

# The Decline and Fall of the Empire of the St. Lawrence

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# THE DECLINE AND FALL OF THE EMPIRE OF THE ST. LAWRENCE

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## I

The phrase "the Empire of the St. Lawrence" made its first public appearance in the autumn of 1937 when the first edition of my book *The Empire of the St. Lawrence* was published. The phrase is thus only a little over thirty years old; but already, somewhat to the surprise of its inventor, it has acquired a symbolic and legendary significance. It has been regarded as the inspiration, at least in part, of a new school of Canadian historians and as the genesis of a new historical doctrine, the Laurentian interpretation of Canadian history. Its origins, now buried in a past which may seem virtually prehistoric to most of you, have been explained by several curious myths and legends. At moments, I have been visited by the thought that I have apparently founded a new religion; and this, to a person who has all his life been a highly sceptical anticlerical, is not an entirely agreeable reflection. At the same time, I have no wish to disavow the parentage of an idea. And I thought that I could not do better today than to talk to you for a while about the Empire of the St. Lawrence. I shall try, very briefly, to explain the origins of my first book and to indicate what I think the Empire of the St. Lawrence meant for Canada in the days of its greatness. Finally, I should like to suggest, at somewhat greater length, why I believe we are now witnessing the lamentable spectacle of its decline and fall.

*The Empire of the St. Lawrence*, it is sometimes confidently asserted, was the fruit of my friendship with Harold Innis; it was a typical example of the preoccupation of Canadian historians, in the 1930's, with economic themes, in reaction against the political and constitutional studies of the previous decade. These explanations, like most simple generalizations, happen to be wrong; the truth is more complicated and also, I feel, somewhat more interesting. At the risk of boring those among you who may be only too familiar with the facts, I ought to begin by saying that I never intended to be an historian of Canada. My ambition, on the contrary, was to do work in the history of Europe, preferably on some phase of the French Revolution; but this meant long years of research overseas, and at that time, the late 1920's, there were no fellowships, grants, or any kind of financial assistance for scholarship in the humanities and social

sciences. Out of my annual salary of \$1,800, I was able, though with difficulty, to finance a summer's work at the Archives and the National Library in Paris; but the effort left me completely broke, and I realized that it would be utterly impossible for me to carry on sustained historical studies in Europe or Great Britain. Yet I earnestly wanted to write history, and to begin at once. There was only one choice left, though it was a bad second or third choice — the history of my own country.

I went off to Ottawa in the summer of 1930 — it was my first visit to the capital — with a definite subject in mind. It was suggested, not by Harold Innis, whom I barely knew at the time, but by W. P. M. Kennedy, the Professor of Law at the University of Toronto, whose work had been done, not in Canadian economic, but in Canadian constitutional history. He proposed that I should do a biographical study of Lord Dalhousie, Governor-in-Chief of Canada from 1819 to 1828, whose papers had just been acquired by the Public Archives. These papers turned out to be very official and impersonal, and I soon lost interest in Dalhousie the man; but I could see possibilities in the quarrel which he and his supporters in the Executive and Legislative Councils were continually carrying on with the Assembly. I realized that I was committing myself to a fairly familiar story, the political conflict in Lower Canada which culminated in the Rebellion of 1837; and I decided that I must adopt a new approach to this more than twice-told tale. In the past, it had been viewed chiefly from the point of view of the *Patriotes* in the Assembly. I came to the conclusion that in order to get a novel and interesting subject, I must take the Conservatives in the Councils, the so-called *Chateau Clique*.

For some time I was very unhappy about my choice. I had always been told that the quarrel in Lower Canada was a constitutional dispute, envenomed by ethnic difference; but, on closer examination, this traditional explanation did not appear entirely satisfactory. It soon became obvious that a good many members of the Chateau Clique were merchants, or landowners and professional men who were closely connected with Montreal's staple trades. They did not seem to be very much concerned about language, religion, or British constitutional principles; but they hardly ever stopped talking about canals, river improvements, tariffs, imperial preferences, markets, and sources of supply. The evidence I was laboriously accumulating left me very dissatisfied, and I was occasionally tempted to throw up the whole enterprise; but I persevered, if only because I was determined to realize something out of my long months of effort. It was not, I think, until the winter of

1931-1932, that I began to understand that I had unwittingly got hold of a good, and even a great, subject. If ever an historian was reluctantly convinced by the weight of his own evidence, it was I.

