

Report of the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Historical Association Rapport de l'assemblée annuelle de la Société historique du Canada

Report of the Annual Meeting

The Maritime Provinces and Confederation

D. C. Harvey

Volume 6, Number 1, 1927

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/300046ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/300046ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada

ISSN

0317-0594 (print)

1712-9095 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Harvey, D. C. (1927). The Maritime Provinces and Confederation. *Report of the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Historical Association / Rapport de l'assemblée annuelle de la Société historique du Canada*, 6(1), 39–45.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/300046ar>

THE MARITIME PROVINCES AND CONFEDERATION

BY PROFESSOR D. C. HARVEY

In any discussion of the Maritime Provinces and Confederation first place must be given to Nova Scotia not only because of the leading part which her statesmen had taken in preparing the public mind for the movement but also because she was and has been the most difficult of all the provinces to reconcile to a subordinate position in the Dominion thus created. As the oldest of the self-governing British Colonies, long the British naval and military headquarters of North America, the centre of a picturesque social life, boasting of literary and commercial eminence, Nova Scotia was proud of her history and her achievements, and anxious to realize Howe's dream of being the Normal School of the other Colonies. Consequently, when Howe does not wish to play second fiddle to a new star like Tupper, he is but expressing the reluctance of Nova Scotians in general to play second fiddle to the Canadians at an Imperial banquet.

Of the Nova Scotian statesmen there were two types of expansionists: those who wished for Maritime Union and those who wished for Confederation. Both pictured for themselves an aggrandized Nova Scotia, an enlarged sphere of action, in which those who went down to the sea in ships should have the leadership. To the former, Maritime Union was but the repairing of a blunder that had been made in 1769 and 1784, when Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick, and Cape Breton had been separated from the political mainland; and, just as Cape Breton had been re-annexed in 1820, so Prince Edward Island and New Brunswick should be restored to the original relationship. To these men, Maritime Union was but a return to the true principles of statesmanship; and there was no problem of a capital when they could point to Halifax, the "*flat city*" of old renown, the social, intellectual, military, naval, and commercial centre. These men were irredentists; and it may be said that, as every citizen of the United States would like to see the Stars and Stripes floating from Pole to Pole, every Nova Scotian would like to see the Mayflower Province expanded to include the utmost bounds of ancient Acadia, together with the islands of the Gulf of St. Lawrence.

But there were expansionists of even wider vision, who dreamed of a great British American Empire, with one flag and one sovereign from Cape Race to Nootka Sound, with the cool spray of the Atlantic on its brow and the warm waters of the Pacific about its feet. Nova Scotia was still to be the "frontage," with Canada and the far West as a noble hinterland.

"With such a territory as this to overrun, organize, and improve," said Howe in 1851, "think you that we shall stop even at the western bounds of Canada? or even at the shores of the Pacific? Vancouver's Island, with its vast coal measures, lies beyond. The beautiful islands of the Pacific, and the growing commerce of the ocean, are beyond. Populous China and the rich East are beyond; and the sails of our children's children will reflect as familiarly the sunbeams of the South as they now brave the angry tempests of the North. The Maritime Provinces which I now address, are but the Atlantic frontage of this bound-

less and prolific region; the wharves upon which its rich argosies are to lie. Nova Scotia is one of these. Will you, then, put your hands unitedly, with order, intelligence, and energy to this great work? Refuse, and you are recreants to every principle which lies at the base of your country's prosperity and advancement; refuse, and the Deity's handwriting upon land and sea is to you unintelligible language; refuse, and Nova Scotia, instead of occupying the foreground as she now does, should have been thrown back, at least behind the Rocky mountains. God has planted your country in the front of this boundless region; see that you comprehend its destiny and resources—see that you discharge, with energy and elevation of soul, the duties which devolve upon you in virtue of your position."

