HOCKEY AND NATIONAL IDENTITY IN CANADA

By

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Integrated Studies Final Project Essay (MAIS 700)

submitted to Dr. Nanci Langford

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts - Integrated Studies

Athabasca, Alberta

November 2014
Abstract

Hockey and National Identity in Canada

This interdisciplinary study examines how scholars, historians, writers and others present hockey as part of Canada’s national identity. The study considers how the growth and development of hockey parallels in many respects the political and economic growth of Canada in the years following Confederation. The paper presents examples of the representation of hockey in Canadian fictional and non-fictional literature, music and art with respect to Canada’s national identity. Sociological issues pertaining to hockey including the participation of women and minorities are also briefly examined. The research determined that the early history, development, acceptance and recognition of the sport have naturalized the sport of hockey as a characteristic of Canada’s national identity. The success of Canadian teams at international spectacles such as the 1972 Canada-Russia Super Series and the Winter Olympic Games helped to reinforce the concept of hockey as part of the national identity.
Introduction

In 1994 the Parliament of Canada named hockey and lacrosse as Canada’s national sports. Parliamentary discourse in favour of the motion centered on four arguments: (1) the invention of the game in Canada is significant, an important moment in Canada’s history; (2) hockey is played and watched by most Canadians; (3) hockey is a unifying force in the country and (4) Canada’s leadership in hockey is the result of cooperation, especially that of English and French Canadians (Jebwab 194). During the debate on the legislation, Member of Parliament Nelson Riis stated, “It is the key to the understanding of Canada…it is much more than a game to our country” (qtd. in Jedwab 191).

This paper examines how scholars, historians, writers and others present hockey as part of Canada’s national identity. The interdisciplinary study undertook an interpretative content analysis of primary and secondary source material including academic research and scholarly articles. The study examines the early history of the game and the impact on the national identity of spectacles such as the 1972 Canada-Russia Super Series. The paper interprets how fictional and non-fictional literature represent hockey with respect to Canada’s national identity. Hockey reflects the nature of Canadian culture historically and the study considers some of the thornier aspects of the sport including the historic lack of representation of women and minorities in the sport. Finally the study briefly examines the potential impact of Canada’s changing population mix on the national sport. The research will draw on the disciplines of history, sociology and literature for insights into the relationship between hockey and the national identity of Canada. Michel Robidoux states that, “hockey is more than a mythological construct; it is a legitimate expression of Canadian national history and identity” (218).
Background

The sport of hockey has many variations including field hockey, floor hockey, ball hockey, sledge hockey, roller-blade hockey, table-top hockey and street hockey. All forms of the game are played in Canada. While hockey is essentially a winter sport, it is played year round in Canada. Ice hockey, simply known as “hockey” to Canadians, is the most common form of the game. Of course not all Canadians embrace hockey while others simply shun sports in general (Gruneau & Whitson 30). However, for many Canadians the sport of hockey is important. Jason Blake observes that discussions of hockey in Canada are as common as conversations about the weather (1). Hockey is often thought of in terms of the professional game as represented by the National Hockey League (NHL). Media coverage of the NHL and the seven Canadian teams is omnipresent nationally. But hockey is more than the professional game. Boys and girls gathered in a cold arena at 6:00 a.m. on a weekday morning; senior citizens playing in the afternoon; or beer leagues playing into the night are the true representatives of hockey in Canada. Hockey that is played or watched for pure enjoyment by thousands of Canadians forms part of the habitual performance of everyday life thereby reinforcing it in the national identity (Edsenor 88).

National identity is a process, not an essence, that is constantly shaped by internal definition and external perception (Edsenor 24). Some view the concept of national identity in historic, territorial or political terms (Beadouin & Dobbie 7-9). Others are more expansive in their characterization of national identity by including in their description ethnic, economic and socio-cultural aspects (Edsenor vi; Guibernau 125; Morris 4; Smith 60). For purposes of this paper, the following description of national identity applies: National identity may include any or
all of the geography, history, language, political concepts or culture of a given nation as well as the values, beliefs, competencies, routines of life and habitual forms of conduct of its citizens.

