

White Supremacy & Chinese Canadian Mythology



Chinese and Asian Canadians who owned property had the right to vote in both the federal and provincial elections before 1885.

1885 Electoral Franchise Act & John A. Macdonald

- In 1885, John Alexander Macdonald Canada's first Prime Minister took the right to vote away from people of Chinese and Asian ancestry across the country on the grounds that they were biologically different from "Canadians" and that their presence threatened the "Aryan character" of Canadian society.
- The *1885 Electoral Franchise Act* is a key moment in Canadian history as it marked the introduced biological racism into Canada's state formation.

Consequences for Chinese/Asian Canadian

- Basing exclusion on alleged biological instead of cultural difference made exclusion inescapable and permanent. The *Electoral Franchise Act* made it so that even Chinese Canadian who adopted European colonial culture and became "acculturated" could not vote.
- Loss of the right to vote also included: exclusion from holding public office, jury service, professions of law, and pharmacy.
- The *Electoral Franchise Act* would make the lives of Chinese Canadians extremely difficult and they would battle the Canadian government, and their subsequent racist policies (ex. Chinese Head Tax, Chinese Immigration Act, etc.) through activism and community organization to restore their rights as Canadian citizens.

How the *Electoral Franchise Act* is Documented by Historians & Why This is Important?

Biographers of Prime Minister Macdonald have either overlooked the importance of this legislation he proposed and or explained it away as an unfortunate outcome of his personal racism or prejudice.

*The Problem

Chalking Macdonald's racism to be a by-product of his time is inaccurate because Members of both the federal and provincial governments of Canada protested Macdonald's legislation on several grounds arguing that...

1. Chinese Canadians were contributing members of society (facilitating trade and aiding in the construction of colonial spaces).
2. Chinese Canadians who immigrated from Hong Kong were British subjects.
3. Chinese Canadians had voted in previous elections and should continue to have been allowed to do so.


White Supremacist Mythology & Examples

"Common" History (The Textbook Story)

1. Canada is a nation with a trans-Atlantic origin with migration and colonial settlement that moved westward.
2. 15,000 Chinese came to Canada during the 1880s to help construct the CPR (Canadian Pacific Railway) boosting the country's westward expansion.

"Uncommon" History (The Missing Story)

- In 1788 Chinese carpenters and labourers arrived from the Pacific to the lands now known as BC, encountered the Nuuchah-Nulth Peoples, and aided in the construction of a trading post led by settler/trader Captain Meares in Nootka Sound.
- Peoples of several different nationalities immigrated (Hawaiian, Scottish, Chinese, Quebecois, others from the Pacific and Atlantic etc.) during the late 18th and 19th century to BC well before the construction of the CPR.



*Problems with the Textbook Story

- By focusing on trans-Atlantic migration and European immigrants historians, have overlooked the contribution of different peoples to Canada's nation building.
- The existence of these peoples and their histories only become important when they are encountered by Europeans and are useful when crafting Canada's multicultural mythology.

1995 "Nitro" Historica Minute

"Nitro" is a minute-long, short film meant to capture the mythology of Chinese Canadians contribution to Canada. "Nitro" was part of a larger collection of "minutes" intended to educate Canadians on the myth of Canada's construction (which are all still utilized today).

- It depicts a Chinese CPR worker being given the job of planting nitro by two white overseers in exchange for immigration money for his wife.
- The worker runs into a tunnel and nearly dies in a nitro explosion.
- The film skips to 50 years later where the man is alive with (assumably his) children narrating how he survived and how one Chinese person died for every mile of the CPR track.

What's problematic? Why is it important?

1. It is the only Historica Minute to depict the contribution of Chinese Canadians in Canadian history.
2. It racializes Chinese Canadians as the overseas "foreigner" and "white" peoples as the native Canadians through their dialogue. The Chinese Canadian character speaks with a heavy accent and the "white" characters have a "Canadian" accent.
3. The narration only acknowledges the existence of Chinese Canadians who immigrated to help in the building of the CPR and none of the Chinese Canadians who participated in Canada's construction before the CPR.
4. The time jump skips over the 50 years of racist policies after the completion of the CPR which stripped away Chinese Canadians of their Canadian rights.
5. It is historical fiction.
 - Chinese Canadians faced intense racism and financial hardship during and after the construction of the CPR.
 - Very few Chinese Canadians could afford to pay the fees to immigrate their families over from China after the completion of the CPR. Some Chinese Canadians remained "bachelors" while others formed relationships in Canada (with Indigenous and white women) and had children.

*Important Note

The argument that John A. Macdonald's actions and his personality were a product of their time is a white supremacist narrative. It shifts the existence of racism in Canada as something in the past. Likewise, "Nitro" makes the same racist mistake in its film by narrating the death of Chinese Canadians in the CPR's construction while making no reference to the struggles that Chinese Canadians faced after the 1880s. By attaching racism to historical figures and past events, historians continue to perpetrate a white supremacist mythology in Canada history that racism is something of the past and that racism disappeared as time progressed.

References

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