

Rewriting the Confederation Centre of Arts and History

By: Caitlin Audas

IST6220

August 18th, 2022

In 1867 four provinces came together in Confederation to form Canada. Individuals from Ontario, Quebec, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia met in London, England to sign the document that would shape the future of Canadian history. However, this was not just planned overnight and was in fact the product of several meetings with delegates from the four provinces plus Prince Edward Island. The first meeting of the group was held in Charlottetown in 1864 at Province House. This event has earned Charlottetown, and Prince Edward Island, the monicker of being the 'Birthplace of Confederation', however, they did not actually join Confederation until 1873. This legacy was commemorated with the construction of the Confederation Centre of the Arts in 1964, one hundred years after the first meeting of the 'Fathers of Confederation'. The purpose of the Centre is to "[...] inspire and engage, through visual and performing arts, to celebrate an evolving Canada" (Confederation Centre of the Arts Strategic Plan 2019-2024). The Centre is meant to be a living monument to Canadian Confederation, but what does 'Confederation' even mean and how do we depict it?

This is not just an issue that plagues the Confederation Centre, but it is an issue that plagues all of Canada. We have only recently become cognizant of the issues surrounding the way that history is told. The story of Confederation is one of those controversial stories where many perspectives have been omitted. Through this paper I will analyze and explain how history can be told in a way that is inclusive of all perspectives and make suggestions for how the Confederation Centre can implement these changes. I will begin with an outline of the history of the Confederation Centre of the Arts, followed by an analysis of what the problems are with how we depict history. I

will conclude with recommendations on what the Centre could add or change in order to remedy the problems that I will have outlined in the previous section.

In 1957, there were ten years until the Canadian Centennial and no action had been taken to plan a celebration. In fact, there was no interest in arts and culture in Canada until the 1950s because people thought Canada was too new of a country to have any culture (MacKinnon, F., p.2, 1990). Especially in Prince Edward Island, citizens were uninterested in the construction of cultural centre because they did not think it was necessary (MacKinnon, F., p. 4, 1990). However, in 1956 the theatre in Charlottetown burnt down, and in 1958 the market building burnt down (MacDonald, E., MacKinnon, F., & Harvie, E. L., 2013). This left a hole in the cultural and community landscape of Prince Edward Island.

The idea for the Confederation Centre of the Arts was born of the dreams of Frank MacKinnon and Eric Harvie. At the time there was no plans for the Centennial of the founder's meeting in Charlottetown and there was now a need for a local museum, library, archive, art gallery and cultural centre (MacDonald, E. et al, 2013). The Confederation Centre was designed to be a memorial to Confederation and was intended to be for all Canadians.

The first task for Eric Harvie and Frank MacKinnon was to get the other provinces and the federal government involved in the process. They began lobbying for support by getting the other two maritime provinces to agree to financially support the Centre (MacDonald, E. et al, 2013). It was decided that the next step was getting support from the provinces furthest away from Prince Edward Island, so British

Columbia was lobbied next (MacDonald, E. et al, 2013). These efforts exemplify the message the two were trying to spread of the Centre being for all Canadians. Their goal was to formalize funding for the centre by 1961 so it could be completed on time in 1964 (MacDonald, E. et al, 2013). The federal government agreed to provide fifteen cents per Canadian citizen and the provinces matched that for their own populations (MacDonald, E. et al, 2013). This meant that every Canadian citizen who was alive at this time contributed thirty cents to the construction of the Confederation Centre, making it something that was genuinely built by all Canadians.

The next step was to design what the building was going to look like and to hire the contractors, and procure the materials and services needed. There was a national competition held in 1962 to find the design of the Confederation Centre (MacDonald, E. et al, 2013). The winning design was created by architects from a firm in Montreal who had also designed the Place Bonaventure and Place des Arts in Montreal, as well as the National Arts Centre in Ottawa and the Queen Elizabeth Theatre in Vancouver (Sawler, H., 2008). To find the contractors and the materials, national tenders were opened across Canada which pleased the other provincial governments (MacKinnon, F., p.20, 1990). They purposefully sourced labour and materials from multiple different provinces with multiple different political parties leading them to come across as non-partisan as possible (MacKinnon, F., p. 21, 2009).

Once the funds had been procured, a design had been chosen and the labour and materials had been acquired, all that was left was for work to begin. The Centre was successfully completed on time and the ribbon was cut on October 7th, 1964 by

Queen Elizabeth II - officially opening the Confederation Centre of the Arts to the public (MacKinnon, F., 1990).

