

Constructing Canadian Symbolism: National Identity as Expressed in Canadian Heraldic Authority Grants

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I expect that all *Raven* readers can agree that symbolism is important and that it works best when it is clear, simple, and visually appealing. An important role for visual symbolism is national identity, or how a country expresses itself through visual signs. The mandate of the office where I work, the Canadian Heraldic Authority, is the fostering and development of such an identity through the creation of heraldic emblems. What follows is an examination of grants of armorial bearings and flags made by the Canadian Heraldic Authority over the past 15 years. The focus of our work is on coats of arms, and most of the flags we grant are banners of the arms, or sometimes standards. Before I begin this examination, I shall briefly discuss historical questions of Canadian symbolism.

In heraldic terminology, “arms” refers to the shield, and sometimes I shall use this term (or “coat of arms”) to refer to the entire composition, properly called “armorial bearings”. A “crest” sits on top of the shield, usually on a helmet. “Supporters” flank the shield. A “banner” is a flag of the shield design in a square or rectangular form. A “standard” is a long flag containing several of the armorial elements. A “badge” is an alternative form of identification.

In the course of our national development, symbols of an indigenous nature—whether plants, animals, or people—gradually came to be used to represent Canada, with a heavy reliance at the same time on symbols of the mother country (France or Britain). The earliest of these indigenous symbols were human figures, such as the Native supporter of the 1625 arms of Nova Scotia and the supporters of the 1664 arms of the *Compagnie des Indes occidentales*. In these two cases the depiction of the manner of dress was highly inaccurate. Somewhat less fanciful Native supporters accompany the 1637 arms of Newfoundland. The use of Indian figures would remain a feature of Canadian heraldry for centuries to come, an example being a supporter for the assumed arms of Toronto in 1834. Following municipal amalgamation in 1998 there was talk of using this supporter with the new arms of Toronto. At that time, a descendant of the original Mississauga inhabitants of the region voiced his opposition to the prospect of a “half naked savage” being used in this way, and it is true that this tradition was prompted more by a desire for the exotic than by a real understanding of early inhabitants.

Not surprisingly, the symbols most frequently used in early Canada were royal or national emblems of the colonial powers. Some of the first appearances of indigenous Canadian symbols came from those fighting against the colonial establishment, an example being the *Patriote* flag, in which maple branches are prominent, which was used at the Battle of St-Eustace of the 1837 uprising in Lower Canada. On the other hand, most of the other flags used by the *Patriotes* and by William Lyon Mackenzie’s rebels in Upper Canada demonstrate a clear ideological debt to the United States.

The beaver and the maple leaf began appearing with increasing frequency in the middle of the 19th century, although the beaver had a somewhat more ancient history, most notably as the crest of the Earl of Stirling in 1621, in Frontenac’s proposed arms for Québec City in 1673, in the arms of the Hudson’s Bay Company in 1680, and as supporters for the arms of Lord Dorchester in 1786. The maple leaf was originally designated as a symbol of the francophone *Canadiens* in the 1830s, a modern revival of which can be seen in the flag granted in 2000 to the *Comité d’action*



Figure 1. *Comité d'action francophone Pontiac*

francophone Pontiac, a francophone advocacy group in Pontiac County, Québec. (Figure 1) It uses a sprig of three maple leaves, four *fleurs-de-lis*, and the green, white, and red colours of several of the 1837 *Patriote* flags.

Within a generation English Canadians had also embraced the maple leaf, as Alexander Muir's popular 1868 song *The Maple Leaf Forever* makes clear. The maple leaf and the beaver were in fact often used together, beginning with the arms of one of the fathers of responsible government, Sir Louis-Hippolyte Lafontaine, in 1854. Other prominent Canadians who received both in their grants of arms were Sir Edmund Boyd Osler, Lord Beaverbrook, and Sir John Eaton.

This tendency to use both national emblems was evident in the unofficial red ensigns that were produced in great numbers to serve increasingly overt displays of patriotic feeling in the late 19th century, usually with the composite arms of the provinces surrounded by maple and oak branches and ensigned by a crown, a beaver, or both. The official flags of Lieutenant Governors and the Governor General also used branches of maple.

