

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 External Relations of the Province of Canada

G. deT. Glazebrook

Volume 17, numéro 1, 1938

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/300175ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/300175ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The Canadian Historical Association/La Société historique du Canada

ISSN

0317-0594 (imprimé)

1712-9095 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Glazebrook, G. d. (1938). The External Relations of the Province of Canada. *Report of the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Historical Association / Rapport de l'assemblée annuelle de la Société historique du Canada*, 17(1), 103–110. <https://doi.org/10.7202/300175ar>

THE EXTERNAL RELATIONS OF THE PROVINCE OF CANADA

By G. DE T. GLAZEBROOK

North America during the life of the old Province of Canada was a vast land whose population was still small, and in which there were great fertile areas untouched by the plough, and as yet the domain of the Indian and the fur trader. This was the heroic age of expansion from the settled areas into a vast, barely known, and largely unmapped hinterland. External relations, therefore, in one sense were between the old and the new districts. In Europe, where the territory had long since been occupied and brought under the rule of a number of political units, expansion meant penetration of the land of a neighbouring state. In America there was space for expansion into further areas held by the same state; so that—as a symbol of the different conditions of the new world—the word “frontier” was given a new meaning expressing the boundaries laid down by nature, and constantly receding.

Yet even with this untenanted empire to exploit, the tide of expansion at times threatened to overflow the boundaries between the countries of North America; then the grammar of politics re-asserted itself and the word “frontier” took on again its older meaning. The boundaries—as North Americans prefer to call them, actuated apparently by some dim sense of superior virtue—displayed the old symbols: fortifications and customs-houses. And the boundaries were disputed in the old-fashioned ways: the battles of maps, the battles of diplomacy, and the battles of the sword. Sometimes the boundaries held under pressure, or were shifted in detail by common agreement. A case of the latter was the boundaries of New Brunswick with the United States. And sometimes, on the other hand, they broke before invading armies, as when Texas was wrested from Mexico by the *force majeure* of the United States.

The people of the Province of Canada knew the problem of a “frontier” under both its meanings. The great majority of them were still faced with pioneer conditions, or something not far removed from them. They had their “frontiersmen”, as the pages of scores of contemporary accounts attest. But they were also much concerned with external relations, partly by necessity, partly by design. When they looked abroad Canadians saw the lands they had left, in sorrow or in anger, a year, a generation, or more before. The bulk of the people of Lower Canada, divided long from their mother country, saw it much changed, threatened by the hand of radicals in religion and in politics. Their feelings were largely of ill-defined affection. It was the real, the only purely sentimental bond between Canadian people and their land of origin. The immigrants from Great Britain had mixed feelings, compounded of filial affection, criticism, and hope of gain. They varied from the comparatively prosperous English middle-class family, which dragged its silver and its piano to a landed estate in the colony, to the destitute Irish immigrants of 1847 with little hope, and little reason to venerate their native land. That part of the population which came from the United States was coloured both by the *émigré* sentiments of the United Empire Loyalists and the enterprising commercialism which had so flourished on the soil of North America.

With such a varied background, the people of Canada could hardly be without interest in affairs beyond their own borders. Those of France touched them lightly. The other British provinces as yet seemed remote: and people with so many mother countries may be excused for a comparative lack of interest in their cousins. It was to the United Kingdom or the United States that they chiefly looked: in hope or in fear, in confidence or in disgust. The Province of Canada bred many views, and the least of these was isolation.

No doubt there were many families, living in remote farming areas, who heard little of the outside world. But for the rest, while news travelled slowly, it was surprisingly full. Of private correspondence we have only samples now, but it may safely be assumed that many people, especially the more recent immigrants, were told by their friends and relations of what was happening in the land they had left. The main body of news from abroad was carried by the newspapers. Though most of the papers were small in size—four pages were normal—they contained a large proportion of foreign news. For the most part this was obtained by the simple process of copying from English or American papers; but while this appears to give a sameness to the news, it is not far removed from the later system of syndicated reports. Some of the Canadian journals had their own correspondents in London or in Paris, who sent them weekly budgets on the state of trade, politics, or any events of interest. With the introduction of steam vessels on the Atlantic in the 'thirties reports came more quickly from abroad, and further speed was added with the completion of lines of telegraph. In 1847 telegraphy was in operation from Quebec to Toronto, and from Toronto to Buffalo, there connecting with the American lines to New York and Boston.

