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A BENT TWIG IN BRITISH COLUMBIA HISTORY

By W. KAYE LAMB
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SEVENTY-FIVE years ago this spring, on April 2, 1873, L. S. Huntington, M.P. for Shefford County, Quebec, rose in the House of Commons and made the charges that precipitated the celebrated Pacific Scandal. In November, Sir John A. Macdonald was forced to resign as prime minister and was succeeded by the Liberal leader, Alexander Mackenzie. This, in turn, precipitated a crisis in the relations between British Columbia and the Dominion of Canada. Even before Macdonald's resignation the province had been restive because of the delay in commencing the construction of the promised transcontinental railway, and Mackenzie's lack of enthusiasm for the project was well known. Within a month of taking office he referred publicly to the railway clause in the terms of union under which British Columbia had joined confederation in 1871 as "a bargain . . . made to be broken,"¹ and announced that he would negotiate for its modification. Early in 1874, in a letter to the emissary he was sending to British Columbia for this purpose, he described the granting of the railway clause as an "insane act" and contended that the province had "obtained on paper terms which at the time were known to be impossible of fulfilment."²

To British Columbians these were fighting words, for they threatened one of the two things that the people of the province considered they must secure if confederation were to be worth while. Railway communication with the East and a satisfactory financial settlement were the twin essentials; and if anyone doubts this, let him read the *verbatim* report of the lengthy debate on the whole confederation question that took place in the Legislative Council of the old crown colony in March, 1870. Many points were mentioned, but of them all those two stand out like mountain peaks.

The financial question was dealt with frankly and in most specific terms. Amor de Cosmos, for example, said in so many words that confederation "must have a money value"; and in his opinion the subsidies and other financial arrangements should be such as to yield the new province an annual surplus of \$200,000.³ "A change, without financial improvement, would," he was convinced, "destroy all hope of any such thing as the loyal and cordial co-operation of our people with the Government of the Dominion." Dr. Helmcken, at that time opposed to confederation because he did not think that sufficiently advantageous terms could be secured, expressed a similar opinion. "The people," said he, "must be better off under Confederation than alone, or they will not put up with it."⁴ "No union between this Colony and Canada can permanently exist, unless it be to the material and pecuniary advantage of this Colony to remain in the union."⁵

¹Speech at Sarnia, Nov. 25, 1873; see *Toronto Globe*, Nov. 26, 1873.

²*Message Relative to the Terms of Union with the Province of British Columbia* (Ottawa, 1875), 10. (Canada, Sessional Papers, 1875, no. 19.)

³British Columbia, Legislative Council, "Debate on the Subject of Confederation with Canada," reprinted from the *Government Gazette Extraordinary* of Mar., 1870 (Victoria, 1912), 57, 62.

⁴*Ibid.*, 11.

⁵*Ibid.*, 13.

The demand for a transcontinental railway arose from the obvious fact that union without easy communication and transportation would be no union at all, but it was linked closely with the financial provisions as well. Economically British Columbia was in the doldrums. Employment was declining in the gold fields, and other industries and agriculture were developing too slowly to make good the deficiency. Construction of a railway would entail the expenditure of many millions of dollars; it would bring to the colony the thing it needed most, namely, a large payroll. It would prime the pump in a lavish way, attract population, and accelerate the whole pace of economic life.

Frequently one hears it said that in 1870 British Columbia asked only for a wagon road, but was given a railroad instead by the Dominion. Actually this entirely misrepresents the facts. It is true that a road was mentioned, but its preliminary nature was made quite clear; a railroad was to follow. Even the draft terms discussed by the Legislative Council in March stipulated that work on the line was to commence within three years of the date of union, and thereafter at least a million dollars a year was to be expended "in actually constructing the initial sections of such Railway from the Seaboard of British Columbia, to connect with the Railway system of Canada."⁶ It is not going too far to say that the attitude of British Columbia could be summed up in the words: "No railroad no confederation." John Robson, amongst others, characterized it as "the most vital part of the whole scheme."⁷ Tyrwhitt Drake insisted that it was "the condition in Hon. Members' minds upon which Confederation or no Confederation hangs."⁸ Helmcken's view was that "Without it Confederation must not take place."⁹

All this was fully realized in Ottawa. Indeed, the railway was as much a part of the Dominion's plan—or, at any rate, of Sir John A. Macdonald's plan—as it was British Columbia's. It is clear, for one thing, that Sir John felt that the maintenance of British sovereignty on the Pacific coast might well depend upon the railway. He was convinced that the Americans would do everything possible "short of war to get possession of the western territory." Only "immediate and vigorous steps" could prevent this, and one of the first essentials was "to show unmistakably our resolve to build the Pacific Railway."¹⁰ Helmcken's diary of the negotiations that took place in Ottawa in June, 1870, between the delegates from British Columbia and representatives of the Canadian government makes it clear that the railway clause was not something that was wrung from the Dominion. It seems to have been practically taken for granted. Helmcken's comment was: "They do not consider that they can hold the country without it."¹¹ This tallies with Macdonald's statement in the letter he wrote to the governor-general when the Pacific Scandal broke, three years later. Referring to the railway clause he explained that his administration had been "obliged to carry the measure, or to abandon all hope of the union with British Columbia. . . ."¹²

⁶*Ibid.*, 163.

