

## “Shame on You Lazy Canadians!” says William Humber

Responding to Jose Bautista’s playoff homerun and subsequent bat tossing against the Texas Rangers in 2015, Globe and Mail journalist Marcus Gee declared, “Baseball is not, of course, the most Canadian of sports. But oddly, it has made us all come together...”.<sup>1</sup> It’s merely one of the latest examples of Canadians treating baseball’s history and their generational play and affection as one long example of, “Bowling Down to Babe Ruth”. A letter writer to the Hamilton Evening Times, 6 September 1865, said, “...Base Ball is fast becoming a Canadian as well as an American game...” Even this profession of a sympathetic Canadian identification with baseball had disappeared by the 1880s when an English Canadian commentator Goldwin Smith wondered if lacrosse and cricket had a chance against Yankee baseball. “The loyal Englishman,” he wrote, “Who regards with pensive regret the adoption of a Yankee game may console himself with the thought that cricket and baseball have apparently evolved from the same infantine British sport.”<sup>2</sup> A 1907 Ph.D. thesis, *The Americanization of Canada*<sup>3</sup> went further. It cautioned that, “Baseball is becoming the National Game of Canada instead of cricket. It has a very deep significance, as has the fact that the native game of lacrosse is not able to hold its own against the southern intruder.” In 1927, Robert Ayre trumped even this assertion. In the country’s leading intellectual journal, *The Canadian Forum*, he said when Canadian children “bowed down to Babe Ruth”, they demonstrated Canada’s integration into the “American Empire”.

By 1962 with its two remaining minor league teams (Toronto and Vancouver) as well as the game’s play at the sandlot amateur level in severe decline, a cover story in the Canadian publication, *Liberty*,<sup>4</sup> wondered “Can [American baseball manager] Charlie Dressen save Canadian baseball,” Not said was the apparent inability of Canadians to do so. The minor league Toronto Maple Leafs actually outlived Dressen who died in 1966, the ball team leaving town after the 1967 season. In 1990, describing the attendance of U.S. President George Bush (the first), at a ballgame in Toronto’s SkyDome, Lawrence Martin in the *Toronto Star* newspaper wrote, “The fantastic success of baseball north of the U.S. border was yet another sign of the times. Major league ball now enjoyed charter membership in English Canada’s new continentalist culture. In sports, as in music, film, and books it was a culture less conscious of borders.”<sup>5</sup> Even a Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper in his otherwise excellent book on early hockey, *A Great Game*,<sup>6</sup> assumed baseball’s identity as “the American importation.”

So what’s the real story!

- Baseball entered Canada largely, but not exclusively, from the United States. It did so however not as an American developed import but as an English/European folk game, analogous to the way early Christmas celebrations, based on British and European traditions first came into the Canadas from the United States (largely, but not exclusively). Its subsequent proto-modern and eventual modern development were acted on simultaneously in Canada as in the United States.
- Baseball is thus a shared North American developed modern game not a solely American one later exported to Canada.
- Its origins owe more to regionalism, i.e. the enthusiasm and modern experimentation within distinct places, rather than a New York-centric one. As such, the New York rules interpretation found established proto-modern and even early modern versions in these places. They were willing and immediate landing spots for the New York game, ensuring it was not a one-off creation either surviving or failing solely within the New York region.

