’s display at Wembley as constructed by the exhibition organizers and perceived by the visitors who flocked through its gates.

Showing Who We Are: Exhibitions and National Identity

John Sylvester MacKinnon, director of the Canadian Industrial Exhibits for the British Empire Exhibition, addressed members of the Canadian Chamber of Commerce in London, England, on February 28, 1924. MacKinnon, a Toronto textile manufacturer and past president of the Canadian Manufacturer’s Association (1920–1921), had considerable experience with exhibitions, having also coordinated the industrial displays at the Canadian National Exhibition in Toronto. As late as the spring of 1924, with the exhibition’s planning and construction well under way, MacKinnon was still explaining to businessmen what Canada stood to gain from her participation: “We want to show the people of the world that Canada is a good place in which to live; and that every man, woman and child has an equal opportunity, and whilst there is no room in Canada for sluggards, those who are skilled and able to work will find plenty of opportunities for giving full scope to their efforts.”¹³ For MacKinnon, the object of Canada’s display was to communicate a central message: that Canada was a place where hard work paid off and dreams came true. To get that message across to the “people of the world”, he and the other members of the exhibition staff had to assemble groups of objects, images, and individuals to construct and convey that essential idea about his nation.

As a former white settler colony in the British Empire, colonized mainly by immigrants from Western Europe, Canada as a land of plenty for those with pluck and resourcefulness remains one of the nation’s “core myths”. Such myths are described by Daniel Francis as stories about ideals that provide experiences with some form of continuity and purpose. The perception of common experiences and acceptance of a shared narrative of nation-building, or accepted illusions about the origin of the nation, facilitates the construction of the nation itself and fosters a collective sense of national identity among its

12 “The Prince of Wales in Butter: New and Old Wembley Tableaux”, *Illustrated London News*, May 16, 1925, p. 968; also see Library and Archives of Canada [hereafter LAC], photo PA/8/S62.

13 LAC, MG 30, A 121, vol. 1, address of J. S. MacKinnon, February 28, 1924, p. 2.

peoples. Put simply by Francis: “a nation is group of people who share the same illusions about themselves.”¹⁴ Following Benedict Anderson’s definition of the nation as an “imagined political community”, a nation is imagined because “the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in each lives the image of their communion”.¹⁵ Nations, then, are communities, created in the imagination and held together by shared ideals and common “core myths”. Francis contends that myths express “important truths”; while not a precise record of events, myths serve to idealize experiences and individuals, selecting important cultural values and elevating them to the status of legend.¹⁶

In keeping with this definition of the nation, this “imaginary community” was reified and rendered visible to its citizens and spectators at public events. Historians Eric Hobsbawm, Terence Ranger, and others have examined national rituals and symbols as “invented traditions”, meaning that they are sets of practices normally determined by formal or informal conventions of a ritual or symbolic nature. Hobsbawm identifies two types of invented traditions: those that are “invented, constructed and formally instituted”, such as the royal broadcasts at Christmas; and those that emerge in “a less easily traceable manner within a brief and datable period — a matter of a few years perhaps” but then establish themselves with great rapidity.¹⁷ Following this theoretical framework, scholars suggest that the celebration of public holidays, the construction of war memorials, the staging of commemorative ceremonies, and the orchestration of elaborate royal processions and historical pageants may be understood as expressions of collective pride intended to cultivate social cohesion and national unity through the creation and performance of public culture.¹⁸ World fairs and colonial exhibitions should also be understood as invented traditions. According to Robert Rydell, world fairs were “symbolic universes” that affirmed fair-goers’ faith in national institutions and social organization, while evoking a community of shared experience.¹⁹

14 Francis, *National Dreams*, p. 10.

15 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London and New York: Verso Publications, 1991), p. 6.

16 Francis, *National Dreams*, p. 11.

17 Eric Hobsbawm, “Introduction: Inventing Traditions” in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 1.

18 Heaman, *The Inglorious Arts of Peace*; Hobsbawm and Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition*; Eva Mackey, *The House of Difference: Cultural Politics and National Identity in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002); H. V. Nelles, *The Art of Nation-building: Pageantry and Spectacle at Quebec’s Tercentenary* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999); Deborah S. Ryan, “Staging the Imperial City: The Pageant of London, 1911”, in Felix Driver and David Gilbert, eds. *Imperial Cities: Landscape, Display and Identity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999).

19 Robert Rydell and Nancy Gwinn, eds, *Fair Representations: World’s Fairs and the Modern World* (Amsterdam: VU University Press, 1994), p. 3; Robert Rydell, *All the World’s a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876–1916* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 3.

Canada became a country in the mid-nineteenth century during the age of the “Great International Exhibitions” held predominantly in France, Great Britain, and the United States.²⁰ At these spectacular displays of material progress, natural resources, and colonial wealth, Canada appeared as a young nation, open for business and immigrants.²¹ For example, Sir John A. Macdonald’s government spent over \$300,000 on the 1886 Colonial and Indian Exhibition held in Great Britain to ensure that Canada was represented favourably.²² Eventually, the better to coordinate exhibitions and avoid duplication by the provinces, Sir Wilfrid Laurier created the Canadian Government Exhibition Commission in 1901. One year later, the federal government appointed an exhibition commissioner with a permanent staff to oversee the organization of all future exhibitions. While these exhibitions both reflected and idealized the particular historical moment in which they were held, historian James Gilbert reminds us that exhibitions begin with “the dreams and aspirations of the political, cultural and social elites who financed, governed and constructed them”.²³ This was indeed the case for Canada’s participation at Wembley.

Politics and Planning

The idea to hold a large imperial exhibition, with royal patronage and government support, was suggested by Donald Smith, titled Lord Strathcona, Canada’s High Commissioner to the United Kingdom from 1896 to 1914.²⁴ Smith, a Scottish immigrant who made his fortune in railway construction, figures prominently in the mythical narrative of Canada’s nation-building: as president of the CPR, the railway that opened up the West, Smith drove the famous “last spike” in 1885.²⁵ Lord Strathcona was also an ardent colonial nationalist, a member of the British Empire League, and a firm believer, like many prominent Anglo-Canadians, that the imperial system was an alliance between Great Britain as the metropolitan power and its colonies of settlement. They believed that, as successful colonizers themselves, Canadians had taken up the mother country’s civilizing burden by bringing law, order, and good government to remote territories in the empire. Colonial nationalists saw no contradiction between “Canadianism” and “imperialism”, asserting that “it was the desire of Canada and all the other possessions of the Empire” to retain

20 Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Capital, 1848–1875* (London: Cardinal, 1988), p. 47, quoted in Heaman, *The Inglorious Arts of Peace*, p. 6.

21 Murray, “Canadian Participation and National Representation”, pp. 1–22.

22 Heaman, *The Inglorious Arts of Peace*, pp. 197–198.

23 James Gilbert, “World’s Fairs as Historical Events”, in Rydell and Gwinn, eds., *Fair Representations*, p. 13.

24 Donald R. Knight and Alan D. Sabey, *The Lion Roars at Wembley: British Empire Exhibition* (London: Barnard & Westwood, 1984), pp. 2–3.

25 Francis, *National Dreams*, pp. 18–20.

their English character.²⁶ Historian George M. Wrong, from the University of Toronto, expressed a similar sentiment in 1915 in his address to the American Historical Association, asserting that “it never occurred to the average Canadian, even when his country reached national stature, that he could not remain both a Canadian and a Briton”.²⁷ Strathcona’s desire for an imperial exhibition to demonstrate the power of the empire and the prosperity of the dominions and colonies was an expression of this colonial nationalist sentiment.

