Historica Canada Education Portal

The Confederation Debates: Ontario Senior Mini-unit

This mini-unit for intermediate/senior-level classes helps students to understand and analyze the key ideas and challenges that preceded Ontario's entry into Confederation. The first section deals with the debates in the provincial and/or federal legislatures, while the second section addresses more specifically founding treaty negotiations with the First Nations. Each section can be taught independently.

The activities and attached materials will help students understand the diversity of ideas, commitments, successes and grievances that underlie Canada's founding.

By the end of this mini-unit, your students will have the opportunity to:

1. Use the historical inquiry process—gathering, interpreting and analyzing historical evidence and information from a variety of primary and secondary sources—in order to investigate and make judgements about issues, developments and events of historical importance.
2. Hone their historical thinking skills to identify historical significance, cause and consequence, continuity and change, and historical perspective.
3. Develop knowledge of their province/region within Canada, minority rights and democracy, and appreciate the need for reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples.

Amor de Cosmos in Brief

This summary borrows from the Dictionary of Canadian Biography entry listed in the "Additional Resources" section of this mini-unit.

Amor de Cosmos was born under the name William Alexander Smith in Windsor, Nova Scotia, in 1825 to a family of Loyalists. In 1852, he moved to California to work as a photographer. In 1854, a bill from the California Senate approved his name change to Amor de Cosmos. Four years later, he joined his brother at Vancouver Island after hearing that gold has been found on the Fraser River. He founded the *British Colonist* newspaper in 1858, where he began his lifelong advocacy for the city of Victoria. His paper also fought for responsible government, the unification of the colonies, and the development of a "nation" in BC that employed Chinese workers without giving them full rights within the community. He also espoused a strong belief in progress, growing populations and an economic future for BC based on farming, fisheries, and forestry. He held a seat in the Vancouver Island Legislative Assembly from 1863 until 1866. After the union of the provinces of Vancouver Island and British Columbia, he sat in the British Columbia Legislative Council for four years.

Image held by Library and Archives Canada.

De Cosmos supported Confederation because he believed it would prevent American expansionism into British Columbia. He hoped that, with time, a larger British political union would mature to the point that it would occupy a seat in an imperial legislature in London, England. His intense advocacy for Victoria also led him to push for that city to become the chief Canadian Pacific transportation hub. To accomplish these lofty goals, he founded the Confederation League with other British Columbian politicians in 1868. At the League's convention in Yale that year, the League passed motions to join Confederation, and sparked considerable support for the colony to join Canada. He and his supporters continued to pursue responsible government and Confederation for several years against those who opposed uniting with Canada. This latter movement was led by de Cosmos's chief rival: John Sebastian Helmcken.

From 1871 to 1874, de Cosmos was elected to the British Columbia Legislative Assembly, where the lack of sufficient progress on the Canadian Pacific Railway limited his effectiveness. De Cosmos served as British Columbia's second premier from 1872 to 1874. He is known as British Columbia's "Father of Confederation" because of his important role in founding the Confederation League, uniting the colonies of Vancouver Island and British Columbia, and for fervently advocating bringing the province into Confederation.

The mini unit provides short biographies of all historical figures.

John A. Macdonald in Brief

This summary borrows from the Dictionary of Canadian Biography entry listed in the "Additional Resources" section of this mini-unit.

John A. Macdonald was born in Glasgow, Scotland in 1815. His father was an unsuccessful merchant who improved his family's fortunes after immigrating to Kingston, Upper Canada in 1820 and opening several businesses. John A. Macdonald began articling in law at the age of 15 and opened his own firm ten years later. His family life was filled with considerable tragedy. In 1843, Macdonald married his cousin Isabella Clark, who soon became chronically ill, endured two difficult pregnancies (John Alexander and Hugh John), and died in 1857. Their first son died at 13 months, while the latter went on to become a reluctant political figure in Manitoba.

Image held by Library and Archives Canada.

John A. Macdonald became the political representative for Kingston after winning his seat in the general election of 1844. He soon ascended to lead the Liberal-Conservatives. A practical politician, Macdonald had a penchant for brokering deals and alliances. This attitude served him well in the Province of Canada's political arena, where he led his Upper Canadian party as Premier or co-Premier with George Étienne Cartier and other Bleu leaders for much of the late 1850s and early 1860s.

Although Macdonald preferred legislative union and doubted the merits of the federal principle until 1864, he championed a centralized British North American federation at the Charlottetown, Quebec and London constitutional conferences because the solution broke the political deadlock that had plagued the relationship between Canada East and Canada West. After marrying Susan Agnes Bernard in February 1867, he became Canada's first Prime Minister in 1867, and was knighted around the same time.

Note: Macdonald personally favoured weak provincial powers, and stated this position during the debates. To gain the support of other provinces, however, he emphasized provincial powers on several occasions. If students ask about this contradiction in Macdonald's statements, congratulate them on noticing that politicians sometimes tell people what they want to hear.

The mini-unit includes primary documents from prominent historical figures who contributed to the debate, such as John A. Macdonald.

Handout: Copy of the Robinson Treaty Made in the Year 1850 with the Ojibewa Indians of Lake Huron Conveying Certain Lands to the Crown

Reproduced from http://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/eng/1100100028984/1100100028994.