Each nation has unique characteristics that help to distinguish it from other nations. Sport is often one such identifying characteristic. Alison Bell observes that sports has a bonding effect on communities (52). Football in Spain, cricket in England, and baseball in America are sports that are closely tied to the fabric of the respective nations (Bell 38). Hockey is often considered to be synonymous with Canada (Morris 25). Jack Jedwab refers to Canada as a “hockey nation” (191).

The national identity of Canada is complex in nature due to regional differences in language, economic wealth, culture and history. The distinctiveness of Quebec culture and society alone has at times challenged the potential for a homogenous national identifier (Gruneau & Whitson 273). Many observers propose that one of the characteristics of the Canadian national identity that is embraced by Anglophones, Francophones and other Canadians alike, is a passion for the sport of hockey (Jedwab 194; Morris 50). The importance of hockey to the identity of Canada has been recognized by its iconic representation on the country’s five dollar bank note and by the multiple hockey-related postage stamps issued over the years by Canada Post. Next to the Canadian flag and anthem, hockey may be the single most recognizable symbol of Canada. While other sports are played and watched in Canada, they are seldom mentioned as being part of the national identity (Blake 24).

**Hockey and Canada - Parallels in Early Development**

Canada is a relatively young nation and the process of building an identity is ongoing. One expression of nationalism that has remained constant over the years is hockey (Robidoux
The sport of hockey, which predates Confederation, evolved from the Mi'kmaq game of oochamkunutk and European games of bandy, hurley, and shinty that were brought from Europe by British soldiers and settlers (McKinley 5-6; Poulton 17-22). Hockey remained unstructured until James Creighton, a Nova Scotian, developed a set of rules for the sport in 1875 (McKinley 10). The introduction of play on ice, which changed the nature, speed and rules of the game, was quickly accepted by Canadians. By the turn of the nineteenth century hockey had become a naturalized marker of the identity of Canada (Blake 5).

There are parallels between the growth of Canada as a nation and the emergence of hockey as a national sport and pastime. The period between 1870 and 1900 was a time of political and economic transition for Canada. By the turn of the nineteenth century hockey was well entrenched in central and eastern Canada (Poulton 85). The completion of the transcontinental railway in 1886 opened up vast areas of western Canada for growth. Settlement and hockey followed the track westward making the game truly national (Kennedy 208). The development and growth of Canada was marked by a struggle for survival through demanding conditions. The harsh climate, vast distances and the need for self-reliance was physically and psychologically taxing (Kennedy 28). The human qualities that grew from conquering the challenging environment were ideally suited to the game of hockey (Kennedy 27). Hockey, originally played on ponds or streams, was cold and demanding. The game required teamwork, perseverance and drive (Kennedy 29). Hockey and early Canada were well suited to each other.

The industrial and economic advances in Canada during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries created new demands for entertainment (Gruneau & Whitson 16). In large part the demand for recreation and entertainment was satisfied by hockey (Jedwab 202). In eastern
Canada communities large and small enjoyed the sport of hockey. Growth of the game accelerated and by 1907 professional leagues existed in both western and eastern Canada creating a national pastime and an identifier that went beyond politics or commerce (Gruneau & Whitson, 1993). In 1909 the National Hockey Association, later to become the NHL, was formed (McKinley 54). The creation of the NHL was a pivotal event in the cultural and social life of Canada (Gruneau and Whitson 101). Numbers of Canadian youth aspired to wear the colours of their favourite team. McKinley notes, “In just four decades, hockey had become essential to the health of the nation” (70).  

Robidoux asserts that hockey is more than a cultural pursuit or recreational pastime, rather it is a “legitimate expression of Canadian national history and identity” (218). Hockey represented a departure from British colonial pastimes for the new nation of Canada (Blake 29). Unlike most former British colonies, Canada rejected cricket which was the quintessence of British sport. Hockey enabled this declaration of sporting independence; it was Canada’s own game (Blake 29). Hockey’s aggressiveness and violence symbolically separated it from other pastimes including the increasingly popular game of baseball that was imported from the United States (Robidoux 219). The sense of identity provided to Canada through superiority in hockey later became a source of national pride. Hockey was something that Canadians were better at than either the British or the Americans (Blake 29). Robidoux describes Canadian’s skill at hockey as a “vehicle of resistance against British and American hegemony” (221).