The defeat of the St. Lawrence system in 1849 was the conclusion of my first book; but it did not seem to me to be the end of my theme. I determined to carry it forward to some undetermined date in the future; but for some time I could see no suitable approach to this second phase of my subject. The protagonist of the Empire of the St. Lawrence was the River itself; but it was obvious that the River could not play the same dominating role in the period after 1850. The Pacific railway, which had always interested me deeply, was a possible alternative; but, like the St. Lawrence, the railway was not, it seemed to me, a sufficiently comprehensive and unifying theme. It was not until several years later that I was attracted by the idea of writing a biography of John A. Macdonald. I began this work without properly appreciating its connection with my first book; but later I gradually came to believe that, in selecting Macdonald, I had stumbled upon the only satisfactory method of writing the second phase of the history of the Empire of the St. Lawrence. What I had written, if the word is not too pompous, was a trilogy on one theme.

## II

This Laurentian theme has its basis in the fact that the St. Lawrence is the one great river system that leads from the Atlantic Seaboard to the heart of the continent of North America. Its owners, the Canadians, have held in it a unique possession; and the realization of its potentialities has been one of the most persistent and compelling aims of their existence as a people. The river has inspired generations of Canadians to build a great territorial empire, both commercial and political, in the western interior of the continent. The prime feature of this imperial drive is therefore western expansion — expansion across the continent to the Pacific Ocean. At first, during the French regime and the early days of British rule, the undivided west was sought as a whole; but after the Treaty of 1783 had drawn an unnatural and unhistorical boundary line across the middle of the continent, the Canadians were faced with a choice between two alternatives and two quite different kinds of western expansion. They could seek to gain either an international commercial empire on both sides of the new boundary or a commercial and political empire to the north of it.

For three generations after 1783 the international commercial empire was the preferred alternative of Canadians. The fur traders of

the eighteenth century tried to hold the trade south of the Great Lakes. The millers and merchants of the nineteenth century hoped to monopolize the traffic of the new American middle west. With the aid of canals, river improvements, imperial preferences, and appropriate shipping regulations, they struggled to make the St. Lawrence the main commercial channel between Great Britain and the agricultural west of North America. In the end all these efforts proved vain. By the middle of the nineteenth century it was clear that the millers and merchants had failed, just as the fur traders had failed more than thirty years earlier. The international commercial empire had been lost; but beyond the international boundary, safely protected as British territory, lay another great empire, the British north-west. The fur traders had turned to it as a valuable alternative; and their successors, the Canadians of the mid-nineteenth century, swerved northward in exactly the same fashion. The first object of Confederation was the preservation of a separate British America in the new continent; the second aim was the acquisition of the whole of British America's patrimony in the north-west. The west, it was believed, would make Canada a nation, and the east-west axis would be its backbone.

Western expansion was thus the prime urge, and the main theme, of the Empire of the St. Lawrence; but two other themes, of only slightly less importance, had from the first been closely associated with it. In their struggle for western empire, the Canadians soon discovered that they were confronted by formidable rivals and needed the support of powerful friends. The rivals were the Thirteen Colonies, soon to become the United States, a far more powerful nation than British America, with western aims as vast as those of the St. Lawrence. The ally was Great Britain whose assistance could alone redress the dangerous imbalance of power on the North American continent. British military power had enabled British America to survive the American War of Independence and the War of 1812. The Old Colonial System, with its tariff preferences and shipping monopolies, had been the chief support of Montreal in its battle with New York for the trade of the new west. By itself the St. Lawrence system was doomed to defeat; even with British help, it had twice failed to gain its international commercial empire. But in the north-west, in acknowledged British territory, and with British assistance, it could make good its claim to the dominion it had inherited; and with British capital, British markets and British immigrants, it could settle and develop it.