Though these burning words of Howe were uttered in advocacy of the Intercolonial Railway, their effect was more far-reaching than their immediate purpose; and, as part of a cumulative propaganda, carried on at intervals from 1784 to 1864, they tended to convince Nova Scotians that they were the predestined leaders of a new British American Empire; and, though the time came when Howe tried to recall such words as these on the ground that the Quebec scheme did not give proper safeguards to Nova Scotia, he found that many of his pupils were determined to take opportunity by the forelock and to realize the vision. Nor was their influence confined to Nova Scotia. New Brunswickers, also, lighted their torches at the Nova Scotian candle; but they did not expect to give so bright a light.

Speaking at the banquet given in Montreal immediately after the Quebec Conference, Lt.-Col. Gray of New Brunswick said:—

"The public men of the Maritime Provinces had for years looked forward to a union with Canada. They had hoped for it—they had spoken for it—not simply a commercial connection, but a political connection—merging our interests, our character, our wealth, in one common union. He could not forget that at a time, in 1837 and 1838, when Canada was threatened with invasion from abroad—the several Legislatures of the Maritime Provinces had by unanimous votes, by acclamation, placed at the disposal of their Sovereign their entire revenues, property and wealth, to aid their brethren in the west. (Loud cheers.) He could not fail to recall that since that day their public men had striven for this union. Year after year they had turned their attention to the construction of the great Intercolonial Railway which would bring us closer together. Their Legislatures had passed Bills—had granted subsidies—arrangements had been made with Canada, yet year after year from causes which it would be difficult to explain, the object had eluded their grasp, and it was only when it appeared beyond attainment, when the hopes of their people, their Legislatures and their public men, were fading away, that they turned their backs on this cherished idea, and the Parliaments of the Maritime Provinces had directed certain of their leading men to assemble at Charlottetown in Prince Edward Island, and consider how best a union could be effected among themselves, since one with Canada seemed unattainable. When assembled for that purpose, the ministry from Canada came down and proposed, that, instead of remaining longer divided, we should come together, and see if we could not lay the foundations of a great empire which should perpetuate on this continent the principles of British constitutional liberty (cheers). He need not say that a proposition so entirely in accordance with the cherished purpose of their lives was received with unqualified satisfaction."

Though these quotations are disproportionate to the length of this paper, they seemed necessary to illustrate a fact that Maritimers, with grievances, tend to forget,—the fact that they themselves led themselves into temptation. Further, while not forgetting the many sporadic suggestions and discussions of Federal Union that had been made or carried on in Nova Scotia prior to 1860, nor the mission to England of Johnstone and Archibald in 1857 which preceded the similar mission of Cartier, Galt and Ross, it is important to remember that it was Howe's Resolutions of 1861, and Newcastle's reply thereto in 1862, which became the basis and original authority for the negotiations that subsequently resulted in the Conference at Charlottetown on Maritime Union and that at Quebec on Confederation. Nor should it be forgotten that Maritime Union was projected in 1864 only because Nova Scotia had become discouraged over the prospect of a wider union through her experiences in regard to the Intercolonial Railway and Interprovincial Free Trade.

But, if the chief obstacle to a contented Canada and the most eager advocate of Maritime Union has been Nova Scotia, the failure of the Charlottetown Conference in 1864 must be laid at the door of both Canada and Prince Edward Island—the former because of its overwhelming promises of Maritime prosperity, the latter because of its insurmountable opposition to Legislative Union. No complete record of this Conference exists, but it is possible to piece it together from a variety of sources:—

Whelan, in his *Union of the British Provinces*, says: "It is well understood that the proposal to unite the Maritime Provinces under one Government and one Legislature was deemed impracticable."

Tilley, speaking in St. John, on December 20, 1864, says: "The Conference was adjourned without a report and one reason, among others, that they did not proceed was that Canada had submitted propositions highly advantageous. We were seeking to unite in order to extend our trade, and Canada offered us a market of three and a half millions. She proposed to guard our local interests and place us in a better position financially Another strong reason for breaking up the Prince Edward Island Conference was the positive refusal of that Colony to come into the Legislative Union."