⁷*Ibid.*, 80.

¹⁰Sir Joseph Pope (ed.), *Correspondence of Sir John Macdonald* (New York, 1921), 124-5. The words quoted are from a letter to C. F. Brydges dated Jan. 28, 1870.

¹¹Willard E. Ireland, "Helmcken's Diary of the Confederation Negotiations, 1870" (*British Columbia Historical Quarterly*, IV, 1940, 120).

¹²Joseph Pope, *Memoirs of the Right Honorable Sir John Alexander Macdonald* (Ottawa, 1894), II, 175.

⁸*Ibid.*, 85.

⁹*Ibid.*, 81.

The important change made in Ottawa was the adoption of a much more exacting building schedule. The time that might elapse before construction commenced was cut from three years to two, and the Dominion undertook to complete the line within ten years. Endless controversy has raged about the question as to whether or not this latter provision was intended to be taken literally. In retrospect it seems quite clear that it was added primarily as evidence that the Dominion proposed to push construction vigorously. The speech made in Ottawa by J. W. Trutch in April, 1871, two months before the terms of union took effect, would seem to decide the point. Trutch had been one of the delegates sent to Ottawa by British Columbia the previous year, and Helmcken's diary indicates that he had a major share in drafting the railway clause. Speaking "with special care" because he desired "that full weight should be given to every word," he explained the origin of the railway provisions at some length. The preliminary coach and wagon road for which British Columbia had asked had been ruled out as unnecessary because travel by that means was already out of date. In its place it was decided to substitute an estimate of the time it would take to build the railway, and ten years was agreed upon. Trutch continued: "If it had been put at twelve or fifteen years, British Columbia would have been just as well satisfied, and if the estimated period had been reduced to eight years she would scarcely have been better pleased; but some definite period for the completion of this work the British Columbia delegates insisted upon as a necessary safeguard to our colony in entering into the proposed union To argue that she expects it to be carried out in the exact interpretation of the words themselves, regardless of all consequences, is a fallacy that cannot bear the test of common sense."¹³

Turning back, with these facts in mind, to the years 1873 and 1874, we can appreciate better how British Columbia's expectations had been dashed since she had joined the Dominion. The financial provisions in the terms of union had not worked out as intended. The Dominion had assumed the colony's million dollar debt in 1871, and there had been a modest budget surplus at the end of that year. But in 1872, instead of having the hoped-for surplus of \$200,000, the province had a deficit of \$277,000. Drastic cuts in expenditure virtually balanced the budget in 1873, but thereafter deficits averaging more than \$250,000 a year were to be the order of the day. Equally disappointing was the fact that construction of the railway had not commenced. Even the surveys were not complete, and expenditure in British Columbia on the project over the seven-year period 1871-7 amounted to no more than \$1,300,000. The hoped-for payroll, like the hoped-for budget surplus, had proved illusory.

It must be stressed again that the two matters were closely linked. Helmcken's notes show that he and his fellow delegates regarded the railway clause as being to all intents and purposes one of the financial provisions of union, and they show, too, that great importance was attached to the fact that construction was to commence in *British Columbia*.

The reasons for the delay in starting work are not far to seek. The task of surveying the various alternative routes that were proposed was an immense one. To await completion of the work seemed reasonable; cer-

¹³*British Columbia and the Canadian Pacific Railway, Complimentary Dinner to the Hon. Mr. Trutch . . .* (Montreal, 1871), 9.

tainly it gave a very plausible excuse for delay. More important, perhaps, was the fact that the Macdonald Government had been forced to give an undertaking that construction of the railway would not increase taxation; to launch so vast an enterprise under this limitation was not easy. The Opposition were mostly of the opinion that the Dominion should never have undertaken to build a railway, and many of them felt that the project was beyond the country's financial ability. It was this latter point of view that Alexander Mackenzie expressed so bluntly when he came to power at the end of 1873.

