

GOD BLESS OUR LAND, THIS GREAT DOMINION BLESS

Perth and Canada's National Anthem

But for the vagaries of a 1908 American magazine, when Canadians today stand to sing our national anthem we might, rather than fumbling for the lyrics of Robert Weir, be mumbling the words of Perth, Ontario, poet Robert Jamieson (1848-1932).

*God bless our Land! This Great Dominion bless!
And firm establish her righteousness
Our heritage from thee is vast –
Oh, grant that we may build ...*

A century ago when Anglophone Canadians were called upon to lift their voices and sing the 'National Anthem', they usually sang 'God Save The King'. Francophones, however, were more likely to sing the 'Chant National', written by Adolphe-Basile Routhier (1839-1920) for music by Calixte Paquet dit Lavallée (1842-1891).



Adolphe-Basile Routhier

Chant National

Par Adolphe-Basile Routhier (1880)
(Official French)

*Ô Canada!
Terre de nos aïeux,
Ton front est ceint de fleurons glorieux!
Car ton bras sait porter l'épée,
Il sait porter la croix!
Ton histoire est une épopée
Des plus brillants exploits.
Et ta valeur, de foi trempée,
Protégera nos foyers et nos droits.
Protégera nos foyers et nos droits.*



Calixte Paguet Lavallee

Chant National

(Translation from French)

*O Canada!
Land of our ancestors
Glorious deeds circle your brow
For your arm knows how to wield the sword
Your arm knows how to carry the cross;
Your history is an epic
Of brilliant deeds
And your valour steeped in faith
Will protect our homes and our rights,
Will protect our homes and our rights.*

The 'Chant National' was first performed in June of 1880 and over the years following there emerged more than a hundred English translations of the French original (whose lyrics have never changed). Then, in the summer of 1908, Robert Stanley Weir (1856-1926), doodling away a rainy afternoon at his summer house on Lake Memphremagog, near Stanstead, Quebec, wrote the lyrics Canadians know as 'O Canada'.

Weir was born in Hamilton, Ontario. He worked as a teacher and lawyer before he was appointed a Municipal Court Judge at Montreal and then named to the bench of the Exchequer Court of Canada. He was also a published poet, and his interest in a National Anthem was prompted by the 300th anniversary of the founding of Quebec City. At first Weir's composition¹ was just one more among the dozens of alternate English lyrics sung to the tune of the 'Chant National', but they soon began to gain popularity across the country.



Robert Stanley Weir

Original 'O Canada' English Lyrics

By Robert Stanley Weir (1908)

*O Canada! Our home and native land!
True patriot love thou dost in us command.
We see thee rising fair, dear land,
The True North, strong and free;
And stand on guard, O Canada,
We stand on guard for thee.*

(Refrain)

*O Canada! O Canada!
O Canada! We stand on guard for thee,
O Canada! We stand on guard for thee.*

¹ Published by Delmar Music in November 1908, with an arrangement by Alfred Grant-Schafer.

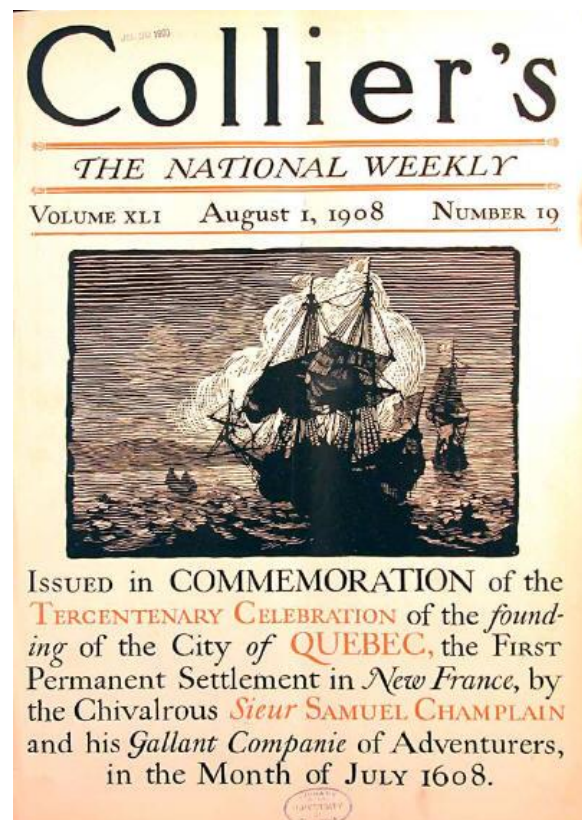
*O Canada! Where pines and maples grow,
Great prairies spread and lordly rivers flow,
How dear to us thy broad domain,
From East to Western sea!
Thou land of hope for all who toil!
Thou True North, strong and free!
(Refrain)*