- Ontario (previously known as Upper Canada, then Canada West) was one of multiple regions whose early enthusiasm and experimentation was matched continent-wide - Philadelphia, Massachusetts amongst others in the US; Quebec, Atlantic Canada in the British provinces.
- Accounts include a dubious 1792 Niagara demonstration put on by Joseph Brant's soldiers (but the 1860 report does say baseball when the difference between it and lacrosse would have been well known); two 1803 accounts in what is today's Toronto and one near Port Hope played by two brothers-in-law; 4 June 1819 Hamilton; informal ball play in Toronto, Woodstock, London and Huron County in the 1820s and 30s; 4 June 1838 Beachville; late 1840s/early 1850s Oxford County remembrance of Adam Ford; 1848 Goderich Bass-Ball; Ontario and Quebec politicians playing in Toronto in 1850. These are matched in other parts of the future country by a New Brunswick account in the 1790s; a ballplaying death in Quebec in 1838; ball and bat in Dartmouth Nova Scotia in 1841. There are at least two accounts of American prisoners of war playing in Ontario but these were isolated from the general population and had little impact.
- Ontario's two 4 June accounts of baseball (1819 and 1838) occur at Militia Muster gatherings as part of George III's birthday celebration. They are thus part of a proto-modern experimentation with both a secular human and an adult agency driving baseball's intentional scheduling. It left behind what had been a one-off and child-like amusement connected to a folk custom with no timetable for future play. Further back in time this custom might ironically have been connected to a religious timetable of performance like many other folk games. The new imperative, driven by human agency influencing its scheduling, was part of the proto-modern process eventually leading to institutionalization, commercialization and professionalism, i.e. today's baseball.
- Baseball's triumph over cricket was not because of the latter game's English identity (Ontario citizens would have supported the one with an English pedigree, all other factors being equal – they weren't!) or its class composition (cricket was exceedingly elitist in Canada but had more working class attributes in the US, nevertheless baseball prevailed in both places). Why? Baseball was a better game from a player perspective (more opportunities for regular participation), spectator interest (closer to the action and avoiding, as cricket often did not, "draws", which meant not a tie, but essentially no result) and in the actual playing of the game on the field (more action at four bases than between two wickets).
- Ontario's independent baseball identity and overall management until at least the 1880s was a "reverse engineering" indication of its distinct development pre-1854, but also demonstrated the significance of the game's regional emphasis in the early modern era. The Canadian start of a permanent modern era generally accords with formal team organization in 1854 in Hamilton, a local directory listing and media coverage of the game in London Ontario in 1856 (detailed in Railton's 1856 London Directory and as reported in the New York Clipper), and spectator interest (Thomas Wells of Ingersoll wrote about it in a surviving diary entry from 1860). In London's case, it was a time when the public realm, beyond those actually playing, cared enough about the result that a box score was sent to a paper outside the country.
- Baseball dominance in Ontario went from the Young Canadians (later Maple Leaf), and the Burlingtons of Hamilton (1854-60) through the Young Canadians of Woodstock (1861-69) and briefly the Victorias of Ingersoll (1868), to the Maple Leafs of Guelph (1870-75), and eventually the Tecumsehs of London (1876-78). Two other claimants, Kingston and Seaforth, defeated Guelph but their games were not recognized as title-worthy.

- Contact with the United States beyond the adoption of the New York rules in Hamilton and Toronto in 1859 and finally Woodstock in 1861 was limited. There were occasional cross-border games usually won by the American team, but not always. Between 1854 and 1878 Canadians administered their own affairs, even dabbled in rule differentiation, and until 1872 the teams were almost exclusively either Canadian or British born players. If American born they generally had arrived in Canada in their childhood years. Sam Jackson was the first American whose primary identity was that of a ballplayer to appear in a Canadian lineup in 1872. The first Canadian ballplayer (also a noted cricketer) in the United States was Bob Addy in 1866 in Rockford. Outright professionalism and the importing of American ballplayers was not significant until 1876. The teams of this entire period however were overseen/owned by Canadians, and were either in a Canadian managed system, or in an equal basis partnership with American teams (International Association).
- The 1877 International Association (IA) with two Canadian cities, Guelph and London, was the culmination of this progressive evolutionary path reflecting an aspiration by these two places for a “major league” identity (whatever that term might have meant in 1877) rather than subscribing to a second-class minor league caste system status.
- The IA potential of an open ended and geographically ambitious membership failed and with it the possibility for a multi-team tiered (pyramid) system of baseball, comparable to what emerged in European soccer, and in some ways has been the character of US collegiate sports. The pyramid would have benefitted the over 50 professional-type teams of the era, including those in large cities. Many of them might still be with us today. (Today’s Greater London with a population near 10 million has eight teams in English soccer’s Premier League, while Greater New York with a population of 18 million has two teams in Major League Baseball down from three teams prior to 1958 when its population was 12 million.)
- Nevertheless, had Toronto accepted Albert Spalding’s blandishments for membership in the early years of the National League we might have had a more fulsome interpretation of the past.
- While American baseball historians largely dwell only on their side of the border neglecting this North American dimension, lazy Canadian commentators, as noted above, have repeated the myth of this being a solely developed American game “imposed” on a docile, agency-deprived, Canadian public. ***Shame on you lazy Canadians!***

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<sup>1</sup> A11, Globe and Mail, 15 October 2015

<sup>2</sup> 457, Goldwin, G. *The Bystander* August 1880, No. 8 (Toronto: Hunter, Rose, 1880). This monthly was written and published by Goldwin Smith. He used the nom-de-plume *The Bystander* in his writings.

<sup>3</sup> 113, Moffet, S. *The Americanization of Canada* (New York: Ph.D. Columbia University, 1907)

<sup>4</sup> 19, Webb, R. *Can Charlie Dressen save Canadian baseball?* Liberty magazine, August 1962, Vol. 39, No. 5

<sup>5</sup> B1, Martin L. *The follies of Philistines: Why did the Mulroney Tories fail to grasp the link between culture and sovereignty?* Toronto Star 25 April 1993

<sup>6</sup> 21, Harper, S. *A Great Game: The Forgotten Leafs & The Rise of Professional Hockey* (Toronto: Simon and Schuster Canada, 2013)