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BRITISH COLUMBIA—ANNEXATION OR CONFEDERATION?

By HUGH L. KEENLEYSIDE

By the treaty which settled the Oregon Boundary in 1846, the Pacific coast of North America between 49° and 54° 40' north latitude, and including Vancouver Island,¹ was definitely declared to be part of the British domain. In all the standard and conventional histories of the continent the struggles, intrigues and arguments which preceded the signing of this treaty are considered at length, and the justice of the ultimate compromise is discussed. Yet these histories pass over in silence a period some twenty years later when the destiny of the same region again became uncertain.² In 1846 there was but a slight possibility of the surrender of this district by Great Britain; in 1868 it was almost questionable whether the Crown either desired, or would be able, to retain it.

Due to a multiplicity of circumstances in the years before Confederation, the annexation of British Columbia to the United States appeared to be the almost inevitable solution of what was from the British point of view, a very unfortunate situation. An insignificant incident might easily have altered the whole course of western history and have given the status of American territory to a region that is to-day the richest section of the Canadian Dominion. Had this event occurred, Canada would in the 20th Century have been barred from the Pacific, her development would have been delayed, her future growth retarded. Vancouver, already the largest port in the Dominion,³ would now be on American soil, and Canadian trade with the Orient would be practically non-existent. On the other hand, the United States would have gained a territory rich in timber, minerals and fish; a region of almost unlimited water-power, and of scenic beauty unsurpassed. All this was at stake in the crucial years between 1866 and 1870, yet little interest was displayed at the time, and historians have ignored it since.

Eliminating the anthropological and ethnographical significance of the Pacific coast Indians,⁴ the early history of British Columbia is synonymous with that of the various fur-trading companies. The fur business was a thriving industry and save for an occasional traveller or explorer the officers of the North West Company or the Hudson's Bay Company were the only Europeans in the region.⁵ Gradually, however, settlers appeared and in 1849 the Colony of Vancouver Island was founded with Richard Blanshard as Governor. He was shortly succeeded by the famous James Douglas, Chief Factor of the Hudson's Bay Company.⁶

The fur trade remained the economic backbone of the Colony, however, until, in 1858, gold was discovered on the Fraser river, and, in 1860,

¹ The definition of the Boundary was so inexact that it later resulted in two disputes—the San Juan and the Alaskan affairs. *Supra*.

² A valuable article on the annexation movement in B.C. is Sage, *The Annexationist Movement in B.C.*, in *Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada*, 1927, Sect. II, pp. 97-110.

³ According to figures supplied by the Dominion Bureau of Statistics, Vancouver leads all Canadian ports in the number of vessels entered and cleared, and in coastal as well as ocean tonnage.

⁴ By 1863 there were only about 8,000 Indians in the Province, *Cf. R. C. L. Brown, British Columbia*, New Westminster, 1863, p. 3.

⁵ These companies united in 1821.

⁶ See Sage's *Life of Douglas*; and *Biographical Dictionary of Well-known British Columbians*, Vancouver, 1890.

in the Cariboo. Immediately the character of the Colony changed, Victoria, being the only settlement of any size, became the headquarters of adventurers and prospectors of every type.⁷ In three months it is estimated that twenty thousand immigrants entered through this port.⁸ The vast majority of these men were Americans, principally from the deteriorating mines of California.⁹ There were many, however, from the eastern states and from England, with the result that Victoria shortly achieved a distinctly cosmopolitan aspect.¹⁰

The newcomers were an extraordinary aggregation of men; the majority of them were hardy, courageous, enterprising and self-reliant. With these virtues however was coupled an unusual proficiency in the vices common to such men in such an environment.¹¹ The quiet villages of Victoria and New Westminster were soon following the lead of the godless San Francisco.

