Using Canadian Symbols to Teach about History and Culture – the Beaver!

—by Nadine Fabbri

National symbols – national animals, anthems, flags, coinage, etc. – are an excellent way to introduce students to other nations and cultures. Every symbol is “loaded” with history, social values, and unique celebrations of culture. And, given that young people seem to have an affinity for animals, learning about Canada by studying its national animal – the beaver – is a great way to introduce the country to your students.

Begin by having your students discuss the attributes and differences of the national animals for Canada and the U.S. Some reflections might include that the eagle is independent, it is a predator, and it soars above other creatures. The eagle could be called the “alpha bird” of the skies. The beaver, on the other hand, lives in a community (in fact, the beaver spends most of its time building and working on the family home) and is “victim” on the food (or fur) chain.

“Canada is one of the few countries that does not have some rapacious animal as its national animal,” wrote Maclean’s writer, Tom Wolfe. “It has a constructive animal, the beaver, which will not even bite your finger unless it is backed into a corner.” Now ask your students to think about how the characteristics of the animals apply to the values. And, from there, intriguing histories including cultural and economic influences are introduced.

The beaver was used to represent Canada and Canadian values from early on. For example, the very first Canadian postage stamp created in 1851 featured a beaver. The Three-Pence Beaver would be the first pictorial stamp in the world and the first that depicted an animal. The government at the time felt that the industrious nature of the beaver with its superb building skills and tenacity were perfect traits for a young nation attempting to carve out a place in the vast wilderness.

The beaver has been featured on the Canadian five-cent piece since 1937 and forms the logo for the Canadian Pacific Railway and Parks Canada. In the mid-60s when Canada held a national contest for a new flag design (a version of the British flag served as Canada’s flag until then), out of 3,500 entries almost 400 of them included the beaver. Many were of beavers gnawing, one was of a beaver wearing a Mountie hat, and another featured one large beaver and ten little ones – one for each province. Ultimately, the beaver lost out to the maple leaf but the importance of the animal to Canadians is clear.

The beaver became Canada’s national animal in 1975 almost 200 years after the eagle was established as the national bird for the U.S. (In 1782). Not uncommon in Canadian history, the adoption of the beaver was significantly affected by events south of the border.

The beaver was first proposed to parliament as Canada’s national emblem in 1974. However, it wasn’t until a journalist from the Toronto Sun heard that New York was about to adopt the beaver as its state symbol that Canadians took interest. Over 10,000 letters poured into the Canadian government, begging that the beaver be adopted as Canada’s national animal and that action be taken swiftly. Said one writer, “It would be a sad day indeed when that noble creature – the Beaver – falls victim to U.S. hands. Not content with having depleted Canada of most of her resources, those damn Yanks are now after her beaver . . . I greatly admire your stand in defending that poor, helpless creature.”

Due to the tremendous support of the Canadian public, Bill C-373 was quickly passed through parliament and made law in 1975.

Symbols can be a fun way to begin to get students to think about national attributes and values. And, from there, intriguing histories including cultural and economic influences can be explored. The beaver and the eagle are a good starting place for this study and, as is often the case in North America, the histories of our two nations are once again intertwined as we see with the adoption of the beaver as Canada’s national animal.
Upcoming Events

May 31, 2008
Quebec Workshop
Enseigner le français: La société québécoise comme outil didactique
University of Washington, Seattle Campus:
9 a.m.-3 p.m.
Cost: $45 per participant (includes 6 clock hours and lunch)
This workshop will be conducted in French and is open to educators and students in teaching certifi-
cate programs or French-language programs. Directed by Dr. Thierry Glasson, Université Laval, with presenta-
tions by U.W. graduate students.

June 22 - June 27, 2008
30th Annual STUDY CANADA Summer Institute
• Sunday, June 22 - Monday, June 23
(Terminal City Club Tower Hotel)
• Tuesday, June 24 - Friday, June 27
(Whistler's Crystal Lodge)
Cost: $550 (includes 3 quarter credits/40 clock
hours, 5 nights’ accommodation, 5 breakfasts & RT
Vancouver-Whistler transportation)
Gain a strong foundation for teaching about Canada while exploring two of our neighbor’s most beautiful,
cosmopolitan and environmentally sustainable cities. Travel awards available.

Canada in the Classroom: K-12 Resources

WEBSITES
Symbols of Canada – Canadian Heritage Website
http://www.canadianheritage.gc.ca/progs/cpcsc-
ccsp/cc-cs/index_e.cfm
Teachers can rely on this Government of Canada website for ad-free information.
The Beaver - Knight's Canadian Info Collection
www.members.shaw.ca/kkc1/beaver.html
Discover more about the beaver’s role in Canadian history and as a national symbol of Canada.
Official Symbols - Canada4Info Website
http://www.craigmarlatt.com/canada/symbols_
facts&lists/symbols.html
Images of each symbol are shared with a historical
note for each.

CLASSROOM RESOURCES
Symbols of Canada – Teacher Resource Book
Canadian Heritage (Canadian Government Publishing, 2002)
$11.95
http://www.fnpubs.com/subj-
ject/govern/symbol.htm
Canada’s symbols are attractively presented with full-color images and short histories of each province
and territory and its symbols. Double-sided (French/
English) wall poster included.

That’s Very Canadian!
An Exceptionally Interesting Report About All Things
Canadian, by Rachel
by Vivien Bowers and Di-
anne Eastman $18.95 (Maple
978-1897066064
This delightful book, told from the viewpoint of a student doing
a project on Canada’s symbols and cultural identity, is a fun way for all students to learn. The book also
offers straightforward information on the differences
between Canada and the USA.

Symbols of Canada – Binder Reference Sheet
(8-1/2 x 11”)
LearnSmart Publishing Co.
http://www.learnsmart.ca/
main/usacustomers.html
$2.95 each
This bilingual notebook insert shows Canada’s national,
provincial and territorial symbols.

Maple Leaf Forever: A Celebration Of Cana-
dian Symbols
By Donna and Nigel
This beautifully illustrated large-format pictorial fea-
tures Canada’s three most enduring national symbols:
the Mountie, the maple leaf and the beaver.

LESSON PLANS
Grade 5 Unit Plan: “Identity – Canadian Symbols”
(Evergreen Curriculum Guide – Saskatchewan)
http://www.sasked.gov.sk.ca/docs/elemsoc/
g5u12ess.html
This unit explores the beaver, the maple leaf, the
RCMP and more with hyperlinks for student re-
search.

“An Interactive Quiz on Canadian Symbols” Social
Sciences Teacher’s Institute 2005 Lesson Plan
www.sasklearning.gov.sk.ca/branches/curr/sci_tech/
/social/astt/2005/mitamichelle/mitamichelle.shtml
Students can explore the symbols of Canada through an
interactive game and other activities.

“Nifty New Flag” Activity Plan (A Helping Hand - A
Social Studies Index by Kevin Kearney)
http://www.cbsr.ns.ca/studies/crit10.html
Students redesign the national flag as a culminat-
ing activity to a unit on Canada (or any other
country).