The Anglo-Canadian alliance, which was the substantial reality beneath the formality of the imperial connection, was essential to the

St. Lawrence system. But the Canadians realized that they must have self-help as well as the assistance of others and that they must maximize their own strength in the unequal struggle for survival. The impulse towards unity in the interests of strength and expansion is one of the oldest and most powerful tendencies in the history of the Empire of the St. Lawrence. The merchants of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries struggled to prevent the partition of their empire by either provincial or international boundaries. They were the first to denounce the division of the old Province of Quebec into Upper and Lower Canada, and the first to propose its reunion in the Province of Canada. The Fathers of Confederation took over unaltered the old aim of unity for strength and expansion. Their principal leaders, Macdonald and Tupper for example, would have preferred a complete or legislative union for British America; but, since this was impossible, they tried to make the new Canada the most strongly centralized union that was possible under federal forms.

The primary purpose of Confederation was political; the creation of a new nationality. The union was the result of a political agreement among several provinces, not of a cultural compact between two cultural groups, English and French. At the Quebec Conference, the Fathers of Confederation acknowledged the presence of French Canada and provided certain safeguards for its continuance; but the resolutions on ethnic and cultural matters were few, precise in their wording, and limited in their scope. The distinctive cultural features of French Canada were confirmed in those parts of the new Dominion in which they had become established; but they were not extended farther territorially, and they were not intended to restrict the federal authority in directing national expansion and growth. In 1864-65, the memory of the long struggle between the merchants of Lower Canada and the French-Canadian *Patriotes* in the Assembly over the commercial development of the Province was still vividly present in the minds of the Fathers of Confederation. And there is no more significant episode in the long debate on the Quebec Resolutions in the Canadian legislature than the passage in which Cartier repudiated Papineau's opposition to economic change, and assured the English-speaking citizens of the future Province of Quebec that they need have no fear of Confederation, since their major interest, the economic progress of the nation, would lie in exclusive federal control.

### III

In my view, these are the four principal features or characteristics of the Empire of the St. Lawrence and of its subsequent political embodiment, the Canadian nation. At Confederation and

for a long time afterward, the permanence and the importance of these distinctive features seemed assured. They lasted, in fact, for another sixty years after Confederation, and it was not until the decade of the 1920's that signs began to multiply that they were losing their force. From then on, the familiar distinguishing characteristics of the Canadian nation began to weaken; and the historic themes of its history lost their old dominance. Up until the beginning of the Second World War the decline was gradual and slow; from that time it has hurried forward, with steadily increasing rapidity, towards what now looks like its inevitable and final fall. What has happened to Canada? Why did it change direction so decisively? And where is it now bound?

The first object of the Empire of the St. Lawrence was western expansion; the first aim of Confederation was the settlement and development of the north-west. The north-west was the common patrimony, and its occupation the joint endeavour, of all Canadians. The country, with the assistance of the national policies of immigration, railways, and tariffs, was organized on an east-west axis. The prairie wheatlands were linked with Canada's commercial and industrial base in the east, and with its overseas markets in the United Kingdom; and for more than half a century the main thrust of Canadian economic activity was transcontinental and transatlantic. The climax of this whole phase of our existence came in the great prosperity of the first decade of the twentieth century and its conclusion in the First World War. In many important respects, the First World War is the great divide in Canadian history, the great watershed of time from which Canadians can enjoy their last clear, spacious view of the Empire of the St. Lawrence. After the War, wheat, the great single export staple, gradually lost its unifying influence on the Canadian economy. In the 1920's, the grain trade fell deeply into trouble. During the depression, prairie agriculture collapsed, its people reduced to beggary, and much of its land in desolation.