The economic and social results of this sudden influx caused a great increase in the difficulties of government, and Douglas soon found it necessary to exceed his powers in order to control the situation that developed on the mainland. Realizing the need of action, in August, 1858, the Imperial Government passed an "Act to provide for the government of British Columbia," which formed the mainland region into an Imperial colony, and Douglas was here also appointed Governor.¹² Vancouver Island was to remain as a separate colony, but the two could unite at the will of the colonial legislators and on the acquiescence of the Queen.¹³

At first it appeared as though the American immigrants would soon outnumber the British to such an extent that the colonies would of necessity become a part of the American union. As the initial excitement died down, however, and as many of the miners, disappointed in their hopes of midatic wealth, left the colony, the balance became restored, and in 1862 an increased British immigration tightened the Imperial bonds.¹⁴ But with the working out of the placer mines, and the practical collapse of the "rush" the two Pacific colonies became involved in ever increasing difficulties. The Imperial Government was prodigal of advice but did little in the way of the financial assistance, which the colonies so badly needed. In an effort to improve conditions Vancouver Island and British Columbia united in 1866, pooling resources and debts, and endeavouring by the reduction of administrative offices to alleviate the economic stringency.¹⁵

Although the population of the new Colony of British Columbia totalled only 10,000 souls, the public debt in 1866 was \$1,300,000, and one-quarter of the annual income was needed to meet the interest charges.¹⁶ To understand fully the deplorable situation which now faced the colony, it is necessary to appreciate its complete isolation from other parts of the British realm. The inhabited regions of Canada were two thousand miles

⁷ Ballantyne, *Handbook to the New Gold Fields*, Edinburgh, 1858.

⁸ Sage, *The Gold Colony*, *Can. Hist. Rev.*, June, 1922.

⁹ Howay, *The Early History of the Fraser River Mines*, Victoria, 1926.

¹⁰ Brown, *op. cit.* p. 52.

¹¹ Sage, *The Annexationist Movement in B.C.*, p. 97.

¹² Downie, *Hunting for Gold*, San Francisco, 1893.

¹³ Cornwallis, *The New El Dorado*, London, 1858.

¹⁴ Howay, *op. cit.*

¹⁵ Sage, *The Gold Colony*.

¹⁶ Howay, *British Columbia, From the Earliest Times to the Present*, 4 vols., Vancouver, 1914. Vol. II, pp.

48-49.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* p. 50.

¹⁸ Brown, *op. cit.* p. 52.

¹⁹ Howay, *op. cit.* Vol. II, p. 227.

²⁰ *British Columbian*, April, 29, 1868.

away, and separated from British Columbia by almost impassable mountains, by desolate prairies, and the barren northern shores of the rock-bound lake Superior. A boat to England must round Cape Horn, or at best the passenger must cross the isthmus of Darien and embark again upon the Atlantic. The only foreign intercourse easily available was with the American settlers in Washington, Oregon and California, and upon these British Columbia depended for supplies of every description. Even here there was no proper system of postal communication, and letters to Portland or San Francisco had to be pre-paid in cash or else bear the American stamps which were sold in the post offices of New Westminster and Victoria.¹⁷ There was little industrial life in the colony, and agriculture was far from supplying the local demands.¹⁸

The physical barriers, however, were not the only obstacles to a firm union between the colony and the Mother Country. English opinion was far from unanimous as to the value or expediency of giving further support to the outposts of Empire. The *Times* did no more than express the common opinion in the following editorial comments:—

“British Columbia is a long way off. . . . With the exception of a limited official class it receives few immigrants from England, and a large proportion of its inhabitants consists of citizens of the United States who have entered it from the south. Suppose that the Colonists met together and came to the conclusion that every natural motive of contiguity, similarity of interests, and facility of administration induced them to think it more convenient to slip into the Union than into the Dominion. . . . We all know that we should not attempt to withstand them.”¹⁹

Lord Granville, Secretary of State for the Colonies, went even further and “expressed a wish that the British possessions in North America ‘would propose to be independent and annex themselves.’”²⁰

Here English colonizing spirit is seen at a low ebb. The Liberals, immersed in the philosophy of Richard Cobden, had grave doubts concerning the ethical and the pragmatic value of a strong Colonial policy. The Conservatives, prevented from exploiting the colonies for the good of the Mother Country, were inclined to cast them off as an hindrance and an expense. On the whole, English opinion was adverse, rather than favorable to any strong effort to retain British Columbia, and no very grave obstacles would have been opposed to a peaceful transfer to the United States, had this been urged by the colonials themselves.

Many considerations of local pride and immediate advantage urged British Columbia towards American annexation. As a state of the Union,²¹ local autonomy could be more fully exercised than as a province of the newly formed Dominion of Canada. With the elimination of all trade barriers between British Columbia and the United States, the necessities of life could be obtained more cheaply, trade would be stimulated, and intercourse facilitated. With a population almost equally divided between Americans and British; with Canada far off and little known; with the English homeland unresponsive and apathetic; with a tremendous financial burden and inadequate political institutions; in a physical situation impossible of defence and isolated from the British world; with all these factors urging her forward, the logical solution of the difficulties of British Columbia appeared to be found in annexation with her only neighbors—the Western states of the American union.

