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The Awakening of Canadian Interest in the Northwest

President's Address

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ANNUAL MEETING

PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS

THE AWAKENING OF CANADIAN INTEREST IN THE NORTHWEST

By DR. A. G. DOUGHTY

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,— In seeking for a subject for the address, which is imposed upon me by the high office to which you were pleased to call me, I found myself in a difficulty. As to the nature of the subject I had no choice. Speaking on the site of the first settlement in the Northwest Territories, and in the presence of many who are the direct descendants of the original settlers, I was practically limited to a subject which had to do with the Northwest. But here the difficulty arose. Many in my audience know better than I the history of the early planting, from which this magnificent province has arisen. The stories, which the children have heard from the lips of their grandfathers and, better still, of their grandmothers, of trials and hardships endured during the early years of this most isolated settlement, have a vividness and wealth of detail that it would be vain for a modern writer to attempt to emulate. So far as these fireside tales could be recovered, it has been done by the piety of the women of the Manitoba Historical Society. The volume which was the fruit of their diligence touches the hearts and excites the pride, not only of the people of this province, but of all Canadians, who are thus privileged to get some glimpses of the sources of the manhood and womanhood of the province.

In thinking these things over, it occurred to me that there was still a story to be told. Canada had no part in the founding of the Red River Settlement. That, I believe, was the work of a group of one of the great stocks in Europe—the Scottish. But it was inevitable that when Canada gained some measure of relief from the pressure of her domestic problems, her statesmen and publicists should give their attention to this settlement and all that it involved. The Northwest was her hinterland, and the greatness of which her people dreamed depended on her secure possession of the vast stretches, which lengthened themselves out to the Pacific ocean. Until the late fifties of the nineteenth century, one can discern scarcely a ripple of interest in the Red River Settlement. Such occasional letters as appeared before that period from missionaries or military officers whom duty called to the Settlement had no sequences. There was one such written in 1839 by Colonel Wigram of the Coldstream Guards to an official of the Government of Lower Canada. It appeared in the *Quebec Gazette*, but it excited no editorial comment either in the *Gazette*, or, as far as can be discovered in any other newspaper. And yet it was an interesting letter. It gave the census returns for 1838, the extent of the settlement along the shores of the Red and Assiniboine rivers, an account of its population which the writer describes as of “the most motley description,” of the provision

for religion and education—there was a well conducted school for both sexes—and notes that spinning had been introduced with great success, two Canadian women having been imported by the company to teach the settlers to make cloth.

Canada's slowness in apprehending the importance of this settlement can easily be explained. She had not yet found herself. She was absorbed in a great experiment, the issue of which was still obscure. The first experiment of governing Upper and Lower Canada as separate provinces had definitely failed. The second experiment of government as a united province with power to govern themselves was then on trial, and the difficulties which successively disclosed themselves were sufficiently formidable to demand undivided attention.

The earliest occasion on which the Northwest was forced on the attention of Canada was a discussion started in London in 1856 as to the expediency of using the territories as a penal colony. Australia had been freed from that blot on her social life, and as speculation ranged over the waste places in the Empire for a substitute for Australia, a London journalist asked what country could be so suitable as the Hudson's Bay territories. One would have supposed that but one answer could come from Canada. But it was not so. It is true that the weight of newspaper opinion was strongly opposed to the proposition, but it found favour in surprising quarters. The *Montreal Gazette* and the *Quebec Gazette* thought the idea a capital one. The latter journal declared that "a Siberia to the north of us would be of incalculable advantage to us. Rome originally was a collection of malefactors, and what else was Venice?" This was not the last suggestion to foist convicts upon Canada and the Northwest. Two or three years later, when it was decided to build a road from lake Superior to the Red River Settlement, the question arose as to where they would find the labour. W. H. G. Kingston, a writer of story books for boys in the middle of the last century, was greatly interested in the territories. He wrote recommending that convicts be employed on the work. In order to prevent the convicts from escaping, he was sure that a select band of Indians armed with rifles and knives and having at their service a number of Spanish bloodhounds would prove effective guards.

The slight, fugitive interest aroused by a prospect of a Botany Bay settlement to the north and west gave way quickly to a permanent concern, which was at full tide before the end of 1857. At the beginning of January of that year, the Toronto correspondent of the *Canadian News* reported that the question which was exciting attention in Canada was the Northwest. The same correspondent reported in July of 1857 that the question of the Northwest territories absorbed more interest and created more conversation than all public questions put together. The moving cause was the influx of population into Minnesota, and the application before Congress to have this territory raised into a state. The correspondent reported that the advancing tide had already touched the imaginary boundary and that the next wave would carry it over. The fixed purpose which Canadians were persuaded existed in the minds of Americans to possess themselves of the entire continent seemed likely to find partial fulfilment in that district. At the present rate of influx it would take very little time to place as many Americans on the British side of the line as would form a state. As soon as that was done, they would apply for admission into the Union as a state.