As Frank MacKinnon states in his book, the Confederation Centre was meant to “[...] blend the ideas a national memorial with the local interest of the island [...]” while also “[...] encourag[ing] the flourishing of the arts as valuable national and local assets[...]” (p. 34, 1990). In the most recent strategic plan published by the Confederation Centre in 2019 they have made it their mission to celebrate the evolution of Canada, but how do you celebrate the evolution of Confederation? Confederation has become a difficult subject to talk about in Canadian history, so the Centre is at a crossroads of how to manage their heritage versus their future. Also in 2019, Parks Canada published a Framework for History and Commemoration which helps to answer the question of how to celebrate controversial Canadian heritage.

The Framework outlined key activities, one of them being designating people, places and events of national historic significance and another being creating an innovative approach to history presentation (p. 9). The Framework also calls on institutions to address the conflict and controversy present within our history (p. 30). We’ve always been taught about Confederation in relation to the people involved, but adapting to the Framework and celebrating Confederation as an event while celebrating the Confederation Centre as the location where this event happened would not be impossible. Ultimately, the Parks Canada Framework aims to resolve many of the issues with how we are teaching and presenting history.

Currently, one of the most controversial Canadian figures is our first Prime Minister, John A. Macdonald. Many have been calling for the removal of his statues and requesting the acknowledgement of his part in the creation of the Residential School System. These public statues depict him as being a heroic figure, but by merely suggesting additions to the plaques to provide context we overlook the fact that he has been literally placed on a pedestal which easily overpowers any context a small plaque may provide (Barrett, M., 2022). Statues are not forums for historical knowledge and learning, nor do they offer any insight into the complexities of our past or our identity (Barrett, M., 2022). In saying that our history is our identity, we are essentially saying that our identity is static and unchanging and is also rooted in the one interpretation of our history that we have been taught (Abrahams, D. A., 2020).

But Confederation is something that is an important moment for Canadians, so how do we tell its story without idolizing John A. Macdonald? This is the danger of individuals as tourist icons. While most people will associate Anne of Green Gables or Lucy Maud Montgomery with Prince Edward Island, they still associate John A. Macdonald with Confederation and thus expect to see him represented. When dealing with individuals as tourist icons, it is important to allow visitors to create their own interpretation of the individual based on diverse displays, experiences and perspectives (Pearce, P. L., Morrison, A. M., & Moscardo G. M., 2003). For visitors to make their own interpretations of individuals in history, they need to be given facts that are objective and inclusive of as many different perspectives as possible. To go back to our example of John A. Macdonald, his story needs to be told without figuratively and literally putting him on a pedestal, and other stories need to be told with equal importance.

So what is the relevance of this for the Confederation Centre of the Arts? If we return to their mission statement - to “inspire and engage, through visual and performing arts, to celebrate an evolving Canada” - then addressing a new perspective of Canadian history is essential to the celebration of the evolution of Canada. Currently the Confederation Centre is mainly known for their contributions to the performing arts and as far as I have seen, there is very little commemoration of Confederation. In a review of the Confederation Centre from 1995, Smith Green and Associates stated that the Centre was “[...] more directed as commemorating Anne than to the Fathers” (p. 19, 1995). This is likely referring to the fact that the thing most people come to the Centre for is the Anne of Green Gables musical in the summer. Many people think that the Centre is meant to promote Maritime culture and bring tourists to Prince Edward Island, rather than commemorate Confederation (Tepper, J, 1996). While the Centre is trying to move away from solely being a memorial to Confederation it is also not meant to promote exclusively Maritime culture. I think that the next phase for the Centre will entail regaining its importance as a memorial for ‘all Canadians’.

I’ve had a few ideas on how to achieve this complex goal. My first idea relates to the art gallery. The art gallery has a huge amount of space, but is largely empty by design. In his book “The Centre for All Canadians” Harvey Sawler, a contributor to the Confederation Centre, notes that “[...] art has the capacity to change the way we interact with each other, our country, our world and our collective histories” (p. 131, 2008) yet this capacity does not seem to be leveraged in the Centre today. My suggestion would be to incorporate more art from across every province. I think that not only would this fill up the space in the gallery, it would tie in the rest of Canada to the

Centre. Art commemorating the landscapes of each province, or dedicated sections with art from every region would emphasize the 'for all Canadians' message. On a less important note, signage that is clearer and easier to find for each art piece would make the gallery more accessible and better able to tell a story.

