



Canadian Stamps and the Business of Commemoration

By Patti Harper

Canada began issuing postage stamps as proof of payment in 1851. Stamps can also be viewed as miniature monuments, assisting to define a nation's identity. Canada Post selects stamp subjects deemed worthy of commemoration and through this selection legitimizes the stamp content as part of the nation's distinctiveness.

Stamps convey messages about a nation's commerce, history, society, politics and images projected nationally and globally. Stamps provide insight into the historical memory at the time of issue. They are more than proof of payment, squares of paper collected by hobbyists, or miniature works of art.

Political historian Denis Altman's *Paper Ambassadors: The Politics of Stamps* (1991) is one of the few academic offerings on the topic of stamps as historical evidence. Altman explains that a government's postal authority uses stamps to promote sovereignty, celebrate achievement, define national, racial, religious, and linguistic identities, portray messages or exhort certain behaviours (p. 103). Commemorative messages in stamps can be deconstructed to determine the myths, symbols and icons that reflect life in Canada. Stamps have a deep significance in local, national and international culture.

From 1868 to 1918, eighty-eight commemorative and definitive (regular) stamps were produced in Canada. In 2006 the same number of stamps were produced within this single year, the majority being commemorative. Philatelists, those who collect and study stamps, have written extensively about specific stamp aspects (e.g., paper, gum, designs) but literature exploring the ideology of stamp depictions is scarce. Historians and other scholars tend to favour archival documents such as correspondence, photographs, etc. over the documentary evidence provided by stamps. Public programming, monuments, educational programming and museum exhibits are all used in memory creation. Can stamps be exploited to yield significant information about a nation's memory through symbolic messages? By exploring the issuance of Canadian stamps we can discover not only what has been selected but also importantly what has not. The absence of certain themes such as gender, regionalism, ethnicity, and landscapes have been overlooked in

favour of commemorations of exploration, settlement, government and transportation.

Altman provides taxonomy for categorizing stamps according to the different messages they disseminate. This interdisciplinary approach details how stamps can reflect all or some of the following:

- State Rivalries
- Foreign Policy
- Peace and War
- State Ideology
- Commemoration of History
- Defining National Identity
- Internationalism
- Propaganda – Modernization and Progress
- Propaganda for Good Citizenship
- God and the Post
- Lobbying – Fighting for Stamps of One's Own
- Propaganda – National Celebration

Although examples provided by Altman include stamps from an international inventory of issues, it is possible to use his categories for Canadian stamps. Through a dissection of stamp issues it is possible to determine the way Canada Post has participated in commemoration and the creation of memory.

In 1898, Canada began to use stamps to disseminate messages with the world's first Christmas and commemorative stamp issue. This stamp is a great example of State Rivalries taxonomy, issued to commemorate the jubilee of the imperial penny postage in Great Britain. When asked to participate in a universal postage rate, Canadian Postmaster William Mulock hoped the postage stamp would generate support for the new rate while emphasizing the extent of the British Empire. This stamp becomes





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important evidence of history at this time, when Prime Minister Wilfrid Laurier's Liberal government was receiving criticism from Imperialists for the new National Policy. Laurier was trying to build and support an independent Canada with economic policies that included relationships with the United States and the Empire; this required support from both imperialists and nationalists. By linking the Canadian postal system to Britain's, with the poem lines from Lewis Morris, "We hold a vaster Empire than has been," we can analyze how Canada Post attempted to define the spirit of the new nation, with depictions of Canada within the Empire, while simultaneously providing a feeling of nostalgia for membership within that Empire.

The commemoration of history is one of the more overt ways that the medium of stamps has been used. The images and narration that accompany a stamp issue become the official version of history in this type of commemoration, legitimized by government-sanctioned issuance. The 1992 Laura Secord stamp issue is a prime example of this commemoration activity promoting a certain version of history via supporting literature as part of this stamp's promotional material. The Secord stamp was part of a folk hero stamp series, where on the verso of the commemorative cover (envelope),



she is given heroine status, attributing to her Canadian success in the War of 1812. Canada Post had taken upon itself the authority to designate heroine status. As part of a souvenir pack, entitled *Legendary Heroes*, the Secord stamp includes an account of her walk that describes personal mood, feelings and conjecture about the occurrence of events. This is a

romanticized Victorian imperialistic version of the Laura Secord narrative oft used by early Canadian folk writers. The historical accounts from the postal agency state: "Laura was not one to give in, however, despite her frail appearance, her courage and endurance proved that, even in 1813, a woman's place was not necessarily in the home." Canada Post provided a gendered bias to this narrative and includes a comment on gendered space and feminine qualities that had to be overcome. By 1992 there were several waves of feminism and a multitude of gender studies, yet the stamp issue does not represent a more nuanced exemplification of gender history and entrenches an old, tired, inaccurate depiction within its memory creation.

Between the first and second world wars, Canada Post began to more purposefully participate in the Canadian commemorative process. In 1929, the agency contributed to the process of a Maritime schooner becoming a Canadian symbol with the issuance of the *Bluenose* stamp. Although there are many messages associated with the stamp, the re-invented message at the time of issue coincided with how Canadian society identified with the vessel. This stamp was conceptualized by Canada Post Financial Superintendent H. E. Atwater (from Lunenburg) to represent the fading culture and tradition of Maritime life that surrounded schooner fishing. With the *Bluenose* stamp issuance, Canada Post came to realize that stamps are not stagnant entities or wholly economic objects; they could define a nation's identity.

With the schooner races occurring in the Maritimes against the more mechanized American ships, Canada saw the wins in these races as a besting of the rapidly modernizing United States. It was the



nostalgia for the present situation that became evident to Canada Post. The stamp had a different nostalgia meaning when issued resulting in commemorating both the past and present. It was the current representation that appealed to more than the Maritime region and made the stamp a national symbol of Canadian success. In this way Canada Post had the ability to participate in fostering the Canadian identity.

These are only a few examples of Altman's taxonomy, but the classification can be applied to every stamp issue within Canada. The role of stamps as a medium to promote cultural memory continues to expand, as social contexts change and, sometimes, as the stamp's depiction itself expands beyond the initial design concept. Stamps are living entities that change and develop; not merely static fragments of times past. The initial purpose of the stamp at its time of issue may not reflect what it comes to represent. Stamps can be deciphered by exploring the historical events / context around that issue. Canada Post presents its stamps as carriers of symbols and places them within both prominent and isolated positions, often without context.