McCully, at the banquet in Toronto, November 3, 1864, describes the entry of the Canadian delegation upon the scene in the following eloquent passage:—

"Gentlemen, we of the Maritime Provinces were engaged a short time ago endeavouring to make such arrangements as would enlarge the sphere of our commercial operations, accomplish a legislative union, and secure future prosperity. We had learned that while commerce knew no bounds, and our sails whiten the shores of every sea, our merchants, entering into large commercial enterprises were cramped in their energies, and our trade encumbered with hostile tariffs. While we were so engaged there tapped at our door one fine morning a delegation from Canada—seven of your most intelligent, active, and enterprising statesmen, whom we invited to seats in our councils. They gave us to understand that they had a more excellent way. We sat down listening to them day after day. First we had our friend from Lower Canada, Mr. Cartier—(cheers)—who in a graphic manner gave us to understand that what was required to make a great nation was the Maritime element. Canada, he said, possesses the territorial and the popular element, but it requires the Maritime element (cheers). He invited us gentlemen of the Lower Provinces to assist him and those who

were with him in preparing a larger scheme than that in which we were engaged. Next followed your Attorney General West, Mr. Macdonald. (Loud cheers.) In that pleasing, chaste, and classic style for which he is distinguished, he spoke to us half a day on the subject of Governments and governmental institutions. He enlarged upon the failure of the institutions which had been adopted in the neighbouring Republic, and advocated a system which he contended would build up a great empire of these provinces. Close upon him came Mr. Galt, mighty in finance, great in statistics, and wonderful in political skill—(cheers)—he charmed us for another half day. Following close upon him came Mr. McGee—(cheers)—with his agricultural statistics—laughter—charming us yet again. Last, but not least, followed my honourable friend from Upper Canada, Mr. Brown—(cheers)—enlightening us, and producing sensations so overwhelming that we almost forgot where we were.”

Brown’s account of what the Canadians said to persuade the Maritime Delegates to suspend their labours is not so convincing. It is taken from his speech at the same banquet in Toronto: “What we said to them was this—We in Canada have had serious sectional differences; but at last we have agreed to a settlement of our troubles on a basis just and equitable to all sections of our country; we are about to frame a new constitution, which will be acceptable to the great mass of our people; and it has occurred to us, on hearing that you too were considering a change of your constitution, whether it would not be well for us all to sit down together, and consider how far it would be for the welfare and good government of our Provinces were we to unite them all under one system of government.”

John S. Macdonald’s version is more convincing than Brown’s, but less high-minded.

“Greater inducements were then offered them, and they were filled with higher hopes and expectations of the good things to be derived from the Confederation of all the provinces. Lieutenant-governorships, chief-justiceships and life-memberships of the Legislative Council were all held out in the prospective by the Canadian Ministers.”

If these accounts are somewhat indefinite, the picture may be filled in from the speeches of the delegates on the Confederation tour from Charlottetown to Toronto. Here, were given the pledges which the Maritimers say have been broken; and these pledges may be summarized as, the prospective increase of trade through Maritime ports, the management of the Intercolonial not as a profit-making concern but as a bond of union, and freedom from taxation for local purposes.

At Halifax, Cartier said, “Halifax through the Intercolonial Railroad will be the recipient of trade which now benefits Portland, Boston and New York.” “It is as evident as the sun shines at noon that, when the Intercolonial Railway is built, the consequence will be that between Halifax and Liverpool there will be steamers almost daily leaving and arriving at the former—in fact it will be a ferry between Halifax and Liverpool.” Galt said, “But the railway is not to be looked upon as a question of cost, but as a bond of union, that will unite us in peace and in time of need.” Macdonald said, “Build the road and Halifax will soon become one of the great emporiums of the world. All the great resources of the west will come over the immense railways of Canada to the bosom of your harbour.” And in regard to taxation, Cartier said at Montreal, “It is sought to turn public opinion against us by saying that if you have a local government you must resort to direct taxation for the support of the

government. This would never be the case, for a subsidy was to be paid by the general government to each of the Local governments to cover their expenses, and there would be some small items of local revenue which would be sufficient. There will be, therefore, no direct taxation if the government be wise and prudent."

But it was Tilley of New Brunswick, not a Canadian delegate, who promised the Maritimes manufacturing supremacy in the new Dominion. "We are in the Lower Provinces," he said in Halifax, "a manufacturing people to a large extent and we would, to the whole of British America, occupy the same position that Massachusetts does to the United States."

