# The nature of Confederation

BY SEAN KHERAJ

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Nature mattered to Confederation.[1] In the minds of many of the legislators from the Province of Canada in 1865, the union of the colonies of British North America was providential and evident in the natural environment. The land, minerals, forests, waters, and animals of the territories of British North America served as evidence of a geographic logic to the movement for Confederation. While the legislators' rhetoric was often exaggerated and overly deterministic, nature itself was one of the primary points of argument in the debates over Confederation in 1865, and it shaped the constitutional resolutions and vision for the future Dominion of Canada.

## A "DEVELOPMENT ETHOS"

In 1865, when Canadian legislators spoke of nature, they did so in particular ways. The debates over Confederation did not include any consideration for environmental protection or stewardship. Instead, they focused solely on nature as a resource for exploitation. Broadly speaking, their collective views of the natural environment were driven by what Laurel Sefton MacDowell has called a "development ethos," a view of nature that, she argues, drove much of Canadian history in the 19th and 20th centuries.[2] The natural environment was a foundation upon which a nation would be built. As William McGiverin, member of the Legislative Assembly for Lincoln, said in his support of the Quebec Resolutions, "Nature has bountifully given us all she could well give towards making us a great and prosperous people."[3] In thinking about nature in British North America, proponents of Confederation saw these resources as natural capital that could best be unlocked through political union and geographic integration.

The arguments many politicians made during the course of the 1865 Confederation debates in the Province of Canada concerning the natural resources of British North America would sound familiar to later historians of Canada. Étienne-Paschal Taché, Alexander Galt, George Brown, Thomas D'Arcy McGee, and others could easily be mistaken for students of Harold Innis and Donald Creighton. For these political leaders, the exploitation of staple resources and the geography of the St. Lawrence–Great Lakes basin proved the wisdom of their Confederation scheme. But unlike Innis and Creighton, they saw no critical problems or weaknesses in an export-led economy based on the extraction and exploitation of staple resources. They were more akin to boosters, often exaggerating and overestimating the vastness of the natural riches of the country. In many ways, the nature of the Canada they envisioned was more caricature than reality.

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## GEOGRAPHIC LOGIC

Alexander Galt captured this sentiment completely in his first speech on the matter of Confederation. He outlined the following vision of Canada:

> Possessing as we do, in the far western part of Canada, perhaps the most fertile wheat-growing tracts on this continent,—in central and eastern Canada facilities for manufacturing such as cannot anywhere be surpassed,—and in the eastern or Maritime Provinces an abundance of that most useful of all minerals, coal, as well as the most magnificent and valuable fisheries in the world; extending as this country does for two thousand miles, traversed by the finest navigable river in the world, we may well look forward to our future with hopeful anticipation of seeing the realization, not merely of what we have hitherto thought would be the commerce of Canada, great as that might become, but to the possession of Atlantic ports, which we shall help to build to a position equal to that of the chief cities of the American Union. (*Debates*, 63)

Thomas D'Arcy McGee described the proposed union as having a "natural oneness" to its geography:

> There is not one port or harbour of all the provinces now proposing to confederate, which cannot be reached from any other by all vessels, if not of too great draught, without ever once leaving our own waters. From the head of Lake Superior the same craft may coast uninterruptedly, always within sight of our own shores nearly the distance of a voyage to England—to [St. John's], Newfoundland. (*Debates*, 139)

Galt and McGee were not the only ones to hold this geographic view of Confederation. Members of the Legislative Assembly who were not part of the ministry expressed similar views. For instance, despite his opposition to the Quebec Resolutions, Joseph-Xavier

Perreault, member of the Legislative Assembly for Richelieu, outlined nearly the same geographic concept of Confederation:

> Those who consider the inexhaustible resources of the Provinces of British North America have no doubt that we possess all the elements of a great power. In territory we have a tenth part of the habitable globe, capable of supporting a population of 100,000,000 of persons. Bounded on the east by the Atlantic, on the west by the Pacific, our territory is further accessible by the navigation of the internal seas, which bound it on the south. Our rivers complete the incomparable network of communication by water, and, like vivifying arteries, bear on their bosom to the ocean and the markets of the world the heavy produce of the western plains, the lofty pines of our forests, our ores of gold and copper, our furs collected in our hunting grounds, and the produce of our fisheries in the gulf. In this vast field of productiveness, where all the materials of immense wealth exist, we need a moving power, and the inexhaustible coal fields of Nova Scotia are at hand to furnish it. (*Debates*, 585-86)

In this vision of Confederation, the proposed union of British North America was a natural system, like a human body, connected by the "vivifying arteries" of its lakes and rivers and its metabolism fuelled by its mineral wealth.