¹⁷ Sage, *Annexationist Movement in B.C.*, p. 98.

¹⁸ Howay, *op. cit.* Vol. II, p. 278.

¹⁹ *London Times*, quoted in *British Colonist*, Jan. 26, 1870.

²⁰ Sage, *op. cit.* p. 101.

²¹ B.C. would probably have been admitted as a territory at first (see below Banks Bill), but would soon have achieved statehood in accordance with the traditions of American expansion in the West.

It should be noted here that while Vancouver Island tended to favour annexation, the mainland was practically unanimous in support of federation with the Dominion of Canada. This situation was the result of a number of factors, outstanding among them being the fact that in the Union of 1866 the "Islanders" felt that they had been somewhat unfairly treated. They had been forced to accept the tariff laws of the mainland and even the seat of government was for some time removed from Victoria to New Westminster.²²

That many Americans fully expected annexation to result from the situation on the North Pacific coast is amply verified by a study of the legislative debates, forensic utterances and editorial comments of the period. The *New York News* anathematized the Whig party which during Polk's administration had "lost to the United States a territory more valuable than all the wealth of all the Indies," but added that the existing conditions pointed to an early annexation of British Columbia.²³ On July 2, 1866, one amiable but rather optimistic individual even went so far as to introduce into the House of Representatives a Bill "for the admission of the States of New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Canada East and Canada West, and for the organization of the territories of Selkirk, Saskatchewan and Columbia."²⁴ Another suggestion was that British Columbia should be accepted in liquidation of the Alabama claims.²⁵ As early as 1858 *Harper's Weekly* had declared that "many months cannot elapse before the Stars and Stripes float over the Fort Victoria."²⁶

At the close of the Civil War the "Manifest Destiny" convictions of the American people were held with peculiar intensity, and *any* destiny which involved the taking over of British territory was viewed with particular satisfaction. Few expositions of this visualization of the American people as the chosen race have the clarity and directness of the following portion of an address on the subject of British Columbia, delivered before a Washington State society by the Hon. Elwood Evans in 1870.²⁷ (The sentiment expressed was not unique but was held by the speaker in common with many Americans; the grammar, however, was peculiarly his own.)

"That it is the destiny of the United States to possess the whole of the northern continent I fully believe. . . . Our destiny, which must not, cannot be altered—a fiat which has the potency of irrevocable law—the forward march of Americanization until the whole continent shall be but one nation, with one sovereign government, one flag, one people." ²⁸

Great Britain had won British Columbia at the time of the Oregon Boundary dispute by graft, chicanery and deceit, therefore it is

"commendable patriotic pride,—not covetousness, or ambition for territorial expansion nor lust for power which justifies—commands the effort" to regain it.²⁹

Not all the settlers in British Columbia, however, were willing to forego their British allegiance, and many there were who preferred union with the Canadian Dominion—could suitable terms be arranged. "No union on account of love need be looked for," wrote one British Columbian. "The only bond of union . . . will be the material advantage of the

²² Sage, *op. cit.* p. 100.

²³ Quoted in *Jacksonville (Ore.) Herald*, July 17, 1858.

²⁴ Introduced by Major Banks, July 2, 1866, Sir E. W. Watkins, *Canada and the United States*, p. 128 ff.

²⁵ Report, U.S. Senate Committee on Pacific Railroads, 1869. Cf. *British Columbian*, May 18, 1869.

²⁶ Quoted in *Victoria Gazette*, October 1, 1858.

²⁷ *The Reannexation of B.C. to the U.S., Right, Proper, and Desirable*; delivered before Tacoma Library Association, Jan. 25, 1870; published in pamphlet form, Harvard Library, cop. 9. p. 3.

²⁸ *Ibid.* p. 3.