1 Readers who may be interested in a more detailed history of the origins and growth of hockey in Canada are encouraged to refer to “Backcheck: A Hockey Retrospective “ at Library and Archives Canada. www.collectionscanada.gc.ca
Hockey as a Commodity

Early hockey operators and power brokers, like their present day successors, operated mainly for commercial gain rather than for public interest or national identity formation. The Montreal Canadiens, owned by English-speaking Ambrose O’Brien from Renfrew, Ontario were founded in 1909 to appeal to the Francophone Montreal community (Jenish 20). Tancrede Marsil, Editor of *Le Devoir* wrote in 1910, “The Canadiens only represent the interests of the money of Mr. O’Brien and not our French Canadian nationality” (Qtd. in Jenish 27). At the professional and semi-professional levels hockey is the commodity of an extensive, capitalistic industry and it is in the interest of the hockey establishment to promote the sport (Ammirante 181). The selfish interests of the NHL owners and players, rather than the national interest of Canada, was evident during the labour disputes that cancelled all or part of four hockey seasons since 1992 (Harrison 152; Fitzpatrick). While capital accumulation is recognized as a driver for stakeholders, the financial impact of the sport and the hockey related future opportunities for the national economy of Canada are also significant (Ammirante 202). The hockey industry is aided and protected by the state in a number of ways including: government funding of facilities; exemption from antitrust legislation; and various tax and fiscal measures (Ammirante 202). The promotion of hockey by the sport’s power brokers extends beyond the concepts of patriotism or national identity formation and includes political and economic interests as well (Ammirante 202).

The 1972 Summit Series and Golden Moments

National identity is often formed or reinforced by singular events or spectacles. An event that captured the interest of the nation is the 1972 Summit Series of hockey between Canada and
Russia. The dramatic victory by Team Canada is widely viewed as a pivotal event in the formation of the Canadian identity (Jedwab 196). The Summit Series is the subject of countless books, articles, television programs and media stories. Sean Mitton & Jim Prime’s book, *The Goal That United Canada: 72 Amazing Stories by Canadians from Coast to Coast*, provides insight into the impact of the series on Canadians from all walks of life. In the forward to the book Don Cherry notes, “Everyone knows where they were when Paul Henderson scored that goal”(1). Henderson’s winning goal was immortalized by The Tragically Hip in the song Fireworks,

> If there was a goal that everyone remembers, it was back in ole ’72
> We all squeezed the stick and we all pulled the trigger. (Downie et al.)

The adoption of hockey as an Olympic sport in 1920, followed by a long period of dominance by Canada in the tournament, reinforced the game’s importance to the country (Poulton, 10). Before 1972 amateur or club teams represented Canada in international competition. In 1952 the Edmonton Mercurys, a club team representing Canada, won the Olympic Gold Medal. Canada was not to win Olympic gold again until 2002 (Gruneau & Whitson 259). In the 1950s and 1960s the amateur teams representing Canada were no match for the powerful Russian squads that were amateur in name only. In 1972 agreement was reached to have Canadian professionals play against the internationally dominant Russian national team. Most Canadians believed that professionals, including Hockey Hall of Famers Ken Dryden, Phil Esposito, Bobby Clarke and others, would easily handle the Russians. The nation soon learned differently when, on September 2, 1972, the Russians beat Canada 7-3 in the first game of the
series (McKinley 51). Jack Ludwig described the loss as a “…national castration” (qtd. in Kennedy 52). After losing the fourth game of the series in Vancouver, the Canadian team was booed. After the game Phil Esposito, team captain, appeared on television and in an impassioned plea told the country that the team was doing its best and needed their support (Kennedy, 51). Ralph Mellanby called Esposito’s speech a “defining moment in Canadian sports television” (78). In the final game Canadian Paul Henderson scored with twenty-four seconds left in the game to win the series.