Whatever the cause, the consequences of the failure to commence work on schedule were far-reaching. For a decade British Columbia was left in the politically dangerous position of being *in* Canada but in most respects not *of* it, and this was a condition that only a railway could cure. "Until this great work is completed," Macdonald wrote in 1878, "our Dominion is little more than a 'geographical expression.' We have as much interest in British Columbia as in Australia, and no more. The railway once finished, we become one great united country with a large inter-provincial trade, and a common interest."¹⁴

Amongst other things the failure to start construction on schedule greatly prolonged the controversy over the route that the railway should follow. To begin with there had been remarkable unanimity on the point in British Columbia, and the treatment of the subject during the debate in the Legislative Council in March, 1870, had been markedly free from sectionalism. H. P. P. Crease, the attorney-general, expressed the general opinion when he contended that "the Overland Railway must follow down the main artery of the Colony, Fraser River, and have its terminus either at New Westminster or Burrard Inlet."¹⁵ As an engineer, J. W. Trutch took the view that the point should be left in abeyance until surveys had been made, but even he went so far as to express the hope that the line would follow the Fraser, and to admit that the river was "the main artery and the probable course of the Railway."¹⁶ Amor de Cosmos, later to become so vigorous a champion of the Island railway, was at this time an equally vigorous champion of the Fraser. He pressed again and again for a line from Yale to the interior: "I never could see how British Columbia could be settled without a Railway to connect Fraser River with Kamloops. . . . I maintain that the true course for the development of the resources of the country is to make a line of Railway from some navigable spot on the Fraser to Lake Kamloops." This, he added, "might be regarded as a part of the transcontinental line."¹⁷

These views were sound, as subsequent events have shown; but unanimity on the point did not last for long. The business men in Victoria awakened up to the fact that the city's days as the wholesale and distributing centre of British Columbia would end quickly if the railway terminated on Burrard Inlet, and by the autumn of 1870 a campaign to bring the terminus to Vancouver Island was in full swing. The *Victoria Standard*, of which Amor de Cosmos was editor, was prominent in this agitation. "No terminus

¹⁴Pope, *Correspondence of Sir John Macdonald*, 240-1, Macdonald to Sir Stafford Northcote, May 1, 1878.

¹⁵*Debate on the Subject of Confederation*, 68.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 70.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 78-9; see also 83.

no confederation" was raised as an election cry, and public meetings endorsed a demand that an Island terminus should be specified in the terms of union.

This demand came to nothing, but the campaign continued, month by month and year by year. Controversy was encouraged by the grandiose scale of the railway surveys, which embraced virtually every river valley running to the sea. As it was obvious that Seymour Narrows was the only conceivable point at which bridges might be constructed which could carry the line to Vancouver Island, the Island railway champions supported the Bute Inlet route, which would bring the line to the coast in that general vicinity. In 1872 their hand was strengthened by the San Juan boundary award. Thereafter every ton of coal shipped by sea from the Nanaimo mines to the Esquimalt naval base was pictured as passing under the American batteries that were sure to be mounted on San Juan Island, and a railway between the two points was represented as being a strategic necessity. Ultimately they achieved a substantial measure of success, for in June, 1873, the Macdonald Government, faced with the Pacific Scandal and desperately in need of support, passed an order-in-council that designated Esquimalt as the terminus of the transcontinental line and stated further that the railway would be built northward to Seymour Narrows.

Victoria's position at this time was a well-entrenched one. Nearly half the white population of the whole province dwelt there, and the city's control of political and commercial activities was virtually absolute. The community was dominated by a closely-knit group of officials and first families whose roots were for the most part in Great Britain. Sentiment thus played little part in their attitude towards Canada. J. D. Edgar, the emissary Alexander Mackenzie sent to British Columbia in 1874, was struck by the unusual atmosphere of the city and in his report accounted for it as follows: "The circumstances of the early settlement of the Province gave it a population of peculiar intelligence; and the fact that most of the rougher kind of labor is performed by Chinamen or Indians, has afforded in an especial way to the people of Victoria, the Provincial Metropolis, leisure and opportunity for the fullest discussion of their great question of the day. Their keen intelligence and zeal in public affairs suggests a parallel in the history of some of the minor States of ancient Greece and Italy."¹⁸

Only a railway or railway construction on a generous scale could pour in goods and population in a volume sufficiently large to counterbalance the influence of the old crown colony clique, and, as it turned out, this took a good many years to accomplish. A quarter of a century passed before Vancouver surpassed Victoria in population, and the last of the old Victoria general wholesale houses, dating back to the days of the gold-rush, closed its doors only about ten years ago. All through the critical years of the seventies the policy of British Columbia towards the Dominion was thus dominated by the surviving crown colony clique in the capital city; and this circumstance was to leave a permanent mark on Dominion-provincial relations.