A flag debate arose in response to these unofficial red ensigns. Writing in the pages of the Toronto magazine *The Week* in 1892, Sanford Fleming advocated the adoption of a red ensign with the "north star" in the fly. In contrast, the heraldist Edward Marion Chadwick championed the maple leaf, countering that it was "simple, heraldic, and universally recognized as Canadian" and that it "possesses a natural variety and range of colour which enables it to enter into any combination, or to be shown on a field of any colour". This aptly summarizes the continuing appeal of the maple leaf. An excellent overview of the maple leaf's development as a symbol of Canada in the 20th century is found in Rick Archbold's recent book, *I Stand for Canada*.

Before I proceed with my examination of Canadian Heraldic Authority grants, I should mention one of the problems that exists with any sort of national symbolism, namely exclusivity: no matter how tied to a particular country a certain symbol is, it will inevitably be found elsewhere. I was reminded of this when I designed arms and a banner for the Canadian Club of New York. In the arms I used four maple leaves, and in the crest a beaver, both taken from the Club's old emblem.



Figure 2. *Canadian Club of New York.*

(Figure 2) In this context it is worth noting that the beaver is not only Canadian, but it is also a symbol of New York from as far back as the Dutch period. The sugar maple is the state tree of several northeastern states, including New York. It can be quite a surprise for a Canadian visiting New York to see Parks Board signs bearing this familiar emblem. Such a situation is not confined to North America: England does not “own” the rose nor France the *fleur-de-lis*, the cross of St. George could just as easily refer to Genoa as to England, and it would be impossible for any one country to claim the lion or the eagle.

All this aside, it is clear the maple leaf has very much become the emblem of Canada in the eyes of the world. For us, it is beneficial to have such a point of reference, but it is also a challenge and occasionally a hindrance, as it can become too convenient a symbol. A London heraldist once told me that the problem with Canadian heraldry is that everyone seems to feel obliged to use the maple leaf. To some extent, I agree, and this tendency has existed for decades; indeed, in English and Scottish grants to Canadians, the maple leaf was used even more extensively than it is now. I suspect that the desire to proclaim Canadian identity in an overseas grant was particularly strong and even necessary.



Figure 3. Statistical Society of Canada.



Figure 4. Dominion Institute

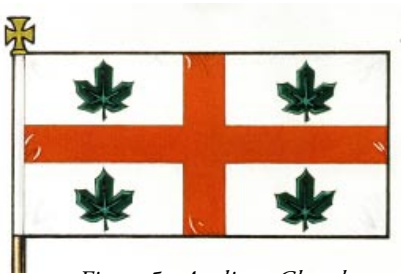


Figure 5. Anglican Church of Canada



Figure 6. Canadian Heraldic Authority



Figure 7. District of Maple Ridge, British Columbia



Figure 8. James Cyrille Gervais

I generally try to steer people who are requesting new arms away from the idea that the only way to express Canadian identity is through the maple leaf. It can be used to great effect, especially for national organizations or agencies of the federal government, but what we have to avoid is the tendency to “brand” every coat of arms with the maple leaf, as if that alone transforms it into a Canadian symbol. Such an approach can be both unimaginative and unnecessary. While we are eager to develop a particular outlook to Canadian heraldry, a coat of arms certainly does not immediately have to proclaim its national origin.

When the Canadian Heraldic Authority was established in 1988, there was a new opportunity to expand the basis of national symbolism. I shall now examine the various ways in which national identity has been expressed in our grants of arms, noting that there is still much potential left to be explored.

I shall begin, of course, with the maple leaf. For close to two centuries, and more evidently since the 1964 flag debate, the maple leaf has been the primary symbol of Canada. The use of a maple leaf or leaves is fitting for an organization of national scope, such as the Statistical Society of Canada (Figure 3) or institutions dealing with national heritage, such as the Dominion Institute. (Figure 4) The Anglican Church of Canada’s flag has for many years flown at churches across the country; it could not be bettered in the way it proclaims its message. (Figure 5) The arms of the Canadian Heraldic Authority itself have a maple leaf and an escutcheon, appropriate for our role as the arm of the federal government responsible for heraldry. (Figure 6) In some cases the name of a location supports the use of a maple leaf, such as the District of Maple Ridge, British Columbia. (Figure 7)