No doubt Strathcona was also motivated by memories of earlier exhibitions. Most recently had been the 1911 Festival of Empire, also initiated by the British Empire League, but directed by Imry Kiralfy, a private exhibition promoter famous for his exhibitions of foreign cultures and “exotic” peoples.²⁸ Although the 1911 exhibition coincided with the coronation of George V and the British government happily used it to introduce a new sovereign, financial backing for the event came from private sources. Billing it as a “Social Gathering for the British Family”, the British Empire League imagined the festival as a colonial family reunion intended to demonstrate the strength of imperial connections.²⁹ Canada participated and the government put up the money, although the Canadian exhibition commissioner, William Hutchison, remained unenthusiastic and grumbled about the stipulation that each nation’s pavilion be a three-quarter-scale reconstruction of its respective legislature. Such a strict organizing concept was confining and expensive, and Hutchison disliked the overall effect of the replica houses of parliament.³⁰ In his opinion, Canada was better served by attending the numerous state fairs and exhibitions held in the United States, promoting the same message of trade and immigration, but avoiding the issue of empire loyalty.³¹ Even though the Festival of Empire had run over budget and attendance was poor, the exhibition executive took comfort in the success of the Pageant of Empire, a recreation of the history of the British Empire that involved 15,000 volunteer participants. Perhaps it was the success of that spectacle that inspired Strathcona to propose another imperial exhibition, while stipulating that the British government ought to be more directly involved.

Strathcona did not live to see his idea revived after World War I, when in 1919 several premiers and high commissioners met at the British Empire

26 *Ibid.*, pp. 63–64; for a detailed discussion of Canadian colonial nationalism, see Carl Berger, *The Sense of Power: Studies in the Ideas of Canadian Imperialism, 1867–1914* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970).

27 Quoted in John Eddy and Deryck Schreuder, *The Rise of Colonial Nationalism: Australia, New Zealand, Canada and South Africa First Assert their Nationalities, 1880–1914* (Sydney and London: Allen and Unwin, 1988), p. 6.

28 John M. MacKenzie, *Propaganda and Empire: The Manipulation of British Public Opinion, 1880–1960* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), pp. 102–103, 152–153.

29 Hoffenberg, *An Empire on Display*, pp. 240–241, 266–267; MacKenzie, *Propaganda and Empire*, pp. 105–107.

30 LAC, RG 72, vol. 129, 210431.

31 LAC, RG 72, vol. 129, 246619.

Club to hash over plans for an imperial exhibition. Lord Edward Morris, the former governor general of Newfoundland, and a group of 120 supporters formed the British Empire Assets Company Limited.³² British Prime Minister David Lloyd George's postwar coalition government endorsed the plan, mainly in anticipation of jobs for ex-soldiers, and offered limited financial assistance to set things in motion, guaranteeing £100,000 of credit from the Board of Trade towards the exhibition's expenses and possible losses.³³ It took until 1922 to acquire the necessary matching funds from private sources, while a series of amendments enacted by the Conservative administrations of Andrew Bonar Law and later Stanley Baldwin gradually extended the government's guarantee to £1,100,000.³⁴ Despite this financial support, not until 1923 did the British government under Baldwin's leadership decide to participate directly in the exhibition by constructing a national pavilion.³⁵

Canadian response to the proposed exhibition was mixed. Having moved away from the large expositions in favour of smaller, regional shows south of the border, some politicians were sceptical about the efficacy of sponsoring an expensive project.³⁶ Sensing some resistance from the dominions, whose support for the venture was imperative, the British Empire Exhibition Corporation enlisted the young and personable Edward, Prince of Wales, to tout their case. In July 1921, at the annual dinner of the Royal Colonial Institute, Edward addressed the dominion prime ministers gathered in London for the Imperial Conference.³⁷ Following the Prince's soft sell, Major E. A. Belcher, the assistant general manager of the exhibition, promoted the exhibition with a "dominion mission" tour. Having made earlier stops in Australia and other overseas dominions, Belcher and his entourage arrived in Ottawa in September 1922 to meet with Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King and his cabinet to determine what level of support Canada was willing to commit.³⁸ With the other dominions participating, Canada could not afford to be left out or shown up by not spending enough money on its pavilion, and the exhibition commission's annual budget was increased to \$140,000 to cover the initial expenses.³⁹ By March 1923, the Canadian Exhibition Commissioner,

32 Knight and Sabey, *The Lion Roars at Wembley*, p. 3.

33 "Roads to Empire", *The Times*, March 18, 1922, p. 7.

34 British Empire Exhibition (Guarantee Act), 1920; 1922 (166) i. 305; also see Memo of proposed guarantee, 1920 Cmd. 823 xlix.1. 1924; Cmd. 2085 xix. 593; 1924–1925; Cmd. 2354, xxii.793.

35 W. T. Clark, "The British Empire Exhibition – Second Phase", *Nineteenth Century and After*, February 1925, p. 176.

36 Heaman, *The Inglorious Arts of Peace*, p. 215; *Hansard*, Debates in the House of Commons, Ottawa, March 23, 1923, pp. 1454–1455, 1465–1466. For the fiscal year of 1921–1922, \$65,000 of the Exhibition Commission's annual budget of \$90,000 was spent on exhibitions in the United States, with the official mandate of attracting American immigrants to Canada.

37 Knight and Sabey, *The Lion Roars at Wembley*, p. 3.

38 "Dominion Mission Arrives in Ottawa", *Globe and Mail*, October 10, 1922, p. 3.

39 *Hansard*, House of Commons Debates, May 19, 1922, p. 2097, and March 23, 1923, pp. 1454–1455.

Alexander W. Tolmie, had visited London and was initiating plans for Canada's pavilion.

Tolmie oversaw the interior design, layout, and arrangement of the pavilion; he coordinated its exhibits, determined what was presented, supervised the staffing, and managed the budget. Reflecting on the notion that public exhibitions were visual articulations of a nation's identity, we must remember that these articulations, or imaginings, originated with a handful of individuals who operated with a great deal of creative independence. By profession, Tolmie was an accountant, the son of a Liberal MP from Bruce County, Ontario. He had joined the Exhibition Commission in 1908, keeping the books under William Hutchison. When the first exhibition commissioner died in 1918, Tolmie assumed the job. Still in his thirties, Tolmie was a likely choice for the commissioner's position based on his experience in the department and his attention to finances. While Tolmie was responsible for keeping exhibition costs within budget, his was also the final authority when dealing with exhibitors and determining the exhibition layouts. In the area of design, Joseph Oscar Turcotte, an architect who had also joined the Exhibition Commission in 1908, assisted Tolmie. Together Turcotte and Tolmie had assembled the Canadian displays for 15 fairs and exhibitions; Canada's image was apparently in experienced hands.⁴⁰ John Sylvester MacKinnon, in turn, was charged with overseeing the industrial displays. To drum up support from the business community, MacKinnon embarked on a cross-country tour of Canada, speaking to chambers of commerce and manufacturers' associations, selling the exhibition to businessmen by extolling the commercial benefits of sending their goods and staff to Wembley.⁴¹

MacKinnon outlined the incentives for the business community in the hopes of attracting participants. For example, the Exhibition Commission assumed the costs of shipping the industrial exhibits to Wembley and provided space in the Canadian pavilion at \$2.50 per square foot. Exhibitors were advised, however, that Wembley was not a common trade fair but a means of advertising the potential of Canadian industry. Therefore, exhibitors were not allowed to distribute handbills from their stalls or to advertise on the grounds of the exhibition; "neat cards" were acceptable because they were less likely to be tossed away by visitors. In addition, exhibitors were not allowed to sell articles directly for delivery; however, orders might be placed and free samples could be offered to exhibition patrons.⁴² Tolmie and MacKinnon agreed that the Canadian exhibitors had to refrain from direct merchandising to ensure that the pavilion retained an air of dignity and was not a venue for cheap souvenirs. Canadian businessmen complained that

40 LAC, RG 72, vol. 192, exhibition scrapbook, "Commissioner at Wembley", *Whig Tribune*, May 28, 1925.

41 "Exhibition Director for Empire's Fair Begins His Duties", *Globe and Mail*, June 1, 1923, p. 13.