*O Canada! Beneath thy shining skies
May stalwart sons and gentle maidens rise,
To keep thee steadfast through the years
From East to Western sea,
Our own beloved native land,
Our True North, strong and free!
(Refrain)*

Even a decade and a half later, however, when Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King wanted to publish English and French versions of 'O Canada' to mark Canada's Diamond Jubilee in 1925, he found little agreement on which English version it should be. When King had patriotic clubs and societies across the country polled on which version they most often sang, the response yielded dozens of different lyrics, but the one most often mentioned was Weir's version. From that point on, with minor alterations over the years, the Weir lyrics emerged as those most commonly sung in English and finally became Canada's official National Anthem; approved in 1968 and officially adopted in 1980.

However, as is the case with most historic events, the outcome might not have been so.

On August 1, 1908, in the same summer Weir wrote his now familiar lyrics, the Canadian edition of the American magazine *Collier's Weekly*² announced a contest to write new English lyrics for the 'Chant National'; offering a \$100 first prize for the best three stanzas set to the Calixte Lavallée melody of 1880. The contest attracted more than 350 entries from across the country, among them an entry from Robert Jamieson of Perth, Ontario.



² *Collier's Weekly* began publishing its Canadian edition in 1893.

Jamieson was a man of many interests and talents. He was Clerk of the Division Court for nearly three decades, but also, at various times, a real estate and insurance agent, the Town of Perth tax collector, a school board trustee and long-time secretary/treasurer of the South Lanark Agricultural Association. Jamieson also sat on the board of directors for several public and private institutions; the Perth Electric Light Company, the Bathurst & Mississippi Macadamized Road Company, Perth Cemetery Company, Perth Mechanics' Institute, Perth Public Library and the Perth Bible Society. He also operated a farm in North Elmsley Township, on the southern outskirts of Perth, where he bred top quality Jersey and Ayrshire dairy cattle.

In addition, Jamieson was something of a poet. Among his compositions was an epic narrative poem entitled *The Hunter's Bride of Otty Lake*, a mix of historical fact and fiction, published by the *Perth Courier* between 1903 and 1907. Having completed *Hunter's Bride* in 1907, Jamieson turned his poetic attention to the 1908 *Collier's Weekly* anthem contest and submitted the following;

National Anthem

By Robert Jamieson of Perth, Ontario (1908)

*God bless our Land! This Great Dominion bless!
And firm establish her righteousness
Our heritage from thee is vast –
Oh, grant that we may build,
A nation, great while time shall last,
While suns our mountains gild;
And aid us all to sing and pray,
God Save our King! Bless Canada for Aye!
God Save our King! Bless Canada for Aye!*

*The Old Union Jack our banner shall be,
Unfurl'd to the breeze on land and on sea.
In war or peace, we'll proudly stand,
Beneath that flag of fame.
Woe to the hand or foeman's band
That would our flag defame.
Beneath its folds we sing and pray,
God Save our King! Bless Canada for Aye!
God Save our King! Bless Canada for Aye!*

*The green maple leaf is our emblem fair,
And with it we twine, with pride and with care,
Fleur de lis, thistle, shamrock, rose –
A wreath that binds us one,
United thus we'll meet our foes,
As in the days agone.
In unison we'll sing and pray,
God Save our King! Bless Canada for Aye!
God Save our King! Bless Canada for Aye!*

Sadly (but perhaps deservedly) Perth's Robert Jamieson was not a *Collier's* winner. Whether or not Robert Stanley Weir entered his lyrics in the *Collier's* contest is uncertain³, but if he did, he was not a winner either⁴. That honor went to Mrs. Mercy E. Powell McCulloch (1880-1952) of Montreal.

O Canada

By Mercy E. Powell McCulloch, Montreal, Quebec (1908)

*O Canada! In praise of thee we sing;
From echoing hills our anthems proudly ring.
With fertile plains and mountains grand
With lakes and rivers clear,*

*Eternal beauty, thos dost stand
Throughout the changing year.*

*Lord god of Hosts! We now implore,
Bless our dear land this day and evermore.
Bess our dear land this day and evermore.*

Ms. McCulloch's version never gained traction, however, and was slowly overtaken in popularity by the Weir lyrics. McCulloch's effort at patriotic Canadian song-smithing has long since sunken into obscurity and Robert Jamieson's contribution to the same cause is no more than a footnote to that obscurity.

- Ron W. Shaw (2018)

³ One source, North Winds Press/Scholastic Canada, says that Weir did enter the *Collier's* contest, while no sources say he did not.

⁴ The *Collier's* winner was announced August 7, 1909, six months after Weir had published his lyrics in November 1908.