Across the country Canadians were obsessed with the Summit Series. Schools set up televisions in classrooms and business practically ceased when the games were on. Over twelve and a half million Canadians watched the final game on television, the largest audience to that point for a single program in the nation’s history (Pevere & Dymond 90). The victory by Team Canada over the Russians restored a sense of pride in Canadian hockey and boosted the nation’s psyche (Gruneau & Whitson 264). Less than two years earlier the country had been wracked by the crisis in Quebec that saw the invocation of the War Measures Act following the kidnapping of British diplomat James Cross and the murder of Quebec politician Pierre Laporte by Quebec separatists (McKinley 204). The series provided the country with a reason to come together and celebrate over a shared passion. The Summit Series provided noted hockey announcer Foster Hewitt with his most famous call,

Here’s a shot. Henderson made a wild stab at it and fell. Here’s another shot. They score! Henderson has scored for Canada (Pevere & Dymond, 90).
In 2010 the winter Olympics held in Vancouver, British Columbia again captured the interest of the nation. A record 16 million television viewers watched the finals of Men’s hockey on television (Houpt). Canada’s success at the games was capped by Olympic Gold Medal victories by both the men’s and women’s hockey teams. Repeat victories by the men’s and women’s teams in the 2014 Olympics reinforced the importance of hockey to the psyche and identity of Canadians. Commenting on the importance of the Olympic victories, Bruce Arthur of the National Post stated, “It’s the biggest measuring stick we have, and hockey matters deeply to us because of the way it’s adored and venerated in this country, so we treat it like a referendum on us. Even when it’s not” (qtd. in Berkshire). In a 2008 survey, participation in Olympic hockey was rated as one of the top predictors of Canadian pride and patriotism (Cameron & Berry 37).

**Hockey in the Arts, Literature and Media**

Cultural endeavours and artistic output often represent components of a nation’s identity (Edsenor 17). Hockey is prominently represented in Canadian art, music and literature. In 1933 William Kurelek, best know for his painting *The Maze*, published *A Prairie Boy's Winter*. This collection of paintings provides a nostalgic picture of the joys of hockey in a prairie winter and the importance of the game in what could be an otherwise demanding environment. Saul Miller’s tribute to hockey moms, *Madonna of the Rink*, shows the baby dressed in a Vancouver Canucks uniform. Andrew Podnieks states that the painting is “…a provocative and profoundly Canadian dialectic” (128).

In October 2013, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation aired a contest to name the twenty greatest Canadian hockey songs. Nominees amongst others were: The Tragically Hip’s *50 Mission Cap*; The Rheostatics’ *The Ballad of Wendell Clark Parts I and II*; and the Gear
Daddies’ I Want to Drive a Zamboni (CBC). Not surprisingly, Tom Connors’ anthem to the game, *The Hockey Song* was a favourite. The chorus of the song is a metaphor for Canadian’s love of hockey and its place in the nation’s identity:

Oh, The good old hockey game

It’s the best game you can name

and the best game you can name

Is the good old hockey game (Connors).

Literary works on hockey proliferate in Canada. Scholarly works, such as Richard Gruneau’s and David Whitson’s *Hockey Night In Canada* (1993) and Jason Blake’s *Canadian Hockey Literature* (2010), provide thoughtful analysis on the role of hockey in Canadian culture and as part of the national identity. Andrew Holman’s interdisciplinary work, *Canada’s Game: Hockey and Identity* (2009), examines the relationship of hockey to regional and national identities. Holman’s book draws on essays by scholars in the disciplines of history, kinesiology, sport management, English and communications to establish the relationship between hockey and national identity (Davis 242).

The celebration of hockey in literature and art has heightened the profile of the sport in Canada. Works, such as *The Hockey Sweater* by Roch Carrier (1979), *The Game* by Ken Dryden (1983), *Two Solitudes* by Hugh McClellan (1945) and *Icelands* by Frank Paci (1999), all figure prominently in the Canadian literary canon. Works of fiction are found in the sub-genre of children’s fiction. Several series of books aimed at young readers are available including *The Screech Owl Series* by Roy MacGregor. In *Murder at the Winter Games*, The Screech Owls are
invited to an international tournament held in Salt Lake City at the site of the 2002 Winter Olympics. MacGregor reprises moments from Canada’s past when, reminiscent of the final of the 1972 Summit Series, The Screech Owls come from behind to win the tournament in the dying seconds of the game (105). MacGregor also recalls the legendary hiding, by Canadian ice-maker Trent Evans, of the “lucky loonie” in the ice of the E. Centre during the 2002 Olympics (3). By repeating and retelling the legends and myths of hockey, the authors reinforce the game as a Canadian institution.