Assuming, as seems reasonable, that editors followed the topics that interested their readers, the newspapers show what was for a simple community a surprising breadth. Sometimes the comments reveal a naïveté that may readily be traced to lack of background, as for example, on the form of government in China. What is more illuminating—and not peculiar to the period—is the interpretation of foreign affairs in the light of local views and issues. In 1848 Kossuth appeared much in the public eye, and occasioned a somewhat startling debate between a liberal and a conservative editor as to whether he was a hero of democracy or a hypocrite. The French revolution of 1848 was a subject of major interest to the Lower Canada papers particularly, and it is revealing to see how a moderate liberal paper like *La Minerve* thrills to the democracy that it saw in Lamar-tine, only to shrink from the socialism that for a time held the field. All through these articles on France, which appeared for weeks, one sees the rather unreal phrases about "les nobles enfants de la France que nous pouvons aimer comme des frères"; but one sees also two notes that strike a more realistic tone. The one is struck when the editor, in explaining why he devotes so much space to the events of Europe in 1848, says: "Pouvons-nous rester étrangers au réveil des peuples, des nationalités?"; the other by the constant warning that, in approving the revolution in Paris, it must be remembered that there is an important distinction between liberty and licence. Only on rare occasions, such as in 1856 when Belvèze was sent to establish trade relations between France and Canada, could

the French Canadian think in terms of something more solid than historic and intellectual affinity.

The English Canadians were in a somewhat different relation to their mother country, for the political bond added a sense of reality. When England was engaged in the Crimean War and the Indian Mutiny, the question of help from Canada was one that could be talked of in terms of colonial regiments. That thought necessarily softened the raptures of kinship, yet, even so, an important Toronto paper, *The Patriot*, trumpeted aloud that, "if the necessities for men should become greater than they are, or Britain's foes should become too many for her defenders, Canada will willingly mingle blood with her blood, and gladly help to bear aloft her flag and her fame".

Many foreign, or external, influences were so fundamental that they were hardly issues; for in one sense all the ideas and all the institutions were in their basis European, though becoming more or less modified in the North American environment. On the other hand, when the ideas of Europe, or indeed of the United States, changed, there was necessarily a question of how far the new course would affect Canada. The principal churches in Canada were still, in varying degrees, linked to their parent body, in Rome or in England. This change in dogma might be reflected in the new world; but curiously enough, because of the peculiar position and character of the Roman Church in Canada, neither the struggle concerning Catholic emancipation in England, nor the revival of ultramontanism on the continent, had much direct meaning for the province. Both education in the formal sense and voluntary reading owed much to Europe. Bishop Strachan was defending an outpost for the cause of denominational education, while Egerton Ryerson was no less in the tradition of the English reformers. The booksellers' lists show standard English, French, and American authors; and new books were regularly imported with other goods in the spring. When, in 1856, a disciple of Lamartine visited Canada in behalf of the poet and politician, he was greeted with enthusiasm in Quebec and Montreal. Charles Dickens, who was already familiar to Canadian readers, visited Canada in 1842 and was given a leading place in regimental theatricals. Innumerable further instances might be cited of external influence on Canada. To quote one, and that in a field very different from education, the banking systems of both the United Kingdom and the United States were copied in Canada, and the two types for a time competed for public favour.

The influence on Canada of the ideas and institutions of Europe and the United States was continuous and many-sided. In some aspects it is intangible, but in others it had an obvious reality because it affected the immediate interests of the population of the province. Foreign policy in the narrow sense of the term was beyond the control of the provincial Parliament, for diplomatic relations with other countries were conducted through the normal machinery of the British Parliament and Foreign Office. There were complaints sometimes against the results obtained, but there was little or no suggestion that Canada should handle her own relations with foreign states. Much as the Liberal papers might attack Metcalfe, much as the Tory papers might fulminate against Bagot or Elgin, they were thinking only in terms of domestic affairs. Actually, they had little of which to complain in English diplomacy. The Webster-Ashburton Treaty

aroused only by an effort any misgivings in Canada. And was it not that desperate radical, the "Earl of dignified neutrality", who brought back from Washington his gift of reciprocity to the Tory merchants who had praised with faint damns the Montreal hooligans that stoned that peer in 1849?

