

The Northern Character Theme and Sport in Nineteenth-Century Canada

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The distinguished Canadian historian Carl Berger once stated that 'if Canadian nationalism is to be understood, its meaning must be sought and apprehended not simply in the sphere of political decisions but also in myths, legends and symbols. . . .' His remarks were directed specifically at the notion of 'northern character,' a theme which dominated the writings of many nineteenth-century poets and authors, and which he considered central to an understanding of the concept of nationalism in the Dominion. While Berger has demonstrated clearly the association between climate, geography and the perceived characteristics of the Canadian people in terms of its relationship with contemporary theories of racial superiority, as a rationale for anti-Americanism and as a prominent feature of Canadian art, the link between 'northern character' and sport has remained almost unexplored. This paper traces the emergence of the ideal which linked sport and 'northern character' by considering material published before and after Robert Grant Haliburton's 'compelling doctrine' *The Men of the North and Their Place in History*, published in 1869, which is regarded as a catalyst for 'Canadian nationalists of all persuasions' who extolled the virtues and influence of the snow and cold weather upon their character. Early ideological dimensions of winter sports were eulogised by the *Montreal Gazette* in the mid-1840s. Throughout the remaining years of the nineteenth-century, writers in national and international newspapers and popular journals highlighted Canada's 'manly and invigorating' winter exercises. The majority of these essays followed Haliburton's publication but a few preceded it, including W. George Beers' piece 'Canada in Winter' which appeared in the *British American Magazine* in 1863. The impressions of these commentators not only described 'the pleasures of a Canadian winter,' they also created the clear picture that the country's winter activities contributed in no small way to the cultivation of its people's distinctive 'northern character.'