42 Ottawa, National Gallery Library, *British Empire Exhibition, Wembley Park, London, England* (Canadian brochure, 1923), pp. 10–12.

exporting firms needed to sell their goods at the exhibition if Canada was to establish itself as a manufacturing nation.⁴³

In defence of their no-sales policy, Tolmie and MacKinnon reminded potential exhibitors that Wembley was an investment in future sales, in the same manner as all forms of advertising. Indeed, the Canadian government had committed \$1 million to the project, in the hope of fostering future returns in empire trade and possibly paving the way for future talks between Canada and Britain on tariff concessions for Canadian products.⁴⁴ MacKinnon and Tolmie also agreed that the Canadian display should present the nation as a single, coherent unit, thereby departing from the previous pattern of allowing provincial and regional displays at international exhibitions. While MacKinnon reasoned that lack of space prevented displays of individual provinces or cities, Tolmie and Turcotte consciously designed the Wembley exhibit to convey a sense of national character, and therefore to downplay regional economic rivalries, while giving equal emphasis to natural resources and industry.⁴⁵ Roughly 50 per cent of Canada's 300-by-400-foot pavilion was devoted to industrial displays from participating manufacturers. The Canadian press boasted that Wembley was Canada's chance to show Europe not what the nation could do in the arts of war (since that had already been proven), but its abilities in the arts of peace and industry.⁴⁶

Exhibiting a Nation

The construction of the Canadian pavilion began in early September 1923. The Canadian site, with a frontage of 415 feet and totalling 5¾ acres, was located north of the Imperial Stadium and opposite the Australian pavilion. Both Australia and Canada faced the long, narrow, artificial lake that was the decorative focal point of the exhibition grounds (Figure 1). Despite serious labour disputes and walkouts that had threatened the completion of the exhibition by opening day, *The Times* reported that the Canadian displays were among the few actually ready for visitors on April 23, even though the building itself was still hidden by scaffolding. The Canadian organizers took great comfort in knowing that, although the Australian pavilion appeared finished on the outside, the British press described the Canadian pavilion's interior as the more impressive of the two.⁴⁷

Canada's exhibits were divided into roughly two groups: the scenic and the industrial. The main corridor consisted of panoramic murals of the Canadian landscape, including cornfields, homesteads, prairies, mountains, and forests. This scenic portion also included a working model of Niagara Falls and its

43 LAC, MG 30, A 121, vol. 1, publicity scrapbook, "Canadian Exporters Complaining of Space Allotted at Empire Fair", *Globe and Mail*, July 28, 1923.

44 National Gallery Library, *British Empire Exhibition, Wembley Park, London, England*, pp. 1, 5.

45 LAC, MG 30, A 121, vol. 1, exhibition clippings.

46 "Canada Tells the World", *Toronto Sunday World*, January 20, 1924, p. 1.

47 LAC, RG 72, vol. 193, exhibition clippings, "Rivalry at Wembley", *The Times*, April 16, 1924.



Figure 1: Exterior of the Canadian Pavilion at the British Empire Exhibition, Wembley, 1924 (Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa, PA 75978).

hydro-electric plant, a pulp and paper mill, and the port of Vancouver with moving ships, which apparently was a great favourite with school children. Another section of the pavilion was devoted to fisheries, fruits, and agriculture and contained colourful displays of fresh and preserved fruits, glass cases of Canadian tobacco, and specimens of fish.⁴⁸ Multicoloured mosaics composed of grains, seeds, and grasses decorated the cornices and ceiling of the building.⁴⁹ The famous Keeley Nugget was the focal point of the mineral section. Standing three feet high and weighing 4,402 pounds, this giant lump of silver hailed from the Keeley Mine in South Lorrain, near Cobalt.⁵⁰ Given its size and weight, Tolmie and MacKinnon were not that interested in transporting the specimen to Wembley; however, it appears that the Ontario gov-

48 LAC, MG 30, A 121, vol. 1, "Canada: The Dominion's Proud Story at Wembley", pp. 2-4.

49 "The British Empire Exhibition: A Study in Geography, Resources, and Citizenship of the British Empire", an address by S. R. Parsons, *Empire Club of Canada: Addresses Delivered to the Members during the Year 1924* (Toronto: Maccoomb Press, 1925), p. 289.

50 LAC, MG 30, A 121, vol. 1, "Canada: The Dominion's Proud Story at Wembley", pp. 2-4.

ernment, the owner of the Keeley marvel, insisted on its inclusion in the exhibition.⁵¹ Perhaps this was the Ontario government's manner of calling attention to the province's mineral resources, despite the official proscription against individual provincial displays. In keeping with the general public's fascination with bizarre exhibits, the giant nugget was a favourite attraction for the two seasons it remained on display.⁵²

Tolmie and his staff also presented Canada as a land rich in natural beauty. In tribute to the national parks, the Canadian pavilion included a mural of the Rocky Mountain regions, with rivers and waterfalls set against a background of mountain peaks. A delegation of Members of Parliament who visited Wembley described the national parks exhibit as the greatest revelation because it presented Canada as an affordable holiday destination for overseas visitors. Apparently, the park mural had aroused a keen interest in Canada among "the leisured class of Europe" as a destination for tourists and sportsmen, leading to predictions from politicians that there were large profits to be made "selling scenery". Some disagreement arose, however, about who would benefit most from a vigorous tourist trade. W. W. Cory, in the Department of the Interior, asked the Department of Immigration and Colonization to produce a brochure for Wembley about the national parks, aimed at the "wealthy cultivated classes" who could afford to travel in North America. But W. J. Egan, the deputy minister of Immigration and Colonization, dismissed the suggestion, advising Cory to ask the railways to fund the booklet since they were the most likely to profit from increased tourism.⁵³ Indeed, the railway pavilions, located on either side of the Canadian building, were most adept at promoting Canada as a destination and distributed to visitors over 100,000 copies of the brochure, "Canada, Playground of the Empire".⁵⁴ If Wembley advertised Canada to the "tourist class", it also convinced Canada's visiting politicians of the important economic potential of tourism, raising proposals for the creation of a separate ministry to oversee its development.⁵⁵

Regional Versus National Identities

In an effort to play down regional economic competition and avoid duplication, Tolmie and MacKinnon were determined to create a national exhibition. This effort to present Canada as a unified nation, not the sum of its regional parts, was a point well taken in the press: "Notwithstanding the keen and

51 LAC, RG 72, vol. 136, 950123, "Collection of Exhibits for BEE", correspondence between A. W. Tolmie and W. D. Dalglish, Ministry of Mines, Ontario, October 1923 to January 1924.

52 LAC, RG 72, vol. 192, exhibition clippings, "Nearly Two Tons of Silver", *Daily Mirror*, August 22, 1925.

53 LAC, RG 72, vol., 136, 950134, letter from W. W. Cory to W. J. Egan, December 5, 1923; letter from Egan to Cory, December 11, 1923.

54 LAC, RG 72, vol. 134, 950020, part 4, report from three delegates to Wembley from the Government: George Kyte, J. Fred Johnson, and L. J. Papineau.

