



The History of Canada Series: Three Weeks in Quebec City: The Meeting That Made Canada

Christopher Moore

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In 1864, thirty-three delegates from five provincial legislatures came to Quebec City to pursue the idea of uniting all the provinces of British North America. The American Civil War, not yet over, encouraged the small and barely defended provinces to consider uniting for mutual protection. But there were other factors: the rapid expansion of railways and steamships spurred visions of a continent-spanning new nation.

Federation, in principle, had been agreed on at the Charlottetown conference, but now it was time to debate the difficult issues of how a new nation would be formed. The delegates included John A. Macdonald, George Etienne-Cartier, and George Brown. Historian Christopher Moore demonstrates that Macdonald, the future prime minister, surprisingly was not the most significant player here, and Canada could have become a very different place.

The significance of this conference is played out in Canadian news each day. The main point of contention at the time was the issue of power—a strong federal body versus stronger provincial rights. Because of this conference, we have an elected House of Commons, an appointed Senate, a federal Parliament, and provincial legislatures. We have what amounts to a Canadian system of checks and balances. Did it work then, and does it work now?

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