Maple leaves also appear on personal arms. One example is the arms of the Deputy Herald Chancellor, James Cyrille Gervais, which uses three gold maple leaves as a reference to the rank insignia of a Lieutenant General, which has the royal crown and three maple leaves, just as the British Army counterpart has the crown with three “pips”, and the U.S. Army uses three stars. (Figure 8)



Figure 9. St. George's Society of Toronto



Figure 10. Asper Foundation



Figure 11. Rev. Canon Cameron Cairns



Figure 12. Terence Hargreaves

Being original with the maple leaf can be a challenge. One of my favourite designs is the arms and banner of the St. George's Society of Toronto. (Figure 9) Inspired by the College of Arms' devisal for its sister society in New York City, I edged the St. George's cross with a series of maple leaves split vertically. This links the Canadian and St. George symbolism in a new way, and the shape of the leaves creates drama in this two-colour design.

As an alternative to the leaf, an entire maple tree can also be used. One appeared on the 1891 arms of Lord Mount Stephen, and we have used a maple tree in the arms of office of the Herald Chancellor and the Deputy Herald Chancellor. Maple leaves have frequently been placed in coronets, beginning with the College of Arms grant to the Royal Society of Canada in 1965. A recent example is found in a crest of the Asper Foundation, a philanthropic body founded by the late media baron Israel Asper. (Figure 10)

The arms granted to the Rev. Canon Cameron Cairns feature martlets (heraldic swallows) with their wings and tails in the shape of a maple leaf. (Figure 11) Incidentally, Canon Cairns used to fly his banner outside his home in Ottawa, and its theft a few years ago excited unusual media interest. The speculation was that the thief thought that the flag was that of Québec, and therefore was making a political statement. It is perhaps typical of the national capital that the silliest things are assumed to have significant political overtones; frankly, I think it was just some youngsters goofing off.

We also have a division line made of maple leaves—"erablé". The example shown here is from the arms of Terence Hargreaves.



Figure 13. *Monarchist League of Canada*



Figure 14. *Regional Municipality of Cape Breton, Nova Scotia*

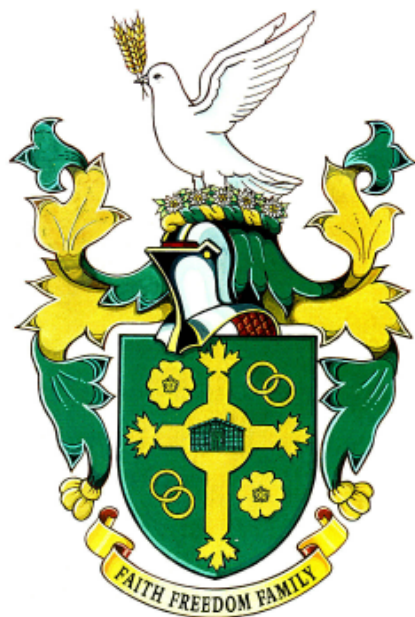


Figure 15. Katerina Schaaf

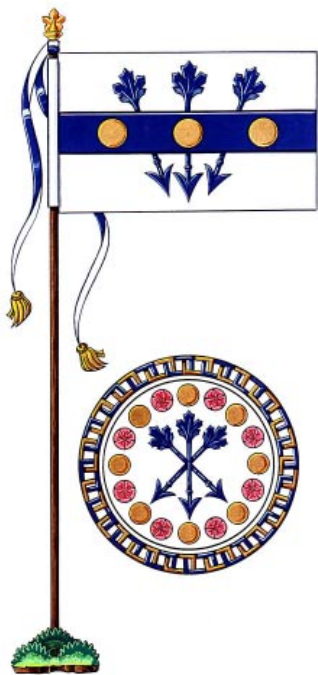


Figure 16. Brian Wallace Hutchinson

(Figure 12) Another is the use of maple leaves in a double tressure, which was done for the arms and flag of the Monarchist League of Canada (Figure 13) and of the Regional Municipality of Cape Breton, Nova Scotia, here enclosing a traditional Cape Breton sloop. (Figure 14) A

cross with maple leaf terminations was granted to Katerina Schaaf. (Figure 15) At the centre is a sod house, made by early settlers on the prairies without access to lumber. The arms granted to Brian Wallace Hutchison in 1994, followed by the grant of a flag and a badge in 2001, (Figure 16) feature arrows that have been “feathered” with maple leaves.