It is perhaps not unimportant to note that Victoria's position had been threatened for a time at an earlier date. In 1866 the old crown colony of Vancouver Island had been somewhat unceremoniously annexed to the

¹⁸*Message Relative to the Terms of Union with the Province of British Columbia (Ottawa, 1875), 16.*

mainland colony of British Columbia. Victoria's reaction may be judged by the oft-quoted note in the diary of the old colony's retired governor, Sir James Douglas: "The union of Vancouver's Island and British Columbia was proclaimed today. The ships of war fired a salute. It would have been more appropriate had they fired minute guns and held a funeral procession on the occasion of this sad and melancholy event." Annexation for a time cost Victoria its status as a capital, but within two years this was regained, thanks to astute behind-the-scenes activity in London.

There is no need to repeat here the familiar story of the Edgar mission, Premier Walkem's appeal to London, the Carnarvon Terms, and the visit of Lord Dufferin. The significant thing is to note that British Columbia's official reaction to the Dominion's failure to live up to the letter of the railway clause in the terms of union would have been more fitting to a crown colony than to a province. The government in Victoria did not yet look upon a "better terms" controversy as a family quarrel; it still retained an independent air, and considered itself in many respects still an outsider. It regarded the terms of union as a treaty, which the colony had been beguiled into signing by the imperial government. Failure to commence the railway constituted a treaty violation, and, remembering the imperial aspect, it was only natural that Walkem should turn to London for redress. From this same root arose the idea that British Columbia should have the right to leave the Dominion if the latter did not fulfil treaty terms to the letter. The transition from the cry of "No terminus no confederation" in 1870 to "The Carnarvon Terms or separation" agitation of 1876 is thus seen to have been an easy and natural one, and Amor de Cosmos's motion in the House of Commons in April, 1879, to provide for the peaceful separation of British Columbia simply carried the series to its logical conclusion.

It must be noted that this was essentially a Vancouver Island point of view; the reaction of the mainland to the situation was quite different. The attitude there was based on two convictions. The first of these was that the Fraser River was the natural gateway to the interior, and that it should and ultimately would be the route followed by the railway. The second was that if the terms of union proved impracticable, or if they were not being carried out, the thing to do was to bargain for a new settlement. The mainland never thought seriously of any alternative to confederation. Its leading citizens felt that British Columbia was in the Dominion to stay. They had confidence in its future and were prepared to work out their salvation within its framework.

The interesting thing is that Vancouver Island's tendency upon occasion to revert to the point of view of an outsider has shown itself to some degree upon many occasions since the eighteen-seventies. The crown colony attitude that circumstances caused to be carried over into the life of the province still lives on in a modest way. A trace of it has cropped up in the submissions prepared and the editorials published on virtually every one of the fourteen occasions upon which British Columbia raised the "better terms" issue between 1901 and 1938. The reaction of some people on the Island to conditions they deem unsatisfactory is still a desire to secede. No longer ago than 1935 a campaign was launched in the *Victoria Colonist* which had for its objective the detachment of Vancouver Island from the mainland of British Columbia. The case was carried right back to the annexation of 1866, from which all the Island's difficulties were alleged to

have sprung. The mainland was represented as a vampire that was sucking Vancouver Island dry of its natural resources, and much was made of the claim that the Island yielded a third of the province's revenues, while provincial expenditure there fell far below that proportion. The earlier articles in the series, which continued for the better part of a year, merely demanded a "new deal" for Vancouver Island, but the last of them came out forthrightly for independence and urged that Vancouver Island "go it alone."

For a time this campaign made some headway. The present writer was an inhabitant of the Parliament Buildings at the time, and he well remembers the mixture of mild excitement and milder anxiety with which it was greeted by the civil servants. Popular discussion quickly embroidered the scheme. Vancouver Island was to become, amongst other things, a holiday playground—a "Monte Carlo of the Pacific." The Parliament Buildings were to be transformed into a casino, and roulette tables were to be set up in the marble halls in which we are meeting this evening. Strange as it may now appear, it seemed for a fleeting moment as if the scheme for separation might conceivably come to something.

One thing is virtually certain. We have not seen the last of the proposal. As the twig was bent, so the tree, once the tallest in the forest, but now usually hidden in the shadow of greater neighbours, has grown, and will doubtless continue to grow.

DISCUSSION

There was no time for discussion but the President, *Mr. Soward*, said in closing the meeting that the three speakers, although their postgraduate work had been done at different institutions including Paris, London, and Bryn Mawr, had all received their undergraduate education at the University of British Columbia. Each owed his or her interest in British Columbia history to the work and inspiration of Dr. W. N. Sage, former president of the Canadian Historical Association and head of the Department of History, University of British Columbia, who had himself devoted so many years to the enrichment of our knowledge of the history of the Pacific Coast.