55 *Hansard*, House of Commons Debates, March 31, 1925, p. 1724.

healthy rivalry which is the life of progress between the Provinces — each a great country within itself — the contribution to the British Empire Exhibition is made up of one unit of national self-expression — Canada.”⁵⁶ To illustrate the nation’s vast resources of coal, Tolmie gathered samples from every producing mine in the country; likewise, timber samples came from widespread areas. The exhibition also pictured a vast nation, but one connected by its extensive transportation network, with the railways, “these great ribbons of steel”, joining the ports in Montreal and Vancouver. One writer considered the Canadian railways from the Atlantic to the Pacific, an important national symbol, as pivotal to the strength of the empire since they “have welded an unbreakable link in the chain which binds the Empire together, and have made it possible for Great Britain to transport, absolutely within her own territory, both passengers and commerce to Australia and New Zealand”.⁵⁷ Canada, then, was central to the empire, and to sustain this image Tolmie and Turcotte sacrificed regional diversity.⁵⁸ They also failed to include French-language references in the exhibition, to the embarrassment of the Liberal government at home.

French journalist Ludovic Naudeau first criticized Canada’s exclusive use of English signs. He complained about the total absence of French didactics in the Canadian pavilion, whereas South Africa displayed information in both Dutch and English. While the South Africans had used the Wembley exhibition as an opportunity to assert an identity distinct from that of Britain, Canada had missed that chance, perhaps in the organizers’ desire to present a unified national presence. Picking up this criticism, C. A. Gauvreau, the Member for Temiscouata, questioned Prime Minister King whether it was possible to have both languages in evidence at Wembley. He reasoned that thousands of French visitors might cross the Channel to visit the British Empire Exhibition and would be interested in products from Canada and the province of Quebec. Gauvreau also asked whether it were true that there were no French Canadians on the staff at the Canadian exhibition. In response, King assured Gauvreau that the pavilion’s architect, Joseph Turcotte, was indeed a French Canadian and fluent in both languages; the prime minister admitted that, in all the hasty preparations for Wembley, the use of French signs had been overlooked inadvertently, but the government was taking steps to rectify the matter.⁵⁹ That week, Tolmie received a cable from Ottawa with instructions to fix the signs, but he protested because the display cases were “already signed and lettered and it was almost impossible to change these now”. Tolmie reasoned that “the percentage of French people visiting the Exhibition is comparatively small” and did not warrant the expense of redoing the signs. While it was too late to

56 “The British Empire Exhibition: The Canadian Exhibits at Wembley”, *Canada: An Illustrated Weekly*, April 26, 1924, p. 77.

57 *Ibid.*, p. 77.

58 “Quebec at Wembley”, *Canada: An Illustrated Weekly*, April 19, 1924, p. 58.

59 *Hansard*, House of Commons Debates, June 6, 1924, p. 2861.

change all of them, Tolmie duplicated about 30 per cent of the signs in French, although he complained, "I do not think there are one in a thousand visiting this Exhibition who do not understand English." Nevertheless, Tolmie expressed his understanding of the "trouble" and assured the government of his intentions to do all he could to address the issue.⁶⁰ Either the bilingual Turcotte had not raised the issue of French signs for the Canadian pavilion, or Tolmie had overlooked his concern.

The representation of Quebec was another touchy issue for the government. Shortly after the sign debate, the House of Commons learned that, of the 268 firms exhibiting in the Canadian pavilion, only four were French Canadian. James A. Robb, the Minister of Immigration and Colonization, whose portfolio also included the Canadian Exhibition Commission, defended Canada's exhibit to its critics. When asked whether the government had made sufficient effort to attract French-Canadian businessmen, Robb replied that the industrial commissioner, MacKinnon, had visited Quebec in the same manner as he had all the other provinces, appealing to manufacturers directly, as well as approaching chambers of commerce and boards of trade.⁶¹ Nevertheless, MacKinnon had been unsuccessful in selling the British Empire Exhibition to francophone companies. In the following year, 1925, MacKinnon made a more concerted effort to attract French-Canadian exhibitors, but, despite an advertising campaign in the French-language press and appeals to Quebec newspapers to express editorial support for the British Empire Exhibition in 1925, the participation of French-Canadian companies remained limited to a handful of enterprises.⁶² While it is tempting to suppose that Quebec businesses boycotted the exhibition out of a lingering resentment against Britain because of the war and conscription, or that Quebec big business was dominated by Anglo-Canadian firms anyway, some Quebec industries such as pulp and paper continued to do most of their trade with the United States. As one article put it, "inter-Imperial preferential tariffs have not been struck or formalized".⁶³ Whatever the reasons for the under-representation of French Canada, on the surface, the exhibition fostered the false impression that Canada's regional and cultural differences had been successfully reconciled.

"Canadian in Mind and Spirit": Identity on Display

One of the most remarked upon features of the 1924 Canadian pavilion was a life-size sculpture of Edward, the Prince of Wales, in the setting of his cattle ranch at Pekisko, Alberta (Figure 2). The tableau included the prince, a horse, and several outbuildings set against the distant foothills of the Rocky Mountains, all carved entirely out of Canadian butter — 3,000 pounds of it.

60 LAC, RG 72, vol. 134, 950020, part 4, letter from Tolmie to Egan, June 25, 1924.

61 *Hansard*, House of Commons Debates, June 12, 1924, p. 3106.

62 LAC, RG 72, vol. 136, 950176, letter from J. S. MacKinnon to W. J. Egan, March 3, 1925.

63 "Quebec at Wembley", *Canada: An Illustrated Weekly*, April 19, 1924, p. 58.



Figure 2: The Prince of Wales carved in butter as shown at his ranch in Alberta, Canadian Pavilion, British Empire Exhibition, Wembley, 1924 (Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa, PA 75995).

The butter tableau was an advertisement for Canada's dairy industry, the Department of Agriculture, and the wonders of modern refrigeration since the entire scene was preserved behind glass and kept at a cold storage temperature a few degrees below freezing. One of Edward's biographers later quipped that pliable butter was the perfect medium from which to carve the impressionable and morally weak Edward,⁶⁴ but in 1924 the Wallis Simpson scandal and abdication crisis were years in the future. The popular prince was highly flattered by the likeness, using his praise for the sculpture to proclaim openly his romantic attachment to Canada. On his first state visit to Canada in 1919, Prince Edward had been so taken with the West that he had purchased 4,000 acres, the E.P. Ranch, to serve as a frontier retreat and where he also intended to raise livestock.⁶⁵ The prince described Canada as "a real tonic"

64 J. Bryan III and Charles J.V. Murphy, *The Windsor Story* (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1979), p. 72. My thanks to Robert Hawkins for this reference.

65 W. L. Townsend, *The Biography of the Prince of Wales* (London: Albert E. Marriott & Son, 1929), p. 176; Phillip Ziegler, *King Edward VIII: The Official Biography* (London: Collins Press, 1990), p. 119.

because of the air and the open spaces; it was a “young country full of hope and confidence” after the horror and confusion in Europe during the Great War.⁶⁶ Edward claimed that he was “Canadian in mind and spirit”, while declaring that Western Canada was the “country of the future” and that it was up to the United Kingdom to “see that its population is British and not alien!”⁶⁷ The English-Canadian press gushed over this royal connection, evidently flattered by the affection the young man held for the dominion,⁶⁸ but the tableau could be read another way. Pictured as an Alberta rancher, Edward assumed the identity of one of Canada’s most powerful national symbols: the Prairie settler. While the butter figure was an homage to the British monarchy, it also suggested that the power of the empire lay not in England, but in its developing dominions. Literally, Edward had been rendered as a Canadian symbol that represented the march of progress and the settlement of the West.