²⁹ *Ibid.* p. 11.

country, and the pecuniary benefits of the inhabitants. Love for Canada has to be acquired by the prosperity of the country and from our children."³⁰ In other words, many of the colonists were willing, or desirous, of remaining within the Empire if some solution could be found for their economic and political troubles. It is an interesting fact that the strongest advocates of Confederation throughout this period were also the most sturdy opponents of the existing government in British Columbia.³¹ Discontent was rampant in the colony. It was felt that England had given little but advice, that the government was arbitrary and wasteful, and that prosperity could not return while the colony remained in the Empire—unless connection by road and rail was formed with Canada.³² In 1867 a petition had been sent to the home government by a group of citizens of Victoria, which asked that in view of the exigencies of the situation the colony be allowed to join the United States.³³ Although this plea was heartily denounced by many other British Columbians, a second petition was circulated in 1869. On this occasion the document was addressed to President Grant, and requested him to intercede with the British Government, and to arrange for the transfer of the colony to the United States. A report that the leaders in this movement were to be arrested, led the *Olympia Tribune* to publish the following statement which gives an incidental sidelight upon conditions in the Washington Territory:—

"We understand that the ruling powers of British Columbia. . . will arrest and punish the leaders of the annexation movement if it cannot be otherwise suppressed. We warn the rulers against such folly. The incarceration of a few men longing for American citizenship would fan into flame a fire long smouldering in our midst, and bring upon the people of that country a force of filibusters who under the pretext of releasing the prisoners would really seek the overthrow of the British Dominion upon this coast."³⁴

To this the *Victoria Colonist* aptly replied that at the time the abortive movement was abandoned the document bore considerably less than fifty signatures.³⁵ Whatever the number of signatures, President Grant ignored the petition, and its only effects were to assist in crystallizing opinion in British Columbia, and in providing an argument for American expansionist orators. The petition did, however, reach the United States Senate and the Committee on Pacific Railways quoted from it in its report in 1869. The Committee at that time felt that the construction of an American line to the north Pacific would almost inevitably result in the annexation of British Columbia.³⁶

In January, 1868, a great meeting had been held in Victoria, at which Amor de Cosmos,³⁷ one of the most picturesque figures in Canadian history, argued eloquently in favour of Confederation, and in opposition to union with the United States. As a result of his efforts a committee was selected to urge upon Governor Seymour, and upon the Dominion Government, the desirability of uniting the Dominion and the colony. On the 25th of March Ottawa replied to the representatives of this committee

³⁰ Quoted in *British Columbia*, compiled by H. J. Bram, London, 1912, p. 44.

³¹ The Governor and his officials feared to lose their positions under Confederation and therefore delayed and hindered the movement. Some of them even favored annexation—as did Dr. J. S. Helmcken, first speaker of the Legislative Assembly of Vancouver Island and son-in-law of Douglas. Dr. Helmcken was later sent to Ottawa as one of three commissioners to negotiate terms of union. See Sage, *op. cit.* p. 106 ff.

³² *British Colonist*, August 15, 1868.

³³ Howay, *op. cit.* Vol. II, p. 280.

³⁴ *Olympia Tribune*, Nov. 20, 1869.

³⁵ *Victoria British Colonist*, Nov. 24, 1869.

³⁶ Sage, *op. cit.* pp. 103-104.

³⁷ This interesting figure was born at Windsor, N.S., with the prosaic name of William Alexander Smith. He emigrated to California, changed his name, came to Victoria in the gold rush of 1858 and established the *British Colonist*. Later he became Prime Minister of B.C., and then member of the Dominion House.

in the following terms: "The Canadian Government desires union with British Columbia and has opened communication with the Imperial government on the subject of the resolutions, and suggests immediate action by your legislature and passage of an address to Her Majesty regarding union with Canada. Keep us advised of progress."³⁸ The Legislative Council of British Columbia, however, was controlled by the annexationists, and the supine governor was too weak to support either cause.³⁹

In May, 1868, the Confederation League was organized. As expressed in its title the object of this body was to secure the entry of British Columbia into the Dominion of Canada. On September 14 a convention was held at Yale—the head of navigation on the Fraser river—at which the Governor and the Legislative Council were severely criticized for their failure to forward the cause of Confederation, and for misgovernment in general.⁴⁰ But in spite of the interest aroused by the League, the elections of December, 1868, went against its leaders, and the Legislative Council by a vote of eleven to five condemned the taking of any action at that time.⁴¹