Another variation is the use of the maple seed: in addition to the national symbolism, the seed also carries the idea of the potential for new growth. It appears in the arms and flag of the Heritage Canada Founda-

tion, which combines the maple leaf with maple seeds. (Figure 17) A similar body is the Canadian Ethnocultural Council. (Figure 18) The crest of the Municipalité de Saint-Philémon, in the maple-syrup producing area of Québec, combines maple seeds with sap buckets. (Figure 19) Finally, the arms and flag of the County of Northumberland in central Ontario use a maple leaf and a ring of maple seeds. (Figure 20)



Figure 18. *Canadian Ethnocultural Council*



Figure 17. *Heritage Canada Foundation*

A unique use of the maple seed is a device in the form of a Japanese mon found in the arms of David Tsubouchi, a former Ontario provincial cabinet minister. Six maple seeds were arranged within an annulus to create a



Figure 19. *Municipalité de Saint-Philémon, Québec*



Figure 20. *County of Northumberland, Ontario*

new *mon*. The effect is sufficiently authentic that the recent *Complete Book of Heraldry* by Stephen Slater incorrectly refers to this *mon* as a traditional device used by the Tsubouchi family. (Figure 21)



Figure 21. David Tsubouchi

Provincial floral emblems make excellent regional symbols, such as the trillium of Ontario and the Pacific dogwood of British Columbia. In some cases the provincial and national symbols are combined, usually in coronets. Shown here is the grant of arms to the Legislative Assembly of Ontario, the crest of which has alternating maple leaves and trillium flowers. (Figure 22) Also worth noting is the combination of maple leaves and wild roses in the ceremonial flag of the Medicine Hat Police Service. (Figure 23)



Figure 22. Legislative Assembly of Ontario



Figure 23. Medicine Hat Police Service, Alberta



Figure 24. David Tysowski

We are eager to employ more examples of Canadian wildlife. Deer, bears, and horses have appeared in armorial bearings in our country for over a century, and there are certainly other Canadian animals that ought to take their place in the heraldic menagerie. Some intriguing examples include the wolverine crest of David Tysowski of Ottawa (Figure 24) and the musk-ox and harp seal supporters for the Hon. Peter Irniq, Commissioner of Nunavut. (Figure 25)



Figure 25. Hon. Peter Irniq, Commissioner of Nunavut

The armorial bearings of the University of Northern British Columbia contain an interesting combination of local flora and fauna in both heraldic and local First Nations artistic styles. (Figure 26) The cougar, the



Figure 26. *University of Northern British Columbia*



Figure 27. *Dr. Helen Mussallem, C.C.*

Canadian mammal closest to the lion, has appeared in many grants, especially in reference to British Columbia, such as the supporters of the arms of Dr. Helen Mussallem, a Companion of the Order of Canada. (Figure 27)

The Canada goose is found in the arms of Gander, Newfoundland (Figure 28), among others. The loon is another bird to which Canadians feel some attachment. Two appear as the supporters of the arms of the late Dr. Larkin Kerwin, a Companion of the Order of Canada. (Figure 29) We have used a number of birds of prey, such as the osprey supporters for the arms of Castlegar, British Columbia. (Figure 30)

Surprisingly, the beaver, proclaimed by Parliament in 1975 as an official emblem of Canada, is relatively under-employed in Canadian heraldry, although it has made some notable appearances, such as in the arms and flag of the City of Brantford, Ontario. (Figure 31) The flag uses the “Canadian pale”, to which I shall refer later. A beaver appears as a supporter of the arms of the City of York, (Figure 32) now part of the City of Toronto, which itself has a beaver supporter. The



Figure 28. City of Gander, Newfoundland



Figure 29. Dr. Larkin Kerwin, C.C.