*The Hockey Sweater* by Roch Carrier is one of the better known literary works in Canada. Blake observes that Carrier’s classic is “the only Canadian story with which anglophones and francophones identify equally” (12). Inspired by an event from his childhood, Carrier writes of a boy in rural Quebec who wore the sweater of his hero, Maurice Richard. When the sweater had to be replaced, a new one was ordered from Eaton’s catalogue. Alas, Eaton’s sent a sweater of the hated Toronto Maple Leafs by mistake and the young boy became the laughing stock of the village. When sent to church to pray for forgiveness for wearing the hated sweater the boy prayed for, “…moths that would eat my Toronto Maple Leafs sweater” (Carrier 82). Carrier’s hero, Maurice “the Rocket” Richard of the Montreal Canadiens was an idol in Quebec and a symbol of their national identity (Poulton, 173). In 1955 the president of the National Hockey League suspended the Rocket for injuring an opponent. The suspension lead to riots in Montreal known as the Richard Riots which are sometimes referred to as one of the pivotal moments of the Quiet Revolution in Quebec (Gruneau & Whitson 132).

In the novel *Icelands*, Frank Paci captures the struggles of young, aspiring players and the visions of hockey glory held by their parents. Paci writes, “Stevie had mentioned how he agreed
with his father…how the country’s passions were heightened and solidified by hockey” (217).

Hockey is a physical sport and Canadians have traditionally shown a tolerance for a level of toughness in the game. Gruneau and Whitson observe “…many people in and around the game view fighting and intimidation …as essential dimensions of both the hockey tradition and the Canadian tradition” (176). In The Last Season, Roy MacGregor chronicles the fading career of fictional tough guy, Felix Batterinski. He observes, “And in Philadelphia, where good play was seldom realized but violence always expected, Batterinski was the biggest draw” (MacGregor, 1983, 183). In Saving the Game Mark Moore opines that modern culture is less tolerant of violence in sport than previously (24). Moore argues that unnecessary fouls and violence, often resulting in injury, no longer have a place in the game (180-85). The NHL has recently taken steps to curb the amount of fighting in the game and progress is evident (Fitz-Gerald).

Like literature, broadcasting has also played a pivotal role in reinforcing hockey as a national identifier. In 1923 the first hockey game aired on radio (McKinley 114). By 1936 the predecessor of Hockey Night in Canada (HNIC) aired nationally to large audiences (Morris 48). The popularity of the radio broadcast exceeded all expectations and created national heroes of the players and the announcer Foster Hewitt (McKinley 114). Commenting on Hewitt’s legacy and his importance to Canada, Brian Kennedy noted, “When Foster Hewitt began his broadcasts 'Hello Canada…’, it was simply assumed that he was talking to everyone” (32). The move to television in 1952 was an instant success and a unifying force in Canada (Morris 48). Since its inception HNIC has been as much a part of Canadian culture and identity as the game itself. Ken Dryden recalls that his favourite childhood memories were of the family sitting and watching
Hockey Night in Canada (145). Gruneau & Whitson note that watching Hockey Night in Canada made us feel “…like part of a national community” (2).

**Women and Minorities in Hockey**

Sport provides a way to metaphorically present relationships between genders, identities and power structures in society (Kennedy 66). Hockey has predominately been a male sport. Gruneau & Whitson claim that, “…hockey rinks around the country have always been steeped in male ambience” (209). Women have played hockey in Canada as long as men and in the early days the two often played together (McKinley 15). After the introduction of organized men’s hockey, women continued to play, but it was mainly recreational and with little formal organization. For a period of time women were cautioned for medical reasons against playing hockey (Poulton 108). Any momentum the women’s game enjoyed during the early part of the twentieth century all but died with the onset of World War II (Poulton 112). After the war women’s leagues, particularly in universities, became more plentiful and the numbers of participants increased. The 1986 Supreme Court decision upholding the right of women to play in men’s leagues served to revive interest in women’s hockey (Poulton 113). Between 1990 and 2012 registration of female hockey players with Hockey Canada increased 967% (CBC). Since the 1998 inclusion of women’s hockey in the Olympic Games, Canadian teams have dominated winning four of the five tournaments to date and reinforcing the game’s importance to Canada and to Canadian women. Olympic success aside, there is still a divide in opportunities in the game between men and women (Gruneau & Whitson 171).