There is no need to rest a case on any vague conception of imperial loyalty in order to explain the difference in the attitudes toward local autonomy and control of foreign affairs. The most fundamental aspect of foreign relations—defence of their territory—was tacitly taken by Canadians as the best reason for acceptance of imperial control and imperial strength. There was little that was new in the threat from the United States after 1840. American expansion and manifest destiny had long been feared in Canada, but there were new examples of their force. The border incidents of 1837-38 gave a fresh impetus to the movement to attain security, and the extensions of American territory in other directions were carefully watched as examples of the policy of the republic. The annexation of Texas and the war with Mexico were not infrequently cited as acts of aggression, as was the annexation of California. The outbreak of the Civil War brought further problems, and there were not lacking individuals in the United States who talked of the annexation of Canada. There were in Canada a variety of opinions on the existence of danger from the United States, or on the extent of the danger. On the whole the Tory papers felt it was real, while some of the Liberal papers either saw no menace, or argued that it should not be taken too seriously. But certainly both in the early and late years of the old province's existence there was ground for serious apprehension. Before the long drawn-out case of McLeod was settled, the British government took the view that his execution would be more than likely to lead to war. During the Civil War both official and public opinion saw invasion as a real possibility.

Given this grave situation, much thought was necessarily given to available methods of defence. The long water boundary was a serious problem, and the limits in the Rush-Bagot Agreement were exceeded by both signatories.

"Lord Stanley is aware", wrote James Stephen in 1843, "that the Force on the Lakes has, for some time, considerably exceeded the amount prescribed by the arrangement with the government of the United States in 1817, the excess having been vindicated by the necessity arising out of the State of the Frontier, that necessity having now terminated Lord Stanley considers that the time has arrived when the Force should be reduced to the original amount."¹

The relation of security and disarmament, however, followed its usual course, and when, two years later, the Oregon dispute was at its height, the British government again made naval preparations. Hearing that the Americans were evading the agreement by the construction of merchantmen capable of being converted into war vessels, the British followed the same course, arranged to subsidize the building of steamers, and sent over experts to explain the necessary fittings.² Later in the year, perhaps inspired by the action of Congress in preventing the president

¹Public Archives of Canada, *Series G*: James Stephen to H. N. Addington, Feb. 10, 1843.

²*Series G*: Stanley to Metcalfe, April 17, 1845; and April 18, 1845.

from constructing some ambiguous revenue cruisers, Stanley decided to postpone the vessels he had planned.³ After taking the opinion of experts, the government concluded that the lower St. Lawrence could not be defended, and proposed to rely on batteries at Quebec, possibly, with works of some kind further up the St. Lawrence.⁴ To improve communications, before the Grand Trunk was built, the governor-general was urged to use any means in his power to expedite the completion of the St. Lawrence Canal and the enlargement of the Welland.

Land defences provided a much more controversial theme, because they were held to be, in part, an obligation of the Canadian people. The construction of any elaborate fortifications was never seriously considered, and it was the view of the British government that the colony was defensible by a small imperial force if, and only if, the local militia was adequate as a complementary force.⁵ The imperial government however, was anxious to withdraw some of its troops from Canada; and, as its military problems elsewhere became more serious in the 'fifties, that anxiety correspondingly increased. In Canada there were constantly voices raised against this alarming procedure. The view was expressed on the one hand that the province should be more ready to play its part in defence, and on the other that, if the British government insisted on regarding Canada as a colony, it was under an obligation to defend it. This was the kind of argument that could have no early end; but in the meanwhile the imperial troops were gradually withdrawn.⁶

If Canadians were slow to develop an army for the defence of their own territory, they showed some enthusiasm in rendering assistance in British wars elsewhere. There was talk of enlistment of Canadians for service in the Crimean War, but it went no further than talk. In the Indian Mutiny, however, numerous private offers to raise regiments did bear fruit in the creation of the 100th Royal Regiment of Foot, consisting of Canadians, although organized, equipped, and paid at English expense, and incorporated in the imperial army.