A careful reading of all the speeches on these occasions leads one to conclude that the Maritimes were honest dupes of their own enthusiasm as much as of the promises of Canadian Delegates; and it is a tenable hypothesis that the Canadians, carried away for the moment on the wings of imagination, were quite sincere in hoping that their dreams would come true, in spite of economic facts and of the normal tendency of mankind to lose the vision when in contact with realities.

At any rate, it is obvious that the offers of the Canadians seemed advantageous from every point of view, and that the Maritimers would have been tempted to lay aside their plans for Maritime Union even if Prince Edward Island had not been so opposed to losing her local Legislature. But to this she was unalterably opposed. She had appointed delegates to this Conference only through courtesy. In discussing their appointment it transpired that only two out of the thirty members of the Legislature had been in favour of Maritime Union, although several had looked with a more kindly eye upon the prospect of a federal union. And her attitude is intelligible. In Maritime Union she saw no hope of solving the Land question, her fundamental problem, she had won responsible government later than the other colonies and only after odious comparisons as to her extent and resources, and ever since the days of Patterson and Fanning she had an instinctive fear of being re-annexed to Nova Scotia, a fear that was played upon by the absentee landlords. On the other hand, a wider federal union seemed to her less dangerous, besides leaving her local legislature intact. Just as Quebec was willing to submit to representation by population in a union that included more than her ancient rival Ontario, so Prince Edward Island was less alarmed at and hoped more from the prospect of a wider union, though even here there seemed little to attract her when the Quebec scheme was finally made public.

But it must be emphasized that once the Conferences had been set in motion and the direction was towards Quebec, the delegates of both Nova Scotia and New Brunswick entertained exalted hopes. Throughout the educational tour in Canada they forgot any suspicions that may have been stirred by Lt.-Gov. MacDonnell and devoted no little time to assuring the Canadian people that they came in no selfish mood nor in a cringing, begging, attitude but rather with full hands and open hearts. Only Prince Edward Island delegates were comparatively lukewarm from Charlottetown to Toronto, *and return*.

But, if the delegates from the Maritimes had achieved a union of hearts and of understandings at Quebec and amidst the attendant festivities, the necessary secrecy which had surrounded the drafting of the Quebec Resolutions was maintained longer than public opinion could bear, and garbled reports reaching the Maritime Provinces wrought havoc with their well-laid plans. In this atmosphere the opponents of Con-

federation were able to whip up an opposition that caused no end of trouble to the unionist statesmen and left behind it a legacy of suspicion and ill-will which has been like an ulcer in the side of the Dominion. It likewise led the Imperial Government to resort to coercion, at the behest of Canada—coercion which made Nova Scotia in particular feel that the decline in her ancient leadership dates from the irruption of the Canadian delegates into the Charlottetown Conference.

The details of this story cannot be recounted here. It may be said in general, however, that the opposition in New Brunswick, which was probably factious, as New Brunswick had more to gain from the Inter-colonial Railway than any of the other provinces, was directly but easily overcome by Imperial pressure; that Imperial pressure was exerted to the fullest extent in Nova Scotia on behalf of the triumphant Confederate faction; and that it was unsuccessfully exerted in Prince Edward Island, which was finally included in the Union only after the Imperial Government had declined further to pay the salary of the Lieutenant-Governor and had bluntly announced that no indemnity for the abuses of the landlord system could ever be expected from it.

It would appear that the Imperial Government, having once committed itself to the plan of Union, became less concerned about public opinion as distinct from a Legislative majority; that it took careful steps to secure governors favourable to the movement—Gordon of New Brunswick being reprimanded and MacDonnell of Nova Scotia being supplanted; and that it put into the hands of these governors every resource at its command, short of direct coercion. These influences were exerted chiefly through the problem of defence and the proposed renewal of the Reciprocity Treaty with the United States.