The old, original Canadian west, the west of wheat fields and grain growers, never completely recovered from this disaster; and nothing has ever since replaced it as the great national enterprise and common interest of all Canadians. In the 1920's, the focus of economic attention shifted from the west to the north, to the water-power, minerals, and pulpwood forests of the Precambrian Shield. But these new export specialties were not national properties as the Dominion Lands in the west had been. They were provincial natural resources whose benefits accrued mainly to the capitalists and public treasuries of the provinces in which they lay. At first it seemed likely that the lion's share of the new riches would go to the central prov-

inces, which occupied most of the Precambrian Shield; but the discovery of oil in Alberta proved that the northern extension of the great central plains concealed treasures perhaps equally valuable. Alberta became the second province of the new west, the west independent of wheat. The first original province of the separate western economy was British Columbia, which had always felt detached from the prairie provinces, and increasingly found the outlets for its energies apart from the national transcontinental system.

The market for most of these new export staples was not the British Isles, but the continent of North America and chiefly the United States. The main direction of Canadian trade was shifting slowly but surely from east to south. Exports to the United States first began seriously to rival the value of exports to the United Kingdom after the First World War; after the Second, the dominance of the American market in Canadian trade became more solidly established every year. The east-west axis, transcontinental and transatlantic, had ceased to be the main line of Canadian endeavour; and while Vancouver, Edmonton, Calgary and Toronto, the cities close to the new economic activities, prospered mightily, the old capitals of the Empire of the St. Lawrence languished in decline. Winnipeg, the hub of the grain trade, had failed to become the metropolis of the west. Montreal, the old commercial centre from which capital, if it could get away, was fleeing, sank slowly into depression.

Along with the increasing weakness of the historic east-west axis, there went a corresponding decline in the old Anglo-Canadian alliance. This second great change in the character of the Empire of the St. Lawrence first manifested itself in the 1920's, that crucial decade significantly dominated by Mackenzie King. Up to that point, the old alliance had flourished; and during the First World War it had been put to new uses and had provided new outlets for Canada's expanding interests and energies. In the nineteenth century, the British Empire had ensured Canada's survival and growth in a continent dominated by the United States. In the first two decades of the twentieth century the British Commonwealth provided an opportunity for Canada, along with the other Dominions, to share the influence and take part in the decisions, of a world power. Borden proposed contributions to imperial defence in exchange for a voice in the determination of imperial foreign policy; and this formula for an effective co-operative Commonwealth was realized during and after the First World War in such bodies as the Imperial War Cabinet and the Prime Ministers' Conference of 1921. There Canada was able to



play a part in world politics such as she had never done before and would never do again.

All this was changed in the 1920's; and the change has been interpreted as the liberation of Canadian nationality from the hideous toils of British imperialism. Mackenzie King, already a stocky, barrel-like figure, with an audible wheeze when in full voice, is cast in the appealing role of a bulky St. George confronting a slaving imperial dragon. He is deified as the great Canadian nationalist, the legitimate heir of that other great Canadian nationalist, Wilfrid Laurier. In reality, of course, neither was a nationalist at all. Laurier was a neo-colonial who hoped that, with the help of both the Monroe Doctrine and the Britannic Peace, he would be kept in comfortable colonial security and go on building political railways for the rest of his life. King was not so much a Canadian citizen as a citizen of North America. The most important part of his academic training had been gained in the United States, and he spent five formative years as professional adviser in labour relations to the Rockefeller Corporation and other large American firms. Laurier, the neo-colonial, had simply tried to resist the development of the co-operative Commonwealth; King determined to destroy it. In Canadian politics his work is purely negative and destructive. He broke up the Britannic union without even attempting to devise policies for a separate and independent Canada. In effect, he prepared her for eventual absorption in the United States.

The Second World War offered a last chance for a revival of the Anglo-Canadian alliance, a last chance to return to the co-operative Commonwealth of the First World War; but it was a chance that neither Churchill nor King had the slightest intention of grasping. For eighteen months the war was fought by the Commonwealth alone; but King saw the dreadful spectre of imperial centralization in every proposal that Canada should take part in its direction. Churchill, who could hardly have cared less for the old Commonwealth of the settlement Dominions, was intent upon a virtual dictatorship in his own cabinet and was not in the least inclined to share his authority with Dominion Prime Ministers. Lloyd George's aim had been to satisfy the legitimate aspirations of the Dominions; Churchill's aim was to propitiate the United States. His central object, from the first, was to win the moral and material support of the American Republic, and if possible, to get it into the war. When this was successfully accomplished, he never gave another thought to the Dominions; they were useful to him only as a collective makeweight against the preponderating power of the United States. Together Churchill and Roosevelt exercised complete and exclusive control over

the forces and policies of the Commonwealth and the Republic. Canada had become an autonomous Dominion during the First World War; she reverted to the status of a dependent colony during the Second.