The manner in which the Americans managed to secure so favourable a decision in the case of the Hudson's Bay Company's possessions in Oregon territory gave point to the apprehensions on that score.

The perfect isolation of the Settlement from British or Canadian associations, and the accessibility of communication with the outside world through the United States could not fail to impress thoughtful persons. All the Hudson's Bay Company could offer was just what they enjoyed themselves. They had two opportunities of corresponding with the outer world each year—one by way of the Hudson's bay, the other by a canoe brigade from Montreal by the rivers, lakes and portages to Red river. As against this was a communication which the progress of settlement in Minnesota was making every day more available. Between 1853 and 1857, the United States reduced their postal route to Fort Garry from over 300 miles to 70 (which is the distance between Pembina and Fort Garry) with a navigable river connecting the two places. Fort Garry was so far incorporated into the American postal system that until 1870 none but American postage stamps were sold in the Settlement. The Canadian Government made an effort in 1858 to attract the mails from the Settlement to the Canadian postal system by establishing a route from Collingwood to Red river, but the odds were too great for successful competition with the American line.

The Canadian Government was being urged to action by public meetings in different parts of the country. The Toronto Board of Trade displayed much energy. In the autumn of 1856, they adopted a resolution, protesting against the exclusive claims of the Hudson's Bay Company to the trade of the vast territories, which lay under their control, and a few months later demanded that to the territories be extended the protection of Canadian law and the benefits of Canadian institutions.

While the Northwest was thus engaging popular attention, the Government was employed in considering the several problems that required solution before an effective measure respecting the territories became practicable. The Colonial Secretary by a despatch which reached Canada in the middle of January, 1857, notified the Government that in view of the expiration of the licence of the Hudson's Bay Company in 1859, it had been determined to appoint a committee of the House of Commons, to report on the question of a renewal of the licence, and the inquiry would cover the whole range of questions respecting the position and prospects of the company.

The Government received this notification with much satisfaction. Their own researches had convinced them that the territorial rights of Canada extended to the Pacific ocean. However that might be, a question of much more importance was the fixing of the boundary between the territories and the United States. The progress of Minnesota northwards could not be regarded without apprehension, and nothing could exceed the importance of delimiting a boundary beyond which the tide of population from the south might not overflow.

The Government appointed Chief Justice Draper as its special agent to represent the interests of Canada before the House of Commons Committee. As the Government could not anticipate the lines upon which the inquiries of the House Committee would proceed, the instructions to the Chief Justice were indefinite. His duty was generally to watch over Canadian interests, offering such information as would safeguard or advance those interests, and to correct any erroneous impressions that he

might observe. He was particularly directed to see that, if it should be determined to renew the company's licence, it should only be on conditions that would leave the way clear for the occupation of tracts adapted for settlement.

The Crown Lands Commissioner made an exhaustive study of conditions in the territories, and presented his conclusions to the Assembly in the session of 1859. A survey of the historical circumstances associated with the company's charter left him in no doubt that the country about Red river and lake Winnipeg belonged absolutely to Canada. He had no hesitation, however, in admitting that, whatever the legal rights of the company in the territories might be, they had been exercised in a manner to secure the fundamental necessities of order and tranquillity. The commissioner was far from desiring the immediate stoppage of the company's operations which he said would be not only ruinous to the company but injurious to the territories.

The interest maintained by the proceedings of the Assembly was kept at the same high pitch throughout the year. The report of the committee of the House of Commons which reached Canada in the early autumn contained an immense amount of arresting information, and discussion of a lively character continued as to the recommendations of the committee. Meetings such as are usually held during an election campaign were held throughout the province. The recommendation that, while the district about the Red river and the Saskatchewan should be reserved for settlement, and, if it were the wish of Canada, annexed to the province, provoked a strong outcry. There was a unanimous demand that the licence of the company should not be renewed for another twenty-one years. The leading Government organ pointed to the activities of the Russians in the west and of the United States in the south, and declared that with nothing but the power of the company to resist their aggressiveness, they could easily overrun and divide the territories between them.

The Red River Settlement added its voice to the agitation by demanding in the *Toronto Globe* that they be either annexed to Canada, which they would prefer, or if that could not be effected, they wished to join the United States.