When American aggression appeared most likely, most of the people of Canada were conscious of the reality of foreign relations. In times of imminent stress some at least felt a sense of duty in affairs abroad. But the aspect of external affairs which most forcefully reminded the people of the province of this dependence on other countries, was foreign trade. With the opening of the navigation of the St. Lawrence each spring there appeared on the front page of the *Quebec Gazette* a picture of a vessel at a wharf unloading packages of all shapes and sizes. Underneath was a series of advertisements by the merchants of the town, explaining in elegant phrases that they had imported wines from France and England; clothes, fancy goods, hardware, salt, oakum, and stationery from England; tobacco and flour from the United States; and sugar from Nova Scotia. On the same page might be seen notices of ships about to sail for England, and advertising for cargoes.

³Series G: Pakenham to Aberdeen, March 29, 1845; Stanley to Cathcart, Dec. 23, 1845.

⁴Series G: Stanley to Metcalfe, June 4, 1845.

⁵The views of the British government on the defence of Canada are expressed at some length in Stanley to Metcalfe, Sept. 15, 1845 (*Series G*).

⁶See C. P. Stacey, *Canada and the British Army, 1846-1871* (London and Toronto, 1936).

In fundamentals this page expresses the economic situation of Canada in the 'forties. She was not self-sufficient, and only under pressure showed any desire to be so. Her staples of lumber, grains, and potash were exchanged for manufactured goods, and there only remained as a major source of business a share in the carrying trade within the continent as a whole. It is true, of course, that the Montreal merchants were the most enterprising and the most vocal; and that they competed for the largest prizes. Their views were not always those of the farming communities of Canada West or Canada East, but even the conservative *habitants* were at times conscious of some interest in foreign trade.

In the early 'forties Canada was in as favourable a position for foreign trade as legislation could put her, but the continuance of that position depended so largely on decisions on which they could have no influence, that the nerves of the merchants were continually frayed. Moreover, the circumstances changed rapidly. Sale of wheat in the British market was first threatened by the protection to English farmers provided by the corn laws, but for a time there was a compensating preference in the Canada Corn Act of 1843, which admitted Canadian wheat at a fixed duty of one shilling a quarter, and wheat milled in Canada at a proportionately low rate. This wide interpretation of imperial preference enabled Canadian merchants to attain their two principal objects: to sell exports in a protected market, and to draw American wheat into the St. Lawrence valley, there to be milled and exported as Canadian produce. The construction of canals was hurried on to facilitate the long-cherished aim of making the St. Lawrence system, the "natural" entry to the continent, fulfill its predestined role.

For a few brief years these favourable tariff arrangements combined with other factors to produce the contentment of prosperity, but it was not to be for long. In 1846 the decision was made in England to turn to free trade; the corn laws were abolished; and the preference on timber—the other staple export—was materially reduced. Business in any case declined, and the Canadian merchants, who were afflicted with the volatile temperament of their kind in North America, saw ruin before them, and hit out wildly in all directions.

The whole commercial edifice seemed to be crumbling. They protested against what they saw as neglect of their interests, and alternately pleaded and threatened. One argument they used has a wide significance. The cost of constructing canals had been met largely by the British government, either by direct gift, as in the case of the Rideau, or by loans, as in the case of the St. Lawrence canals. In 1842 the British government had guaranteed the interest on bonds to be issued up to the value of £1,500,000, and the treasury negotiated the sale of the issue, in parts, at favourable prices. After 1846 the view was held in Canada that the interest could no longer be met, since there would be a reduction in revenue from tolls on the canals, and that it was these tolls which had been regarded as the source of interest payments. In spite of this, however, the province asked for further loans, which were at length granted; and in the 'fifties an additional source of capital for public works was found in private investment in Canadian railways. The economic picture in Canada would have been very different indeed had it not been for the stimulating flow of English capital.

Many avenues of escape from the economic impasse consequent on free trade were explored. An immediate demand was for the repeal of the navigation acts, as far as they affected Canada; for with the virtual abolition of preference, the restriction on shipping became a burden rather than an advantage. The American drawback acts of 1845 and 1847 so increased the competition with the St. Lawrence route that it became necessary to encourage shipping, British or not, to help to pay for the new canals. The navigation acts were repealed, but left the main problem unsolved.