THIS AGREEMENT, *made and entered into this ninth day of September, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and fifty, at Sault Ste. Marie, in the Province of Canada, between the Honorable* WILLIAM BENJAMIN ROBINSON, *of the one part, on behalf of* HER MAJESTY THE QUEEN, *and* SHINGUACOUSE NEBENAIGOCHING, KEOKOUSE, MISHEQUONGA, TAGAWININI, SHABOKISHICK, DOKIS, PONEKEOSH, WINDAWTEGOWININI, SHAWENAKESHICK, NAMASSIN, NAOQUAGABO, WWBEKEKIK, KITCHEPOSSIGYN *by* PAPASAINSE, WAGEMAKI, PAMEQUONAISHEUG, *Chiefs; and John Bell*, PAQWATCHININI, MASHEKYASH, IDOWEKESIS, WAQUACOMICK, OCHEEK, METIGOMIN, WATACHEWANA, MINWAPAPENASSE, SHENAOQUOM, ONINGEGUN, PANAISSY, PAPASAINSE, ASHEWASEGA, KAGESHEWAWETUNG, SHAWONEBIN; *and also Chief* MAISQUASO (*also Chiefs* MUCKATA, MISHOQUET, *and* MEKIS), and MISHOQUETTO and ASA WASWANAY *and* PAWISS, *principal men of the* OJIBEWA INDIANS,[1] *inhabiting and claiming the Eastern and Northern Shores of Lake Huron, from Penetanguishine to Sault Ste. Maire, and thence to Batchewanaung Bay, on the Northern Shore of Lake Superior; together with the Islands in the said Lakes, opposite to the Shores thereof, and inland to the Height of land which separates the Territory covered by the charter of the Honorable Hudson Bay Company from Canada; as well as all unconceded lands within the limits of Canada West to which they have any just claim, of the other part, witnesseth:*

THAT for, and in consideration of the sum of two thousand pounds of good and lawful money of Upper Canada, to them in hand paid, and for the further perpetual annuity[2] of six hundred pounds of like money, the same to be paid and delivered to the said Chiefs and their Tribes at a convenient season of each year, of which due notice will be given, at such places as may be appointed for that purpose, they the said Chiefs and Principal men, on behalf of their respective Tribes or Bands, do hereby fully, freely, and voluntarily surrender, cede,[3] grant, and convey unto Her Majesty, her heirs and successors for ever, all their right, title, and interest to, and in the whole of, the territory above described, save and except the reservations[4] set forth in the schedule hereunto annexed;[5] which reservations shall be held and occupied by the said Chiefs and their Tribes in common, for their own use and benefit.

And should the said Chiefs and their respective Tribes at any time desire to dispose of any part of such reservations, or of any mineral or other valuable productions thereon,[6] the same will be sold or leased at their request by the Superintendent-General of Indian Affairs for the time being, or other officer having authority so to do, for their sole benefit, and to the best advantage.

And the said William Benjamin Robinson of the first part, on behalf of Her Majesty and the Government of this Province, hereby[7] promises and agrees to make, or cause to be made, the payments as before mentioned; and further to allow the said Chiefs and their Tribes the full and free privilege to hunt over the Territory now ceded by them, and to fish in the waters thereof, as they have heretofore[8] been in the habit of doing; saving and excepting such portions of the said

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[1] Indians = an archaic term for First Nations Peoples
[2] Perpetual annuity = a payment made every year forever
[3] Cede = give up
[4] Reservations = lands set aside for Indigenous bands
[5] Hereunto annexed = listed below
[6] Thereon = following from the thing just mentioned
[7] Hereby = as a result of this document
[8] Heretofore = before

The mini unit also includes Indigenous primary documents, including texts from the Robinson-Huron Treaty.

Curriculum Objectives

This mini-unit has been broadly designed for senior-level classes. The activities described in the pages, for example, fulfill the following outcomes listed in Ontario's "Canadian and World Studies: Geography, History and Civics (Politics)" grade 9 and 10 curriculum.

The mini-unit can be accessed here:

https://hcmc.uvic.ca/confederation/pdfs/ontario-national.pdf

Background

Before each province and territory became a part of Canada, their local legislatures (and the House of Commons after 1867) debated the extent, purposes and principles of political union between 1865 and 1949. In addition to creating provinces, the British Crown also negotiated a series of Treaties with Canada's Indigenous Peoples. Although these texts, and the records of their negotiation, are equally important to Canada's founding, as the Truth and Reconciliation Committee recently explained, "too many Canadians still do not know the history of Indigenous peoples' contributions to Canada, or understand that by virtue of the historical and modern Treaties negotiated by our government, we are all Treaty people."

The vast majority of these records, however, remain inaccessible and many can only be found in provincial archives. By bringing together these diverse colonial, federal and Indigenous records for the first time, and by embracing novel technologies and dissemination formats, *The Confederation Debates* encourages Canadians of all ages and walks of life to learn about past challenges, to increase political awareness of historical aspirations and grievances and engage present-day debates, as well as to contribute to local, regional and national understanding and reconciliation.