Edward’s praise for Canada perfectly suited the exhibition’s official image as a homeland for British settlers and a place of peace and plenty. The sight of all that golden butter indeed made a definite impression on British exhibition patrons, still suffering from the economic decline that followed the Great War. At a time when British working-class families consumed more margarine than butter, one schoolboy told a British reporter that his favourite thing at Wembley was the “Prince of Wales in butter. An ear’d keep us a week.” The reporter understood this exclamation as a quaint, but pathetic, indication that butter was a luxury in many British homes.⁶⁹ In contrast, Canada was presented as a land of rich abundance.

While it was important to present Canada as a modern industrialized nation that was also rich in natural resources, the Canadian exhibition commissioner relied further on the use of popular symbols as illustrations of Canada such as the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. By the 1920s, adventure stories, novels, and Hollywood films had bestowed upon the RCMP the virtues of courage, discipline, efficiency, and strength, making them living examples of an ideal-type of rugged Canadian masculinity in the popular imagination.⁷⁰ Associated with the romance of the wilderness and the forces of justice and order, the RCMP officers at Wembley exemplified all that the young Prince of Wales admired about Canada. Surely, here were men genuinely “Canadian in mind and spirit”.

66 LAC, RG 72, vol. 194, exhibition clippings, “New Empire Conference”, *Evening Standard*, July 2, 1924.

67 Zeigler, *King Edward VIII*, p. 119.

68 “Scenes on Canada’s Royal Ranch”, *Toronto Star Weekly*, September 1, 1923, p. 1.

69 LAC, RG 72, vol. 194, exhibition clippings, “The Prince in Butter”, *Woman’s Life*, September 13, 1924.

70 Keith Walden, *Visions of Order: The Canadian Mounties in Myth and Symbol* (Toronto: Butterworths, 1982), chap. 2; Michael Dawson, *The Mountie: From Dime Novel to Disney* (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1998), pp. 31–49.

The idea to send Mounted Policemen to Wembley originated with James A. Robb, the Minister of Immigration and Colonization, whose ministry oversaw the Wembley exhibition. Tolmie approved of the idea and made arrangements with the Ministry of Justice.⁷¹ Robb requested that, when selecting officers for the exhibition, RCMP Commissioner Starnes choose only well-trained men who were of “standard stature” and had a long service record, as they would make the best impression upon visitors to the exhibition. The ten officers selected were to be paid as usual while in London, including a per diem of between \$7.50 and \$4 depending on rank.⁷²

To what purpose would Mounted Police attend the exhibition? Outside Canada, the RCMP had no powers of law enforcement; while the Mounted Police were to be stationed in the Canadian pavilion, ostensibly to protect the exhibits, Commissioner Starnes thought it important, at the very least, that the men be sworn in as peace officers so that they could make arrests if necessary. In London, the High Commissioner’s office took up the matter with the British Home Office. The Home Office and the Metropolitan Police determined that the Mounties needed no special powers to detain pilferers in the Canadian pavilion, and, even if they were sworn in as special officers, their powers would not extend beyond the limits of the Canadian buildings, so there was no advantage to be had in doing so.⁷³ Furthermore, the Home Office had made its own policing arrangements for the exhibition, which did not include the use of dominion officers. Canada’s High Commissioner, P. C. Larkin, forced the issue, however, and the ten RCMP officers became “special constables” for the duration of the exhibition, were issued special warrant cards, and were under the jurisdiction of the London police, although the Mounties had no real authority outside Canada’s five acres.⁷⁴

Why all the fuss to swear in ten men to mind the seed murals and displays of Empire apples? Evidently, it was important to the RCMP Commissioner that his officers be treated as law enforcement personnel rather than over-paid stand attendants in fancy dress. If anything, their swearing in at New Scotland Yard was a political gesture to sooth both the Canadian High Commissioner and the head of the RCMP. Although the men’s powers were limited to a tiny jurisdiction, the Mounties were at least recognized as professional policemen. At Wembley as at home, the Red Serge was Canada’s national police force to ensure that law and order prevailed. From this, one might ascertain that in the mid-1920s the Mounted Police had not yet

71 LAC, RG 72, vol. 137, 9501955, letter to J. A. Robb from A. W. Tolmie, September 24, 1923; letter to J. A. Robb from Cortland Starnes, Commissioner RCMP, January 25, 1924.

72 LAC, RG 72, vol. 137, 9501955, memo from J. A. Robb to E. Lapointe, January 12, 1924; memo to James A. Robb, January 25, 1924.

73 LAC, RG 72, vol. 137, 950195, letter to W. J. Egan from Commissioner Starnes, February 21, 1924; letter to W. J. Egan from Lucien Pacard, March 11, 1924.

74 Public Record Office, Kew, MEPO 2/1817, correspondence between High Commissioner’s Office and Home Office, March-April 1924.

become the familiar “tourist icons” of travel posters, enlisted by Canadian officials to promote vacations in Western Canada and to make public appearances at conferences and conventions.⁷⁵

Despite the High Commissioner’s efforts to give his officers genuine authority, the British public identified the RCMP with their Hollywood image, and the Mounted Police became the unofficial mascots of the Canadian pavilion. The British press heralded the Mounties’ arrival, with the *Daily Graphic* calling them “Canada’s Finest Exhibit” and claiming that every one of them stood over six feet tall.⁷⁶ Their policing duties over the two Wembley seasons included patrolling the roof of the Canadian building for stray, unexploded fireworks, monitoring the displays, and regaling school children with tales of tracking cattle rustlers and criminals on the Canadian frontier. In their red tunics, broad hats, and black breeches, the gallant Mounties were “six feet of stirring romance”.⁷⁷ As police officers at Wembley, the RCMP were redundant, but, as symbols of Canadian masculinity and the benevolent power of the law, they captivated the imaginations of exhibition visitors. In addition, the RCMP represented the process of nation-building itself: the transformation of the wilderness frontier into civilization and the submission of Native peoples to the inevitable advance of progress.⁷⁸ In this regard, the Mounted Police complemented Tolmie’s discourse of development as presented at Wembley.

A Second Season: Wembley in 1925

By the summer of 1924, Prime Minister King’s government faced the prickly question of whether to participate in the British Empire Exhibition a second year. Even within British political circles, the continuation of Wembley was far from assured. In spite of the glowing press reports and self-congratulatory comments of the exhibition organizers, the British Empire Exhibition in 1924 was a financial disaster. The exhibition’s executive director, Sir William Travers Clark, blamed the cold, rainy summer for lower attendance figures than organizers had anticipated. Instead of the estimated 30 million visitors that had been the basis for projected returns for the exhibition, only 17 million people had passed through the turnstiles, meaning that the private guarantors and the British government were liable for Wembley’s £1.5 million losses.⁷⁹

In Ottawa, Mackenzie King initially refused to extend Canada’s participation to a second year. The Prime Minister’s office and External Affairs noti-

⁷⁵ Dawson, *The Mountie*, pp. 55–60.

⁷⁶ LAC, RG 72, vol. 193, exhibition clippings, “Canada’s Finest Exhibit for Wembely”, *Daily Graphic*, March 29, 1924; “For Wembley”, *Sunday Herald*, March 30, 1924.

⁷⁷ LAC, RG 72, vol. 192, exhibition clippings, “The Blood Soaked Blanket”, *Edinburgh Evening News*, August 15, 1925; “Too Much Fireworks”, *Daily Graphic*, August 26, 1925.

⁷⁸ Mackey, *The House of Difference*, pp. 16, 34–35.