Each region of the proposed union brought with it an abundance of natural wealth. Canada was, to these legislators, the agricultural and emerging industrial heart of the proposed federation. New Brunswick, while geographically small and lacking in agricultural potential, offered rich stocks of timber and fish. As Taché described New Brunswick, "If it did not produce wheat, it produced timber in immense quantities. It had a very extensive fishing coast which was a source of great wealth" (*Debates*, 8). Nova Scotia also contributed its fisheries, according to John Jones Ross, life member of the Legislative Council from Toronto, who argued that "[a] large portion of the population are devoted to fishing, and skilled in drawing from the bosom of the deep the inexhaustible treasures which will be a perennial source of wealth and prosperity to that country" (*Debates*, 831). But in addition to its fisheries, Nova Scotia would also fuel the industrial growth of the new nation with its mineral inheritance. Thomas D'Arcy McGee was just one of many in the Legislative Assembly to highlight the coal deposits of Nova Scotia. "But there is one special source of wealth to be found in the Maritime Provinces," McGee exclaimed, "which was not in any detail exhibited by my hon. friends—I allude to the important article of coal. I think there can be no doubt that, in some parts of Canada, we are fast passing out of the era of wood as fuel, and entering on that of coal." Not only would coal soon replace wood for heating, but it would fuel the growth of manufacturing in Canada (*Debates*, 141).

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## A VISION OF NORTHWEST EXPANSION

Advocates of Confederation saw some of the greatest potential to exploit nature in the northwest, especially through agricultural colonization. It was in this region that legislators expressed their most explicit imperial ambitions. George Brown was a leading voice for western expansion. "What we propose now is but to lay the foundations of the structure," Brown argued, "to set in motion the governmental machinery that will one day, we trust, extend from the Atlantic to the Pacific" (Waite, 38). In that enormous territory between the head of Lake Superior and the Pacific coast, Brown claimed, "vast sources of wealth to the fur trader, the miner, the gold hunter, and the agriculturalist, lie there ready to be developed" (*Debates*, 98). Brown, of course, was not alone in this imperial vision of Confederation. Robert MacFarlane, member of the Legislative Assembly for Perth, was one of many to hold similar ideas: "Before long we shall see population extending over these vast plains, across the basin of the Winnepeg [*sic*] and the valley of the Saskatchewan, and thence to Vancouver [Island], and all the sooner if this measure be adopted, supplying as it will a government for the encouragement of its settlement and the protection of its settlers; for the country is as fertile and productive as our own province, and its domain as wide" (*Debates*, 1024).

Nature would make Canada an empire. "With such an extent of territory and so fertile a soil," Taché told the Legislative Council, he had "no doubt whatever that in less than half a century Canada would embrace a population equal to that of the large empires of the old world" (*Debates*, 6). The idea of nature as a divine inheritance and foundation for a new transcontinental empire animated the imaginations of Confederation's vocal proponents in the Province of Canada. It was a view of nature that was often hyperbolic and overly optimistic. It was also singular in vision, driven by a development ethos without much concern for many of the problems associated with export-led natural resource exploitation or the need to conserve or even protect elements of

