

After the Napoleonic Wars a large migration set in from the British Isles to the North American Continent. Up to 1840 about 500,000 persons left for Canada and 420,000 for the United States; the peak year of departure for Canada was 1832 when immigrants numbered 66,000. But from 1834 until 1910 the annual British immigration destined to the United States always exceeded that to Canada. For instance, between 1846 and 1854, 1,750,000 persons left the British Isles for the United States and not quite 500,000 for Canada. These migrants were mainly from Ireland which was then suffering an extensive famine.

From 1670 to 1869 the territories that are now the Provinces of Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta were governed by the Hudson's Bay Company and, except for the Scottish colony established in 1811 at Selkirk on the Red River, no attempt was made at settlement during that time. In 1869, two years after the British North America Act had united the Provinces of Ontario, Quebec, Nova Scotia and New Brunswick to form the nucleus of what is now Canada, these territories were acquired from the Company by the Canadian Government. Under the Homestead Act of 1872 and the Dominion Land Act of 1874 free, quarter-section homesteads were made available for which any head of family or adult person might acquire patent after three years subject to certain conditions of tillage. For a time, transportation difficulties and the attraction of the more prosperous United States diverted many of the arriving immigrants. The easier and therefore more popular route to the Canadian mid-west lay by rail through the United States by way of Chicago and St. Paul or by water to Duluth and then by rail to the Red River and from there by boat or stage to Fort Garry. But the completion of a railroad from Minneapolis and St. Paul to Winnipeg in 1878 was a step towards the solution of this transportation difficulty and the number of settlers mounted steadily.

Even though between the years 1874 and 1879 the first major settlements were established south of Winnipeg by some 7,000 German-speaking Mennonites from southern Russia who were accustomed to the steppe, and by a group of Icelanders who settled near Lake Winnipeg and in southern Manitoba, the immigration of this period was largely of people from Eastern Canada whose agricultural background was of farms won from timbered lands. Following the construction of the Canadian Pacific Railway which reached Winnipeg in 1882, development became more pronounced. Large-scale projects, assisted settlement, and religious enterprises brought thousands of settlers from the British Isles and Continental Europe. By 1891 the population of Manitoba and the North West Territories, which had been 118,706 in 1881, had reached 251,473, of whom only 11,150 were in what later became Saskatchewan.

Meanwhile in 1871 the colony of British Columbia had entered Confederation with a population of about 10,500. Until 1858, when the colony was created, the Hudson's Bay posts were the only evidence of the white man's presence west of the Canadian Rockies. The discovery of gold on the Fraser River and later in the Cariboo Creeks brought the first shifting wave of settlers of many different races from the United States and some overland from Eastern Canada. When the flow of gold slackened in 1865 and 1866 and Vancouver Island became united with the mainland, a fairly permanent nucleus had formed made up mainly of Americans but including also a 'solid' British group of Hudson's Bay Company officials as well as a Canadian-born element. It was during the subsequent road and railway building period that the first Chinese immigrants appeared in British Columbia, the beginning of the Asiatic element which later became a factor in that population. The Canadian Pacific Railway was completed to Vancouver in 1885, overcoming for the settler the great barrier of the Rocky Mountains.