⁷⁹ Public Record Office, Kew, T 161/153, 204504, memo from W. T. Clark to Sir George Barstow, Department of Overseas Trade, re: Future of the British Empire Exhibition, July 29, 1924.

fied the British Empire Exhibition authorities of Canada's position in early August 1924, while the other dominion governments and India also declined to participate a second year.⁸⁰ Canada's pavilion, though hailed as the most remarkable and successful dominion exhibit at the exhibition, had run over budget, and Mackenzie King and his ministers had evidently grown weary of defending the Wembley expenditures, which had risen steadily to a cost of \$1 million.⁸¹ T. L. Church, the Conservative member for North Toronto, asked the House of Commons what Canada hoped to gain from Wembley. If the exhibition was intended to improve trade relations with Britain, open up markets for Canadian goods, and win tariff concessions for Canadian exports to the United Kingdom, why spend all that money at Wembley, when Britain continued to favour a free trade policy, even allowing British free trade lobby groups to secure exhibition space? Chastising the Progressives for their free trade position and the Liberal government for wavering between free trade and tariff reform, Church suggested that Canada's exhibit should be constructed from "the unused timber and planks in the Liberal platform" and include a diorama showing the exodus of farmers to the United States, thanks to the Progressives' "free trade fallacies".⁸² Clearly, trade continued to be a divisive issue, with the Canadian Council of Agriculture anxious to promote free trade and make Canada the granary of the empire, while manufacturers in central Canada preferred some form of protection, lest they be swamped with cheaper British imports, even as they still hoped to gain better access to Britain's domestic market. In addition, Canadian manufacturers still worried about the possible revival of plans for a free-trade zone within the empire, as proposed by Lionel Curtis and the Round Table Movement.⁸³

Even the image of Canada as a haven for British emigrants, as projected at Wembley, was not an entirely accurate reflection of the Liberal government's postwar immigration policy. Mackenzie King responded coolly to Britain's 1921 empire settlement scheme, under the assumption that Canada was to become the dumping ground for Britain's unskilled and unemployed, thereby exacerbating Canada's own postwar economic problems.⁸⁴ Despite Ottawa's continued reticence to commit funds to the empire settlement programme, some of the provinces, particularly Ontario, and the business sector favoured the British settlement initiative. In the House of Commons, politicians debated immigration quotas at home and fretted over the dangers of swelling

80 LAC, RG 27, vol. 134, 950020, part 4, telegram, August 12, 1924.

81 For example, see *Hansard*, House of Commons Debates, June 23, 1924, pp. 3533–3550; July 4, 1924, p. 4089; July 11, 1924, p. 4405.

82 *Hansard*, House of Commons Debates, May 5, 1924, p. 1748.

83 John E. Kendle, *The Round Table Movement and Imperial Union* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1975).

84 John A. Schultz, " 'Leaven for the lump': Canada and Empire Settlement, 1918–1939", in Stephen Constantine, ed., *Emigrants and Empire: British Settlement in the Dominions Between the Wars* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), pp. 151–159.

the ranks of Canada's unemployed. Several Progressive Party MPs, including Agnes Macphail and J. S. Woodsworth, objected that the exhibition might increase Canada's unemployment by attracting people unsuited for farming, while there were insufficient jobs for the existing population. Macphail referred pointedly to a brochure, "Canada, the New Homeland", that had been distributed at Wembley, wherein immigrants were told how to acquire homesteads, but not how to keep them.⁸⁵ Macphail opposed advertising that she felt misrepresented the economic situation in Canada and advised against spending more money at Wembley by funding a delegation of three Members of Parliament and their wives to visit the exhibition.⁸⁶

Part of the problem was that Alexander Tolmie had underestimated the costs of running the Canadian pavilion. According to Tolmie, although the exhibit was managed with the strictest economy, construction and installation costs ran higher than expected due to the shortage of skilled men in the building trades, the frequency of labour disputes, and disorganized exhibition officials who regularly changed their minds as to building standards. While exhibition budgets were difficult to project under normal circumstances, Tolmie claimed that Wembley was the worst he had ever experienced. Tolmie was also anxious that Canada's exhibit had to be "the outstanding feature of the exhibition" and outshine those of rival dominions, especially Australia. He reminded his superiors in Ottawa that, even though the original total budget was \$1 million, he had been advised "not to spoil the Exhibit for lack of funds". Once the exhibition opened, Tolmie complained that he was forced to hire more staff and attendants than anticipated to comply with British trade union regulations. In view of the above challenges, he hoped that the government appreciated the "almost impossible task of trying to estimate a job of this kind in advance especially in a country where conditions have been so unstable as England during the past year".⁸⁷ Such candid admissions on the part of Canada's Exhibition Commission illuminated what had gone wrong at Wembley in 1924.

The Canadian government reversed its decision about a second exhibition following a British announcement in early October 1924 of financial incentives for the dominions. In Ottawa, Tolmie's superior, W. J. Egan, tried to wrangle 100 per cent of Canada's 1925 costs from the British government, with the idea of trumping Australia a second time, but then settled for a grant of £60,000, the same amount offered to the other dominions. In early November 1924 British Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin announced that his government supported the re-opening of Wembley for a second season, if the dominions were prepared to stay, but by that time the deals between the British exhibition authorities and the dominions had already been struck and the

85 *Hansard*, House of Commons Debates, June 23, 1924, pp. 3535, 3539–3540.

86 *Ibid.*, pp. 3539–3540.

87 LAC, RG 72, vol. 134, 950020, part 4, letter from A. W. Tolmie to W. J. Egan, August 12, 1924.

subsidy payments agreed upon.⁸⁸ Even if the Canadian government was reluctant to participate for a second year, staying home would have been far more damaging for the country, if potentially rival dominions were committed. It was a matter of national pride and prestige.

At home, the newspapers celebrated the decision to remain for 1925 as being good for Canadian business.⁸⁹ Indeed, according to MacKinnon, the Canadian manufacturers that participated in 1924 had expanded their export markets, and, although businessmen hesitated to disclose much about their business deals, Canada's industrial commissioner reported that substantial orders had been placed for Canadian automobiles, furniture, rubber shoes, milk products, canned fish, and tires.⁹⁰ But improvements were still necessary. The Montreal Publicity Association stated that Canadian firms had lost great opportunities by not being allowed to conduct direct sales in the Canadian pavilion, especially when other dominions, notably Australia, were not similarly hampered.⁹¹ The no-sales policy was altered for 1925, but Tolmie stipulated that firms could only sell commodities from which an export trade was likely to develop, and were therefore sales for the purpose of advertising. Tolmie fretted that "we must not let this exhibit develop into a bazaar permitting the sale of cheap souvenirs". Although the commission did not have to supervise the completion of an entire building as had been the case the previous year, Tolmie intended to overhaul the displays and redesign the government dioramas.⁹²

Despite the grandiose plans, from the descriptions of the 1925 display — the seed murals, the working dioramas of the ports of Montreal and Vancouver, the model railway of Canada's transportation network — the government displays were not changed significantly.⁹³ Perhaps the redesigned Canadian pavilion was indicative of a wider problem: the British Empire Exhibition in 1925 was not the same as the previous year, but neither was it different. From the Canadian perspective, however, any success at Wembley, great or small, was considered clear profit since the dominion exhibition had, apparently, cost the Canadian government nothing, thanks to the British subsidy that had been a condition of Canada's participation.⁹⁴

Following the 1924 success of the EP ranch tableau, and possibly to re-use

88 LAC, RG 72, vol. 134, 950020, part 4, correspondence between W. J. Egan and James Robb, October 1924; telegrams from Leo Amery to Governor General of Canada, November 11 and 15, 1924.

89 LAC, RG 72, vol. 136, 950176, exhibition clippings; see, for example, *Daily Herald* [Calgary], October 15, 1924; *St. John Daily Telegraph Journal*, November 7, 1924; *Quebec City Daily Telegraph*, December 5, 1924; *Edmonton Daily Journal*, February 20, 1925.