Figure 30. City of Castlegar, British Columbia

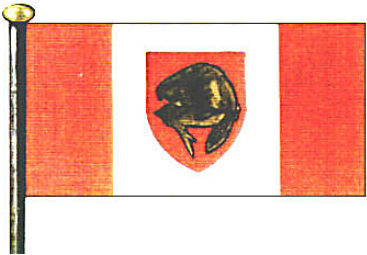


Figure 31. City of Brantford, Ontario



Figure 32. City of York, Ontario



Figure 33. University of New Brunswick



Figure 34. John Bogie



Figure 35. City of Penticton, British Columbia

University of New Brunswick has two beavers (Figure 33), perhaps alluding to its benefactor, Lord Beaverbrook.

A beaver also appears in the grant to John Bogie, a retired bush pilot. His favourite airplane was the DeHavilland Beaver, so the crest is—what else?—a winged beaver. Mr. Bogie was also granted a heraldic standard. (Figure 34)

Canadian monsters are rare, examples being the lake monster Ogopogo as a supporter of the arms of Penticton, B.C. (Figure 35) and a few creatures taken from aboriginal mythology, such as the raven-wolf supporters for the Hon. John McKinnon, the former Commissioner of Yukon. (Figure 36) When the Hon. Hal Jackman was created Lieutenant Governor of Ontario, he already had arms and a crest inherited from his father, but he was also entitled to a grant of supporters. Inspired by this type of animal combination, a griffin-moose and a griffin-deer were created for him. These combined the top half of a griffin with the hind portions of each of the provincial supporters, although it is admittedly very difficult to differentiate between them. (Figure 37) Another example is the former Lieutenant Governor of New Brunswick, the Hon. Gilbert Finn, who has a sea-cougar and a sea-deer as supporters. (Figure 38)

This type of experimentation is more common in grants to individuals, as municipalities tend to play it safe, not wishing to use a fantastic animal or one not native to the region. An early suggestion for the arms of the new City of Toronto had two hybrid animals as supporters, but these were rejected in favour of the bear and beaver. Persuading municipalities



Figure 36. Hon. John McKinnon



Figure 37. Hon. Hal Jackman



Figure 38. *Hon. Gilbert Finn*



Figure 39. *James Robert Neilson*

to show animal life in vivid heraldic colours as opposed to natural colours is a battle of its own. I don't know what it says about our time, but there seems to be reluctance and even outright hostility to showing anything fantastical or even exotic.

Canada is a northern nation, so references to snow and ice provide further potential for symbolism, following the stylized snowflake insignia created for the Order of Canada in 1967. A recent grant uses polar bear paw prints and a white and blue composition, which the grantee, James Robert Neilson, chose to allude to his upbringing in northern Alberta. (Figure 39) The City of Prince George, in northern British Columbia, uses snowflakes on its flag and arms. (Figure 40)

There are also examples of items and artifacts that can be said to be distinctively Canadian. One that comes to mind is the astrolabe, which itself is not Canadian, but to students of history it has come to be associated with Samuel de Champlain, who established the permanent French settlement at Québec. What is referred to as Champlain's astrolabe was discovered in 1867 and eventually became the property of the New-York Historical Society until its acquisition in 1989 by the Canadian Museum of Civilization. It has appeared on several grants, including that to the

Dominion Institute and to the Museum itself, which also has a crest and supporters taken from Inuit, Woodland Indian, and West Coast Indian mythology. (Figure 41)



Figure 40. City of Prince George, British Columbia

Our national sports are hockey and lacrosse, although of course these are also popular in the United States. I am surprised that curling, popular here although practically unknown in the United States, has yet to find its way into Canadian heraldry. The only example of hockey equipment is found with the supporters of the arms of Trail, British Columbia, famous for its hockey teams.



Figure 41. Canadian Museum of Civilization



Figure 42. City of Trail, British Columbia



Figure 43. Lionel Conacher

(Figure 42) The badge of Lionel Conacher, a Toronto investment banker, uses a lacrosse stick and a shotgun. (Figure 43) His arms are a tribute to his grandfather, also named Lionel Conacher, the greatest Canadian athlete of the first half of the 20th century. I persuaded the younger Mr. Conacher that instead of showing various sports equipment in the arms (which I conceded to do on the badge), we could create an emblematic pattern, with the shield of alternating green and white diamond shapes to indicate ice rinks and playing fields. Each white diamond contains a black disc to indicate a puck or shot, while each green diamond contains a white disc to indicate a lacrosse ball or baseball.