Like women in hockey, the numbers of visible minorities in professional hockey has not always reflected the racial demographics of Canada (Poulton 119). In 2007 the NHL stated that
31 players, five per cent of the total in the league, were from minorities. By 2013 the number of had more than doubled to sixty-nine, or roughly ten per cent of NHL players (Sax). In the early days of hockey, black players were excluded from playing with whites in some areas of Canada. The Coloured Hockey League, operating from 1894 to 1930, provided an opportunity for black Canadian athletes to play the game at a high level (Poulton 120). In 1958 Willie O’Ree broke the colour barrier in hockey when he signed and played with the Boston Bruins (Poulton 124). It was not until the 1980s and the success of goaltender Grant Fuhr with the Edmonton Oilers, that the numbers of black players began to increase in any quantity.

The Future of Hockey and its Place in the National Identity

The population of Canada continues to be shaped by immigration. For many newcomers, learning to play hockey is a part of the acculturation process. Italian-Canadian author Frank Paci commented that playing hockey, “…made us feel that we belonged to the new country” (qtd. in Blake 57). While the population of Canada continues to increase enrolment in hockey is slowing compared to soccer. Hockey Canada reports a gain in registrations of roughly 10 per cent during the period between 1998 and 2005 (Morris 45). During the same period soccer registrations nearly tripled (Morris 45). The high cost associated with playing hockey and its unfamiliarity to new Canadians are often cited as a reason for the comparative disparity in enrolment (Morris 49). In Selling the Dream, Ken Campbell and Jim Parcels expose the high financial cost of minor hockey, particularly in larger urban areas (82). Campbell and Parcels opine, “Perhaps we’ve allowed the game to become too important to us” (11). The challenges facing minor hockey and the potential consequences for Canada’s identity formation suggest that further study in this aspect of hockey is warranted.
For numbers of Canadians sport is neither culturally significant nor socially relevant and would not be considered by them as part of the nation’s identity (Gruneau & Whitson 30). Some Canadians approach patriotism with uncertainty or even ambivalence (Cameron & Berry 30). Ben Cousins opines that given the multicultural nature of Canada, hockey should not be considered part of the national identity (5). Contemporary forces including the increasing globalization of hockey, the growing cosmopolitanism of Canada’s population, and the rise of other sports, challenge the role of hockey as a future part of the national identity of Canada (Gruneau & Whitson 2).

Despite these headwinds, hockey remains immensely important in Canada. For example during the week of October 20-26, 2014 nearly 1.3 million Canadians watched the Eastern Canada English language broadcast of HNIC (Top 30). That same week countless thousands of Canadians across the country viewed other hockey broadcasts, played the game, watched live games, or participated in hockey in other ways. Canadian poet Richard Harrison writes. “Hockey can be said to be Canada’s game not so much as Canadians invented hockey as because hockey invented Canada” (153).

**Conclusion**

Hockey is a metaphor for Canada: winter; hard work; the passing of tradition; the blending of aboriginal and European cultures and the celebration of spectacle (Jedwab 195). The sport has been an integral part of the Canadian identity since the days before Confederation. The game is played, watched and understood by Canadians of all ages, in all parts of the country. French Philosopher Bernard Barthes considers hockey the classic example of a national sport because of its link to the land and its ability to transform winter (Blake 5). Hockey has been
celebrated in Canadian art, music, literature and movies. Spectacles such as the 1972 Super Series and victories at the Olympic Winter Games have enhanced the attachment of Canadians to the game and reinforced its place in the national identity of the nation. While it is clear that Canada no longer has a monopoly on hockey, the sport maintains a powerful influence on the country and its identity. Many some newcomers struggle with understanding hockey, others have embraced the sport as a means of assisting with acculturation to Canadian society. The increased participation of women and minorities in hockey has helped make the sport more reflective of the Canadian demographic and more representative as a national identifier of the country.
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