90 LAC, RG 30, A121, vol. 1, BEE Press Releases, September 5, 1924, p. 1.

91 LAC, RG 72, vol. 194, exhibition clippings, "Canada at Wembley", *Canadian Gazette*, November 27, 1924.

92 LAC, RG 72, vol. 134, 950020, part 4, letter from Tolmie to Egan, November 27, 1924.

93 LAC, RG 72, vol. 194, exhibition clippings, "Canada at Wembley", *Canada*, May 9, 1925, p. 125.

94 "Much Delay Over Wembley Exhibits", *Montreal Gazette*, May 22, 1925, p. 21; "Attendance at the Exhibition is Disappointing", *Montreal Gazette*, May 28, 1925, p. 1.

the enormous cold storage display case, Tolmie and Turcotte opted for yet another dairy design, to be carved by their technical sculptors George Kent and Beauchamp Hawkins.⁹⁵ Edward was again the subject of the 1925 butter sculpture, which depicted the prince dressed as a First Nations chief, flanked by several Native women, a tepee, a dog, and a small child. The scene was inspired by Prince Edward's 1919 royal visit to Canada and his stop in Banff, where several Assiniboine leaders made Edward an honorary Stony chief, naming him "Morning Star".⁹⁶ Tolmie was nervous about the response of the Prince, but, when Edward visited the building in March 1925 and saw the sculpture thus far, he was extremely pleased, and the butter scene continued as planned.⁹⁷ Upon her inspection of the Canadian pavilion, Queen Mary, Edward's mother, supposedly laughed out loud, declaring that it was "quite a remarkable likeness", which it was (Figure 3). According to the British newspapers, Edward in "full feathers as an Indian chief" was one of the new wonders of Wembley.⁹⁸

Amid the lavish praise for the masterful carving and its flattering likeness of the Prince, a few newspapers made reference to the First Nations peoples in the scene. For example, the Plymouth *Western Evening Herald* included brief references to the Stony people described as "active and fleet of foot, the most energetic of all the Indians of the Canadian Northwest". The Plymouth article noted that, of all Canada's Aboriginal peoples, the Assiniboine were the most enterprising indigenous farmers and ranchers. Beneath this thin praise was the implicit assurance that this association with Native culture did not somehow dishonour the royal family since the Stony were hardworking and respectable people who honoured European values. What the British papers failed to notice, however, was the absence in the Canadian pavilion of any other reference to Canada's First Nations.

Some members of the Canadian press were more observant. The Quebec paper *Le Canada* commented on the "Prince as Red Indian" carving; not questioning the "good spirit in which this statue has been executed", the editorial regretted that "such clumsy publicity should be given to the few remaining Indians in Canada". The commentary continued that Canada was still imperfectly known in Europe, and, rather than enhance the "false impression that our country is still largely peopled by savages", the exhibition commissioners ought to have focused on the progress already made. Publicity

95 LAC, RG 72, vol. 134, letter from A. W. Tolmie to J. A. Ruddick, February 11, 1925.

96 G. Ivy Sanders, *Edward Prince of Wales: An Authentic Biography* (London: Nisbet & Co.), pp. 85–86; *The Prince of Wales Book: A Pictorial Record of the Voyages of H.M.S. Renown, 1919–1920* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1921). See also "The Prince of Wales in Butter", *Illustrated London News*, May 16, 1925, p. 968.

97 LAC, RG 27, vol. 134, 950020, telegram to W. J. Egan from A. W. Tolmie, March 25, 1925.

98 LAC, RG 72, vol. 192, exhibition clippings, "Wembley Tour by the Queen", *Daily Mirror*, May 21, 1925; "Wembley Wonder in Butter", *Christian Herald*, May 2, 1925; "Prince in Butter", *Sunday Mercury*, May 24, 1925; "Patriotism in Butter", *Western Evening Herald Plymouth*, June 5, 1925.



Figure 3: The Prince of Wales as Chief Morning Star, Canadian Pavilion, British Empire Exhibition, Wembley, 1925 (Library and Archives Canada, Ottawa, PA 181562).

that perpetuated “misleading legends” should be omitted from the exhibition.⁹⁹ The *Montreal Herald* took up the same theme and was not only critical of the Morning Star sculpture, but dismissed the entire practice of conferring chiefdoms on visiting European dignitaries as “ridiculous” and meaningless,

⁹⁹ “Report from *Le Canada*”, *Montreal Gazette*, May 28, 1925, p. 10.

for both Natives and visitors. According to the *Herald*, “it was about time that these silly mummeries were done away with and certainly it is time that Canada should cease to be advertised by representations of Indians in war paint.” That image of Canada, the paper continued, was inappropriate at Wembley, while the pavilion needed to highlight the “modern and progressive character of our development”.¹⁰⁰ What began as a critical editorial that drew attention to the Canadian pavilion’s tasteless caricature of Native culture concluded with the assertion that the representation of “savages” undermined the image of Canada as a modern, progressive nation.

The editorial provoked further public criticism of the display. By the end of July, W. J. Egan informed Tolmie that the negative commentary about Prince “Morning Star” continued in the Canadian press, advising him that an alteration of the sculpture would be “a good stroke of business on your part”.¹⁰¹ Tolmie provided no direct response to Egan’s request, or at least none that was officially recorded, and one might assume that indeed it was too late. Besides, the Prince of Wales liked the tableau, and it may not have been worth offending the royal family to take the pressure off the government at home or to sooth business groups that may have taken exception to the sculpture and its portrayal of Canada. In some respects, Tolmie’s bizarre homage to Native culture complied with the discourse of development that was the basis of the Canadian exhibit. The recreation of a scene in which assimilated Natives offered their allegiance to a foreign British prince symbolized the colonization of Canada’s frontier and the extension of order and progress. Native culture symbolized a vanishing past, and the exhibition commissioners could therefore afford to treat it in a sentimental fashion.

Until the Wembley exhibit, in an effort to present the view that Canada was a civilized place to do business or settle, exhibition organizers had limited, or omitted entirely, displays of Native peoples and indigenous material culture. Although Aboriginal peoples from Labrador and British Columbia had appeared in the Native encampments at previous world’s fairs, these groups were not part of the official Canadian pavilions; instead, First Nations peoples were enlisted by sideshow entrepreneurs seeking interesting and exotic entertainment for the paying public. Officials worried that performances of Native dancing and rituals, which were exaggerated to thrill and horrify exhibition audiences, contradicted the official image of Canada as a civilized nation. According to the official rhetoric, Canada’s Native peoples had undergone successful assimilation thanks to the extension of state education, their adoption of the Christian religion, and the implementation of land settlement policies organized by a benevolent state.¹⁰² Conversely, international

100 “The Prince as an Indian Chief”, *Montreal Herald*, July 15, 1925, p. 4.

101 LAC, RG 72, vol. 134, 950020, correspondence between W. J. Egan and A. W. Tolmie, May and July 1925.

102 Heaman, *The Inglorious Arts of Peace*, pp. 297–310.

exhibitions offered Native groups a cultural space for performing traditional ceremonies that were banned under colonial rule, thereby subverting the message that Native traditions had vanished in Canada.¹⁰³ By the same token, as government officials discouraged the display of Native Canadians, Europeans increasingly “romanticized and appropriated” Aboriginal material culture by collecting artifacts or, as in the case of Edward, Prince of Wales, by donning Native clothing.¹⁰⁴

At Wembley in 1925, Edward was once again presented as a mythical icon of an emerging Canadian identity, appearing in the guise of the “good” Indian, the chief of the assimilated Stony, who had accepted the Anglo-Canadian values of hard work and respect for law and order. As in 1924, Edward assumed a symbolic Canadian identity. In their efforts to create and market a national image, Tolmie and his staff selectively appropriated and manipulated cultural symbols. The live Mounties and the butter Indians reified the national narrative of material and cultural progress within a land of peace and plenty.