A canoe also features in Mr. Conacher's arms, indicating his interest in canoeing and his involvement with the Canoe Museum. The canoe has been used several times in Canadian heraldry, not only as a symbol of an activity popular today, but also as one historically associated with the fur trade. Furthermore, the canoe is a symbol with particular importance to Native Canadians and European explorers, French or British, and it can also indicate the idea of exploration. It was also used, along with paddles, in the arms of the Rt. Hon. John Turner, the former Prime Minister. (Figure 44) We have also granted specifically Native canoe styles, such as the Kootenay canoe found in the arms of the College of the Rockies, (Figure 45) or the T'Souke canoe in the crest for the District of Sooke, British Columbia. (Figure 46)

Simple heraldic shapes can sometimes make national references, as the saltire does for Scotland. In the fields of vexillology and heraldry there is a notable "Canadian" innovation, Conrad Swan's creation of the Canadian pale (square central panel), for the national flag. Our office has encouraged the use of this form of flag design in a number of grants to municipalities or to other corporate bodies, such as the University of Ottawa. (Figure 47)

The national colours of red and white have often been used to make a subtle reference to the country. We have even adapted the heraldic pattern of ermine in red and white, such as for the supporters for the Rt. Hon. Antonio Lamer, the former Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Canada. (Figure 48) On one grant to a museum, currently in progress, I have



Figure 44. Rt. Hon. John Turner



Figure 45. College of the Rockies



*Figure 46. District of Sooke,
British Columbia*

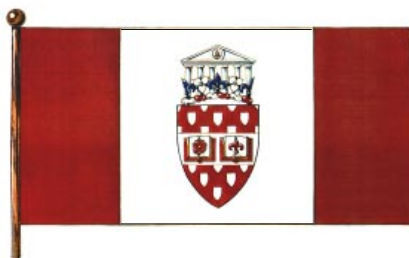


Figure 47. University of Ottawa



Figure 48. Rt. Hon. Antonio Lamer



Figure 49. Hon. James Bartleman

suggested a segment of birchbark as a reference to Ojibway Midewiwin scrolls, an important way of recording history. Although this will be the first appearance of birchbark in arms, it has been used in the ship's badge of HMCS *Miramichi*.

I began this brief survey by looking at the use of Native figures in Canadian symbolism—perhaps I should end by looking at modern-day references to the First Nations. Distinctive insignia of aboriginal Canadians can be employed in traditional heraldry, such as the Chippewa head-dress with the arms of the Lieutenant Governor of Ontario, the Hon. James Bartleman. (Figure 49) There are also symbols from native cultures that connect well with traditional heraldry, like the inukshuk in the arms (and flag) of the territory of Nunavut (Figure 50), the medicine wheel in those



Figure 50. Territory of Nunavut



Figure 51. Royal Saskatchewan Museum

of the Royal Saskatchewan Museum, (Figure 51) and the infinity symbol from Métis flags, used in the arms and crest of the Hon. Willie Yvon Dumont, the former Lieutenant Governor of Manitoba. (Figure 52)

On other occasions we have used animals depicted in aboriginal art forms, such forms being well within the tradition of heraldic stylization.

I have attempted to give a representative sample of Canadian Heraldic Authority grants that employ different forms of Canadian symbolism: the maple leaf, the beaver, native animals and birds, peculiarly Canadian items, and aboriginal symbolism. Some of these are familiar because they have been extensively used in the past, none more so than the maple leaf. Others represent efforts we have made to expand the range of Canadian emblems. I believe strongly that the existence of our office greatly benefits the cohesive development of national identity through symbols. This process is ongoing, and it is exciting to be a part of it. Moreover, those of us who work at the Canadian Heraldic Authority are only part of the equation: we also rely on the ideas and input of our petitioners and of others in the wider heraldic and vexillological communities. I hope all who have an appreciation for effective symbolism will feel welcome not only to find out more about us, but also to respond to what we do.



Figure 52. Hon. Willie Yvon Dumont



This article took its initial form as the keynote address at NAVA's 37th Annual Meeting in Montreal, Québec.