The post-war dissolution of the British Empire utterly changed the character of the Commonwealth. Its old military power was gone for ever; but as a link between East and West, a bridge between different races and contrasting ideologies, it might have had a considerable moral influence in international affairs. The Colombo Conference implied as much; but the promise of the Colombo Conference was never fully realized. Canada first betrayed its hopes by failing to follow the rest of the Commonwealth in the recognition of the People's Republic of China. The Korean War widened the division between the eastern successor states on the one hand and Britain and the older Dominions on the other; and the Suez crisis dealt the Commonwealth a heavy blow from which it has never really recovered. Today, the new African nations, who exercise with complete impunity their family privilege of pouring abuse on the Mother Country, are the only delegations that get much satisfaction out of the proceedings of a Commonwealth Conference. Britain views the old institution with obvious boredom and irritation. Her own course, oscillating uneasily between the security of her "special relationship" with United States and the attractions of the European Common Market, is highly uncertain. If she can save herself, which is doubtful, she can certainly give no help to Canada.

#### IV

Canada now stands alone. She has stood alone, in reality, ever since the beginning of the Second World War. And the fate that overtook the Empire of the St. Lawrence in both its fur-trading and gain-trading days has now overtaken Canada, the Empire's residuary legatee. Since 1940, Canada has been exposed to the irresistible penetrative power of American economic and military imperialism. The process by which the Dominion became a branch-plant dependency and a military satellite of the American Republic began with the Ogdensburg Agreement of 1940; and since then Canada's subordination to American foreign policy and American capital has continued progressively with scarcely a serious interruption. Canada joined Nato largely because the United States was certain to do so. Canada was taken in by the confidence trick which President Truman and his aides practised on the United Nations in 1950 and, like Britain, agreed to accept American leadership in the Korean War. Canada consented to the American fortification of her northland, and

thus implicitly permitted her defence policy to be determined by the anti-Communist mania that swept over the United States in the 1950's. In the meantime, under the benevolent supervision of C. D. Howe, the economic continentalist who was King's perfect associate, American ownership of Canadian industry grew apace.

This whole trend is now probably irreversible. At any rate, the experience of the last dozen years goes far to prove that it cannot be easily changed. It is now more than twelve years since the pipeline debate first revealed the deep anxiety of the Canadian people over the prospect of American domination; but since that time they have never agreed on a method of resistance. No political party has ever drawn up a comprehensive programme for the defence of Canadian economic and political independence; and only a few individuals — a Governor of the Bank of Canada, a Conservative Prime Minister, a Liberal Minister of Finance, and a few University Professors — have even urged that there was a real danger which must be met, if Canada wished to survive. The fate of these separate protests has been monotonously unvarying. Dismissal, enforced resignation, defeat at the polls have been the results for the politicians and civil servants. The urgings of the Professors have either been ignored, or read and forgotten in daily newspapers, or embalmed in government reports.

Canadians are held back from any determined action on their own behalf both by their own fears and inhibitions and by the bluffs and threats of Americans and their government. Bruce Hutchison, that Doric pillar of the Liberal establishment in Canada, threatens massive American retaliation if Canada withdraws from Nato. There are always anonymous American imperialists in high places who are eager to bluff and threaten; but, in addition, as Walter Gordon has recently been pointing out, the American State Department is prepared to go into instant action whenever some important American interest, such as the journalistic empire of the late Henry R. Luce or the National City Bank of New York seems endangered by Canadian policy. In 1963, at the height of the Bomarc crisis, it was not merely the American State Department, but the entire American executive that intervened directly in Canadian politics. The real leader of the Liberal party in the winter and spring of 1963 was not Lester B. Pearson but John F. Kennedy; and it was press interviews by the American commander of Nato, press handouts by the American Secretary of State, and public opinion analyses by an American presidential adviser, who, with Kennedy's blessing, was sent up to Canada to work for the Liberals in the election, which probably contributed most to the downfall of Diefenbaker. About the only manifestation of American power which was spared Canada in