During the summer of 1869 one of the great obstacles to Confederation was removed when the Dominion Government took over the rights of the Hudson's Bay Company to the territory between British Columbia and Canada proper. Thus the way for the transcontinental railway was opened—and such a railway was the *sine qua non* of all schemes of Confederation. This matter cannot be too strongly emphasized. Without the prospect of railroad communication with Canada, British Columbia would certainly have joined the American Union. The patriotic *British Colonist* warned the Canadian Government that if the enterprise stopped at the east of the Rockies, "it may stop there for good as far as British Columbia is concerned. Whatever may be the pecuniary interests and necessities of Canada we know ours to demand immediate consolidation by the only bond strong enough to retain British Columbia."⁴² The same paper again wrote that "of all the conditions usually attached to a union of this colony with Canada, that of early establishment of railroad communication from sea to sea is the most important. If the railroad scheme is utopian, so is Confederation. The two must stand or fall together."⁴³

Governor Seymour died in May, 1869—an event of great good fortune for the loyalists of the Colony. At a time when British Columbia had needed a leader, it had been ruled by a man whose strongest attitude was a tentative negation.

The Imperial Government was now enabled to appoint Mr. Anthony Musgrave, whose energetic personality was the precise antithesis of that of the willowy Seymour.⁴⁴ The processes of government, however, were slow, and due to an accident the new Governor was not able at once to attend to the vital problem of Annexation or Confederation. As a result, during the winter of 1869-70 a resurgence of annexation sentiment was evident. "Annexation may now be said to be rampant in this community," wrote the editor of the *Colonist*. "It no longer lurks in secret

³⁸ Hon. S. L. Tilley to H. S. Seeley, March 25, 1868. Given in Begg, *History of British Columbia*, Toronto, 1894, p. 377.

³⁹ *British Columbian*, April 29, 1868.

⁴⁰ *Confederation Papers*, pp. 18-26. Gosnell & Coats, *Sir James Douglas*, (The Makers of Canada Series), London, 1906, pp. 311-312.

⁴¹ *British Columbian*, Feb. 20, 1869.

⁴² *British Colonist*, Jan. 19, 1870.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, Feb. 2, 1870.

⁴⁴ See Howay, *Governor Seymour and Confederation; and Governor Musgrave and Confederation* in *Trans. of the Royal Society of Canada*, 3d Series.

places and shuns publicity. It may be said, and doubtless with much truth, that the Annexationists are for the most part American citizens who, having adopted this colony as their home, are naturally anxious that the institutions and the flag of the Fatherland should extend over it. But the party is not solely composed of such."⁴⁵ Two of the Victoria papers vigorously supported Annexation, and it was obvious that a crisis was approaching. The American people were again interested in the question by the introduction of the Corbett resolution in the Senate. This resolution contained instructions to the Secretary of State to "inquire into the expediency of . . . the transfer of British Columbia to the United States."⁴⁶ The resolution was not, however, acted upon.

The crisis came in British Columbia with the meeting of the Council in February, 1870. Governor Musgrave had prepared for this meeting a statement urging immediate consideration of terms of Confederation. The insistent character of the Governor's demand bore down the opposition, and in spite of the protests of Dr. Helmcken and a few other staunch annexationists, the desired resolution was passed. This was the turning-point of the contest, and, when on April the 13th a great meeting was held in Victoria, the *Colonist* was able to report that "The most ardent advocate of Confederation with responsible government must have felt satisfied with the result. The most intense enthusiasm pervaded the assemblage. The most vague hint in the direction of annexation was met with a howl of execration."⁴⁷ Thus rapidly did conditions change under the hand of an adroit and determined leader.

All that then remained was to decide upon the terms of union and this was done with mutual satisfaction. On July 20, 1871, British Columbia became an integral part of the Dominion.

In the carrying out of the terms of the union, the railroad agreement was the first in importance, and the long delays in construction resulted in much ill-feeling in British Columbia. The union had not been born primarily of love, and any failure on the part of the Dominion Government might easily have resulted in the withdrawal of the western province.⁴⁸ In 1878 the British Columbia Legislature went so far as to threaten separation, but a change of ministry at Ottawa, and a more energetic railway policy soon cleared the atmosphere,⁴⁹ and with the completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway in 1885, "Manifest Destiny" was finally cheated of its prey.

⁴⁵ *British Colonist*, Jan. 28, 1870.

⁴⁶ Quoted *ibid.*, Feb. 9, 1870.

⁴⁷ *British Colonist*, April 19, 1870.

⁴⁸ Bram, *op. cit.* p. 44.

⁴⁹ Goenell and Coats, *op. cit.* p. 323.