In regard to the Reciprocity Treaty the colonies were told that their views would be heard only through a Confederate Trade Council, which was an excellent illustration of the advantages of Union from the Imperial point of view; and, in regard to defence, a matter of much concern to the Colonies at this time because of their proximity to the United States, which was in a very uncertain temper and struggling to reabsorb its large army into peaceful industry, the Maritime Provinces were all told quite frankly that if they continued to rely upon Great Britain for protection they should be willing to accept advice from her as to what political measures would most likely conduce to that end.

This thinly-veiled coercion, coupled with the Fenian Raid and Lt.-Gov. Gordon's conversion, which transmuted Confederation from a matter of public opinion into a matter of executive conscience, had great weight with New Brunswick, which in 1866 completely reversed its decision of the previous year, and voted for Union. Prince Edward Island, true to its independence complex, replied by a "No-Terms" resolution, deliberately drafted so as to prevent the appointment of delegates to England, lest there they should be won over by the smiles of favour.

In Nova Scotia Imperial pressure did not at first appear, as such, because the substitution of Williams of Kars for Lt.-Gov. MacDonnell was soothing to Nova Scotian pride, and because the Provincial Government, taking advantage of the fact that it still had two years of life, refused to test public opinion by an election. Consequently the Anti-Confederate party was confident that it could rely upon the spirit of fair-play in England to see justice done to the under-dog. This was the hope of Howe and his fellow-delegates. This was the hope of the entire Anti-

Confederate group. But their hopes were dashed to the ground, for the Imperial Government had made up its mind before the struggle began; and when the Anti-Confederates found that the Imperial Government sided with Canada, and with Tupper who seemed to be in league with her, they drank the gall and wormwood of those who discover that all Imperial governments, like "God," are "on the side of the big battalions." Gone was Nova Scotian pride and Nova Scotian leadership! Instead of being federated with the British North American Provinces, she had been annexed to Canada and she had been coerced at the request of Canada! Psychologically, therefore, if not from the point of view of commerce and industry, Nova Scotia was sorely wounded by Confederation.

Little can be gained by speculating as to what might have been if Confederation had not been forced to an issue in 1867. Perhaps, like the South American Colonies, the British American Provinces might have become little republics. Perhaps, the West would have been annexed to the United States almost immediately, and the Maritime Provinces might have been absorbed by peaceful penetration. Perhaps, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia would have united at that time and Confederation would have taken place later under more satisfactory conditions.

It may be that the Maritime Provinces would have been better off commercially and industrially if they had been allowed to remain aloof from Canada. It is possible that they could have made better commercial arrangements with the United States apart from Canada. The abortive Bond-Blaine Convention between Newfoundland and the United States is an instance to the point. On the other hand, they might have been unable to resist the attractive power of their Southern neighbour, especially if Great Britain had ceased to assume obligations for defence as she might have done; for there is no doubt that a united Canada has seemed more worth while to Great Britain than the scattered British American Colonies did, and besides it has needed much less direct aid.

At any rate, it is unfair to blame Confederation for the decline of the ship-building industry of the Maritime Provinces, or for the importation of New Zealand butter into Nova Scotia, or for the tendency of Nova Scotians to look to government for a livelihood, a weakness older than Haliburton and severely castigated by Sam Slick. But it is none the less incumbent upon the Dominion to remove if possible the Maritime sense of wrong. Perhaps, some help might come through a wider union to include the West Indian Islands. In that way the Maritime Provinces might recover some of their commercial prosperity, as ferries between the West Indies and Western Canada. But, with Confederation as it is, the Dominion should do all in its power to redeem the promises of the Canadian Delegates in 1864, to make the Intercolonial a bond of Union regardless of cost, to subsidize the Maritime Provinces so that they may not have to resort to heavy taxation for local purposes, to grant such subventions to coal and steel as will make it possible for the Middle Provinces to dispense with these American products, to give such encouragement as may be necessary to enable the fishing industry to come into its own, and to encourage immigration to the East as well as to the West.

When that day comes the Maritimers will be able to recapture some of the enthusiasm of McCully who in this city, on November 3, 1864, hoped to be able to apply even to Ontario, Scott's immortal line, which Haliburton had long since appropriated for Nova Scotia alone—"This is my own, my native Land."