the crisis was the sight of American tanks rumbling up Parliament Hill in Ottawa. But the Canadians, unlike the Czechs, who are a brave and independent people, do not need tanks to coerce them. All they require is the instructions of an American President, an American Secretary of State, and an American general as to where their best interests lie. Then, dutifully, they act accordingly.

One of the main reasons why the Canadians have surrendered so easily is that the primitive Canadian belief in unity for strength in defence has been so seriously undermined. A debilitating weakness has spread over the fourth and last of the main features of the Empire of the St. Lawrence. The Fathers of Confederation tried to establish a strongly centralized union; but their purpose has been defeated by two important sets of circumstances, the first of which was the chain of legal decisions in the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council. By the early 1920's — again the crucial decade in Canadian history — these decisions reduced the federal government's residuary authority to an emergency power, exercisable normally in crisis such as wars. In an age of social welfare and economic regulation, these strangling legal limitations were likely to confine the federal government within very narrow bounds. Before the war both Bennett and King tried in vain to break through these barriers; after the war was over, King and St. Laurent renewed the attempt to take the initiative in a national programme of social security and economic growth. This effort was maintained, with small results, for about a decade. Then it was abandoned; and, at the beginning of the 1960's, the federal government found itself on the defensive. It was not long before it began a retreat which now threatens to end in a rout.

The reason for this drastic decline in the confidence and prestige of the government of Canada is, at bottom, fairly simple. It arose out of a profound and revolutionary change in the way in which the Canadian people looked at their federal union. For the first time in the hundred years of their history, a large and influential number of Canadians were induced to accept the idea that what were now called "ethnic and cultural values" were, and ought to be accepted, as the fundamental values in Canadian federalism. The most important thing about Canada was not its economic growth, its constitutional viability, its political independence and freedom from external control, but simply and solely its cultural duality. Confederation had failed to satisfy French-Canadian cultural needs and fulfil French-Canadian cultural aspirations; for a hundred years French Canadians had been reduced to a second class citizenship, not by their own church, or their own educational system, or their own government, or their own timid capitalists, but by the English-speaking majority, and

its instruments, the federal government and the British North America Act. To remedy these hideous injustices, one, or both, of two remedies were proposed. Bilingualism must be officially recognized and, as far as possible, protected and promoted throughout the whole of Canada; and Quebec must be recognized as essentially different from the other provinces and given a special position distinct and largely detached from the rest of Canada.

These ideas, the dominant ideas in Canada today, are in effect, a repudiation of the intentions of the Fathers of Confederation; and, in the decade that is now ending, they have led to a steady demolition of the structure the Fathers built. Quebec, granted exemption from federal programmes, without losing the accompanying federal revenues, began effectively to gain the special position she had claimed; but these concessions did not satisfy her demand for complete and exclusive control over virtually the whole range of the economic and social life of her citizens. Backed by Ontario, which now revived the Toronto-Quebec axis, Quebec pressed the case for more drastic change; and finally the federal government sponsored a general and fundamental revision of the constitution. The progress of this revision so far is not likely to renew the confidence or even win the respect of Canadians. The priority which the federal government has given to fundamental rights and governmental institutions reveal a continued obsession with ethnic and cultural values, and an astonishing ignorance of parliamentary government. The provinces, secure in the possession of their present legislative powers, have declined to follow the federal lead and instead demanded a reallocation of the sources of revenue. Nobody has yet been willing, or has yet dared, to breath a word about the subject which logically comes first, the division of powers. If that subject is ever seriously considered, there is no guarantee that the federal government will gain any essential power. In the present state of Canadian opinion on federalism, it may suffer substantial losses. And thus Canada may very well enter the final struggle of its existence as a united and separate nation without the means of ensuring its own survival.