A second suggestion would be to make the goals and the purpose of the Centre more clear. I think explicitly stating the goals of the Centre would make it clear that the Centre is not just for the Maritimes and is not just a place to come to see a musical. The history of the Centre is an excellent example of how it is not just for the Maritimes, since every Canadian that was born at the time contributed thirty cents to the construction. I don't think many people know this and I personally think it is a fun fact that could make people more invested and interested in the Centre.

My third and final suggestion is meant to answer the question of what to do with the library space. The Confederation Centre used to house a library and archive, but this has recently been moved to the new Charlottetown Library, leaving a third of the Centre empty. I think that this would be an excellent opportunity for the Centre to fill the void of 'rainy day activities' in Prince Edward Island. Creating an interactive exhibit of Canadian history and the history of the Centre would be a good use of this space and would appeal to audiences of all ages. By creating an interactive walk through history the Confederation Centre would be able to reframe history and include more perspectives. They could retell the story of Confederation without portraying John A. Macdonald as a hero by guiding their visitors on where to direct their focus. Portraying Confederation as something that *provinces* engaged in rather than *people* could be a refreshing way of telling Canadian history. By making it interactive, the Centre could

leverage a more nuanced way of telling history, allowing visitors to create their own understanding and adding their own meaning. The Centre also is lacking in heritage activities for children, so an interactive exhibit with learning activities would be appealing to families and would shape the perspectives of new generations.

The Confederation Centre of the Arts is ultimately at a crossroads. I think that navigating away from 'commemorating' Confederation and steering in a more educational direction are important. The Centre was once built to fill a void in Canadian heritage and in the Prince Edward Island community, it could fill that void again and become a 'must-see' centre for all Island visitors. Prince Edward Island was the 'Birthplace of Confederation' and it could be where Confederation and Canadian history evolve to create a new, inclusive and objective story.

This placement has given me a greater appreciation for how history is told and how difficult it can be to 'get it right'. I very much enjoyed spending the last six weeks researching the Confederation Centre and Canadian history. I've learned more about how we tell history and the importance of this than I thought there was to know. Canadian history desperately needs new perspectives included, especially from Indigenous peoples whose perspectives were omitted for so long. Adding more perspectives to history does not take away from the story, it adds new layers and nuances for people to identify with. Canada is constantly evolving, Confederation is constantly evolving, and so the way we tell the history of these two things should also constantly be evolving. Not everything, or everyone, needs to be memorialized in a way

that makes them out as a hero. Acknowledging the dark parts of historical figures and of our history allows Canadians to heal and grow and that is what history should be about.

I ultimately hope that the Confederation Centre is around to see their own Centennial in 2064 and that they are able to shape the perspectives of new generations of Canadians. Redefining Confederation can just mean that we reshape history and add new perspectives but we do not need to entirely rewrite Canadian history, nor should we forget about it. We can evolve from commemoration, to education.

References

- Abrahams, D. A. (2020). The Importance of History to the Erasing-history defence. *Journal of Applied Philosophy*. <https://doi-org.proxy.library.upei.ca/10.1111/japp.12422>
- Barrett, M. (2022). De-picturing John A. Macdonald: Opportunities and Challenges of Representing Canada's Past with Graphic History. *Canadian Historical Review*, 103(1), 32-74. 10.3138/chr-2020-0047
- MacKinnon, F. (1990). Honour the Founders! Enjoy the Arts! Canada's Confederation Memorial in Charlottetown. *Confederation Centre of the Arts*.
- MacDonald, E., MacKinnon, F., & Harvie, E. L. (2013). Cradling confederation: The founding of the Confederation Centre of the Arts. *Confederation Centre of the Arts*.
- Sawler, H. (2008). The Centre for all Canadians : Confederation Centre of the Arts : Five decades of inspiration and excellence. *Confederation Centre of the Arts*.
- Parks Canada. (2019). Framework for History and Commemoration National Historic Sites System Plan. *Government of Canada*.
- Pearce, P. L., Morrison, A. M., & Moscardo G. M. (2003). Individuals as Tourist Icons: A Developmental Marketing Analysis. *Journal of Hospitality & Leisure Marketing*, 10:1-2, 63-85, https://doi.org/10.1300/J150v10n01_05
- Sawler, H. (2008). The Centre for all Canadians : Confederation Centre of the Arts : Five decades of inspiration and excellence. *Confederation Centre of the Arts*.
- Smith Green and Associates Inc. (1995). Confederation Centre of the Arts management review: final report. *Department of Canadian Heritage - Steering Committee*.
- Tepper, S. J. (1996). Confederation Centre of the Arts : a question of national purpose. *John F. Kennedy School of Government*.