

The Development of Canadian-Finnish Bilateral Relations

David K. Ratz

This article looks at the development of bilateral relations between Canada and Finland from the earliest days to the 1960s.¹ Until after the First World War contacts between the two countries remained informal. Finland was a source of immigrants for Canada as well as a trade competitor especially in the area of forest products. With the establishment of formal contacts in the 1920s, the interaction of the two states remained at a low level. The Second World War saw widespread sympathy for Finland during the Winter War but that devolved into official enemy status after December 1941. With the conclusion of the Paris Peace Treaty in 1946 relations were normalized, but not until 1960 was a Canadian embassy opened in Finland.

Canada and Finland are in many ways very different, but they also share many common traits. Both countries have a varied land mass, but much of Finland in terms of geology and geography resembles Labrador and the northern parts of Ontario and Quebec.² For this reason a Finnish geographical expedition visited north eastern Canada in 1937 and again in 1939.³ Bilingualism is a feature of both countries, as is liberal democracy with the rule of law and individual rights. Geopolitically Canada and Finland are middle powers, integrated in regional organizations or structures such as the EU and NAFTA. Both are exporting countries. These similarities also extend to shared values such as a belief in multilateralism and peaceful conflict resolution. Both countries have historically been

major contributors to UN peacekeeping. Likewise, they have some common interests such as the Circumpolar North, as seen in membership in the Arctic Council.⁴

After Confederation, the Canadian government made a concerted effort to attract Finnish immigrants, regarded as hard workers and ideal settlers. As Immigration Agent John Dyke wrote in 1882 about some Finns employed building the Canadian Pacific Railway, "They are first class axemen, charcoal burners, and miners, and as such would I feel confident to be a most valuable class of settlers to encourage to any part of the Dominion".⁵ Through the use of immigration agents, the first informal Canadian contacts with Finland began. Immigration agents would periodically visit Finland to report on conditions there, and later "unofficial agents" were contracted on an ad hoc basis to distribute immigration literature and find immigrants.⁶ Canada had to compete with the United States for Finnish immigrants, and these early efforts were not very successful. In response to the repressive Russification policies many Finns were looking to escape their homeland, but efforts to induce mass migration to Canada failed. By hiring additional agents, working with the Canadian Pacific Railway and shipping companies, there was more success attracting Finns in small groups. By the 1911 Census there were 15,497 Finns in Canada.⁷

Finns were almost universally literate and many actively participated in political debate.

1 This article is based on research from my doctoral dissertation at the University of Oulu, Finland, on Canadian-Finnish foreign relations. My interest in things Finnish grew out of encounters with Finns in my hometown of Thunder Bay, Ontario.

2 Editor, "Canada and Finland," *External Affairs* 19(5), (May 1967): 174.

3 V[äinö] Tanner, "Outlines of the Geography, Life and Customs of Newfoundland-Labrador," *Acta Geographica* 8(1), (1944): 32 and 77.

4 Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland, *Finland and Canada: Northern Partners. Finland's Canada Action Plan* (Helsinki: Publications of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, 9/2011).

5 John Dyke to John Lowe, Secretary Department of Agriculture, 4 December 1882. Library and Archives Canada, (LAC) RG 17, Vol. 357, Docket 38224A.

6 Mauri A. Jalava, "The Scandinavians as a Source of Settlers for the Dominion of Canada: The First Generation, 1867-1897," *Scandinavian-Canadian Studies* 1 (1983): 3-14.

7 Varpu Lindström, "History of Finland-Canada Relations," Ministry for Foreign Affairs of Finland, Embassy of Finland, Ottawa. Last modified December 18, 2008; accessed August, 2016. <http://finland.ca/public/default.aspx?nodeid=36033&contentlan=2&culture=en-US>.