“Proud to be Canadian”: Visitors’ Responses to Wembley

Despite resurgent criticisms, Wembley had its boosters, who reported favourably on Canada’s exhibition in speeches to the Empire Club of Canada and reports in the House of Commons. R. S. Parsons, the Canadian president of the British American Oil Company, had nothing but praise for Canada’s pavilion, describing it as “an eye-opener to the people of Great Britain, to see what Canada is able to produce and offer to the world”.¹⁰⁵ In an address to the Empire Club in 1925, Sir Robert Falconer, president of the University of Toronto, interpreted the exhibition’s significance in terms of Canada’s changing status within the empire. Falconer, although educated in Britain and a frequent visitor to London, claimed that he “never quite realized, until he saw Wembley, the magnitude of the British Empire; the variety of the Empire; the demands on administration that are made by the British Empire”. He also realized, in his visit to the “three great pavilions” — those of Canada, Australia, and New Zealand — that here were the next “great peoples arising”, ready to assume a larger role in world affairs, particularly through the League of Nations. Britain, he contended, was “only waiting to have from us that larger co-operation and that if we show any desire to take a share in the burden of the world, they will be only too glad to bring us in, not as Colonials, but as co-operative members of this British Commonwealth to sit down and discuss these matters together”.¹⁰⁶ Falconer had accepted the illusion, had

103 Paige Raibmon, “Theaters of Contact: The Kwakwaka’waku Meet Colonialism in British Columbia and at the Chicago World’s Fair”, *Canadian Historical Review*, vol 81, no. 2 (June 2000), pp. 157–190.

104 Mackey, *The House of Difference*, p. 36.

105 S. R. Parsons address, p. 291.

106 “London, Paris, Geneva: An Address by Sir Robert Falconer”, *Empire Club of Canada: Addresses Delivered to the Members during the Year 1925* (Toronto: Maccoomb Press, 1926), pp. 256, 262.

seen the “magnitude of the British empire” at Wembley, while also “seeing” Canada’s new place within it as one of the “great peoples” ready to make its own foreign policy, but in a commonwealth of equal nations.

Ordinary Canadians visiting their national pavilion at Wembley were unlikely to see the exhibition in such grand terms, but it still made a distinct impression on many. The guest book for the 1924 Canadian pavilion contains 844 entries, the signatures and comments from Canadians, Britons, Americans, and a few Europeans who toured the pavilion. While this guest book represents a fraction of the estimated several million visitors who walked through Canada’s display, it still offers a sample of visitors’ impressions. Canadians from across the country attended the exhibition, from large cities like Montreal and Vancouver, but also from small towns, including Pine Lake (Alberta), Ingersoll (Ontario), and Chilliwack (British Columbia). Comments in the guest book seemed to follow the maxim, “if you can’t say anything nice...”, and were overwhelmingly positive. Several Britons expressed an interest in either visiting or emigrating to Canada, although a few British visitors commented on the lack of winter scenes.¹⁰⁷ Canadians, by and large, used the guest book to declare their affection and pride in their nation, as the comments recorded in May 1924 suggest. J. M. Fraser from Victoria, visiting Wembley with his wife and daughter, declared that he was “Proud to be Canadian”; Mrs. Mercer Adams of Toronto wrote, “Maple Leaf Forever”; Mrs. J. A. Burgess of Calgary expressed pride in her adopted country, identifying herself as “An American proud I married a Canadian”, while Mr. E. Waller of Vancouver was “prouder than ever of being Canadian”. Alluding to the economic prospects in Canada for the hard-working, visitors in July 1924 invited “Good men” and “good people” to immigrate. Others said the Canadian exhibit made them homesick, as Arthur Lismer, visiting with his family, recorded in September 1924, while Cecil E. Race of Edmonton declared succinctly on June 10: “East! West! Home’s best!”¹⁰⁸ Visitors from Quebec and France, signing the guest book in French, offered praise for the pavilion. Nobody mentioned the butter prince, although one British woman, May Robson of Newcastle-on-Tyne, referred to the Mounties and was “glad to have met the RCMP boys”, cryptically adding, “no wonder my brother likes the force!”¹⁰⁹ Evidently, Canada’s exhibition at Wembley communicated to visitors that Canada was a land of opportunity and abundant resources, a nation to be imagined from a collection of dioramas and displays. For the Canadians who saw the exhibition, the pavilion seemed to speak on a more emotional level, inspiring pride in their country, identification with its values, and a longing to return home.

107 LAC, RG 72, vol. 189, Visitor’s Book, British Empire Exhibition, 1924.

108 *Ibid.*, June 10, 1924.

109 *Ibid.*, October 31, 1924.

Conclusion

E. A. Heaman points out that one cannot literally see an empire; as a cultural idea and a political construct, it is an abstraction. An empire is made real through its representation, and it requires “a feat of imagination to read the concept of empire into objects like grains, cocoa beans and spices”.¹¹⁰ Likewise, to see a nation in a set of dioramas, a pile of apples, and a display of timber demands a “feat of imagination”. International exhibitions offered a place where new national identities could be constructed and expressed, and, while these exhibitions were in themselves ephemeral, Burton Benedict notes that the same sorts of displays recurred in exhibition after exhibition, themselves becoming a manufactured tradition, with a manufactured national identity to go with it.¹¹¹ In the early 1920s Canadians may not yet have identified themselves with the image of the RCMP, but, as the Mounted Police came to signify Canada abroad, the associations were strengthened. As Heaman points out, whether or not international displays contributed to an “emerging national identity”, they did “foster an expectation that a national identity existed”, moreover, that an identity could be summed up, assembled, and projected to the world.¹¹²

The British Empire Exhibition, 1924–1925, enabled the Canadian exhibition commissioner and his staff to present a unified and homogeneous image of the nation. They constructed and projected this image despite the nation’s vast geographic distances and obvious differences of language and race, as the misleading representation of Aboriginal Canadians and tensions over the apparent limited participation of Quebec suggest. In addition, by not allowing individual provincial displays and by downplaying regional economic competition, Tolmie, Turcotte, and MacKinnon sought a unity of purpose and identity. While their intentions were to attract investment and improve export markets for Canadian goods, the exhibition commissioners assembled a set of images intended to sum up the idea of Canada. This included the use of the Mounted Police and the image of Prince Edward, as both Alberta rancher and Stony chief. We cannot know exactly how many Canadians attended or how they were affected by the exhibition; nevertheless, unofficial responses such as those recorded in the pavilion guest book indicate that Canadians identified with the displays on an emotional level.

During the mid-1920s, for Canadian political leaders, the assertion of a national identity was particularly significant, as they attempted to renegotiate Canada’s status within the empire by seeking greater economic and diplomatic autonomy from Britain, eventually granted in the terms of the Balfour Agreement, signed at the Imperial Conference of 1926. While Tolmie and

110 Heaman, *The Inglorious Arts of Peace*, p. 210.

111 Burton Benedict, “International Exhibitions and National Identity”, *Anthropology Today*, vol. 7, no. 3 (June 1991), p. 3.

112 Heaman, *The Inglorious Arts of Peace*, p. 215.

MacKinnon must have realized that the Wembley exhibition coincided with these discussions, it was imperative that Canada make a successful presentation at Wembley, not simply to show up Australia, although that seemed to be a consideration, but to symbolize its position within the “family of nations”. As George Wrong later observed, the empire had become a commonwealth of equal partners, and “the title-deeds of the British Empire are not in London”. England was no longer the homeland, because Canadians “have made a home of their own”.¹¹³ That home was built and displayed at Wembley.

113 George M. Wrong, “Nationalism in Canada”, *Journal of the Royal Institute of International Affairs*, vol. 5, no. 4 (July 1926), p. 184.