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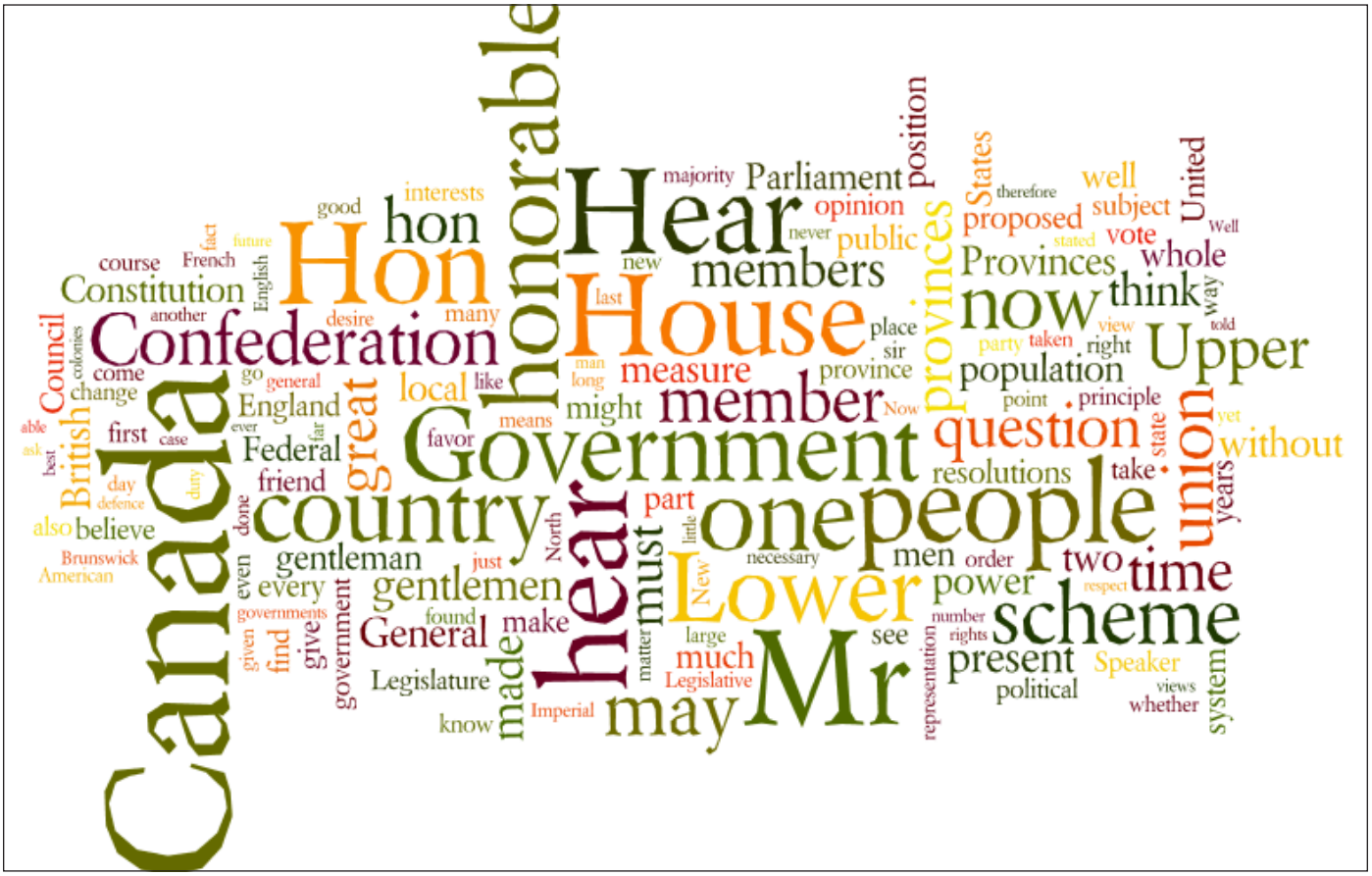
the natural environment. The resources of the country certainly fed the growing economy of Canada in the 19th and 20th centuries, but Canada never achieved the levels of population growth envisioned by legislators in 1865, nor were its resources nearly as "inexhaustible." By the 1990s, even the seemingly endless stores of cod in the north Atlantic reached their limits. This logic and understanding of Canada as an interconnected web of abundant natural resources, however, would come to shape the country for many years after 1867, and it arguably continues to shape the country into the present.

## NOTES

1. Rather than using P.B. Waite's abridged version of the 1865 debates, I drew from the full text of the debates. For the most part, Waite did not include much of the discussion of the natural resources and geography of the country. To some extent, historians have not paid much attention to this element of the debate in Canada.
2. Laurel Sefton MacDowell, *An Environmental History of Canada* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2012), 6.
3. Canada, *Parliamentary Debates on the Subject of the Confederation of the British North American Provinces*, 3rd Session, 8th Provincial Parliament of Canada (Quebec: Hunter, Rose, 1865), 472. Unless otherwise noted, references in the text are to the *Debates*.






Wordle illustration of the most common words in the Confederation debates. The larger a word is, the more frequently it was used. The unabridged version of the debates was used in creating this Wordle.