What was the solution? Some support was given to free trade, and an association to promote it was formed in Montreal. This plan, however, never received wide approval. More weight was put behind the move for a protective tariff. An imperial act of 1846 enabled the Canadian legislature to set a tariff without regard to preference on English goods, and in 1847 the first steps were taken towards a serious raising of duties. As soon as the news of the change was known came protests—both from exporters in the British Isles and from those interested in the fisheries in Canada. The imperial government took the attitude that it would not interfere with any measures adopted by the Canadian legislature for revenue purposes but that protective duties would be more than a Canadian affair. The Canadian tariff, of course, thus remained officially a revenue one, though there were advocates of protection both within the legislature and outside it.⁷ At the end of 1848 *La Minerve* argued that there were two distinct parties, free trade and protectionist; the Montreal *Economist* made a survey of Canadian resources and manufactures; and the Montreal *Gazette*, a protectionist paper, argued that there was neither a political nor an economic link remaining with the mother country.

The arguments on the tariff were earnest enough but there was a little unreality in trying to make of Canada a self-sufficient country, and the debate was not translated into party terms. While it was still going on, the annexation movement of 1849 provided a new excitement, and gave a new turn to the discussions on foreign relations. In Lower Canada opinion was very much divided, but in the upper part of the province there was little enthusiasm for the movement.⁸ Reciprocity was a more moderate alternative, and the British government was constantly urged to bring it into effect. For some years negotiations were unsuccessful, but when the treaty was finally secured in 1854 it stole the clothes of the annexationists.

In the Province of Canada it was as true as in any country that foreign policy was an extension of national interests. But the problem of deciding what those national interests were, and how they could best be pursued, was as difficult as anywhere. The farming communities of Canada West, the old settlements on the lower St. Lawrence, the vigorous commercial group—all had interests that might overlap, but were as often conflicting. The pace was made by minorities, but the tortoise had a way of catching up.

The people of Canada sketched their future external relationships in bold colours. Independence was often discussed and sometimes advocated;

⁷In 1852 Clark Gamble initiated a debate on protection (Edward Porritt, *Sixty Years of Protection in Canada* [London, 1908], 206).

⁸For a detailed study of contemporary opinion see C. D. Allin and G. M. Jones, *Annexation, Preferential Trade and Reciprocity* (Toronto, n.d.).

but it was almost always dismissed as impracticable, and to be no more than a step toward union with the United States. Direct talk of annexation to the republic was more common, but depended for any serious support on hardships like those of 1849. It was countered not only by the loyalty cry, but by specific objections to American institution. William Lyon Mackenzie, who was seldom accused of Tory inclinations, and who had lived in the United States, expressed most of the criticisms in his usual trenchant style. The despots of Europe, he argued, were bad enough, "but the greedy republicans are grasping at Texas, at Mexico, at California, at Cuba, at the Sandwich Islands; I may say at all creation—insatiable as death—yelping for freedom and the protestant religion while riveting the chains of perpetual bondage on the millions of Nebraska; and presenting in the commercial seaport of New York a local rule as vile, as unnecessary, as degraded, and as pillaging, *tho' elective*, as can be met with in Russia, Austria, Turkey or England, who sowed the seeds of dissension in Mexico, spread slavery over Texas, and wrested California by violence, fraud, and bloodshed from its owners . . . the covetous, unprincipled Yankee. . . ."^o

There remained the imperial connection, or some modification of it. There were almost infinite shades of views on "the connexion", but while many people were lukewarm, few were opposed on principle. During the Crimean War loyal addresses poured in from all parts of Canada West, and gifts to the patriotic fund were made by localities and organizations. The legislature made a grant of £20,000 for the widows and orphans of soldiers and sailors of England and France: for once the two mother countries were allies.

The 'forties and early 'fifties were the turbulent youth of the foreign policy of central Canada. By the 'sixties the energy was spent, and a more sedate Canada settled down in a *mariage de convenance* with the cousin on the Atlantic coast.

^o*Mackenzie's Weekly Message*, Dec. 15, 1854.