The Confederation Train

The name Canada means much more than the top half of the North American continent. What is Canada? It is many things—majestic mountains, beautiful rivers and lakes, golden plains, forests, ice floes, farms, mines, towns and cities with busy factories, churches and new buildings reaching skyward. It is a land of workers. Its people use two main languages, long ago brought across an ocean, but Canadians also represent a colourful pattern, its racial and cultural pieces contributed by the whole world. Yet Canada is more than all this. It is our story—of primeval beginnings, explorers and pioneers, successes and sufferings, peace and war, happiness and unhappiness—a story of great development and a bright future.

During the 1967 Centennial of Canada’s Confederation, a touring exhibition train tells our story, with the aid of life-size models, sound effects, lighting, artifacts and photography.

The following pages provide an “aide-mémoire” on a visit to the Confederation Train.
Here the land is born. We are in the great rain forests before the last ice age. Then time etches its changes; as ice recedes we see the signs of an early man. What was he like? We wonder. Across the Bering Strait come the first immigrants but our knowledge of them is scant and our first accurate view of a culture is that of the west coast Haida Indians and, later, the eastern Indians. All this we experience through the skills of designers, technicians, artists and craftsmen. They take us into Indian villages and they also transport our minds between past and present for comparisons of today with yesterday. We see the incense burner and the ornament from a pagoda, symbols which remind us that the Orient held the new riches wanted by the old European world—the incentive to discovery. But the European explorers, who found this other world in their path, discovered that it had its own riches in furs and gold and the missionaries who followed saw a potential harvest in men’s souls.
Car two
Exploring new horizons called for rare skill and courage. We stand on the deck of a Viking ship and hear the sound of the wild sea—perhaps off Labrador’s coast. We see a model of Cartier’s ship, and a plank from the original hull. The electronic map traces the routes of Cabot, Cartier, Hudson and the many others. Canada’s first great hero, Champlain, who attempted the first settlement of Nova Scotia, stands in life size near his astrolabe and a 1632 Canada map of his own making. Here too, ancient engravings of his own sketches reveal Champlain the soldier as he sees himself, and Quebec City’s first house built by this same man. We move through the explorations of yesterday and today, symbolized by the canoe and the bush aeroplane’s pontoon. We live with early immigrants, horrified by disturbingly realistic steerage class conditions on an early sailing ship, and share their hopes of leaving misery behind in Europe and of finding a better life in the new world.
Entering the era of settlement we step into a French seignorial house. Through the drawing room window we look upon a scene typical of early 19th century French Canada. No matter what our background do we not feel that old France as well as old Britain contributed much to our heritage? Old and modern tools and machines (the means of settlement) and their economic and sociological implications contrast the efforts of the pioneers with life and work today. More exhibits illustrate the pre-Confederation state of confusion—the isolation of communities and colonies and the pressures from the United States. Now we move into the Confederation Chamber, 1867, and find emotional stability in the birth of an idea: Canadian Confederation. Here, for the first time, we find the Centennial symbol prominent—with four triangles coloured, representing the first four entrants into Confederation: Ontario, Quebec, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia.
Car four

Travelling quickly through time we experience the growing pains of the period from 1867 to 1876. (Our visit to an old printing shop reminds us of Confederation's birth pains because it contains the printing press of Nova Scotia's Joseph Howe which he used to flail the Confederation idea, then to praise it.) We meet the prime ministers of the period: Macdonald and Mackenzie. More provinces join: Manitoba 1870, British Columbia 1871 and Prince Edward Island 1873. Does the sight of Sitting Bull's rifle and the Sioux headdress stir sympathy deep within us? That great force, the North West Mounted, is born. We live through the Riel Rebellion. The Hudson's Bay Grant, of an area larger than some continents, creates a Canada that stretches to three oceans. We go on to complete the rail line to the Pacific, experience the wild excitement of the Klondike rush, meet Prime Ministers Thompson, Abbott, Tupper, Bowell and Laurier. From now on Canada negotiates her own treaties. We learn of greater wealth in gold, iron, copper and uranium.
The pace of life quickens as the 19th century ends. Our troops start dying, for the first time for someone else, somewhere else—in the Boer War. 1900 to 1910 is the era of “the homesteaders” on the prairies. Alberta and Saskatchewan join in 1905. We see wheat from horizon to horizon and a widening of the mosaic by peoples from eastern Europe. Amundsen, at last, forces the Northwest Passage. A recruiting streetcar invites us on a “Free Trip to Europe . . .” and a terrible war. Inside a dug-out roofed by corrugated iron and sand bags we peer out on no-man’s land amid the frightening din of trench warfare. The Prime Minister is Sir Robert Borden followed by Arthur Meighen. The twenties roar in with flappers, peep shows and player pianos. The roar ends with a stock crash, heralding the sad, drab thirties. Intellectual ferment brings new political ideas. Prime Minister Bennett presides. Then, in 1939, front pages cry “Canada at War With Germany,” “Warsaw Hurls Back Invaders.” But Warsaw hadn’t.
Car six

Again the torch is seized by willing hands in 1939—so soon after the terrible war of 1914-1918. Now a production nation, Canada turns out warplanes, tanks and ships on the home front while her heroes fight and die abroad. We witness the bomber raids, the fighting on land and sea, and the great mushroom cloud—a huge question mark that forces our concern for the world’s future. It is Prime Minister Mackenzie King who announces the war’s end. Having adjusted to peace Canadians make new achievements in science, politics, medicine, industry, the arts and international affairs. Newfoundland joins to complete the Centennial symbol. We meet the Prime Ministers of our time—St. Laurent, Diefenbaker and Pearson. Perhaps it is here one feels so brief an adventure through history is not enough. Perhaps one years to spend time to read and gain a deeper understanding of the past. We also see images of the future suggesting that a greater story is about to begin. Who will make that story? Who, but us, will create the future Canada?

THE CENTENNIAL COMMISSION