The feverish discussion, which had characterized the year 1857, subsided sufficiently in 1858 to allow people to consider what was the most practicable and expedient course to adopt towards this vast hinterland. Fear began to be expressed that Canada would not be equal to the burden of so large an addition to her territory, and the vast expense of establishing and maintaining a practicable road to the Settlement over British territory.

There was another objection which touched the heart of the controversy which was at its height between Canada West and Canada East. This was on the question of representation by population. Ever since the population of Canada West began to surpass that of Canada East, certain parties in Canada West demanded that that section of the united province should have representation in the House of Assembly, in correspondence with its preponderance in numbers. This was resisted by the people of Canada East, who pointed to the fact that during the several years in which they had largely the advantage in the matter of population, they had been obliged to content themselves with a mere equality. Now that positions were reversed and the superiority lay with Upper Canada they were determined not to allow Upper Canada more than an equality of members.

With this resolution before them, they had a strong objection to any measure that would add to the balance against them. If the Northwest were annexed to Canada, it would be to the western section of the province that its weight would be thrown. Consequently, they were first instinctively and afterwards vocally opposed to the annexation of the Northwest, unless, as some of them said, Confederation were brought about, and the new territory entered as a separate province.

A new factor now appeared which stimulated interest to its highest point. The discovery of gold in Cariboo carried the eyes of speculative statesmen farther afield. The Pacific coast replaced the Red river and the Saskatchewan as the objective. A transcontinental railway was all the talk. Again the activities of Minnesota supplied the goad. The legislature of the recently erected state set on foot an inquiry as to the practicability of a route from the United States border, and issued a 100-page pamphlet on the subject. They computed the distance from St. Paul to the eastern border of the new regions to be 1,650 miles. The route proposed was via Carlton House, Edmonton and Thompson's river. They discussed the question of a railway, and predicted that one day the territories would develop into "powerful and populous states".

A Canadian company at the same time came into the field with a project of its own. Its scheme was to utilize the waterways as far as possible. It proposed to reopen the old route followed by the North West Company until 1821, when the amalgamation of the two great rival organizations resulted in new transportation arrangements. There was to be a line of steamers on lake Superior, lake of the Woods, Rainy river, Red river and the Saskatchewan. The engineer of the company reported that there was but one obstruction to navigation as far as the Rocky mountains, and he was hopeful that it might be overcome. A railway to the Pacific was within the scope of the company's plans. Neither the Minnesota nor the Canadian company's proposition was carried into execution, but they had the important effect of keeping the Northwest to the forefront in the minds of the public in Canada.

The great obstacle to direct communication between Canada and the Northwest presented by the inhospitable tract to the north of lake Superior exercised the ingenuity of persons who foresaw the eventual incorporation of the territories into the United States, unless some preventive action were taken by the British Government. One of the most curious suggestions was that the territories should be approached through the colony on the Pacific ocean. A remark by Captain Palliser in his report that the prairie region was always accessible through British Columbia solved the problem for this speculator. Since the centre of the continent was practically unapproachable to settlers from British territories on the Atlantic side, then they could find access through the British territories on the Pacific. In days when emigration from the British Isles was still largely carried by sailing vessel, reaching the Pacific by way of Cape Horn, the idea was naïve in the extreme.

The Settlement now began to participate in the discussion which never ceased in Canada. In the Christmas week of 1859, there appeared the first number of the *Nor-Wester*, the first regular newspaper published in those regions. It took just a month to reach Montreal. From this newspaper, we can gain some idea of the isolation of the Settlement. The mail which arrived there on December 18, through the United States, brought newspapers, the latest from Canada being a month old and from London six weeks.

The chief function of the *Nor-Wester* as regards the outside world was to feed the interest, which in Canada showed few signs of waning. Extracts from the numbers as they appeared were used by Canadian newspapers, and the very shadowy notions of the country that prevailed were gradually displaced by accurate views. The *Nor-Wester* made it clear that the Settlement was no ordinary one. A rumour which reached the Settlement in 1860 that the British Government intended to erect it into a Crown colony, offered the occasion for comparison with the last Crown colony established. In British Columbia, the newspaper observed, everything was chaotic, and the people were of the roughest and the least likely to recognize the mild influences of law and order. Red River Settlement, on the contrary, was proverbial for its quiet morality and law-abiding habits—a community, which, with exceedingly simple machinery to control it, maintained a greater respect for life and property than can be found under similar circumstances in any other part of the world.

The report that reached Canada in the midsummer of 1861 that gold had been discovered on the Saskatchewan between Edmonton and Fort Pitt gave a sudden expansion of interest, which affected a class in Canada and the United States that was unconcerned with public affairs. The *Nor-Wester* also foresaw an awakening of interest among the people of Great Britain, observing cynically that they "will not long resist their national cupidity." The gold discoveries and the *rapprochements* between the Settlement and Minnesota with annexation in full view, were stern realities which warranted the expectation of the *Nor-Wester* that something would be done soon.

The penetration of the Settlement from the south went steadily on. An overland route between St. Paul and Fort Garry was completed in the spring of 1862, and daily evidence of the fact was a fine new steamer which plied between the Settlement and Georgetown, Minnesota.

The *Toronto Globe* which constituted itself the special guardian of British interests in the territories, kept before the Canadian public the dangers to which these interests were exposed by the perfectly legitimate and even laudable enterprises of the Americans. It notes with anxiety a congressional document on the subject of the relations of the United States with the Northwest, and urges the Canadian Government to lose no time in devising measures for the acquisition of what it describes as the magnificent empire between Canada and the Rocky mountains. While the Imperial and Canadian Governments were each waiting for the other to make a move, the United States was bestirring itself to get all the information it could on the subject. The articles in the *Globe* were ably assisted by the oratorical gifts of D'Arcy McGee. The subject was one which excited his ranging imagination. He reproached the Canadian Government for its slackness in face of the immensity of the interests involved. Referring to the recent congressional paper, he touched Canadian sensibilities by wondering whether the writer of the report on the Northwest, had not accompanied it by letters of a more political character to President Lincoln. This was in 1863, when the outcome of the Civil War was by no means assured, and McGee speculated as to whether, if the Union should go to pieces, the North would not look eagerly to the territories.

Another interest, which touched both Canada and the United States (the latter with particular force) was pushing the Northwest into prominence from another angle. The possibility of establishing instantaneous communication by telegraph between America and Europe had been shown

by an Atlantic cable as early as 1858. A cable laid that year had carried a message between Queen Victoria and President Buchanan, but the electrical impulse had been so feeble that after a few further messages it ceased carrying altogether. Other attempts to lay a workable line having failed, attention was turned to the other direction. By way of Russia, there would be required only a short submarine cable across the Behring Sea. It was consequently arranged that the Russian inland system should be extended to the mouth of the Amur on the coast of Siberia and that a submarine cable should be laid between that point and Sitka in Alaska. A line would then be carried south to New Westminster. At this point the British Northwest territories became important. In Minnesota it was proposed to build a telegraph line from St. Paul to Fort Garry, to connect with another line to be carried across the continent to New Westminster.

The successful laying an Atlantic cable in 1867 obviated the necessity of this communication with Europe by this extensive inland system, but the proposal to treat the Red River Settlement as part of the American telegraph system increased the general uneasiness in Canada.

Fortunately, the Americans themselves supplied the antidote to the Americanization of the Settlement. The repeal of the Bonding Act by Congress in 1864, which had permitted the importation of British goods through the United States duty-free compelled the people of the Settlement to look to a Canadian route as the means of transportation from England. There was also another circumstance which operated to the same end. The rising of the Sioux Indians in 1862 had led to the placing of some hundreds of American troops at Pembina on the border of the territories. These troops kept the route clear from the Settlement to the American system of communications. In 1864, the troops were withdrawn, and the element of insecurity was added to the drawback occasioned by the repeal of the Bonding Act.

The Board of Trade of Fort Garry decided to take steps to secure co-operation between the Canadian Government and the Council of Assiniboia in the construction of a practicable route between lake Superior and Fort Garry. Memorials were sent to the Boards of Trade of Western Canada, and a petition addressed to the Council of Assiniboia, requesting an appropriation for a road to the lake of the Woods and for an expedition to lake Superior, whose duty it would be to improve the portages.

We need not pursue the course of the negotiations, nor enquire too minutely as to the material results of the several expeditions sent out to explore the region between lake Superior and the Red River Settlement. So far as preparing a route was concerned, they were foredoomed to failure. There was no possibility of competing with the route through the United States, until the railway was built around the head of the lakes.

There is a last word. A survey of the material collected in the preparation of this paper gives rise to several reflections, but the impression that is most abiding is of the extraordinary staunchness of the people of the Settlement. The allurements offered, by the steady approach to their borders of people of a kindred race, anxious to co-operate in the pursuit of a common aim, must have been a great temptation to so completely isolated a settlement. Their steadfast resistance, in the faith that Destiny would some time link them to their own people, is one of the wonders of our history.